

On the nature of corporate and generational sin

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The members of presbytery sat uncomfortably during the long and tense pause by the pastoral candidate during his oral examination on theology. The topic of generational and corporate sin had come up in the context of the statement of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America on racism. The candidate had taken a position quite similar to that expressed by many of the speakers on the floor at General Assembly, namely, support for the concept of generational sin of our fathers passing down to us, in particular, in their promoting or not opposing racist oppression. One of the members of presbytery had asked the candidate, “So are you saying that I am guilty of the sins of my father? So, for example, if my father committed murder, should I be taken before a law court and held guilty?”

Everyone in the room felt the answer must clearly be no. After a long pause, the candidate answered, “No, of course not. But there are consequences of my father’s sins that come down to me.” This, of course, was a repudiation of the concept of shared guilt, i.e., corporate and generational sin. Consequences are not guilt. Everyone at presbytery breathed a sigh of relief, because rejection of shared guilt is deep in our bones, especially among Americans with a deep sense of individual responsibility. But among Presbyterians who teach the Reformed doctrines of grace, should it be? Was the candidate’s response adequate?

In this article I argue that the concept of shared guilt in corporate and generational sins is deeply biblical and orthodox. The problem that will need to be addressed, then, is why we find some biblical passages that seem to overturn this concept; for example, the precept in the Law of Moses that children shall not be punished for the sins of their fathers (indirectly referred to by the questioner in the above story), or Paul’s statement, “Each of us will give an account of himself to the Lord.” (Romans 14:12) We will see that such passages draw us to the theme of grace in Christ.

Generational and Corporate Sin and Blessing

To put it succinctly, the concept of shared guilt and blessing due to a perceived union with someone else is the default world view of both the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps one could even go further to delve into anthropology to argue that it is the default world view of all humans, just as the concept of blood sacrifice lies at the head of all of cultures.

This concept of shared guilt by union is built on a prior deep concept, that people can be really united to each other, such that the merits and sins of one person count toward all those in union. This is not a modern concept by and large, although we have vestiges of it. If one member of a sports team breaks the rules, no one protests if the coach makes the whole team run laps. If an employee breaks the law, we find it admirable when the boss apologizes and says “the buck stops here,” even if the boss had no knowledge of the crime at the time it occurred. We recognize it as normal for parents to be proud of their children, and married people to be proud of the

accomplishments of their spouses. If a President acts shamefully, the whole nation is embarrassed; if a local sports team wins a championship, everyone in the area feels proud.

One might break these cases down and find a way to say that the person sharing in the guilt or blessings of another actually had some part in them; e.g., perhaps the parent can be proud of teaching the child, or the boss created a climate in which crime was tolerated. But those are secondary in our thinking; primarily, we are proud of the accomplishments of our family or team because we feel they are part of us, that we have a share in them. To see this, think of the common practice in which a sports team has a disabled team member. That disabled child does not contribute to the success of the ball team, and in fact, may make their success a little bit harder. But we would think it nothing less than shameful if, when the team had won a championship, they did not invite that team member to the victory banquet, or said “You have no part of our glory!” By virtue of being on the team, the merit is shared.

We also see this in modern cultures with more ancient practices. In many such cultures, the idea of “honor killings” is common. If one member of the family acts shamefully, all of the members of the family are shamed, and must expiate that sin. The same cultures that have such practices often are also the quickest to share blessings: an international student in the US may send half his salary home to family, not even thinking of keeping it all himself, because blessings belong to the whole family.

Let us then take ourselves back to the ancient cultures of the Bible when the concept of corporate union was natural and normal. Many of the stories that bother modern readers stem from our lack of understanding of this type of union.

The sin of King David. To begin, let us consider the story of King David’s sin, recorded in 2 Samuel 24, when David took it into his head to number the people in his kingdom. Without delving into why that was a sinful act, the passage clearly records that it was, and that guilt was incurred, which David acknowledged (2 Sam 24:10). In consequence, God offers to David three options: famine, defeat in war, or pestilence. All three of these would involve punishment of people other than David, namely his nation of Israel. David chooses, and eventually 70,000 people die of pestilence.

Modern readers may react against this because others are punished for David’s sin. But the story makes sense when we understand that David was a federal head of the nation, as their king. His guilt was their guilt, by the union they had with him.

One might argue that King David feels the same as a modern reader, when he says, “I have sinned, not them.” (2 Sam 24:17) But note that in asking for mercy for them, he invokes corporate union and corporate guilt: he says “Let your hand be against me and against my father’s house,” invoking guilt not only on himself but his family. There are two views of why David says this. One is that David accepted without question the notion of union of families, but in those early days of the monarchy, he still felt that the union of a king with his people was less real than the union of a family. Another view is that David is being Christlike in offering to save the nation by laying himself down, but even in this, his view of his “self” included his family. In either case, David is not overturning the principle of corporate guilt, but rather affirming it.

The finish of the story continues this theme. God ends the pestilence, but the implication of the story is that God can do this because a sacrifice for sin will atone for it—sacrifice to expiate what justly could have been extracted even further from the people. The place where David is told to set up the sacrifice eventually becomes the ground of the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3:1). Thus, the entire Temple system of sacrifice is to some degree founded on this principle of shared merit and blessing by virtue of union. What David brings to the nation, Christ removes from the nation as the fulfillment of the Temple sacrifices.

The statement of David, “let the guilt fall on me and my family,” is echoed in Matthew 27:25 “His blood be on us and on our children!” In both cases, there is no indication in the text that the people were rebuked or corrected for such a proposition, even though they were sinners. Rather, it seems tacitly assumed that they had the right to such a statement.

Saul’s sin. An even more striking example of corporate and generational sin is found in 2 Samuel 21:1-14, which reads

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year. And David sought the face of the LORD. And the LORD said, “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.” So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites. Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah. And David said to the Gibeonites, “What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement, that you may bless the heritage of the LORD?” The Gibeonites said to him, “It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel.” And he said, “What do you say that I shall do for you?” They said to the king, “The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before the LORD at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the LORD.” And the king said, “I will give them.

“... The king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; and he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the LORD, and the seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest.

“... And after that God responded to the plea for the land.”

Note that here the text clearly says that “the LORD” said there was bloodguilt on the “house” of Saul because of Saul’s actions. Some might argue that Saul’s children were involved in the bloodshed, but there is no indication of that whatsoever in the text; rather, the text says that there is bloodguilt on the whole house because “he” put the Gibeonites to death. This is from the mouth of God himself, not from some foolhardy human who didn’t know better.

Parents and children. There are numerous other passages in which children and family members are held accountable for the sins of their parents. Examples include the following:

Deuteronomy 5:9: “I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.”

Lamentations 5:7 “Our fathers sinned, and are no more, and we bear their iniquities.”

Psalm 109:14 “May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD, and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out!”

Psalm 137:8-9 “Blessed shall be he who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!”

Matthew 23:31-35 “Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets... that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.”

In each of these, there is no reference to the children walking in the ways of their parents, though that might also occur. In some cases, as with the infants of Babylon, there was no chance for that. The most direct interpretation of each of these passages is that guilt has been accrued by virtue of the family union. In none of these is there any implication in the text that the speaker is thinking wrongly, and of course, the first and last are from the voice of God himself. In the Matthew passage, Jesus clearly states that by claiming sonship of their fathers who killed the prophets, they acknowledge their share in the guilt of those fathers.

In general, the entire pattern of using the name of a patriarch to refer to a nation is founded on this principle. When Israelites read of the curse of Canaan in Genesis 9:4, they almost certainly did not view this as ending with Canaan himself, but saw this as underlying the curse on the Canaanites they were led to conquer.

Conversely, there are numerous passages proclaiming a blessing passed down to families:

Deuteronomy 7:9 “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.”

Psalm 112:2 “His offspring will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.”

Proverbs 20:7 “The righteous who walks in his integrity—blessed are his children after him!”

2 Samuel 7:29 “For you, O Lord GOD, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever.”

2 Kings 8:19 “Yet the LORD was not willing to destroy Judah, for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever.”

These are all familiar passages to Christians. Yet people often explain these in terms of children following in their parents’ footsteps, and therefore meriting the same blessings or curses on their own, or in terms like physical law, in which consequences somehow adhere to the later

generations by the action of some machinelike force of nature, independent of any attribution of guilt. Yet the most natural reading of each is that of shared guilt and blessing by virtue of *union*—by the fact of being united, what belongs to one belongs to all. If the union is real, then the sharing of guilt and blessing is just. On the other hand, if we believe the union is fictional, then we see no justice in sharing the merits and guilt of others.

Union with God. Apart from the curses and blessings of family union, there is the blessing of being in union with God himself, through covenant. The fundamental concept of covenant is that of union which brings shared curses and blessings. (It is a mark of the growth of individualism of our culture that covenants are often described as “agreements,” as though they were temporary contracts between disconnected individuals. Biblical covenants were like the “blood brotherhood” sealed by Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer—union between two parties never to be broken. Cf. 1 Samuel 18:3.)

Some of the stories that bother people in the Bible have to do with the undeserved blessing of those in covenant with God. For example, in Genesis 12 and 20, Abraham is cowardly and lies about his wife, but those around him bear a curse or potential curse for his actions. The point of these stories is not that Abraham deserved the blessing, but that by virtue of his union with God, he was the “apple of God’s eye” (cf. Deuteronomy 32:9-10, Zechariah 2:8) and therefore he had God’s blessing despite his sin.

Note that God intrinsically identifies himself with the notion of corporate and generational sharing in the Deuteronomy passages listed above—he is the God who visits the sins of the parents on the children, and who blesses the future generations of his people. Thus, this notion is not merely a wrong-headed cultural practice of ancient times, but intrinsic to the way God himself views things.

Shared Guilt and Blessing in Adam and Jesus as Federal Heads

This notion of shared merit and guilt via union lies at the core of the Gospel itself, through the two federal heads, Adam and Jesus. In particular, two key doctrines of Reformed theology rest on this principle: the doctrine of original sin due to Adam’s fall, and the doctrine of atonement of our sin and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

On the first, the Reformed creeds are careful to spell out that our fall in Adam is not merely that we sin as Adam did, and therefore we are accountable for our new sins; the creeds also teach that our fall in Adam is not merely a case of physical consequences like death. Rather, the creeds teach the actual accounting of Adam’s sin to us. In the same way, Jesus as our Savior does not merely point the way to living a righteous life, or give us the power to live more rightly (although he does indeed do both); rather, our sin is imputed to him, and his righteousness is imputed to us. Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 make symmetrical arguments for the headship of Adam and Jesus; their guilt and righteousness lead to death and life for all humanity, respectively.

Often, in Reformed theology, these doctrines are based on the notion of Adam and Jesus being our “representatives.” In this picture, God selected these two humans to represent the rest

of us, like an elected political official. That picture has perhaps some validity, but the deeper concept of Scripture is that we share their merits and guilt because we are “in” them—we are united to them, and therefore what belongs to us belongs to them, and what belongs to them belongs to us. In the case of Jesus, this union comes about by a spiritual act of the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., R. Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*). It is an “unnatural” union, akin to a branch cut off from one vine (Adam) and grafted into another vine (Jesus). (John 15:4-5, Romans 11:24).

In the case of Adam, we are in him naturally because he is our father. It is notable that *no argument is ever made in Scripture that God “selected” Adam to be our head or representative*. No special act of God was needed to make us united to Adam. Rather, it is taken as obvious in Scripture that we are in Adam simply because he is our father, and it is well understood that the sins of fathers accrue to their children.

This is a key point, which bears restating: the very fact that no argument is made in Scripture as to why Adam is our federal head is itself resounding evidence of the ubiquity of the notion of corporate and generational sin in the world view of Scripture. Throughout Scripture, the sins of the fathers are understood to accrue to the children. Therefore it needs no further stating in the Bible: since Adam is the father of all humanity, clearly his sins and curse are accounted to all of us. As the nation of Moab was “in Moab,” their progenitor, so also the whole of humanity is “in Adam,” our common progenitor, whose name translates, indeed, to “Human.”

Lifting the Burden of the Law

Given the universal concept of corporate and generational sin throughout Scripture and implied by our doctrine, why then do we find it so surprising? The short answer is that we live on this side of the Cross, and not holding children accountable for the sins of their parents is a consequence of grace, to such a degree that we have forgotten that grace is not the natural way of things. But even in the Old Testament, it was grace, not law, that held back the punishment of children for the sins of their parents.

Let us look at several key passages that seem to overturn the principle of corporate sin. One of the most well known is given in variations in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 18, as follows:

Jeremiah 31:29-30 “In those days they shall no longer say: ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But everyone shall die for his own iniquity. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.”

Ezekiel 18:2-3 “What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.”

The first thing to note in these passages is that the concept that the sins of the fathers are passed to the children is “proverbial,” that is, obvious in their culture. These passages assume that this concept is well known, consistent with what we have discussed so far in this article.

Does God condemn this proverbial wisdom as unjust? No, in both of these passages is God is promising a “new thing” to come in the future. This is indicated by “in those days” in

Jeremiah, and “shall no more” in Ezekiel. The new thing that God is referring to is the New Covenant, discussed directly after this passage in Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 31:31-32 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.”

God promises to bring about a new day when the weight of generations of sin will not hang around their necks. But that weight of generational sin is real, and must be atoned for. We now know, in the revealed mystery of the Gospel, that in the New Covenant, Jesus provides that atonement.

Without that atonement, God is open to the accusation of injustice, and indeed, that accusation is made in Ezekiel 18:

Ezekiel 18:19 “Yet you say, ‘Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?’

Ezekiel 18:25 “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’”

Both of these accusations imply that to *not* hold a child accountable for the sins of the parents is unjust. Some would dismiss these accusations as a wrongheaded ancient thinking, but as we have seen, the justice of shared generational sin is assumed throughout the Bible, including in direct statements from the voice of God. Generational sin is real—just as the original sin of Adam is real. Until the atonement of Christ, the new precept laid down in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 18 remained a mystery. It was the same problem addressed by Paul in Romans 3, namely, how could a just God ignore any sin? Paul notes that when God “passed over former sins” in the Old Testament era, this presented a problem to be solved:

Romans 3: 25-26 “This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Before Christ, God’s justice could be impugned if he left unpunished either a person’s sins or the sins of his fathers. In Ezekiel 18, this charge of injustice is not answered directly; essentially, God says, as he does so often in the Old Testament, “Trust me.” In the Gospel, the paradox is solved—Christ presents the perfect atonement for all sins, inherited and new. As prophesied in Ezekiel, those who repent and turn from their sins will be saved, despite the weight of all their former sins and the sins of their parents.

Corporate Sin in the Civil Law

Perhaps the most common passage to be invoked to reject the notion of generational sin is in the Law of Moses:

Deut. 24:16 “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.”

God does not say here that the children bear no guilt from their fathers. He says that as a principle of earthly, civil justice, children shall not pay the penalty for the sins of their parents. Why not, if they share in the guilt?

To understand why not, we need to understand the role of earthly punishments and justice as a whole. As R.C. Sproul has pointed out, by God's standard, every sin is a capital offense deserving death ("the wages of [any sin] is death"). From an absolute moral standpoint, God could justly demand the death penalty for any sin, and he will, at the final judgment, from those who are not in Christ.

Thus the question is not why the Law of Moses allowed the death penalty, but why not every sin was punished with the death penalty. If God enforced the death penalty for every sin, no one would be left standing, and the human race would cease to exist. By reducing the earthly penalty of the law, God ensures that although there is a testimony to the seriousness of sin, the human race (and especially the nation of Israel, which is in view in the Deuteronomy text) will not be wiped out.

The precept to not punish children for the sins of their parents is one example of the reduction of the full penalty of sin under the same principle of grace. Justice says that children do indeed share in the guilt of their parents, just as we share in the sin of Adam. Grace reduces the penalty of earthly justice, so that every generation is not wiped out.

Nevertheless, on many occasions, God enforced the just demands of the absolute moral law on generational sin, and allowed the consequences of parents to come on their children. For example, the captivity of Judah is associated not only with the sins of the people alive at that time, but with the accumulated generational sins of their nation:

Isaiah 43:27-28 "Your first father sinned, and your mediators transgressed against me. Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary, and deliver Jacob to utter destruction and Israel to reviling."

Jeremiah 14:19-20 "Have you utterly rejected Judah? Does your soul loathe Zion? ... We acknowledge our wickedness, O LORD, and the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against you."

Recall that the law of Moses that says "Each one shall be put to death for his own sin," also starts out with the statement by God that he visits the sin of the fathers on their children (Deuteronomy 7:9). The later command of the civil law cannot be used to overturn the principle of corporate guilt established in the prologue of the same document. But even in that statement, which establishes the justice of corporate accounting of guilt, has grace: God only visits the sin of the fathers to the fourth generation in this world, while he extends the blessing of obedience to a thousand generations. Pure justice demands the accounting extend to all generations in both cases, but God graciously limits the punishment of the sins of the parents.

Scriptural Rejection of Nominalism

Another relevant passage occurs in one of the disputes of the Pharisees with Jesus, when Jesus says

Luke 3:8 “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”

Is this passage teaching that connectedness with our progenitors is irrelevant? Not at all. There is a blessedness from belonging to Abraham in the flesh. Yet both the Old Testament and New Testament teach that his blessing does not cancel out the sins of either ourselves or our forefathers if we have hearts that are hard against God. It must be so, because Abraham was not a sinless savior who could atone for anyone’s sins. The limited but real blessing of descent from believing parents does not, in the final accounting of God, overcome the weight of our guilt, if we do not have repentant hearts. Thus the Bible presents a repeated image: those with hard, unrepentant hearts are not covenantally connected to God at all; they have “uncircumcised hearts”. The children of Abraham are connected physically to Abraham, but they do not share in his covenantal connection to God if they repudiate his faith in their hearts:

Deuteronomy 10:16 “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”

Jeremiah 4:4 “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

Jeremiah 9:25 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh.”

By contrast, those who have faith and repent are spiritually connected to God through Abraham’s covenant:

Colossians 2:11 “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ”

In a nutshell then, our union with those of faith among our ancestors, while a blessing, cannot outweigh the weight of sin also attributed to us by virtue of our union with all our previous ancestors. This can be somewhat overwhelming if we pause to grasp it: we share the guilt of all our progenitors in the flesh, as well as all those to whom we are legally united, for example in national bonds of allegiance. We also share in all their blessings, but because none of them was sinless, any blessings that they merited, which also belong to us by union, are never enough to overcome the guilt of even their own sins, much less the sins of all the generations after them. Only our covenantal connection to God himself, in the new “circumcised” heart, can do that, through the merit of Christ.

Corporate Sin in the Final Judgement

There are several statements in Scripture that give the picture of us standing before God on our own:

Romans 14:12 “So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

1 Corinthians 3:13 “Each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.”

Revelation 20:12 “And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.”

These passages teach the incredible weightiness of everything that we do, but they do not overturn the concept of generational and corporate sin. We *are* judged individually, but in addition, our guilt is “heaped up” by the sins of our fathers and nations. As discussed above, if it were not so, if we could not share in the guilt and merit of others united to us, then the doctrine of original sin imputed to us from Adam would be false, and so would the imputation of Christ’s atonement to us.

While Revelation speaks of individual judgment, it also affirms connectional guilt. For example, in Revelation we read of the city of Babylon,

Revelation 18:5 “For her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.”

This passage, like so many others in Scripture that call down judgment on whole nations, teaches that the sins of whole city/nation are collectively judged. The whole city/nation falls under one judgment for the sins heaped up by all the other members, past and present.

Recall also the passage quoted above, in which Jesus said,

Matthew 23:31-35 “Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets... that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.”

One could argue that this refers to the temporal judgment of God on the Jewish nation in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., but it can equally well apply to the final judgment. The sins of the fathers are “heaped up” on the children. God sometimes brings judgment to bear in temporal disasters in this world, but ultimately all of these are mere precursors of the judgement to come. (Luke 13:1-5)

Legal Applications Today

How should we apply the Bible’s teaching on corporate sin today? We can address this in three areas: the *criminal* code, the *civil* code, and the *ethical* code.

Criminal law. In the case of crimes, there is no reason to lift the general principle given in Deuteronomy 24:16, discussed above, that parents are not to die for their children, nor children for their parents. The same applies to serving time in prison. As we have seen, this is not because there is no such thing as shared guilt, but because God graciously has limited the power of the sword of government (Romans 13:3-4) to punish only provable crimes by the person who committed them.

Civil law. The US system of justice has two parallel sets of courts. The *criminal* justice system punishes crimes independent of whether a victim wishes to forgive them; the debt is owed to society, or to the “ground that cries out,” not to an individual victim. These courts judge the intrinsic demands of justice based on the actions of the criminal. In the second system, the *civil* courts, what is in view is disputed ownership, or debt. In the criminal courts, the state is the prosecutor; in the civil courts, another citizen is the accuser, and the state is merely judging between rival claims.

In the second system, there is no precedent of the Law of Moses that would overturn the principle of corporate guilt. Thus, for example, suppose that my parents steal money from a neighbor and then give me the money to buy a house. Later, they die, but the crime is found out. Can I argue that I have no responsibility to give back the stolen money? No, the full amount, plus the lost time and lost opportunities of the victim, are still owed. If the victims are also dead, then the money is owed to their heirs. The amount owed is equal to the amount stolen or borrowed and not repaid. In other words, if an ancestor has 10,000 descendants, the amount of the debt is not multiplied by 10,000, as though each descendent had personally taken the whole amount. Rather, the full original amount, with whatever interest and penalties may have accrued over time, is owed by the whole set of descendants.

Based on this principle, the concept of “reparations” for past injustices is not some crazy talk, but thoroughly biblical. It may be that if many generations have gone by, it will be hard to do a full accounting, and it may also be the case that different types of payment could be more helpful than others—is free education and job training better than cash? But the principle that past sins have not only a criminal aspect for the generation that did them, but also a debt that accrues to later generation, is fully biblical.

Ethical considerations. Apart from the legal aspects given above, individual Christians should embrace the concept of corporate sin as biblical—as we have seen, the concept of imputed sin and blessing is essential for the understanding of the Gospel itself. Our union with Christ is “unnatural”—wild branches ingrafted into a new vine—while our union with Adam and all our other parents is “natural”—assumed as obvious in Scripture without argument.

At one level, this can lead to an overwhelming guilt that drives us to the Cross of Christ as our only hope. If we repent and cling to Christ, we need not wallow in the guilt of our parents any more than in our own guilt. But just as true repentance means that we honestly account for and confess our own individual sins, true repentance means that we also honestly account for and confess our corporate and generational sins. Our forgiveness is not dependent on whether we can accurately and fully account for every one of our individual or corporate sins—who could ever

account accurately for all one's sins?—but when we do know of a sin, we are duty bound to honestly acknowledge it.

Reformed pastors well versed in the Bibles all know of the great corporate confessions of sin in the Bible, such as the following:

Lamentations 5:7 “Our fathers sinned, and are no more, and we bear their iniquities.”

Nehemiah 1:6 “Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.”

Isaiah 6:5 “I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”

It seems odd that pastors who know these themes well should balk at the idea of owning the corporate sins of their own forefathers. Those who know well the imputation of the sin of Adam and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ should know as well the continuing theme in the Bible of the imputation of guilt and blessing from all those we are united to.

Conclusions

How could that pastoral candidate, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, have answered more biblically? On one hand, it is clearly a principle of criminal law that children are not to be punished for the crimes of parents. As we have discussed above, this is not because guilt does not accrue to the children, but because in God's grace the punishment meted out for crimes is limited in this present world.

On the other hand, the candidate (or another member of presbytery, who could have helped the candidate to not step on toes) could have returned the question, “In the Bible, if a nation oppressed Israel in the past, were all the people of that nation accounted guilty in the present?” The answer to this is clearly yes, and one need look no further than the Passover with its judgment on the whole nation of Egypt for evidence; other examples of remembered national sins are rife in the Old Testament. Our modern discomfort with the idea of shared guilt may come partly with the freedom from the weight of all sins, including generational and national ones, through the blood of Christ, but it may also come partly through our modern sense of lack of connection to others altogether, so that my parents and my nation seem alien to me in terms of any real shared connection. We are good at disconnecting ourselves from others, in what is known as the “alienation” of the modern world. May that not be so in the kingdom of God.

Appendix. Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What if I have multiple corporate identities, say, as an American, as a Christian, and as a member of an ethnic group?

This is certainly possible, and it leads to the real possibility of being a member of one corporate body that repents of its sins, while also a member of another corporate body that does not.

Our most core corporate identity is in Christ and his Body of people, if we are united to him by faith. The lack of repentance of my country and or immediate family doesn't change that. Thus, while the sins of my nation and forebears accrue to me, they are forgiven like all other sins if I am in Christ.

Seeing my highest identity in Christ does not mean that I should act as though I had no union to anyone else, and reject all ties of country or family (or sports team, etc.) We are both in this world and not of it. While those other ties can neither save us nor condemn us, they are real and important to our identity.

Q: How can people call on America to repent of sins if it is not a Christian nation? Does this not imply misusing Scripture to treat America like a new Israel?

America is not a chosen nation, nor has it ever had any explicit covenant with God. It is a nation which has had a lot of Christians and a lot of Christian influence in a positive way, but it is one of many nations.

But any nation, pagan, Christian, or a mix therefore, can be called to repentance. The Old Testament prophets did not just call on Israel to repent. Pages are given to calling the surrounding nations to repent. The message to anyone in the world, both individuals and nations, is to preach the just laws of God and the need to repent of evil and turn to God and ask for his grace. Calling the USA to repent of any national sin, whether abortion and infanticide, or institutionalized racism, or sexual perverseness, is not a call to a prior "golden age" but a call to conform to the absolute, eternal standards of God.

Q: What about Paul's statement that "there is neither Jew nor Greek" in the kingdom of God? (Romans 10:12, Galatians 3:28) Doesn't that remove any sense of ethnic identity?

Paul also said that there is neither male nor female, and neither slave nor free, but that did not mean that he rejected these as real categories of people with relevant consequences.

In those statements, the Apostle Paul is making the general argument that we all are equal before God, and that certain categories of group identity do not make us higher or lower in God's eyes. But he is not saying that such identities are not real or relevant. As discussed above, we have multiple aspects of our identities, with our union with Christ being the highest. Other connections matter, but do not overrule our chief identity in Christ.