

ORIGINAL SIN: NEGATIVE DOCTRINE OR NECESSARY DOCTRINE?

In classical Christian theology the doctrine of original sin, implicitly taught in such portions of Scripture as Romans 3:23 and Ephesians 2:1, is foundational to the Christian faith. Original sin is the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden that brought death to all mankind (Romans 6:23). Our LDS friends would agree with this definition. Both Evangelical and LDS doctrine teach that Adam's sin was his disobedience to God by eating the forbidden fruit. Where sharp disagreement comes in is whether or not original sin *infected* the entire human race or simply *affected* it. In LDS doctrine, sin (and thus evil) affect mankind, and that effect is both good and bad. LDS doctrine teaches that without original sin there would be no death and thus no human race and no way back to God. According to LDS doctrine, God and his spirit wife gave birth to and loved all their spirit children, of whom the eldest was Jesus. God desired that his children (born in pre-existence) would grow, be tested by sinful temptations, and eventually become (literally) like him. The earth was organized for this mission, and Adam voluntarily came first to bring about original sin which would help mankind progress back to God and ultimate godhood. In a sense, evil (sin) is a "necessary evil" in Mormon theology. It exists and affects every human being, but ultimately it is necessary for the good of mankind.

No Mormon would deny the horrible effects of evil. Nor would they deny the fact that they have sinned. They would, however, disagree with the historical Christian teaching of the total depravity of all mankind because of Adam's sin. Mormons believe man is basically good, that children are born without sin, and that sin is not considered sin unless it is consciously done. Mormon theology teaches that by the age of eight children know the difference between what is right and what is wrong and therefore can make a conscious choice to sin when faced with temptation. In light of these beliefs, our LDS friends are taken aback by what they perceive to be a very negative teaching of original sin in historical Christian doctrine. That man is inherently evil because of one person's wrong-doing is inconceivable.

It is interesting to note that this issue of the transmission of Adam's sin to all mankind has been challenged since the time of the Apostles. Paul, in his letter to the Romans (3:24-26) explains that our hope of being justified by God rests in the person and work of Jesus (our Divine representative) whose perfect sinlessness was imputed to us, bringing reconciliation to God through faith in Him. This imputation of righteousness from the perfect Son of God takes care of the sin of Adam (our human representative), which had been imputed to us at the Fall (Rom. 5:16-21).

The doctrine of Original Sin is necessary to understanding a sinful nature that cannot fix itself, but when sharing our faith with our LDS friends it is best

to start with a conversation about evil and sin rather than using terminology like original sin and total depravity (concepts which build walls rather than bridges). When the problem of sin is established then we can explain, states Greg Johnson of *Standing Together Ministries*, “that it is not that we evangelicals love to burden ourselves with the heaviness of sin, but that we realize how truly broken we are.” Recognizing that we are all sinners (because of Adam’s sin) and that we need a perfect Savior who once and for all defeated sin and its power over us, is an essential step towards helping Mormons understand who God is and what He has truly done for us.