Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 14/1 (Spring 2003): 150–175.

Is All Death a Consequence of Sin?: Theological Implications of Alternative Models

Marco T. Terreros
Colombia Adventist University

The mystery of death has perturbed the human mind for ages. As a consequence, perplexing questions have constantly haunted Christian understanding. How and why did pain, suffering, and death enter the world? Is the sin of Adam the only viable explanation? Did physical death in all its forms, death in the animal kingdom, for example, come into the world exclusively as a result of the fall of man? Was there any kind of death on earth before the sin of Adam?

If death anteceded sin, what happens with the concept of the goodness of God and of his original creation? Many Christians believe God used organic evolution as his means for creating humanity. Does that belief have any negative impact on the Christian perception of humanity as created in the image of God? How are we to interpret those biblical passages that seem to indicate that there was no death in the world before the Fall? Are there any important soteriological implications involved?

Great thinkers in the records of the Judeo-Christian tradition have grappled with most of these queries. Their views reveal a significant variety of suggestions offered in answer to these and related questions through the centuries. In order to illustrate the point, a brief survey of views held by some representative figures from the intertestamental period up to modern times is now presented.

The Relationship Between Adam's Sin and Nonhuman Physical Death

Intertestamental and Early Christian Era. In the Book of Jubilees, from the second half of the first century B.C., the effects[1] of the Fall are limited

[1]The effects are described in 3:17ff. For Adam these included wearisome work, expulsion from the Garden, and return to the earth from which he was taken (death); for Eve, painful childbearing and subjection to man.

mostly to Adam and Eve themselves, as far as the lot of humanity is concerned, but include the animal kingdom, which, as a result of the sin of man, was deprived of the faculty of speech:

> And on that day [‘on which Adam went forth from the Garden’ (Jub. 3:27)] was closed the mouth of all beasts, and of cattle, and of birds, and of whatever walks, and of whatever moves, so that they could no longer speak: for they had all spoken one with another with one lip and with one tongue. (vs. 28)

It is worth noticing, in this connection, that Jubilees seems to ascribe moral responsibility to the animal creation as well as to human beings.

Adam’s sin, according to 2 Enoch, did not translate into a curse and a cause of death for the nonhuman creation. And as Adam, ruler and representative of all the creation, was not cursed, [2] the creatures under him were not either:

> But I cursed ignorance, but what I had blessed previously, those I did not curse. I curse not man, nor the earth nor other creatures, but man’s evil fruit, and his works. (2 Enoch 31:7–8)

According to Wisdom of Solomon, in the beginning “God made no death,”[3] and this condition of original immortality seems to apply to the natural world as well as to humanity:

> For he created all things that they might have being: And the products of the world are healthsome, and there is no poison of destruction in them: Nor hath Hades royal dominion upon the earth. (Wisdom 1:13)

Post-New Testament Christian Era. Late in the first century A.D. the Jewish historian Josephus made comments on the effects of the Fall upon Adam, Eve, the serpent, and the earth. Apparently, Josephus believed that harmful characteristics in animals, like poison in venomous serpents, were not a natural feature in them, but were furnished by God after the Fall as a punishment for sin.[4] Referring to some of the consequences of the Fall, Josephus writes of God: “He moreover deprived the serpent from speech,[5] indignant at his malignity to

---

[2]In this connection, 2 Enoch 58:3–6 reads: “. . . The Lord will not judge a single soul of beast for man’s sake, but adjudges the souls of men to their beasts in this world; for men have a special place. And as every soul of man is according to number, similarly beasts will not perish, nor all souls of beasts which the Lord created, till the great judgment, and they will accuse man, if he feed them ill.”

[3]Wisdom 1:13.

[4]Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.45–50.4 (Loeb Classical Library [LCL]), 4:23.

[5]This may be a reference to Jubilees 3:28, where the legend of animals being deprived of the faculty of speech due to man’s sin is originally found.

Adam; He also put poison beneath his tongue, destining him to be the enemy of men."[6]

Irenaeus is an early Father for whom "not only the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin" and her sin,[7] but also, as a consequence of that sin, the creation itself was submitted to bondage. To argue his case, Irenaeus quotes the Pauline statement, "for the creature has been subjected to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope" (Rom 8: 19ff.).[8] For Irenaeus, the final restoration of all things will be a return to the conditions existent prior to the Fall.

By the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine, the famous bishop of Hippo, sees no problem in God's creating harmful animals[9] that may occasion even death. These are not harmful because of the sin of Adam.[10] In Augustine's view, men are "very foolish" when they "dare," as the Manicheans, "to find fault with many things whose purpose they do not see." Augustine admits that he does not know why mice, frogs, flies, or worms were created,[11] but he sees that nevertheless, "all things are beautiful in their kind, though on account of our sins many things seem to us disadvantageous."[12] For Augustine, all living things are either useful, on one hand, or harmful or superfluous, on the other; and since God governs this universe so well, it behooves us to "make use of what is useful, watch out for what is harmful, [and] leave what is superfluous."[13]

In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas rather indirectly addresses the question of animal death on account of the sin of man. The sin of man did not so change the animals' nature as to make them become savage and kill one another. So, for Aquinas, "clashes and antipathy would have been natural between certain animals," even in the state of man's innocence.[14] He considers it "altogether unreasonable" for animals to have been tame and to have lived on a vegetarian diet before the Fall.

Martin Luther addresses the issue in the sixteenth century. In his understanding, the misfortunes that followed the sin of Adam were aggravated in

---

[6]*Antiquities* 1.45–50.4 (LCL, 4:23).

[7]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 19.1 (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers* [ANF]), 1:547).

[8]Ibid., (ANF 1:561).

[9]Augustine, *Against the Manichees* 1.16.25. See also Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 3.15 (*Ancient Christian Writers* [ACW], 41:91).

[10]In Augustine's view, brute beasts inflict harm on one another not because of sin, "for there is no sin in them for which this could be a punishment," but because "one animal is the nourishment of another." Ibid., 3.16 (ACW, 41:92).

[11]Augustine says, "I do not understand where all these things come from if not from the highest measure, number and order, which lies in the immutable and eternal sublimity of God." *Against the Manichees* 1.16.25 (*The Fathers of the Church* [FC], 84:72).

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., (FC, 84:74).

[14]Thomas Aquinas, "The Original State or Condition with respect to Man's Dominion," *Summa Theologiae* 1a.96.1.

those who came after the Flood.[15] The troubles appearing immediately after Adam's sin were lighter than the deterioration that followed in the aftermath.[16] But Luther differentiates between human death and any other kind of death. Based on Ps 90:3, he states that "the death of man is in countless ways a far greater calamity than the death of other living beings."[17]

Luther considers the death of humans a punishment for sin, a "genuine disaster," and in itself "truly an infinite and eternal wrath." Animals, however, "die because of a law of nature."[18] Animals

> do not die because God is angry at them. On the contrary, for them death is, as it were, a sort of temporal casualty, ordained indeed by God but not regarded by Him as punishment. Animals die because for some other reason it seemed good to God that they should die.[19]

On the other hand, writing about the cause of animal death, Luther states that "Even animals do not die by accident. They die because we make them die (Gen. 1:28). Their experiences are directed by man."[20]

Two centuries later, John Wesley recognizes the universality of the food chain,[21] in virtue of which almost all creatures devour one another in a struggle for survival due to the scarcity of food. "But in the beginning it was not so," he writes. "The paradisiacal earth afforded a sufficiency of food for all its inhabitants; so that none of them had any need or temptation to prey upon the other."[22] Other views from more recent times will be presented as our discussion advances.

This survey of views reveals at least three things. First, that great minds in the history of Christian thought have struggled to understand the relationship between the sin of Adam and the occurrence of death and its corollaries—pain, suffering, etc.—in the natural world. Second, that those thinkers were not agreed on the subject. And third, that further investigation can still contribute to the discussion in the search for further clarification. This study approaches the issue from the theological perspective.

---

[15]Frosts, lightning bolts, injurious dews, storms, overflowing rivers, earthquakes, things not mentioned in Gen 3, "were added to the curse of the earth," as consequence of the Flood. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* 3:17–19 (Luther´s Works [LW], 1:206). Calvin would eventually make a similar point. Cf. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* 1.1.30 (Calvin's Commentaries, trans. Rev. John King [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948]), 99–100.

[16]Ibid., (LW, 1:216).

[17]Luther, *Selected Psalms II* 90:3 (LW, 13:94).

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Luther, Psalm 90 vs. 3 (LW, 13:97).

[21]See Wesley, Sermon LX 2.3 (*Wesley´s Works* [WW], 6:246–247).

[22]Sermon LXI 1.12 (WW, 6:212).

Ideological Background to the Concept of Death Before Sin

Three major ideas are prominent in the development of the concept of death before the sin of Adam. These ideas, mentioned in chronological order according to their appearance in history, are: First, the total independence of the lot of the animal kingdom from human morality. This means that man's moral behavior in terms of obedience or disobedience to God has nothing to do with the sufferings of the animal creation. Second, the existence of pre-Adamic beings as a hypothesis to explaining the origin and differences between races. Third, the idea that periods of time far greater than the biblical record as traditionally interpreted seems to allow for were needed in order to account for the history of life on earth. Let us consider them briefly.

Human Morality and the Animal Kingdom. 2 Enoch, written in the intertestamental period, is perhaps the first source hinting that the lot of animals is independent of human moral behavior. According to this work, God would not curse that which he had blessed; Adam was not really cursed when he sinned; neither was the animal creation (2 Enoch 31:7–8; 58:3–6).

Throughout the Christian era several writers suggest that whatever happens to the animal creation has no relation to human moral conduct, as sampled in the preceding survey of thinkers. Literature arguing for the total independence of the animal kingdom's fate from human morality is more abundant after 1800. William Buckland, John Pye Smith, and James Orr, among others, contribute significantly to this body of literature. Buckland, theologian and Oxford lecturer in Geology and Mineralogy, declares that

> throughout the brute creation death is in no way connected with the moral misconduct of the human race, and whether Adam had, or had not, ever transgressed, a termination by death is, and always has been, the condition on which life was given to every individual among the countless myriads of beings inferior to ourselves, which God has been pleased to call into existence.[23]

The fundamental point in Buckland's argument is that if the fate of animals is not to be made dependant on human moral behavior, it can be logically concluded that death in the animal kingdom occurred before man sinned. He argues from the uniformitarian principle that the present is the key to the past, but not from Scripture.

The theologian James Orr believes that the whole discussion of the connection between natural and moral evil is summarized in the consideration of one

[23]William Buckland, "An Inquiry Whether the Sentence of Death Pronounced at the Fall of Man Included the Whole Animal Creation, or Was Restricted to the Human Race," London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1839,12. A Sermon preached by Buckland on January 27, 1839, in the Cathedral of Christ Church, "before the University of Oxford."

special and decisive issue, namely, "the relation of sin to death."[24] Even though Orr opposes what he repeatedly calls the "modern view," namely, the dissolution of any connections between sin and human death[25] he gives new emphasis to the idea that the sin of the original couple affected only the human but not the animal realm. Another thinker, John Pye Smith, who follows Buckland and refers constantly to him, argues in similar terms.[26]

Pre-Adamic Theories.[27] The affirmation that human (or prehuman) beings existed before the Adam of the Genesis record is not new. The idea is very important in connection with affirming death, the death of these pre-Adamic beings, as a historical reality before the sin of Adam.

There has been an abundant literary production on the subject of the existence of pre-Adamite beings and their significance in connection with the debate about origins.[28] The idea was advanced in an attempt to harmonize religion and science, particularly "upon the question of the antiquity of man and the unity of the race."[29] The possibility of the existence of human races before the time of Adam was welcomed even by some who were not yet committed to the idea, as a functional means of elucidating some Bible difficulties.

Pre-Adamic theories were proposed in writing as early as 1655[30] by the French intellectual and diplomat Isaac de la Peyrère (1594–1676).[31] Since then,

---

[24]James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World as Centring in the Incarnation* (New York: Charles Scribner´s Sons, 1897), 196.

[25]Ibid., 196, 198, 447.

[26]John Pye Smith, *On the Relation Between the Holy Scriptures and Some Parts of Geological Science* (Philadelphia: Robert E. Peterson, 1850), 198.

[27]The issue of Pre-Adamism is treated in this article only as it relates to the affirmation of the occurrence of death on our planet prior to the sin of Adam. For more on the subject, see David N. Livingstone, "Preadamites: The History of an Idea from Heresy to Orthodoxy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 41–66; Herbert W. Schneider, *A History of American Philosophy* (New York: Columbia UP, 1946), 343–365; Richard Henry Popkin, "The Development of Religious Skepticism and the Influence of Isaac La Peyrère's Pre-Adamism and Bible Criticism," in *Classical Influences in European Culture, A.D. 1500–1700*, ed. R. R. Bolgar (New York: Cambridge UP, 1976), 271–280; idem, "The Pre-Adamite Theory in the Renaissance," in *Philosophy and Humanism, Renaissance Essays in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. Edward P. Maloney (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 50–57; idem, "Pre-Adamism in 19th Century American Thought: 'Speculative Biology' and Racism," *Philosophia* 8 (1978): 205–239.

[28]Ellen White addresses the teaching "that the earth was populated long before the record of creation." E. White, *Spiritual Gifts* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1945), 3:92–93.

[29]Joseph Parrish Thompson, *Man in Genesis and Geology, or, the Biblical Account of Man's Creation, Tested by Scientific Theories of His Origin and Antiquity* (New York: Samuel R. Wells, 1870), 106–107.

[30]According to Livingstone, there have been suggestions, without much objective evidence, that the idea was hinted at in the days of early Christianity by such figures as Origen and Julian the Apostate. Livingstone, "Preadamites," 42.

[31]Isaac de la Peyrère, *Systema Theologicum ex Preadamitarum Hypothesis* (Amsterdam/Basel: Latin Press, 1655). That same year Peyrère also published his *Preadamitae sive exercitatio super versibus duodecimo, decimo-tertio et decimo-cuarto, capitis quinti Epistolae D. Pauli ad Romanos*. Both works were republished together in London the following year, 1656, under the title *Men Be-*

the theory has reappeared repeatedly, gaining such significance in scholarly circles that Richard H. Popkin is convinced that

> from the mid-17th century onward, pre-Adamism was the real spectre haunting Western thought, it was the most fundamental challenge to the Judeo-Christian tradition to arise from the "new science" and the "new philosophy."[32]

Thus, Popkin not only highlights the lure of pre-Adamite philosophy, but points out the historical fact that it flourished in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. Popkin goes on to say that pre-Adamite theories were a greater threat to the traditional picture of nature and the destiny of man, based on the biblical account, than the Copernican theory or the mechanistic view of nature.[33] Popkin describes the character of the pre-Adamite theory as multifaceted, with three basic thrusts in its development:

> The first was Bible criticism, presenting the existing Scripture as a human construction whose relation to Divine Truth was difficult, if not impossible to ascertain. The second was polygenesis, that mankind had multiple origins, and only some (in fact only, at the most, one) had Divine significance. And the third was the pre-historical aspect, that human history preceded the official history of the world presented in Genesis, and possibly developed independently of the Divine plan therein described.[34]

Even though the origin of Adam is not made altogether clear in pre-Adamic theories, his historicity is never denied. For example, Benjamin Warfield, a champion of evangelicalism, did not see any danger for Christian theology in believing that Adam was a descendent from pre-Adamic races, though these races lacked God's image in the soul. Warfield believed that if a body is formed "by propagation from brutish parents" under the directing hand of God, it would

---

fore Adam. Or a Discourse upon the Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth Verses of the Fifth Chapter of the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Romans. By Which are Prov'd, That the First Men were Created before Adam. The work, originally designed to meet the problem of the extent of animal and human migration over the earth since the time of creation, was theologically based, allegedly, "in detailed exegesis of the book of Romans." It was Peyrère's intention to clarify the Pauline statement, "for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law" (Rom 5:13). Finding conventional interpretations of the passage as referring to the Mosaic law unconvincing, Peyrère applied "the law" as law given to Adam. From this reinterpretation it logically followed that there must have been human beings on earth before Adam. Livingstone, "Preadamites," 42.

[32]Popkin, "Pre-Adamism," 206.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

be just and appropriate that such body be provided by God's creative energy with a soul truly human.[35]

David Livingstone further remarks:

> Since the 1940s, right up to the present day, the preadamite theory has continued to attract those evangelicals who want to maintain their traditionally 'high' doctrine of scripture and yet remain open to the world of science.[36]

This means that pre-Adamism is neither dead nor foreign to evangelical theology. But, if human races lived and became extinct before the time of Adam, then death before Adam's sin becomes an "a priori" established reality.

Evolution and "Deep Time." A very important factor in establishing the idea of death as a reality on earth prior to humankind's fall into sin is the concept that periods of time significantly longer than those suggested by the biblical record, as normally interpreted, are needed in order to account for the history of life on the planet. Time and the geological and biological changes that take place in the course of time are two properties without which evolution would be unable to operate. In the context of an evolutionary continuity of life, those two properties bring death as a third factor in their wake.[37] Deep time is indispensable for evolution. If observable present-day causes do not seem to be sufficient to provide acceptable explanations for things as they are now, "one must postulate vast periods of time in the past, in order to give the causes time to produce these physical changes."[38]

With the rise of geology as a science and the ensuing increase in the amount and variety of fossils that were being unearthed, it seemed evident that far more time than the biblical record (as traditionally interpreted) allowed for was needed if a plausible explanation for the mysteries of the past was to be found. This was true no matter which of the two major approaches to understanding those mysteries, catastrophism or uniformitarianism, was adopted. As a result, the accepted scale of historical time was forcibly expanded from a few thousand to many million years.[39] Thus the truism was gaining confirmation that "basic

---

[35]Benjamin Warfield, review of James Orr, *God's Image in Man* (New York: Charles Scribner´s Sons, 1904), 557. This, for Warfield, was not equivalent to a denial of a common origin for the human race, a common origin which, in his view, the evolutionary hypothesis had established. Cf. Warfield, "On the Antiquity and the Unity of the Human Race," *Princeton Theological Review* 9 (1911): 21–22.

[36]Livingstone, "Preadamites," 63.

[37]Loren C. Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), 35.

[38]Robert T. Clark and J. D. Bales, *Why Scientists Accept Evolution* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 12; see also Wilbert H. Rusch, Sr., *The Argument: Creationism vs. Evolutionism*, Creation Research Society Monographs Series, no. 3 (Norcross, GA: CRS Books, 1988), 51.

[39]Stephen Toulmin, "The Historicization of Natural Science: Its Implications for Theology" in *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*, eds. Hans Kung and David Tracy, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 235.

conceptual changes in fact take place, which transform the theoretical basis of the natural sciences either rapidly or gradually."[40]

It was becoming apparent, in the course of time, that as opponents of a uniformitarian worldview, such as that popularized by Lyell, grew silent, what Eiseley terms "point-extinction" (the extinction of individual species) had replaced the concept of mass death. "Death, in other words, was becoming natural—a product of the struggle for existence."[41] And, as appropriately noted by George L. Murphy, "such acceptance was a necessary prelude to serious scientific thinking about evolution."[42]

Thus, Lyell succeeded in establishing the philosophical framework (geological uniformitarianism) necessary for the acceptance of a long history of death on earth before the appearance of humans. But it was Darwin who made death biologically acceptable and, even more, indispensable.[43] There was no perceived need for death on earth before the advent of humankind as long as a short chronology for the history of life on the planet was almost universally accepted,[44] or, in the words of Bernard Ramm, "as long as the theologians reckoned humankind's existence on this earth as no more than six thousand years and interpreted Gen. 2–3 in a literalistic and historical sense."[45] However, with the development of geology, paleontology, and physical anthropology, this traditional interpretation was challenged. Thus, science was succeeding in having the chronological framework changed. Clark Pinnock points out astronomy and geology as indicators, for evangelicals, that Gen 1 and 2 should not be regarded as history. "One thing is certain," says Pinnock about evangelicals, and that is, "they did not find out about an ancient earth from reading Genesis."[46]

In other words, if long periods of time did not elapse before the advent of man, no basis remains for the claim of death occuring before the fall of Adam. Hence, claims of death before sin are usually linked with statements of a very long history of life on earth prior to the Fall.

---

[40]Ibid., 233.

[41]Eiseley, 51.

[42]George L. Murphy, "A Theological Argument for Evolution," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* [JASA] 38 (March 1986): 23.

[43]David Lack observes that "the only method of evolution of which we have knowledge is natural selection, which requires a high death-rate." David Lack, *Evolutionary Theory and Christian Belief: The Unresolved Conflict* (London: Methuen, 1957), 76.

[44]Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 5, comments that Darwin used a "prodigious length" of time to soften the blow of his theory of human evolution upon human pride.

[45]Bernard Ramm, *Offense to Reason: The Theology of Sin* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 113.

[46]Clark H. Pinnock, "Climbing Out of a Swamp: The Evangelical Struggle to Understand the Creation Texts," *Interpretation* 43 (January 1989): 154.

Evangelical Christian Theology and Death Before Sin

The Relationship between Sin and Death. While naturalistic evolution excludes God, theistic evolution became such by retaining God in the model. There lies their fundamental difference. They concur, however, in ascribing an essential role to death in the evolutionary process. And so, as evolution as a process cannot operate without struggle and death, death remains an essential factor not only in atheistic evolution, but also in the context of an evolutionary system which claims to be theistic.

In theistic evolution, death is viewed as just the "other side" of life. In fact, death is needed as a pre-requisite if new life is to appear, which means that life is contingent upon death.[47] Because God intended things to be the way they are, according to many evangelical scholars, death in itself is not evil and, therefore, it has always been there, even before sin appeared.

For example, Jan Lever, who considers death as a central element in the Paradise story, thinks that the idea "that death, disease and abnormalities could have occurred in organisms only *after* the fall in Paradise" is passé; it is not believed any more.[48] The current fact according to the fossil record, he stresses, is that countless living forms lived and died before man was present on this earth.[49]

The Oxford scholar Arthur Peacocke thinks that theology will be going "along the wrong track" if it presupposes an ideal deathless past from which humans have fallen. Therefore, death, in the context of Pauline thought, can only mean "death" in some figurative sense or, perhaps, spiritual death.[50] John Polkinghorne, and many other evangelical scholars, reason along similar lines.[51]

In evangelical circles it has become a given that death was present in the world before the sin of Adam. The affirmation may take different forms. It may be either expressed directly or implied in other assumptions and theories. Different ways of justifying the belief are now presented.

Evangelical Justifications for Accepting the Concept of Death Before the Fall

Bernard Ramm, leading modern proponent of progressive creation, a model with more elements of agreement than disagreement with theistic evolution, is perhaps the first outstanding contemporary evangelical scholar to reopen the

---

[47]Arthur Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 164, 165, 169. See also Pattle P. T. Pun, "A Theology of Progressive Creationism," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 39 (March 1987), 12, 13.

[48]Jan Lever, *Where Are We Headed?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 20, 21; Lever's emphasis.

[49]Ibid., 21.

[50]Arthur Peacocke, "The Challenge of Science to Theology and the Church" in *The New Faith and Science Debate: Probing Cosmology, Technology, and Theology*, ed. John M. Mangum (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 16.

[51]John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship Between Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1991), 99. See especially chapter 8, "The Fall," 99–104.

discussion on death before the Fall that became so prominent in the nineteenth century.[52] Ramm points out that in general, the sentence of death is one of the issues related to the Edenic curse that has received the most attention.[53] He devotes a good deal of attention to the subject, too.

Ideal Conditions Only Within the Garden. Ramm suggests that the assumption that before the sin of Adam there was no death anywhere in the world and that all creatures were vegetarians is all an imposition on the biblical record.[54] In his view, ideal conditions, those without the presence of death, existed only within the garden of Eden.[55] Outside of it "there was disease, bloodshed and death throughout nature long before man sinned."[56] Ramm explains:

> Outside of the Garden of Eden were death, disease, weeds, thistles, thorns, carnivores, deadly serpents, and intemperate weather. To think otherwise is to run counter to an immense avalanche of fact. Part of the blessedness of man was that he was spared all of these things in his Paradise, and part of the judgment of man was that he had to forsake such a Paradise and enter the world as it was outside of the garden, where thistles grew and weeds were abundant and where animals roamed and where life was only possible by the sweat of man's brow."[57]

Death: A Divine Institution. A number of evangelical scholars picture death as a divine institution rather than as the result of human sin. It is their common underlying premise that death is essentially good and not evil. On this account, they resort to the overpopulation argument, according to which, "unless a very large number of certain forms of life are consumed, e.g., insects and fish, the earth would be shortly overpopulated with them."[58] Death is thus perceived as an indispensable factor originally intended by God himself for preserving the balance of nature and the happiness of life.

---

[52]James R. Moore remarks: "As for evolutionists who wish to be more intelligent Christians, they would do well to read again the ancients. Which is not to say that Christian evolutionists in the nineteenth century provided all the answers for Christian Neo-Darwinians in the twentieth, but that almost every contemporary issue was confronted or anticipated before 1900." James R. Moore, "Evolutionary Theory and Christian Faith: A Bibliographical Guide to the Post-Darwinian Controversies," *Christian Scholar's Review* 4 (1975): 230.

[53]Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 334.

[54]Ibid., 334. On the basis of the assumption that "life can live only on life," Ramm argues that we are not to believe that the lion, the tiger, the ant-eater, and the shark were all vegetarians till Adam fell, and that the teeth of the big cats were all for vegetarian purposes only (ibid., 335).

[55]The idea of the existence of ideal conditions only within the garden of Eden, with the presence of death outside of it, had been suggested by the middle of the nineteenth century by Edward Hitchcock in his book *The Religion of Geology and Its Connected Sciences* (1851), and by Brian P. Sutherland by the middle of the twentieth. Cf. Brian P. Sutherland, "The Fall and Its Relation to Present Conditions in Nature," *JASA* 2 (December 1950): 14–19.

[56]Ramm, *The Christian View*, 334.

[57]Ibid., 335.

[58]Ibid., 334.

Death in the Garden: Spiritual Death. The proposal here is that God's sentence of death in Gen 2:17 must have been a reference to spiritual death, while the words of the serpent in 3:4 were a reference to physical death as effected after expulsion from the Garden. This being the case, the apparent contradiction between the two passages disappears and both God and Satan are found to be in the right, which, in turn, would not rule out the existence of physical death before a historical Fall.[59]

It has been suggested that even "if Adam hadn't sinned and continued to live in the garden of Eden, some death would most likely have taken place"[60] in order to prevent unchecked growth and ensuing overpopulation. The means of achieving these objectives would necessarily be the presence of carnivora before and after the Fall. That presence, it is maintained, is attested by the fact that "some forms of life today live exclusively on other life," and by evidences from the fossil record that "some of the pre-Adamic animals were carnivores."[61] Therefore, the sentence of death in Gen. 3 must necessarily be a reference to spiritual death.

The Myth of Physical Death as Evil. For many evangelical scholars, the traditional interpretation of the reality of death as a direct consequence of human sin is a myth. Richard Doss has called it "the myth of cosmic drama," following John Hick, who calls it "the great creation-fall-redemption myth" and also "the great cosmic drama."[62] The myth is cosmic in scope because it includes the creation story, humanity's fall into sin, the struggle between good and evil, Christ's death (and resurrection) for the redemption of humankind, and the hope of a definitive eschatological elimination of death.[63]

Even though the historical validity of this "myth" is acknowledged in "conserving and communicating the basic realities of the Christian faith," its veracity is questioned.[64] Even if not using the term "myth" in this context, some evangelical authors treat as such the belief in the Fall as the cause of physical death. William Sanford LaSor, for example, considers the concept that nothing or no one on earth died before Adam's fall an "unrealistic teaching."[65] And Munday calls it "presumptuous" to affirm "that the creation was 'subjected' to creature mortality at the fall" rather than at the very beginning.[66]

---

[59]Don Wardell, *God Created*, 2d ed.(Winona Lake, IN: Priv. Pub., 1984), 96–97.

[60]Ibid., 97.

[61]Ibid.

[62]John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 283, 284; G. R. Lambert, "Was the Pre-Flood Animal Kingdom Vegetarian?" *Creation Research Society Quarterly* [CRSQ] 20 (September 1983): 16; cf. Hick, 283.

[63]Richard Doss, "Towards a Theology of Death," *Pastoral Psychology* 23 (June 1972), 16.

[64]So Hick, 284.

[65]William Sanford LaSor, "Biblical Creationism," *Asbury Theological Journal* 42. (1987), 17.

[66]John C. Munday Jr., "Creature Mortality: From Creation or the Fall?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (March 1992), 51, 56, 63–64, 67.

The Agency of Evil Angelic Powers. That Satan's rebellion against God could have taken place before there was any life on the earth is seen by some evangelical authors who are devoted to a high view of Scripture as an interesting possibility for explaining the existence of death before the sin of Adam. Admitting the possible truth of the belief that animals would not die if there was no sin in the world, the suggestion has been made that animal death could be considered an effect of Satan's sin before Adam was created.[67]

Murphy admits that the idea of fallen angelic powers can be of some help in understanding the cosmic scope of the problem of evil.[68] At the same time, the idea of applying any theory of angelology and demonology to gaining an understanding of the Genesis account is opposed by some scholars like Ramm,[69] while favored by such others as Donald Bloesch[70] and C. S. Lewis.[71]

The foregoing discussion leads us to at least two important points. First, evangelicals justify the affirmation of death before the Fall mostly through arguments drawn from sources other than Scripture. Second, these scholars do not refer to any negative implications of the acceptance of death as a reality anteceding Adam's sin. They fail to provide their readers with solid, biblically based theological justification for their respective proposals. The question is, what does the Bible say to evangelicals for whom the Bible is the final authority?

It must be observed, at this juncture, that another group of evangelical scholars have addressed, in fragmentary fashion, the subject of death before the Fall by pointing to its potential problems for theology. Their writings on this issue will be considered later in this study.

Death in Animals Because of Adam's Sin? The question of death and suffering in the animal world is one of great importance. On the one hand, as we have seen, many scholars see such death as a natural phenomenon. On the other hand, the fact of suffering in the animal world is seen by other thinkers as one of the greatest of all objections to a Christian theology about a loving, all-powerful, and compassionate God. The problem is not an easy one to explore.[72]

---

[67]Wardell, 97. On the concept of the agency of fallen angels as a possible explanation of natural evil as part of the free-will defense argument, see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

[68]Murphy, 25. In like fashion, David Lack considers it a "serious claim" that "the power of evil which helped to produce man's Fall was active in the world before man's appearance and produced other effects, including death" (76).

[69]Cf. Ramm, *The Christian View*, 205, 199 passim; so also R. J. Berry, *God and Evolution* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 89–90.

[70]Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 1: *God, Authority and Salvation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 106.

[71]After stating his personal belief in the existence of Satan and demonic powers, Lewis writes that such powers "may well have corrupted the animal creation before man appeared. . . . I say that living creatures were corrupted by an evil angelic being." C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 123.

[72]Cf. John Hartog II, "Sin, Redemption and the Animal Kingdom," Th.D. diss. Grace Theological Seminary, 1978, 68–69; Lewis, 118–119.

John Hick states the difficulty as follows:

> Now the sufferings of animals constitute one of the most baffling aspects of the problem of evil. Although this is perhaps not the gravest and most oppressive of evil's many forms, it may nevertheless be the hardest for us to understand.[73]

A tension between a terrible predicament and a hopeful expectancy of liberation is said by Paul in the New Testament (cf. Rom 8:18–25) to be the lot not only of human beings but of the whole of creation, subjected to decay at the beginning, but awaiting eschatological redemption. That way of thinking is in keeping with the Old Testament theology and philosophy of nature, to which we now turn.

The Old Testament Data: Man as Federal Representative of the Natural World

A connection between human moral behavior, particularly in terms of obedience or disobedience to God, and death in the animal kingdom is evident in the Old Testament.

The close interrelation between humanity and the nonhuman order of nature is underlined in the account of the Fall in Gen 3. The passage reveals that "rebellion against God disrupts relationships among people and between people and the land."[74] When the man and woman fall into sin, the earth is cursed because of them (vs. 17). Now, in order to eat from it, the earth must be tilled and harvested "through painful toil" (vs. 17b, 19a). In addition, as God says, "it will produce thorns and thistles for you" (vs. 18).[75] Later on, "the earth is cursed by a flood because of human sin" (cf. Gen 7–9).[76]

At the time of the Exodus, Pharaoh's wickedness affected not only the whole of his people, but their sinfulness was visited upon their natural world as God's judgments fell on both men and animals (Exod 8:17; 9:1–3, 9, 10, 25; 12:12; see Ps 135:8), and even on the vegetable kingdom (9:22, 25). Conversely, the Israelites by their obedience saved not only themselves, but their animals and their land (9:4–7, 26).

Psalm 107:33–34 speaks of God's turning "rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground, and fruitful land into a salt waste," and all of that "because of the wickedness of those who live there." Abundant illustration of

---

[73]Hick, 109; so Cameron, "Evil, Evolution and the Fall," 30–32.

[74]William Dyrness, "Stewardship of the Earth in the Old Testament," in *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth*, ed. Wesley Grandberg-Michaelson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 55. Dyrness calls attention to "the complex of disobedience to God, oppression of the poor, and ecological disaster," and concludes that "the one cannot be separated from the other in the Old Testament" (ibid., 60).

[75]Cf. ibid.

[76]Ibid.

this principle is provided in the book of Jeremiah. According to Jer 9:9–10, God would desolate mountains, desert pastures, cattle, and birds, because "the people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord" (7:30). The question is raised in 12:4, "How long will the land lie parched and the grass in every field be withered?" The answer is in the same verse stated by means of a clear connection between human sinfulness and the death of animals in the land: "*Because those who live in it are wicked, the animals and birds have perished*."[77] And in Hos 4:1–3 it is stated that because of the sin of the Israelites, all that is in the land wastes away, and "the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying" (cf. Zeph 1:3).

If the question is asked, Why do the land and the animals therein (that do not sin) have to suffer the same doleful lot men have to suffer because of their sin? One answer is provided in Deut 29. There the Lord Himself foresees that both the Israelites' children and the "foreigners who come from distant lands" and "all the nations," upon seeing calamities and disease on the world of nature (vs. 22), would wonder why. They would ask the question, "Why has the Lord done this to the land?" (vs. 24). "And the answer will be: 'It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers, the covenant He made with them when he brought them out of Egypt'" (vs. 25).[78] God complements this answer in Jer 27:4–5 on the basis of His creatorship:

> This is what the Lord Almighty, the Lord of Israel, says: "Tell this to your masters: With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please."[79]

This passage indicates that God, as Creator of all that is, reserves for Himself the right of dealing with His creation as He sees best. It was God Himself who, at the beginning, constituted the human being as lord and representative of the lower created order.

Nature's well-being was made dependent on man's allegiance to the divine plan: "If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all His commands . . . the fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks" (Deut 28:1, 4). The concept of man's federal representation of the creation is a prominent one in Old Testament literature. God subjected the nonhuman creation to the dominion of His human creatures (Gen 1:27–28; Ps 8:3–8), and that creation was to stand or fall with them.[80] Animals, as already noticed,

---

[77]Emphasis added.

[78]It is evident that these curses come "as a clear response to unfaithfulness" (Dyrness, 60).

[79]See also vs. 6. This reply, no doubt, sounds authoritative and even despotic to modern man, but it was not so to the ancient, theocentrically minded Israelite who fully recognized the supreme sovereignty of God.

[80]Dyrness, 60.

would fall along with man because of human sin (cf. Ezek 14:13, 17, 19, 21; 25:13; 29:8; Zeph 1:1–3; Zech 14:13–15.),[81] but, conversely, animals would stand, or be restored, with man because of human repentance (Jer 31:18–19, 27–28; Joel 2:12–13, 21–22).[82]

Additionally, we must recognize that in a natural world affected by the calamity of sin, death became a necessity. On this point Hartog writes:

> Under the present system, with higher forms feeding on lower ones, there is a balance in nature. It is based on the death of all things. The present system of death and decay is necessary in order that old generations may go as new ones come and an ecological balance may keep man from perishing from the face of the earth. He most certainly would have if the curse had not extended to death in the animal kingdom. This is one way the present system is best suited for fallen man.[83]

In light of this statement, it is clear that nature's solidarity with man in death was now indispensable in order to keep the new order of life in balance. Furthermore, that solidarity in death obeys a divinely ordained plan of love in facing the emergency generated by the Fall and intended, in the long run, to preserve human life on the planet. But we must keep in mind that this is a new order of things.

The New Testament Data: Adam as Representative of the Creation

A connection between human sin and death of all kinds is also present in the New Testament. This is especially true of passages in the Pauline corpus. Romans 5:12 is most notable for linking Adam's sin to the entrance of death into the world. Other important passages include Rom 6:23; 8:18–25, and 1 Cor 15:21–22.

---

[81]F. F. Bruce states: "Man was put in charge of the 'lower' creation and involved it with him when he fell" (Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963]), 169,; So also Richard W. De Haan, *The World on Trial: Studies in Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 96; Andre Marie Bubarle, *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, trans. E. M. Stewart (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964); E. J. Forrester, *A Righteousness of God for Unrighteous Men, Being an Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), 97.

[82]It is interesting to notice that even Isa 11:5–9, that classical description of eschatological bliss in the natural world, is preceded by the description of the wise ruler of Jesse's stock; the ideal conditions are evidently intended to result from the goodness of the wise ruler (cf. Moule, 7–8).

[83]Hartog, 114. For other ways in which this present world is best for sinful man, and for an approach to the ethical problem involved in the suffering of the animal world, see ibid., 115 passim. Haigh expresses thus her view: "The animals too were cursed with death and, in my opinion, it may be that the fearful and violent instincts in the presence of man and their violence against creatures lower down the scale of being than themselves (snakes eat frogs, frogs eat flies, etc.) may be a kind of participation in the now fallen, unruly state of man's own passions." Paula Haigh, *Thirty Theses Against Theistic Evolution* (Louisville: Catholic Center for Creation Research Publications, 1976), 55.

Romans 5:12. As sin affected the totality of the creation, human and nonhuman, so will the salvific work of Christ.

Exegetical considerations on Romans 5:12, as presented in my doctoral dissertation,[84] make clear that this passage does not mean that as sin entered the world, nonhuman creatures became sinful as man did, for, as Paul puts it, "the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice" (Rom 8:20). It rather means that as man, the king of creation, became sinful, nonhuman creatures became as mortal as man did. In other words, the kingdom fell with its king. In this sense the words of Cranfield, the renowned New Testament scholar, are true, that death "followed sin like a shadow."[85] This is due to the direct correlation between man's faithfulness to the covenant with God and the welfare of nature. The same correlation exists between human unfaithfulness and death in the natural realm. This truth also implies that the Messianic eschatological restoration will include both the king and the kingdom. This will be accomplished through the resurrection of man and the recreation of the natural world (Rev 21:5; cf. Isa 65:17–25). The whole of creation will be set free (Rom 8:21). Thus, what man lost because of sin will be restored to him when sin is eliminated from the earth.

Romans 5:12 shows that death came to all humanity in a way analogous to how it came to the rest of the creation; that the means it took (one man's sin), as well as its extension (cosmic), are similar in both cases. In this light, the passage could be thus interpreted: "As sin and death came into all creation through one man, even so death came to all men."[86] This interpretation preserves the contextual parallel between Adam and Christ and highlights the universal scope of their respective roles. Other Pauline passages (e.g., Rom 7, 8) make clear that neither of the two realms (human and nonhuman) can extricate themselves from their situation and that their only hope is God's gracious provision. The nonhuman creation will also be made free from corruption only through the work of Christ, though not through resurrection but by new creation. In what other form could Paul's prediction in Rom 8:18–25 be fulfilled?

That *ho thanatos* is the subject of the comparison in Rom 5:12 is indicated by the fact that this is the noun that occurs in both the protasis and the apodosis (the two elements of the comparison). On the other hand, the second element in this comparison, "so death came to all men," makes better sense if death is come before to some element other than men, an element to which death's coming to

---

[84]Marco T. Terreros, "Death Before the Sin of Adam: A Fundamental Concept in Theistic Evolution and Its Implications for Evangelical Theology," Ph.D. Dissertation, Andrews University, 1994. Recently published as *Theistic Evolution and Its Theological Implications* (Medellín: MARTER Editions, 2002).

[85]C. E. B. Cranfield, "On Some of the Problems in the Interpretation of Romans 5:12," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969), 329.

[86]For this wording I am indebted to Dr. Robert Johnston, New Testament Department, Andrews University.

all men is being compared. That element is *ho kosmos*. In a point of time, after the first humans sinned, death came to the natural, nonhuman world before it came to the human world (cf. Gen 3:21). By the time the first physical human death (Abel's) actually took place, humans had observed repeatedly the death of animals, at least as sacrificial victims if not as a result of animals killing each other. As death eventually became a universal phenomenon in the subhuman realm, it likewise occurred in the human world. As a greater reality is usually illustrated by one of lesser import, so it seems that the universality of human death, which is the second element in the comparison and doubtless the more important for the apostle, is being illustrated by the universality of death in the nonhuman world. The coming of death to men is being compared to the coming of death into *ho kosmos*.[87]

The purpose in highlighting the universality of this cosmic predicament is just to establish the basis for the universal need of the saving work of Christ. As Adam's sin is the cause of universal death, so Christ's saving work is the cause of universal reconciliation and salvation. The point of the death of Christ as the means of human reconciliation with God has already been made in 5:1–11 (see vs. 8, 10).[88] Now Paul goes on to show why Christ's life-giving work is so desperately needed, i.e., because of the universality of death.

The change of verb from *eiserchomai* in the first clause to *dierchomai* in its parallel second clause, a verb that "has been interpreted in different ways according to the theological conceptions preceding the reading of the verse,"[89] is worth noticing. It could hint at how sin and death entered and were transmitted to the two different realms alluded to here. Because of the sin of one man (cf. v. 17), death just "came in" (*eiserchomai*) to the natural *kosmos*, as in a nonvolitive action on the part of the object of death. But regarding the human *kosmos*, death and sin not only came to, but death "passed through" and "spread" (*dierchomai*), and this, due to some kind of volitive[90] action, that is, *eph' hō pantes hēmarton* ("because all sinned"), an affirmation that could not be made in the former case, that of the nonhuman world. It is also important to notice that Paul says that death reigned *from* the time of Adam, not before.

---

[87]See, John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, 2 vols. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:182.

[88]A. J. M. Wedderburn, "The Theological Structure of Romans 5:12," *New Testament Studies* 19 (1972–1973): 347.

[89]J. Cambier, "Péchés des Hommes et Péché d'Adam en Rom. V.12," *New Testament Studies* 11 (1964–1965): 238 (my translation).

[90]In classical Greek and in early Christian literature, *dierchomai* also means to "go through in one's mind," to "review" (Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979], 194), a meaning which, without denying the involuntary-action meaning, certainly points to the volitive character of the action of the verb.

Related Passages. Romans 8:18–23 and 1 Cor 15:21–22 are passages related to Rom 5:12–21 where the issues of human sin and death (or its corollaries: pain, suffering, and decay) are associated with one another.[91] Thus, these pericopes are thematically connected with each other, and one of the themes that runs through all these passages is the concept of Adam (or the first human beings) as federal representative(s) of the human race and the whole of the creation.

If *ho thanatos* (death) came into the world *dia tēs hamartias* (through sin), then it follows that the presence of *ho thanatos in* the world cannot be explained apart from the presence of sin.

Because of these observations and in light of the foregoing discussion, we can conclude that Paul teaches that all forms of death (both in the human and nonhuman realms) are introduced in the world as a consequence of the sin of Adam, and that liberation from corruption (cf. Rom 8:21) equals liberation from death.

The issue of whether death is a natural or an unnatural phenomenon is fundamental for the development of a Christian theology of death.[92] There is in the mystery of death a paradox that must be kept in mind. There is undeniable truth in the assertion that living is a dying process. Animal tissue is systematically destroyed by use, and when the loss of tissue and energy becomes excessive, death and decay soon overtake the organism. And so, on one hand, death is "the normal end of our fleshly existence and as such is the most natural thing in the world."[93] On the other hand, as pictured in the Bible, death is anything but something natural or intended by God for His creatures. Rather, the Bible pictures death as an alien, an intruder, an enemy to be overcome and not a friend. Death is "the last enemy to be destroyed" (1 Cor 15:26) at the *eschaton*.

New Testament scholar Leon Morris, after surveying a number of relevant New Testament passages, concludes:

> What emerges clearly from our study of the New Testament documents is the fact that death characteristically is regarded as something completely unnatural, an alien, a horror, an enemy. It is not simply an event, but a state, and is connected very closely with sin.[94]

This statement highlights the unnaturalness of death, as well as its intimate connection with sin. This is not less true of death in the nonhuman realm than it is of death in the human domain.

---

[91]William Barclay, "Great Themes of the New Testament: Romans v. 12–21," 2 Parts, *Expository Times* 70 (1958–1959): 174.

[92]Doss, 18.

[93]Leon Morris, *The Wages of Sin: An Examination of the New Testament Teaching on Death* (London: Tyndale, 1954), 6.

[94]Ibid., 30.

Theological Implications of Affirming Death before the Fall

The preceding analysis of the biblical data indicates that death, suffering, and pain in the nonhuman world may be considered as much a consequence of the Fall as is human death, and that creation as a whole groans in the expectancy of liberation. In Christian theology in general we find that the work of Christ is effective redemptively only if a causal link between sin and death is presumed.

On this point Charles Hodge writes:

> The reason why death is the result of sin is, that sin deserves death. Death is due to it in justice. There is the same obligation in justice, that sin should be followed by death, as that the labourer should receive his wages.[95]

Thus, Christ's substitutionary atonement can liberate the sinner from death only if death is a consequence of the sin of that sinner; only if there is, in other words, a cause-effect connection between humanity's sin and death, because Jesus Christ "is the Representative of fallen humanity."[96] It follows that only in the light of this cause-effect connection between sin and death can theological sense be made of Christ's vicarious dying for sinners. Why? Because without the causal linkage between sin and death, Christ's death could not satisfactorily pay for the consequence of sin.

Early Twentieth-Century Evangelical Stance on the Issue

By the turn of this century, a time when modernism[97] was making significant inroads into evangelical churches and colleges in North America, fundamentalism, one of the "subcultures"[98] within the broad spectrum of evangelical theology, reacted by taking a challenging stance represented by the publication of *The Fundamentals*.[99]

---

[95]Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1909), 211.

[96]Ibid., 145.

[97] Ronald Nash terms this "liberalism" and "the new kid on the block," as compared with evangelicalism. Ronald H. Nash, *Evangelicals in America: Who They Are, What They Believe* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 24.

[98]On this, Nash writes: "Typically, three evangelical subcultures are distinguished: Fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, and what, for want of a better term, can be called the evangelical mainstream" (ibid., 25); cf. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 30.

[99]It is important to notice that *The Fundamentals* "represent the movement at a moderate and transitional stage before it was reshaped and pushed to the extremes by the intense heat of controversy" (George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* [New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980], 119). This means that at this point in evangelical history, according to Marsden, later distinctions between evangelicalism and fundamentalism did not yet exist. It means that "'evangelical' and 'fundamentalist' were not then separate entities," and that, "though *evangelical* may have been the more respectable word to use, few would have questioned the fundamentalist identification" (George M. Marsden, *Reforming*

By the time these works were written, the notions of sin and death, including physical death in the nonhuman world, were understood in conservative evangelical theology as connected in a cause-effect relationship. On this point, the declaration explicitly affirms that according to Paul the apostle, "*all cosmic life, plant, animal, and human, has been made to suffer because of the presence of sin in man. Who can doubt it?* See Rom. 5:12–14, 21; 6:21; 7:10; 8:19–25; Eph. 2:1, etc."[100] This work, in which the causal link between human sin and cosmic death is acknowledged in such distinct terms, constitutes the most comprehensive single declaration of evangelical doctrinal beliefs discovered to date.

As modernism[101] succeeded in influencing evangelical educational institutions and churches, a significant number of evangelical thinkers reacted by doctrinally moving away from fundamentalism and the traditional belief in a literal understanding of the Genesis creation narratives. However, what initially started as a trend associated with demands for open-mindedness about evolution has resulted in what seems to us a major theological shift, namely, the moving away from affirming a causal connection between sin and physical death, as it has already been documented.

Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 3). Evangelicalism's theological break with fundamentalism began to take place in the early 1940s (ibid.). On this point, Marsden's definition and historical description of "fundamentalism" is worth quoting: "From the 1920s to the 1940s, to be a fundamentalist meant only to be theologically traditional, a believer in the fundamentals of evangelical Christianity, and willing to take a militant stand against modernism.

"*Conservative* was sometimes a synonym. So to call oneself a fundamentalist did not necessarily imply, as it virtually does today, than one was either a dispensationalist or a separatist. Neither did it necessarily imply, despite efforts to the contrary by its detractors, that one was obscurantist, anti-intellectual, or a political extremist" (ibid., 10, Marsden's emphasis).

Marsden's clear definition implies that any efforts at establishing a sharp distinction between evangelicalism and fundamentalism on the basis of *The Fundamentals* would not only be anachronistic but inexact. Carl Henry concurs, writing in retrospect, in a letter to Marsden, that "in the 1930s we were all fundamentalists. . . . The term 'evangelical' became a significant option when the NAE [National Association of Evangelicals] was organized (1942)" (Carl F. H. Henry to Marsden, Feb. 24, 1986, quoted by Marsden in *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 10). In the same letter, Henry writes: "In the context of the debate with modernism, fundamentalist was an appropriate alternative; in other contexts [of the debate within the fundamentalist movement], the term evangelical was preferable" (ibid.). In another part of the same letter Henry even comments that "nobody wanted the term 'evangelical' when NAE was formed in 1942; in social context and in ecumenical context it implied what was religiously passe" (ibid., n. 4). For a condensed historical overview and description of *The Fundamentals*, see Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, chap. 14: "The Fundamentals," 118–123.

[100]Ibid. (emphasis supplied).

[101]Modernism included belief in evolution as opposed to creation, as noted by Erickson, who writes, "In the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the earliest twentieth century, the struggle was on a large scale—evolution versus creation." Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Unabridged, 1 vol. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 367.

The Basis for Atonement Theology Challenged

The rejection of a cause-effect connection between sin and death adversely affects the evangelical theology of the atonement in at least the five following ways:

First, it was the tragedy of the fall of humanity into sin that set in motion God's plan for the redemption of the human race. Thus, redemption history begins with the sin of humankind, so that evangelical soteriology is dependent on a literal Fall of man.[102] It was at the Fall that the *proto-euangelion* was announced (Gen. 3:15). If man's voluntary, free decision is removed or severed from death, then sin as a cause of death disappears from the story of redemption.

Second, the disjunction of death and sin undermines the biblical teaching on death as a penalty for sin, thereby removing the basis for Christ's atonement understood in a substitutionary sense. For example, if death entered the world through any other means than by human sin, then, as noted, death could not be the penalty for sin, and the basis of the atoning value of Christ's death in the sinner's stead is neutralized precisely because His death does not then constitute the wages of the sin of humanity.[103] The importance of this implication cannot be overstressed. This means that Christ did not really have to die because God could have solved the death problem in a better way than the one He chose. "Christ dying for us," however, as noted by Bloesch, "is certainly the foundation and pivotal point of our salvation."[104] As Cameron argues, the acceptance of death as a reality before the sin of Adam pulls the rug "from under the feet of the evangelical understanding of the atonement."[105]

A third effect of the rejection of the biblical cause-effect connection between sin and death for atonement theology is that only if the phenomenon of death is more than natural is a more-than-natural plan of redemption necessary. If death were just a natural problem, it could have then been solved through natural solutions, and no supernatural intervention, such as God's irruption into human history through the incarnation, would have been necessary. Denying the sin-death connection makes the biblical plan of salvation a faulted plan instead of a perfect one. It jeopardizes God's wisdom in designing it. In short, the admission of no cause-effect connection between sin and death, as when death is regarded as just a natural phenomenon, renders the plan of salvation, as delineated in the Bible, unnecessary.

---

[102]Pinnock, 151.

[103]This means that God could have dealt with the problem of death without having to deal with the problem of sin. But in fact He did not, which demonstrates the causal connection between sin and death.

[104]Bloesch, *The Christian Life and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 105.

[105]Nigel M. de S. Cameron, "Evil, Evolution and the Fall," in *Creation by Evolution? The Evangelical Debate Today*, ed. David C. Watts, 26–33 (Glasgow: Biblical Creation Society, 1983), 29.

Fourth, according to a high view of Scripture, the above conclusion is not less true of the phenomenon of death in the nonhuman world, because the solution of even this aspect of the problem will also require supernatural intervention. Only if evolution is true, if animals, for instance, first came into life by only natural means, can we expect that the problem of their death should be reversed by means equally natural. But if the Genesis account is correct, and creation and the historical Fall are true, then the only possible way that the problem of death in the nonhuman world can be reversed is through a new creation, i.e., through God's supernatural intervention, which is precisely what God says He will do (Rev 21:5; cf. Isa 65:17–25). Moreover, it is because the lot of the natural creation is so inseparably connected with humanity's attitude toward God that Paul can write that the creation "was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice" (Rom 8:20), and that the whole of creation will be "liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (vs. 21). This passage indicates that God promises to accomplish the liberation of the lower animal kingdom through a new creation, not through a long process of evolution.

Fifth, affirming death before sin means that the first human sin ceases to be the basis for the human need of salvation, and this suggests the need of a rethinking of the Christian faith. Such faith has to be adapted to this new understanding of the "Fall" and "original sin." Theistic evolutionary evangelicals maintain that if this adaptation is not made possible, Christian soteriology would become obsolete.[106] Evangelical theology is thus confronted with the alternatives of either preserving historical Christianity or renouncing its doctrinal values in favor of interpretations that give science authority over Scripture. For example, writing from the standpoint of a theistic evolutionist, Schmitz-Moormann affirms that salvation "cannot mean returning to an original state, but must be conceived as *perfecting* through the process of evolutionary creation."[107] This process of creation by evolution, some evangelicals believe, is capable of telling us still more about God's purposes and about His way of offering humanity a way of salvation[108] than is the traditional Christian belief in creation as "a series of instantaneous events—creation by simple *fiat*."[109] On this point, evangelical author George Murphy agrees with Schmitz-Moormann.

---

[106]Or, to quote Karl Schmitz-Moormann's words, the "Christian faith would be relegated to the status of the religious fossils known through mythology" (Karl Schmitz-Moormann,"Evolution and Redemption: What is the Meaning of Christians Proclaiming Salvation in an Evolving World?" *Progress in Theology: The Newsletter of the John Templeton Foundation's Center for Humility Theology* 1 [June 1993]: 7). In a theistic view illumined by evolutionary science, the most important truths, in keeping with the idea of continual progress, are to be found not in the beginnings, but in the present and in the future (ibid.).

[107]Ibid.; Schmitz-Moormann´s emphasis.

[108]Ibid.

[109]Paul K. Jewett, *God, Creation and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 480.

Murphy, as noted above, believes that theologically, evolution is preferable to the doctrine of creation.[110]

It is theologically important to notice that it was the emergency of the entrance of sin into the world which gave occasion to the most fundamental alteration of divine nature testified to in Scripture, namely, the Son of God's incarnation as Christ Jesus (1 Tim 3:16). In light of this fact, it is not surprising that some alterations, such as changes in the physiological make-up of some animals, became necessary in order to cope with the new conditions brought about by human sin. Only if the character of sin is not regarded as seriously as the Bible does can we wonder at the physical evils and the changes in the natural world brought about by the emergency of sin. At the same time, no physical evil can be compared with that moral or spiritual evil which is sin itself.[111] But if death preceded sin, how can the evil of sin be characterized?

Concluding Remarks

As noted, human beings have always pondered questions about origins. What has not always been taken into consideration is that the answers given are deeply influenced by the presuppositions of the inquirer. For example, scientists who are committed only to naturalistic assumptions and scientists holding a biblical worldview will reach entirely different conclusions. For those in the first group, "present day processes must be assumed to be sufficient to explain the origin of all things by naturalistic means."[112] For the second group, there is a distinction between God's acts of creation in the past and His continuing providential government of the created order.

This discontinuity implies that creation—which cannot be tested experimentally—and issues connected with the state of the original created order lie outside the sphere of scientific inquiry. This means that these issues become a matter of revelation.[113] This is not to say, however, that if scientists trust the claims of Scripture's creation texts, literally interpreted, in seeking to understand these issues, they cannot make intelligent inferences in their study of nature. But

[110]Murphy, 19. However, in brief response to the claims made above, one may point out that if humanity is evolved from lower life forms, whether it happened entirely through natural processes as Darwin proposes, or through divine guidance of the process as suggested in theistic evolution, there was not a first man who stood as an individual entity separate from the animal kingdom. This means that without an Adam and Eve, the Fall as recorded in Genesis never occurred (cf. Bolton Davidheiser, "Theistic Evolution," in *And God Created*, ed. Kelly L. Segraves (San Diego: Creation-Science Research Center, 1973), 3:50–51.

[111]Haigh, 55.

[112]David J. Tyler, "Creation and Providence," in *Creation by Evolution?*, ed. David C. Watts (Glasgow: Biblical Creation Society, 1983), 37.

[113]Ibid.

inferences in those areas are safe only as long as they do not go beyond God's given revelation.[114]

Cranfield notes that the admission that death came through sin entails very serious difficulties for many people, "since they are in the *habit of thinking* of death as natural and in no sense 'the wages of sin' (Rom 6:23)."[115] As we have seen, this "habit" has become almost a standard thinking pattern even within evangelical scholarship. This has clearly been the case since death "became natural" in pre-Darwinian times. And today, as noted by Munday, "*All evolutionary interpreters of course accept pre-fall animal death.*"[116] Usually for these scholars, a peaceful predator-prey relationship as described by Old Testament prophets is to be interpreted as "great poetry and true mythology." The reason is that, "if we believe at all in God as creator, and in the evolution of species as part of his design, it seems we must accept universal predation as integral to it."[117]

In harmony with these considerations we conclude that according to a high view of Scripture which interprets the creation texts as real history, one may well adopt the presupposition that a discontinuity exists between creation and providence, "which is the normal working of God in upholding and sustaining the universe,"[118] with reference, particularly, to post-Fall conditions. In other words, the present conditions of a world fallen into sin must not be made the measure of the so-called "natural conditions" of an unfallen creation.[119] Evangelical Christian scholars who reject this presupposition succumb to an unbiblical worldview.

Death is "the *eschatos echthros* with whose definitive destruction the work of salvation is fully accomplished (1 Cor 15:26; Rev 20:14)."[120] We agree with Murphy that at present we cannot fully know "how death and corruption can be

---

[114]On this point, Ellen White writes: "I have been shown that without Bible history, geology can prove nothing. Relics found in the earth do give evidence of a state of things differing in many respects from the present. But the time of their existence, and how long a period these things have been in the earth, are only to be understood by Bible history. It may be innocent to conjecture beyond Bible history, if our suppositions do not contradict the facts found in the sacred Scriptures. But when men leave the word of God in regard to the history of creation, and seek to account for God´s creative works upon natural principles, they are upon a boundless ocean of uncertainty." *Spiritual Gifts* 3:93.

[115]Cranfield, 340 (emphasis supplied).

[116]Munday, 52 n. 4 (emphasis added).

[117]Moule, *Man and Nature*, 12.

[118]Tyler, 35.

[119]Jim Gibson's thought, in personal communication to author.

[120]R. Bultmann, "Thanatos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 3:14. Carnell notes that the resurrection of Christ is the most celebrated event in the New Testament, and that this event enjoys this place of honor "because it verifies Christ's victory over sin and death." Edward J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 90.

forever done away with in a new heaven and a new earth."[121] But Christians can certainly depend on God, His Word, and His promises that the Messianic eschatological restoration will include both the king—man—and his kingdom—the world of nature (see Hos 2:18). The whole of the creation will be set free. For, as the consequences of sin are cosmic in scope, so is redemption. This means "that all created natures, and not only the human, will share in the new creation."[122] The liberation of the creation from its bondage to decay, to be brought "into the glorious freedom of the children of God," will be accomplished through the resurrection of humans and the recreation of the natural world.

Marco T. Terreros, Ph.D. in Systematic Theology (Andrews University, 1994), is chair of the School of Theology at Colombia Adventist University, where he teaches courses in Greek, introductory Hebrew, and science and religion, and where he also serves as site coordinator for the Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary.
mterrero@unac.edu.co

[121]Murphy, "Time, Thermodynamics, and Theology," *Zygon* 26/3 (1991): 371.
[122]Idem, "A Theological Argument for Evolution," 21; so Alsford, 129.