

The Teaching of Headship / Original Sin

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Introduction

The doctrine of headship falls under **the doctrine of original sin** and it addresses how Adam's guilt was passed down or imputed to his posterity or how we inherited a sinful nature from the sin of Adam. There are two prevailing views of the doctrine called federal headship and natural headship. Some other terms for federal headship are covenant representation, federalism, or covenant headship. Some other terms for natural headship are seminal headship or the realism theory. These terms are often used interchangeably by theologians.

In Church History

In the early church the dominant view was natural headship. We see this in the writings of Tertullian, Augustine, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas. The federal headship position is a newer position that was introduced around the time of the Protestant Reformation with it really being established post Reformation with the formalization of Covenant Theology. Federalism is unique to the Reformed theology position. Just because it is a newer position does not make it wrong or unbiblical. Often time's theological positions are not fully formed until an idea is challenged and examined.¹

Defining the Terms

Natural Headship

Natural headship is the idea that we inherit Adam's sin guilt because we are his literal offspring. We were physically with him in the garden in seminal form in his loins so when Adam sinned, we sinned with him. A more philosophical view of this idea is that our souls were present in the garden with Adam. This belief is the soul is passed down from the father to the son and that the souls of all mankind were corrupted before our incarnation at conception. The soul is where the evil of our sin nature lies.²

The primary passage in Scripture used to support the natural headship position is Hebrews 7:1-10 but particularly verses 9-10.

7 ¹For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ²and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. ³He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.

⁴See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! ⁵And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers,^[a] though these also are descended from Abraham. ⁶But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. ⁸In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. ⁹**One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham,** ¹⁰**for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.**

The natural headship position draws a parallel between Levi being in Abraham's loins and paying tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham to all mankind being in Adam's loins in the garden. The point being that we inherit original sin from Adam because of a physical connection we had with Adam, as the father

of our race. Or it can be looked at from the perspective of our souls being present in the pre-incarnate state. Either way the position maintains that all mankind was somehow present in the garden with Adam and therefore because of that we are guilty of Adam's first sin as well.

Federal Headship

Federal headship is the idea that Adam was our representative in the garden and because of that, his sin is imputed to us. God made a covenant with Adam and those whom Adam represented, the whole human race. When Adam failed to keep that covenant his punishment was given to him and those whom he represented. We see this idea of covenant representation in other parts of Scripture. For example, Noah was the representative of his family. They were saved on the Ark because of their relationship to Noah as the head of his family. We see federal headship in the negative sense in the sin of Achan, who took for himself spoils from the Canaanite conquest and because of his sin his whole family was stoned to death (Joshua 7).³

We have non-Biblical examples of this kind of headship as well. An ambassador is the representative of a nation and speaks and acts on behalf of the nation he or she represents.

In Romans 5, Paul gives a stark contrast between the two "Adams." Adam and Christ acted representatively as covenant heads on the behalf of many others. Mankind has solidarity with Adam as their representative before God. When Adam sinned, his sin was imputed to all mankind because Adam stood as their covenant head. This is contrasted with Christ who stood in the place of believers as their covenant head. Christ succeeds where Adam failed.

Objections

There are objections to both views. The natural headship view breaks down when we look at it in contrast to the Christ who is the second Adam. We were never physically present in Christ's loins. It also does not account for how we are not imputed with the sin and guilt of all of Adam's sin post fall or all the sins of all our ancestors since Adam. If we inherit original sin because of being present in seminal form, how is it we don't inherit all sin? The objection to federal headship is that it does not appear fair. We did not pick Adam as our representative so how can we inherit original sin from him? However, if God appointed Adam as our representative, we must trust that in His infinite wisdom and foreknowledge that He chose the best person to represent us.

Conclusion

In conclusion these two views make an attempt to explain imputation of original sin. The natural headship view making a physical connection between us and Adam and the federal headship view making a covenantal connection between us and Adam. There are some who hold to both positions or a blend of the two.⁴

¹ Berkhof, Louis, *Systematic Theology, Combined Edition*, 1996, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

² <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=620131456424>

³ <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1IKDZjy74ZVnV95Oi3KlpqYOzBJi4Mv9c>

⁴ Bavinck, Herman, *Reformed Dogmatics, Sin and Salvation in Christ, Volume Three*, 2006, The Dutch Reformed Translation Society, Published by Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group