



**WHEN
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HUMAN EVOLUTION AND
THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN

LOREN HAARSMAN



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Introduction

Theology and Science in Harmony and Counterpoint

YOU SIN. I SIN. EVERYONE SINS. Individually and collectively, we do morally wrong things and cause much suffering. Calling this “sin” is actually the start of good news. It signals that a holy and loving God wants better for us. God has a rescue plan in operation. Christianity, from its earliest days, affirmed that Jesus Christ is at the center of that rescue.

Human Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin Seem Dissonant

The Western church for centuries has followed St. Augustine’s formulation of the doctrine of original sin. Augustine taught that God created Adam and Eve holy and righteous; they chose to sin in the garden of Eden; sin damaged them; the guilt and damage were passed by inheritance to their descendants—all of humanity. The doctrine of original sin isn’t just about how the historical first sin occurred. It summarizes many things taught throughout Scripture about God’s goodness, human responsibility, the pervasiveness of sin, and the need for Christ’s atonement.

Theologians before and since Augustine disagreed with him on some points. But throughout church history most Christians, like Augustine, assumed that Adam and Eve were literal historical persons who were created miraculously by God a few thousand years ago in or near Mesopotamia and that all human beings are descended from just those two. So it is not surprising that many

Christians perceive dissonance between the theology of original sin and modern scientific theories of human evolution. Scientific evidence indicates that disease, predation, and death were in the world long before humans existed. Genetic similarities between humans and animals indicate common ancestry. Human genetic diversity points to humanity descending not from just a single pair but from a larger ancestral population probably never less than thousands of individuals.

One line of thinking is that if Augustine’s interpretation of Genesis 2–3 is not true, then there was no original sin, no fall, and no need for Christ’s redemption. From this perspective, it seems like the entire gospel of Christianity is at stake.

The central premise of this book is that *there are several possible ways to harmonize the doctrine of original sin and the science of human evolution*, taking seriously both what Scripture teaches and what we learn from science. The first half of this book describes a range of scenarios; the latter half discusses theological strengths and challenges of each.

Is the Doctrine of Original Sin Really Such a Big Deal?

Sin is a big deal. All of Scripture agrees on this. Sin breaks our proper relationship with God. Sin would separate us from God eternally without God’s rescue.

God’s shocking answer to sin is the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Word of God, “begotten from the Father before all ages,”¹ “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil. 2:6–7). He became an infant. He grew and lived as we do. He did not sin, but he suffered the terrible consequences of our sin—including denial and betrayal by friends, mob hatred, unjust condemnation by religious and secular authorities, and death by torture. His resurrection and ascension completed and vindicated his work of atonement. Consider how vast the problem of sin must be if God would do all that to solve it.

How did we humans find ourselves in need of such rescue? God created us. God is good. God loves us. Why aren’t we sinless? Over the centuries, that question has been answered in a variety of ways.

The author of Genesis 2–3 lived in a particular cultural context and had important universal truths to communicate. The surrounding cultures of

1. Nicene Creed; translation from Christian Reformed Church, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988).

Egypt and Mesopotamia had stories of their gods creating the world, fighting one another, and forming human beings. They also had stories about a past golden age. In that context, the author of Genesis 2–3 needed to communicate some universal truths. The world was made by the one true God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God created humanity. God is good. Instead of trusting God’s pronouncements about good and evil, humans rebelled and tried to decide for themselves, breaking fellowship with God. But God did not leave them without hope. God had a rescue plan.

Centuries later, the apostle Paul lived in a particular cultural context and had important universal truths to communicate. Paul was taught that the Messiah would rescue Israel from political oppression and restore Israel’s relationship to God through obedience to the law of Moses. But then Paul met the risen Jesus and learned some amazing truths. The Messiah had been crucified. The Messiah was for the gentiles—even without their obedience to the law of Moses! The work of the Messiah was bigger than Paul had pictured. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ were not just for Israel; they were for restoring Jews and gentiles alike to a right relationship with God. To communicate these truths, in Romans 1, Paul wrote about the knowledge of God that all human beings should have from looking at nature but that everyone gets wrong. In chapter 2, Paul wrote about how gentiles know they are sinners even without the law of Moses because of the law of God in their hearts. In chapter 5, Paul wrote about sin entering the world through the sin of Adam, the first human being.

Centuries later, St. Augustine lived in a particular cultural context and had important universal truths to communicate. Some church leaders at the time argued that infants are born sinless. Augustine believed that no one can be in a right relationship with God apart from Christ; everyone needs saving grace, even infants who have not yet sinned willfully. But this raised questions. How did humans come to be in such a state? Did God create humans sinful? If not, how was it possible that our first parents could sin? Why would the sin of our first parents affect all of their descendants, including infants? In answering these questions, Augustine and others developed the doctrine of original sin, which influenced the Eastern church and has dominated the Western church to this day.

We live today in a particular cultural context and have important universal truths to communicate. Archaeological discoveries and improved translations of ancient Near Eastern texts have taught us things about the cultural context of Genesis 2–3 that Augustine didn’t know. Modern science indicates that God used evolutionary processes to create humanity. Augustine’s assumption that all humans descended from just a single pair of individuals who lived a

few thousand years ago does not fit with what we are learning from fossils and genetics. But in today's cultural context, we still have important universal truths to communicate. Sin is a rebellion against God's revealed will. Our sin would separate us from God eternally without God's rescue. The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central point of history and the heart of God's rescue. What are the best ways to harmonize these truths in our particular cultural context today?

We Anticipate Harmony because of Our Faith in God's Character

The unity of Scripture is a guiding principle for Christian theology. This is not just a belief about Scripture; it is a statement of faith in God's character. We trust that God would not inspire one passage of Scripture to teach one thing and then inspire another passage to teach something contradictory. If two passages seem at first to contradict each other, then we do not properly understand one or both. We trust that if we interpret Scripture rightly, an overarching, coherent voice and message will emerge. We must work to discern the underlying harmony.

Scientists have a similar intuition about the natural world. If two scientific theories, each well supported by experiments, make contradictory predictions about experiments that are beyond our current ability to perform,² we don't simply live with the contradiction. We look for an overarching theory that incorporates both previous theories and unifies them. This procedure reflects a belief about the natural world. We believe there is a unified set of natural laws that we, at present, only partly understand. If two theories make contradictory predictions, then those theories must be incomplete. We have more work to do.

If we believe that God both created the universe and inspired Scripture, we carry this search for harmony into realms where science and theology overlap. Truths we learn from studying Scripture come from God. Likewise, truths we learn by doing science ultimately come from God. God created the world; science and philosophy are human interpretations of that world. Our human interpretations can be mistaken. God inspired Scripture; biblical scholarship and systematic theology are human interpretations of Scripture. Our human interpretations can be mistaken. If we trust God's character and believe he would not teach contradictory things, then whenever science and theology appear dissonant, we must work to find the underlying harmony.

2. Quantum field theory and general relativity are two such theories.

This doesn't mean that science and theology are equally authoritative. The natural world and Scripture are different sorts of revelation. Their complex relationship is explored in later chapters. For now, it's enough to say that we don't simply give theology authority over science or vice versa. God has authority over both.

Consensus on the *Core Doctrine* but Not on Every *Theological Theory*

Christians sometimes subscribe to a core doctrine while holding in tension multiple theological theories and not selecting one theory as superseding the others. For example, the church has developed multiple theories of atonement, which seek to explain how Christ's work answers the problem of sin. Not every proposed theory of atonement was accepted by the church; some were debated and rejected. But several complementary theories of atonement remain—still studied, preached, and compared with one another centuries after they were proposed. This is because Scripture uses numerous images for Christ's atoning work: bearing the penalty of sin as a substitute, victory over evil, ransom to free us from slavery, covenantal sacrifice, an example for us to imitate, and more. Indeed, how could a single human theory fully describe Christ's work? Christians often profess a core doctrine of the atonement while holding in tension multiple theories, each with its basis in Scripture, each recognized as incomplete. Doing so does more justice to the magnitude and mystery of Christ's atonement than any single theory could.

Christians can also agree with one another about a core doctrine while disagreeing about theological theories surrounding that doctrine. In such cases, individual Christians do not hold multiple theories in tension; rather, each one advocates for their own favorite theological theory while acknowledging that the Christian tradition includes a range of possible theories. For example, Christians generally share a core doctrine about baptism and follow Christ's command to baptize, but there is a range of theological theories regarding infant and adult baptism.³

Competing theological theories are part of Christian tradition. Competing theological theories can be good. They help us better understand our core doctrines and better explore their implications. There is the danger, however,

3. More examples: C. Marvin Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); William V. Crockett, *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Jason S. Sexton, *Four Views on the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017); John Hick, Clark H. Pinnock, and Alister E. McGrath, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); and Melvin Easterday Dieter, Anthony A. Hoekema, and J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

of mistaking our own favorite theological theory for the core doctrine itself.⁴ A challenge to one's favorite theological *theory* might feel like an attack on the core doctrine, even when it is not.

This book first describes multiple competing theological theories about how to harmonize the doctrine of original sin with human evolution; then it examines some theological strengths and challenges of each theory.

The scenarios explored in this book disagree with one another on several significant questions. For example, they disagree about when the historical first sin might have happened, what it looked like, and what its immediate consequences were to the individuals involved. They disagree about whether we should think about the fall primarily as a concentrated historical event involving a few individuals or as spread out over time and involving many individuals. They disagree about how sin spread from some to many. They disagree about the status of the first sinners immediately prior to sin.

However, the scenarios examined here share a commitment to a core doctrine. Much of this book explores what that core doctrine is. For now, a summary: *God is good and just and holy. Sin is a rebellion against God's revealed will. The earliest acts of sinful disobedience by our ancestors had consequences both for them and for their descendants. All humans today are prone to sin and are incapable of not sinning. The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are central to God's atonement for human sin.*

That is not a complete list; more statements could be added. In coming decades—as it has done throughout history—the church will discuss and debate what, exactly, has the status of “core doctrine” and what has the status of “theological theory.” As we bring together scholarship in biblical studies, systematic theology, and evolutionary science, if we do our jobs carefully, the church will be well served by discussing the implications of these competing theological theories. The doctrine of atonement is so staggering that the

4. Benno van den Toren, “Distinguishing Doctrine and Theological Theory—A Tool for Exploring the Interface between Science and Faith,” *Science & Christian Belief* 28, no. 2 (2016): 64, writes about the value of distinguishing our core doctrines, which Christians generally hold in common, from theological theories that seek to explain the doctrines but carry far less consensus:

First, doctrine is crucial to the Christian life, as is the question of truth. Therefore, the church teaches who God is, how he relates to us, and how the Christian life should be lived given that this God is God. Second, not all theological reflection has the status of “doctrine” in this more narrow sense. Theological reflection can also be exploratory, or even speculative as an expression of the desire to love God with our minds, to grow in understanding or to find new ways to give account of our faith without these ideas having a similar regulative function for the Christian life and community. Third, there is a very limited range of doctrines that have the status of “dogma” in that denying them does mean undermining what is essential to the Christian understanding of salvation and would place oneself outside the orthodox Christian community.

church has found it best to hold in tension multiple theories of atonement. If the problem of sin is so vast that it requires such an astonishing solution as the atonement, perhaps we will find that we also need multiple theories of original sin. Some theories will be examined and ultimately discarded as inconsistent with God's revelation. Those that remain should deepen our understanding and appreciation of God's grace.

In Science and Theology, New Data That Challenge Old Theories Are Exciting and Important

When scientists discover new data that contradict a well-established scientific theory, they don't typically react with fear. Often, they react with curiosity. At their best, they react with humility, because they know that if the new data hold up, their current best theories will need rethinking. They have exciting work to do. They hope and trust that the new data will eventually lead to a deeper understanding of the natural world. And that gives them joy.

Of course, scientists don't simply throw out the old theory. Any new theory that explains the new data must also incorporate all the truths explained by the old theory.

Theology has had similar experiences, where it has been confronted with new data that challenged well-established theories but eventually led to deeper understandings of God's special revelation. There have been times when the Holy Spirit provided new data directly and dramatically, as when the apostle Peter's dream prompted him to go to the home of a gentile to preach the gospel of Christ (Acts 10).

At other times the Holy Spirit has done this more slowly, by challenging the church to reflect on things happening in the world. For centuries, many Christians used Scripture to justify using political and social power to oppress Jews. However, after reflecting on the suffering this caused, and ultimately witnessing the Holocaust of World War II, the church was forced to rethink how it interpreted those Scriptures.

On a few occasions, the natural sciences provided new data that helped theology improve its theories. One historical example is Galileo and other scientists finding strong evidence that the earth moves around the sun. At first the church was understandably reluctant to give up its traditional interpretations of passages like Psalm 93:1 as teaching that the earth does not move. But after significant scientific and theological work, this new data eventually moved the church to a better understanding of those Scriptures. The discovery that the earth moves did not cause the church to give up its core doctrines about

the truth and divine inspiration of Scripture. Instead, it prompted the church to come up with better theological theories about whether certain scriptural passages that talk about the natural world are best interpreted literally.

For another historical example, Christians for several centuries found theological justification in passages like Genesis 1:28 (“fill the earth and subdue it”) for turning wilderness wherever possible into cities and farms by clear-cutting forests, plowing up prairies, straightening rivers, and filling wetlands. Advances in science eventually illuminated some of the problems these practices created. Today, through more theological reflection, the church is developing a richer understanding of what it means to be God’s stewards of the earth and why good stewardship might include maintaining some wilderness.

Of course, history has also taught Christians to exercise caution when scientific advances seem to contradict traditional theology. For example, when scientists during the last several centuries found data contradicting a literal reading of certain passages of Scripture, some people used these scientific advances to justify the rejection of core Christian doctrines such as the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture, and even the existence of God. Science provides new data for theology, and that might prompt new theological theories, but not every new theological theory preserves the truths taught by the old theories.

Theology and Science in Counterpoint, Not Compromise [Chapters 1–2]

To some, “harmony” between theology and science might sound like “compromise” in the bad sense. They fear a compromise of sound principles of interpreting Scripture, a compromise of core doctrines of Christianity, or a compromise of good science. These are real dangers to watch out for, but they are not what we seek. We seek a harmony reminiscent of J. S. Bach’s counterpoint. In counterpoint, two or more melodies are played simultaneously. Each can be enjoyed independently. Although the melodies might occasionally strike notes that sound dissonant, the melodies as a whole don’t clash. Each complements the other. Each draws out intricacies of the other. Played together, they form a richer whole.

Chapter 1 of this book reviews a few historical occasions when scientific discoveries prompted the church to look again at how it interpreted certain passages of Scripture. Science doesn’t decide how we interpret Scripture. Theology decides. Science occasionally provides helpful information. Theology provides a conceptual foundation that helps science flourish and a biblical worldview from which to interpret the results of science. Chapter 2

discusses divine action. God is sovereign and providentially acting not only when we perceive miracles but also when the natural world is operating in regular, repeatable ways that we can describe scientifically.

Summary of Scientific Discoveries [Chapters 3–4]

Chapter 3 summarizes what science can tell us about “natural evil.” The earth has a history stretching back billions of years.⁵ Long before humans existed, plants and animals experienced natural disasters, death, disease, predation, and parasitism. Natural processes that we regard as pleasant and those that we regard as unpleasant occurred together throughout natural history. For example, the geological processes of plate tectonics are vital for life because they recycle to the earth’s surface nutrients, but they also cause earthquakes. Biological processes involving genetic variation and natural selection can lead to symbiosis and adaptation, but they can also lead to parasitism and disease.

Chapter 4 discusses human evolution. Evidence from anatomy, physiology, developmental biology, and genetics strongly indicates that humans share a common ancestry with animals, most recently with other primates. Hundreds of fossils have been discovered that show a history of gradual changes among our ancestors over the last several million years, starting with species close to our common ancestors with other primates, through several intermediate species, eventually leading to *Homo sapiens*. During this long history, growth in brain size among our ancestors appears to have been gradual. Fossils of anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* have been found in Africa going back more than 200,000 years. *Homo sapiens* spread into Asia, Europe, and Australia in significant numbers roughly 70,000 years ago, reaching the Americas about 15,000 years ago. Genetic diversity in the human population is not consistent with what we would expect if all humans had descended from only a single pair of individuals 10,000 years ago, or even 200,000 years ago. Genetic

5. There are many mutually reinforcing lines of evidence from geology, astronomy, and biology pointing to this long age. For Christians who wish to learn more, I recommend one or more of the following: Davis A. Young and Ralph F. Stearley, *The Bible, Rocks and Time: Geological Evidence for the Age of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008); Roger C. Wiens, “Radiometric Dating: A Christian Perspective,” American Scientific Affiliation, 2002, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/resources/Wiens.html>; Howard J. Van Till, *The Fourth Day: What the Bible and the Heavens Are Telling Us about the Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Howard J. Van Till, John Stek, Robert Snow, and Davis A. Young, *Portraits of Creation: Biblical and Scientific Perspectives on the World’s Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Deborah B. Haarsma and Loren D. Haarsma, *Origins: A Reformed Look at Creation, Design, and Evolution* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2011); and Darrel R. Falk, *Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds Between Faith and Biology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004). There are many other excellent books besides these.

data are consistent with models in which the most recent “bottleneck” in the *Homo sapiens* ancestral population was at least several thousand individuals more than 100,000 years ago. As *Homo sapiens* migrated out of Africa, some interbred with *Homo neanderthalensis* and other similar populations whose ancestors had migrated to Europe and Asia much earlier. So for scientific reasons, and possibly for theological reasons as well, we cannot simply equate the term “human” with *Homo sapiens*.

Some animals—especially the most intelligent and social primates—show that they have dispositions toward actions that (for humans) would be classified as selfish or immoral and also toward actions that (for humans) would be classified as altruistic or moral. Sociobiology provides hypotheses for why evolutionary processes would lead to such a mix. Neurobiology and developmental biology show that similar brain structures are involved in these behavioral dispositions in humans and other animals alike. It therefore seems likely that our earliest human ancestors also would have had such a mixture of behavioral dispositions. There appears to be some connection between the evolutionary methods that God used to create us and the genes and brain structures that push us today toward both “nasty” and “nice” behaviors.

Of course, genes alone don’t determine behavior. Brain development and behavioral dispositions are significantly affected by environment. Among social animals and humans, a major part of that environment is the culture of the social group in which an individual is raised. As our ancestors evolved larger brains, it seems likely that they also developed things such as empathy, reason, and conscience that helped them understand how their behaviors hurt or helped others. They would have had moral impulses, religious impulses, and societies that could shape the content of moral and religious beliefs. Our ancestors, both as individuals and as societies, would have had impulses toward both “nasty” and “nice” behaviors and would have had the ability to receive and be shaped by divine special revelation.

Old Theological Questions Made New Again [Chapters 5–11]

Christian scholars in recent decades have proposed several scenarios for harmonizing the core doctrine of original sin and the science of human evolution.⁶ Some scenarios propose that the first human sin occurred millions of years ago when our ancestors first crossed some threshold of moral awareness; others propose that our ancestors’ behavior was not counted as sinful until God had specially revealed certain commands to them, perhaps as recently

6. References to specific authors, books, and articles are given throughout chapters 5–11.

as about 10,000 years ago. Some scenarios propose that Genesis 2–3 should be read as a stylized retelling of the sin of particular historical individuals chosen out of a larger population; others propose that Genesis 2–3 should be read as a literary retelling of the stories of many of our ancestors over a long period of time. Some scenarios propose that the first sin resulted in damage to our created human nature; some propose that it resulted in the loss of supernatural gifts; some propose both. Some scenarios propose that the first individuals who sinned acted as representatives of the entire population so that their individual sin resulted in a fall for the entire population; others propose that sin spread from the first sinners to the rest of the population more slowly, either genealogically or through cultural contact. Exploring the theological strengths of and challenges for these different scenarios is the work of chapters 5–11.

Church history provides a storehouse of theological reflection to help us in this work. While there is a core doctrine of original sin that the church collectively has affirmed over the centuries, the church also has a tradition of exploring a range of theological theories within and around the doctrine. Rather than starting by summarizing the answers, here we will start by summarizing the *questions* that theologians over the centuries have asked and debated. By exploring how theologians have answered these questions throughout church history, we find resources to help us appraise these modern scenarios.

Chapter 5 looks at theological questions related to human origins just prior to the fall. Does being made “in God’s image” refer to our capabilities such as our intelligence, or to our personal relationship with God, or to our assignment as God’s stewards on earth, or perhaps to all three? How did God create our souls? What are our souls in relation to our bodies? At some point in human history, God began to give special revelation to human beings in various ways. What other types of divine action should we consider? For example, did God at some point miraculously empower our ancestors spiritually with supernatural gifts to enable them for a time to be perfectly morally righteous? Did God miraculously physically transform our ancestors’ bodies, brains, and genes? What are the theological implications of each answer?

Chapter 6 looks at how modern archaeological discoveries and biblical hermeneutics help us understand the Old and New Testament texts that refer to Adam and Eve. What do Genesis 1 and 4–11 tell us about Genesis 2–3? What can we learn from their original linguistic and cultural context? What indications are there that Adam and Eve refer to actual historical figures? What indications are there that Adam and Eve were symbolic figures? In the New Testament, the apostle Paul refers to Adam in Romans 5 and elsewhere. Does the fact that this inspired author seemed to believe that Adam was a

historical person, and interpreted Genesis 2–3 that way, imply that we should as well? Does the logic of Paul’s argument regarding the universal need for Christ require that Adam was a historical person?

Chapter 7 summarizes the history of the doctrine of original sin as developed in the early church and amplified by later theologians. Certain questions have occupied considerable theological reflection over the centuries. What was the state of Adam and Eve prior to their sin? What was damaged by their sin? What is passed on from generation to generation?

Chapter 8 summarizes what Scripture means by the term “sin.” What are some metaphors the Bible uses? What sort of revelation from God has to be in place in order for an action to be described as sinful? Must there have been an explicit command to be violated? Or are general revelation and common grace (conscience, empathy, reason, altruistic feelings, etc.) sufficient revelation for disobedience to be counted as “sin”?

Chapter 9 discusses questions about what changed when sin entered the world. How intellectually and socially advanced were the first humans who sinned? What sort of innocence did the first human beings who sinned have? Was it an animal innocence, a human infant-like innocence, a fully adult human intelligence with moral innocence, or a legal innocence? Was a state of fully developed moral righteousness a potential state that humans might have grown into through obedience over time, or was it an actual state that some humans lived in for some period of time? Were the first humans who sinned expected to obey only simple commands they could reasonably be expected to obey, or were they expected to obey the entire moral law and live in “true holiness”? What is the connection between human physical death and the fall? Should we think of humanity’s rebellion into sinfulness, the damage to our shared human nature, and the spiritual consequences for all humans as resulting primarily from that first disobedient act (or two acts) or from an accumulation of many disobedient acts over a long period of time?

Chapter 10 turns to the difficult theological questions about God’s foreknowledge, human responsibility for sin, and theodicy. If God is wholly good and sovereign, why does God permit suffering? Why did God create humans capable of sinning? Why are all humans—even infants who have not yet willfully sinned—in a state in which they need Christ’s atonement? Was human sin simply unavoidable? Was human sin avoidable in principle but very unlikely to be avoided in practice? Or was there a serious possibility of humanity remaining sinless?

This book does not raise every possible question, nor does it offer a complete list of all possible scenarios for harmonizing human evolution and the doctrine of original sin. It does not offer a complete list of all possible ob-

jections to the proposed scenarios or every possible good response to those objections. This book is exploratory. Think of it as a roundtable discussion of theologians, biblical scholars, and scientists—each sharing what they know, each sharing what they’re not yet sure about. They’ve gathered together to ask tough questions. For many questions, instead of a single answer, they examine a range of answers. For each proposed answer, they discuss its theological strengths and weaknesses.

Making Charitable Assumptions about Motives

During theological arguments, Christians can be tempted to assume the worst about the motives of a person with whom they disagree. Christians who affirm evolution as God’s means of creating humans have been accused of being motivated by a desire to fit in with non-Christians at secular universities and of having their theology compromised by philosophical naturalism. Christians who have been hesitant to embrace evolution as God’s means of creating humans have been accused of being motivated by anti-intellectualism or of being fearful of a loss of power within their denomination.

God commands us to avoid bearing false witness. Whenever there is reasonable doubt, we should assume the best about the motives of Christians who disagree with us.⁷ For example, one person might strongly prefer a scenario of human origins that includes God doing a radical act of supernatural transformation of our ancestors at some point early in human history because they believe it is theologically necessary in order for humans to have had a real chance of avoiding falling into sin. Another might strongly prefer scenarios that do not include God doing a radical act of supernatural transformation at some point in early human history because they believe this would imply that God created with an “appearance of false history.”

Someone might strongly prefer an interpretation of Genesis 2–3 that downplays any attempts to derive historical information from those chapters because they believe this approach takes most seriously God’s accommodation to the culture and literary styles of the original audience. Another might

7. The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 112, says this about obeying the command against bearing false witness: “That I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one’s words, nor gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing. Rather, in court and everywhere else, I should avoid lying and deceit of every kind; these are the very devices the devil uses, and they would call down on me God’s intense wrath. I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it. And I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor’s good name.” Christian Reformed Church, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism>.

strongly prefer hermeneutics that, while taking seriously the literary and cultural context of those chapters, maintain a more historical interpretation of Genesis because they believe that certain theological points developed in later Scriptures depend on such an interpretation.

Or someone might push for a greater freedom in scholarship on this issue, embracing a wider range of possible scenarios, because they believe that the Holy Spirit is using scientific discoveries to lead the church to new and better interpretations of Scripture. Another might prefer to start the discussion by drawing some theological boundaries, being more restrictive on the range of scenarios under consideration, because they believe that certain kinds of scenarios are clearly at odds with Scripture and potentially destructive to advancing the gospel of Christ.

On contentious theological issues, Christians can be driven to different conclusions by different valid concerns. When in doubt, we should assume the best about what motivates those with whom we disagree.

Four General Types of Scenarios

Summarized briefly here are four general types of scenarios for harmonizing original sin and human evolution. These four types correspond to specific proposals from more than a dozen authors who have recently published books on this topic. Readers might wish to bookmark these scenario types. We will refer to them throughout chapters 5–11.

1. *Adam and Eve as particular historical individuals acting as representatives of humanity.* At some point in time, God specially selected a pair (or small group) of individuals to act as representatives of all human beings. This might have been around 10,000 years ago, shortly before recorded human history began, or it might have been much further back. They received a special revelation from God. They disobeyed God and so fell into sin in a concentrated historical event. Because they sinned as representatives of all of humanity, all of humanity fell into sin. They lost the opportunity, for themselves and for the rest of humanity, to receive additional spiritual gifts and to live unmarred by sin.

2. *Adam and Eve as particular historical individuals; sin spread through culture or genealogy.* At some point in time, God specially selected a pair or small group to act as representatives of all human beings. This might have been around 10,000 years ago, shortly before recorded human history began, or it might have been much further back. They received a special revelation from God. They disobeyed God and so fell into sin in a concentrated historical

event. In the centuries following their disobedience, they and their descendants mixed culturally, and eventually genealogically, with others of their species alive at that time. In this way, the spiritual, psychological, and cultural effects of sin eventually spread to all humans.

3. *Adam and Eve as a highly compressed history referring to many individuals over a long period of time who received special revelation.* Over a long period, God from time to time selected particular individuals or groups to receive special revelation to augment general revelation, to teach them something about their relationship to God, their relationship to one another, and how they ought to live. Had they obeyed, God could have led them to greater moral and spiritual maturity over time. They chose disobedience again and again, individually and collectively. We might never know, from science or archaeology, when the first such act of disobedience occurred, although God does know. No one act of disobedience set the course for all of humanity, but consequences of each disobedience accumulated, spreading from person to person and generation to generation. Genesis 2–3 is a stylized retelling of many historical events compressed into a single archetypal story.

4. *Adam and Eve as symbolic figures referring to many individuals over a long period of time, all who became ready to be held accountable and chose sin.* Over a long period, whenever our ancestors became able, God began to hold them accountable for whatever they could understand from general revelation and whatever special revelation they had. Had they obeyed, God could have led them to greater moral and spiritual maturity over time. They chose disobedience again and again, individually and collectively. We might never know, from genetics or archaeology, when our ancestors transitioned from premoral animal self-interest to human sinful disobedience, although God does know. Genesis 2–3 is a stylized retelling of this entire history compressed into a single archetypal story.

This is not a comprehensive list of scenario types.⁸ There are many possible variations on each of these four, and some of them can be blended. These four general types are intended to give an overview of a range of possible scenarios.

8. Still other types of scenarios could be considered. For example, (5) humans created miraculously and *de novo* without common ancestry with other animals yet with the appearance of common ancestry in the genetics; (6) Adam and Eve as a single pair who are the sole progenitors of all humans; (7) Adam and Eve created *de novo* amid a larger population of *Homo sapiens*, whose offspring then mixed with that larger population; and (8) humanity created by God using evolutionary processes in which the fall was necessarily built in to human nature apart from human choice, with the reality of sin and God's plan for redemption simply revealed to humanity at a later time. While these other scenarios are not the focus of this book, they are mentioned here (and discussed briefly later) to give a still broader view of the possibilities.

Such a wide range of proposals might seem troubling. It's not the case that there is no way to harmonize human evolution and the doctrine of original sin. Instead, the problem seems to be that there are too many ways! I believe this shows the richness of Christian theological tradition. The church is blessed with a treasure trove of theological reflections from over the centuries that will help us sort through the theological strengths of and challenges for each proposed scenario.

The Holy Spirit is prompting us to do this work. We can do it well, or we can do it poorly. If our work drives us to fear or resentment, or if it prompts us to make excuses for our sin, then we are doing it poorly. But if our work on this topic drives us to a deeper appreciation of God's character, God's holiness, and God's grace, then we are doing it as we should.