

THE RESURRECTION OF A FRENCH HERESY: JOSHUA DE LA PLACE'S DENIAL OF THE IMMEDIATE IMPUTATION OF ADAM'S SIN TO HIS POSTERITY (1)

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I. Introduction

The Amyraldian Association, headed by Alan C. Clifford in Norwich, England, is aggressively promoting the views of the French heretic, Moise Amyraut (1595-1664). Less well known are Amyraut's fellow professors at the Academy of Saumur, Joshua De La Place (1596-1665) and Louis Cappel (1585-1658). Frans Pieter Van Stam, a historian sympathetic to Amyraut, writes, "At this academy in 1631 three relatively young theologians were appointed who together formed a close-knit team."¹ While Amyraut undermined the atonement, De La Place subverted the doctrine of original sin and Cappel attacked the text of Scripture.

Not content with resurrecting the views of *one* French heretic, the Amyraldian Association are now promoting Joshua De La Place's erroneous views on original sin. In a recent publication, enthusiastically endorsed by Clifford, David Llewellyn Jenkins sets forth De La Place's doctrine of mediate imputation. This doctrine subverts the doctrine of original sin and, as this article will contend, jeopardizes the doctrine of justification, as can be observed as a bitter fruit in the writings of the Amyraldian Association.

II. A Brief History of the Controversy

Joshua (or Josué) De La Place (or Placaeus) was appointed theological professor at the Academy of Saumur in 1631 or 1632. He remained professor

¹ Frans Pieter van Stam, *The Controversy over the Theology of Saumur, 1635-1650, Disrupting Debates Among the Huguenots in Complicated Circumstances* (Amsterdam and Maarssen: APA-Holland University Press, 1988), p. 16.

there until his death in 1665, less than a year after the death of his close friend and colleague, Amyraut. In 1640, six years after the publication of Amyraut's infamous *Brief Traitté de la Prédestination*, De La Place published his treatise on original sin, *De statu hominis lapsi ante gratiam*.² This was followed in 1655 by *De Imputatione Primi Peccati Adami*. In this latter treatise De La Place set forth his position of mediate imputation.

De La Place's doctrine of mediate imputation has been defined by theologians in different ways. Jenkins defines it this way: "The belief that the sin of Adam reached his descendants only as mediated by the inherited and sinful state."³ James Buswell writes, "This doctrine would imply that we are not guilty sinners because our representative sinned but we are guilty sinners only because we ourselves are individually corrupt."⁴ James Garrett defines mediate imputation as "the theory that depravity is the medium through which the imputation of Adam's guilt to all human beings takes place."⁵ Robert L. Dabney elucidates the doctrine thus:

[De La Place] said that the imputation of Adam's sin was only mediate, and consequent upon our participation in total native depravity, which we derive by the great law, that like begets like. We, being thus depraved by nature, and, so to speak, endorsing his sin, by exhibiting the same spirit and committing similar acts, it is just in God to implicate us in the same punishments.⁶

Stanley Grenz offers the most helpful explanation expressed in a simple syllogism: "We are not guilty of Adam's sin; rather God imputes guilt to us because of the presence of depravity in us ... *Adam sinned; therefore, all are*

² David Llewellyn Jenkins, *Saumur Redux: Josué De La Place and the Question of Adam's Sin* (Harleston, Norfolk, England: Leaping Cat Press, 2008), pp. 11-12.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴ James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, repr. 1975), p. 298.

⁵ James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology, Biblical, Historical and Evangelical*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, repr. 1996), p. 488.

⁶ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, repr. 1972), p. 340.

The Resurrection of a French Heresy

depraved; therefore, all are guilty.”⁷ This stands in contrast to the orthodox position: “Adam sinned; therefore, all are guilty.”⁸

De La Place introduced his doctrine in the middle of the Amyraut controversy when the French Reformed Churches were already in turmoil over Amyraut’s hypothetical universalistic view of the atonement. The National Synod of Charenton met in 1645 and exonerated Amyraut, but it also published the following decree in reference to a certain teaching on original sin circulating in the French churches:

The Synod condemneth the said doctrine as far as it restraineth the nature of Original Sin to the sole hereditary corruption of Adam’s posterity, to the excluding of the imputation of that first sin by which he fell, and interdicteth on pain of all Church-censures, all pastors, professors, and others, who shall treat of this question, to depart from the common received opinions of the Protestant Churches, who (over and besides that corruption) have all acknowledged the imputation of Adam’s first sin unto his posterity. And all synods and colloquies, who shall hereafter proceed to the reception of scholars unto the holy ministry, are obliged to see them sign and subscribe this present Act.⁹

Many writers consider this decree to be a condemnation of De La Place, although he is nowhere named in the decree as the one guilty of heterodoxy. For example, Brian Armstrong, one sympathetic to Amyraut, writes, “This condemnation of De La Place’s views was a stunning blow to the Saumur Academy.”¹⁰ Van Stam agrees: “It is perfectly clear, however, that the Synod had in mind the ideas of Josué De La Place, Amyraut’s colleague at Saumur.”¹¹

⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 201; italics mine.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁹ Quoted in Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvin and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison, Milwaukee, WI, and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 104-105.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹¹ Van Stam, *Controversy*, p. 210.

Jenkins, De La Place's modern advocate, however, believes that the views of De La Place were *not* condemned by the French synods. He has uncovered a letter from Charles Drelincourt (1595-1669) addressed to De La Place in 1653 in which Drelincourt, a delegate to the Synod of Charenton and one who helped to compose the aforementioned decree, assures De La Place that the condemnation was not aimed at him at all: "Sir, I can well assure you, and all those who have any doubt of it, that the intention of the last National Synod of Charenton was in no way to condemn either your person or the doctrine which you are putting forward." He goes on to write that he is in full agreement with De La Place: "We have never thought to posit the imputation of the sin of Adam which you call antecedent and immediate, but only that which you name consequent and mediate. And for my part, I have always thus conceived and taught it."¹² Jenkins concludes,

De La Place is largely in agreement with the decree as set out at Charenton, and certainly does not consider himself condemned by it ... It was only *represented* as being a denunciation of De La Place by Garrisoles and his supporters after the event.¹³

John Murray includes this preface to the Synod's decree and one is left wondering, if De La Place is *not* meant here, who is? The preface reads,

There was a report made in the Synod of a certain writing, both printed and manuscript, holding forth this doctrine, that the whole nature of original sin consisted only in that corruption, which is hereditary to all Adam's posterity, and residing originally in all men, and denieth the imputation of his first sin.¹⁴

Which writing had come to the Synod's attention and *what* was Synod condemning if not De La Place's treatise published some five years previously? Dabney contends that De La Place knew he was condemned and invented the distinction between mediate and immediate imputation to avoid censure:

¹² Jenkins, *Saumur Redux*, pp. 14-15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 15; italics Jenkins'.

¹⁴ John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1959), pp. 42-43.

The Resurrection of a French Heresy

“The distinction seems to have been a ruse designed to shelter himself from censure.”¹⁵ Turretin charges De La Place with “rais[ing] a smoke” with his artificial distinction between mediate and immediate imputation.¹⁶

If Jenkins is correct in his assertion that the Synod did not in fact condemn De La Place, it only further highlights the weakness of the French Reformed Churches. They were unable to condemn Amyraut and De La Place for their aberrant views of the atonement and original sin respectively. Amyraut and De La Place were in full agreement on this issue. Jenkins enthuses, “Not surprisingly, De La Place’s opinion in respect of Adam’s sin was ultimately endorsed by Moise Amyraut and drawn into his own teaching.”¹⁷

De La Place was never condemned by name by the French synods and neither he, Amyraut nor Cappel were ever disciplined. Nevertheless, De La Place’s doctrine was criticized from many quarters, especially in Switzerland in the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675) where we read:

We hold [therefore] that the sin of Adam is imputed by the mysterious and just judgment of God to all his posterity. For the Apostle testifies that *in Adam all sinned, by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners* (Rom. v. 12, 19), and *in Adam all die* (I Cor. xv. 21, 22). But there appears no way in which hereditary corruption could fall, as a spiritual death, upon the whole human race by the just judgment of God, unless some sin (*delictum*) of that race preceded, incurring (*inducens*) the penalty (*reatum*, guilt) of that death. For God, the supremely just Judge of all the earth, punishes none but the guilty (*Canon X*).

For a double reason, therefore, man, because of sin (*post peccatum*) is by nature, and hence from his birth, before committing any actual sin, exposed to God’s wrath and curse; first on account of the transgression and disobedience which

¹⁵ Dabney, *Lectures*, p. 340.

¹⁶ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1992), p. 615.

¹⁷ Jenkins, *Saumur Redux*, p. 14.

he committed in the loins of Adam, and, secondly, on account of the consequent hereditary corruption implanted in his very conception, whereby his whole nature is depraved and spiritually dead; so that original sin may rightly be regarded as twofold, viz., *imputed sin* and *inherent hereditary sin* (*Canon XI*).

Accordingly, we can not, without harm to Divine truth, give assent to those who deny that Adam represented his posterity by appointment of God, and that his sin is imputed, therefore, *immediately* to his posterity; and under the term *imputation mediate and consequent* not only destroy the imputation of the first sin, but also expose the doctrine (*assertio*) of hereditary corruption to great danger (*Canon XII*).¹⁸

The Swiss were not the only opponents of De La Place's theory. Robert Haldane quotes the reaction of the Theological Faculty of Leyden from 15 November, 1645:

We have learned with great pain that the doctrine, which has been by common consent received as scriptural respecting the imputation of Adam's sin, is now disturbed, although when it is denied, the original corruption of human nature cannot be just, and a transfer is easy to a denial of the second Adam's righteousness.¹⁹

The theologians in Saumur held to a peculiar view of man's depravity which "informed De La Place's work on Adam's sin."²⁰ Distinguishing between a natural and a moral ability, De La Place and Amyraut taught that "man is naturally able to respond to grace because he possesses both understanding and will, but won't because of the corrupting effects of sin on the mind."²¹ This means that man "is able to understand, to reason, and to take the decision,

¹⁸ Quoted in A. A. Hodge, *Outlines in Theology* (London: Banner, repr. 1972), pp. 658-659; italics Hodge's.

¹⁹ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (McClean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Company, 1958), p. 232.

²⁰ Jenkins, *Saumur Redux*, p. 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

The Resurrection of a French Heresy

the rational decision, to come to faith” and “if, despite his natural ability, man decides not to take up God’s universal offer,” he only has himself to blame for the damnation which follows.²² This is not a biblical distinction. The Bible says, “there is none that understandeth” (Rom. 3:11), and describes the ungodly as “having the understanding darkened” (Eph. 4:18). Understanding is a gift of God peculiar to the regenerate (I John 5:20), not a natural endowment. Saumur’s doctrine, of course, fits with universal grace and a universal will of God to save all (with another particular will of God to save some),²³ but not with particular, efficacious, sovereign grace rooted in particular, unconditional election and displayed in a particular, efficacious atonement.

III. The History of the Dogma of Original Sin

De La Place, like Amyraut, appealed to Calvin in support of his doctrine. In order to evaluate this claim, we turn to the history of dogma because we can only understand Calvin’s position when we understand the theological climate in which he engaged in controversy.

A. Pelagianism

Pelagius (c. 354-418) denied original sin outright. According to Pelagius, Adam sinned as an individual and his sin had no effect on his posterity except by way of example. The Pelagians, so Warfield says, “utterly denied, therefore, that men either suffer harm from Adam’s sin or profit by Christ’s merits. By their examples only, they said, can either Adam or Christ affect us.”²⁴ Pelagianism was roundly condemned by the early church due especially to the polemical labours of the worthy Augustine.

B. Roman Catholicism

Roman Catholicism developed a Semi-Pelagian doctrine of sin especially in the Middle Ages and it was to this doctrine that the Reformers reacted. It was at the Council of Trent that Rome codified her doctrine of original sin. Rome

²² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁴ B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia, PA: P & R, 1952), p. 264.

did this in response to Protestantism which was teaching man's total depravity, which Rome, in the interest of safeguarding man's freewill, rejected. Trent taught the following concerning Original Sin: Adam, by his disobedience, "immediately lost the holiness and justice wherein he had been constituted"²⁵ and "the entire Adam through that offense of prevarication was changed, in body and soul, for the worse"²⁶ Furthermore, Trent anathematized the Pelagians who "assert that the prevarication of Adam injured himself alone and not his posterity."²⁷ Adam transmitted to his posterity both guilt and corruption, but "by the grace of [Christ], which is conferred in baptism, the guilt of original sin is remitted"²⁸ and furthermore concupiscence in the baptized "is not truly and properly sin in those born again."²⁹ Finally, Trent does not intend to include the Virgin Mary among those tainted by original sin.³⁰ Murray remarks,

One would gather from these statements that the sin of Adam which is the sin of all is that which by propagation is transfused into all. Obviously this notion is quite distinct from that of the imputation to all of the actual transgression of Adam.³¹

It is important to note that Trent was responding, not only to the Reformers but also to certain of her own theologians, Albertus Pighius (1490-1542) and Ambrosius Catherinus (1483-1553), who understood original sin to consist in *merely* the imputation of Adam's sin, but with no consequent corruption of the nature. Writes A. A. Hodge,

At the Council of Trent Albertus Pighius and Ambrosius Catherinus ... maintained that the imputed guilt of Adam's first sin constituted *the only ground* of the condemnation which rests upon men at birth. The Council did not allow this heresy but nevertheless maintained a rather negative than positive view of man's inherent guilty corruption.³²

²⁵ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 2007), p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³¹ Murray, *Imputation*, pp. 13-14.

³² Hodge, *Outlines*, p. 357; italics mine.

The Resurrection of a French Heresy

A. N. S. Lane's introductory essay to Calvin's polemic against Pighius confirms this:

Pighius posited a novel theory of original sin according to which the only effects of the fall of Adam were the introduction of death and the imputation of the guilt of Adam's sin to all humanity. There was no talk of the corruption of human nature as a result of the fall.³³

In other words, what was at issue at the time of the Reformation was not the imputation of Adam's sin—both sides agreed that there *was* such an imputation, although a detailed development of the doctrine had not been offered—but the (total) corruption of man. Both man's guilt in Adam and man's corruption were grounds for man's condemnation from birth, although Rome (with her doctrine of baptismal regeneration) taught very different solutions to the problem.

Thus Charles Hodge observes,

As at the time of the Reformation an influential party in the Romish church held, after some of the schoolmen, that *original sin consists solely in the imputation of Adam's first sin*, and as the Confessions of the Reformers were designed not only as an exposition of the truth, but as a protest against the errors of the church of Rome, it will be observed that the Protestants frequently assert that original sin is not only the imputation of Adam's sin but also hereditary corruption of nature; and the Reformed theologians often made the latter more prominent than the former, because the *one was admitted by their adversaries, but the other denied*.³⁴

Warfield writes,

It became not uncommon (especially after Dun Scotus' strong assertion of the doctrine of "immediate imputation")

³³ John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice Against Pighius*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. xvii.

³⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), p. 194; italics mine.

for the imputation of Adam's sin to be exploited precisely in the interest of denial or weakening of the idea of the derivation of inherent corruption from Adam ... The Protestants ... constantly remark that men's native guilt in the sight of God rests *not merely upon the imputation to them of Adam's first sin, but also upon the corruption which they derive from him* ... The polemic turn given to these statements has been the occasion of a remarkable misapprehension, as if it were intended to subordinate the imputation of Adam's transgression to the transmission of his corrupted nature as the source of human guilt. Precisely the contrary is the fact. *The imputation of Adam's transgression was not in dispute*; all parties to the great debate of the age fully recognized it; and it is treated therefore as a matter of course. What was important was to make it clear that *native depravity was along with it the ground of our guilt before God*. Thus it sought to hold the balance true, and to do justice to both elements in a complete doctrine of original sin.³⁵

Suffice it to say, then, that the Reformers, including Calvin (to whom we shall return), taught that man is guilty *both* of Adam's sin *and* of his own inherent corruption which has rendered him totally depraved and unable to do anything good.

The modern Roman Church teaches the following on Original Sin:

All men are implicated in Adam's sin ... [Adam] has transmitted to us as sin with which we are all born afflicted, a sin which is the "death of the soul" ... the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand ... It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice. And that is why original sin is called "sin" only in an anagogical sense: it is a sin "contracted" and not "committed"—a state and not an act ... it does not have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam's descendants. It

³⁵ Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, pp. 264-265.

The Resurrection of a French Heresy

is a deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature has not been totally corrupted.³⁶

We notice an absence of imputation language (“implicated,” and “transmitted” are Rome’s terms) and an insistence that man is not “totally corrupted.” This, of course, fits Rome’s doctrine of justification, infused not imputed righteousness.

C. Socinianism, Arminianism and Anabaptism

The Arminians and Socinians rejected the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity. Turretin quotes the heretic Socinus:

Although all men descending from Adam are exposed to perpetual death it is not because the sin of Adam is imputed to them but because they are begotten by him who was devoted to eternal death by a divine decree. And so that happens to them not on account of the imputation of sin but on account of the propagation of the race.³⁷

Grenz writes concerning Arminius that he “softened the seemingly harsh view of Reformed theology. To do so, Arminius reasserted the semi-Pelagian position that Adam’s offspring do not share in the guilt of the sin of our first father.”³⁸ And Ursinus attributes the view that “posterity are not guilty on account of the fall of our first parents” to Pelagianism and Anabaptism.³⁹

D. Realism

The realist teaches that *our human nature sinned* in Adam and we, as it were, were “in him” sinning with him. Charles Hodge explains,

³⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Allen, TX: Thomas More of Tabor Publishing, 1994), paragraphs 402-405, pp. 101-102.

³⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, p. 614. We should point out that Socinus does not mean by “divine decree” the eternal decree of reprobation—but the “decree” of Genesis 2:17: “in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

³⁸ Grenz, *Theology*, p. 200.

³⁹ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R, repr. 1852), p. 39.

According to this theory humanity is numerically one and the same substance in Adam and in all the individuals of his race. The sin of Adam was, therefore, the sin of all mankind because committed by numerically the same rational and voluntary substance which constitutes us men. It was our sin in the same sense that it was his sin because it was our act (the act of our reason and will) as much as it was his.⁴⁰

In other words, writes Berkouwer, guilt is an “actual and real co-sinning,” for realists “want an imputation in which we are held responsible for what we actually do.”⁴¹

The problems with realism are insurmountable. Only a person can sin, objects Buswell.⁴² Hodge posits other objections: Adam’s descendants cannot *actually* sin before they exist; realism cannot explain why our human nature is not guilty of all of Adam’s sins and of the sins of Eve besides.⁴³ Buswell finds in realism insoluble difficulties connected to the incarnation of Christ: “This human nature in its totality became sinful in Adam. What then is the nature of the humanity of Christ?”⁴⁴

Only if it is maintained that all human beings born of natural generation inherit a totally depraved nature *on account of the imputed sin of Adam to them*, can we understand how Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, to whose Person no sin was imputed, and who was not under the federal headship of Adam, could be exempt from this general rule.

to be continued (DV)

⁴⁰ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 221.

⁴¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 439, 447.

⁴² Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, p. 303.

⁴³ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 224.

⁴⁴ Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, p. 303.