The Imputation Of Adam’s Sin

John Murray

THEOLOGICAL thought of the present day is not only hospitable to the notion of solidarity in sin and guilt; it is keenly sensitive to the fact of such solidarity. Dealing with the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, Emil Brunner can say: “I want to make it clear from the outset that I am in complete agreement with the twofold aim of Augustine: to represent sin as a dominant force, and humanity as bound together in a solidarity of guilt”.¹ And C. H. Dodd, commenting on Paul’s argument in Romans 5:12–21, says: “What lies behind it is the ancient conception of solidarity. The moral unit was the community ... rather than the individual.... Thus the whole of humanity could be thought of as the tribe of Adam, and Adam’s sin was the sin of the race. With the growing appreciation of the ethical significance of the individual, the old idea of solidarity weakened. But it corresponded with real facts. The isolation of the individual is an abstraction.”² “Adam”, he continues, “is a name which stands to him (Paul) for the ‘corporate personality’ of mankind.”³ Yet of Romans 5:12 Brunner also says: “It does not refer to the transgression of Adam in which all his descendants share; but it states the fact that ‘Adam’s’ descendants are involved in death, because they themselves commit sin”.⁴ And C. H. Dodd can also say: “Thus Paul’s doctrine of Christ as the ‘second Adam’ is not so bound up with the story of the Fall as a literal happening that it ceases to have meaning when we no longer accept the story as such. Indeed, we should not too readily assume that Paul did so accept it.”⁵ We thus see that the recognition of and the emphasis upon solidaric or corporate sin and guilt in our present-day theology are not to be interpreted as identical with the classic protestant doctrine of the imputation of Adam’s sin. And it does not advance the cause of theology or of exegesis to regard Paul’s appeal to the fall of Adam as but the mythical form in which the fact of solidaric unity in sin is expressed. It is not a work of supererogation, therefore, if we address ourselves anew to this question of the imputation of Adam’s sin to posterity and to the study of the passage upon which, more than any other, the doctrine is based. It is encouraging to find in so brilliant a scholar as Anders Nygren so a...

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