

## Romans 5:12-14 In Adam -the problem!

### Introduction

In 1989 on the steps of Downing Street Margaret Thatcher announced to the assembled media 'We are a grandmother'. She was telling the world that she and Dennis were celebrating the arrival of their first grandchild Michael, son of their son Mark. There was shock expressed by many in the media because the convention that only royalty could use this form of expression had been broken. Queen Victoria famously used the words 'We are not amused' with reference to herself! In reality, in the excitement of the moment, Mrs Thatcher probably mixed up her words and instead of saying 'I am a grandmother' or 'Dennis and I are grandparents' the well known expression was uttered. In our individualist culture the use of the collective term appeared as decidedly odd. However, in cultures unlike our own where individual identities are heavily played down in favour of family, clan, tribe or some other form of collective identity there would probably been a different reaction to what she was seeking to say.

### 1. Union with Christ is at the heart of our faith

In Romans 5:12-21 the apostle teaches some foundational Christian truths that are often misunderstood even by some of the most well-known Bible commentators who read this passage from a Western individualist cultural perspective which contrasts sharply with what the apostle is seeking to communicate to us about our relationship with Adam, the first human being and Jesus Christ. Paul speaks about **our union with Christ** more than other form of words to express the heart of our relationship with Him, but because his pattern of thinking comes from a completely different cultural context, unlike some of the other metaphors or analogies he uses, we tend to focus on the vocabulary we do understand to grasp biblical teaching about our relationship with the Lord. Even before we come to try and understand this biblical truth we know and accept that the Bible teaches God as a union of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit- yet still at the same time as One God. The Lord Jesus is one genuine person yet in speaking of Him we understand a union of a divine and a human nature. The details were expressed memorably at the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD. We recognise that the biblical evidence confirms these truths even if our finite minds can never fully grasp the significance of what these words mean. Likewise our Lord Himself, well before the apostle's words, illustrated His relationship with us in this way. He spoke of (a) **The gift of salvation** (John 6:35, 53-55 & John 4:13-14) To shocked disciples he declared: *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty* (6:35); later in the message He continued: *Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.* <sup>54</sup> *Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.* <sup>55</sup> *For My flesh is real food and My blood is real drink.* <sup>56</sup> *Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in me, and I in them.* <sup>57</sup> *Just as the living Father sent Me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on Me will live because of Me.* <sup>58</sup> *This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live for ever.'* In case any of the disciples had taken these words literally Jesus (John 6:62) made it plain He was speaking of a spiritual identification with Him in His death not a form of cannibalism! The tense of each verb here implies a once-for-all-time act in the past of receiving Christ. This of course is the moment we put our faith and trust in Him for salvation, believing He died in our place on Calvary. To the Samaritan women at the well the same truth is explained with the imagery of water. *Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in*

them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ (John 4:13-14) Identification with Jesus results in salvation. (b) **The Vine and the Branches** (John 15:1-5) *‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in Me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing.* What a vivid picture our Lord paints here of our relationship with Him. Identification with Jesus as a Christian should result in spiritual fruitfulness. Paul, albeit using the image of an olive tree rather than a vine uses the same word picture to place Jews and Gentiles in our relationship with the Lord (Romans 11:11-24) (c) **The Lord’s Supper** (Matthew 26:26-28) *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is My body.’ <sup>27</sup> Then He took a cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. <sup>28</sup> This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.* In essence when by faith we invite Him into our lives Jesus becomes a permanent part of who we are and we likewise in Him, just as surely as what we eat and drink. In some other world cultural contexts corporate identities are the major forms of identity –individual identities are played down, the reverse of Western European and North American cultures of the past few centuries. To understand what Paul wants to communicate here we must step out of our cultural assumptions to grasp what he means by being ‘in Adam’ or ‘In Christ’

## 2. **The two humanities, in Adam and in Christ** (Romans 5:12-21)

The two communities are characterised in one case by sin and guilt and on the other hand by grace and faith. In the former case ‘in Adam’ and in the latter ‘in Christ’; Romans 5:1-11 has spoken about the fruit of justification through the death of Jesus and reconciled to God the Father as a result we enjoy peace with God, experience the blessings of His grace, can rejoice even in our present sufferings and future glory because we are assured of final salvation and therefore take particular delight in exulting in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. **Therefore...** Romans 5:12 indicates a bridge to the information given in the second half of this chapter. Some might have asked the question –how is it that a particular sacrifice on a cross in Jerusalem all those years ago can save me? Paul answers this question through the information given in Romans 5:12-21. Through one person for ill or for good, many have been affected by the actions of Adam and Jesus; they are the respective heads of the old and new humanities. This section of Romans chapter five divides neatly into three sections. [John Stott, *Romans*, pp.148-154 is particularly helpful on this section of Paul’s letter]

(a) **Adam and Christ are introduced** (Romans 5:12-14) *Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned –<sup>13</sup> To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone’s account where there is no law. <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.* Adam as responsible for sin and death and as a pattern of the one to come (Romans 5:14), who is of course Jesus Himself.

(b) **Adam and Christ are contrasted** (Romans 5:15-17) <sup>15</sup> *But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! <sup>16</sup> Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man’s sin: the judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. <sup>17</sup> For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! In*

each of these three verses the work of Christ is *not like* that of Adam. Or its impact is much greater than what Adam accomplished –*how much more...*

(c) **Adam and Christ are compared** (Romans 5:18-21)<sup>18</sup> *Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.* <sup>19</sup> *For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.* <sup>20</sup> *The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more,* <sup>21</sup> *so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* Notice the pattern here in verses 18, 19 and 21 (*just as... so also...*, that is through one mans one specific action (Adam's disobedience in Eden and Christ's obedience on the cross) the many of humanity have been cursed or bless respectively.

### 3. **Adam and Christ are introduced** (Romans 5:12-14)

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(a) **The statement of Paul's argument** Paul begins a sentence in Romans 5:12 that he does not complete. We might have expected a 'so also' part of the sentence as seen in vs 18, 19 and 21 of Romans 5. John Stott states what Paul probably understood here as follows: '*Just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death came to all because all shared his sin, so also through one man, righteousness entered the world and life through righteousness, and so life came to all because all shared his righteousness.*' It is probable that the apostle stopped mid sentence to justify what he had shared in Romans 5:12. He could not assume all his hearers or readers had understood or accepted his point. His subject is sin and death and how from one man's inappropriate action, by three steps all humanity in future generations suffers the consequences of what he did. What are the steps in this regression?

(i) **Step One** *Sin entered the world through one man* (Romans 5:12a) This is a reference to Adam as the apostle seeks to explain the origin of human sinfulness. He is not addressing the wider issue of evil in the rest of the created order but how humanity got into the predicament it faces in every generation. One person bore the ultimate responsibility –Adam. Eve was also guilty (II Corinthians 11:3; I Timothy 2:13-14), but Adam was supremely responsible because God gave the commandment directly to him alone (Genesis 2:15-17). She heard of it through her later husband.

(ii) **Step Two** *death entered the world through sin...* (Romans 5:12b) Adam was the means of sin entering God's perfect world, the consequence of sin was death both spiritual, in the sense of separation from God, and physical, in the sense of a termination of an individual's life on earth. Genesis 2:15-17 states: *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.* <sup>16</sup> *And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;* <sup>17</sup> *but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.'* After Adam and Eve's fall into sin, God told them, in the words of Genesis 3:19: *By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.'* At the end of a funeral service there is a form of words that echoes this statement in Genesis 3. The first part of Romans 6:23 declares: *The wages of sin is death...* It is stating the obvious here that Paul believes in a literal Adam every bit as much as a literal historical Jesus Christ, the two people stand or fall together in his argument.

(iii) Step Three ..., and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned (Romans 5:12c) Sin and death is no longer merely a problem for Adam and Eve it became a problem for the whole of humanity. The problem of sin and death is now our problem. Adam's sin led inevitably to Adam's death. Universal death was now normative for the whole of humanity due in turn to universal sin. There is, though, a challenge here in addressing our predicament.

(b) **The explanation of Paul's point**

Did Paul mean simply that we face potential spiritual and physical death because of our own actual sin, that we sinned like Adam, or when Adam sinned were all humanity included in his sinning, that is all sinned in and with Adam? Verse twelve on its own can be interpreted equally in either of these two ways. You may think does it really matter which is correct because the fact that we are all sinners means that the predicament is the same in both cases? The issue here concerns how the problem is resolved. In our cultural context most people would probably vote that each person individually has fallen short of God's standards and is personally responsible and accountable to God for that. Therefore, the simplest easy to understand explanation should be accepted. However, the apostle Paul does not choose to go for that explanation. A careful reading of this chapter indicates that Paul meant 'all sinned in and through Adam and therefore all died'. There are three main reasons why this is the case.

(i) **The significance of Romans 5:13-14:** <sup>13</sup>To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law. <sup>14</sup>Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come. Paul reminds us, **first**, that sin was in the world prior to the giving of the moral law, the Ten Commandments in the time of Moses (Exodus 20). This fact was not disputed. **Secondly**, no-one could be punished for breaking God's Law, because it had not been given until the time of Moses and the Israelites meeting with God on Mount Horeb in Sinai. Therefore, sin could be held against transgressors. But, **thirdly**, death was a fact for humanity from Adam to the present day, even in the experience of the people who didn't consciously sin against God. There were individuals at the time of Noah and the flood; at the Tower of Babel, together with those punished in the judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah, who deliberately flouted God's moral standards and were punished accordingly. But the fact of death for child and for adult, for able-bodied and disabled; those in full command of their rational faculties and those without, everyone had this in common – they died (only Enoch Genesis 5:24 and Elijah II Kings 2:1-12 are the exceptions). Death is the penalty of sin. Careful reflection, I suggest, points to the fact that all died because all sinned in and through Adam, the representative or federal head of the human race. To grasp this explanation clearly is of real pastoral assistance. If the simple explanation of death is that each person is personally punished for their sin and death is the consequence –how do we account for the babies who die before birth or in the first weeks, months or early years? how do we account for the small number of human beings whose mental incapacity is so serious that they cannot make rational decisions for themselves? When we address the problem in this way and work out the implications of the opposing explanations, only one makes genuine sense. All of us as humanity sinned in and through Adam, the majority of us in time committed actual sins as well, but the original sin whose consequences affect all humanity was committed by our first human ancestor Adam.

(ii) **The importance of the wider context of Romans 5:15-19** <sup>15</sup>But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by **the trespass of the one man**, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! <sup>16</sup>Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of **one man's sin**: the judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. <sup>17</sup>For if, by **the trespass of the one man**, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! <sup>18</sup>Consequently, just as **one trespass** resulted in condemnation for all people, so also

one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. <sup>19</sup>For just as through **the disobedience of the one man** the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. It is as if the apostle knew that not everyone would get or choose to accept the point he was making in the previous verses, so he labours the point here in verses 15-19. Here five times in five verses Paul emphasises that the trespass or disobedience of **one man** brought death, judgement and condemnation to all people. Humanity as a whole was identified with and suffered the consequences of the single sin of Adam in Eden. This is repetition for the sake of effect here which we need in our culture to enable us to make sense of what he has just said.

(iii) **The analogy between Adam and Christ** Paul presents a third argument to back his explanation of the human predicament. He is **not** saying that death comes to all because we sin like Adam; therefore, by analogy we gain the gift of salvation when we are as righteous and holy as Jesus! This would be impossible. What is it he means here in using this analogy? ‘As we (humanity) are condemned on account of what Adam did, (so) we are justified on account of what Jesus Christ did’ (Charles Hodge, *Romans*, p.142). The threefold strength of Paul’s argument from the text, the wider context and by use of the analogy between Adam and Christ, makes a convincing case for what he is teaching. \_

(c) **The illustration of Paul’s point** In Paul’s day and in some cultures today the collective solidarity of the extended family, tribe or nation is very real to many people. We need to grasp this cultural assumption was normative in the first century AD. However, it was not just the culture of the day but deeply biblical. Here are three biblical examples of collective solidarity, the one representing the many; that is the implications of the action of one affected the many even beyond their lifetime:

(i) **Melchizedek and Abraham** (Genesis 14:17-24; Hebrews 7:1-10) In the book of Hebrews the author highlighted the extraordinary relationship between these two men and its significance. Melchizedek, the Priest-King of Salem (later called Jerusalem) received tithes of everything he had from Abraham, and in return offered him bread and wine (Genesis 14:17-24). Hebrews 7:4-10 records these words: *Just think how great he was: even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder!* <sup>5</sup>*Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people – that is, from their fellow Israelites – even though they also are descended from Abraham.* <sup>6</sup>*This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises.* <sup>7</sup>*And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater.* <sup>8</sup>*In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living.* <sup>9</sup>**One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham,** <sup>10</sup>**because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.** The action of Abraham had implications for his future descendant Levi more than five hundred years later.

(ii) **Achan and Israel at Jericho** (Joshua 7) God had told the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land that they must not take any plunder from Jericho. All of it belonged to God. Unfortunately one man with the knowledge of his family members stole a stunning designer coat, together with a wedge of gold and two hundred shekels of silver. In lifestyle terms it was potentially like possessing the proceeds of the winning lottery ticket of a national lottery to them. But the coat could not be worn as everyone would know where it had come from. The money could not be spent for the same reasons. So all the loot was buried underground beneath the family tent; no-one might have known but for the tragic defeat of the Israelites in their battle against the small community of Ai. Joshua and the Israelites cried out to God as to why this judgement against the nation had been carried out? Joshua 7:11-13 records God as saying to the nation through its leader Joshua these words: <sup>11</sup>**Israel has sinned; they have violated My covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions.** <sup>12</sup>*That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been*

*made liable to destruction. I will not be with you any more unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.*<sup>13</sup> *‘Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, “Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow; for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: there are devoted things among you, Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove them.* One man’s actual sin had consequences for the whole nation. A class in Primary School may lose their ‘golden time’ for the bad behaviour of a few individuals. Well-behaved children suffer the consequences of the actions of other people. At a time when I played church league football in an SFA-affiliated league, a team were expelled from the League. Why? A trialist at the end of his first game punched the referee in the face for what had been a disastrous attempt at officiating at a game of football. However, the whole team were put out of the League and paid the penalty for one man’s misconduct in which others played no part, not did they approve of or consent to his course of action. Many other examples could be cited of this collective solidarity even in our own society today.

(iii)**Jesus on the cross** Who was responsible for putting Jesus on the cross? The Roman Governor Pontius Pilate had legal responsibility for sentencing Jesus to death, but he washed his hands claiming he was not responsible for what happened (Matthew 27:24); the Jewish religious authorities were responsible as they asked Pilate to put Jesus to death (Matthew 27:20); the crowds that gathered at the trial that morning chanted for Barabbas to be released and Jesus of Nazareth to be crucified –were they responsible (Matthew 27:25)? The Early Church in Jerusalem identified more people as responsible in Acts 4:27: *Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed.* They also said God was responsible for Jesus being on the cross. *They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen* (Acts 4:28). We must make it personal and say my sin and your sin was responsible for Jesus being on the cross. The author of Hebrews warned his readers against falling into sin because of the risk of *crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace* (Hebrews 6:6b). All died because all sinned in and through Adam, our representative head. Praise God that to recognise this is the first part of coming to His solution, our saviour Jesus. May each of us put our faith and trust in Jesus, for His name’s sake, Amen.