

Is Generational Sin A Legitimate Christian Doctrine

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Generational Sin is a term used by various Christian teaching and healing ministries to describe negative behavior that persists through two or more generations of the same family. Alcoholism, spousal abuse, and child abuse are common examples. Some ministries have expanded the scope of the definition to include generational patterns of physical illness, emotional distress, financial difficulty, et al. The principal justification for the doctrine is Exodus 20:5-6, and repeated nearly verbatim in Exodus 34:6-7 and Deuteronomy 5:9-10:

“For I, Yahwah your God am a jealous God and I punish the father’s fault in the sons, the grandsons, and the great-grandsons of those who hate me; but I show kindness to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” (*Jerusalem Bible*)

The Lord God’s stated intention to punish the sons and grandsons for the faults of the father was a logical extension of the promise previously made to Abraham:

“Now Yahweh had wondered, ‘Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am going to do (to Sodom), seeing that Abraham will become a great nation with all the nations of the earth blessing themselves by him? For I have singled him out to command his sons and his household after him to maintain the way of Yahweh by just and upright living. In this way Yahweh will carry out for Abraham what he has promised him.’” (*Genesis 18:17-19, Jerusalem Bible*)

Abraham further confirmed the Lord God’s willingness to spare the lives of many because of the virtuous conduct of a few when he interceded on behalf of Sodom (Genesis 18:22-32) After negotiating with Abraham, God agreed to spare Sodom if ten just men were found therein.

Abraham was a patriarch and therefore the leader of a household that included wife, children, relatives, in-laws, grandchildren and slaves, yet he alone answered for all of his people, and he alone spoke to God. In the patriarchal social structure, the only thing that

mattered was the virtue, or lack of virtue, of the patriarch. That patriarchal social structure dominated the ancient world, but ended for the Hebrews with their enslavement to Egypt.

Then God led them out of Egypt and out of enslavement with the revelation of a radically new social order:

“Then you (Moses) will say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what Yahweh says: Israel is my first-born son.’” (*Exodus 4:22, Jerusalem Bible*)

That revelation constituted an unprecedented advance in social order because the entire ethnic group of the people known as Israel was established as the earthly manifestation of the divine, and thereby became “the people of God.”¹ All previous social order had been patriarchal or a “cosmological king,” such as the Pharaoh, who was revered as the earthly manifestation of the divine. The consequence was the mutation in ethical responsibility. The patriarchal model had been abandoned. Exodus 20:5-6 was an assignment of responsibility to each man for his own family. The concept of individual morality was developed further in Deuteronomy, Chapter 11, and individual responsibility for social and religious customs was developed in Chapters 12 thru 26.

The social structure established during the period of the Judges was formed by the revelation given Moses. The people as a whole were constituted under God with no particular leader, and no formal government. Leaders, or “judges,” were raised up by God and served at his discretion. The period of the Judges lasted 150 years, and then was replaced by a monarchy structured similarly to the monarchies of neighboring cultures.

“It displeased Samuel that they (the people of Israel) should say, ‘Let us have a king to rule us.’ So he prayed to Yahweh. But Yahweh said to Samuel, ‘Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for it is not you they have rejected; they have rejected me from ruling over them.’” (*1 Samuel 8:6-9, Jerusalem Bible*)

Samuel was instructed by the Lord God to warn the people of the consequences of a monarchy:

“These will be the rights of the king who is to reign over you. He will take your sons and assign them to his chariotry and cavalry, and they will run in front of his chariot. He will use them as leaders of a thousand and leaders of fifty; he will make them plow his plow land and harvest his harvest and make his weapons of war and the gear for his chariots. He will also take your daughters as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. He will take the best of your fields, of your vineyards and olive groves and give them to his officials. He will tithe your crops and vineyards to provide for his eunuchs and his officials. He will take the best of your man servants and maid servants, or your cattle and your donkeys, and make them work for him. He will tithe your flocks, and you

¹See Order and History, Volume One, Israel and Revelation, Eric Voegelin, Louisiana State University Press, 1956.

yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out on account of the king you have chosen for yourselves, but on that day God will not answer you.” (1 Samuel 8:11-18, Jerusalem Bible)

The people of Israel justified their desire for a king by declaring their desire to be like other people, but that was only superficial. Israel accepted the steep social cost of the monarchy because they wanted to abdicate the personal responsibility before God necessitated by the revelation that Israel was “the people of God.” The moral order of Israel reverted back to that of the patriarchal period, and throughout the monarchy period the King alone had the responsibility to answer to God. The people were blessed if the king had God’s favor, and suffered if the king incurred God’s disfavor. David, for example, incurred God’s displeasure near the end of his life by ordering a census of Israel. God’s response was given through the prophet Gad:

“So Gad went to David and told him. ‘Are three years of famine to come on you in your country,’ he said, ‘or will you flee for three months before your pursuing enemy, or would you rather have three days’ pestilence in your country?’” (2 Samuel 24:13-14, Jerusalem Bible)

David chose pestilence and seventy thousand people died as a result of David’s transgression. The subsequent history of Israel under the monarchy was recorded only in terms of the king’s performance, i.e.:

“Asa did what is good and right in the eyes of Yahweh.” (2 Chronicles 14:1, Jerusalem Bible)

and, “Yahweh was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father’s earlier days . . .” (2 Chronicles 17:3, Jerusalem Bible)

During the period of the monarchy God raised up prophets, just as he had raised up leaders during the period of the Judges, and the role of the two were similar: to be the instrument through which the Lord God accomplished his objectives on earth. The principal message of the prophets was a call to the people of Israel to return to the covenant of Sinai . . . to again embrace the revelation given thru Moses. Through Jeremiah he specifically repudiated generational sin in Jeremiah 31:22:

“In those days people will no longer say:

‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes; the children’s teeth are set on edge.’

But each is to die for his own sin. Every man who eats unripe grapes is to have his own teeth set on edge.”

The rejection of the moral structure of the patriarchal and monarchical periods was reaffirmed through Ezekiel:

“The word of Yahweh was addressed to me as follows. ‘Son of man, if a country were to sin against me by faithlessness, and if

I were to stretch out my hand against it and destroy its stock of bread and send famine to it to kill its men and beasts, and if in that country there were these three men, Noah, Daniel and Job, these men would have their lives spared because of their integrity - it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks. Were I to unleash wild animals on that country to rob it of its children and reduce it to such a desert that no one would dare to cross it because of the animals, and if these three men were in that country, then, as I live - it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks - they would not be able to save either son or daughter; they alone would be saved, and the country would become a desert. If I were to bring the sword into that country and say: Let the sword pass through the country; I will strike down men and beasts with it, and if these three men were in that country, then, as I live - it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks - they would not be able to save son or daughter; they alone would be saved. If I were to send the plague into that country and satisfy my anger with them by bloodshed, cutting off men and beasts, if Noah, Daniel and Job were in the country, as I live - it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks - they would not be able to save either son or daughter, though they would save their own lives because of their integrity.” *(Ezekiel 14:1-21, Jerusalem Bible)*

God followed with a rejection of generational sin in Ezekiel, Chapter 18:

“The Word of Yahweh was addressed to me as follows, ‘Why do you keep repeating this proverb in the land of Israel:

The fathers have eaten unripe grapes;
and the children’s teeth are set on edge?

‘As I live - it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks - there will no longer be any reason to repeat this proverb in Israel. See now: all life belongs to me; the father’s life and the son’s life, both alike belong to me. The man who has sinned, he is the one who shall die.’” *(Ezekiel 18:1-4, Jerusalem Bible)*

The remainder of Chapter 18 detailed God’s rejection of generational sin, and affirmation of individual responsibility.

God the Father’s intention with regard to responsibility for sin was developed further by Jesus in healing the man born blind:

“As he went along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?’ ‘Neither he nor his parents sinned,’ Jesus answered, ‘he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” *(John 9:1-3, Jerusalem Bible)*

After Jesus restored the man’s sight a public dispute erupted between the Pharisees, the parents of the man born blind, and the man born blind himself. The Pharisees first denounced Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, and then later chased the man born blind

away with:

“‘Are you trying to teach us,’ they replied, ‘and you a sinner through and through, since you were born!’” (*John 9:34, Jerusalem Bible*)

‘Pharisee’ meant ‘true Israel.’ and was a lay movement committed to restoring the true Israel, specifically the holiness and purity of Israel, by strict observance of the Law. Their zeal for the “law of Moses,” and their public scorn for the lower class, resulted in a regression back to the belief in generational sin.² Jesus again repudiated that doctrine in accordance with the Father’s previously stated desire.

In summary it must be said that generational sin was doctrine during the very earliest period in Israel’s history that was first displaced by revelation and rejected again and again by the Prophets, and then finally by the Son. It therefore has no place in Christian doctrine, and should only be studied in the context of salvation history.

²See Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, Joachim Jeremias, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1962, pages 246-267.