

chapter one

Are Children Born Without Sin?

It is easy to understand why parents who lose a child seek some reason to ground the hope that their infant is saved. Unfortunately, many people seek this reason in false beliefs that not only lack any foundation in Scripture but that in fact contradict essential biblical claims. This is the first of four chapters to explore these false beliefs.

In three of these chapters I introduce the false theory in terms of a particular family's search for spiritual guidance and hope after the loss of a child. In each case, they mistakenly seek that help from a theological system that is inconsistent with Scripture. I do not do this to judge the parents. Many people justify their lack of biblical and theological knowledge by saying they have been too busy to pay attention to such matters. Denominational and theological differences have never seemed important to them, until suddenly, as in these cases, the tragic loss of a child makes it necessary to call on a minister for the funeral. In the stories that follow, all names are fictitious and, as they say in the movies, any resemblance between these people and any other person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

In this chapter I critique a theory that continues to influence large numbers of people in Christendom, even though it was correctly denounced as a heresy almost sixteen hundred years ago. This belief, known as Pelagianism, teaches that all human beings are born morally innocent; infants are born without sin. Large numbers of people still seek mistakenly to ground the salvation of children who die in infancy upon their supposed sinlessness. This chapter explains why such thinking cannot be an option for Christians who regard the Bible as their ultimate authority of faith and practice. Whatever our answer to the issue of infant salvation, it must recognize that all human beings, including all infants, suffer from original sin.

Sam and Mary

Sam and Mary are in their late twenties. They are a good example of what is often called an unchurched family. They met in college and were married in the church that Mary's family attended three or four times a year. The church building was large and ornate, although the small number of people in the typical Sunday morning service left much unfilled space in every row.

Even though Sam and Mary seldom attended church, they would always, when asked, say that they "belonged" to the big church in the center of town. Their first child was a beautiful little girl named Amy. One night when she was three, Amy came down with a fever that grew progressively worse as the night wore on. About three in the morning, Amy's condition became so critical that Sam and Mary rushed her to an emergency room. By 8 a.m., Amy was dead.

As though the shock of Amy's death were not bad enough, family members softly reminded them of the need to make funeral arrangements. Mary's mother called her pastor, Rev. Michael Matthews, to request that he conduct Amy's funeral and also meet with Sam and Mary. The meeting was scheduled for the day before the funeral.

Reverend Matthews had studied at a small seminary in the East that was well-known for its liberal theology. By the time he graduated, he was grappling with a number of issues he had been unable to resolve during his seminary training. For one thing, he had lost his former confidence that the Bible was the Word of God. In place of the Bible, the real "Word of God" was the collection of subjective feelings, sentiments, and emotions that people sometimes become conscious of after reading the Bible. Sometimes similar feelings result from reading other literature, hearing certain forms of music, or observing works of art. Mike Matthews wasn't sure he understood how all this was supposed to work itself out in his preaching, but he was rather glad he didn't have to make his own beliefs and preaching adhere to everything in the Bible.

Because Mike had no ultimate, objective, and infallible religious authority, he wasn't sure what to believe about many issues, one of them being the matter of life after death. About the same year in seminary that he rejected the authority of the Bible, he had decided that the biblical account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was historically untrue. He assumed that someone named Jesus had lived and died in Palestine. But he doubted that this Jesus was the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. He rejected the miracles attributed to Jesus in the New Testament and felt free to ignore any teachings of Jesus that no longer fit the worldview he had picked up during

seminary. And Mike was quite agnostic on the matter of life after death.

Funerals always gave Mike problems. He knew he was supposed to eulogize the deceased and offer family members some hope for their loved one. He always found a way to be very ambiguous in his statements. He followed tradition and read the customary passages of Scripture such as Psalm 23 and Jesus' words, "In my Father's house are many mansions."

Amy's death confronted Mike with his first funeral for a child. He knew he could do and say most of the things that had become the major content of his funerals for adults. But what was he going to tell Sam and Mary at the conference they had requested?

When Sam and Mary sat down in Mike's study, their previous disinterest in Scripture and theology left them particularly vulnerable. They didn't even know the right way to phrase their question. They also had no knowledge of Reverend Matthews's theological doubts. Finally, their search for the right words produced the question that was on their hearts. "Reverend Matthews," they asked, "is Amy in heaven?"

If Mike had been totally honest at that moment, his answer would have been, "I don't know!" To be truthful, he didn't know whether there is a heaven or what it is like. But that did not seem an appropriate time or place to put his uncertainties into words. And so, without being consciously insincere, Mike smiled compassionately and said, "I am sure she is. If anyone is in heaven, I guarantee that Amy is."