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# THE NATURE OF CHRIST: THE SOTERIOLOGICAL QUESTION

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# **The Nature of Christ: The Soteriological Question**

## **Introduction: Jesus, the God-Man**

It is quite evident in the Scriptures that the followers of Jesus acknowledged Him as Immanuel, “God with us”. His followers held a firm belief that in him they had encountered Yahweh himself. The New Testament’s reflection on this experience, and its implications, led to the judgment that Jesus is both God and Savior (2 Pet 1:1). So commonly was Jesus evaluated as Messiah or Christ, that “Christ” became almost a personal name.<sup>1</sup> It was the assertion of the New Testament writers that Jesus of Nazareth is divine.

The certain conviction of the New Testament writers regarding the divinity of Jesus met a different fate among both Jewish and Greek mentalities. Some people of Jewish heritage with a strict monotheistic background evolved in their thinking to maintain what has been called an *adoptionist* view. This view, held by the Ebionites, “understood Jesus as a mere man who by scrupulous observance of the law was justified and thereby became the Messiah.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Greek mentality, imbued with rationalism, cast the apparent divine-human paradox in metaphysical terms. For them, it was important to decide on the ontological identity of Jesus of Nazareth. These Greek concerns underlay the various *docetic* views. According to the docetic view, the divine Christ did not have an actual human body; it was only an appearance, a phantasm; since if Christ died, then he was not God, and if he was God, then he did not die.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (Paulist Press: new York, 1994): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994): 247.

The upshot of these Jewish and Greek objections was great heresies early in the history of Christian thought. I wish to visit briefly four of these early heresies to make one significant observation: accompanying the controversies were particular conceptions of salvation. I make this observation with the goal of exploring how these perennial controversies may inform the discussion within the Adventist faith community. The hypothesis underlying the approach I am taking here is that the Christological discussion in the Adventist community may be illuminated by paying closer attention to respective soteriological positions.

### **The Nature of Christ in the History of Christian Thought**

I have observed that the controversies over the nature of Christ were accompanied by particular views of salvation. Indeed, we may say that the soteriological implications of the various positions held on the nature of Christ fuelled the Christological controversies. I will test this observation by reviewing the first four great controversies of Christian history. Before doing so, I should observe that the *adoptionist* and *docetic* tendencies had already crystallised into two schools of thought: the Antiochian and Alexandrian Christologies respectively. These two overarching Christological schools were at the heart of the Christological debates. The Antiochian school, originating in Antioch, Syria, appeared to have been influenced by the Jewish mentality where the humanity of Jesus was over-emphasised to the point of denying the divinity of Jesus. Alexandrian Christology, however, originating in Alexandria, a center of Greek learning, emphasised the deity of Jesus to the point of blurring the distinction between deity and humanity.

#### **The Arian Controversy**

The Arian controversy, sparked off by Arius, a popular presbyter in the Church of Alexandria (died 335 AD), centered on ideas expressed by him that seemed to reflect the sentiments of the Antiochian school of thought. Arius, committed to the philosophically influenced Greek idea that God is undifferentiated,

argued that Jesus, the Son or *Logos*, had to be a creature and, therefore, must have had a beginning. As he put it

“what we say and think we both have taught and continue to teach; that the Son is not unbegotten, nor part of the unbegotten in any way, nor is he derived from any substance...And before he was begotten or created or appointed or established, he did not exist; for he was not unbegotten. We are persecuted because we say that the Son has a beginning, but God is without a beginning.”<sup>3</sup>

Arius’ point of departure, then, is ontological, meaning that terms like the “Son” should not be construed to define the *essential* nature of Jesus.

The Soteriological Connection Arius’ main opponent, the church father Athanasius, revealed in his opposition that although Arius argued from an ontological perspective, the essence of the debate was soteriological. Athanasius argued that salvation can be brought to humankind only by one who is truly God.<sup>4</sup> It is true that Athanasius’ particular view of salvation in which humanity is partaking of the nature of God was at the core of his argument; nevertheless, the centrality of the salvation question to the Christological debate is undeniable. We should remember that the church rejected Arius’ position at the First Ecumenical Council (A.D. 325 at Nicea), ruling that Jesus was begotten of the Father and of the same substance as the Father. The council, therefore, affirmed the deity of Jesus.

### **Apollinarianism**

The Nicene declaration of the deity of Jesus left unanswered how His unity with the Father would be sustained. Apollinarius was concerned to affirm the Nicene position and work out a solution that would preserve the integrity of Jesus, i.e., truly

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<sup>3</sup> See “The Letter of Arius to Eusebius,” in *Documents of the Christian Church*

<sup>4</sup> Grenz., 248.

integrate the divine and human against the Antiochian school that tended to create two persons.

Apollinarius worked out his solution on the basis of Platonic anthropology that understood the human person to consist of three substantial entities: body, soul and spirit. His proposition was that in the incarnation Jesus' body and soul were human in nature whereas the *logos* occupied his spirit.

The Soteriological Connection While ontologically Apollinarius' solution seemed to resolve the question about Jesus' identity, as in the Arian controversy, the soteriological issue became the test for its acceptability. Besides its docetic tendency, the Apollinarian position was also criticised for not correctly reflecting the Christian position that Jesus is the bearer of salvation.<sup>5</sup> The view was that what the *Logos* did not assume in the incarnation, in this case "the spirit," the *Logos* could not redeem. The position was pointedly stated by Gregory of Nazianzus as follows: "If anyone has put his trust in him as a man without a human mind, he is himself devoid of mind and unworthy of salvation. For what he has not assumed he has not healed; it is what is united to his Deity that is saved."<sup>6</sup> Apollinarius' position was rejected at the Second Ecumenical Council (A.D. 381, at Constantinople), affirming the Nicean position.

### **The Nestorius Controversy**

It should be remembered that underlying the Nicean position which was consistently affirmed in the controversies was the Alexandrian Christology, which, unlike the Antiochian Christology that tended to create two persons, tended to blur the distinction between the divine and the human. Alexandrian Christology insisted on a true *communication idiomatum* of two natures, a doctrine Nestorius could not accept since for him it fused the divine and human natures. Nestorius sought to correct the foregoing perception; hence his opposition to the title "Bearer

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, "An Examination of Apollinarius," in Bettenson, 45.

of God” as applied to Mary. For him, such a characterisation did not emphasise enough the integrity of the two natures. Nestorius, sought to maintain the integrity of natures by saying that the union between deity and humanity was a *voluntary* union. The union is voluntary in two senses: the union results from the free will of God; the will of the human nature agrees with the divine will.<sup>7</sup>

The Soteriological Connection Nestorius’ position was rejected at the Third Ecumenical council meeting in Ephesus in A.D. 431 as dividing Jesus into two persons. Yet, the underlying soteriological dimension is significantly noted by Grenz.

At the foundation of the Nestorian position lay another heresy, the anthropology developed by Pelagius. According to Augustine’s theological antagonist, a human person is endowed at birth with sufficient grace to reinforce the human will in its battle against sin. Sin, in turn, is not a state of being but lies entirely in human action. Because of this endowment, an individual could theoretically attain perfection. Nestorius saw this perfectible human substance revealed in Jesus. The man Jesus employed the natural endowment of grace without fail. This exercise of his good will effected the voluntary union between Jesus and the *Logos*.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Eutychian Controversy**

Eutyches, after whom the controversy is named, accused Nestorius of dividing Jesus into two natures. His own solution was to insist that Jesus possessed only “one nature” (hence monophysitism), a nature which, as it turns out, was neither divine nor human. Eutychianism was rejected at the Fourth Ecumenical Council held at Chalcedon in 451 and the two natures of Jesus were affirmed without *confusing, changing, dividing or separating* them.<sup>9</sup>

The soteriological Connection What is important for the purpose of this discussion was the aftermath of Chalcedon with regard to

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<sup>7</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. 1. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970): 363.

<sup>8</sup> Grenz, 296.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Leith, ed. *Creeeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982): 36.

salvation. The monothelites, drawing from Chalcedon, concluded that Jesus had only one will, namely, the will of the *Logos*. In other words, Jesus' obedience was a result of the moving force of the *Logos*. Here again, as in the Apollinarian controversy, the early church applied the soteriological test to reject the monothelite position, arguing that "complete redemption demands a complete incarnation, including assumption of a human will."<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is quite instructive to note that in these early controversies the test of the orthodoxy of any position, *ontologically*, was decided in relation to its soteriological implications, namely its implications for *salvation*. In other words, even though the controversies appeared to centre on the "being" of Jesus, ultimately, the significant issue was how his "being" related to our salvation. How may this conclusion shed some light on the issue of the nature of Christ in current Adventist thinking? Is it possible that ultimately the Christological debate is really an issue about views on salvation?

## **The Nature of Christ in Adventist Thought**

The Christological discussion among Adventists has divided along the lines of whether in Jesus' humanity he took on a "fallen" or "unfallen" nature.<sup>11</sup> As in the early controversies of the early church, the discussion on the nature of Christ appears to center on the "being" of Christ, which the opposing positions hope to establish on the basis of the exegesis of relevant texts. Unlike the earlier debates, however, the "fallen" and "unfallen" positions in Adventist thinking focus on the nature of Jesus humanity without addressing explicitly the relationship between his deity

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<sup>10</sup> Grenz, 298.

<sup>11</sup> Two papers dealing with the respective positions are posted at the Biblical Research Institute Website: Kenneth Gage (Pseudonym), "What Human Nature Did Jesus Take? Fallen"; BenjaminRand (Pseudonym), "What Human Nature Did Jesus Take? Unfallen" These position papers crystallize the thoughts on the opposing sides and will be relied upon in my analysis.



and humanity. My discussion will, therefore, have that narrow focus. How can our understanding of salvation help us define the “ontological” questions? In the rest of this presentation I wish to analyse the “fallen” and “unfallen” positions with respect to their underlying (explicit or implicit) soteriology and anthropology. In addition, I will seek to show how E.G. White’s comments may shed some light on the analysis.

### **Jesus’ Human Nature: Fallen?**

The fundamental argument for the “fallen nature” position is that Jesus somehow assumed fallen *sinful flesh* without being a *sinner*. This position is based on the premise that “a person born with sinful flesh need not be a sinner.”<sup>12</sup> By *sinful flesh* is meant “the human condition in all of its aspects as affected by the fall of Adam and Eve.”<sup>13</sup> The grand principle underlying the “fallen” position is that the witness of the New Testament writers suggests that Jesus had no physical, emotional or moral advantages over his contemporaries.<sup>14</sup> It seems fair to conclude from the perspective of “fallen nature” advocates that as far as Jesus’ humanity is concerned, he was exactly like any human being after Adam and Eve. These fundamental convictions of the “fallen nature” position are ontological in nature. But what possible view of salvation does such ontology entail? I will explore these issues. The reason I am choosing to emphasise the soteriological rather than the ontological issue is that, in my view, the former is less intractable in the Bible.

Two basic questions may be asked of the “fallen nature” position: first, is it biblically accurate to argue that sinful flesh cannot be equated with sin? Second, is it correct to say that Jesus in his humanity was exactly like us after the fall?

Born With Sinful Flesh But Not A Sinner Several Scriptural passages are brought together in support of the idea that Jesus was born with sinful flesh. Jesus’ *virgin birth* (Matt 1:16, 18-

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<sup>12</sup> Gage, 3

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

25: Luke 1:26-38; 3:23); His self-description as *Son of man* (Matt 8:20; 24:27); and Paul's *Adam/Christ* analogy (Rom 5) are used to support Jesus' *solidarity* with the human race. This solidarity, however, is interpreted ontologically; hence the notion of *heredity* looms large in these arguments. Thus, concerning the virgin birth Gage notes: "No Biblical evidence suggests that the stream of human heredity was broken between Mary and Jesus,"<sup>15</sup> also, the second Adam "is a hereditary descendant, born of woman."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, key passages in Hebrews 2 are treated along the lines of ontological solidarity between Jesus and post-fall human beings. Thus, "all from one..." (v. 11) means *common human heredity*; "flesh and blood" (v. 14) means the same nature; and "in its most immediate obvious sense, verses 16-18 seem to say that Christ took the human nature common to all post-Fall humanity."<sup>17</sup>

The next set of arguments in support of the view that Jesus was born with sinful flesh is a consideration of texts that specifically use the words "sinful" and "flesh" in relation to Him. First, it is argued from some of Paul's use of the word *sarx*, particularly Romans 8:3, that although the word is morally neutral, "it does provide the seat and material in which evil may operate."<sup>18</sup> *Sarx*, then, in this view, is the fallen human condition which is given to all men and women at birth, although no one is held guilty or responsible for the condition. Gage quotes Anders Nygren approvingly. In reference to Romans 8:3 Nygren observes: "He shared all our conditions. He was under the same powers of destruction. Out of 'the flesh' arose for Him the same temptations as for us."<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the fact that Jesus had the same liabilities and disadvantages common to all mankind, He did not sin. Referring to Jesus Gage writes, "He had the power of choice and the heredity that weakens and misdirects it. He had a nature wherein

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<sup>15</sup> Gage, 3

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

temptations common to men and women could find appeal. *But in Jesus evil found no response.*<sup>20</sup> Jesus' victory over sin has implications for us. Gage interprets Hebrews 4:15 in the context of the great controversy to conclude that "because Jesus did not sin, no man must sin."<sup>21</sup> That is, since Jesus was made like his bretheren in every respect and was tempted as we are yet without sin, we too can live without sinning.

### **Jesus' Human Nature: Unfallen?**

The "unfallen nature" position argues primarily from the nature of sin.

If sin were simply a matter of acts, then, it would be possible to conceive of Jesus as born with sinful flesh and yet not a sinner. But from the perspective of the "unfallen nature" position, "It simply isn't true that sin isn't present until the person's first act of sin. Men are born sinners."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Jesus could not be born of sinful flesh.

It should be remarked that unlike the "fallen nature" position that argues from ontology to soteriology, the "unfallen nature" position takes the opposite route of working from hamtiology/soteriology to ontology. But is it biblically accurate to argue that sin is not consummated only in acts? Is it biblically correct to say that Jesus was different, ontologically, from the rest of humanity at birth? Answering these two basic questions should enable us to flesh out the "unfallen nature" position.

Jesus Was Not Born With Sinful Flesh Because Of The Nature Of Sin. The "unfallen nature" position places great emphasis on the theological concept of original sin. From their perspective, all post-fall humans partake of original sin which is defined first as a broken relationship between man and God (Rom 14:23), which then leads to the commission of wrongful acts (1 John 3:4).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 6 (emphasis mine).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Rand, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Romans 5:12-21 is presented as a key passage in defence of original sin. Rand concludes from this passage that

death, or condemnation does not pass on to each person only because of his own sin. It does that, too. But in a profound sense, death passes on to every man because of Adam's sin, or broken relationship with God. (That Adam's sin affects all the race is mentioned five times in verses 15-19.) It simply isn't true that sin isn't present until the person's first act of sin. Men are born sinners. 'Death reigned' (verse 14) from Adam's sin. Babies die before knowingly sinning.<sup>24</sup>

Rand develops the case for original sin also on the basis of Ps. 51:5, and concludes that every human, save Christ, is born a sinner.<sup>25</sup> However, he distinguishes this biblical concept of original sin from the Roman Catholic concept which imputes guilt to every human born on the basis that every one was seminally present in Adam when he sinned. It would seem that the "unfallen nature" position also builds on a principle of *solidarity*, though not ontologically, between Adam and the post-fall human race.

Jesus' Nature Was Unfallen Because He Was Unique The "unfallen nature" position defends Jesus uniqueness, ontologically and otherwise, by a consideration of two key Greek terms applied to Jesus: *monogenes* and *prototokos*. First, all the nine uses of the term *monogenes* in the New Testament are examined to show that in its five applications to Jesus (John 1:14,18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) it means unique, and one of a kind. This uniqueness is interpreted Christologically to mean that "his uniqueness consisted not only in how he was born (without human father) but in what nature he was born (without human sin).<sup>26</sup> Second, the uses of the word *prototokos* with reference to Christ (Heb 1:6; Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Rev 1:5) yield the same results of uniqueness with particular reference to mission.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4.

Jesus Not *In Sinful Flesh* But In The *Likeness* of Sinful Flesh As with the “fallen nature” position, the “unfallen nature” position examines Romans 8:3 but comes to the opposite conclusion. Rand shows that not only in Romans 8:3, but also in Philippians 2:7 and Hebrews 2:7, the use of the Greek *homoioima* or *homoioo* (likeness) instead of *isos* (same) suggests that “Jesus was only *similar* to other humans in having a sin-affected *physical* human body, but not the *same* as other humans, for He alone was sinless in His *spiritual* relationship with God.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Assessing The Two Positions**

The assessment of the two positions on the nature of Christ will be undertaken first, by taking a second look at the foundational Scriptural texts which serve as their respective points of departure, and second, by evaluating their views on salvation. Relevant Spirit of Prophecy passages will be employed in the assessment.

#### **The “Fallen Nature” Position**

In my overview of the fallen position I drew attention to two main Scriptural arguments: those relating to Jesus’ ontological solidarity with us, and texts on “flesh” or “sinful flesh.” What can be said about the fallen position’s interpretation of these texts?

First, the Adam/Christ analogy. Minimally, we can say that ontological solidarity is perhaps not the best or only possible interpretation. F.F Bruce, for example, understands the Hebrew concept of corporate personality to underlie Paul’s argument in Romans 5:12-21. In other words, to Paul, Adam was more than a historical individual. Yes, he was the first man, but he was also ‘humanity.’<sup>28</sup> Contrary to the fallen position’s *hereditary*, ontological solidarity, Bruce observes, “it is not simply because Adam is the ancestor of mankind that all are said to have sinned in his sin (otherwise it might be argued that because Abraham

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>28</sup> F.F Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988):118-123.

believed God all his descendants were necessarily involved in his belief); it is because Adam is mankind.”<sup>29</sup>

William Barclay concurs with Bruce’s interpretation. While he grants the plausibility of the interpretation that what we inherit from Adam is *the tendency* to sin (an ontological idea), Barclay insists that this is not what Paul meant here. In Barclay’s view, the passage ought to be given what he calls the realistic interpretation, “namely, that because of the solidarity of the human race, all mankind actually sinned in Adam. This idea was not strange to a Jew; it was the actual belief of the Jewish thinkers.”<sup>30</sup>

Second, Hebrews 2:14 declares that Jesus partook of flesh and blood. While the text basically speaks of Jesus partaking in humanness, it does not by itself exhaustively characterise the humanness of Jesus. If we take Jesus’ humanity as an exact ontological participation in all aspects of human life, as the fallen position does, then He must have undergone trials and faced temptations the way we all do. Talking about temptation James writes: “But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed” (Jas 1:14). On this point, Grenz notes that we know from the gospels that Jesus was not pulled into sin in this manner. Then he draws the ontological implication: “In this sense we can affirm the... position that Jesus was free from the taint of original sin, that is from the propensity to sin all humans inherit from Adam...Jesus was not drawn into sin by an evil desire inherent within his humanness.”<sup>31</sup>

Does Grenz’ conclusion run contrary to Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus was tempted in all points just as we are? Not necessarily. Hebrews 4:15 simply states that Jesus was tempted just as humans are tempted. Did Jesus have to have evil propensity in his human nature in order to be tempted as humans are? No, Adam was tempted humanly, yet he had no evil propensities when he was tempted.

Third, what about Romans 8:3? Gage quoted Nygren approvingly and said that Jesus shared all our conditions.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>30</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975):80.

<sup>31</sup> Grenz, 276.

Ostensibly, this must include our propensity to sin since “*out of the flesh*’ arose for Him the same temptations as for us.”<sup>32</sup> Here again, Bruce thinks this would be incorrect, in view of the fact that Paul clearly taught that Jesus “knew no sin” (2 Cor 5:21), to say that Jesus came “in sinful flesh,” since in his view that “might imply that there was sin in him.”<sup>33</sup> Hence, Paul intends the phrase “in the likeness of sinful flesh” to erase such an implication.

It should be noted that the fallen position also believes that Jesus never sinned. That being the case, it seems that they are able to hold onto this belief and say at the same time that Christ came with sinful flesh on the basis of their notion of sin. Sin seems to consist solely in *actions*, since Jesus shared in all our conditions, including the inherent evil desire that draws into temptation, and yet was not a sinner.

#### E. G. White On the Status of Jesus’ “Being”

Does the Spirit of Prophecy shed any light on the ontological status of Christ’s humanness, particularly as it relates to His alleged ontological solidarity with post-fall human beings? I will only cite, without much comment, a few reference on the subject.

1. “The incarnation of Christ has ever been, and will ever remain a mystery. That which is revealed, is for us and for our children, but let every human being be warned from the ground of making Christ altogether human, such an one as ourselves; for it cannot be.”---5BC 1129.
2. “He is a brother in our infirmities, but not in possessing like passions. As the sinless One, His nature recoiled from evil.”---2T 202.
3. “Because of sin his [Adam’s] posterity was born with inherent propensities of disobedience. But Jesus Christ was the only begotten Son of God. He took upon Himself human nature, and was tempted in all points

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<sup>32</sup> Gage, 4 (emphasis mine).

<sup>33</sup> Bruce, 152.

as human nature is tempted. He could have sinned; He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in him an evil propensity.”---SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 5, p. 1128.

4. “He was a mighty petitioner, not possessing the passions of our human, fallen natures, but compassed with like infirmities, tempted in all points even as we are. Jesus endured agony which required help and support from His Father---2T 508.

Quite clearly, E. G. White did not see Christ’s human nature to be exactly as ours. At least as far as propensity to sin is concerned he was not in complete, ontological solidarity with our depraved, sinful nature.

In spite of these clear statements cited above, other passages appear to give the impression that Christ inherited a fallen, sinful human nature. Consider, for example, the following.

The story of Bethlehem is an exhaustless theme. In it is hidden “the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God.” Rom. 11:33. We marvel at the Saviour’s sacrifice in exchanging the throne of heaven for the manger, and the companionship of adoring angels for the beasts of the stall. Human pride and self-sufficiency stand rebuked in His presence. Yet this was but the beginning of His wonderful condescension. It would have been an almost infinite humiliation for the Son of God to take man’s nature, even when Adam stood in his innocence in Eden. But Jesus accepted humanity when the race had been weakened by four thousand years of sin. Like every child of Adam He accepted the results of the working of the great law of heredity. What these results were is shown in the history of His earthly ancestors. He came with such a heredity to share our sorrows and temptations, and to give us the example of a sinless life--DA 48-49.

How should we deal with a statement like this in the face of what seems to be overwhelming evidence in her writings regarding the absence of propensity to evil in Christ human nature? Erwin Gane argues that unless we are willing to say that E. G. White contradicted herself, we are obliged to interpret the passage in



some other way. On his part, Gane applies the effects of the 4000 years on Jesus' humanity to his physical dimension.<sup>34</sup>

Gane may not be inaccurate in this suggestion when we consider the following statement of White's. "He is a brother in our infirmities, but not in possessing like passions. As the sinless One, His nature recoiled from evil"---2T 202. In this passage, *passion* relates to "nature", which Gane carefully shows, in E. G. White, to deal with His *spiritual nature*, as distinct from the physical and intellectual nature of man.<sup>35</sup> In this, Christ is different from us. On the other hand, Christ was like us in our *infirmities*, which in this case must be what is left of human nature when the *spiritual* is taken out; namely, physical.<sup>36</sup>

### The Soteriological Connection in the "Fallen Nature" Position

The assessment of the soteriology of the "fallen" position must begin with its view of sin. The view that "possessing sinful flesh does not necessarily make a person a sinner" has already been examined and shown to be biblically inaccurate. The notion, however, embodies a particular concept of sin, since it can be justified only if sin is defined in terms of actions. It would seem that without saying it in so many words, this is the view of sin that underlies the "fallen nature" position as presented by Gage.

An action focused *harmatiology* tends to lead to a *perfectionist* soteriology which at least seems to be hinted at in places in Gage's paper. Such is the case, for example, when he says, "because Jesus did not sin, no man must sin."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, his quotation of C. E. B. Cranfield on Christ's method in overcoming seems to come quite close to a perfectionist, legalistic view of salvation. Cranfield writes:

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<sup>34</sup> Erwin R. Gane, "Christ and Human Perfection," *Ministry*, Oct. 1970, Reprinted Supplement to *The Ministry*, August 2003, 16. See Gane, 15-16 for what he considers to be other unsatisfactory, but possible ways of interpreting the passage.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Although E. G. White uses the word *infirmity* in the sense of spiritual weakness too, there seems to be a preponderant use of the word in a material, physical sense: AA 208; 2T 434; 4T 30; MH 226; 2SM 231; 1T 306; SL 25.

<sup>37</sup> Gage., 6.

“Christ’s life before His actual ministry and death was not just a standing where unfallen Adam had stood without yielding to the temptation to which Adam succumbed, but a matter of starting from where we start, subjected to all the evil pressures which we inherit, *and using the altogether uncompromising and unsuitable material of our corrupt nature to work out a perfect, sinless obedience (emphasis mine).*”<sup>38</sup>

Gage’s interpretation of Hebrews 2:10 has the same perfectionist tone. For him, Jesus as the pioneer of men’s salvation, “made perfect through suffering” means that Jesus “rose triumphant in the very arena where His human counterparts have fallen, *employing no other weapons than fallen men and women have at their disposal.*”<sup>39</sup> Donald Guthrie, however, interprets the phrase *pioneer of salvation* as a figure of speech. “The pioneer in this sense is more than an example for others to follow. His mission is to provide the basis on which salvation can be offered to others.”<sup>40</sup> It seems, however, that in Gage’s soteriology, Christ’s comes across more as a model or example than the source of our salvation. Notice, for example, the following quote: “His [Jesus] moral development was an *example* of how all men and women would develop a character such as His. They would be made perfect by learning obedience amid hard decisions. They must choose God’s will and reject the allure of temptations whether from within or from without.”<sup>41</sup> (cf. the emphasis on the role of the will with Nestorius’ *voluntary* union).

Like Nestorianism, and indeed like the Antiochian school, the “fallen nature” position, technically, masks a Pelagian anthropology. It is this anthropology and its attendant soteriology that seem to inform their “fallen nature” Christology.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 6. (emphasis mine)

<sup>40</sup> Donald Guthrie, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989):88-89.

<sup>41</sup> Gage, 6.

### The “Unfallen Nature” Position

In analysing the “unfallen nature” position as presented by Rand, I noted three key Scriptural points. What can be said about these points as we assess this position?

First, the view on the nature of sin. It seems fairly accurate, biblically, to define sin beyond actions to include post-fall human nature, so that to possess sinful nature is to be a sinner. Grenz surveys the various terms used for sin in the Bible, and after concluding that the most widely used in the New Testament is *hamartia* he observes:

The New Testament usage of *hamartia* describes the human predicament as a complex situation. . .*hamartia* can refer to sin as a specific act. But in addition, the New Testament authors speak of a power or force operative in the human sphere. As an alien reality which has us in its grasp, sin holds sway over individuals not merely externally, but also internally. Consequently, *hamartia* also denotes the defective, internal dimension of the human person.<sup>42</sup>

Second, the uniqueness of Jesus. What is of importance in our assessment is not simply the technical correctness of defining *monogenes* as one of a kind. It is the Christological connection that is relevant to us. Dale Moody’s study of the translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version remains quite definitive. Moody notes that “the meaning of *monogenes* in Johanine writings is the epitome of Christology.”<sup>43</sup> He observes that two aspects of the *monogenes* declared in 1 John and expanded in the Gospel of John are: as revealer (1 John 4:9/cf John 1:14) and as redeemer (1 John 4:10/John 3: 16).

Third, on the interpretation of “likeness of sinful flesh,” the critique already advanced against the “fallen nature” position on Romans 8:3 leads us to conclude that the “unfallen nature” position on the point represents the biblical view fairly accurately.

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<sup>42</sup> Grenz., 184.

<sup>43</sup> Dale Moody, “God’s Only Son,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953): 4.

### E. G. White On the Status of Jesus “Being”

All the E. G. White quotations cited before may be recalled to give credence to the “unfallen position’s” view that Jesus did not take on sinful flesh; only the likeness of sinful flesh, a point which makes him unique in His humanity. This uniqueness is expressed in the terms *monogenes* and *prototokos*. To affirm this position, however, immediately raises the soteriological question: If Jesus was not exactly like us, could He save us? The answer depends on one’s view of salvation.

### The Soteriological Connection

The soteriology of the “unfallen nature” position is consistent with their ontology. They do not have to insist on ontological sameness between Christ and us because for them salvation is not obtained through the exact following of the example of one who in every respect was like them, but struggled and became victorious. For them, as Rand notes, “Jesus was both our substitute and example, and in that order. There is a priority of substitute over example as there is of God over man and Savior over saved.”<sup>44</sup> George Ladd would seem to agree on the balance in the “unfallen nature” position. He writes, “Jesus death is not only redeeming; the atonement is accomplished by substitution.”<sup>45</sup>

## **Conclusion**

I have tried to show in this paper that soteriology and Christology are two sides of the same coin. This was the case in the Christological debates of the early Christian era, and it is the case in the current debate in Adventist thought about the humanity of Christ. We will do well in Christology by following Paul’s method in laying the emphasis on clarifying the *fact* of salvation in the unique Christ, rather than exploring his ontological status.

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<sup>44</sup> Rand., 6.

<sup>45</sup> George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991): 188.



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