

THE LOWER AND HIGHER NATURES

The Key to Resolving the Adventist Christology Debate

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Three Ellen White statements are often used by some to prove that the human Christ didn't inherit the same fallen tendencies we inherit. Once these three statements are understood, in the light of both Scripture and the whole of Ellen White's writings, the current Adventist discussion on the nature of Christ is easily settled.

These three statements are as follows:

Be careful, exceedingly careful, as to how you dwell upon the human nature of Christ. Do not set Him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin. . . . He could have sinned, He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity (1).

He (Christ) is a brother in our infirmities, but not in possessing like passions. As the sinless one, His nature recoiled from evil (2).

He was a mighty Petitioner, not possessing the passions of our human, fallen natures, but compassed with like infirmities, tempted in all points like as we are (3).

Other statements seem, on the surface, to teach just the opposite::

Though He (Christ) had all the strength of passion of humanity, never did He yield to temptation to do one single act which was not pure and elevating and ennobling (4).

The words of Christ encourage parents to bring their little ones to Jesus. They may be wayward, and possess passions like those of humanity, but this should not deter us from bringing them to Christ. He blessed children that were possessed of passions like His own (5).

By a word Christ could have mastered the powers of Satan. But He came into the world that He might endure every test, every provocation, that it is possible for human beings to bear and yet not be provoked or impassioned, or retaliate in word, in spirit, or in action (6).

It is obvious that the passions described in the last three statements refer to sinful passions, those that tempt to impurity, waywardness, and provocation. We read that *though* Jesus had all the strength of human passion, He never yielded to temptation to do anything impure or ignoble. We read that even if our children are wayward, possessing passions like those of humanity, this shouldn't discourage us from bringing them to Christ, since He blessed children who had these very passions, which were "like His own."

Are these two sets of statements contradictory? Or do we need to dig deeper into what God is saying?

God Explains Himself

According to the Bible's own testimony, the Bible is its own interpreter. All Scripture is inspired by God (II Tim. 3:16), the product of holy men moved by the Holy Spirit (II Peter 1:20-21). And what the Spirit inspires is to be understood by comparison with itself (I Cor. 2:12-14).

According to Ellen White, her writings are to be understood in the same way:

The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture (7).

Every disagreement Adventists have with other Christians over the Bible—regarding the Sabbath, the state of the dead, salvation, the sanctuary, etc.—is the result of other Christians failing to follow the Bible's own method of Bible study, as stated above. Either the whole of Scripture is not considered before a doctrinal conclusion is reached, or the Bible isn't allowed to interpret itself.

Current doctrinal controversies within Adventism are largely the result of failing to permit either Scripture or Ellen White to explain themselves. No doctrinal understanding can be valid which fails to demonstrate the harmony existing between all inspired statements. Once we let Ellen White explain herself regarding the statements quoted earlier on the nature of Christ, her meaning becomes clear.

Two Forces in Human Nature

In order to resolve the apparent conflict in the statements quoted at the beginning, we need to look closer at what Scripture and Ellen White teach regarding the structure of human nature.

Jesus declared to His disciples in Gethsemane, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). Paul declared: "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection" (I Cor. 9:27), and speaks of the weapons of Christian warfare "bringing into

captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (II Cor. 10:5). Contrary to what some believe, this has nothing to do with the body/soul dualism of Greek or popular Christian thought, nor does it have anything to do with what happens to people when they die. When Seventh-day Adventists teach a wholistic view of man, they do not deny the Biblical teaching that different forces exist within man.

Ellen White makes this distinction very clearly: "The will is not the taste or the inclination, but it is the deciding power" (8). In numerous other statements she describes the need for the lower passions and propensities to be subject to the higher powers of the being (9).

The Bible is clear that to be tempted by our lower, fleshly desires is not sin:

But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death (James 1:14-15).

Notice that only when lust *conceives*—when the will gives consent—does sin occur. Ellen White agrees:

There are thoughts and feelings suggested and aroused by Satan that annoy even the best of men; but if they are not cherished, if they are repulsed as hateful, the soul is not contaminated with guilt and no other is defiled by their influence (10).

Ellen White is equally clear that the lower nature of itself cannot sin:

The lower passions have their seat in the body and work through it. The words "flesh" or "fleshly" or "carnal lusts" embrace the lower, corrupt nature; the flesh of itself cannot act contrary to the will of God. We are commanded to crucify the flesh, with the affections and lusts. How shall we do it? Shall we inflict pain on the body? No, but put to death the temptation to sin. The corrupt thought is to be expelled. Every thought is to be brought into captivity to Jesus Christ. All animal propensities are to be subjected to the higher powers of the soul (11).

Notice how carefully Ellen White distinguishes the lower passions from the higher powers. Once this distinction is understood, we can better understand the two types of Ellen White statements on passions and propensities as they relate to human beings, as well as the two types of statements we have seen relative to the humanity of Christ.

Evil Passions and Propensities: Controlled or Cast Out?

In some of her statements, Ellen White speaks of the need to *control* evil passions and propensities:

The body is to be brought into subjection. The higher powers of the being are to rule. The passions are to be controlled by the will, which is itself to be under the control of God (12).

Our natural propensities must be controlled, or we can never overcome as Christ overcame (13).

However, other statements speak of the need to *cast out* evil passions and propensities:

The only power that can create or perpetuate true peace is the grace of Christ. When this is implanted in the heart, it will cast out the evil passions that cause strife and dissension (14).

But although their evil propensities may seem to them as precious as the right hand or the right eye, they must be separated from the worker, or he cannot be acceptable before God (15).

Nonsense and amusement-loving propensities should be discarded, as out of place in the life and experience of those who are living by faith in the Son of God, eating His flesh and drinking His blood (16).

We must realize that through belief in Him it is our privilege to be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. Then we are cleansed from all sin, all defects of character. We need not retain one sinful propensity.

As we partake of the divine nature, hereditary and cultivated tendencies to wrong are cut away from the character, and we are made a living power for good (17).

But from where are evil passions cast? Where are sinful propensities not to be retained? Ellen White gives the answer in two of the above statements. She speaks of evil propensities as out of place in the *life* and *experience* of the faithful, that as we partake of the divine nature, hereditary and cultivated tendencies to wrong are cut away from the *character*. The character is the higher nature, where choices are made.

Notice she doesn't say these tendencies will be cut away from the lower, fleshly nature, so that we won't feel the urge to sin any more. According to Ellen White, that change will not happen until Jesus comes:

So long as Satan reigns, we shall have self to subdue, besetting sins to overcome; so long as life shall last, there will be no stopping place, no point which we can reach and say, I have fully attained (18).

Appetite and passion must be brought under the control of the Holy Spirit. There is no end to the warfare this side of eternity (19).

During the Holy Flesh controversy of the early 1900s, Ellen White wrote the following:

When human beings receive holy flesh, they will not remain on earth, but will be taken to heaven (20).

We need to notice carefully what these statements say, and what they don't say. They aren't saying that complete victory over sin is unattainable this side of eternity. They are simply saying that war with the flesh will not cease this side of eternity, which means the fleshly urges will still be present in the lower natures of believers. Continuous warfare doesn't necessarily mean occasional defeat. (The Russians learned this during World War II, when they experienced hard-fought but consistently victorious warfare against the Germans in the two years between the aftermath of Stalingrad and the conquest of Berlin.) Complete victory over the fleshly nature is promised to the Christian in this life (Rom. 8:4,13; II Cor. 7:1). But while complete victory does mean the absence of failure, it does not mean the absence of conflict until our earthly life is past.

Settling the Issue

In short, Jesus had sinful passions and evil propensities in His lower nature, where He kept them under the control of a sanctified will—as indeed we may, through His power. But He did not have these passions and propensities in His higher nature, where we need not retain them either.

Another statement by Ellen White regarding Christ and sinful propensities helps us understand this point more clearly:

We must not become in our ideas common and earthly, and in our perverted ideas we must not think that the liability of Christ to Satan's temptations degraded His humanity and that He possessed the same sinful, corrupt propensities as man (21).

We might reach the wrong conclusion if we stopped there. But in the very next paragraph she explains what she means:

Christ took our nature, fallen but not corrupted, *and would not be corrupted unless He received the words of Satan in place of the words of God* (22).

So what does she mean when she says Jesus never had the same corrupt propensities we have? Simple. She means He never chose to sin, and thus never acquired a taste for sin. Notice she doesn't say His nature wouldn't be corrupted unless He was born with the same fallen nature other humans are born with. Rather, the corruption here described would occur only if He received the words of Satan in place of the words of God. Choice, not birth, is the source of the corruption here described.

We see this same principle further illustrated in the more than 200 statements where Ellen White speaks of *hereditary* and *cultivated* tendencies to evil (23). These are Ellen White's terms for what we hear today regarding the difference between *nature* and *nurture* in human development. Ellen White is clear that Jesus took our fallen *hereditary* tendencies, since she writes that "He came with such a heredity to share our sorrows and temptations, and to give us the example of a sinless life" (24). In other words, His heredity would be a source of temptation to Himself, as it is to us. But very clearly, Jesus didn't take our fallen *cultivated* tendencies to evil, since to do this would have required Him to sin.

More on the Lower and Higher Natures

When we understand the role of these lower and higher forces in human nature, it becomes clear how the various, seemingly contradictory statements of Ellen White on the nature of Christ fit together beautifully. Let us review again one of the statements quoted above:

We must not become in our ideas common and earthly, and in our perverted ideas we must not think that the liability of Christ to Satan's temptations degraded His humanity and that He possessed the same sinful, corrupt propensities as man (25).

And yet, we have the following statement:

Think of Christ's humiliation. He took upon Himself fallen, suffering human nature, degraded and defiled by sin (26).

But as we saw when we read the paragraph following the first of the above statements, the corruption and degradation being described in this statement is a matter of choice, not something involuntarily received at birth. But in the statement just quoted, which says the human nature Christ took was "degraded and defiled," the lower nature is being referred to. In other words, Jesus' higher nature was not degraded, since that is where choice, character, and the will exist. But His lower nature was in fact degraded, because He had taken on Himself the same fallen heredity all men and women inherit.

Many who hold the pre-Fall view of Christ's humanity will quote Hebrews 7:26, which speaks of Christ being "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." Yet Ellen White declares that Christians, who according to her still have fleshly natures to subdue (27), are to achieve through heaven's power the same state of purity:

Cherish those things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report; but put away whatever is unlike our Redeemer. . . . Every soul that gains eternal life must be like Christ, "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." (Heb. 7:26) (28).

The grace of Christ alone can change your heart and then you will reflect the image of the Lord Jesus. God calls upon us to be like Him—pure, holy, and undefiled. We are to bear the divine image (29).

The context of both of the above statements makes it clear that the earthly process of sanctification is being referred to, not the removal of the fleshly nature at glorification. In other words, according to Inspiration, you don't need an unfallen fleshly nature in order to be holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.

Some have alleged that when Ellen White, referring to Jesus, writes that there was “no sin in Him,” that this means He did not inherit the same nature all humans inherit at birth. One of the statements thus used is the following:

There was no sin in Him that Satan could triumph over, no weakness or defect that he could use to his advantage. But we are sinful by nature, and we have a work to do to cleanse the soul temple of every defilement (30).

But another statement, which uses similar language, helps us understand what “no sin in Him” means:

Satan finds in human hearts some point where he can gain a foothold; some sinful desire is cherished, by means of which his temptations assert their power. But Christ declared of Himself, “The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me.” John 14:30. Satan could find nothing in the Son of God that would enable him to gain the victory. He had kept His Father's commandments, and there was no sin in Him that Satan could use to his advantage. This is the condition in which those must be found who shall stand in the time of trouble (31).

Thus, “no sin in Him” means no *cherished* sinful desires, not the absence of such desires in the lower nature. The statement we quoted earlier, which speaks of our being “sinful by nature” and needing “to cleanse the soul temple of every defilement” (32), clarifies this point again. Elsewhere Ellen White is clear when this cleansing is to occur:

Not one of us will ever receive the seal of God while our characters have one spot or stain upon them. It is left with us to remedy the defects in our characters, to cleanse the soul temple of every defilement. Then the latter rain will fall upon us as the early rain fell upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost (33).

Obviously this refers to the cleansing of the will and character, which will take place prior to the end-time sealing and latter rain. This does not refer to the cleansing of the lower, fleshly nature, since the same author maintains we must contend with that nature till Jesus comes (34). Thus, when she writes in the earlier statement of our being “sinful by nature” in contrast with Jesus who had “no sin in Him” (35), she is speaking in context of the higher nature. She is not denying that Jesus inherited a fallen lower nature at birth, with its tendencies and desires.

We see this point further clarified in another Ellen White statement, where she writes of our Lord: “The prince of darkness found nothing in Him; not a single thought or feeling responded to temptation” (36). Yet in another statement which we saw earlier, Ellen White is clear that it is not the arousal of sinful thoughts and feelings that constitutes the response to temptation here described, but rather, the *cherishing* of these thoughts and feelings:

There are thoughts and feeling suggested and aroused by Satan that annoy even the best of men; but if they are not cherished, if they are repulsed as hateful, the soul is not contaminated with guilt and no other is defiled by their influence (37).

In another statement, Ellen White says Jesus had to struggle with sinful thoughts:

Some realize their great weakness and sin, and become discouraged. Satan casts his dark shadow between them and the Lord Jesus, their atoning sacrifice. They say, It is useless for me to pray. My prayers are so mingled with evil thoughts that the Lord will not hear them.

These suggestions are from Satan. In His humanity Christ met and resisted this temptation, and He knows how to succor those who are thus tempted (38).

In a pamphlet devoted specifically to sexual indulgence, Ellen White offers hope to the tempted with these words:

All are accountable for their actions while upon probation in this world. All have power to control their actions. If they are weak in virtue and purity of thoughts and acts, they can obtain help from the Friend of the helpless. Jesus is acquainted with all the weaknesses of human nature, and if entreated, will give strength to overcome the most powerful temptations (39).

Elsewhere we read:

His (the Christian’s) strongest temptations will come from within, for he must battle against the inclinations of the natural heart. The Lord knows our weaknesses (40).

And how does He know our weaknesses?

He knows *by experience* what are the weaknesses of humanity, what are our wants, and where lies the strength of our temptations, for He was “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15) (41).

Yet in another statement she informs us of the way in which Jesus did *not* know our weaknesses:

Our Redeemer manifested no human weakness or imperfection (42).

The key word here is “manifested.” That refers to choice, the consent of the will, the higher nature. Jesus most assuredly struggled with human weaknesses in His lower nature, which the above statements clarify beyond dispute. But He never consented to such weaknesses through choice.

Elsewhere we see this contrast when Ellen White writes concerning Jesus: “He was perfect, and undefiled by sin. He was without spot or blemish” (43). But then we remember another statement where she says, “He took upon Himself fallen, suffering human nature, degraded and defiled by sin” (44). The first statement refers to His higher nature, the second to His lower nature.

In another statement, from the famous Baker letter, Ellen White says of Christ: “His spiritual nature was free from every taint of sin” (45). But other Ellen White statements make it clear that the spiritual nature is the same as the higher nature:

Professed followers of Christ are today eating and drinking with the drunken, while their names stand in honored church records. Intemperance benumbs the moral and spiritual powers and prepares the way for indulgence of the lower passions (46).

The faculties of the mind, as the higher powers, are to rule the kingdom of the body. The natural appetites and passions are to be brought under the control of the conscience and the spiritual affections (47).

By such misuse of the marriage relation, the animal passions are strengthened; and as these grow stronger the moral and intellectual faculties become weaker. The spiritual is overborne by the sensual (48).

The indulgence of natural appetites and passions has a controlling influence upon the nerves of the brain. The animal organs are strengthened, while the moral and spiritual are depressed (49).

Ellen White declares elsewhere, regarding Jesus: “He was born without a taint of sin, but came into the world in like manner as the human family” (50). Many have alleged that this means He was born without the inherited sinful nature common to all humans. But at least two other statements make it clear that His being “born without a taint of sin” refers to His divine nature, not to the absence of fleshly desires in His lower, human nature:

What a sight was this for Heaven to look upon? Christ, who knew not the least taint of sin or defilement, took our nature in its deteriorated condition (51).

Though He had no taint of sin upon His character, yet He condescended to connect our fallen human nature with His divinity (52).

In other words, all Ellen White means when she says Christ was “born without a taint of sin” (53) is that He came from heaven pure. In no way does she ever imply that anyone is tainted with sin just by being born.

This point helps us clarify what Ellen White means in other statements where she says: “He (Christ) took upon His sinless nature our sinful nature” (54). The sinless nature here described refers not to His inherited human nature, but to His divine nature. This becomes clearer yet in another statement:

Sinless and exalted by nature, the Son of God consented to take the habiliments of humanity, to become one with the fallen race (55).

Other statements likewise clarify that when Ellen White says Jesus had no taint of sin, she is talking about His choices, not the human nature He took at birth:

One unsanctified act on the part of our Saviour would have marred the pattern, and He could not have been a perfect example of us; but although He was tempted in all points like as we are, He was yet without one taint of sin (56).

Christ, the second Adam, came in the likeness of sinful flesh. In man’s behalf, He became subject to sorrow, to weariness, to hunger, and to thirst. He was subject to temptation, but He yielded not to sin. No taint of sin was upon Him (57).

Not one impure word escaped His lips. Never did He do a wrong action, for He was the Son of God. Although He possessed a human form, yet He was without a taint of sin (58).

The Baker Letter and the *Signs* Article

A bit more attention is deserved by the so-called Baker letter, which forms a major part of the case built by some Adventists for the pre-Fall understanding of Christ’s humanity.

What we must remember, as we noted at the beginning, is that inspired statements can only be understood in the light of each other. This is true with Scripture (Isa. 28:9-10; I Cor. 2:12-14), and it is true with Ellen White. Let us review her words again on this point:

The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture (59).

With this principle constantly in mind, which it must be as we study any spiritual topic, we cannot view the Baker letter, or any other inspired materials, except in the light of the totality of inspired teachings. No inspired document or statement ever stands

alone. The language of one inspired statement must not only be understood in its own context, but also in the light of other inspired statements.

We have already observed Ellen White's use of the terms passions and propensities and their different roles within human nature. But the picture becomes clearer when we place the wording of an article from the *Signs of the Times* alongside the relevant lines from the Baker letter:

Be careful, exceedingly careful, as to how you dwell upon the human nature of Christ. Do not set Him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin. He is the second Adam. The first Adam was created a pure, sinless being, without a taint of sin upon him; he was in the image of God. He could fall, and he did fall through transgression. Because of sin his 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 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 (60).

Adam was tempted by the enemy, and he fell. It was not indwelling sin which caused him to yield, for God made him pure and upright in His own image. He was as faultless as the angels before the throne. There were in him no corrupt principles, no tendencies to evil. But when Christ came to meet with temptations of Satan, He bore the "likeness of sinful flesh" (61).

Notice how both these statements put the tempted Adam and the tempted Christ alongside each other. But it is important to note the difference in the way Adam and Christ are contrasted in one statement, as distinct from how they are contrasted in the other statement. Even if one concludes—as I believe the weight of evidence demands—that the "propensities of disobedience" in the early part of the first statement refer to the lower nature, while the "evil propensity" at the end of the statement refers to the cherishing of such tendencies by the higher nature, there is still sufficient contrast between Adam and Christ so that the statement makes sense. Adam was capable of falling, and he did. Christ was also capable of falling, but He didn't.

This point is further clarified as this letter continues, with Ellen White's denial that "a taint of, or inclination to, corruption, rested upon Christ, or that He in any way yielded to corruption" (62). "Rested upon" implies choice every bit as much as yielding to corruption. The higher nature is the issue here, not the lower. Her denial that Christ "in *any* way yielded to corruption" implies that there is more than one way to do this, that for Him to have cherished such tendencies in His mind—even with no manifestation in outward deeds—would have involved a yielding to corruption.

In other words, one need not see a contrast between Adam's children being "born with inherent propensities of disobedience" and Christ not having "for one moment" an evil propensity, in order for this statement to make sense. There is enough contrast simply between her statement that Adam yielded to temptation, but Christ did not. Her

other statements which we noted earlier, regarding sinful propensities being present or absent from the mind through choice (63), further clarify this point.

The inordinate attention given by some to the Baker letter, to the neglect of so many other Ellen White statements on this subject, cannot but remind us of F.D. Nichol's statement that if the only Bible verse on the state of the dead were Philippians 1:23, which speaks of Paul's desire to "depart and be with Christ," we might be justified in accepting the popular doctrine of the intermediate state after death (64). It is the inspired consensus which helps to explain what individual passages and their occasionally imperfect language might not always say by themselves.

Based on this consensus, on the totality of inspired teachings concerning the lower and higher natures and their role in the struggle with evil, we can safely say that the "inherent propensities of disobedience" described in the Baker letter refer to the lower nature (which Christ possessed), while the "evil propensity" in the latter part of this statement refers to the potential control of the higher nature by such tendencies, which Christ never experienced because He never sinned. In the same way the consensus of Scripture tells us that the time of our departure (death) and the time we go to be with Christ are widely separated events, even though Philippians 1:23 states the two in a single phrase.

Yet another Ellen White statement helps us understand this need to put all inspired evidence together before reaching a conclusion. This is the one we noted earlier where she says of Jesus, "Never did He do a wrong action, for He was the Son of God" (65). Taken by itself, this statement might lead us to believe Jesus didn't sin because He was God. But other statements make it clear that while—as the above statement says—He maintained His dignity as the Son of God by not sinning, it was not His Deity that prevented Him from sinning, but rather, the same imparted power available to us (66).

Let us now consider the second of the two statements under discussion in this section--the one from the *Signs* article. Put simply, this passage makes no sense unless we acknowledge that Christ had tendencies to evil in His lower nature. Note again that it says Adam had no "indwelling sin," "no corrupt principles, no tendencies to evil." Then the next sentence reads, "But when Christ came to meet the temptations of Satan, He bore the 'likeness of sinful flesh'" (67). All the arguments we often hear about the "likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3) are beside the point so far as this statement is concerned, since the expression is used here to draw a contrast with the unfallen Adam—who, the statement tells us, had no indwelling sin, corrupt principles, or tendencies to evil. Certainly such terms as "indwelling sin" and "corrupt principles" could not apply to Jesus, but at least it must be acknowledged that Jesus' fleshly nature included tendencies to evil. Otherwise the statement offers no contrast with Adam, and makes no sense at all.

We must ever bear in mind the premise stated at the beginning—that no explanation of inspired materials can be valid unless it brings all inspired materials together. The pre-Fall view of Christ's human nature simply cannot bring together all relevant Ellen White statements—or Bible verses—on this topic. Most of its advocates

have given up trying. The evidence suggests this is one key reason so many of them seek to reduce Ellen White's doctrinal role in this and other discussions (68).

The Melvill Explanation

Certain Adventists who defend the pre-Fall view of Christ's humanity have tried to use one of the authors from which she seems to have borrowed some language, as the true explanation of what she taught on this subject (69). In the words of one contemporary Adventist author:

While Ellen White did not quote the words (of Melvill, such as "innocent infirmities," "sinful propensities," and "prone to offend") the sentiments of Melvill could very well reflect Ellen White's own convictions (70).

This method of explaining inspired materials can only be described as speculative and dangerous. While it is true that Ellen White, like many Bible writers, made occasional use of uninspired sources, to allow such sources to interpret the inspired writings themselves is perilous in the extreme. For example, it has been demonstrated that the apostle Paul used language from the apocryphal book *The Wisdom of Solomon* in writing some of his epistles (71). Should we therefore go to this uninspired book to find what Paul really meant?

Other evidence indicates that Christ may have borrowed the words of the Golden Rule from the famed Rabbi Hillel (72). Should we then go to Rabbi Hillel's writings to learn the true meaning of what Christ taught, on this or any subject?

Whenever an inspired writer uses the words of an uninspired writer, the words used cannot be understood except in the setting where the inspired writer places them. Such language then assumes whatever meaning the inspired consensus imposes upon it. No hint can be found, either in Scripture or Ellen White, that uninspired sources ever provide the key to understanding inspired passages. Again, from her own words:

The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture (73).

Condemning Sin in the Flesh

The apostle Paul writes, in the book of Romans:

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh. That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4).

In succeeding verses he writes:

For they that are after the flesh to mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. . . .

So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His. . . .

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live (verses 5,8,9,13).

We spoke earlier of the arguments some have raised regarding the “likeness of sinful flesh,” whether this means sameness or simulation. Both linguistic and contextual evidence in Scripture indicate that the word “likeness”—*homoiomati* in Greek—means sameness (see also Acts 14:11,15; Phil. 2:7). The prefix “homo,” which this word contains, is obviously where we get such English words as “homogenous” and “homosexual.” “Homo” means same, as distinct from “hetero” which means different.

But aside even from this argument, the surrounding verses in Romans 8 which we cited above make it clear that the flesh, as described in these verses, is something hostile to the Holy Spirit and to God’s will. Jesus “condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit (verses 3-4). We read that “they that are in the flesh cannot please God” (verse 8), that “if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die” (verse 13). But the apostle also states, “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you” (verse 9).

Paul, like Ellen White (74), isn’t saying in the above verse that Christians no longer have a fleshly nature to contend with. That much is clear when he writes elsewhere, “But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection” (I Cor. 9:27). He is simply saying that Christians refuse to *live* after the flesh, declaring that “if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (verse 13).

Clearly, according to Paul, it is possible to subdue the flesh and overcome sin through the Spirit’s power. And it is Jesus who “condemned sin in the flesh” (verse 3), in the same fleshly nature we inherit, who has shown us how to “walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (verse 4).

Summary

In sum, the writings of Ellen White, like the Bible, interpret themselves (75). As with Scripture, whenever certain Ellen White statements seem to disagree with each other, we must look further into her writings for an explanation.

Both Scripture and Ellen White teach that lower and higher forces exist in human nature (Matt. 26:41; I Cor. 9:27) (76), and that in the sanctified Christian's life, the lower forces must be controlled by the higher (77).

Keeping in mind this inspired view of the structure of human nature, it becomes clear that when Ellen White says Jesus had sinful passions and tendencies to evil (78), she is speaking of the lower, fleshly nature which all humans—including Jesus—inherited at birth. By contrast, when she writes that He didn't have sinful passions and propensities (79), she is speaking of the higher nature, the seat of character and the will, where we need not retain such passions and propensities either (80).

Like Jesus, the Christian must always contend with the lower, fleshly nature throughout his earthly sojourn (81). But because Jesus consistently trusted His Father's strength and never yielded to the lower nature's sinful urges, the sanctified Christian is able—through the same divine strength—to do as Jesus did (Rom. 8:3-4; I Peter 2:21-22; Rev. 3:21).

Practical Relevance

Where we stand on this issue makes all the difference in the practical struggles of our lives. Its relevance is heard in the privacy of the predawn devotional hour, as a young man pleads for strength to defeat the forces of lust, only to be comforted by the awareness that His Savior vanquished these very temptations (82). Its importance is felt in the executive office and construction yard, as frustrations and irritations are met with the confidence that our Lord subdued these very feelings (83). Its splendor breaks like sunshine in the heart of a teenage daughter whose family has a history of incest, as she learns that this was part of Jesus' family lineage also (Gen. 19:32-38; Ruth 4:10; Matt. 1:5).

A few years ago a denominational editor wrote, regarding the continuing debate on this subject in the church: "How I wish that we could turn our energies from fighting over Him (Christ) and instead contemplate Him" (84). I appreciate his concern. I too wish we would all contemplate Christ more. But it will do no good to contemplate a false Christ, a sterilized savior who never contended with the frustrations, urges, and hormones of fallen humanity. As we find our way through the veritable minefield that is life, the inspired assurance of a truly relevant Savior becomes more precious than all beside.

This is not, as some believe, some abstract quarrel over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin! It is an issue of supremely practical relevance. For this reason, not for any perverse love of argument, this issue will not go away.

We close with the following promise from the inspired pen:

In our own strength it is impossible to deny the clamors of our fallen nature. Through this channel Satan will bring temptations upon us. Christ knew that the

enemy would come to every human being, to take advantage of hereditary weakness, and by his false insinuations to ensnare all whose trust is not in God. And by passing over the ground which man must travel, our Lord has prepared the way for us to overcome. It is not His will that we should be placed at a disadvantage in the conflict with Satan. He would not have us intimidated and discouraged by the assaults of the serpent. "Be of good cheer," He says, "I have overcome the world." John 16:33 (85).

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