1998

Positions of Key Thinkers in Adventist History on the Human Nature of Christ

Ryan L. Ashlock

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research/100

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Southern Scholars at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Research Projects by an authorized administrator of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.
Positions of Key Thinkers in Adventist History on the Human Nature of Christ

How can I be saved? The question has occupied the minds of generations of people the world over. One has only to look at the proliferation of world religions to see that man seeks after something better than is contained in this life. In the Christian realm with a seemingly simple Biblical answer of, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:31), it would seem that the question is answered beyond any need for discussion, but Christian history would teach us otherwise. What does it mean to believe on the Lord Jesus? What is involved in this belief? And Who is Jesus?

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the topic of Christ’s nature has caused heated debate. This is not a debate just for the sake of discussion. There is more at stake than winning an argument. As William Johnsson, editor of the Adventist Review, points out, “The stakes in this debate are high. This isn’t some abstract theological discussion—it’s about our salvation; it’s about the very gospel God calls us to proclaim” (“Our Matchless Saviour—II” 22 July 1993:4). For Adventists the issue of Christ’s nature is closely related to soteriology, or the science of salvation.

The focus of the debate has been in particular on Christ’s humanity. There is general agreement among Adventists that Christ was truly God and truly man. This belief is clearly stated in the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual 8). Though it is agreed that Christ was fully man, there is disagreement as to which kind of man He was. Did He take the humanity that we all possess? Or was His humanity that of the unfallen Adam, before sin entered the world? In 1976 a group of leading Adventist teachers, editors, and administrators met in Palmdale, California to study the doctrine of righteousness by faith and of necessity, related issues such as the nature of Christ. Their statement, published in the Review and Herald, allows for Adventists to take either the fallen or
unfallen nature view (27 May 1976). While the Church takes no official position on the matter, the debate rages on.

The Adventist Church’s modern day wrestling with the person of Christ is not the first time His nature has been debated in history. The person of Christ has occupied the attention of thinkers the world over ever since He was born and among some, even before His birth. The idea of God becoming human, not just looking like a human, but actually becoming human, has captivated men’s hearts and aroused their bitter opposition.

The incarnation of Jesus was foreign to both the Jewish and Greek schools of thought in the time of Christ. The Jews believed their Messiah would be a man anointed by God for a special work, while the Greeks believed God would fake humanity in an incarnation. The Christian concept of incarnation, God Himself in real human flesh, is the scandal of Christology (Skarsaune).

It was a scandal which resulted in the promulgation of numerous heresies. Docetism was one of the first. It said that Christ didn’t really become flesh, He just looked human. The incarnation was a fake. Adoptionism and Modalism or Sabellianism, two extreme forms of Monarchianism followed. Monarchianism teaches that God is a unity and the Trinity does not constitute three Gods. This is true, of course. But Adoptionism states that Christ was an unusually virtuous man, who because of His goodness, was raised from the dead and taken up to join the Godhead. Modalism says that Christ is just one mode in which God appears. The Trinity are three different modes of the one same God so that while God is on earth as Christ, heaven is empty.

Arianism was the first major crisis in Christology in the early Christian Church because of its widespread acceptance. It is a belief that Christ was a created being who was thus secondary to the Father, not of the same substance as God. This heresy led to the Church Council at Nicea in 325 A.D. where it was condemned and Christ was declared to be of the same substance as the Father.

More controversy followed. Apollinarianism sought to maintain Christ’s unity as a
person by declaring that Christ did not have a rational human soul; it was replaced by His divine Logos. This heresy denied Christ’s actual humanity. Nestorianism, on the other hand said that Jesus was a fully human being in whom the Logos came to dwell. Remove the Logos and Jesus is still a complete human being. Thus the humanity and divinity of Christ are two very separate entities, so sharply divided that there was no union between them and the human Jesus should not be worshipped. Eutychianism opposed Nestorianism by stating that Christ’s nature was an amalgamation of His divine and human natures. Thus He was nothing like us in nature.

Eutychianism and the older Apollinarianism led to a school of thought known as Monophysitism which taught that Christ had one nature—a combination of human and divine. Monophysitism and Nestorianism were condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. where it was proclaimed that Christ was two separate natures united in one person. Other controversies such as the Monotheletist (Christ had one will) and the Monergistic (Christ had one energy) continued to upset the Christian world well into the seventh century.¹

Controversy over the person of Christ is nothing new. Though with a slightly different focus, Christology, especially in the Adventist Church, still struggles to define just Who Jesus was. For Adventists the debate is not so much over how divinity and humanity met in the person of Jesus like it was in the first few centuries. The debate is specifically concerned with Christ’s humanity. Did Jesus assume the fallen nature of man, or did He assume the unfallen nature that Adam had when he was first created? The answer has many implications for Adventist theology.

The Bible has much to say about the incarnation. There are scores of passages speaking of Christ coming to earth as man, in the flesh. But certain key Bible passages come up again and again in the Adventist debate. Among these are Romans 8:3; Luke 1:35; Hebrews 2:11-12, 14-17; Philippians 2:5-8; Hebrews 4:15; Romans 1:3. But various thinkers interpret the Scriptural evidence differently. There is nothing in the Bible which states unquestionably in a few sentences which human nature Jesus took. A person’s position on the subject must be

¹ For a good overview of the Christological Controversies see Justo Gonzalez, A History of the Christian Church, Baker’s Dictionary of Theology. The controversies of earlier centuries do not usually appear, though their inclusion might prove useful in understanding the fuller implication.
from many passages and from other related side issues. Often it seems that a person will take a particular position on the nature of Christ, for no other reason than that it fits well with the rest of his theology.

Much of the debate takes place over interpretations of the writings of Ellen G. White, a prolific author and formative influence on the Adventist Church. Mrs. White is held by the Adventist Church to have manifested the gift of prophecy. Her writings are considered authoritative, but not canonical (Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual 13). Mrs. White makes extensive reference to Christ’s human nature in her writings. And she recognizes the immensity of the subject. In the infamous “Baker Letter” she writes, “It is a mystery that is left unexplained to mortals that Christ could be tempted in all points like as we are, and yet be without sin. 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” (Letter 8, 1895 cited in Larson 315). She presents the mysterious paradox of Christ. On the one hand she says, “He took upon Himself fallen, suffering human nature, degraded and defiled by sin” (The Youth’s Instructor 20 December 1900 cited in Review and Herald 27 May 1976: 5). And on the other hand she says, “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” (Testimonies vol. 2: 509).

This paper will narrow itself to considering the broad outlines of certain key Adventist thinkers’ positions on the nature of Christ. It will not attempt to evaluate their interpretations or use of Ellen White. 2 The thinkers we will examine are: E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones, Edward Heppenstall, Herbert Douglass, Norman Gulley, Ralph Larson, and Jack Sequeira.

---

2 Much work has been done on Ellen White’s own position on the nature of Christ. See Woodrow Whidden’s Ellen White on the Humanity of Christ: A Chronological Study and The Soteriology of Ellen G. White: The Persistent Path to Perfection, 1836-1902. See also Eric C. Webster’s work, A Critical Analysis of Christology in Seventh-day Adventism.
Waggoner and Jones

Ellet J. Waggoner and Alonzo T. Jones were two Seventh-day Adventist editors who have left a huge impact on the Adventist Church. At the 1888 General Conference Session in Minneapolis and during the ministerial institute that preceded it, they gave a series of presentations on the subject of righteousness by faith. The presentations stirred the other delegates, some in agreement, most to disagreement and even strong opposition. Ellen White, who was there and heard Waggoner and Jones speak, gave a strong endorsement of their message. Her now classic statement, "The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones. This message was to bring more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. . . . It is the third angel’s message, which is to be proclaimed with a loud voice, and attended with the outpouring of His Spirit in a large measure" (Testimonies to Ministers 91-92), indicates the welcome she gave the message of these men.

The exact words spoken at the session were not recorded, so we do not exactly know the content of "the 1888 Message." Both Waggoner and Jones continued to speak on the subject of righteousness by faith, even traveling for a time with Mrs. White. We do have manuscripts of these later presentations, as well as several books that each of these men wrote. Waggoner, in 1890, published Christ and His Righteousness, fresh on the heels of the 1888 General Conference Session.

Adventist historian George Knight, perhaps the leading authority on 1888, says there is some evidence that the nature of Christ did factor into the 1888 session, though not largely (A User-friendly Guide to the 1888 Message 153). Waggoner does make reference to Christ’s humanity in Christ and His Righteousness, just two years later, but his comments are not extensive. It was at the General Conference session of 1895 that Christ’s human nature became a fully formed issue for Jones. According to Knight his view did not change significantly from this time on (From 1888 to Apostasy 136). His 1905 book The Consecrated Way to Christian Perfection, though containing ideas on the Adventist sanctuary doctrine that are sympathetic with
the pantheism of J. H. Kellogg and Waggoner at the time, still espouses his earlier position on Christ's humanity (Ibid. 214). In The Consecrated Way to Christian Perfection Jones inseparably links the nature of Christ to righteousness by faith.

Both men eventually apostatized and left fellowship with the Adventist Church. Waggoner became a pantheist and Jones became embittered against church leaders.

**Christ's Nature**

Waggoner and Jones taught that when Jesus became human He was like us in every way. His likeness to man was not merely in form or representation, but Christ so identified Himself with the human race that He became like us in substance. “It is likeness to men as they are in all things, exactly as they are” (Consecrated Way 18). Christ is as much like man as He is like God—in very substance. His identity with us is so complete that He “felt just as we feel when we are tempted.” This identity is necessary for Him to be able to help and save us “to the uttermost” (Ibid. 21).

This emphasis on Christ's identity with us can be taken to be nothing more than an affirmation of His true humanity. But Waggoner and Jones clearly state beyond this that Jesus had to come to men where they were, just as they were, under the law. “To be under the law is to be guilty, condemned, and subject to the curse” (Ibid. 22). Therefore Jesus was made as guilty and condemned as any man who is guilty under the law. But Jones emphasizes the fact that Christ was made to be guilty and condemned whereas we are by nature guilty and condemned. He was not guilty of any sins of His own nor did He have a sinful nature of His own, but He was “made” to be like us. What is ours by native right, He was made (Ibid. 23).

**Original Sin**

The doctrine of original sin plays a key role in the nature of Christ debate. The position one takes on original sin is very much related to how one sees the nature of Christ. Waggoner and Jones take the view that man is born with a nature that is already guilty and condemned. This nature with its guilt and condemnation, Jesus, by being born into the stream of history, takes upon Himself. The sin that was laid upon Him from the time of His birth was both our sinful
nature or tendency and our sinful acts. To deliver us from sin He had to do more than just rescue us from our acts of sin, but He had to rescue us from our inherited disposition to sin. Jones points out that the purpose of Christ's genealogy, with its many sordid characters, appearing in Scripture is to illustrate that He was born from that line with their hereditary tendencies. Jones interprets Isaiah 53:6 "And the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" to have happened at birth (Ibid. 32). "Bearing guilt, being under condemnation, and so under the weight of the curse, Jesus, a whole lifetime in this world of guilt, condemnation, and the curse, lived the perfect life of the righteousness of God, without ever sinning at all" (Ibid. 24).

There is in the theology of Jones and Waggoner the idea of Christ gathering up the entire sinfulness of man in Himself and bearing it, not only on the cross, but His entire life. The significance of Christ being "made of a woman" is that sin went back to the woman, not Adam. Eve sinned before Adam, therefore Christ went back to the entry point of sin in the world "to meet the sin that was in the world before the man sinned" (Ibid. 27). The reason for this is that Christ had to come into the closest possible contact with sin as it is in the world. "Between Christ and sin in this world, and between Christ and human nature as it is under sin in the world, there is no kind of separation, even to the shadow of a single degree. He was made flesh; He was made to be sin. He was made flesh as flesh is, and only as flesh is in this world; and was made to be sin only as sin is" (Ibid. 27).

Christ's Temptations

When the Bible speaks of Christ being tempted in "every point" that man is tempted (Hebrews 4:15), Jones and Waggoner interpret this to mean that Christ faced the temptations that each person on earth is specially faced with. Each person has certain temptations to which he is especially susceptible. Christ stood in each person's place to meet that person's particular temptations. "Christ was in the place, and He had the nature, of the whole human race—And in Him meet all the weaknesses of mankind, so that every man on the earth who can be tempted at all, finds in Jesus Christ power against that temptation. For every soul there is in Jesus Christ victory against all temptations, and relief from the power of it" (Jones, General Conference
Christ’s Victory

Christ’s victory came through His own divine faith (the faith of Jesus) which brought to Him the power of God (Consecrated Way 21). It would almost seem that Jones is here saying that Jesus had an advantage over us because of His divine faith. Waggoner at one point would say that Christ’s divinity made it impossible for Him to fall (Signs of the Times 21 January 1889 cited in George Knight, A User-friendly Guide to the 1888 Message 74), a definite advantage He had over us. But by Jesus uniting divinity (whether it is His own or the Father’s) with humanity, He enables us to have the same victory. This power of God is now ours because He brought it to our flesh. He is Emmanuel, God with us. This means God is now with us and not just God with Jesus. “Jesus became ‘us,’ that God with Him might be ‘God with us’” (Consecrated Way 21).

Impact on Soteriology

If Christ did not come to this world in the same “poor, sinful, lost, human flesh that all mankind have” then He wouldn’t have come to the world where the world needed Him (Ibid. 28). He would have been unable to help man, He would have been too distant. In the view of Jones and Waggoner, Christ’s level of identity with the human race is directly related to His ability to save us.

The idea is not so much that He had to identify Himself with us to be our Example, though He was our Example. His identity was necessary to connect the human race with God, to unite the human nature with the divine nature. It is this uniting of human and divine that gives us power for victory over sin. Christ provides for both justification and sanctification. “For the sins that are past, His righteousness is imputed to us, as our sins were imputed to Him. And to keep us from sinning, His righteousness is imparted to us in our flesh; as our flesh, with its liability to sin, was imparted to Him. Thus He is the complete Saviour” (Ibid. 33).

In Christ’s role as High Priest, He ministers to bring atonement to individual believers so that He may dwell in them. And the purpose of His dwelling in us is that we may attain perfection—both moral and spiritual (Ibid. 57). Perfection, perfection of character, is the
Christian goal—perfection attained in human flesh in this world. Christ attained it in human flesh in this world, and thus made and consecrated a way by which, in Him, every believer can attain it. He, having attained it, has become our great High Priest, and by His priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary enables us to attain to perfection (*Ibid.* 62).

This belief in the possibility of perfection leads to the eschatological position that God’s people must be cleansed and made perfect before the sanctuary can be cleansed and Christ can return. This is not the kind of perfectionism which treats Christ as an Example merely to be imitated. It’s not a Christ-did-it-so-must-I theology. What Jones teaches is the believer’s dependence upon Christ’s performance for his own performance.

Speaking of the weakness of the flesh and its inability to keep the law, Jones says, “Therefore God, to supply the need, must bring strength to weak flesh. He sent Christ to supply the need; and therefore Christ must so arrange it that strength may be brought to our flesh itself which we have to-day, that the purpose of the law may be met in our flesh” (Jones, *General Conference Bulletin* 1895 cited in Larson 75). “All the tendencies to sin that are in human flesh were in His human flesh, and not one of them was ever allowed to appear; He conquered them all. And in Him we all have victory over them all” (Jones, *General Conference Bulletin* 1895 cited in Larson 80).

It was not until the 1950s that any Adventist arose to challenge the thinking of Waggoner and Jones on the nature of Christ. George Knight states that the understanding of Christ taking fallen human nature was, “a generally accepted theological nonissue” during the time of Waggoner and Jones (*From 1888 to Apostasy* 133). Knight believes that, just as the Adventist understanding has grown and changed on other issues, so it did on the nature of Christ.

A new position on the nature of Christ began to be advanced in the 1950s. With the 1957 publication of *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* the church semi-officially took the position that Christ took unfallen human nature.³

³ For a more thorough explanation of the events surrounding the publication of Questions on Doctrine see George Knight’s *Angry Saints: Tensions and Possibilities in the Adventist Struggle Over Righteousness by Faith* 131-133.
Some church members, most notably among them M. L. Andreasen, saw the change in position as a compromise of one of the pillars of Adventism. Andreasen vocally attacked church leadership for selling out to gain evangelical acceptance. This charge continues to be advanced by some even to the present day.\textsuperscript{4}

**Edward Heppenstall**

Edward Heppenstall served the church as a pastor and Bible teacher. In 1955 he was called to the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary then located in Takoma Park, Washington, D.C. Nine of his eleven years there Heppenstall spent as dean of the seminary, a capacity in which he exerted a world-wide influence on the church by instructing teachers and ministers from around the world. E. C. Webster claims that Heppenstall was a contributor to the book *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine (A Critical Analysis of Christology in Seventh-day Adventism 252).*

**Christ’s Nature**

Heppenstall takes a very different view from that of Waggoner and Jones. Like they do, Heppenstall believes in righteousness by faith, but he does not believe that Jesus took the fallen nature of man in the sense that Waggoner and Jones believe it. “To believe that Jesus Christ inherited a sinful nature as all men do—a nature that was inclined to evil and incapable of doing any good of itself—is to ascribe total depravity to Him, to say that the whole of His being was sinful as is ours. If this was so, then He needed to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit, Christ’s sinful nature would then have to come under the judgment of God at the cross. His sacrifice would have had, in part, to be the penalty, not only for our sins but for His own sinful condition. For a sinful state of being brings men to judgment and condemnation as do sinful acts and unrighteous deeds” (*The Man Who Is God* 141).

Heppenstall cites the Bible’s many statements which say that Christ did not sin and had

\textsuperscript{4} Roy Adams, because of his research on the Adventist sanctuary doctrine, is quite familiar with Andreasen. In *The Nature of Christ: Help for a Church Divided over Perfection* pp. 37-54, he gives an analysis of Andreasen’s response to *Question on Doctrine.*
no sin in Him—He was sinless. According to Heppenstall, this means Christ did not have sin in Him either as a state of being or in His doing. Heppenstall defines sin as a broken relationship. Because Jesus was in constant harmony and dependence upon His Father, He never had that broken relationship, therefore He was sinless in nature.

Jesus had the Holy Spirit for His Father, and Mary for His mother. No other human being has ever had this arrangement. “If Jesus had been conceived as all other men are, He could not have been different from us. But in the conception and birth of Christ there is a decisive break with sinful humanity. Jesus was born of God in a sense that is not true of us. Christ never needed to be born again and find a new divine center. At the center of His being was Deity itself” (Ibid. 135).  

“In the likeness of sinful flesh” (Romans 8:3) means Christ came in the likeness of sinful flesh, not sinful flesh. His flesh, which Heppenstall defines as His physical being, was like ours. He took our physical body as it was affected by 4,000 years of sin. He appeared no different than any other man, but that’s where the sameness stops. He did not possess a nature stained with sin, a state of separation from God. “Every man comes into the world in sinful flesh possessing the stain of sin, of separation from God. For Jesus Christ this was only an assumed condition. If Christ had been born exactly as we are Paul would not have written ‘in the likeness’ but ‘in sinful flesh’” (Ibid. 137).  

Christ emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives, surrendering them to the Father. “He accepted the limitations of human mind and spirit” (Ibid. 80). These limitations made Him need to spend entire nights in prayer to get direction and strength from His Father. And it made Him only gradually become aware of His identity as the Son of God (Ibid. 80). “In this emptying Christ was still God. But He was truly limited in knowledge, truly subject to temptation, and required the help of the Holy Spirit, as we do. The indwelling Spirit enabled Him to live as we

---

5 As E. C. Webster points out in A Critical Analysis of Christology in Seventh-day Adventism, Heppenstall’s view of Christ having Deity at the center of His being needs to be harmonized with his belief that Christ had a completely human consciousness.

6 It is unclear from the context and from the rest of Heppenstall’s view what he means by “assumed” in this statement.
are to live. Jesus exercised no power not available to Christians” (Ibid. 91).

Heppenstall believes that Christ did not have His own weak human will and His omnipotent divine will both functioning. This is an important presupposition of Heppenstall’s view, that Christ operated out of His human will, because then the human will must not have any tendency to sin or else Christ would have fallen.

Heppenstall’s view of Christ’s nature sees Jesus as stepping into the physical limitations and even weakness of a fallen human body, emptying Himself of His divine prerogatives, but not taking a sinful spiritual nature. A fallen spiritual nature is separated from God, and Jesus was in constant connection with His Father. “He was never alone until the hour when He bore our sins at Calvary” (Ibid. 142).

**Original Sin**

Heppenstall’s premise for his position on original sin is that it must make sin the responsibility of Adam and man. The Calvinistic and Arminian positions make sin God’s responsibility. Heppenstall is concerned with seeing God vindicated (Ibid. 115-118).

Adam and Eve’s sin was one of self-gratification, of self-seeking, instead of obedience to God. They chose self over God and broke the relationship of God-dependence with which they had been created. They were not infused with an entity called “sin,” they simply had a broken relationship with God. We inherit this broken relationship of alienation between us and God. We are born separated from God. But Heppenstall puts great emphasis on the fact that our state is the result and consequence of Adam’s sin. We are not punished or guilty for Adam’s sin. We are born separated from God as a result of Adam’s sin. “There is a causal connection between the first sin of the first man and the self-centeredness of his posterity” (Ibid. 122).

“Original sin is not per se wrong doing, but wrong being,” says Heppenstall (Ibid. 122). Sinning is merely the natural expression of our state of separation from God. Original sin is not a biological inheritance which can be reduced to something genetic or physical. “Our physical structure, including the glands, genes, and chromosomes with all their biological and physiological possibilities would be no problem were it not for the perverseness of our
minds. . . . The effects of sin are seen primarily in the brain and its functions" (123). "Inherited propensities” are merely characteristics of a life of separation from God. We do not inherit propensities, so to speak, but separation from God. “Life apart from God is distorted, it is the ultimate source of all selfishness, evil, perversion, weakened propensities, all inherited tendencies to sin” (Ibid. 119).

With original sin thus separated from the biological process, Christ can be said to have entered the genetic stream of humanity without being contaminated by it. “When we ascribe to Jesus flesh such as that which His contemporaries had after 4,000 years of sin, it is easy to assume His nature was exactly like ours, once we tie original sin to the physiological processes, which can be transmitted genetically. But once we separate original sin from the genetic process, Christ’s being born by the power of the Holy Spirit leaves Him free from sin” (Ibid. 138).

Heppenstall’s position on original sin enables Christ to be born of a sinful mother without partaking of the sinfulness of humanity. What He got genetically was a weakened physical being, but not a weakened or sin-affected spiritual nature.

**Christ’s Temptations and Victory**

Christ’s temptations did not come from inward lusts as ours sometimes do. His came only from outside Himself, even as Adam and Eve were tempted before they fell. But Christ had less advantage than Adam, because Christ was tempted in a physical constitution 4,000 years degenerated from Adam’s.

Christ triumphed over temptation by constantly depending on the Father. He was victorious by faith in His Father and by the power of the Holy Spirit. He was dependent on God for His victory (Ibid. 155).

Christ’s earthly temptations were to take things into His own hands, losing His dependence on the Father. Satan’s goal was to get Jesus to lose faith in His Father. In a sense Christ’s temptations are greater than ours because we don’t have the option of taking things into our own hands as did a Man Who was also God. But the basis of the temptations is the same as ours—whether or not to trust God in every circumstance, whether or not to maintain our
connection of dependence on Him. “Self-dependence is the deep, hidden root from which all sin and unrighteousness springs” (*Ibid.* 164). This is how Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are.

**Impact on Soteriology**

The phrase “Made ... to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21) does not mean that Christ was made to be a sinful person any more than we are made righteous persons by Christ. Rather Christ’s righteousness is imputed, or credited to us. “When we become Christians we are not made righteous in the sense that Christ is intrinsically righteous. We are still sinners who are declared righteous by having Christ’s righteousness reckoned to our account with God” (*The Man Who Is God* 143). Jesus bore our sins, but He did not Himself become a sinner. If being made sin for us involved a state of being, it did not happen until Christ was on the cross (*Ibid.* 144).

When it comes to imitating Christ’s example, it is impossible for us to repeat His sinless perfection, and it would be pointless if we could because “our hope and faith in Christ does not depend on our imitating Him” (*Ibid.* 147). The only way in which we are to imitate Christ is in His faith and dependence on the Father. We are to depend on Jesus. This is the only way we will grow in obedience. And even the dependence on Him is a gift. We don’t have to try hard to imitate Christ at all (*Ibid.* 148).

Christ must be exalted high above anything we can ever achieve, otherwise His gift of righteousness to us is minimized, as are His sinlessness and our sinfulness. “To believe that Christ had a sinful nature implies that He was little more than a good man: the highest type that we, in ourselves, may become” (*Ibid.* 148).

Heppenstall sees perfectionism as anti-gospel. A concentration on moral living, imitating Christ, degenerates into a concentration on self, he says. The gospel is not about a “quest for righteousness,” but dependence on Jesus and His righteousness (*Ibid.* 149). “The everlasting gospel and the third angel’s message of righteousness by faith are based upon certain basic facts: first, our utter inability to live like Christ and achieve spiritual maturity by any effort of our own;
second, our consequent need for daily dependence upon Him" (Ibid. 149).

**Herbert Douglass**

In Douglass we again see the view that Jesus took fallen humanity. Douglass seems to place an especially strong emphasis on Christ as our Example. This is evident from the title of his main work on Christ, *Jesus—The Benchmark of Humanity*. He sees Jesus as the Model-Man, the ultimate human specimen.

**Christ’s Nature**

For Jesus to be our Example, He had to come in the same nature that we possess, without advantage over us in our fight against sin. “Jesus remained sinless in the arena where sin had conquered all other human beings, and in so doing He exposed the nature and vulnerability of sin” (*Jesus—The Benchmark of Humanity* 28). And again Douglass says, “For Jesus to effectually save us, He had to enter our terrible predicament” (Ibid. 30).

Douglass enumerates six reasons for Christ’s incarnation. It is interesting to note the focus of Douglass’ theology from the reasons he gives. By far his great emphasis is on Christ as the Model-Man to be imitated rather than as the God-Man Who redeemed. Douglass’ reasons why Jesus became a man are:

1) He came to show us what God is really like as well as what being human is all about.

2) He came to vindicate the character of God by proving His love in self-sacrifice and self-denial.

3) He came to disprove Satan’s claim that God’s law was impossible to keep.

4) He came to prove that God’s grace and power can keep fallen humans from sinning.

5) He came to give us an example of how to live.

6) He came to justly and completely atone for mankind’s sins (Ibid. 35-39).

**Original Sin**

Douglass defines sin as a broken relationship. As such it is a state of being, a condition of rebellion. All humans are born into this state. “And because of that broken relationship, God
holds each individual personally guilty or responsible” (Ibid. 29).

“If the human hereditary stream was broken between Mary and Jesus, the Bible fails to suggest it” (Ibid. 27). Douglass poses a challenge to those who believe the hereditary stream was “antiseptically cut off” for proof of the fact. It is interesting to note however, that Douglass’ opposition, Heppenstall and Gulley, don’t believe the hereditary stream was cut off either. They just don’t share a common view on the nature of the hereditary stream. “He had the same heredity that tends to weaken human decision-making” (Ibid. 32). The “flesh” is not inherently evil and does not possess sinfulness. Biblically, flesh and sin are used interchangeably in the experience of the unconverted person (Ibid. 29).

Christ’s Temptations

Jesus’ temptations were greater than ours because He never gave in to them—He never got the break from temptation that we get when we give in. Temptation for Him was constant. And He was fully capable of falling. His temptations were like ours in that they arose both from within and from without. Douglass defines temptation from within as envy, self-exaltation, and self-indulgence. Temptations from without are direct appeals from Satan, or come from objects of unholy desire (Ibid. 32). Christ was tempted every day of His life even as we are. His wilderness temptations focus on three basic areas in which man is tempted: (1) self preservation/appetite, (2) spiritual pride, and (3) the use of improper means to achieve a desired end (Ibid. 54-57).

Thus it would seem that Douglass believes, like Heppenstall, that when the Bible says Jesus was tempted in all points like we are, that Jesus was tempted categorically as we are. But Douglass expands the categories and includes temptations from within and without. Heppenstall, on the other hand, distills temptation into the common denominator of self-dependence. Therefore Christ did not have to be tempted from within to be tempted like us.

Christ’s Victory

Douglass is emphatic that Christ’s victory was achieved without advantage over us.

“Jesus is the first to break the power of sin, beating a path for all to follow. He conquers every
and He did it all in the very arena where His brethren had failed and with no other weapons than those God places at His brethren’s disposal” (Ibid. 31). Christ was not protected from His human nature, or somehow shielded from it, says Douglass, He risked all by “fighting the battle of faith as every son and daughter of Adam has had to fight it” (Ibid. 33). “If Christ had a special power which it is not the privilege of a man to have, Satan would have made capital of this matter. . . . We are led to make wrong conclusions because of erroneous views of the nature of our Lord. To attribute to His nature a power that it is not possible for man to have in his conflicts with Satan, is to destroy the completeness of his humanity” (Ibid. 40).

And the way in which Jesus obtained victory, even as we may obtain it, was by His connection with His Father. Christ’s victory was achieved by trusting in the power of the Bible and God (Ibid. 58). The secret of Jesus’ success was His prayer life. He truly communicated with God, sometimes agonized, His praying was essential to resist temptation (Ibid. 63).

Impact on Soteriology

A keynote of Douglass’ theology is his belief in the delay of the parousia, or second coming of Christ. This delay is because God is waiting for His people to truly reflect the glory of His character. “By God’s grace they make possible the last demonstration of truth before probation closes” (Ibid. 23). Jesus could have returned anytime since 1844; the delay is because His people aren’t ready (Ibid. 123). He is waiting for His people to not just tell the world, but show the world what it means to be a Christian (Ibid. 127).

This doctrine of eschatological perfection is a major focus of Douglass’ soteriology. God’s salvation of man enables him to live sinlessly, and this will happen before Christ returns. The delayed Advent provides the impetus for Douglass’ teaching on Christ’s nature, because, as Douglass says: “How we understand Jesus’ humanity has much to do with our own character development” (Ibid. 25). Jesus is the Model-Man. He sets for us an example in His victory over sin, in His constant communion with His Father through prayer, by His love for other people, in His moral courage and integrity, in His masterful teaching and dealing with people, in the joyful
witness of a life surrendered to God, in an unshakable faith (the faith of Jesus), in His humility and self-denial, in His magnificent love. Says Douglass, “Our measuring line is too short. We do not appreciate what the blending of Christ’s divinity with our humanity can accomplish in and for us today. Many of us have felt reticent to accept the fact that Christ’s model life demonstrates what we can become now in Him” (*Ibid.* 121). Christ’s perfect life can be reproduced in His people.

Man can partake of the divine nature by faith and through divine power can overcome just as Jesus overcame. “To attribute to His nature a power that it is not possible for man to have in his conflicts with Satan, is to destroy the completeness of His humanity” (*Ibid.* 40). “He proved not only that sinless Adam could have remained sinless but also that fallen men and women, with all the disadvantages of sinful heredity, could also live in obedience” (*Ibid.* 52).

Norman Gulley

Norman Gulley holds the view that Christ took unfallen human nature. His position is very similar to Edward Heppenstall’s. In fact, Heppenstall wrote the introduction for Gulley’s book *Christ Our Substitute*.

Gulley is perhaps the leading systematic theologian of the Adventist Church. With this background he is able to set the Adventist argument in the wider frame of Christendom as a whole. Gulley commonly examines the positions of non-Adventist scholars and argues his points in relation to their teachings. He writes against the ideas of John Calvin, Martin Luther, and Karl Barth on how Jesus was both God and man at the same time. Calvin’s view, called the *Extra Calvinisticum*, states that while Jesus was a baby in Bethlehem He was still on the throne in heaven, the powers of His Godhead remained fully active. Luther eventually came to believe that the divine and human natures commingled in Jesus to form a Hegelianlike synthesis. Barth believed that Christ’s divinity surrounded his humanity like an insuperable wall.7

---

7 Barth’s position here is an interesting parallel of E. J. Waggoner’s position that Christ’s divinity prevented Him from falling.
Christ’s Nature

In the context of the views of the Christian world, Gulley asserts that Adventists believe Jesus was fully God and fully man, 100% of both. As to which nature Christ took for His humanity, Gulley states, “He took both. For Christ took the spiritual nature of man before the Fall, and the physical nature of man after the Fall” (Christ Our Substitute 33).

Christ must be different from us in order to save us. Believing that He is entirely like us minimizes His role as our Substitute, we see Him only as our Example. Because if Jesus could do it without a Savior, we can too. “Such a concept completely misunderstands the terrible reality of sin as man’s utter estrangement from God. It can only be healed by one from outside the stream of human history—never from within. . . . Redemption is not a healing, but a radical new creation” (Ibid. 38).

Gulley clearly states his theological presupposition for understanding the nature of Christ. “Mission determined the extent of identity—not the other way around. He came to save” (Ibid. 39). This means He became as like us as possible without jeopardizing His mission by putting Himself in need of a Savior. Gulley uses the analogy of Christ coming on a rescue mission to save humanity. Man got lost and far from home because of his attempt to be self-sufficient.

“The man Jesus brings humanity, within Himself, home from the far country, retracing all the steps, undoing them—matching dependence for independence—till He has brought us back to dependence and salvation” (Ibid. 42).

To fulfill His mission, Jesus did become like us in every way possible. His physical nature was like ours. And He operated as a man. Gulley, like Heppenstall, references the Kenosis doctrine to show that Jesus had a human consciousness, not a divine one. He cites Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo as the first time a significant scholar states that Christ’s personality dwelt in his human side, not divine, as had previously been taught.

Interestingly, this sounds similar to Jack Sequeira’s “In Christ” Motif, which we will examine in a later section, and which Gulley opposes. The extent to which Gulley intends this analogy to be taken needs to be clarified.
Original Sin

Gulley avoids directly the original sin issue and asks questions, “Did Jesus break the law in becoming man? ... Did Jesus become a sinner in Bethlehem? Did He separate Himself from His Father in the very act of doing His Father’s will?” People from both sides of the issue agree that the answer is no. These questions skirt the real issue. It is commonly agreed that Jesus did not Himself sin by being born into humanity. The question to be asked is whether or not Jesus took sinful humanity while remaining sinless.

Like Heppenstall, Gulley asserts that Jesus became “sin for us” at His death, not at His birth. Gulley emphasizes Christ’s dependent relationship on His Father throughout His entire life, demonstrating no separation. Only on the cross “when the world’s sins rested upon Him, did He cry out, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:46). For the first time the relationship seemed to be broken—for He who knew no sin before now, for the first time, became ‘sin for us’ (2 Cor. 5:21)” (Christ Our Substitute 36). Thus Gulley teaches, in echo of Heppenstall, that Christ did not inherit the broken relationship that we all do at birth.

Christ’s Temptations

Any advantage Jesus had in temptation is for our benefit. And yet He had no real advantage because of the rigor of His temptations. Christ’s temptations were greater than any we will ever experience because He had His divine nature “in His back pocket,” so to speak (Class lecture 20 April 1998). His temptations to self-reliance were greater because He had more that He could rely upon. In addition, Satan knew who Jesus was and “dogged Jesus’ footsteps” more than he has any other man (Christ Our Substitute 55). Even though Christ had a sinless spiritual nature, the strength of His temptations undoes any advantage He had over us.

Christ’s Victory

Gulley makes an examination of Romans 7 to show that Christ never dealt with the struggle of the “wretched man” who fights against the strong pull of sin and can’t help giving in. Gulley believes the “wretched man” of Romans 7 is regenerate, or post-conversion. It should be noted that this conclusion is debated by theologians. Gulley says that the man of Romans 7 is a
struggling Christian who doesn’t have the fullness of the Spirit spoken of in Romans 8. But
“Jesus was never the man of Romans 7, but always the man of Romans 8” (Ibid. 51). He had the
fullness of the Spirit from His birth. This is how He was able to overcome where all other men
have failed in the fight with sin.

Impact on Soteriology

Gulley is unclear as to whether or not he believes sinless perfection is possible on earth.
He leans toward Heppenstall’s position that it is impossible, calling Christ’s life, “unique,
unrepeatable, all-sufficient” (Ibid. 79). He emphatically denies the possibility of man achieving
perfection on his own, but he does seem to point to Jesus as being able to give us His perfect life
as a “life transfusion.” “Out of our union with Him comes every necessary work as the fruitage
of a saving relationship” (Ibid. 78).

Ralph Larson

Ralph Larson’s main contribution to the debate is his book The Word Was Made Flesh:
One Hundred Years of Seventh-day Adventist Christology 1852-1952, in which he has marshaled
hundreds of quotations from Ellen White and other early Adventists, including A. T. Jones and
E. J. Waggoner on the subject of Christ’s human nature.

Christ’s Nature

Larson interprets the writing of Ellen White and other early Adventists to say that Christ,
when he was made in the likeness of men, did not have “a surface or partial similarity, but a true
and complete likeness, differing from ours only in that the flesh (nature) of Christ never became
involved in sinning” (The Word Was Made Flesh 13). He quotes the often cited statement made
by Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth century, “That which He has not assumed, He has not
healed,” to show that Christ had to be just like us in order to save us (cited in Larson 277).

Like Douglass, Larson enumerates several reasons why Christ had to come in fallen human
nature. Larson says if Christ had not come in fallen human nature:

1) He could not have truly understood us.
2) He could not have been our example in victorious Christian living.
3) He could not have been our substitute-sacrifice.
4) He could not be our Priest-Mediator.
5) He could not have been our Saviour- Redeemer (Larson 278-280).

**Original Sin**

Larson claims, correctly, that the basic issue beneath discussions about the nature of Christ is the doctrine of original sin. He claims that because proponents of the unfallen nature view in Adventism wrongly believe in the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, they reach wrong conclusions about the nature of Christ. Augustine’s doctrine of original sin teaches that man is born guilty and so completely depraved that he simply can’t resist sinning. In Larson’s view, this is how those with a pre-fall view of Christ’s humanity arrive at the conclusion that Christ took unfallen human nature. Otherwise He would unavoidably have become a sinner. Larson, in opposition to this position, states his own formulation of original sin. He teaches that we do not inherit guilt from Adam. In fact we inherit nothing that makes us worthy of condemnation (*Ibid.* 336). He believes in inherited weakness, but not inherited guilt. “All earth-born children, including Jesus, inherit the fallen nature of Adam as weakness, not as guilt. At the point in time when the will of the child chooses to sin, guilt enters the picture” (*Ibid.* 345). If guilt is inherited biologically, God is responsible as the creator of flesh that can transmit guilt, and He is unjust. If guilt is transmitted non-biologically, God is even more so responsible because the guilt comes directly from Him (*Ibid.* 346).

Larson further defines what He means by saying man has inherited weakness but not inherited guilt. He is comfortable with saying that Christ had a sinful nature when such a nature is defined as having a “tendency toward sin.” He does not accept the view, however, that Christ took sinfulness or sin as a state of being upon Himself. Larson affirms Christ’s sinlessness as to His state of being. Says Larson, Christ could have sinned, He had the same natural tendencies that we have, but He was not born with our sinfulness (*Ibid.* 16).

In describing Christ’s likeness to us Larson draws a distinction between Him possessing
natural inclinations toward sin that we all have by nature and evil propensities which come as a result of sinning and, unless "crucified," inevitably lead to more sinning. In interpreting Ellen White Larson says, "We should recognize the undeniable evidence that she saw Christ as having certain natural passions and propensities, and that He avoided sin by controlling them. The other type of evil passions and propensities, which are already sinning or the result of sinning, and which Christians must eliminate from their experience, Christ did not have at all" (Ibid. 27, italics his).

This leaves us with a theology of imitation. Christ started out on the same exact ground at birth where we start—weak in our sinful nature, but not guilty, possessing natural tendencies to sin, but not evil propensities. Larson uses 1 Corinthians 15:22⁹ to show that we are to imitate Christ. Being "in Christ" means we are His followers and imitators, being "in Adam" means we are his followers and imitators. We sin like Adam did and earn our own guilt and condemnation. The natural conclusion, though unstated, is that in like manner we obey like Christ did and earn our own eternal life (Ibid. 337).

Larson goes further in defining his terms for original sin. He equates guilt with condemnation. Therefore those who say we inherit condemnation but not guilt¹⁰ are simply using verbal gymnastics. They both mean the same thing (Ibid. 343).

"There is never any guilt in the flesh of any human being" (Ibid. 341). Larson teaches that guilt belongs to the will of a person, not the flesh. Therefore in the passing of flesh to flesh in inheritance, no guilt is passed. The will is not flesh. Even though the will resides in the flesh of the brain, “then the will apparently stands apart from and controls the flesh, even including the flesh of the brain.” This is “one of the major mysteries of human existence” (Ibid. 341).

"Thus guilt is not automatically incurred by a violation of God’s law. There can be wrong-doing without guilt, if the act is ignorant rather than willful. The deciding factor is the attitude of the will of the law breaker. Did he will to violate the law of his Creator God? Or did

---

⁹ "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."

¹⁰ See Jack Sequeira’s teaching on original sin which we will examine in the next section.
he violate an unknown or misunderstood precept of God’s law while willing to serve and obey God? The Creator-God takes into account these extenuating circumstances in deciding whether or not to assign guilt” (Ibid. 343, italics his).\(^\text{11}\)

**Christ’s Temptations and Victory**

Larson doesn’t speak much to how Christ was tempted and by what means He obtained victory. Again, like E. J. Waggoner, we have a hint that Christ overcome somehow because of His divinity. In commenting on a statement by Ellen White in which she warns against making Christ “altogether human” he states, “Divine-human and altogether human are opposite poles in meaning. There can be no divine nature in a Christ who is altogether human, such an one as ourselves” (Ibid. 110, italics his).

**Impact on Soteriology**

Larson, like the others who take the post-fall position on Christ’s nature, believes that it is possible for man to stop sinning while on this earth. “Christ had lived a life without sin in sinful flesh in order to demonstrate that man, by using the same faith, trust, and God-dependency that He used, can successfully do the same thing. Thus at its very source their [Ellen White’s and other early Adventist’s] Christology (nature of Christ) was inseparably linked with their Soteriology (saving work of Christ)” (Ibid. 13). Thus Larson clearly connects salvation with sinless living.

**Jack Sequeira**

Jack Sequeira has the advantage of coming at the end of these many thinkers in Adventist history. He is well familiar with the views on both sides of the argument, and is thus able to make a thorough defense of his own position. Sequeira believes that Christ took the nature of Adam after the fall. But his position differs markedly from others who take the same view.

\(^{11}\) This view should cause concern for Adventists because it tends to negate the binding nature of God’s law. It also would seem to contradict Paul’s argument in Romans 5:14.
Christ’s Nature

Sequeira makes the startling statement that he believes Satan’s counterfeit of the truth about the nature of Christ is not the unfallen nature view, but the position of those who view Christ’s humanity in the context of perfectionism—those who see Jesus as more of an Example than a Savior. The unfallen nature position Sequeira sees as simply a reaction to this counterfeit belief (*Saviour of the World* 10).

Sequeira’s understanding of the humanity of Christ is closely tied up with his teaching on “the gospel.” One can not read Sequeira long without seeing this phrase, “the gospel,” come up repeatedly. The gospel he defines as the “unconditional good news” that, in Christ, God has fully saved humanity from sin now and in the judgment.

Crucial to Sequeira’s theology, and perhaps his most distinctive characteristic, is his “In Christ” Motif. This teaching emphasizes the solidarity, or corporate nature of the human race. It states that the entire human race, corporately, was in Christ when He took upon Himself our humanity. This means that He took upon Himself corporate fallen humanity. Jesus assumed our “corporate, sinful human nature that needed redeeming” at the incarnation (*Ibid.* 12).

The “in Christ” Motif does not, as it might appear, destroy the unity of Christ’s person by viewing Him as more than one man. Rather it sees Him as the representative head of a new race. Sequeira appeals to Hebrews 7 for support for the idea of corporate oneness which he says is “largely foreign to the Western mind” (*Ibid.* 33). In Hebrews 7 the Biblical writer argues for the superiority of Melchizedec’s priesthood over Levi’s priesthood based on the fact that Abraham, Levi’s great-grandfather, paid tithe to Melchizedec. Levi, who was in the loins of Abraham, is considered to have paid tithe to Melchizedec. The idea of Abraham’s descendants being accounted as in him, is the idea of corporate oneness. He is Levi’s substitute and representative in the sense that he is Levi’s ancestor and the unborn Levi was in him (*Beyond Belief* 33-34).

“By God’s miraculous act, initiated and carried out by Him alone, He united in one person—Jesus Christ—our corporate humanity that needed redeeming with His own perfect divine nature. At His incarnation, Christ assumed the corporate life of the entire human race in
We hear echoes of Waggoner and Jones in Sequeira’s emphasis that Christ was “made” in the nature of fallen man, He did not “have” a fallen nature. “When Christ became a man, He actually became what He was not. The sinful nature He assumed was not His by native right, but something he took upon Himself, or was made to be in order to redeem it. ... Scripture teaches that Christ actually did assume our condemned sinful human nature as we know it. But He totally defeated ‘the law of sin and death’ (Romans 8:2) that resided in the sinful human nature and then executed it on the cross. Had Christ consented, even by a thought, to the sinful desires of that nature which He assumed, then He would have become a sinner in need of a savior Himself. That is why, in dealing with the human nature of Christ, we must be exceedingly careful not to drag His mind or His choice into sin or to say that He ‘had’ a sinful nature” (Beyond Belief 43-44, italics his).

Original Sin

Sequeira believes that at birth man inherits condemnation, but not guilt. He condemns the Augustinian doctrine of original sin because it teaches that man inherits guilt. According to Sequeira, what we inherit at birth is condemnation, alienation from God, and weakness. We do not inherit guilt as Augustine and the Catholics teach (Saviour of the World 67). Sequeira teaches that Jesus took this very same, condemned, alienated, weak nature (Ibid. 71).

Christ’s Temptations & Victory

Sequeira doesn’t offer much detail on how Christ was tempted or how He overcame. About as far as he goes is to say that Christ’s victory was by the indwelling and controlling power of the Holy Spirit. Sequeira touches on the idea of Christ’s dependence on the Father being necessary to His victory, as well. The basic point Sequeira makes is simply that Christ did overcome. Christ’s method is not treated in detail (Ibid. 176).

Impact on Soteriology

Sequeira claims that those who teach that Christ took the unfallen nature of man, “present a Saviour who redeemed humanity only from the guilt and punishment of sin” (Ibid. 14). In
response, Sequeira presents Christ as a Savior who also delivers man from the power of sin in the present, not just at the eschaton.

Christ’s primary purpose in coming to this earth was not to prove that God’s law could be kept, or to be our Example, but to redeem us from sin (Ibid. 41). And in His substitution for us, He did not redeem us vicariously, but “in actuality,” as Sequeira puts it (Ibid. 42). Concerned with the problem of Christ’s substitution being seen as unethical, Sequeira says that the common understanding of Christ’s death being done in our place is incorrect. Sequeira teaches that we actually died in Christ, corporately. He was our substitute in the sense that He took us in Himself to the cross. He did not just do it instead of us (Ibid. 40). “Christ’s life and death actually changed mankind’s past. Because each of us was corporately identified with Christ’s humanity, His life and death became our life and death. In Him, we lived a perfect life; in Him we died the penalty for sin. When Christ died on the cross, all humanity was legally justified because all humanity died with Him there” (Ibid. 43).

“The good news of the gospel is that because Christ assumed the self-same human nature we inherit from Adam, that human nature was made spiritually alive at the incarnation (see Ephesians 2:5), its weakness was overcome by the power of the Spirit of life in Christ (see Luke 4:14), and finally this condemned nature was executed at the cross (see John 12:31; Romans 8:2, 3). The result of all this is that Christ obtained for all humanity a salvation that is full and complete, one which we can all experience by faith” (Saviour of the World 71).

Conclusion

It is obvious at this point that the debate in Adventism over the nature of Christ is not as simple as deciding whether Christ had a fallen or unfallen human nature. The various thought leaders we have examined are actually just a representative sampling of the plethora of views out there, each with subtle differentiating nuances.

But for the sake of summary we can divide the Adventist spectrum into two different camps. The first, composed of Heppenstall, Gulley, and others like them, is the most well-
defined in the church. There is not much variation among them on their theme. They see Jesus as coming in both fallen and unfallen natures. His physical nature was fallen, His spiritual nature was unfallen. And they see sin as primarily a broken relationship which is not passed genetically. This enables Jesus to be born of Mary and inherit from her a physical nature subject to hunger, weariness, aging, and pain, but not separation from God. Even though Christ was tempted more fiercely than we will ever be, He had an advantage over us in that He never possessed our sinful depravity which makes sinless living an impossibility for us. Jesus is the only person who will ever live on this planet this side of the millennium and be sinlessly perfect.

The second camp, represented here by Waggoner and Jones, Douglass, Larson, and Sequeira, is not so well-defined, and infinitely more varied than the other view. These men do not agree with each other on even key issues. About the only thing they are in agreement on is that Christ came in fallen human nature, both a fallen physical and spiritual nature. But even here their positions become fuzzy. Jones and Sequeira, in particular, emphasize that Christ "was made" in the nature of fallen man but did not possess His own fallen nature. And yet they will talk about Jesus as if He had His own fallen nature, not as if He had a split identity. They are apparently dealing with something quite beyond explanation. How could Christ take upon Himself a fallen spiritual nature, operate through it, and remain sinless?

This brings up an important point of note on the nature of Christ: Christ’s method of victory. It is unfathomable to think that Jesus, as a Man with less advantage than Adam who fell (and both sides of the debate agree He had less advantage), could live in a world of sin and suffering, endure the onslaughts of Satan, and never once give in to sin. Both sides of the debate agree without question that Christ succeeded in living the sinless life. They are left with the perplexing problem of explaining how He did it. This issue, though not often addressed, I see as one of the main factors in the debate. The simple fact remains that Christ had to have some difference from us, some advantage over us, that enabled Him to never sin.

The Heppenstall-Gulley camp have an easier time explaining how Christ had victory. According to their view His divinity was not an advantage for Him, but a huge disadvantage
because He could be tempted to use it. Christ overcame on the same ground where Adam fell. Certainly Adam didn’t have to fall. It would have been fairly easy for Adam to live through eternity without ever sinning. The unfallen inhabitants of God’s universe are proof of this. Though Jesus was certainly subjected to far more than Adam ever faced, in Adam’s nature it is fairly easy to see how He could be victorious. He had an unfallen spiritual nature.

The post-fall camp doesn’t have quite so simple a job of explaining Christ’s victory. Douglass and Larson advance the untenable position that Christ overcame in sinful nature in just the same way we can overcome in sinful human nature—by complete reliance on God. The difficulty with this view is that no other human has ever done it. It doesn’t explain how Jesus could be victorious where no one else has been. Of course it is unsafe to completely deny this possibility because possibility is not destroyed just because it has never been done.

Waggoner and Jones say blatantly what the others merely hint at: that Jesus had a certain advantage because of His Deity. This view sees Jesus in a literal sense as the God-Man. But it does not explain how He could maintain the unity of His person while being both God and Man. It also fails to deal with the very argument Douglass presents against the pre-fall position. As we saw before, Douglass writes, “If Christ had a special power which it is not the privilege of a man to have, Satan would have made capital of this matter.... We are led to make wrong conclusions because of erroneous views of the nature of our Lord. To attribute to His nature a power that it is not possible for man to have in his conflicts with Satan, is to destroy the completeness of his humanity” (Jesus—The Benchmark of Humanity 40).

More study is needed on the issue of Christ’s nature. But more speculative theories are emphatically not needed. The issues are fairly well defined, and some unanswered questions remain for each side in the debate.

Though the subject is inexhaustible, I do believe there is hope for our church to reach greater consensus on the issue of Christ’s human nature. It will not be achieved by argument, but by prayerful, unbiased Bible study. And in the end, we must bow before the inexplicable miracle of the Incarnation. As Ellen White wisely counseled, “It is a mystery that is left unexplained to
mortal that Christ could be tempted in all points like as we are, and yet be without sin. 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” (Letter 8, 1895 cited in Larson 315).
Works Cited


——. Class lecture. Christian Theology II. Southern Adventist University, Colleagedale. 20 April 1998.


The Holy Bible. King James Version.


