

Letter to George Vandeman

It is with sadness that I pen this letter. I have admired you for years: the empathy you so often manifested in your demeanor and voice, and the evangelistic fervor with which you worked.

You were the one who, when in 1955 as I was completing the Bachelor of Divinity degree and seven years of college, graduate, and post-graduate school, counseled me to go into the ministry instead of going on for a Ph.D. and becoming a Bible teacher in one of our colleges. I took your advice, and that summer entered the ministry in California.

I have here before me your letter in defense of a Martin Webber article in the *It Is Written* monthly, *Channels*, advocating the erroneous view of the nature of Christ.

Because his article was sent to all your *Channels* readers, and because you wrote a form letter to every one protesting the article (enclosed), I will let others read my reply to your theological position.

I was deeply saddened as I read it. I had thought you to be a staunch supporter of our Bible/Spirit of Prophecy historic beliefs. It comes as a shock to learn that you have been swayed, as have so many other of our leaders and workers, by fellow associates.

I have repeatedly observed that, in our denomination, doctrinal beliefs among workers are determined more by friendships, and cronyism, than by the study of God's Word.

A higher-echelon worker notes that a subordinate is standing for a certain position. In a few friendly words he sets him straight. "Didn't you know that . . . ?" Perhaps he mentions it with a laugh, but the point is made: Shape up, or you may ship off down the road erelong.

In every century of church history it has been the same. Errors creep into the church, and divisions occur. One side stands on Bible prin-

ciples; the other unites on the doctrine of cronyism: "Whatever my superiors advocate, that is what I will teach."

It is rather easy to detect this pattern, because those defending the corporate error use logic to defend their position. They may interweave some Scripture into it—which may seem to loosely accord with it,—but they do not take the whole teachings of the whole Word. They take a segment of an idea, and blow it up into a full-fledged doctrine, while ignoring the great majority of Scriptural statements on the subject. This is the method used to find "Sunday sacredness" in the Bible. This is how men defend the incorrect view of the nature of Christ.

When forced to defend their position more fully, they will quote fallible, uninspired men: the councils, the creeds, the popes, the saints, or influential theologians.

Those unacquainted with the issues here may wonder why it matters what nature Christ had. Yet as both you and I know, it is a crucial matter. For Christology prefaces soteriology: **The nature of Christ lays the foundation for the way we are saved or lost.**

Very briefly, here are the issues:

The Bible/Spirit of Prophecy truth is that Christ took our human nature. That means He was able to be fully tempted as we are, and was fully tempted as we are. Yet He never yielded; He never once sinned.

He took not the nature of Adam before his fall, but the nature of Adam's fallen descendants.

This concept is called the *fallen nature of Christ*. It might better be called the post-Adamic nature of Christ. Though Christ had a nature like ours—a fallen nature,—He never actually fell! He never sinned.

Because Christ could have

sinned, but did not do so,—we can be saved! **He died to live our life and be our example, and provide us with grace to overcome, resist sin, and obey God's commandments—just as He did while on earth.**

That is the correct view.

"For verily He took not on Him the nature of angels; but He took on Him the seed of Abraham."—*Hebrews 2:16*.

Hebrews 2:16 declares that **Christ did not take the nature of Abraham's ancestor, Adam, but the nature of Abraham's descendants!** Surely, then, how can anyone say that Christ took the nature of Adam before his fall?

"Wherefore in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

"For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted."—*Hebrews 2:17-18*.

Unless Christ was "made like unto His brethren," He could not be our High Priest. Unless He Himself was able to be tempted as we are, He could not give us overcoming help when we are tempted. That is what we learn in Hebrews 2:17-18.

In contrast, the erroneous position is that Christ had the nature of Adam before he sinned in the Garden of Eden. This is called the *unfallen nature of Christ* view.

This is the teaching that Christ could not have had our fallen nature, for then He could not have resisted temptation! According to this error, Christ did not, by His life and death, give us empowering grace to resist sin and obey the laws of God.

Thus, the erroneous view completely changes the way we are saved! Instead of receiving forgiveness and empowering grace, the error provides

only forgiveness.

The unfallen nature position is closely tied to the error of *original sin*, which the licentious Catholic bishop, Augustine, invented in order to explain how he, so passionately locked in cherished sin, was certain that he was going to heaven.

According to this false collection of errors, mankind does not have to obey the laws of God; indeed, God does not enable him by grace to do it, and does not necessarily want him to try to do it. This is the heart of, what is called, the *New Theology*.

So, on one side, we have the fallen nature position which we clearly find in the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy: Christ was made in all points like us. He was tempted in all points like as we. But He never sinned. Because He was fully God and fully man, His death on the cross could provide the basis for our atonement. We are now to come to Him, find forgiveness for the past, and henceforth live in Him. By faith in His enabling grace, we are to live His life. We are to live "in Christ." We, adopted sons and daughters of God through Him, are to obey the Father as He, Christ the Son, obeyed the Father.

However, there is one point about the nature of Christ teaching, which it is easy to twist into an attempt to support the erroneous position (that of the unfallen nature of Christ) from Scripture.

That is the obvious fact that both views teach that Christ never sinned.

Everyone agrees on THAT point: Christ did not once yield to temptation or indulge in any kind of sin. Christ was sinless. This is clearly stated in both the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy.

The error is presented in this way: Christ never sinned, therefore Christ must have been miraculously protected from being able to sin.

But the truth is that Christ relied on His Father for help, just as we today may rely on Christ for help to overcome.

The error is presented in this way: Because Christ never sinned, therefore He must have had an un-fallen nature.

But the truth is that Christ chose to resist sin and successfully did it—and He did it in the same humanity that you and I have.

That is a promise! In Christ—you and I can have victory also! Trusting, moment by moment in Christ, you and I can also resist temptation and obey the law of God.

The controverted issue is about the *nature of Christ—whether or not He actually took our human nature*. All agree there is no controversy about the *actions of Christ—whether or not He ever sinned*.

The controverted issue is *whether or not you and I can resist temptation and sin*. There is no controversy about *whether Christ was sinless*.

So the fundamental question in the nature of Christ—is **whether He took OUR nature (and thus was truly tempted like us, and truly resisted sin as we may do); or did He take a nature NOT OURS—Adam's pre-fall nature—which could not really be tempted or resist sin, as we in our daily struggles must do.**

The obvious outworking of the erroneous view is that, if Christ could not, and did not have to, resist sin,—then we do not either.

But the truth is that Christ was tempted in all points like as we, yet without ever once yielding;—therefore, by His grace we can successfully resist and overcome also.

Both sides agree that Christ never sinned. But the truth is that **the reason He never sinned, while on earth, was because He resisted sin by relying on His Father for divine help—just as today, by relying on Him, we may now do.**

The error is that Christ never sinned while on earth—because He could not be tempted as we are tempted! Therefore we are still in our sins, and cannot escape them till the Second Advent. The error teaches that Christ did not die to save man *from* his sins, but *in* his sins (Matt 1:21).

There it is in a nutshell.

Elder Vandeman, in your letter to inquiring listeners, (*paragraph 3*) you write that Christ only had "a form similar (not identical) to sinful flesh. In other words, He had a body like ours, but He did not have the sinful nature we have. His nature was holy, harmless, and undefiled."

But the correct position would be this: Christ did indeed have a body like ours, but in that body He did not choose to commit sin. He had our body, but He did not indulge in our sins. All the decisions of His life were holy, harmless, and undefiled.

(*Paragraph 4*) This paragraph is reasoning based on your premise in paragraph 3. But, as we have noted, that premise is incorrect.

(*Paragraph 5*) You here get to the heart of the matter: You state that babies sin, and Jesus never did; therefore He could not have had our nature. The implication is obvious: *You are saying that, if Christ really had our nature, He could not have resisted sin.* THIS is the fundamental crux of the erroneous view of the nature of Christ: The theory is that He could not have had our nature, because everyone with our nature cannot, in this life, resist sin; we are locked into it, by virtue of original sin.

Jesus was "that Holy One" by choice, not by nature. Because He was holy in our nature, we can put away our sins in that same nature, by faith in His empowering merits.

(*Paragraph 6*) Repeatedly, you confuse nature with choices. Although Christ's nature was like ours, His choices were always pure and clean.

You say, "Christ came to this earth, as Adam did, with a sinless nature. He overcame where Adam failed, and therein lies our salvation."

The truth is that, when Adam sinned,—it resulted in an immense fall! As soon as Adam fell, Satan could thereafter have much closer access to him. If Christ lived and died in Adam's UNFALLEN nature, then by His life and death He may have been able to save Adam, but not us! Yet if Christ took our nature (not Adam's), then by His life

**and death and heavenly mediation
He would be able to save us, as well
as Adam!**

(Paragraphs 7-10) In these four paragraphs, we are told that Christ never sinned. Everyone agrees on this point.

The quotation in paragraph 9 is from the *Baker letter*, and the one in paragraph 10 is also in response to Baker's peculiar view.

W.L.H. Baker was an Adventist minister in Tasmania, an island off the southeast coast of Australia. He had developed a strange concept which Ellen White replied to in, what is known as, the *Baker Letter* (*Letter 8, 1895*).

From 1852 through 1895, Ellen White repeatedly taught that Christ took the fallen human nature of humanity. From 1895 to her death in 1915, she continued to teach that doctrinal truth. (The most complete collection of these statements is to be found in *The Word Was Made Flesh*, by Ralph Larson.)

Elder Baker had gotten into a peculiar error, called *Adoptionism*. He imagined that Christ was just a regular man, whom God later endowed with divinity. *Adoptionism* was an ancient error that Christ was merely a human being whom God eventually adopted into the divine family. Obviously, it is a strange and unscriptural teaching. Baker theorized that, during His life, Christ may have sinned.

So Ellen White wrote and warned Baker! Some of the warning statements in that letter have been taken out of context, in an attempt to set aside all her other statements on this subject.

Paul of Samosata (bishop of Antioch from A.D. 260 to 269) was one of the teachers of adoptionism. He said this:

"Mary did not bring forth the Word, for Mary was not before the ages. But she brought forth a man on a level with ourselves."

Because Baker was moving into the Adoptionist arena, Ellen White wrote to Baker:

"Let every human being be warned from the ground of making

Christ altogether human, such an one as ourselves, for it cannot be."

"Never, in any way, leave the slightest impression upon human minds that a taint of, or inclination to, corruption rested upon Christ, or that He in any way yielded to corruption."

"Do not set Him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin."

"On not one occasion was there a response to his [Satan] manifold temptations."

Not only did the Adoptionists teach that Christ had sinful propensities, but they also tried to decide at what time divinity entered His body. In the Baker letter, Ellen White wrote:

"The exact time when humanity blended with divinity, it is not necessary for us to know."

Understanding the background of the Baker Letter, we can better see the strange error which she was trying to counteract.

At the same time that the Baker Letter was written, Ellen White was writing *Desire of Ages*.

Seven times in that book, she stated the correct view of the nature of Christ. **If you have a little extra time, just turn to two pages and read them: *Desire of Ages*, pages 49 and 117.** They clearly explain the whole matter.

How many different ways can the correct view of the nature of Christ be stated? Well, one will surely will find them in the Spirit of Prophecy! Consider these:

"Nature . . . identical to our own."—*Ms 94, 1893* / "Became flesh even as we are."—*MH, 422* / "Down to the level of those He wished to save."—*ST, 7-30-02* / "He should take man's fallen nature."—*1 SG, 25* / "The likeness of sinful flesh."—*RH, 12-24-72* / "Taking the place of fallen Adam."—*RH, 2-24-74* / "The weaknesses of fallen man upon Him."—*RH, 7-28-74* / "Humble Himself to fallen humanity."—*RH, 2-24-74* / "Bore the infirmities and degeneracy of the race."—*RH, 7-28-74* / "One with the fallen race."—*ST, 4-25-92* / "All the strength of the passion of humanity."—*ST, 11-21-92* / "The form

of humanity with all its attendant ills."—*ST, 1-04-77* / "To unite the fallen race with Himself."—*ST, 9-23-89* / "Not aloof from degraded, sinful humanity."—*5T, 346* / "United the fallen world with heaven."—*RH, 7-10-91* / "To meet fallen men where they were."—*RH, 7-21-91* / "Identified Himself with the weakness and wretchedness of fallen man."—*RH, 8-04-74* / "Linked Himself to the weakness of humanity."—*RH, 4-01-75* / "The child of a fallen race."—*Letter 19, 1901* / "Down to the level of fallen humanity."—*GCB, 4-25-01* / "Brother in our infirmities."—*ST, 6-18-02* / "Took upon Him the infirmities of degenerate humanity."—*ST, 12-03-02* / "Stand among men as one of them."—*ST, 4-29-03* / "Not only made flesh, but made in the likeness of sinful flesh."—*Letter W6, 1896* / "He was in all things like us."—*Ms 141, 1901* / "He assumed human nature, and its infirmities, its liabilities, its temptations."—*Ms 141, 1901* / "Took upon Himself fallen suffering human nature, degraded and defiled by sin."—*YI, 12-20-1900* / "Taking the nature but not the sinfulness of man."—*ST, 5-29-01* / "Took human nature upon Him . . . to stand at the head of the fallen race."—*Ms 11, 1902* / "Like every child of Adam, He accepted the results of the working of the great law of heredity."—*DA, 49* / "Bearing the humanity we bear."—*Ms 21, 1895* / "Took on Him our sinful nature."—*RH, 12-15-96* / "Passing over the ground which man must travel."—*ST, 5-27-97* / "Fully human."—*ST, 6-17-97* / "Taking man's nature in its fallen condition."—*ST 6-09-96* / "Christ came to be one with humanity."—*Ms 124, 1903* / "[God] gave Him to the fallen race."—*[Austr. Signs] AST, 7-22-29*.

"The nature of God, whose law had been transgressed, and the nature of Adam, the transgressor, meet in Jesus, the son of God and the son of man."—*Manuscript 141, 1901*.

"If we have in any sense a more trying conflict that had Christ, then He would not be able to succor us. But our Saviour took humanity, with all its liabilities. He took the nature of man, with the possibility of yielding to temptation. We have nothing to bear which He has not endured."—*Desire of Ages, 117*.

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