

CONVENTIONAL AND BIBLE VIEWS ON HUMAN NATURE

Views on Human Nature

“Your hands have made me and fashioned me, an intricate unity... You have made me like clay.” (Psalm 119:73 & Job 10:9).

It is contended here that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” but not because of sin in our physical body or nature. Sin is out of the heart or mind of man as a creature answerable to God. God intends, not to destroy human nature but to raise it to incorruption.

Concerning the body as a seed cast into the ground, God says through Paul; “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body and there is a spiritual body . . . However the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual” (1 Corinthians 15:44 to 46).

Man was created with the potential to succeed or fail. Now it may have been that the odds were against him but we cannot say, only God knows. Of His foreknowledge, how can we judge? However, there was a balance between human frailty and high intelligence but without inner spiritual light in their nature. Man failed his simple test, no doubt taken by surprise - how often this has happened - yet we are without excuse.’ We find, on looking at Genesis 3 that the actors in this play each were found guilty and took the blame and their personal punishments. But what about their “sinful” flesh? Because human frailty was a necessary part of the test (and anyway, they had not created it), nothing is said about it. God had made it in His all-wise way and He did not condemn it - why should He? (Job 10:9). No doubt, it contributed to failure and yet it could have been overcome to man’s credit. He had the choice. God had arranged it this way; He had set the stage. Was He going to condemn the ‘props’ on the stage? Man had sinned and was guilty - not his nature. Yet Christ is held by some as innocent, yet condemned to die for Himself because of His nature; what injustice! Job seeks to remind God that: “Your hands have made me and fashioned me, an intricate unity; yet you would destroy me. Remember, I pray, that you have made me like clay and will you turn me into dust again?” (Job 10:8,9). Though man had sinned in the beginning, his nature had remained the same, on this evidence, as the neutral basis of his very existence. ‘Neutral’ here is understood as not a moral issue in itself - it does not mean without influence. We see this question of neutrality more clearly if we look at the use of the word “nature.” In biblical terms it means “natural body” (1 Corinthians 15:42-46), and its natural characteristics. The following phrases are interesting: “the natural use for that which is against nature” (unnatural) (Romans 1:26). “Gentiles who “by nature do the things in the law” (Romans 2:14). “Does not even nature itself teach you?” (1 Corinthians 11:14). These verses do not disparage human nature or flesh in any way. There is “natural affection” (Romans 1:31, 2 Timothy 3:3), which is legitimate and the lack of it, which is not. The two minds of man are spoken of in 1 Corinthians 2:14,15 - the ideal being the mind of Christ.

It is hard to see why God would judge or condemn the nature He gave to man for his trial and development, or deny Himself by so doing. “The natural man” is a term meaning a man of fleshly leanings or carnal mind - i.e. everyone who has not received spiritual light - verses 6-13. The doctrine of flesh has been consistent at all times and the “doctrine of Christ” (2 John 9:10), coming in the flesh is the same. Robert Roberts could hardly have put it better than in a letter to one who thought there was a change in Adam’s nature when he transgressed. He wrote: “The Phrase sin in the flesh is metonymical, it is not an expression of a literal element or principle pervading physical organization. Literally, sin is disobedience or an act of rebellion... The impulses that lead to sin existed in Adam before transgression as much as they did afterwards; else disobedience would not have occurred... There is no such thing as essential evil or sin.” (“Ambassador,” March 1869).

Could God deny His own workmanship as “condemned and evil nature” (Roberts’ question in a later 1896 series of propositions)? Do we have the right to do so?

Adam And The Original Sin.

Did Adam's sin change him physically? It is hard to find evidence of this. Flesh has always been subject to influences and mood swings, just as it was in Eden. What did change was man's relationship to God; the sentence of death was the sign of this, as was the covering made for man's body and the expulsion from the pleasant order of the Garden. In all that transpired there was no mention of the part played by man's nature, his physical body of flesh. Questions are addressed: "Have you eaten from the tree... Because you have done this, you are cursed... What is this you have done?" "And to Adam He said, Because you have heeded the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree which I commanded you saying, You shall not eat of it: cursed is the ground for your sake... Until you return to the ground." The responsibility belonged to the creature as a whole and not to his nature separately as the "condemned nature" doctrine teaches. Death is rather an interim matter of convenience although associated with sin. We know this is so because as Hebrews 9:27 informs us; "And as it is appointed for man to die once, but after this the judgement" - "at His appearing and His kingdom" - 2 Timothy 4:1 - "so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many." - Hebrews 9:28 - in their life before dying. Because the second death is an unnatural one and is the real judgment upon sin, so Christ suffered and died unnaturally to bear the sins of those who, deserving of this death, are forgiven and reconciled. The different federal and legal relationships of "The Children of Adam and the Son of God" were dealt with in the article of that title. They, the solitary couple in the Garden, had sold the human race to Sin and God now had a free hand in dealing with the problem of sin. He chose to show mercy on the basis of a selective process and He chose the method and ritual of sacrifice in order to satisfy the need to see justice done in accord with Romans 3:25,26 and 5:6-8: "that he might be just and the Justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." "For when we were still without strength (bodily and federally) in due time Christ died for the ungodly." This was through the vicarious suffering of the pains due to the guilty by One who was innocent of all guilt, symbolized and foreshadowed in the blood sacrifices of the Law. It might appear unjust but was undertaken willingly by Jesus in the Father's Name: "I have come in my Father's name and you do not receive me..." "As the Father loved me, I also have loved you; abide in my love..." "Greater love has no one than this..." "I have glorified you on the earth, I have finished the work which you have given me to do..." pending the great sacrifice which would end with the words "It is finished." Man has chosen; God was to make His own choices. He chose Abel not Cain; Isaac not Ishmael; Jacob not Esau; Israel in place of Pharaoh, saying through Moses: "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." For the Potter has power over the clay: the whole of Romans 9, where we find the principles of testing and selection is still there, though human 'clay' remains the same as it has always been: "Behold I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offence, and whoever believes on him shall not be put to shame."

Jesus and "Sinful Flesh"

Things are not always what they appear. God never calls the actual flesh sinful, even though man himself collectively and individually is sinful. We should not judge according to the appearance - John 7:24. Jesus did say of His own flesh, in view of His person and work, "Except you eat my flesh you have no life in you." The Jews were horrified at this and answered "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" His reply was to the effect that the spiritual meaning would give life, not the literal flesh - "the flesh profiteth nothing" 6 - "the words that I speak to you are spirit and they are life." His flesh was life because it was unleavened by sin and when He broke the Passover bread it was unleavened which, incidentally, makes it appropriate that we should do the same. At this point the whole of John chapter 6 should be read. Among Jesus' words are: "I am the bread of life..." "This is the bread which comes down from heaven that one may eat of it and not die." "I am the living bread which came down from heaven... and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world..." "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:48-54) Would bread from heaven have sin in it? Would He ask us to eat "sinful" flesh?

Where Do The Churches Stand?

The churches have their own view which they call "original sin" corresponding to "sinful flesh." On the other hand, perceiving where this would leave the Saviour, they accept that He was without "original sin." This led to a belief in two different kinds of flesh. Christadelphians do not make this distinction; they condemn Christ instead. However, there is a middle way - what I believe to be the more biblical way. In the Church of England's 39 Articles of religion, Article 9 is headed "Of Original or

Birth-Sin.” It speaks of human nature as corrupt and infected, when in reality, it only responds or reacts to the heavy burden placed upon it and is not incapable of answering to the light of truth. Article 15: “Of Christ alone without Sin” has this: “Christ in the truth of our nature was made like unto us in all things, sin only except, from which He was clearly void, both in his flesh, and in his spirit.” The light of truth has its own psychology, its own effect on our nature and mind, which in the case of Christ was perfect. It fulfilled His own dictum that if your eye is perfectly single your whole body shall be full of light (not sin).

What The Body Is For

There was an original sin when original integrity was lost, but this was moral not physical. There is a sense in which every sin is outside the body, being governed by the mental attitude of the person concerned (see 1 Corinthians 6:18). The body belongs to the person and experiences weal or woe, joy or sorrow, depending on what that individual decides to do. God did not produce robots but gave us the ability to choose between Himself or Sin as possible masters. That was what flesh, or human nature, was for in the beginning. It was “very good” for this purpose. It still is, for His purposes. We bear federal guilt and also individual guilt. Sin is an individual matter. This is why Christ bore no sin in His flesh, or in His Spirit.

The Body As A Temple

Jesus taught that His body was a temple - a dwelling place of God. It would die and in three days would rise again – John 2:19. Paul taught the same about the body: “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” – 1 Corinthians 6:19, “citizens... a holy temple in the Lord... a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” - Ephesians 2:19-22. “The body is... for the Lord, and the Lord for the body... your bodies are the members of Christ” - 1 Corinthians 6:13-15. The body is not therefore likely to be contaminated with a parasite, physical sin-principle. Let us say rather that this idea is a myth, even a figment of the imagination.

The Context Of Romans 8:3 to 7

In 1873 God gave an insight into this verse of Scripture that has stood the test of time. It removed the idea of sin and guilt from flesh, the physical body, and placed it where it ought to be: “For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life” - Galatians 6:8. This effectively separates the person who shall be judged from his nature which will not. For “to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” - Romans 8:6. This ought to make us suspicious of the usual interpretation of “sinful flesh” that it means “condemned nature” and that impulses and temptation are actual sin. For by no stretch of the imagination can the Greek “flesh of sin” mean “sinFULL.” The reference clearly is to the context - notably chapter 6, dominion or reign of sin [verses 9-23], “under sin” (Romans 3:9 and 7:14). In 7:12 Sin is personified as an “exceeding Sinner” to whom man was sold). Yet the traditional translation impugns God whose works are perfect and His Son who was, as we read in Hebrews 4:15, “tempted in all points... yet without sin,” proving that temptation, therefore flesh, is not sin. This enables us to see Him as He really was and is - clean according the law-requirement, the perfect Lamb of God. The clean unblemished condition made the sin offering “most holy.” Only thus was it fit to bear sin that was not its own; this we learn in Leviticus 10:17: “Why have you not eaten the sin-offering in a holy place, since it is most holy, and God has given it to you to bear the guilt of the congregation?” This was a foreshadowing of Christ, for animal blood could never take away sins but the precious blood of Christ, who was “most holy” could. His own offering was effective to bear the sins of all who came to Him, even though they are not most holy.

Romans Chapters Five To Eight.

These chapters move forward, from judgment and condemnation in chapter 5 to the cleansing waters of baptism in the “likeness” (homoioma) of Christ’s death, to deliverance from the “old man, the body of sin” and the “reign” of sin in chapter. 6 Here sin appears as a master slave-owner holding dominion or sovereignty over man. This is different from the idea of flesh that is full of physical sin and defilement without forgetting its innate weakness and poor response to law. In Romans 3:9 the phrase “all under

sin” occurs, meaning federal relationship to the primary sin of Adam. This is a “spirit of bondage” and corruption in Romans 8:15,21. In Romans 6:14,17 “death reigned.” In 6:21 “sin reigned.” In Romans 6:6 the “body of sin” (the “old man” condition) has been “done away with” (rendered powerless - Diaglott) i.e. the former state of bondage, “that we should no longer be slaves of sin.” The theme of servitude continues: 6:7 “For he who has died has been freed from sin.” 6:9 “Death no longer has dominion.” 6:12 “Do not let sin reign.” 6:14 “Sin shall not have dominion.” 6:16,17 “slaves of sin” (AV. servants) Also 6:20. 6:18 “set free from sin.” Also 6:22. 6:23 sin pays the wages of death to his slaves. In chapter 7, verse 12, Sin, the figurative slave owner becomes, in the Greek, an “inordinate sinner” (Concordant) and in the Diaglott rendering is personified as “an exceeding great sinner.” Therefore, while not denying that flesh is weak (being of the dust it cannot be otherwise), the finger points at Sin. In chapter 7 those who sin under the law, and are without Christ, are said to be “in the flesh” (verse 5). This is a past event for Paul and others in that he says “When we were in the flesh,” though obviously still flesh. 8 In Romans 7:7 he no longer writes of “we;” he now writes “I” - would not have known sin. He continues in this mode to the end of the chapter. In 7:18 he reflects back to verse 5 and speaks of his former days as being “in my flesh” - the previous state under sin when sin dwelt in him and “nothing good” as regards relationship with God. Not literally true as applying to flesh objectively though. Not Sin but Christ was in him now.

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