

CHRIST'S NATURE AS SINFUL OR SINLESS IN THE EARLY *REVIEW* (1850–1895)

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Before the mid-1890s, the phrase “sinful nature” was occasionally used in Christological discussions in the *Review*, mainly in order to reject such an idea. Around that time, however, influential writers adopted the direct terminology of “sinful flesh” for Christ’s nature, instead of “likeness of sinful flesh” which had formerly been carefully distinguished from plain “sinful flesh” by J. N. Andrews and even by U. Smith. In the case of E. G. White the new terminology did not imply adopting the idea of sinful propensities in Christ, and in any case a sinful nature for Christ should not be equated with the historical position of SDAs.

Key Words: sinful nature, sinful flesh, Christology, historical Adventism

1. Introduction

The *Review* occupied in early Seventh-day Adventism a unique place.¹ “The story of the church paper, since 1978 called the *Adventist Review*, is the story of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”² It is fair to say that in the first decades of the movement the paper was not just an official church publication, but also the main visible link between the scattered bands of believers.

In the last fifty years, the human nature of Christ has become one of the most ardently debated theological issues in the denomination.³ The historical position of Adventism on this issue is of course a matter of importance in this debate. Consequently, the position of early *Review* writers who mention the topic is presently examined.

¹ The original name of the first publication of nascent Adventism was *Present Truth*, but the name was later changed to *The Advent Review* and then *Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (with slight variations). In this study the name *Review* will be used for brevity. For a concise history of the paper and its name changes see the article “Review and Herald” in the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1966), 1075–78.

² William G. Johnsson, “Our Roots and Mission,” n.p. [cited 20 August 2008]. Online: <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=22>.

³ This was repeatedly shown in the Andrews University *Symposium on Questions on Doctrine*, held October 24–27, 2007, though the debate has recently abated.

The phrase “sinful nature” was used in the *Review* before Ellen White first used it in 1896. Even though it was used 42 times in the *Review*, few of the references refer to Christ.⁴ After that time Ellen White discussed the issue repeatedly. Her concept of the human nature of Christ is nuanced and even complex at times, as will be shown below, and has been much discussed within the denomination since the appearance of *Questions on Doctrine* in 1957.⁵ However, given the special place that Ellen White has in Adventism, the opinions of later contributors to the *Review* are much less relevant to the historical discussion than her writings. This is why only *Advent Review* occurrences predating 1896 are examined here.

Not all these occurrences represent Seventh-day Adventist contributors. In many cases, the early *Review* reproduced material taken from other Christian publications or works. Even so, there is a clear responsibility assumed by the Seventh-day Adventist editors in selecting and publishing those materials. James White, the editor during the 1850–1855 and 1861–1864 periods, was also one of the co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist movement, and all editors were considered to be thought leaders in the denomination in early Adventism. Thus, all these occurrences are still relevant for a discussion of the historical Adventist position on the issue.

2. Analysis

Most of the 42 “sinful nature” occurrences refer to the condition of ordinary human beings, in a wide variety of contexts, usually connected with practical Christian living, and were investigated only to make sure that they do not belong to our topic. Apparently, in only three cases a sinful nature is discussed with reference to Christ. In one of these cases (1883) there is an unmistakable rejection of such an idea, and in another (1894) the rejection is clear, but implicit. On the other hand, in 1860 an author accepts the idea.

As early as 1856, the sinless nature of Christ is clearly presupposed.⁶ James White inserted text selected from a work which takes the absence of any sinful impulses in Christ for granted. On the basis of such rejection the selected author argues for the personal existence of Satan and denies the modernist theory that turns the devil into a mere metaphor for evil im-

⁴ This was determined with the help of the search engine in the official archive site of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Online: <http://www.adventistarchives.org/search.asp?CatID=27&CatName=Review+and+Herald&Search=sinful+nature>.

⁵ *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1957), especially pp. 50–59; cf. the main passages in Ellen G. White’s writings in the Appendix B, pp. 647–60.

⁶ This is not one of the 42 references mentioned above, since the phrase “sinful nature” does not appear. It is here included because of its obvious relevance.

pulses. The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness had to come from a personal devil, he says, not from inner evil impulses; otherwise the tempted Jesus would have been sinful.⁷

In contrast, an Adventist contributor is clearly open to the idea of a sinful nature in Christ. E. Goodrich, in "Grace Through Unrighteousness" (Sept 25, 1860), makes the standard 19th-century SDA defense of the perpetuity of the 4th commandment by arguing that in Christ we are free *from* sin, but not free *to* sin (as in transgressing a commandment). Once forgiven, we are to sin no more. Rom 6:10 says that Christ is to die no more, and Goodrich argues that a dying nature and a sinful nature are synonymous, even in Christ's case: "Having inherited our nature with its sinful susceptibilities and promptings, he could feel the power of the tempter." But as printed in the *Review*, the article does not unreservedly attribute sinfulness to Christ's nature; it only says that he inherited "a part" of our nature.⁸

⁷ In June 1856, "Personality of the Devil" (said to be taken from *Universalism Against Itself*, 252–61, but without other bibliographical information) the author argues: "If his own lusts, or his own carnal mind, was the devil that tempted, was he [Christ] not sinful? He certainly was; because the carnal mind is enmity against God. Rom. viii, 1. His lusts were most unquestionably sinful, if they were the devil that tempted him; for that which is holy, will not try to tempt any one into wickedness!"

⁸ The context may be ascertained in the complete paragraph (cf. E. Goodrich, "Grace Through Unrighteousness," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* [Sept 25, 1860], 5): "This is the liberty wherewith Christ makes free: a deliverance from the dominion of lust and sin. This kind of remedy is genuine and thorough, because it begins with the root of the matter and aims at a complete change of nature. The necessity, consistency and beauty of such a reformation as this, is the better seen and realized when we remember that a dying nature and a sinful nature are identical. To be delivered from one is to be freed from the other. This sentiment, is expressed by the apostle, [Rom. vi, 6], when he says, 'Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him; for in that he died he died unto sin once; but in that he liveth he liveth unto God.' Died unto sin: not that Christ ever sinned, or that guile was ever found in his mouth; but as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, and he also likewise took part of the same, *he inherited a part of our nature*, subject as it was to the-law of sin and death. And having inherited our nature with its sinful susceptibilities and promptings, he could feel the power of the tempter, yea, be in all points tempted as we are. And having been tempted, he could sympathize with and succor those that are tempted, and thus be a merciful and faithful High Priest. But when he died he was put to death in the flesh, but raised by the Spirit, the power, and glory of the Father, and placed infinitely above the power of temptation, the dominion of sin or death. Now, according to the apostle's reasoning and language, as Christ died unto sin, and as when we are baptized we are baptized into his death, to carry out the figure and doctrine, as Christ was raised up by the glory of the Father, and lives a new life,—so we, having died unto sin, should live the rest of our time to God. The above and foregoing is in brief the doctrine of the Bible from beginning to end; and how any one who has read the Scriptures, who has learned the reason why man fell, the pur-

In contrast to the main concern of Goodrich, which was the perpetuity of God's law, in 1883 a *Review* selection deals specifically with Christological concerns. Here the sinless nature of Christ is asserted specifically in a strongly worded statement. This is when G. S. Barret is cited extolling the "absolute sinlessness" of Christ in contrast to "that consciousness of a sinful nature, of an inherited bias toward evil, which makes its appearance with the first dawn of consciousness in every other human life."⁹

In a later occurrence, a rejection of a sinful nature in Christ is not explicit, but appears to be implied. This is an editorial note in the first page of the issue of May 22, 1894, where a contrast between our sinful nature and the nature of Christ seems implicit. The editor (U. Smith) notes:

Many people read the text, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin," with the idea of its meaning that it cleanses by granting remission of all the sins of the past, and removes the penalty from the sinner. It does all this and more. It cleanses from sin by *taking away the sinful nature, and implanting in the believer the nature of Christ*. Hence Jesus could say, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" [italics added].¹⁰

The optimistic view of the editor on the nature of man and sin is here in evidence. According to him, human sinful nature may be "taken away" even in present life. But when this happens, the nature of Christ is "implanted." Such a belief seems incompatible with any description of Christ's

pose for which the Son of God was manifested, and who professedly has been converted,—how any such one for a moment believe that the moral law of God ceased by limitation, or was abolished by the death and mediation of Christ, is a mystery—a mystery that seems only to be explained by the deception of the human heart and the enormity of the carnal mind" [italics added].

⁹ In *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Dec 11, 1883), 10, Barret is cited (from "The Greatest Miracle," without other bibliographical information) as follows: "The miracles wrought by Christ are not the only, or the most startling miracles of the gospel. Christ himself is his own greatest miracle. His absolute sinlessness, his freedom from the least taint of human infirmity and folly, his pure and perfect life, are a far more wonderful exception to the so-called 'laws of nature' than the healing of the sick, or the stilling of the storm, or the raising of the dead; for not only was Jesus 'without sin' in the outward acts of his life, but he was free from that consciousness of a sinful nature, of an inherited bias toward evil, which makes its appearance with the first dawn of consciousness in every other human life. And it is only when we remember that this sense of sinfulness is as truly 'a law of nature' as any of the great laws of the physical universe, that, to use the words of the late Professor Mozley—perhaps the deepest thinker of the English church since the time of Bishop Butler—'the sinlessness of Christ appears in its true light as a supernatural fact, an inward visible miracle, surpassing in wonder any of the visible miracles which he wrought'."

¹⁰ U. Smith, "Editorial Note," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (May 22, 1894), 1.

nature as "sinful," since there would be no point in implanting the same kind of nature that had been just taken away.

It is likely that the editor used the term "sinful" with reference to actual sin,¹¹ in which case the Christ-like new nature implanted in the believer could have been still compatible with sinful tendencies. But whatever the import of the term "sinful" in his mind, it is clear that at the time he would not describe either the born-again believer or the humanity of Christ as being "sinful."

In sum, before 1896 the issue of a sinful or sinless nature for Christ is not frequent in the pages of the *Review*. The sinful nature of man was well known, even though out of the thousands of *Review* pages published by 1896 there are apparently only 42 occurrences of the phrase in all. The phrase is never applied unreservedly to Christ; on the contrary, it is repeatedly used to deny such an idea (1883, 1894), though in one case the author speaks of "sinful ... promptings" in Christ's nature (1860).

3. "Sinful Nature" and "Sinful Flesh"

We have seen above that only in a few instances does "sinful nature" appear to be related to the case of Christ in the pre-1896 *Review*. There is a clear rejection of any sinfulness in Christ's human nature in 1856, and a "sinful nature" in Christ is explicitly rejected in 1883. In another occurrence (1894) the rejection is implied, while in one case only (1860) it is accepted, but perhaps only partially. In no case is a "sinful nature" ascribed unreservedly to Christ. This clearly implies that it is incorrect to call "historical" the position that makes the human nature of Christ sinful.

However, though "sinful nature" is not directly attributed to Christ in the pages of the *Review* before the Ellen White article, the close parallel "sinful flesh" is so attributed starting in 1895. Until that time the *Review* had always used the biblical qualification "*the likeness of sinful flesh*" when applied to Christ (57 times until 1894). J. N. Andrews once explained that this "likeness" did not extend to inner sinful dispositions:

What did the Lawgiver do to relieve man's helpless condition? He sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and by a sacrifice for sin [margin], condemned sin in the flesh. Jesus came in the *likeness of sinful flesh*, but he had no sinful disposition within him. He was subjected to the utmost power of temptation, but he knew no sin. He rendered perfect obedience to his Father's law. Then he took the curse of that law which stood

¹¹ See below on the 1896 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* editorial position.

against us upon himself.¹² He died, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God [italics added; previous square brackets in the original].¹³

But things change. In the March 10, 1896 issue (p. 16) a letter from a reader to the editor objected to recent developments in Adventist teaching: "E. M. says: 'I notice that some of our writers refer to Christ as having 'lived in sinful flesh.' The Scriptures say that he came in 'the likeness of sinful flesh.' If one's *flesh* is sinful, why is he not sinful? Can you separate a man from his flesh, without separating him from himself?'" [italics added]. The point of "E. M." seems to be that attributing "sinful flesh" to Christ would make him sinful, an idea clearly rejected in the Scriptures. But the editor (still U. Smith) tries to reassure him that this is not the teaching favored by the *Review*:

We do not regard the statement, "in the likeness of sinful flesh," to be an exact equivalent to sinful flesh. It behooved Christ to be made in all points like unto his brethren. And as we partake of flesh and blood, he himself took part of the same. He was therefore tempted in all points "like as we are, yet without sin." We believe that in Christ's humanity dwelt the weaknesses and evil tendencies to which humanity is heir, otherwise he could not be "tempted as we are." In this sense he was in the likeness of sinful flesh. But he kept himself pure from sin. He did this by the same means that are provided to keep us—seeking help from above, and keeping his Father's will ever before him.¹⁴

It is not clear what persons were included in this editorial "We" who made a distinction between the biblical "likeness of sinful flesh" and plain "sinful flesh." What is clear is that for the same issue of the *Review* the editors had accepted the contribution of W. W. Prescott, in which such a distinction is completely lost: "The flesh that Jesus Christ took when he came here was the only flesh that one could take by being born of a woman, and that was the flesh of sin. No other flesh could be given. It was impossible that one should be born at that time into the human family, and become a member

¹² This appears to be also the understanding of Ellen G. White, "The Law of God," *Advent Review and Herald of the Sabbath* (May 6, 1875), 2, when she suggests that the "likeness of sinful flesh" in Christ was largely vicarious: "Christ became sin for the fallen race, in taking upon himself the condemnation resting upon the sinner for his transgression of the law of God. Christ stood at the head of the human family as their representative. He had taken upon himself the sins of the world. In the likeness of sinful flesh he condemned sin in the flesh."

¹³ J. N. Andrews, "The Righteousness of the Law—the Purpose of the Gospel," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Feb 9, 1869), 1.

¹⁴ U. Smith, "Editorial Note," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (March 10, 1896), 16.

by birth, without taking flesh of sin."¹⁵ The *Review* had also accepted in the previous January a contribution by one "elder William Covert," mentioning "The perfect life which Christ led while in *sinful flesh*... on the same plane and terms in which man was required to act,"¹⁶ which was perhaps the trigger of "E. M.'s" objection,¹⁷ and another by G. E. Fifield, who held that "Christ *took our sinful flesh* at the point of weakness and sinfulness to which our sins had brought it [italics added]."¹⁸ Also, there is a report on July 17, 1894, about a sermon pronounced in the Battle Creek Tabernacle, which apparently maintained that "Christ inhabited *sinful flesh*."¹⁹ But plain "sinful flesh" is not applied earlier to Christ in pages of the *Review*.

It appears, then, that in the mid-1890s there was a sea change in the terminology used by *Review* writers to describe the human nature of Christ. This new trend apparently had started in other sources,²⁰ but had already

¹⁵ W. W. Prescott, "The Christ of Judea," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (March 10, 1896), 8-9. Soon after becoming chief editor of the *Review* he insisted that Jesus Christ "was the perfect revelation of God's ideal in *sinful flesh*." Cf. W. W. Prescott, "Full Salvation from Sin," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (June 3, 1903), 2.

¹⁶ William Covert, "The Victory of Christ," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Jan 14, 1896), 18. Curiously, as late as August 20, 1895, he still seemed to distinguish between the "sinful flesh" of ordinary men and the "likeness of *sinful flesh*" in Christ: "It would seem that there was much room for conjecture and doubt among *men who were dwelling in sinful flesh* as to what God would do if he were here in *the likeness of sinful flesh* and subject to temptation as man was subject; but the coming of Christ to this world in our flesh has solved the query for the one who will believe" [p. 4, italics added].

¹⁷ E. M. had read an author claiming that Jesus had "lived in *sinful flesh*." Covert spoke of the "perfect life ... in *sinful flesh*." Cf. Covert, "The Victory of Christ," 18.

¹⁸ G. E. Fifield, "The Gospel in the Earthly Sanctuary," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (April 23, 1895), 3.

¹⁹ The report reads: "The Tabernacle pulpit was occupied last Sabbath by Elder A. T. Jones, who delivered an impressive discourse illustrating the unity of Christ with God, and with mankind. 'God with us' and in us is the secret of the power of divine grace. It is not to do as Christ did, that we may be like him; but to be like him, that we may do as he did. *Christ inhabited sinful flesh* and overcame. It is by Christ dwelling in our flesh that we may overcome" [italics added].

²⁰ Ralph Larson, *The Word Made Flesh: One Hundred Years of Seventh-day Adventist Christology, 1852-1952* (Cherry Valley: Cherrystone Press, 1986), 53-110, correlates this new trend with articles in *The Bible Echo* (an Australian paper), as well as other publications and sermons by W. W. Prescott, A. G. Daniells (both of whom were in Australia in the 1890s, as was E. G. White herself), E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones. This Australian connection is persuasive. However, Larson also tries to show (*ibid.*, 34-52) that the sinful nature of Christ was the ordinary position of Adventism before that time, but in spite of combing through the early *Review* and writings of E. G. White he was only able to come up with statements affirming the humanity of Christ and its fallen character (as in his infirmities), never its sinfulness. There is no argument in our denomi-

been noticed by *Review* readers and resisted at least by some of them. *Review* editors then held that “sinful flesh” by itself was an improper phrase in connection with Christ, but at the same time accepted articles with no such qualms. While *Signs of the Times* carries less weight than the *Review* for Adventist studies, it tells a similar story about new trends in the mid-1890s.²¹

It is in this historical context that we find the first direct attribution of a “sinful nature” to the incarnated Christ in the *Review*. In 1896 Ellen White stated: “Clad in the vestments of humanity, the Son of God came down to the level of those he wished to save. In him was no guile or sinfulness; he was ever pure and undefiled; yet he took upon him our *sinful nature*” [italics added].²² After this statement writers in the new trend felt authorized to be much more elaborate in their teaching.²³ But Ellen White’s adoption of the terminology of those writers does not necessarily mean that she also adopted the rest of their Christology.²⁴ It has been persuasively shown that

nation about the full humanity or inherited (fallen) infirmities of Christ’s nature, so Larson’s discussion in that section seems largely beside the point.

- ²¹ The *Signs of the Times* never had in Adventism a role comparable to the *Review*, but was also founded by J. White, though much later in 1875. By 1895 “sinful nature” had never been discussed in connection with Christ, but “sinful flesh” appears a total of 13 times: vol. 1, no. 23 (1875), 5; vol. 3, no. 29 (1878), 5; vol. 20, no. 17 (1894), 15; vol. 20, no. 24 (1894), 4; vol. 20, no. 27 (1894), 4; vol. 20, no. 28 (1894), 4; vol. 20, no. 32 (1894), 1; vol. 20, no. 34 (1894), 6; vol. 20, no. 39 (1894), 9; vol. 20, no. 43 (1894), 8; vol. 20, no. 52 (1894), 5; vol. 20, no. 57 (1894), 1; vol. 20, no. 59 (1894), 1. However, not until 1894 is it connected with Christ without the biblical qualification, “the likeness of sinful flesh.” That year it appears by itself in this connection two times. The first is by the editor, Milton C. Wilcox, “The Righteousness of God,” *Signs of the Times* (June 18, 1894), cover page, who says, “The sinless Son of God took man’s sinful flesh and overcame sin in the flesh.” The other is by L. A. Phippeny, “Life and Death—No. 2,” *Signs of the Times* (Nov 5, 1894), 5: “He took upon him sinful flesh, and was obedient unto death because of the flesh.” The year 1894, as noted above, is also when a report of a sermon in Battle Creek by A. T. Jones initiates the terminology of naked “sinful flesh” for Christ in the *Review*. Thus the *Signs of the Times* seems to participate of the same trend as the *Review* at about the same time.
- ²² Ellen G. White, “The Importance of Obedience,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Dec 15, 1896), 789.
- ²³ For instance, A. T. Jones, “Ministers of God,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Sept 29, 1896), 9, explicitly teaches: “Do not forget, either, that the mystery of God is not God manifest in sinless flesh, but God manifest in sinful flesh. There could never be any mystery about God’s manifesting himself in sinless flesh—in one who had no connection whatever with sin. That would be plain enough. But *that he can manifest himself in flesh laden with sin and with all the tendencies to sin*, such as ours is—that is a mystery” [italics added].
- ²⁴ For example, she differed on the issue of temptations. These writers thought, as U. Smith, that man’s “evil tendencies” dwelt in Christ, who “kept himself pure from sin ... by the same means that are provided to keep us—seeking help from above, and

she consistently (and not just in the famous "Baker letter" of the same year)²⁵ understood the sinfulness of Christ's nature in terms of innocent infirmities of fallen humanity, but at the same time rejecting specifically any "evil propensities" in him.²⁶

4. Conclusion

The complexity of the thought of Ellen White on the issue will probably continue to be a subject of argument in the future. However, a study of early *Review* discussions of the topic shows that her thought should not be set against a supposed background of general consensus on a sinful nature for Christ.²⁷ There was no such consensus, and the preponderance of pre-1895 sentiment leaned in the direction of a sinless nature for Christ—one might say by three to one, if only the small statistical sample could be trusted.

In 1896, following a change in the terminology of *Review* authors, Ellen White spoke of a sinful nature in Christ. By that time "sinful flesh" substituted for "the likeness of sinful flesh," which had been carefully delimited by J. N. Andrews in 1869 as not extending to internal sinful dispositions. While incorporating a plain "sinful nature" phrase into her theological language, Ellen White specifically rejected the evil propensities.

keeping his Father's will ever before him." U. Smith, "To Correspondents," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (March 10, 1896), 16. See also the extensive quotations from A. G. Daniells, A. T. Jones, E. J. Waggoner and W. W. Prescott in Larson, *The Word Made Flesh*, 53–110.

²⁵ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (7 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1957), 5:1131.

²⁶ Claude Webster, *Crosscurrents in Adventist Christology* (American University Studies Series VII: Theology and Religion 6; New York: Peter Lang, 1984), 115–56.

²⁷ Contra Larson, *The Word Made Flesh*, 53–110, who subsumes the period preceding 1896 within a supposed "age of clarity" for the sinful conception of Christ's nature.