

Questions on Doctrine and “Questions About Christ”

Richard Rice

“Show me your christology,” said Karl Barth, “and I will tell you what you are.” No point of doctrine is more central to Christian faith than its understanding of Jesus Christ. As every student of theology knows, the most important development in the first four hundred years of Christian history was the achievement of “christological orthodoxy.” The formulas that emerged from Nicea and Chalcedon have served as a litmus test ever since. To be truly “Christian” is almost universally taken to mean that one affirms that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate, one person with two natures, divine as well as human.

It is no wonder, then, that an early section of *Questions on Doctrine* is devoted to “Questions About Christ.” For only if the Adventist position on Christ comported with the church’s time-honored christological expressions could Adventists be considered fellow Christians by the larger Christian world, whatever their other doctrinal positions may be.

The christology of *Questions on Doctrine* clearly fits the standard of Christian orthodoxy. Christ is identified as the second person of the heavenly trinity, “comprised of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” He is “one with the Eternal Father—one in nature, equal in power and authority, God in the highest sense, eternal and self-existence, with life original, unborrowed, underived.” He “existed from all eternity, distinct from, but united with, the Father, possessing the same glory, and all the divine attributes.”¹

This is quite a statement, considering the fact that it took many years for Seventh-day Adventists to embrace the Trinity. Some early Adventist leaders directly opposed the idea. For Joseph Bates it was unscriptural, for James White it was an “absurdity,” and for M. E. Cornell it was a fruit of the great apostasy that also included Sunday keeping and the immortality of the soul.² In fact, according to one Seventh-day Adventist historian, early Adventists were “about as uniform in opposing trinitarianism as they were in advocating belief in the Second Coming.”³

Adventist thinkers today clearly support the idea. They use explicitly trinitarian language to talk about God and they interpret the concept of Trinity with care and subtlety.⁴

¹ *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Review and Herald, 1957), 36.

² George R. Knight, “Adventists and Change,” *Ministry* (Oct. 1993): 11. Knight cites Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates* (Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Assn. 1868), 20-5; James White, “The Faith of Jesus,” *Review and Herald* (Aug. 5, 1852): 52; M. E. Cornell, *Facts for the Times* (Battle Creek, MI: Cornell 1858), 76. Knight also mentions two scholarly examinations of early Adventist anti-trinitarianism by Adventist graduate students: Erwin R. Gane, “The Arian or Anti-Trinitarian Views Presented in Seventh-day Adventist Literature and the Ellen G. White Answer” (MA thesis, Andrews University 1963), and Russell Holt, “The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance” (term paper, Andrews University 1969).

³ Mervyn C. Maxwell, “Sanctuary and Atonement in SDA Theology: An Historical Survey,” *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Theological Studies*, ed. Arnold V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshner, (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1981) 530; qtd. Bull and Lockart 56.

⁴ In a 1993 article Raoul Dederen defends the doctrine of the Trinity as biblically based, even though the word itself is not found in Scripture. He rejects all tritheistic or modalistic conceptions of God and urges us to respect the essential mystery of God’s triune reality (“The Mystery of the Trinity: God as Father, Son,

A few years ago, a trio of Andrews University scholars presented a strong case for the Trinity, arguing that the doctrine is biblically sound and asserting that it “forms the essential basis for the very heart of what is unique to Christianity,” namely, “the greatest of all biblical notions—God is love.”^{5, 6}

Chronologically, the development of a high christology among Seventh-day Adventists is closely connected to the emphasis on righteousness by faith that emerged in the important General Conference session of 1888, notably due to the work of A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, and in the writings of Ellen White during the decade that followed, which focused largely on the life and work of Jesus.⁷ When we realize that our salvation depends entirely on what Christ does for us and on nothing we do, it is natural for us to emphasize the how different Christ is from us, how far above us he is, how much greater he is than we are. But while they insisted that we are saved by Christ and not by anything we do, at least one of the famous proponents of righteousness by faith held views of Christ that were not fully orthodox.

and Holy Spirit” *Adventist Review* [Aug. 26, 1993]: 8-11). The widely circulated commentary on the church’s 1980 Statement of Fundamental Beliefs is equally explicit in affirming the Trinity and it, too, explores the meaning of the idea, albeit briefly. The Godhead comprises a relationship of love that comes to expression in the work of salvation, and most clearly at the cross of Christ. The Trinitarian differentiations within God correspond to the various saving activities of God (P. Gerard Damsteege et al., *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Twenty-Seven Fundamental Doctrines* [Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988], 17-25).

⁵ Woodrow W. Whidden, Jerry A. Moon, and John Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding Gods’ Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Review and Herald: 2002), 279. “The essential nature of Their divine unity is one of dynamic creative outflowing and self-sacrificing love” (278).

⁶ When and how did these transformation take place? I’m not sure we can tell. The earliest version of the Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists (1932) describes “the Godhead, or Trinity,” as consisting of “the Eternal Father,” “the Lord Jesus Christ,” and “the Holy Spirit.” The 1980 revision of the Statement curiously omits the word *Trinity*, but clearly affirms and further develops the idea. Belief 2 asserts, “There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit a unity of three co-eternal Persons,” and Beliefs 3, 4, and 5 deal, respectively, with “God the Eternal Father,” “God the Eternal Son,” and “God the eternal Spirit.”

One of the church’s most significant liturgical sources also points to a doctrinal transition. Looking at the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* of 1985 alongside the 1949 *Church Hymnal* it replaced, we surmise that there were reservations among Adventists about the concept of the Trinity in the late ’40s but that these reservations were largely overcome within the next three decades. The 1949 publication altered a number of familiar Christian hymns in order to remove their Trinitarian references. The 1985 publication restored the Trinitarian references to these hymns. Thus, the closing line of “Holy, Holy, Holy” in the 1949 hymnal—“God over all who rules eternity”—becomes in the 1985 hymnal “God in three persons, blessed Trinity!” The 1949 version of “Come Thou, Almighty King” deletes a stanza that begins with the words “To Thee, great One in Three, Eternal praises be.” The 1985 version restores that stanza. The 1985 publication also adds no fewer than ten new hymns containing straightforward Trinitarian language. Consequently, we can now sing the following lines: “Praise the Father, praise the Son, and praise the Spirit, three in One” (in hymn 2); “Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, three we name You” (in hymn 30); “The Trinity whom we adore, forever and forever more” (in hymn 148).

⁷ During the 1890’s, which she spent in Australia, Ellen White wrote three books on the life of Christ: *The Desire of Ages*, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, and *Christ’s Object Lessons*. Woodrow W. Whidden II, however, argues that the basic elements in Ellen White’s christology were in place before 1888: “There is simply no marked cause/effect relationship between her christological expressions after 1888 and the remarkable developments that took place in her teachings on salvation” (*Ellen White on the Humanity of Christ* [Review and Herald, 1997], 57).

In *Christ and His Righteousness*, E. J. Waggoner clearly affirms Christ's divinity, insisting that he was not a created being. "Now if He created everything that was ever created, and existed before all created things, it is evident that He Himself is not among created things. He is above all creation, and not a part of it. The Scriptures declare that Christ is 'the only begotten Son of God.' He is begotten, not created."⁸

Although he holds that Christ was not a created being, Waggoner also asserts that there was a time when Christ began. "It is not given to men to know when or how the Son was begotten; but we know that He was the Divine Word, not simply before He came to this earth to die, but even before the world was created We know that Christ 'proceeded forth and came from God' (John 8:42), but it was so far back in the ages of eternity as to be far beyond the grasp of the mind of man."⁹ "There was a time when Christ proceeded forth and came from God, from the bosom of the Faith (John 8:42); 2:18), but that time was so far back in the days of eternity that to finite comprehension it is practically without beginning."¹⁰

In time, of course, Adventist christology reached orthodox proportions on this issue, too, as the statements in *Questions on Doctrine* indicate. If indeed Christ is one with God, Adventists realized, then there never was a time when Christ was not. The Son is coeternal with the Father.

Waggoner's comments on another aspect of Christ's nature broach issues which have never been uniformly resolved. These concern the condition of the human nature that Christ assumed. Says Waggoner, "Christ took upon Himself the flesh, not of a sinless being, but of sinful man, that is, . . . the flesh which He assumed had all the weaknesses and sinful tendencies to which fallen human nature is subject." He took upon himself "sinful nature." The logic seems clear: "[I]f Christ took upon Himself the likeness of man, in order that He might redeem man, it must have been sinful man that he was made like, for it is sinful man that He came to redeem."¹¹

While an orthodox christology emerged with the developing doctrine of righteousness by faith, an important question remained. What was the condition of Christ's human nature? Was his humanity affected or unaffected by the fall? Or, to use the language that some Adventists appropriate from Calvinist theology, did the Son of God assume humanity in its pre- or post-lapsarian condition?

The debate on this issue among Adventists has been vigorous, to say the least. In fact, it is arguable that no theological question has generated sharper differences of opinion or more sustained disagreement. Again, all Adventists agree that Christ was genuinely human, that he was tempted, that he could have sinned, and that he never yielded to temptation. Adventists also generally agree that the humanity Christ assumed in the incarnation was affected by sin. The question that remains concerns the precise condition of his humanity? Was Jesus born with an inclination to sin, or not?

It is clear where the authors of *Questions on Doctrines* stood on this question. The ten-page section of Question 6 entitled "Miraculous Union of the Divine and the Human," quotes the following statement of Ellen White no fewer than five times: "We

⁸ E. J. Waggoner, *Christ and His Righteousness* (Pacific Press, 1890), 21.

⁹ Waggoner, 9.

¹⁰ Waggoner, 21-22.

¹¹ Waggoner, 27-28.

should have no misgivings in regard to the perfect sinlessness of the human nature of Christ.” And there are two section headings in Appendix B, “Christ’s Nature During the Incarnation,” that further emphasize the authors’ position on the issue: “III. Took Sinless Human Nature,” and “VII. Perfect Sinlessness of Christ’s Human Nature.”

It is ironic that a book intended to summarize Adventist beliefs for those outside the church should prove to be the source of such intense debate among those inside. But instead of providing the Christian world the doctrinal of Seventh-day Adventists, *Questions on Doctrine* proved to be the stimulus for vigorous, and often heated, disagreement. The book exposed serious rifts among Adventists on a range of important theological questions. And nowhere was the ensuing controversy sharper than over its description of Christ’s human nature.

No aspect of Christian faith stands alone. Every important belief is connected to other important beliefs, and major differences involving the single most important article of faith, the church’s concept of Christ, will reverberate through the entire range of Christian doctrine. Virtually all Adventists agree that Christ is both our substitute and our example. However, those who emphasize his substitutionary work generally underscore the differences between Christ and other human beings, while those who emphasize Christ’s role as our example tend to emphasize the similarities.

We see this in a 1990 *Adventist Review* series entitled “Model or Substitute?” Norman Gulley takes the position that Christ’s sinless humanity contributed to both roles. “Clearly, Jesus did not have a sinful nature,” Gulley asserts. “He had no sinful passions or any taint of sin.” He was “spotlessly sinless.” Nevertheless, “He, as our example, experience[d] an equivalency in intensity while remaining a sinless human.” In fact, his sinlessness actually intensified his suffering and “contributed to His authentic example.”¹²

Those who emphasize Christ’s role as our example often take a different view of his humanity. They hold that Christ had to deal with the same evil tendencies that we are all familiar with. Although he never yielded to temptation, he like us was naturally averse to doing God’s will. And because Christ began where we do, so to speak, we have the assurance that the victory he attained can be ours as well. We too can overcome hereditary tendencies to evil.

One who argues along these lines is Dennis Priebe. In a reply to Gulley’s articles, Priebe takes issue with the notion that Jesus had a sinless human nature. This idea violates the true humanity of Jesus, he insists, and it contradicts a number of Ellen White statements indicating that Jesus experienced the effects of heredity. The concept that Christ adopted sinful human nature is basic to Priebe’s central concern, which is that “fallen men and women can perfectly obey the law.” Jesus’ sinless life demonstrates that one does not need a perfectly sinless nature in order to perfectly obey the law. Christ can be an ideal example for us because he starts more or less where we do, with inherited tendencies to sin. And because he perfectly kept the law in spite of these tendencies, we know that we can do the same. “Even though we must live constantly within the restrictions of a fallen nature, we may be free from even a taint of corruption.”¹³

¹² *Adventist Review*, February 1, 1990, 21-22.

¹³ *Our Firm Foundation*, September 1990, 20.

Twenty years after *Questions on Doctrine*, another publication appeared which further stimulated discussions of these issues: a series of Adult Sabbath School Lessons entitled, “Jesus: The Model Man.” It, too, focuses on the spiritual and moral attainments expected of God’s people.¹⁴ And it, too, makes certain claims about the humanity of Christ. No Christian denies that Christ is the perfect model for us and that we should emulate the pattern of his life in every respect. The question author Herbert Douglass poses is whether we can actually reach the level of moral excellence that Jesus’ exemplified. His provocative answer is, “Yes, we can!” As the Introduction states, “There is nothing that God asks of men and women for which He has not already provided a living demonstration in Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ Accordingly, “when God asks men and women to obey Him and to live above sinning, He is not asking the impossible or merely tantalizing them. Jesus proved what a man or a woman can do. Jesus not only gave mankind ‘an example of obedience’; He also settled the question once and for all that ‘it is possible for us also to obey the law of God.’”¹⁶ And he could do this because “Jesus entered the human family, taking the same nature as all other ‘descendants of Abraham.’”¹⁷

Behind Douglass’ thesis lies a pressing eschatological concern—the delay of the Advent. According to Mark 4:29, the harvest comes when the grain is ripe. And this “harvest principle,” to use Douglass’ expression, explains why Christ has not yet come. Christ cannot come until God’s purposes for this world have been fulfilled, and among them is “the reproduction of Christ’s character,” the reproduction of “the very image of God,” in God’s people in the last days. According to Douglass, Christ is waiting for his people to reach the point where they live “above sinning” before he can return to this earth, because only then will a central issue of the great controversy be settled, namely, whether or not God is truly fair in what he asks of us. When there is a significant group of people who perfectly keep the law that matter is settled. Accordingly, Douglass concludes, “The plan of salvation, as well as the time for the second advent, depends upon the quality of glory that Christians reflect.”¹⁸

The concerns of Gulley, Priebe and Douglass show how closely connected Adventist christology is to other doctrinal issues. Behind the question of Christ’s humanity lies a pressing question about the experience of salvation. And behind this soteriological concern there frequently lies a further eschatological question that has long perplexed Adventists. It is not hard to see why the relatively straightforward statements about Christ’s humanity in *Questions on Doctrine* turned out to be so controversial.

From time to time church leaders have attempted to relieve the tension surrounding these issues by emphasizing points of agreement. One such statement appeared in the May 27, 1976 issue of the *Review & Herald*. The New Testament asserts both that Christ came “in the likeness of sinful flesh” and that God “made him to be sin who knew no

¹⁴ “Jesus The Model Man,” Adult Sabbath School Lessons/ No. 328, April-June, 1977 (Pacific Press, 1997). The quarterly lists Herbert E. Douglass as “Lesson Author.” The final product, however, is the responsibility of a committee. As the Quarterly states on page 5, “The preparation of the lessons is directed by a worldwide Sabbath School Lesson Committee, the members of which serve as consulting editors.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19. In a later publication Douglass indicates that this involved “a fallen sinful nature” (*Review and Herald*, December 23, 1971, 13).

¹⁸ “Jesus The Model Man,” 109.

sin.” But Christians do not view these passages alike. “For some they mean that Jesus did not commit sin either in word, deed, or thought; for others they mean that Jesus not only committed no sin but was without the inherited tendencies to sin common to fallen humanity.”¹⁹

As the article notes, a similar ambiguity appears in the writings of Ellen White, and the article nicely summarizes her contrasting statements. On the one hand, Ellen White states that “He [Christ] took upon Himself fallen, suffering human nature, degraded and defiled by sin,”²⁰ and that “our Saviour took humanity with all its liabilities”²¹; on the other she exulted with Biblical writers in noting that “in taking upon Himself man’s human nature in its fallen condition, Christ did not in the least participate in its sin”²²; His was the “perfect humanity.”²³ Even though He “took our nature in its deteriorated condition,”²⁴ accepting “the results of the working of the great law of heredity,”²⁵ He did not possess “the passions of our human, fallen natures”;²⁶ He took “the nature but not the sinfulness of man.”²⁷ Although “He could have sinned; He could have fallen, . . . not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity.”²⁸ “He was born without a taint of sin.”²⁹

Although this statement was designed to “help create a greater bond of unity among Adventists throughout the world,” it did not reduce the volume of discussion, in either sense of the word. A couple of years later J. R. Spangler felt compelled to respond to this provocative inquiry with a series of four extensive editorials: “Why don’t the editors of *Ministry* have more to say on the current discussion regarding the nature of Christ and righteousness by faith? Where do you stand on these issues?”

Spangler said that his views on the condition of Christ’s humanity underwent a significant change after *Questions on Doctrine* appeared. “Prior to the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* and certain articles appearing in *Ministry*,” he recounted, “I hadn’t given much thought to the precise nature of Christ. . . . I leaned heavily toward the view that Christ had tendencies and propensities toward evil just as I did. . . . However, in the fifties, as the church focused on Christ’s nature, my position changed. I now favored the idea that Christ was genuinely man, subject to temptation and failure, but with a sinless human nature totally free from any tendencies or predisposition toward evil.”³⁰

As Spangler describes it, the most important factor behind his change of views was this particular statement of Ellen White.

Be careful, exceedingly careful as to how you dwell upon the human nature of Christ. Do not set Him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin. . . . Because of [Adam’s] sin his posterity was born with inherent

¹⁹ “Christ Our Righteousness,” *Review & Herald*, May 27, 1976, 5.

²⁰ *The Youth’s Instructor*, Dec. 20, 1900.

²¹ *The Desire of Ages*, 117.

²² 1SM 256.

²³ DA 664.

²⁴ 1SM 253.

²⁵ DA 49.

²⁶ 2T 509.

²⁷ *Signs of the Times*, May 29, 1901.

²⁸ 5BC 1128.

²⁹ 7BC 925.

³⁰ *Ministry*, April, 1978, 21.

propensities of disobedience. But Jesus Christ was the only begotten Son of God. He took upon Himself human nature, and was tempted in all points as human nature is tempted. He could have sinned; He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity. He was assailed with temptations in the wilderness, as Adam was assailed with temptations in Eden.³¹

Spangler concludes, “In the light of this statement I personally have had to admit that whatever type of sinful nature Christ had (if He had such), it had no propensity, no natural inclination, tendency, or bent toward evil. Whatever Ellen White’s statements regarding the ‘sinful’ nature of Christ mean, they must be interpreted in harmony with [this] strong qualifying statement.” At the same time, he admits that this does not give us a very clear picture. “I cannot understand how a sinful nature could have no evil propensities, unless the sinful nature resulted from the effects of sin in other areas than propensities to evil,” such as “a diminished mental, physical, and moral capacity compared to that of Adam prior to his fall.”³²

Spangler puts his finger on the nub of the problem. Everyone agrees that Christ experienced the consequences of sin in some respects but not in others; the challenge is to identify the two. This is his tentative account of the general effects of sin.

The Scriptures clearly teach that man is born with a fallen, sinful nature. . . . [M]an is corrupted both by nature and afterwards by practice. Whether or not we call this depraved condition at birth original sin, the point is that from birth, a baby possesses a disposition and bent toward evil. . . . We all arrive in life with inherited sinful tendencies that make it impossible for us not to sin. This is not to say we inherited guilt, but evil tendencies and inclination. Even if we faced no temptations, we would create them and yield to them in time.³³

I believe that Spangler provides us with a helpful way to approach the question of Christ’s humanity. As he notes, one of the effects of sin is to make further sin inevitable. And even though Christ’s life of perfect obedience to God was not inevitable—he could have rebelled—it was possible, and that is not true of any of us. Why not? That is the critical question, and it has to do with freedom. Christ was evidently free in a way that we are not. Or, to put it another way, our freedom was damaged by the fall in a way that his was not. To resolve the most perplexing questions about Christ’s humanity, therefore, we need to explore the nature and content of human freedom. “The nature of Christ,” as Spangler notes, “must include a study of the nature of man.”

³¹ 5BC 1128. Ellen White’s comments on John 1:1-3. This statement comes from a letter that Ellen White wrote in 1896 to W.H.L. Baker, an Adventist minister in Tasmania at the time. It has been the source of extensive discussion and disagreement among Adventists since it was published in the mid-1950’s. Woodrow W. Whidden devotes an entire chapter to it in his book, *Ellen White on the Humanity of Christ*. He describes it as the “main cause for the appearance of the pre-Fall school of thought” among Seventh-day Adventists (59), an opinion that Spangler’s autobiographical comments in *Ministry* supports.

³² *Ministry*, April 1978, 23.

³³ *Ibid.*, 22.

With freedom, as with so many aspects of Christian faith, the reflections of Augustine have exerted an influence throughout the course of Christian history. Although Augustine asserted in an early treatise that due to sin, "man has not the free choice of will to choose what he should rightly do,"³⁴ it was years later, in response to Pelagianism, that he fully explored the consequences of sin. He believed that the Pelagians underestimated the effects of sin and promoted a view of human freedom that rendered divine grace superfluous.³⁵ Pelagius assumed that the will has the power to keep the law. God's grace provided freedom of choice at creation, but it does not function in the experience of salvation.

In reaction, Augustine insisted that sin renders the human will, though free to will, powerless to do what it wills.³⁶ We are responsible, he concluded, for the evil we both choose and do, but God is responsible for whatever good we choose and do.³⁷ God "begins his influence by working in us that we may have the will, and completes it by working with us when we have the will."³⁸ In the final analysis, therefore, God deserves credit for human faith. God's grace is responsible for the initial exercise of faith,³⁹ and divine grace sustains faith to the end.⁴⁰

The Protestant Reformers reasserted Augustine's views on the effects of sin on our freedom and the priority of divine grace in our salvation. Martin Luther emphatically rejected the notion of "a will that can and does do God-ward whatever it pleases."⁴¹ His reasons for denying free will include divine omnipotence and foreknowledge.⁴² But his most important reasons are soteriological. Free will is incompatible with justification by grace, or "righteousness without the law."⁴³ "The supreme concern of free will," Luther asserts, "is to exercise itself in moral righteousness,"⁴⁴ to attempt to gain favor with God. To avoid legalism, therefore, it is necessary to "deny free will altogether and ascribe everything to God."⁴⁵

Free will also detracts from the assurance of salvation. Luther wants nothing that enables him to strive for salvation, for then he could never be sure he had done enough to satisfy God. He is assured of salvation precisely because "God has put salvation out of the control of my own will and put it under the control of His."⁴⁶

Luther illustrates the ineffectiveness of the will by comparing it to a beast of burden. "If God rides it, it wills and goes whence God wills If Satan rides, it wills and goes

³⁴ In the anti-Manichaean treatise, "On Free Choice of the Will."

³⁵ "On Free Choice of the Will"; trans. Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964-), , 152 ("Retractions").

³⁶ Paul Lehman, "The Anti-Pelagian Writings," in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Roy W. Battenhouse (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), , 222.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

³⁸ "On Grace, and Free Will," 33.

³⁹ See the treatise on predestination.

⁴⁰ See the treatise on perseverance.

⁴¹ Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," in *Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will*, trans. and ed. Ernst F. Winter (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. Inc., 1961), , 119.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

where Satan wills.”⁴⁷ But the will itself chooses neither its course of action nor its rider. When God is not present to work in us, everything we do is necessarily evil. We are not compelled to do evil; we do it spontaneously and willingly, and this craving to do evil is some thing we cannot change.⁴⁸

In the *Institutes* John Calvin defines original sin as "a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul."⁴⁹ The Fall had a drastic effect on human freedom. Since "the Lord entrusted to Adam those gifts which he willed to be conferred on human nature," Adam lost the gifts "not only for himself but for us all."⁵⁰ The "infection," or "contagion," of his sin involves his entire posterity. Moreover, the effects of the Fall are not (humanly) reversible. At creation man received the capacity to obtain life or death,⁵¹ and "while he still remained upright ... he could incline to either side."⁵² But when Adam "willingly bound himself over to the devil's tyranny,"⁵³ the option of refraining from sin was no longer available, and his continual choice of sin was inevitable. The will remains, but "with the most eager inclination disposed and hastening to sin."⁵⁴ Consequently, "Man sins of necessity, but without compulsion."⁵⁵ We still choose, but we can only choose to sin.

Calvin's central concern, as was Luther's, is the claim that salvation is from first to last a matter of divine grace, to which human activity, even the slightest exercise of the will, contributes exactly nothing. "Not a whit remains to man to glory in, for the whole of salvation comes from God."⁵⁶ "When we, who are by nature inclined to evil with our whole heart, begin to will good, we do so out of mere grace."⁵⁷

Conversion is a transformation of the will. On the one hand, our will is "effaced,"⁵⁸ or "extinguished,"⁵⁹ in the sense that the evil will is removed. On the other, the will is "created anew," an evil will changed to a good one,⁶⁰ entirely through God's activity. "Everything good in the will is the work of grace alone."⁶¹ This rules out the notion that God moves the will, and we choose to obey or resist the motion.⁶² God *both* wills and works in us. He "directs, bends, and governs our heart and reigns in it as in his own possession."⁶³

The Reformers' insistence on the priority of grace excluded human freedom, and peo-

⁴⁷ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster, 1960), 251.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 249.

⁵¹ Ibid., 338.

⁵² Ibid., 303.

⁵³ Ibid., 317.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 294.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 298-299

⁵⁷ Ibid., 300

⁵⁸ Ibid., 297

⁵⁹ Ibid., 299

⁶⁰ Ibid., 297; cf. 299, 235.

⁶¹ Ibid., 298

⁶² Ibid., 303; cf. 298, 304

⁶³ Ibid., 303

ple objected this facet of their thought from the beginning. Their own writings contain replies to their contemporary critics, and not all associated with the Reformation accepted their formulations.⁶⁴ But the most influential reaction to their denial of free will bears the name of the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius. According to Arminian thought, human beings are free: they have the ability to prefer good to evil; sin represents an act of the will, rather than an inherited condition of moral depravity; and the will participates in the experience of salvation: it cooperates with the Holy Spirit in conversion.⁶⁵

Arminius believed that humans experience the consequences, but not the guilt, of Adam's sin. The gift of the Holy Spirit counteracts the effect of the inherited depravity and makes obedience possible, but the Spirit is effective only if the human will cooperates.⁶⁶ Unless the will is free, Arminians argued, we are not responsible for our behavior. We have no coherent concept of sin, and the commands, reproofs, and promises of Scripture make no sense, since they all presuppose freedom of the will.

With the Arminian rejection of divine determinism, and the Calvinist rejection of free will,⁶⁷ a debate was joined that continues among Protestants to this day, particularly in America. Human freedom itself was not a topic that Adventist writers discussed at length during the early decades of the church's development, but a generally "Arminian" notion of freedom appears in their accounts of sin and its consequences. Early Adventists typically identified the effect of Adam's sin as mortality, rather than depravity. And, like Nathaniel Taylor, they applied sin to specific acts, rather than a pervasive human condition. The prevalent view was that a human being was created in a "state of probation," "to test his loyalty to his Maker."⁶⁸ "He had no character," for "the formation of character is man's work, not God's."⁶⁹ And he had "no confirmed mortality or immortality, but was a candidate for either."⁷⁰

Our first parents sinned by disobeying the law God had given them. And the consequences of this "original sin," as it was sometimes called, pass into the experience of every descendent.⁷¹ For Uriah Smith and Albert Stone, the primary effect of sin is death. "Death ... is a penalty inflicted on the whole race, on account of the sin of the first pair."⁷² Because of sin, Adam became subject to death possessed of a mortal, dying nature." And

⁶⁴ Melancthon, for example, rejected the idea of predestination and gave the will a role to play in the experience of salvation. Bengt Haegglund, *History of Theology*; trans. Gene J. Lund, (Concordia, 1968), 250.

⁶⁵ Roger Nicole, "Arminianism," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison: Pickering & Inglis Ltd, 1960), 65.

⁶⁶ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: . A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Judson Press, 1907) , 601.

⁶⁷ The Calvinistic rejection of Arminianism took shape at the Synod of Dort in the famous five points, known by the acrostic "TULIP": total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.

⁶⁸ Uriah Smith "The Death of Adam," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 40, No. 22 (Nov. 12, 1872)

⁶⁹ Albert Stone, "The Wages of Sin," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 31, NO.4 (Jan. 7, 1868)

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ According to Woodrow Whidden, Ellen White used the expression "original sin" only once (*Ellen White on the Humanity of Christ*, 20; *Review and Herald*, April 16, 1901; cf. 5T 645). It is clear that she here refers to the first sin committed, i.e. "the original sin," not to a condition that affects human beings as a result of the fall.

⁷² Ibid., cf. Uriah Smith, "The Penalty of Adam's Sin," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 65, No. 27 (July 3, 1888).

"he could bequeath to his posterity no higher nature than he possessed," "a mortal condition, a dying state, whose only end was death."⁷³ "Hence the unborn millions of the race were involved with him in the effects of that penalty, and all became subject to death." So the death that terminates our present life results, "not from our own sins, but from the original transgression of Adam."⁷⁴

The effect of Christ's work is twofold. It gives us another probation, and it provides forgiveness when we sin. As a result, our eternal destiny is now decided not by the action of another, but by our own obedience or disobedience. And each of us is "answerable for his course of life and the use he makes of the privileges within his reach."⁷⁵

Because their primary objective was an understanding of death, early Adventists did not explore at length the nature of sin and its consequences for human freedom. And their references to these topics fail to provide us with a clear conceptual scheme. For the most part, "sin" is transgression of the law, and death is its "punishment," or "penalty."

When early Adventists did describe our present moral condition, their words often suggest that our situation is similar to Adam's before the fall. We are on probation now, as he was then. And our eternal destiny will be determined by our own decisions, not by anyone else's. At times, their words even suggest that a sinless life is possible. Smith speaks of "personally sinless beings from Adam to Moses,"⁷⁶ and of "those who are found righteous either because they have never violated the law, or because they have secured through Christ forgiveness for all their transgressions."⁷⁷

On the other hand, there are statements indicating that the situation after Adam's transgression was much more serious. Smith, for example, described human beings as "having inherited from Adam a fallen nature."⁷⁸ And J. N. Andrews identified sin as more than acts of transgression. These make sin visible, "but it exists in the motives, purposes, and desires, of the heart," "the great fountain of evil." Sin, wrote Andrews, "is that all-pervading moral darkness and evil with which our world is enshrouded as with the pall of night." It is, like leprosy, a predominantly internal, highly infectious, and humanly incurable disease of universal prevalence, "communicating itself to all who come in contact with it."⁷⁹

To summarize, the view of human freedom that emerges from these early *Review and Herald* articles seems clearly Arminian, in that personal choice determines human destiny. Occasionally, it borders on Pelagianism with the notion of a second probation and the intimation that a sinless life is possible. On the other hand, there are references to the pervasive effects of sin, including a fallen nature, and the need for divine aid in counteracting these effects. On the whole, however, early Adventists give us no clear account of human freedom. Its reality and importance are assumed, but it does not receive much explicit attention.

⁷³ Uriah Smith, "Does Rom. 5:18,19 Teach Universalism?" *Review and Herald*, Vol. 41, No. 20 (Apr. 29, 1873); "The Penalty of Adam's Sin," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 65, No. 27 (July 3, 1888).

⁷⁴ Smith, "Rom. 5:18, 19."

⁷⁵ Smith, "Rom. 5:18, 19."

⁷⁶ Smith, "The death of Adam"

⁷⁷ Smith, "Rom. 5:18, 19."

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ J. N. Andrews, "Death, Sin, and the Law," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 33, No. 9 (Feb. 23, 1869).

Freedom plays an important role in Ellen G. White's theology. She does not address this topic at length in any one work, but she has say a great deal about the will. To begin with, the will is the central organ of personal existence. It is "the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or choice" (Ed 289; cf. SC 47). It is the "spring of all our actions" (5T 515).⁸⁰ The original purpose of freedom was to enable human beings to enjoy a personal relationship with God and to provide them an opportunity for character development. As she states in her account of creation, "God made [our first parents] free moral agents, ... with full liberty to yield or to withhold obedience.... Without freedom of choice, [Adam's] obedience would not have been voluntary, but forced. There could have been no development of character" (PP 48-49).

Sin had disastrous effects on the will. Fallen human beings are no longer free to make a positive response to God. Although we can still make choices in other areas of life, we are incapable of altering our basic spiritual condition. "It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken.... Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless" (SC 18).⁸¹ "This will, that forms so important a factor in the character of man, was at the Fall given into the control of Satan; and he has ever since been working in man to will and to do his own pleasure" (5T 515).

The effect of salvation is to restore to human beings the opportunity to make a positive response to God. "The infinite sacrifice of God in giving Jesus enables Him to say.... , 'Yield yourself up to Me; give Me that will; take it from the control of Satan, and I will take possession of it'" (ST 515). Although salvation makes it possible for us to make an initial response to God, it does not restore all our original faculties, not to begin with at least. For even though are free to choose the right, we do not have freedom to *do* the right. Once we make that choice, however, God works within to transform our lives. This is why Ellen White says, "Everything depends on the right action of the will" (SC 47). It is the one and only thing we can do. We can be "willing to be made willing" (MB 14?). "You cannot control you impulses, your emotions, as you may desire; but you can control your will, and you can make an entire change in your life" (5T 514)

Ellen White is frankly Arminian in her insistence that God never forces a person to respond to him. Salvation restores our freedom to choose, but the actual choice a person makes is his or her own. Everyone is therefore responsible for his or her own eternal destiny (PP 207). God does not assign people to be saved or lost. He cannot save people against their will (4T 32).

Although she variously speaks of God and Satan "controlling a person's will" (5T 515), Ellen White also indicates that there is a drastic difference in the way these two masters operate. Whereas Satan's control restricts, indeed eliminates, personal freedom, God's control restores, preserves, and enhances it. "In the change that takes place when the soul surrenders to Christ, there is the highest sense of freedom" (DA 466). And within the Christian life a person's will unites with God's in such a way that she fulfills her own

⁸⁰ This is why no one should try to control another person's will, like that of a student of a child (Ed 288-89), or surrender one's own will to the control of another person (MH 242).

⁸¹ Cf. "Not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right, a desire for goodness, exists in every heart. But against these principles there is struggling an antagonistic power. The result of the eating of the tree of knowledgge of good and evil is manifest in every man's experience. There is in his nature a force which, unaided, he cannot resist" (Ed 29).

desires by doing what God commands: "If we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses. The will, refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service" (DA 668).

Although we do not find in denominational writings an extensive account of freedom or a developed theology of the will, we can say that Adventist theology is characteristically Arminian. Adventist writers uniformly affirm the reality and the importance of human freedom, and the will as the agent of decision. It is also clear that the fall had a drastic effect on the will, leaving human beings in a situation where they are set against God by nature.

Following Spangler's suggestion, we have pursued our interest in Christ's humanity by exploring the effects of the fall, particularly its effects on human freedom. The resulting inquiry leads us to an important conclusion. If the purpose of salvation is to restore something lost in the fall, and the fall left us powerless to choose good, then Christ must have had a freedom that we don't have. It must have been within his power to obey or disobey. Were his will set against God as is the will of every other human being, he would have sinned just as we all do: he could not have avoided it. In order to save us, therefore, Christ cannot begin where we begin. We must exempt Christ from the moral or volitional effects of the fall.

Those who insist that Christ provides us a perfect example have an important point, of course. He overcame temptation by trusting in divine power—the same resource available to us. But unless his humanity is drastically different from ours in its basic orientation to God, he would inevitably have sinned, just as the rest of us do. And in that case, he could not have been the savior: he would himself have needed a savior.

This conclusion corroborates the view of Christ's humanity presented in rather cryptic form in *Questions on Doctrine*. As we have seen, the christological affirmations there did not settle questions about the condition of Christ's humanity—quite the opposite, in fact. But they uphold the divinity of Christ in a fully orthodox way and they describe the humanity of Christ in a way that preserves his unique salvific status.

Richard Rice
Loma Linda University