

DO CHRISTIANS SIN?

A Study On the Two Natures of Man

by David E. Moss

It is sad but true. As redeemed, justified, and forgiven as a Christian may be, he still sins. Of course, not everyone agrees. There are some who believe in the "sinless perfection" of the believer.

Some believe sinlessness is acquired at the very moment of salvation. From that point forward, they acknowledge some "mistakes" along the way, but they definitely do not acknowledge any sin.

Others believe that sinlessness is acquired some time during their Christian life on earth, after which the Christian never does sin again. This was the view of John Wesley who is the father of the Holiness movement.

His theory is that in the normal Christian the principle of holiness, beginning with the new birth, gradually expands and strengthens as the believer grows in grace and in the knowledge of the truth, till, by a final, all-surrendering act of faith in Christ, it reaches an instantaneous completion through the act of the Holy Spirit, the sanctifier.... Thus sanctification is gradual but entire sanctification is instantaneous.... On March 6, 1760, Wesley entered in his Journal the following testimony of one Elizabeth Longmore: "I felt my soul was all love. I was so stayed on God as I never felt before, and knew that I loved Him with all my heart.... And the witness that God had saved me from all my sins grew clearer every hour.... I have never since found my heart wander from God." Now this is what I always did, and do now, mean by perfection. And this I believe many have attained, on the same evidence that I believe many are justified.

- International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Both of these views are incompatible with the Bible's teaching on the two natures that coexist in the Believer's life. The sin nature of the old man and the "divine" nature of the new man are clearly part of the believer until the time of the rapture.

The Two Natures

The Bible uses the terms "old man" and "new man" to refer to the two natures of the Christian.

The Old Man

God did not intend for man to sin. He created us in a state of innocence. We use the term "innocence" because man was completely without the knowledge of sin (Genesis 3:5) and had not yet committed any sin. He was, however, capable of sin. Upon being tempted with an alternative, Adam chose to reject total faith in the Word of God and by an act of his will brought sin into the world.

By Adam's choice, man acquired a sin nature (Romans 5:12). The entire human race became "by nature, the children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3) determined to indulge in the lusts of the flesh and to fulfill the desires of the flesh and the mind which were contrary to the Word of God.

The "old man" is the term the Bible uses to describe the sin nature. It was the old man that needed to be crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6) and the characteristics of the old man that need to be replaced with the characteristics of the new man in the life of the believer (Ephesians 4:22-24, Colossians 3:9-10).

The unfortunate state of being of a "natural" man is eternal condemnation. This means that he is totally separated from God for eternity (John 3:18-20) because of his sin.

The New Man

As God did not want to leave man in this condition, He devised a plan whereby, the sin nature of man and man's consequent doom could be supplanted with a new nature that would restore him to divine fellowship. Through the redemptive plan of the Gospel, this plan would be affected.

Faith in Christ and in his righteous work would grant to man all things pertaining to life and godliness. The Scriptures describe this as "partaking in the divine nature" (II Peter 1:1-3). This is not to say that we become divine, or "god", but we acquire a nature that makes it possible for us to participate or "fellowship" with God in the things of his divine nature.

This new nature is the new man. It is described as being "made the righteousness of God in [Christ]" (II Corinthians 5:21).

Coexistence of the Two Natures

A question arises at this point: When a person is saved by Faith in Christ through the Grace of God, and in that moment of salvation acquires the new nature which is the righteousness of God, what happens to the old nature which made us the children of wrath? Does the Christian now have two natures or is the old nature completely eliminated?

Some isolated statements of Scripture make it sound like the old man is gone. I John 3:9 says, "Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin...and he cannot sin, because he is born of God." However, if this verse is teaching the sinless perfection of the believer, then the Bible contradicts itself.

There are very clear statements in the Word of God that the believer retains the capacity to sin. Even in I John 2:1, God expressed His hope that Christians would not sin but acknowledged their ability to do so. The advocacy of Christ was provided to compensate for the guilt we experience as a result of sin we commit as believers.

So what does I John 3:9 mean? The middle of that verse says, "his seed remaineth in him". The seed of God is the righteousness of God that He places within the believer at the time of his salvation. This seed "remains" with the believer forever as a new nature. It is the seed of the righteousness of God that cannot sin. With this, the believer always has the capacity to overcome sin, which is something the unbeliever cannot do (vs.10).

But as surely as the seed of the righteousness of God remains in us so does the sin nature. Romans 7:14-25 speaks of the battle that rages inside of us as a result of this coexistence of two natures. My nature that fellowships with God does not want to sin (vs. 15). But sin still lies within me pushing my old man to the limits of temptation (vs. 18-20). It is when my new inward man reigns that I successfully resist sin (vs. 22). It is when the fleshly nature of the old man reigns that I fail (vs. 23).

The Departure of the Old Man

We must trust that God has His reasons for allowing the old man to continue with us. It certainly reminds us of the value of the redemption we have in Christ.

God has also promised, however, that He will not let the old man remain in us forever. Christ intends to present the Church (and thus all the individual Christians included) to Himself without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, completely holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:27). In this presentation, we will be as a chaste virgin (II Corinthians 11:2), every one of us totally complete in Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:28).

Biblical truth teaches us that the final eradication of the sin nature from believers will occur at the time of the rapture. All believers still experience physical death. Death is the result of sin (Romans 5:12). If sin were totally removed from us, then our body would be freed from the curse of death and its precipitous diseases. The bodies of believers are referred to, however, as corrupt and mortal (I Corinthians 15:53) until the last trump. The elimination of the corrupt part of our nature will occur "when" Christ appears. Corruption and mortality cannot inherit eternal life. So this part of our nature will be totally eliminated "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump" (I Corinthians 15:52) which is the rapture of the church. It is when Christ appears that we become like Him (I John 3:3). Before this moment, the battle of the two natures rages within man.

Conclusion

The fact that the old man remains in the believer is not an excuse to sin. The intention is that as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18), we will learn how to put off the things of the old man and put on the things of the new man (Ephesians 4:22-24, Colossians 3:9-10). The goal of all believers is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). As we grow closer to this goal, the leverage of the old man should diminish even though the desires of the old man remain as sinful as ever. Until the rapture and resurrection of the church, believers will struggle with the old man. But thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 15:57).