

Adventist University of the Philippines  
College of Theology

THE NATURE OF CHRIST: A BRIEF SURVEY OF  
THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST VIEWS

A paper

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RELB 414 Systematic Theology I

by

Moses Yesubi Yoseph

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## History of Nature of Christ's Interpretation

From the time of Jesus, there were several disputes of His divinity, and humanity, where Jesus' disciples understood that He was Immanuel, "God with us." (Matt. 1:23) On the other hand the Pharisees' and Sadducees believing that He was only Human (Matt 26:65). But after the ascension of Jesus, and the death of the disciples, the church slowly started to struggle to understand who Jesus is, and particularly how he is related to the father, which started bringing about new doctrines, and different interpretations concerning this matter.<sup>1</sup> The Ebonites, solved this tension by "denying the real or ontological deity of Jesus," and therefore He was born to Joseph and Mary in the same way.<sup>2</sup> He was predestined to be the Messiah, but in a very natural and human way, with no superhuman or natural gifts. On the other hand, the opposite of Ebonism was Docetism, whereas they believed that "the divine Christ did not have an actual human body; it was only an appearance, a phantasm, since if Christ died, then he was not God, and if he was God, then he did not die."<sup>3</sup>

In the Seventh Day, with the founders having been formerly members of the Christian Connection they came with the Arianism concept of Jesus' pre-incarnational origin which resulted to them claiming that during His incarnation "Christ was both human and divine and perceived as setting forth His death as a mere human sacrifice rather than a divine atonement."<sup>4</sup> However, there was a significant change after 1888, as E.J. Waggoner brought to light the "Incarnation as a dwelling of the divine Word in sinful flesh, to live as divine Word a perfect

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<sup>1</sup> Erickson, Millard J., *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985), 710.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kwabena Donkor, *The Nature of Christ: The Soteriological Question*, (Silver Spring MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005) 6.

<sup>4</sup> Reid, George W., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 199.

human life”<sup>1</sup> Alongside with A. T. Jones, who emphasized that “Christ’s nature is precisely our nature. In His human nature there is not a particle of difference between him and you.”<sup>2</sup> This view led him to write the book *The Consecrated Way*, which simply relates this ontological nature of Christ unto our soteriology. Though today there has been aggregate agreement on the sinlessness of Jesus, but on the other hand, many have had difference in opinion regarding the nature of His humanity, “whether or not He shared in the evil tendencies of the fallen human nature.”<sup>3</sup>

Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church theologians, the huge amount of strain of theology especially centering on the “Christ’s human nature,” still continues. Thou it has been going on for years, and though there are new lights shed on this area, there are still huge arguments on the nature in which Christ took. As Pastor Roy Adams places it, “The controversy in our church involving the linkage of the *nature of Christ, sin, sanctification, and perfection...* has been festering for decades now and shows no signs of dying down,”<sup>4</sup> within our church. Many of the theologians have argued the point that Jesus came and took our human nature, complete and full after the fall of Adam’s sin. Some of these few theologians include Joe Crews, former director of Amazing Facts, an Adventist radio-television evangelistic ministry; Robert J. Wieland and Donald K. Short, Ralph Larson and many others.<sup>5</sup> In this, they counter the argument that it could be possible that Christ came in the nature of the unfallen, using Ellen G. White quotes, and furthermore, Biblical analysis too, of Hebrew and scriptures of the same sort.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Adams, Roy, *The Nature of Christ; help for a church divided over perfection*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1994) 31.

<sup>3</sup> Reid, George W., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 199.

<sup>4</sup> Adams, Roy, *The Nature of Christ; help for a church divided over perfection*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

The other opposing view, is that Christ took the unfallen nature has recently been adopted by many Adventist, claiming that Christ came in the unfallen nature.<sup>1</sup> Here the claim is that Jesus could not be born of sinful flesh, just like us, as when we look at the nature of sin in itself, its not only when one commits the first act of sin, but inherent, we are born sinners. Several books have been published presenting the two opposing perspectives including *The Questions on Doctrine* (1957), M. L. Andreasen in a series of publication titled Letter to the Churches wrote against the position stated on the book Questions on Doctrines.<sup>2</sup> L. E. Froom also wrote the book *Movement of Destiny* (1971), emphasizing on the sinless of the nature of Christ, basing this on Ellen G. White comments, Southern Publishing association published *Perfection* which was the view of four Adventist Theologians talking about the effect of Christology to Soteriology, with many others.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will compare these two perspectives and issues, in the wide variety of thought and what the stand of the church is concerning this matter, and finally conclude on how the as Seventh-day Adventist church should proceed in addressing this matter.

### **The Adventist Propositions**

In June 1985, the Ministry Magazine Editor, J. R. Spangler wrote an editorial addressing the problem that is prevalent in the Adventist theology concerning the nature of Christ. He asks these questions which are also very closely related to my comparative research today,

Did our Lord in His human nature begin where all of the other children of Adam began? Did Christ take the human nature of pre- or post-Fall man? If the human race was affected by the Fall of Adam and Eve, was Christ also affected the same way or was He exempt? If Christ accepted sinless human nature, did He have an advantage over us? Did He vicariously take upon Himself fallen human nature? If He took fallen human nature, was the "fallen" element related only to the physical and not to His moral character? Is it possible to settle the issue of the nature of Christ, which the Christian church has

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Rand (Pseudonym), (Silver Spring MD: Biblical Research Institute).

<sup>2</sup> J . R. Spangler, *Ministry Magazine* ([www.ministrymagazine.org](http://www.ministrymagazine.org)) accessed October 11, 2012 <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1985/June/the-nature-of-christ>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

struggled with for two thousand years? Is it necessary for us to have a very definitive and accurate understanding of Christ's nature in order to be saved? Must Christ have our fallen nature (without ever sinning, of course) in order for Christians to live the unsullied life that He lived?<sup>1</sup>

In light of these questions being asked, the Ministry Magazine editorial commissioned two scholars to write after a careful study concerning the views on the Nature of Christ, with Pseudonym authors, which was published in the same month of 1985.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Nature of Christ, Fallen**

In the argument about the position of the “fallen nature” of Christ, the Pseudonym author has several points to highlight the fact that Jesus was born in sinful flesh but did not commit any sin. The scholar explains simply that the fact of the virgin birth (Matt. 1:16, 18-25; Luke 1:26-28; 3:23) the fact that He was born from a human mother, His identity Himself of His solidarity with the human race as “Son of Man” (Matt 8:20; 24:27) The analogy of his solidarity is further explained in (Rom. 5; Hebrews 2:11; 14; 16-18), which shows the analogy of Adam/Christ, and also “Sarx” which according to the author, provided the seat and material in which evil may operate, but at birth everyone has it, but no one held responsible, (Rom. 8:3) meant that Jesus came in the sinful flesh of man.<sup>3</sup> Asking the logical question, Rand further explores this idea “How could Jesus be sinless without being separated from the infected stream of genes and chromosomes shared by the rest of the children of Adam?”<sup>4</sup> In looking at the nature that Christ took when He came to the earth we have to look at the reason for his coming, as stated by Rand. He came to the earth to silence Satan’s misrepresentations and accusation and to fulfill the role

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<sup>1</sup> J. R. Spangler, *Ministry Magazine* (www.ministrymagazine.org) accessed October 11, 2012 <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1985/June/the-nature-of-christ>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rand.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 2.

of fallen man's substitute surety a example and this determined the way he came, or else he would not have fulfilled its purpose and o triumph over evil. He became our substitute, the pioneer man, mankind's model and achieved this through.<sup>1</sup>

E. J. Waggoner supports this view by stating that Christ was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, and not sinless being meaning that He had all weaknesses and sinful tendencies to which fallen human nature is subject (John 1:14; Rom. 8:3, 4), also shown by David's statement "was made of the seed of David *according to the flesh*." In which David had all passions of human nature as He states "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me."<sup>2</sup> In this he explains that

"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. Death could have no power over a sinless man, as Adam was in Eden; and it could not have had any power over Christ, if the Lord had not laid on Him the iniquity of us all."<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, He concludes that if He was tempted like we were, and was like us in every way possible (Hebrews 2:16-18; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal 4:4, 5; Heb. 2:18; 4:15, 16; Heb 5:2), we are not depreciating His divine character but merely exalting it, as Jesus humbled Himself and took upon Himself the same form as us, so in His weakness He could overcome, one who knew no sin, concluding that we in the same way could overcome these adversities by being completely dependent upon Him.<sup>4</sup>

M. L. Andreason a well respected Adventist professor and writer in the 1930s and 1940s concludes on this matter in relation to our salvation, that the same as Christ was here on earth, so

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Gage, *What Human Nature Did Jesus Take? Fallen*, Biblical Research Institute, (Silverspring MD: Biblical Research Institute), 8.

<sup>2</sup>E. J. Waggoner, *Christ and His Righteousness*, (Oakland, Cal.: Pacific Press Publishing Company, 1890) 26-27.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 28.

will it be in the final day, when in the final process of atonement, Christ will demonstrate that “man can do what He did, with the same help He had. This phase includes His session at the right hand of God, His high priestly ministry, and the final exhibition of His saints in their last struggle with Satan, and their glorious victory,” as part of atonement, and cleansing of the true sanctuary.<sup>1</sup> Therefore implying that in the final generation, people of God (saints) will have sinless perfected characters whilst still on the earth.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Nature of Christ, Unfallen**

On the other hand the fallen nature takes a different measure to proceed on the question concerning the nature of Christ. Rather than going from ontology to soteriology, or hamatology, this perspective looks at the nature of Christ as first hematology/soteriology to determine about the study of ontology, more or less concerning what was the nature of Christ. Looking at the Pseudonym publish of an Adventist scholar on this matter in the article, human nature of Christ, unfallen, the author argues from the point of the nature of sin, explaining that all post-fall humans partake of original sin which is defined as a broken relationship between man and God (Rom. 14:23) which leads to commission of wrongful acts (1 John 3:4)<sup>3</sup> Other claim include the use of greek *homoima or homoioo* (likeness) instead of *isos* (same) which suggests that “Jesus was only similar to other humans in having a sin-affected physical human body, but not the same

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<sup>1</sup>Woodrow W. Whidden, *Ministry Magazine*, (www.ministrymagazine.org) 2003 accessed on October 11, 2012 <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2003/August/questions-on-doctrine-then-and-now.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Benjamin Rand, “What Human Nature Did Jesus Take” *Biblical Research Institute*, accessed on October 11, 2012 [www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/.../humannaturechristunfallen.pdf](http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/.../humannaturechristunfallen.pdf)

as other human, for He alone was sinless in His spiritual relationship with God.”<sup>1</sup> This is also supported by the fact that Christ is referred to as “*monogenes*” and “*protokos*” unique and one of a kind, which implies that not only was His birth unique, but also His nature.<sup>2</sup>

Adams, agrees with this point, and explains that it is widely accepted by Adventists fully about the fact of humanity of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> But this is to describe that Jesus has the essential elements of human nature-flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14); had a human mother (Gal 4:4); Subject to ordinary laws of human development (Luke 2:52); Experienced physical deficiencies that characterize ordinary human beings e.g. he knew hunger (Matt. 4:2; 21:18), thirst (John 4:7; 19:28), fatigue (Matt. 8:24), and weariness (John 4:6). However, arguing the same point that he was unfallen, but with the weakened state. In looking at Hebrews 2:17, whereas it says that ‘Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his bretheren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest.’” Adams suggests that this can be looked contextually in other passage as not meaning everything. E.g. Abraham giving all he had to Isaac, God telling Noah to eat everything, Paul telling Timothy every creature is good for eating, Peter saying submit ourselves to the ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, they all don’t mean literally that, but simply to “in the essential way.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore in the like manner Christ “was a real *real human being*, subject to the vicissitudes, danger and limitations that threatened all of us.” But not meaning that He had also propensities to sin.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>3</sup> Adams, Roy, *The Nature of Christ; help for a church divided over perfection*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1994) 58.

<sup>4</sup> Adams, Roy, *The Nature of Christ; help for a church divided over perfection*, 64-66

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 66.



Norman Gulley also sides with this argument in explaining about Man of Sin in Romans 7.<sup>1</sup> The law of sin that is talked about in this chapter most perceives it's the unconverted man, however, Normal Gulley presents the idea that this we find a Christian struggling.<sup>2</sup> With the only way to overcome this struggle of Romans 7 is for the floundering Christian to have the full infilling of the Spirit described in Romans 8 which Jesus also was, but never the man of Romans 7.<sup>3</sup> Jesus, according to Gulley was the only one who was recorded to be born of the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18) and baptized by the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:16) which was unique in human history, and this makes Jesus unique, despite being tempted, the same way we are, as He also bore the infirmities that were caused by sin and passed on through the 4000 years degrading.

In the article "Tempted as we are" Sakae Kubo, pursues the argument of proving that Jesus was in fact tempted as we are. He proposes three different questions in pursuit to answer this claim: "It was impossible for Christ to be tempted with every temptation that comes to man, it was useless for Jesus to be tempted with every temptation that comes to every single person; it was unnecessary for Jesus to be tempted with every temptation that comes to every single person."<sup>4</sup> In this argument, Kubo explains that if Jesus had come the same way we are, which is in the fallen state, and received the same effects, "He would simply be one of us and there would be no plan of salvation."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Jesus had to come as a second Adam but not as one of the

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<sup>1</sup>Norman R. Gulley, *Christ Our Substitutue* (Washington DC: Review and herald Publishing Association, 1982) 50.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Sakae Kubo, *Ministry Magazine*, ([www.ministrymagazine.org](http://www.ministrymagazine.org)) 1961 accessed on October 11, 2012 <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1961/january/tempted-like-as-we-are>, 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3.

descendant of Adam. This he argues does not mean that he did not face the same temptations with us but even greater temptation, as it is greater for one to resist than to give in.<sup>1</sup>

### **Other Perspectives**

There has been other alternative understanding or suggestions on the incarnate nature of Christ which is different from the two suggested about, which is proposed by Thomas A. Davis another scholar within Adventism. In his proposal Davis suggests that rather than looking at the nature of Jesus as either fallen, or unfallen, we should look at it from the perspective of the “born again” and “regenerated” ones, or sanctified ones.<sup>2</sup> In this view, basically rather than claiming that Jesus was born in the fallen nature, the author, places it in the different context rather on our perspective using the text Hebrews 2:17 “made like his brethren [the born again, sanctified ones] in every respect. Therefore, applying Ellen G. White’s writing that we are also called brethren to Jesus and sanctified ones when we have accepted Him and we are born again.<sup>3</sup> He explains it clear when he says

Jesus, then, became man with a fully human nature (while also being fully God). Thus, of the flesh, He had weakness of humanity, torn by temptations as we are, with the possibility of sinning. But in that condition he had an unfallen mind, heart, and will, and was totally and continually attuned to the Father and directed by the Holy Spirit. In this way He was like the unfallen Adam. And it is at this point that, I believe, the regenerate and Jesus meet on common ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas A. Davis, *Ministry Magazine*, (www.ministrymagazine.org) 1986 accessed on October 11, 2012 <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1986/June/christs-human-nature>, 1-2, 1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

This then implies that we can meet at a common ground with Christ, that in our flesh though we have weakness of human flesh, with temptations and possibility of sinning, once regenerated and born again, and in faith Christ dwells in us, and we in Him, we can completely be attuned to the father and directed by the Holy Spirit that we will be similar also with Jesus. However, the author does not suggest whether we will attain sinless perfection, to make his argument more clear.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of the nature of Christ has a deeper connection which has been explored by nearly all the systematic theologians or scholars who look at this matter in a deep way. When you notice the views of the nature of Christ will bring along a certain view of the soteriology. As Kwabena Donkor rightly says, “an action focused *harmatology* tends to lead to a *perfectionist soteriology*,” this is hinted in most of the authors and scholars who propagate the unfallen position, as in the article Gage says, “Because Jesus did not sin, no man must sin.”<sup>1</sup> This seem to suggest and bring forth legalistic means of saving ourselves and brings less dependence and complete utter need of Christ as the atoning sacrifice and through whom we can have salvation. Likewise the soteriology of the “unfallen nature” rather than looking at Jesus as an equal whom we can likewise overcome sin, as though salvation is obtained by following the exact example of one who in every respect was like tem, but rather struggled and became victorious, it is more or less, that Jesus substitution is in higher respect than example.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Gage, *What Human Nature Did Jesus Take? Fallen*, 6

<sup>2</sup> Kwabena Donkor, *The Nature of Christ: The Soteriological Question*, (Silver Spring MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005) 20.

As noticed by the writer, it will be a close to an impossibility to try to unite these views, or correctly say which one is right. This is also recognized by the world wide church, as the church has allowed “diversity of views on this subject and encourages its study, but it rejects attempt to impose on others our personal view.”<sup>1</sup> This is because the church recognizes the fact that the debate has been ongoing for decades and near centuries with no point of resolving the diversity of views that characterize the debate.<sup>2</sup> I believe one of the problem that has caused this is the way we look at the issue, which is in different perspectives. The scholars and theologians who side with the “fallen” claim of the nature of Christ, look at it more on the missiology, and move from ontology to soteriology, whilst on the other hand, the claims of the “unfallen” perspective look at it from the context of hermeneutology, soteriology to determine the ontological nature of Christ.

Therefore, the position that the church has set out is wise, and also which we need to re-affirm also in this paper. Affirming the statements that the Bible has clearly revealed to us that Jesus is divine, human and without sin, the church then accepts that truly, “what took place inside Mary’s womb is unknown to human beings.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, understanding the depth, and the sacredness of this study, we are always to recognize that our views are “always limited and that our claims to understand be characterized by humility.” Further, we are to prioritize the fact that “The incarnation did not take place in order to stimulate theological debate among believers, but to make it possible for the Son of God to die for us and to free “those who all their lives were

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<sup>1</sup> Angel Rodriguez, “Christ Human Nature,” *Biblical Research Institute*, (www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org) 2003 accessed on October 11, 2012 <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/Biblequestions/christ's%20human%20nature.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

held in slavery by their fear of death” (Heb. 2:15, NIV).”<sup>1</sup> The focus, of this study should be on the sacrifice that God made for us, which was able to atone for our sins, and the redemption that we have got through faith in Jesus, and it is free for us to claim, by constant dependency to Christ, and the empowerment through the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

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