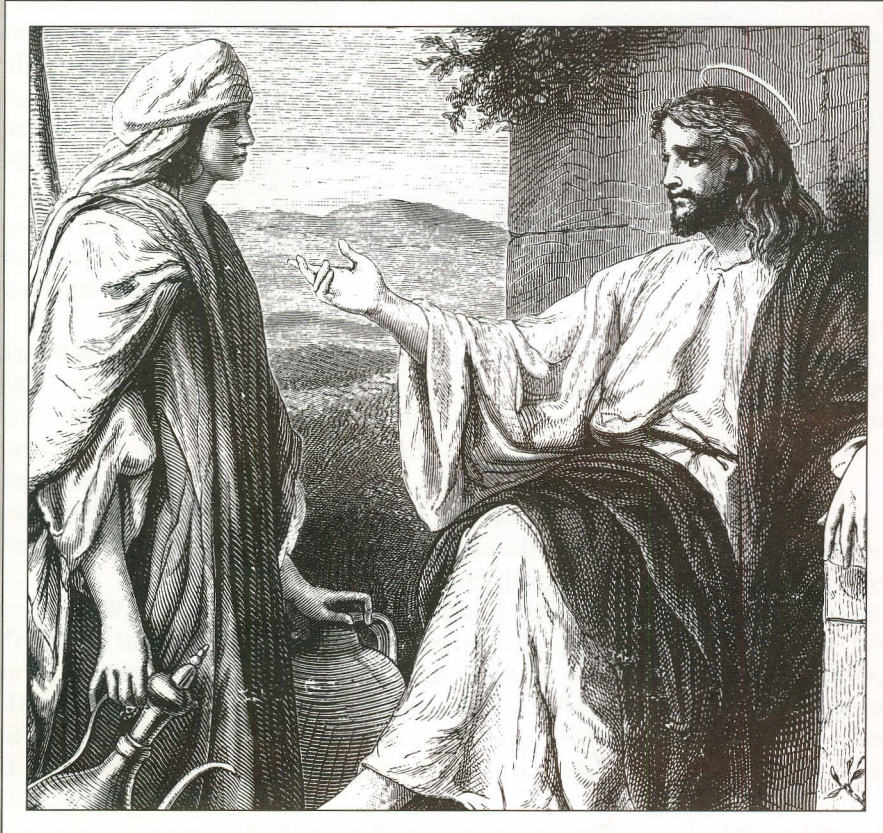


The Nature of Christ

A book review by Desmond Ford

A bold new denominational book affirms the importance of the sinless human nature of Christ. This means that Christ is first and foremost our Savior. He is our example in meekness and love, not in perfection.



The Nature of Christ: Help for a church divided over perfection,
by Roy Adams. [1994: Review and Herald Publishing Association,
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740. 143 pages, \$9.95.]

At last! After a century and a half, the Seventh-day Adventist church has published a book devoted entirely to the vital subject of the sinless nature of Christ, our Lord and Savior.

For nearly fifty years, the denomination has been rent by divisions over this issue.

The denomination's major university, Andrews University, has for nearly half a century clearly taught that our

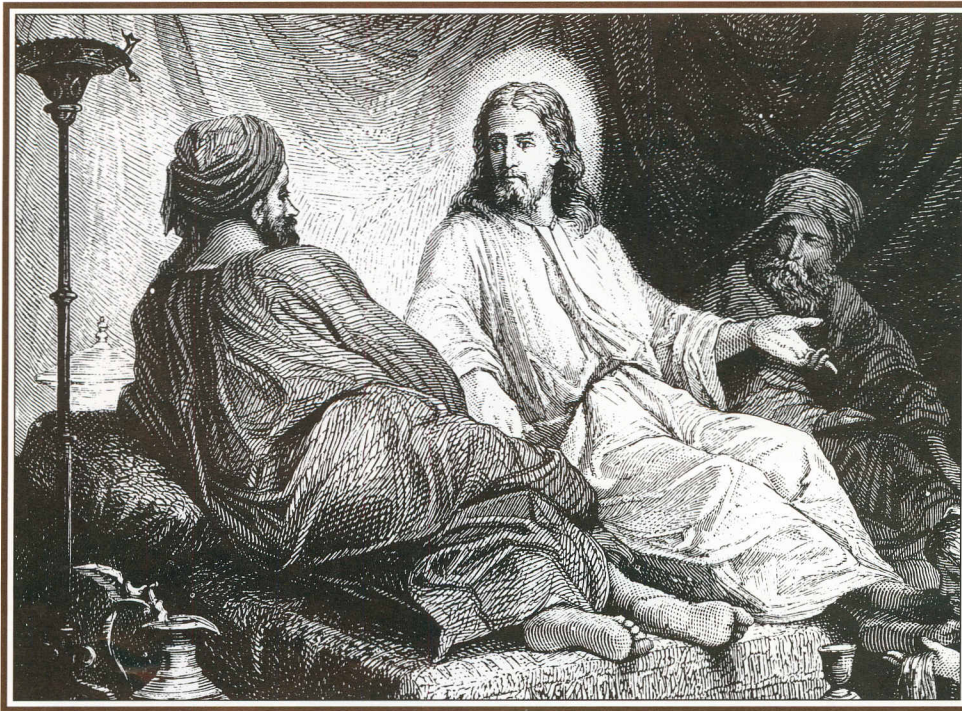
Lord's spiritual nature was like that of Adam—without spot or blemish. Still, the denomination's publishing houses have hesitated to proclaim that truth in any publication devoted wholly to the issue. Fear has restrained the publication of scholarly responses that many have longed to make.

Mistake Leads to Perfectionism

Why is this doctrinal controversy so

important? Because a misunderstanding of the nature of Christ can so easily lead to the doctrine of perfectionism.

In fact, it has done exactly that throughout Adventism for about a century. If we make the Lord Jesus Christ one altogether such as ourselves, except that he did not yield to sin, we are led to only one logical conclusion. We should be able to do as he has done.



This not only brings the heresy of perfectionism but tremendous disappointment and depression. We can only be disappointed and depressed as a result of our inevitable failure to match the Pattern.

Opposing Views in Adventism

In Adventism, A.T. Jones and M.L. Andreasen are chiefly responsible for the heresy of the sinful nature of Christ. Their view still rules in the thinking of perhaps the majority of Seventh-day Adventists (though only in a minority of its pastors in the Western world).

In all their years of teaching, Dr. Edward Heppenstall and Dr. Raoul Dederen unhesitatingly asserted in all their classes the sinless human nature of Christ.

They taught that Christ is “that holy thing” (Luke 1:35 KJV), “without spot and without blemish” (1 Peter 1:19), “without spot, and blameless” (2 Peter 3:14), “separate from sinners” (Hebrews 7:26).

They taught that Christ “knew no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21), that “in him is no sin” (1 John 3:5), that he was “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15), and came “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Romans 8:3, my emphasis). This is indeed the testimony of Scripture.

Sin Not Part of True Human Nature

It has only rarely been understood by the Adventist in the pew that sin is no part of **true** human nature. Christ was truly human. None of the rest of mankind is.

Because of the Fall, we are only shadows of human beings. We are born without the Holy Spirit. What we desperately need is to be born again.

It was not so with the One who was born in Bethlehem twenty centuries ago. We are born without the Holy Spirit. Our Lord Jesus was born full of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had no need to be born again.

We need a Savior. If Jesus had a nature such as ours, he too would have needed a redeemer. Had Jesus been a sinner such as I am, he could never have made an atonement for the sins of the world.

Sin Is What We Are as Well as Do

At the root of the sinful nature of Christ heresy lies ignorance—ignorance of the fact that the law of God demands a perfect **nature**, not just perfect **behavior**.

The Hebrew and Greek words for “sin” have not only to do with action but also with the hearts of men. The worst thing about all of us is nothing we have **done** but what we **are**.

The law requires of us, “truth in

the inner parts” (Psalm 51:6 NIV). Because we fail to see how “exceedingly broad” are the commandments of God, we remain unaware of the height and depth and length and breadth of the divine requirements. God’s divine requirements call for perfect motives, perfect feelings, perfect words, and perfect actions in every area of existence (see Psalm 119:96).

The perfect love to God and man as required by the two great commandments (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28) is beyond all of us. Furthermore, it would be too late even if we could accomplish it now. We have all continually transgressed the spirit of those commandments in years gone by. The law not only requires perfection of our behavior today, but from the moment of our first breath and our first thoughts in infancy.

“Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:16 KJV)

Christ Is First Our Savior

For these reasons, the New Testament sets forth Christ, first of all, as a **Savior**. Only after that does it set forth Christ as an **example** in meekness and love. The New Testament never sets Christ forth as an example in perfection.

When the New Testament uses the word “perfect” as in Matthew 5:48, it is referring to maturity. (Compare Matthew 5:48 with the parallel passage in Luke 6:36. See also 1 Corinthians 14:20, where the Greek word for “perfect” is translated “mature” in the RSV.)

Adams Confronts the Issue

Roy Adams has courageously named names and given examples of the error he is endeavoring to fight. He traces the historical background of the sinful human nature of Christ heresy within Adventism. He also deals with the various questions implicit in the polemic of our day.

Roy inquires as to Ellen G. White’s position on the issue. He concludes that she agreed with the New Testament picture of our Lord as immaculate.

(The term “immaculate” simply means “spotlessly clean,” or “having no stain or blemish.” It should never be confused with the doctrine of the Im-

maculate Conception. This doctrine is Roman Catholic dogma concerning the birth of Mary, Christ's mother. It is not about Christ at all.)

Roy points out that because Ellen White fought antinomianism as well as legalism, she made strong calls for loyalty to Christ. Many interpret these calls as teaching perfectionism.

Ellen White and Issue

Of course, the truth in this matter of the human nature of Christ should not be based on Ellen White but on Scripture. We are glad that Dr. Adams has not endeavored to use Ellen White as the basis for his position, though he quotes her often.

Pages 62-65 are crucial in Roy's book, as they touch upon the basic **Scriptures** concerning Christ's true humanity.

For those who draw their theology from Ellen White rather than the Bible, Adams points out that Ellen White, in her statements on Christology, often echoed one of her favorite authors, Henry Melvill.

Henry Melvill, in preaching on Christ, distinguished between "innocent infirmities" and "sinful propensities," both of which come from the Fall. Melvill taught that Adam, as he was created, had neither innocent infirmities nor sinful propensities, but that after the Fall, he had both.

In the Incarnation, Christ took the innocent infirmities, which are sinless, but not the propensities, which are sinful.

Dr. Adams might have added that theologians in Ellen White's day often used the term "sinful nature" for the deteriorated human nature (or condition), which our Lord took by inheritance. They never intended by that term "evil propensities."

While the Holy Spirit was the creator (but not Father) of Christ's human nature (Luke 1:35), he did use the elements of Mary's womb. Mary (as with all of us) suffered from the separation from the Tree of Life. This separation was brought on by Adam and Eve's rebellion when the human race was in its infancy. Thus, Christ was neither as tall nor as strong as Adam. Neither would he have had the energies and capacities of the unfallen Adam.

Yet "not for one moment was there in Him a sinful propensity."

Two Disagreements

There are two points where I would personally differ with this splendid book by Dr. Adams.

First, as with many modern theologians, Roy does not like to speak of mankind inheriting guilt from Adam.

I believe that Romans 5:12, 18-19 teaches the corporate solidarity of human guilt. This is because all humans sinned in their representative, the first Adam. Just as surely as we all sinned in our representative Adam, we all suffered in our second representative, Christ, the last Adam.

I believe the Scripture teaches clearly in Romans 5 that the sin of Adam was imputed to the whole human race, for we were in him seminally. None can rightly complain of this as unjust. As surely as all are counted in the first Adam and thereby accrue guilt, so all by the mercy of God are counted as being in the second Adam, Christ (Romans 5:18-19). We are therefore justified by his atoning death at Calvary.

As sin and guilt are imputed through the first Adam, so righteousness and acquittal (justification) are imputed through the second. The first none can avoid. The second is a matter for choice. By faith we choose Christ's justifying work on our behalf.

Second, Dr. Adams takes the popular Adventist view (found in Ellen White) that the destiny of the human race hung in the balance when Christ came to earth. There was no absolute certainty that Christ would overcome and conquer and successfully complete the Atonement. In other words, Christ could have sinned.

It is clear that Christ was absolutely free. That much is true. That means he had the ability to sin. But Christ is divine. It was impossible for him as God to choose evil. Scripture declares that God cannot lie. Similarly, God cannot do anything contrary to his nature, and Christ was God in the flesh.

The salvation of the human race did not hang in the balance when Christ came. Success was absolutely certain. Success had been predicted with all assurance—Christ's provision of sal-

vation would, indeed, eventuate on behalf of the whole human race.

Christ did not come **to seek to save** that which was lost. Christ came **to seek and save** that which was lost. And he did it. It was never in doubt for a moment.

Let me use a crude illustration. Could I murder my mother? If you mean am I stronger than she is and do I know how to do it, the answer is, "Yes."

If you mean is it possible for me to do it psychologically, the answer is, "No."

Could Christ fail? Because he was free, we are forced to answer, "Yes." Because of who Christ is we must say, "No." There was no chance, no possibility, no likelihood, no potentiality or prospect, that Christ could fail to accomplish our salvation.

Final Recommendation

I recommend Roy Adams's book wholeheartedly.

It reminds me of *Perfect in Christ* by Helmut Ott, which was published in 1987 by the same publishers. Ott's book, which I also heartily recommend, is of the same genre.

However, as mentioned at the beginning of this review, Roy Adams's *The Nature of Christ* is (as far as I know) a first in Adventist publications. It is the first official SDA book to affirm the sinless human nature of Christ, our Lord and Savior. We salute the author and the publishers. ❖