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The Two Natures of the Believer

Compiled & Revised from the Writings of Joel T. Andrus

No one has ever seen a nature. A nature cannot be felt with the hands or painted with an artist's brush. Like the wind, it is known only by the effect it produces. Consequently, it has always been a difficult concept to define with clarity. Perhaps the most appropriate synonym to use is the word "capacity." This term emphasizes potential, ability, or possibility for action. Everything that exists has its own nature or capacity, and everything acts in accordance with its nature. A stone always acts like a stone and a bird like a bird, except in cases of miraculous intervention by God such as the swimming axhead or the water turned into wine. Birth determines the nature of all living things on the earth. Life born from a horse will have the nature of a horse. And life born of man will have the nature of man. A basic difference between the nature of man and the nature of any other creature is that man has a spiritual dimension as part of his nature. He is a spiritual being. His nature finds expression through the normal components of personality—the mind (intellect), the heart (emotions) and the will (power of choice).

The Origin of the Old Sinful Nature

At the time of creation, the minds, hearts, and wills of Adam and Eve reflected perfectly the image of God. But when they sinned, there was a change in their nature that was a tremendous "fall" from that which God had created. They became possessors of a sin nature, and they have passed this nature on to all of their descendants. The Word of God clearly declares that as a result of birth in Adam's race, the mind, heart and will of every man is characterized by an inability to become holy. Man has absolutely no capacity for receiving or performing the things of God; such is not his nature (Isa. 64:6; I Cor. 2:14). His only potential in God's sight is for sin. Indeed, he is controlled by sin (Rom. 3:9). Paul reminds the Ephesians that before they were saved they were "dead in trespasses and sins" and "were by nature the children of wrath" (Eph. 2:1-3).

The Origin of the Believer's New Nature

Just as birth into Adam's family gives man Adam's nature—a sin nature—so birth into God's family gives man God's nature—a divine nature. Peter states, "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). This divine nature is the goal and result of the new birth, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). In making us a new creation in Christ Jesus, God does not reform or rehabilitate the old Adamic nature.

"With this new nature we have the capacity of mind to 'know the things that are freely given to us of God'(1 Cor. 2:12). We have the capacity of heart to 'love Him, because He first loved us'(I John 4:19). And we have the capacity of will to 'let not sin therefore reign' in our bodies (Rom. 6:12). This nature makes possible a life that is pleasing to the Lord."

Joel T. Andrus

Rather, He introduces into our lives a new capacity of mind, heart, and will—an entirely new nature. With this new nature we have the capacity of mind to “know the things that are freely given to us of God” (1 Cor. 2:12). We have the capacity of heart to “love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). And we have the capacity of will to “let not sin therefore reign” in our bodies (Rom. 6:12). This nature makes possible a life that is pleasing to the Lord. Thus far, we have observed that every man born into Adam’s race has a sin nature. Furthermore, every man who is born again is given a new, divine nature through the new birth. These truths lead us to a very important conclusion. While the unregenerate man has but one nature, the regenerate man has two natures—the old capacity from Adam and the new capacity from God.

The Debate Concerning the Two Natures of the Believer

This conclusion has been a point of contention and misunderstanding among believers throughout the course of Church history. Many have argued that the impartation of the new nature automatically eradicates the old. But a correct understanding of Scripture will demonstrate that such is not the case. The fact of the continuing existence of the old capacity along with the new is repeatedly affirmed in many ways.

One example is found in the word “sin,” which is used in more than one way in the Bible. In some places the word refers to the acts of sin in a man’s life, and in others it refers to the source of those acts, the nature received from Adam. This distinction is especially notable in Romans 6:1-8:13 and I John 1:1-2:2. A case in point is I John 1:8: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Two factors are important here. It is distinctly the sin nature that is in view, and furthermore, the entire passage is addressed to believers and includes all believers. John is strongly affirming that every born-again person has a sin nature. Anyone who denies this fact is self-deceived and has no truth in him.

Another important word that evidences the fact of the believer’s sin nature is “flesh” (sarx). Its general reference is to the physical body. However, there is also the idea of our sin nature. An example is Romans 7:18: “I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwells no good thing.” The term is used here to signify the totality of a man’s old capacity, which is his as a result of the Fall. The term “flesh” is not synonymous with the term “old nature,” but it does include the old nature. Since the body of flesh is the vehicle through which the old nature operates (Rom. 13:14; 6:12-19), the term “flesh” is used to represent all that that nature is and does. Another passage which teaches that the flesh is an active force is Galatians 5: 16,17: “This I say then, walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” If the flesh was not a continuing force in our lives as believers (the only men who have the Spirit), then why does the Spirit fight?

The Debate Over the Term the “Old Man”

The Scriptures use the term “the old man” to designate our nature before we became believers. Reference to this is found in Romans 6:6, Ephesians 4:22-24 and Colossians 3:9,10. It has in view the total unregenerate personality—the old, unrenewed self which we were because of our connection with Adam. The “new man” is our new nature “which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24). An examination of these passages which deal with the “old man” has led some Christians to conclude incorrectly that a genuine believer does not have the “old man.” In Romans 6:6, Paul says that “our old man is (was) crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed.” If “destroyed” were

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Kenneth Wuest
from *Romans in the Greek
New Testament*, p. 101

the best translation, then we might conclude that after salvation our “old man” is actually gone. But the Greek word *katargeo*, which is used here, has the meaning of “rendered inoperative.” Williams Version of the Bible translates it this way: “For we know that our former self was crucified with Him, to make our body that is liable to sin inactive, so that we might not a moment longer continue to be slaves to sin.” Paul is not saying that we died with Christ in order that the sin nature might no longer be able to operate within us. Rather, we died with Him in order that the sin nature might be deposed as our master. The point is not that the old nature is destroyed, but that our obligation to obey it is ended.

The same idea is found in Ephesians 4:22-24 and Colossians 3:9. Correctly translated, these verses acknowledge that the believer’s “old man” has already been put off. But that is not to say that it cannot possibly act any longer. The exhortation is that, in light of the fact that the right of the “old man” over our lives has been broken, we should start living as though we believed it. The clear implication is that even as believers, we could be allowing the “old man” to reign. The biblical discussion concerning “sin,” the “flesh”, and the “old man” gives abundant evidence to the fact that as Christians we do retain the old nature along with our new divine nature.

The Spiritual Battle Between the Flesh and the Spirit

It should be immediately obvious that when two natures are moving in opposite directions, there will be conflict. Paul states in Galatians 5:17: “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are *contrary* the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” The present tense of the verbs shows this to be a continual conflict. The verb “are contrary” (*antikeimai*) is especially important. Not only does its present tense indicate continual conflict, but its meaning suggests that the struggle is an intense one. There is no biblical evidence of any believer who ever came to the point of no longer experiencing conflict. Nor is there a hint that any will ever come to that point while in the body.

This fact of continual conflict could lead to real spiritual depression if we fail to view this conflict correctly. As already mentioned, some have evaded the issue by denying that a genuine believer will experience struggle. They declare that either initial salvation or a second blessing destroys the old capacity for sin. It is exactly this error that John warned against in I John 1:8.

Others often make the mistake of trying to suppress the old nature by observing sufficient rules. Such a law-principle is doomed to failure because it depends for strength on the very flesh from which it seeks deliverance.

Still others try to escape the reality of conflict altogether by conceiving of themselves as spectators watching a battle between two inner forces over which they have no control. The popular illustration of the old nature being a black dog and the new nature a white dog perhaps unintentionally promotes this erroneous concept. The danger of this way of thinking is that it tends to relieve the individual believer of any responsibility. If he sins, he can say in an almost detached way that “my old nature won,” as if he himself was not really liable. After all, he didn’t do the fighting—he was just watching the battle. The truth is that the sin nature no longer has an inalienable right to the control of our lives.

The Bible teaches that as believers in Christ we have two natures. Both natures are alive and seeking to exert their power in our lives. But despair is not inevitable if we accept God’s plan for victory. That plan involves a perfect balance between God’s provision and the believer’s responsibility. God’s plan is that His Spirit lives His life through us, giving victory in conflict. He proposes both to control the old nature and to manifest His life in the new divine nature.

“ The old nature loves to feed on that which is unedifying and unclean. It accounts for man’s natural bent against God, it does not want to obey God’s law. Because of it man is more inclined to accept error rather than the truth.”

William MacDonald
(1917-2007)



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As believers we are to appropriate the power of the Holy Spirit in controlling the old nature. The fact of the Spirit's presence does not automatically assure victory. We have the responsibility to continually yield to His control. This is the teaching of Galatians 5:16: "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." It is the Spirit alone, working through our new nature as we give Him liberty, that can give victory. Romans 6:14 brings out this truth clearly: "Neither yield your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin, but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God."

Conclusion

It is important to understand that our new nature and the indwelling Holy Spirit are not one and the same. A nature is an ability; our old nature has the ability to do evil, while our new nature has the ability to do good. Neither is the same as its energizing power. To have a radio is not necessarily to have sound. The radio must be energized by some power. The radio is not the same as the power. Similarly, the new nature is not the same as the Holy Spirit. To depend on the new nature apart from the Spirit is to invite certain defeat. The Apostle Paul discovered this truth the hard way. He relates in Romans 7 that he was endeavoring to be victorious in the Christian life by battling the old nature with his new, divine nature. The result was spiritual disaster. But when he came to recognize that he should rely on the Holy Spirit to work through his new nature, he found the key to victory. With us, as with Paul, conflict will still be present. But it will be a conflict waged by the Holy Spirit.

Do not be confused. The battle spoken of in Galatians 5:17 will be present as long as we are in the body. But conflict is not sinful; defeat is. God never demanded that the believer live without conflict, but He does command that he be victorious in it. The full power of the Holy Spirit is available to fight the battle. Through a yielded walk of dependence on His power, victory can be assured.

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