

Paul's Use of the Psalms in Romans and  
Their Relation to the Nature of Christ in  
Seventh-day Adventist Christology

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## **Introduction**

The Apostle Paul, claimed by many to be the “theologian of the New Testament,” used numerous quotes from the Book of Psalms in his letter to the Romans. This is significant because of the ongoing debate within the Seventh-day Adventist Church regarding the nature of Christ, that is, the nature He took when He came to earth as a man. Was it the perfect, sinless nature of Adam before the Fall? or, did He come in the fallen, sinful nature of Adam after the Fall?

Of course, the real issue behind the controversy over Christ’s human nature is the definition of sin: Is it a “condition”—what we are? or, is it an act—what we do? This is the point which first must be addressed in any discussion of whether Jesus Christ had a pre-lapsarian or a post-lapsarian human nature. Paul’s choice of texts is crucial in assessing where he stood on the issue of what sin actually is, and, by extension, what human nature Christ chose to take while on earth. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural references are to the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and all emphasis is added. Where the NASB uses capital letters to set quotations from the Old Testament apart, we have here presented those passages in standard lower case.)

### **“Original Sin”**

For the sake of this discussion, “original sin” is defined to mean sin as a state of being, in contrast to meaning sin as a personal choice. Further, it considers a sinful, fallen nature to be sin itself and therefore that mankind is condemned simply in existing, and that he is guilty on the basis of his birth-nature. This particular definition would be in agreement with the Augustinian view of sin that has been accepted throughout much of modern Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism and the modern evangelical world. Consider, for example, the following:

The *Collatio cum Maximino Ariano*, an obscure babbling, belongs to the year 428 for Protestants. They were written between the years 412 and 429. In them Augustin, in his intellectual and spiritual prime, develops his system of anthropology and soteriology, *and most nearly approaches the position of Evangelical Protestantism*: On the Guilt and the Remission of Sins, and Infant Baptism (412); On the Spirit and the Letter (413); On Nature and Grace (415); On the Acts of Pelagius (417); *On the Grace of Christ, and Original Sin* (418); On Marriage and Concupiscence (419); On Grace and Free Will (426); On Discipline and Grace (427); Against Julian of Eclanum (two large works, written between 421 and 429, the second unfinished, and hence called *Opus imperfectum*); On the Predestination of the Saints (428); On the Gift of Perseverance (429); etc..

And, in the following, Augustine himself shows how he differentiates Christ from man in this regard:

He had absolutely no sin, either original or personal, on account of which death could be supposed to be merited by Him, since He paid on our behalf that which was not on His own account due by Him, in whom the prince of this world, who had the power of death, found nothing—and there is nothing unreasonable in the supposition that He who created a soul for the first man should create a soul for Himself; or if the soul of Christ be derived from Adam’s soul He in assuming it to Himself, cleansed it so that when He came into this world He was born of the Virgin perfectly free from sin either actual or transmitted. If, however, the souls of men are not derived from that one soul, and it is only by the flesh that original sin is transmitted from Adam, the Son of God created a soul for Himself, as He creates souls for all other men, but He united it not to sinful flesh, but to the “likeness of sinful flesh.” For He took, indeed, from the Virgin the true substance of flesh; not, however, “sinful flesh,” *for it was neither begotten nor conceived through carnal concupiscence*, but mortal, and capable of change in the successive stages of life, as being like unto sinful flesh in all points, sin excepted.

This idea of Christ not being conceived through “carnal concupiscence” will be addressed in more detail later. As we will see, this does away with the suggestion that Paul taught an Augustinian view of original sin.

In contrast to the “original sin” view would be a theology defining sin as an act performed by a person with an awareness of the difference between right and wrong, who

knowingly chooses to commit wrong. It remains true that a state of mind or state of being can be chosen as well, but in such case it is still a choice—thus an “act.” Of course, a state of mind or state of being could be chosen as well, but this is still a choice—thus an act. In this vein consider the witness of James 1:12-15 (particularly verses 14 and 15), as our definition of sin.

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

By this definition, sin is not a state of being or even a temptation; it is following through on temptation in thought or deed. James here uses the illustration of a woman who has conceived but not yet given birth. Sin is not charged against the individual simply because a temptation arose in the heart. Sin comes when that temptation is embraced, when endorsed in thought or deed.

This stands in harmony with James 4:17, “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.” In this case as well it is a conscious act of the will, not a state of being.

To summarize, in this view, sin is not an involuntary state of being, it is a conscious act of the will in opposition to the known will of God through His Spirit.

This is important with an Arminian theological view such as that of Seventh-day Adventists. In Arminian (or “Wesleyan”) theology, free will plays an integral role. In a free will theology, the freedom of choice of the individual is respected as much as God’s sovereign will.

God will not force the individual to act according to His desire but instead works His divine will while respecting those choices.

This stands in contrast to the Calvinist view commonly seen in evangelical Christianity which values God's sovereignty above all else and demands that the creature act according to the will of the Creator.

### **Excursis: A Denominational Watershed**

It is necessary to have at least a cursory knowledge of the background of the understanding of the nature of Christ and the nature of sin in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in order for us to properly understand certain primary issues.

In the early SDA Church many of the leaders had a semi-Arian view of Christ, that is, they believed that Jesus Christ was not co-eternal with the Father but that at some point in time Jesus was the first created being. This view was a significant one among some early Adventists. James White, Uriah Smith, and others, had come from the community of faith known as the Christian Connexion which did not believe in a co-eternal godhead.

It was not until the 1890s that the SDA Church began to adopt the orthodox view of Christ as co-eternal and co-equal with the Father. Recent years have seen a very small but vocal movement among those at the fringes of the church to return to the semi-Arian view. Thankfully, this has been rejected by the membership at large.

In the 1950's something occurred that was to have consequences that no one involved could have foreseen. It began with a simple letter of appreciation and culminated in the publishing of the book, *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine (QOD)*.

The story of *QOD* begins when a prominent evangelical minister by the name of Donald Grey Barnhouse, editor of *Eternity*, a popular evangelical magazine, received a letter from T. E. Unruh, who was at the time the president of the East Pennsylvania Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, complimenting Barnhouse on a sermon on righteousness by faith that he had preached on his radio program. Barnhouse came from the Calvinist wing of evangelical Christianity.

In contrast to Calvinist belief, Arminian theology teaches, as earlier stated, free will. Our decision to either follow or reject Christ has a determinative role in our salvation. The two views, although sharing some common ground, are different in significant ways. Barnhouse was surprised, given what he understood Adventists believed, that a prominent Adventist would agree with his articulation of righteousness by faith.

The letter from Unruh led a young evangelical theologian by the name of Walter Martin, a friend of Barnhouse, to contact our General Conference headquarters and ask to meet with our leaders to discuss what we actually believe. He was in the process of doing research for a book that Zondervan Publishing had commissioned him to write, entitled, *The Rise of the Cults*, which would later become known as *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Seventh-day Adventists were to have an important place in that book.

These two events—Barnhouse receiving this compliment from Unruh, and Martin contacting the General Conference—created what could be called the “Perfect Storm.” A small group of General Conference workers saw these events as a golden opportunity to have Seventh-day Adventists removed from the “cult” status that some had been insisting upon.

These men met with Martin and Barnhouse to discuss our beliefs. Barnhouse and Martin took offense at what they perceived we believed on four points in particular:

1. That the atonement of Christ was not completed at the cross
2. That salvation is the result of grace plus the works of the law
3. That the Lord Jesus was a created being, not from all eternity
4. That Jesus partook of man's sinful fallen nature at the incarnation

Although disagreeing with us on other important points such as the Bible Sabbath and the state of the dead, they felt that these in and of themselves needn't be considered "cultic." But because of their belief in "original sin" they felt that point #4 was utter blasphemy.

The meetings proceeded in quiet. Martin and Barnhouse met with a self-described "little committee." Participants included: Leroy Edwin Froom, Roy Allen Anderson, Walter Edwin Read and Tobias Edgar Unruh, the man whose letter to Barnhouse had started this whole affair. These were determined to head off any possibility that Seventh-day Adventists would figure prominently in the new book on cults that Martin had been commissioned to write by Zondervan Publishing.

Their motivations were laudable, but the decisions made in order to accomplish their purpose continue to reverberate through the church. It has been suggested that nearly every dissident group associated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in existence today is in one way or another the result of the theological shift that produced *QOD*.

Part of their plan to appease Martin and Barnhouse included revision of positions that had stood unquestioned during the previous five or six decades. Some could fairly be considered "semantics," but some could not.

L. E. Froom took an informal poll of workers and found a substantial majority of them held to a postlapsarian position on the humanity of Jesus, holding that Christ had chosen to put on fallen human nature at the Incarnation. In spite of the strong consensus, he chose to present a different view to Martin and Barnhouse.

The view of sin was also brought into line with the Calvinist/evangelical/Augustinian position, that man is inherently guilty by virtue of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden.

All of this created controversy in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

### **The Relationship between Original Sin and the Nature of Christ**

It is impossible to understand Christology without a proper understanding of hamartiology (the doctrine of sin). If, as Calvinists teach, we are all guilty of sin at birth because we share in Adam's sin, then it is reasonable to argue that it is impossible for Christ to have taken man's nature after the Fall, as that would automatically make Him guilty of sin. It would be a direct contradiction of the witness of Scripture. Hebrews 4:15 states unequivocally,

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, *yet without sin*.

If, on the other hand, sin is a decision, and a fallen nature of itself is not sin, then Christ could have chosen to come to this earth, taking our sinful human nature without being guilty of sin. This was the consensus position of Seventh-day Adventists previous to the publication of *QOD*.

For purposes of this paper we proceed in the understanding of the latter position concerning the nature of sin, which we shall demonstrate is also the Pauline position.

## Paul's Position on Sin

Did Paul believe that our sinful natures, which resulted from Adam's sin, included the guilt of sin itself? This is the crucial question that must be answered before we can explore how Paul's hamartiology impacts his Christology.

Paul quoted the Old Testament (OT) extensively in his writings. In his letter to the Romans he used several statements from the Book of Psalms in describing the nature of sin. Although this will not be an exhaustive study, it is to these references in particular that we now turn.

All of the Psalmic quotes that Paul presents in Romans present sin as an act, never as a birthright. In this, Paul is both repetitive, and consistent.

The most oft quoted text in the OT used to sustain the idea of original sin is Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me."

If Paul, as some suppose, supports the concept of original sin, how interesting, then, that this text is never recapitulated by him in any of his writings!

The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* explains this text thus:

I was shapen in iniquity. David recognized that children inherit natures with propensities to evil (see Job 14:4; Ps. 58:8; PP 61, 306; MH 372, 373; GC 533). He did not seek to excuse his sin, but sought to stress the still greater need of God's mercy because of his inborn tendency to do evil (see PP 64).

The evidence for the opposite conclusion is convincing. Paul, far from advancing an original sin concept, is consistent in demonstrating that sin is an act for which forgiveness is possible and is to be sought through God's grace.

This is consistent with Paul's use of Psalms 51:4, ("Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge") in Romans 3:4, where he states, "May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, 'That You may be justified in Your words, and prevail when You are judged.'"

Paul is clearly referring to the act of sin here, and acknowledging that God is justified in His judgment against man for the act of sin in each individual life.

In Romans 3:10, ("as it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one'"), Paul uses Psalm 14:1-3, ("The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good. The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one"), to point out the fact that there is "none righteous," and that this is because of what they do.

Paul, here, is pointing out that men sin not because they are guilty from birth but because they have said in their heart that there is no God, and as a result, they openly sin against His divine, eternal law. They have all "turned aside." How can one "turn aside" if already in that condition as a result of their birthright?

In Romans 3:20, ("because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin"), Paul appeals to Psalm 143:2, ("And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous"), to demonstrate that the law is what defines sin and gives man a knowledge of it.

We are not justified by the “works of the law” because the singular purpose of the law is to point out what sin is. If sin was a condition what would the law be pointing out? Why would mankind be guilty of sin for transgressing what is revealed through the law, if he was already guilty and condemned simply by being born?

In Romans 4:7, 8 (“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. ‘Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account’”), Paul refers to Psalm 32:1, 2, (“How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!”). How could one possibly have their transgression forgiven or their sins covered if sin was a state of being and not an act of the will?

In Romans 5:5, (“and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us”), Paul talks about the hope we have in God’s love to strengthen us, and alludes to Psalm 119:116 in support, (“Sustain me according to Your word, that I may live; and do not let me be ashamed of my hope”). What “hope” do we have if we can’t be forgiven because sin is our nature?

### **Paul did not teach the Augustinian concept of original sin?**

We have already noted that the primary OT text used to uphold the concept of original sin is completely absent from the Book of Romans and indeed the entirety of Paul’s writings, and that the texts from Psalms that Paul does use, in their original context, consistently present sin as acts for which we can receive forgiveness.

The Bible says in 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Repentance results in being

cleansed from *all* unrighteousness. Not some; not most; but *all*! Can this be said of our very natures? Does repentance cleanse our sinful nature? Of course not! How then can we say that the guilt of sin is a condition of nature? The answer is that we can't, and be consistent in our exegesis of Scripture.

So what *did* Paul write that has been used to portray him as having an original sin theology? Probably the single most used text is Romans 5:12, 13,

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

Many believe that his statement says that all men are guilty at birth because the guilt of Adam's sin "spread" to all men. Is that really what Paul is saying here? As already noted, he says nothing of the sort. Only this understanding is consistent with Paul's theology in Romans and with the Bible as a whole.

Paul is stating the obvious fact that because of Adam's sin man began to die. He was originally created to live forever but because of the entrance of sin death came to mankind. Paul does not say that death spread to all mankind because all mankind is guilty of Adam's sin. He says plainly that death spread to all men because *all men sinned!* This is a personal judgment, not a corporate one.

Throughout Scripture, God is portrayed as a fair Judge, a righteous Judge, a just Judge. How could any fair-minded, finite human being who is privy to all the facts, find someone actually guilty for another person's crime? How much more so the infinite, all-knowing Creator of the universe? This would be inconsistent with the righteousness of God.

This was Job's complaint against God. He felt that he was being judged unjustly and couldn't understand how the God who is absolutely righteous could allow that to happen. But Job was not being judged, he was being tested. God's judgment of Job was fair when He said to Satan in Job 1:8, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil." Far from unfairly judging, God was so certain of Job's faithfulness that He was prepared to allow him to undergo special trials because He trusted him to remain steadfast.

This brings us to the Scriptural teaching in regard to the nature of Christ.

### **What Does the Bible Say About the Human Nature of Christ?**

Our study has demonstrated that Paul never supported the notion that mankind is born bearing the guilt of Adam's sin in the Garden. This is crucial because, as noted earlier, it is also reasonable to assume that if guilt itself is inherited then Jesus Christ could not have inherited mankind's sinful, fallen nature and still be free from sin.

In the Book of Romans Paul makes very clear statements regarding the nature of Christ such as in Romans 1:3, "concerning His Son, *who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh.*" Not a descendant of Adam before the fall but "a descendant of David according to the flesh"! How can one read this statement and still argue that Jesus took Adam's nature before the Fall?

Also, Romans 8:3, "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son *in the likeness of sinful flesh...*"

It has been argued that the phrase "in the likeness of sinful flesh" doesn't really mean that He came in sinful flesh, just in a facsimile of sinful flesh. The problem with this is that *Paul uses*

*exactly the same Greek phrase* in Philippians 2:7, “but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made *in the likeness of men.*”

Those who argue that in Romans Paul only meant that it *appeared* that Jesus came in sinful flesh, then turn around and say that He actually *became* a man in Philippians. But the onus is on those who wish to take the identical phrase and translate it in diametrically opposite ways in order to support their assertion—not on those who wish to be consistent in translation.

To continue our examination of the Scriptural position of the human nature of Christ we move from Romans to the Book of Hebrews (many hold that Paul was the writer of Hebrews, but for the purposes of this examination it is not necessary for that it be so).

The Book of Hebrews contains the clearest language in regard to Christ’s human nature of any book of the Bible. Hebrews 4:14, 15 says,

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

Could Christ have been tempted in all ways like I am if He had a different nature than I have? After the Fall man inherited a fallen nature which, unlike Adam before the Fall, had a disposition towards sin rather than away from it. How could Christ have endured the same temptations as me if He had a tendency opposite sin in His very nature that I do not have?

In Hebrews 2:14 Paul states, “Therefore, *since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same...*”. At least one writer claims derisively that this is simply “an English idiom” (Roy Adams, *The Nature of Christ*). But, far from being simply a modern figure of speech, it is a most accurate translation from the Greek.

This is an emphatic statement that Christ partook of the very same flesh and blood as fallen humanity. The phrase “since the children share” cannot possibly be referring to Adam. It can only be referring to the descendants of fallen humanity.

We also read in Hebrews 2:17, “Therefore, He *had to* be made like His brethren *in all things*, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people”. He was made like His brethren in some things? In most things? No, in *all things*. There is no mistaking the language here. Text after text points to the fact that Christ took upon Himself the nature of fallen man, the seed of Abraham, sinful flesh. One must disregard the plainest of statements from Scripture in order to maintain that Christ did not take on Himself man’s sinful, fallen nature.

If we are to fairly and honestly exegete Scripture we have to put aside preconceived ideas and allow the Bible to speak for itself. When we do this, it becomes clear that Scripture is consistent in its position. Jesus Christ *chose* to take mankind’s fallen, sinful human nature.

This is one of the most encouraging and comforting teachings in all of Scripture.

Philippians 2:5-8 says,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Christ “emptied Himself” of certain aspects of His divinity in order to be an example to the entire human race, so that He was willing to suffer what we suffer in order to show the extent of His love for mankind, and to give us an example of what the gospel can accomplish if we truly allow Him to have rule over us. Romans 8:37-39,

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Christ's love for His creation was, and is, so strong, so overwhelming, so all-consuming, that He was willing to do whatever it took to redeem us from the penalty of sin, which is death. Fortunately, the gift of God is eternal life in Christ.

Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Not only does a careful study of Paul's use of the Psalms in the book of Romans, and elsewhere, fail to support the idea of original sin, it actually demonstrates that Paul forcefully argues for the view that Christ came to this earth in the sinful flesh that all of us have. (See Romans 8:3; Hebrews 2:14, 17; 4:14, 15.)

For this author, this is perhaps the most vivid picture of how far God would go to redeem His wayward children. It is the ultimate expression of what He was willing to do to demonstrate that He would humble Himself to a level that is worthy of our eternal thankfulness and devotion.

In Philippians 2:5-11, we read

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The evidence presented shows that Jesus took on the nature of man after the Fall. He was willing to do whatever it took to demonstrate the depth of His love, and to provide an example for us of overcoming sin “in the flesh.” Paul’s use of the Psalms in the Book of Romans sustains that position.

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