

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER 2

In this second chapter, Ellen White sets forth her understanding of the impact of sin on human nature. She starts by noting that at creation humankind “was originally endowed with noble powers and a well-balanced mind” (17). Coming from the hands of the Creator, human beings lived “in harmony with God” (17). “But through disobedience, his powers were perverted . . . his nature became so weakened through transgression that it was impossible for him, in his own strength, to resist the power of evil” (17). Thus the sinner is in dire need of a Savior.

Any discussion of the impact and effects of the sin of Adam and Eve on future generations is part of the doctrine of original sin. Given this chapter opening, where does Ellen White’s theology of original sin fit in the two millennia of discussions on this controversial topic? First, it is interesting to note that she refers to the weakening of human nature and not to a total depravity as the Magisterial Reformers did. This seems to indicate that she has a more optimistic view of fallen human nature; yet, that is not the case. White rejects any thought

of Pelagianism when she states, “It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them” (18).

Second, against the ideals of the Enlightenment, she affirms, “Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless” (18). These human efforts “cannot purify the springs of life” (18). The only power that can create or bring about a change in people’s hearts must come from within and “that power is Christ. His grace alone can quicken the lifeless faculties of the soul, and attract it to God, to holiness” (18).

As noted in the Historical Introduction, White’s theology of original sin, or sinful nature, is semi-Augustinian, similar to John Wesley’s and that of other Arminian theologians who affirm a depravity of human nature since the Fall but argue in favor of God’s prevenient grace given to all human beings to restore a measure of free will, enough to enable a possible response to God’s invitation to salvation. The optimism Ellen White exhibits regarding fallen human nature is post-prevenient grace: after this grace is given, sinful humanity is weak but not totally depraved. Also in contrast to other

Augustinian views of original sin, White did not subscribe to the inheritance of personal guilt from Adam and Eve, although she did acknowledge the objective consequences of their transgression on the human race.

White's concept of prevenient grace is similar to Wesley's theology, and she quotes many of the same texts of Scripture. Prevenient grace is the Holy Spirit's work upon all human beings to bring them to God. This work of the Holy Spirit is universal and initially imperceptible to human eyes. It is God who takes the first step in humankind's salvation, yearns over lost humanity, and desires to bring them back to Him. God's "grace alone can quicken the lifeless faculties of the soul, and attract it to God, to holiness" (18). In the next chapter on repentance, she explains that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to influence hearts and consciences that sinners may "discern something of the depth and sacredness of God's holy law" (24). She then asserts that the influence of the Holy Spirit is upon every human heart, quoting John 1:9 and John 12:32 (24, 26). God's work of grace for all human beings prepares them to accept His offer of salvation. For White, the sinner's greatest need is Christ, and this chapter focuses on Christ as Savior of humankind

and how all heavenly agencies are working for humanity's salvation.

It is in this chapter, as we saw in the Historical Introduction, that White highlights Christ as Jacob's mystic ladder between heaven and earth, a reference to Jacob's dream as he fled from his brother Esau in Genesis 28 (20). This metaphor of the ladder is the thematic architecture of this book. In fact, remembering that this chapter was the first chapter in the original Revell edition, the title of the book is drawn from this metaphor of the mystic ladder, with each step representing an aspect of our relationship with Christ. Steps up the ladder are all done in Christ who metaphorically carries the sinner from earth up to heaven. "The mystic ladder is the basis for reuniting with God," comments Katrina Blue, "for understanding God's design in reconnecting humans with Himself, through Jesus Christ. He is the only link between heaven and earth. *Steps to Christ* is thus about reconnecting with Christ, forming a union with Him."¹

Humanity's response to God's offer of salvation and to the influence of the Holy Spirit is discussed in the last paragraphs of this chapter. Here is a synergy between God's grace and the offer of salvation, and the free human response, however weak and feeble this response may

be. After listing various rewards for salvation, White asks, “are these not mighty incentives and encouragements to urge us to give the heart’s loving service to our Creator and Redeemer?” (21). Humanity, therefore, needs to respond to God’s offer. “Let us avail ourselves of the means provided for us that we may be transformed into His likeness, and be restored to fellowship with the ministering angels, to harmony and communion with the Father and the Son” (22).² Later, in 1893, she further explains, “The very first step to Christ is taken through the drawing of the Spirit of God; as man responds to this drawing, he advances toward Christ in order that he may repent.”³

FURTHER READING

See Jack J. Blanco, “Christ, Centrality of,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, pages 688–690; Jiří Moskala, “Sin,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, pages 1164–1167.

ANTECEDENTS TO THE TEXT

This chapter is a compilation of prior publications, mainly articles in the *Review and Herald* and *Signs of the Times*, along with some original sections.

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NOTES

1. Blue, "Union with Christ in the Writings of Ellen G. White," 166.

2. Another clear statement on the need for human response is found in the next chapter: "Christ is ready to set us free from sin, but He does not force the will; and if by persistent transgression the will itself is wholly bent on evil, and we do not *desire* to be set free, if we *will* not accept His grace, what more can He do?" (34).

3. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 1, 390.

CHAPTER 2

The Sinner's Need of Christ

MAN WAS ORIGINALLY endowed with noble powers and a well-balanced mind. He was perfect in his being, and in harmony with God. His thoughts were pure, his aims holy. But through disobedience, his powers were perverted, and selfishness took the place of love. His nature became so weakened through transgression that it was impossible for him, in his own strength, to resist the power of evil. He was made captive by Satan, and would have remained so forever had not God specially interposed. It was the tempter's purpose to thwart the divine plan in man's creation, and fill the earth with woe and desolation. And he would point to all this evil as the result of God's work in creating man.

In his sinless state, man held joyful communion with Him "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."¹ Colossians 2:3. But

1. Allusion to Genesis 3:8. Ellen White understood this reference to God walking in the Garden of Eden in the "cool of the day" (the evening) as a pattern of direct communication between God and human beings before the Fall.

after his sin, he could no longer find joy in holiness, and he sought to hide from the presence of God.² Such is still the condition of the unrenewed heart. It is not in harmony with God, and finds no joy in communion with Him. The sinner could not be happy in God's presence; he would shrink from the companionship of holy beings. Could he be permitted to enter heaven, it would have no joy for him. The spirit of unselfish love that reigns there—every heart responding to the heart of Infinite Love—would touch no answering chord in his soul. His thoughts, his interests, his motives, would be alien to | 18 | those that actuate the sinless dwellers there. He would be a discordant note in the melody of heaven. Heaven would be to him a place of torture; he would long to be hidden from Him who is its light, and the center of its joy. It is no arbitrary decree on the part of God that excludes the wicked from heaven: they are shut out by their own unfitness for its companionship.³ The glory of God would be to them a consuming

2. See Genesis 3:8–10.

3. Allusion to the Reformed doctrine of predestination which states that God in his everlasting knowledge decreed from all eternity which humans would be saved and which humans would be lost, even before they were created and had rebelled against God. White considered such a decision process in God's plan of salvation as arbitrary and harmful to understanding the real character of God.

fire. They would welcome destruction, that they might be hidden from the face of Him who died to redeem them.

It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them.⁴ “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one.” “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” Job 14:4; Romans 8:7. Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life. There must be a power working from within, a new life from above, before men can be changed from sin to holiness. That power is Christ. His grace alone can quicken the lifeless faculties of the soul, and attract it to God, to holiness.

The Saviour said, “Except a man be born from above,” unless he shall receive a new heart, new desires, purposes, and motives, leading to a new life, “he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John 3:3, margin.⁵ The idea that it is necessary only to develop the good that | 19 | exists in man by

4. Allusion to Ecclesiastes 9:3 and Jeremiah 17:9.

5. The standard text of the King James Version reads, “except a man be born again.”



Ilya Repin, Barge Haulers on the Volga, 1870-1873