

THE SINFUL “NATURE” OF MAN

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The Augustine-Pelagian controversy of the early fifth century crystallized two schools of thought on the “nature” of man. Pelagius, a British monk, sought to correct immorality in Rome but his remonstrances were met by the plea of “human weakness.” Pelagius then argued the actual powers of human nature, affirming the freedom of will and man’s capability to choose good or evil. His favorite maxim was, “If I ought, I can.” But this threw him into direct conflict with the Augustinian doctrine of total depravity and the consequent bondage of man’s will. “The church” favored Augustine, and condemned Pelagius’ teaching as heretical. This “council” decision has greatly affected the theology of the western world.

In Benjamin Warfield’s *Plan of Salvation* his first classification of opposing redemption concepts is “Naturalistic and Supernaturalistic.” He says, “The consistently naturalistic scheme is known in history of doctrine as Pelagianism,” which, he says, “affirms that all the power exerted in saving man is native to man himself.” (This is a prejudicial statement, don’t swallow it without studying what Pelagius actually taught.) Warfield lumps free will into “naturalism” and summarily removes it from consideration. Augustine, Calvin, Warfield, and late twentieth century “theologians” see mankind as depraved by inherent nature and incapable of taking an independent step toward God. If they can establish their base: “Man sins because he is man;” the ground is prepared for the next logical step: “Man must be initially moved by some direct or immediate operation of divine power.” A scriptural understanding of the “*nature*” of man is, therefore, inseparable from a study of God’s scheme of redemption.

K. C. Moser’s book, *The Way of Salvation*, does not espouse classic Calvinism on this point. His “theology” does, however, reveal a rather inconsistent mixture of Calvinistic concepts, which lead him to some very doubtful exegesis of scriptures. After saying that “sin is unnatural. Man was not made for the devil and sin, but for God and righteousness.” Moser says the source of sin is in man, and “man cannot rid himself of the source of sin” (pp. 16-19). He identifies this “source” as (a) “the presence of Satan as it is proof of the absence of God.” (Later, his concept of redemption involves a reversal of what is in man; and he thinks the Holy Spirit personally indwells man, “enabling man to live righteously.” This causes me to wonder what he means by Satan in man.) The “source” of sin is further identified as (b) the “law of sin” or the “old man.” He says (p. 73) that “the real cause of sin” is the “law of sin” which he identifies (?) as “the principle of sin in man,” (whatever that is).

Moser borrows heavily from Calvinistic terminology when he says God “takes the initiative in the redemption of man. Indeed, he must; for man could not start. Here are mysteries too deep for man” (p. 23). One might charitably say he refers to God’s eternal plan to save mankind through Christ—and has no reference to the particular response

of an individual to the gospel. But on p. 21, he says, “Man is even now unfit for Christianity until he is ‘born from above,’ until the crucifixion of the ‘law of sin.’” Later (pp. 70-71) he says, “law...cannot give *power* to obey against this tremendous evil influence”...“Law could not overcome the ‘law of sin’ in man”...“The will to do right might be present, but the *power* to accomplish it was lacking. But it is different under grace. Justification provides for the crucifixion of this ‘old man,’ the ‘law of sin’”...“The Holy Spirit is given the child of God for the purpose of crucifying lust and thus *enabling* man to live righteously” (emphasis mine, RFT). Moser seems willing to take a Calvinistic position regarding the “enabling power” of the personal indwelling Spirit in the saint, and offers a confused picture of the unregenerated man and his initial overcoming of sinful nature to the extent that he could obey the gospel. What can we expect from “Preacher Training Schools” that use such a theological mish-mash as a text book?

It seems ridiculously irrelevant to argue “free will” with a brotherhood that has so long given lip-service to this cardinal principle. But Moser says “man cannot” do what God commands him to do; and it was in one of “our” booklets on “Grace”—not in Calvin’s Institutes—that I found the statement, “Man sins because he is man.” I believe our brethren make such arguments without considering the consequences, nor their place in a fallacious system.

The “system” says if God *knows* all that will happen, then He must *determine* all. This confuses *fore-knowledge* with *fore-ordination*. It does not follow that because God *can do* all things (omnipotence), that he *must* know all things. Who are we to impose limitations upon God’s free agency? But we are told, if man is free to choose, and can affect his own destiny, this implies a limitation upon God’s sovereignty. Free creatures, within the realm and time-span of their existence, may suggest a self-imposed limitation upon God—self-imposed to serve His own purposes now—but *God’s sovereignty is completely vindicated in final, irrevocable judgment* (2 Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:7).

Of course our brethren usually speak on the “nature” of man following the sin of Adam. Do we forget the scriptures declaring the individual’s responsibility for sin are given to descendants of Adam? “*Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book*” (Ex. 32:33). “*The soul that sinneth, it shall die*” (Ezek. 18:20). But some of our brethren are beginning to toy with the Calvinistic idea that we sinned “*in Adam*”—being “*yet in the loins of...*” Adam, when he sinned (cf. Heb. 7:9-10). This is a Hebraism, implying inferiority in keeping with their genealogical system. Jacob and Esau, prior to birth and willful action, yet descendants of Adam, had done neither good nor evil (Rom. 9:10-12). Descendants of Adam “*had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression*” (Rom. 5:14), apparently because they had not had similar positive precepts. Descendants of Adam were told, “*Choose you this day whom ye will serve*” (Josh. 24:14-24). Descendants of Adam are capable of loving God with all the heart, soul, and mind that is *in* them (Matt. 22:37). Love, praise, and all like fulfillment of purpose on man’s part would be farcical, and meaningless, except they come from a heart free to

choose. Every “seek...come...obey...ought” and “if” in God’s precepts to man imply, in keeping with the justice of God, that the capacity to respond is in man. How can we forget such obvious Bible truths?

But were not the alien Gentiles “*by nature the children of wrath?*” Read the American Standard (or check Greek text) and you will find that Eph. 2:1-3 says, “*ye were dead through your trespasses and sins.*” They “*walked according to the course of this world*” (v. 2), which means they lived according to the corrupt principles and practices which prevailed in the world at that time. And that is exactly what is meant by “*were by nature children of wrath.*” Nature (*phusis*) may mean physical laws of propagation (Rom. 11:21, 24), although neither “*nature*” nor scripture tell us how “*sin*” can be so transmitted. But “*nature*” also refers to social customs and mores (1 Cor. 11:14). Some Gentiles “*do by nature the things contained in the law*” (Rom. 2:14); i.e., sometimes “*nature*” is on God’s side.

“*All have sinned*” (Rom. 3:23), is a far cry from saying “all are born in sin” or “all sinned while in the loins of Adam.” Rom. 3:12 says, “*All are gone out of the way...become unprofitable.*” The “*death*” of Rom. 5:12 “*passed upon all men, for that all have sinned*” (all emphasis mine, RFT). Unlike 1 Cor. 15:22, where physical death and resurrection is the context, this passage is concerned with *spiritual* atonement and redemption (vv. 6-f). The context, from Rom. 1:16 forward, demands this. The “*all have sinned*” (*pantes hemarton*) of Rom. 5:12 is exactly the same as that of Rom. 3:23, and part of the same argument.

There is no desire on my part to deny the universality of sin---nor, for that matter, to deny the sinful “*nature*” of man. We are, to a great extent, children of our environment---and the “*course of this world*” is a jungle filled with unprincipled men who prey on their fellow-men. Adam’s sin was the beginning of it all; in that sense, the primordial influence of all that has since brought the world to such a depraved condition. The appetites of the flesh, steeped in the *consequences* of Adam’s sin, war against “*the law of the mind*” (Rom. 7:23)—against man’s desire to do better, against the flickering *spirit of man* that is still responsive to God’s overtures. Man’s flesh prevails, he fails, he sins—and if his only hope was a system of law and justice, he would be most undone. Man’s unworthiness is repeatedly affirmed in the scriptures, and in his own conscience. All these conditions, and more, affirm the sinful “*nature*” of man—but *they do not say* that “man, because he is man, sins.” The “*nature*” under consideration changes with social patterns. It is not comparable to “*inherent,*” in the sense that we can say Justice is inherent in God.

On the contrary, we can say that “man, because he is man” can be touched by God’s appeal in His word. “Man, because he is man” still has a sense of “ought”—can still “desire” to do better. There is still a “warfare” within him, between his spirit and his flesh. He is still soil that *can* receive the seed of the kingdom; that can be taught, hear, learn and come to the Savior (Jn. 6:44-45). Man, unlike other animal life, was made in

God's image (Gen. 1:26-27), "*but little lower than God*, ("angels, spirit beings" f.n.; Psm. 8:5). We should be ashamed of ourselves for saying, "Of course I sin, I am only human." Instead, we might stop to realize that being human is reason to expect greater and more noble things in our life. And "being human" God can and will justly condemn us for our failures. That is why we should be so grateful for Christ Jesus, who died on our behalf; and in whom we can find forgiveness and hope for eternal life.

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