

DOES THE BELIEVER HAVE ONE NATURE OR TWO?

by
William W. Combs*

In recent times the popular radio preacher and author, John MacArthur, has attacked the idea of two natures in the believer. He says at one point: “If you are a Christian, it’s a serious misunderstanding to think of yourself as having both an old and new nature. We do not have a dual personality!”¹ Similar attacks have come from a number of others. J. I. Packer says: “A widespread but misleading line of teaching tells us that Christians have two natures: an old one and a new one.”² John Gerstner labels the two-nature viewpoint “Antinomianism.”³ Are these attacks justified? Is it unbiblical to speak of two natures within the believer? This essay purposes to tackle the issue.

I should begin by stating that I *do* think there is a sense in which the believer can properly be said to have two natures, and yet there is also a sense in which the believer can properly be said to have one nature. Whether the believer can more correctly be described as having one nature or two is *partly* a matter of semantics—a difference in the *usage* of the term *nature*. Those who insist that a believer has only one nature are using the term *nature* differently from the two-nature proponents. But, as I will demonstrate, more important than the issue of the semantics of one or two-nature terminology, there lies below the surface of this debate a serious disagreement regarding the character of regeneration and sanctification within the believer. Those who argue against two natures in the believer usually do so because they view most of the two-nature proponents as having a defective understanding of these two doctrines,

*Dr. Combs is Academic Dean and Professor of New Testament at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in Allen Park, MI.

¹“The Good-Natured Believer,” *Masterpiece* (March–April 1990): 18.

²*Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992), p. 83.

³John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, 1991), p. 143.

which is merely reflected in their two-nature terminology. Thus, it is important to note at the outset that the debate between one or two natures has both semantic and substantive elements of disagreement. Both of these areas will now be explored.

MEANING OF *NATURE*

We might begin our discussion by looking at the word *nature*. It is important to note that the meaning of the term *nature* as it is used in the debate over one or two natures in the believer is primarily a theological issue, not one of scriptural usage. Thus we observe that neither the KJV nor the NASB, for instance, ever use the terms *old nature*, *sinful nature*, or *new nature*. This does not necessarily invalidate the legitimacy of these terms since, as we are well aware, it sometimes behooves us to use a term to describe a theological teaching of Scripture even though the term itself is not found therein—the well-known example being, of course, the term *Trinity*.

Scriptural Data

It is not exactly true that Scripture *never* uses *nature* in the sense we are discussing. Here I have reference to the Greek term φύσις, commonly translated “nature,” which is used fourteen times in the NT. On two of those occasions, it may, in fact, be used in a sense similar to the way *nature* is used in the debate at hand. In Ephesians 2:3 Paul says: “Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.”⁴ Though the meaning of the phrase “by nature children of wrath” is debated, at least some commentators understand “nature” to mean “sinful human nature.”⁵ Also, in 2 Peter 1:4 we are told that God “has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them [we] might become partakers of the divine nature.” “Partakers of the divine nature” could be understood to refer to the Christian’s “new nature.”⁶ However, neither of these verses can ultimately settle the debate at hand, for, as we will later observe, some who argue for one nature would admit that an individual can be

⁴Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the NASB, 1988.

⁵E.g., Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Ephesians: The Glory of the Church*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 35; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), p. 99.

⁶D. Edmond Hiebert, *Second Peter and Jude* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1989), p. 48; Renald E. Showers, “The New Nature” (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1975), pp. 86–88.

said to have an old nature or a new nature, but they do not allow that the Bible ever refers to both these natures in the saved person.⁷

It should also be noted that the term *nature* is used in both the RSV and NRSV in 2 Corinthians 4:16, “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (NRSV). Here it might seem the Bible does refer to two natures in the believer. However, “outer nature” and “inner nature” are literally “outer man” (ὁ ἔξω ἄνθρωπος) and “inner man” (ὁ ἐσω). These terms may be contrasting Paul’s outward physical life (“outer man”) with his inward spiritual life (“inner man”),⁸ though this is debated. What is certain is that no one is claiming they are to be equated with the old or new natures and thus have no bearing on the present debate. *Nature* is also found in the RSV’s translation of Colossians 3:9–10, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” Here, however, “old nature” and “new nature” are literally “old man” (τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον) and “new man” (τὸν νέον).⁹ However, in this case the terms “old man,” “new man” in Colossians 3:9–10 (as well as Rom 6:6 and Eph 4:22, 24) have often been identified with old and new natures, respectively. Therefore, we must necessarily discuss these three passages more carefully later in this paper. Finally, we should note that the phrase “sinful nature” is found numerous times in the NIV; however, this is not φύσις, but σὰρξ (flesh). We will later examine the appropriateness of this translation and its relevance to the question of one or two natures.

Theological Usage

As was previously noted, the use of the term *nature* as it relates to the question of one or two natures does not stem primarily from a particular text. Instead, it can more correctly be viewed as a theological term, essential to the discussion at hand, but whose meaning is generally derived from its common, ordinary usage. Webster, for example, defines *nature* as “the inherent character or basic constitution of a person or thing: essence, disposition, temperament.”¹⁰ Smith helpfully observes that “except when it is used for the material world or universe, the term

⁷E.g., B. B. Warfield, review of *He That Is Spiritual*, by Lewis S. Chafer, in *Princeton Theological Review* 17 (April 1919), reprinted in Michael Horton, ed., *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 215.

⁸Homer A. Kent, Jr., *A Heart Opened Wide: Studies in 2 Corinthians* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1982), p. 76.

⁹The NRSV has replaced “old nature,” “new nature” with “old self,” “new self.”

¹⁰*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. “nature,” p. 774.

'nature' does not designate a substance or an entity. Instead, it is a word which refers to the inherent or essential qualities of any substance or entity."¹¹ We might simplify by saying that *nature* can be defined as "the characteristics which make a thing what it is," or as Smith says, "a set of characteristics."¹² The important thing to remember is that *nature* and *person* must be carefully distinguished. Here we have been helped by the discussion of Buswell, who argues that "a nature is by definition a complex of attributes." His more complete statement reads: "A person is a non-material substantive entity, and is not to be confused with a nature. A nature is not a *part* of a person in the substantive sense. A nature is a complex of attributes, and is not to be confused with a substantive entity."¹³ Thus a nature cannot act and the Bible never speaks of a nature as acting.

By defining *nature* as a "complex of attributes" we can, for instance, correctly speak of Christ as having both a human and divine nature. By a human nature we mean he possessed all those attributes or characteristics essential for true humanity and, in like manner, by a divine nature we mean he possessed all those attributes or characteristics essential for true deity. Natures are not persons and natures do not act; thus Christ was one person with two natures. Therefore, it is perfectly acceptable to use two-nature terminology to describe Jesus Christ. Orthodox theology has traditionally used such terminology even though it is not found in the Bible. But, as Smith has wisely observed, "it is perfectly proper to speak of *the* (single) nature of Jesus as the God-Man. In so doing one would cite all those characteristics which are true of Him as the unique God-Man."¹⁴ In describing Christ as having one nature or two natures, a different *meaning* is not being given to the term *nature*—"a complex of attributes"; rather, we are simply grouping various attributes of the one person into either one or two groups emphasizing different aspects of the one person. Though, admittedly, not our normal perspective, if we were to describe the God-man as having one nature, we would include all those attributes which are essential to both natures—human and divine. If, as is our normal practice, we describe the God-man as having two natures, we are separating and grouping those attributes according to their distinctive qualities, whether they are human or divine. We are not suggesting by this two-nature terminology that these two natures are

¹¹Charles R. Smith, "Two Natures—Or One? An Attempt at Theological Clarification," *Voice* 62 (July–August 1983): 20.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962, 1963), 2:52.

¹⁴Smith, "Two Natures—Or One?" p. 21.

separate entities or persons. But we may conclude that, theologically, two-nature terminology seems quite helpful, if not essential, for understanding the one God-man.

By understanding *nature* as a complex of attributes, one is perfectly justified in using the term to describe the believer as having either one or two natures. In two-nature terminology the believer is usually said to have an old or sinful nature as well as a new nature. This old nature can be defined as “a continuing tendency to sin or rebel against God,”¹⁵ or “as that capacity to serve Satan, sin, and self acquired through Adam.”¹⁶ When the believer is viewed from the perspective of his old nature, the focus is on those attributes or characteristics which dispose him to sin. The old nature is in effect a disposition to sin which remains in the regenerate person. In similar fashion the new nature can be defined as “the capacity to serve God and righteousness acquired through regeneration.”¹⁷ It is a disposition toward holiness. Two-nature terminology provides us with what Smith calls a “useful abstraction,” enabling us to “speak of our ‘old nature’ when referring to the set of characteristics which is intrinsically ours by virtue of being born into this world as sinful persons—in contrast with those characteristics which are ours as a result of regeneration.”¹⁸

In similar fashion, our understanding of *nature* as a complex of attributes permits us to view the believer as having one nature. By this we would be referring to all those attributes, whatever they are, necessary to describe the individual as a fallen human creature who has also been regenerated. In actuality, however, it is difficult to find a critic of the two-nature view who, in rejecting that view, argues instead that the believer has only one nature. Critics of the two-nature view mostly avoid using the term *nature* at all. Packer rejects its use since he believes the two-nature view employs the term contrary to its use “both in life and in Scripture.” He adds “that ‘nature’ means the whole of what we are, and the whole of what we are is expressed in various actions and reactions that make up our life.”¹⁹ I have previously suggested, contrary to Packer, that Scripture may in fact use *nature* in the same way the two-nature view does (Eph 2:3; 2 Pet 1:4); but, even if Packer were correct on that point, he certainly falters when he insists that *nature* must mean “the

¹⁵Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 214.

¹⁶Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 3:196.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Smith, “Two Natures—Or One?” p. 21.

¹⁹*Rediscovering Holiness*, p. 83.

whole of what we are.” Clearly, he would not want us to believe that when he speaks of Christ’s human nature, he intends “the whole” of what the God-man is. In truth *nature* can refer to “the whole of what we are,” but it does not have to. As Smith explains:

It is proper to speak of a believer as having only one nature if the term is used to mean a “complex of attributes” which characterize an individual, and if this “complex” includes *all* the characteristics, good and bad, which describe the individual. But this does not disallow the use of the term as an abstraction to label various complexes of attributes such as that complex due to my Adamic inheritance.²⁰

So, it may be concluded, contrary to Packer, there is nothing illegitimate about using *nature*, especially as a theological term, to refer to those characteristics, both good and bad within the believer—the new and old natures. Neither is it illegitimate to speak of the believer as having one nature, one complex of attributes, as long as those attributes describe the whole individual—including both good and bad characteristics. Thus, the difference between one-nature and two-nature terminology is not over the *meaning* of the term *nature* but rather the *usage* of *nature* to describe different complexes of attributes. The value and attraction of two-nature terminology is that it provides convenient terminology to describe the struggle with sin within every believer. Those who decry the idea of two-natures in the believer would still strongly affirm that struggle, but they simply believe that it is not theologically accurate to describe it as a struggle between the old and new natures. Such terminology, they feel, can be misleading.

But, in reality, those who object to two natures in the believer have a difficult time ridding themselves of two-nature terminology. One could hardly find a more strident opponent of the two-nature view than John Gerstner, yet his own position is that “the Christian is one person *with two struggling principles* [emphasis added].”²¹ Another opponent of the two-nature view, J. I. Packer, explains that “believers find within themselves contrary urgings,” which he identifies as their “regenerate desires and purposes” and their “fallen, Adamic instincts.”²² Thus it seems that it is difficult to accurately describe the struggle which takes place within the believer without talking about two opposing somethings—principles, desires, urgings, etc. While it is true that two-nature terminology can be misleading and has sometimes been tied to

²⁰Charles R. Smith, review of *Birthright: Christian, Do You Know Who You Are?* by David Needham, in *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Fall 1982): 288.

²¹*Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, p. 232.

²²J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), p. 171.

inadequate views of sanctification, this is not necessarily so. The problem is not with two-nature terminology per se, but with a defective theology which happens to use two-nature terminology. But before we deal with this issue, it behooves us to look more carefully at the scriptural descriptions of the believer's struggle with sin.

THE OLD MAN/NEW MAN

In Romans 6, Ephesians 4, and Colossians 3, Paul contrasts the old man with the new man, though, actually, Romans 6 speaks only of the old man. Whereas the KJV has "man" (ἄνθρωπος) in these passages, the NASB uses "self."

Romans 6:6, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin;

Ephesians 4:20–24, But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

Colossians 3:9–10, Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him

Advocates of the two-nature view have found support for their position in Paul's description of this old man/new man contrast. The old man is equated with the old nature, and the new man with the new nature. Numerous interpreters, especially in earlier years, have understood the old-man/new-man contrast as a struggle between the believer's two natures.²³ Bavinck explains:

The spiritual struggle which the believers must conduct inside their souls has a very different character. It is not a struggle between reason and passion, but between the flesh and the spirit, between the old and the new man, between the sin which continues to dwell in the believers and the spiritual principle of life which has been planted in their hearts.²⁴

²³E.g., Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857), p. 259; idem, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 3:221–224; Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 2:348.

²⁴Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), p. 493.

However, there has always been a problem with this interpretation. On the one hand, the Ephesians passage would seem to support the equation of old man/new man equals old nature/new nature since there Paul does appear to speak of a present situation within the believer: he must “put off the old man” and “put on the new man.” This interpretation is probably more clearly seen in the NIV’s translation: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, . . . and to put on the new self.”²⁵ In other words, the Ephesians passage would seem to argue for the two-nature view of the believer—he has both an old man and a new man.

On the other hand, the Romans and Colossians passages make it difficult to identify the old man with the old nature since the old man is said to have been “crucified” (Rom 6:6) and to have been “laid aside” (Col 3:9), both past circumstances for the believer. If the old nature has been “crucified” and “laid aside,” how can one say the believer still has an old nature? Godet comes to the rescue by suggesting that Paul does not say our old nature was killed, only crucified—“He may exist still, but like one crucified, whose activity is paralyzed.”²⁶ However, this is probably not Paul’s thought. As Moo wisely reminds us:

The image of crucifixion is chosen not because Paul wants to suggest that our “dying with Christ” is a preliminary action that the believer must complete by daily “dying to sin,” but because Christ’s death took the form of crucifixion. The believer who is “crucified with Christ” is as definitely and finally “dead” as a result of this action as was Christ himself after his crucifixion (as Paul stresses in v. 10: the death Christ died he died “once for all”). Of course, we must remember what this death means. This is no more a physical, or ontological, death, than is our burial with Christ (v. 4) or our “dying to sin” (v. 2). Paul’s language throughout is forensic, or positional; by God’s act, we have been placed in a new position. This position is real, for what exists in God’s sight is surely (ultimately) real, and it carries definite consequences for day-to-day living. But it is status, or power-structure, that Paul is talking about here.²⁷

As Moo stresses, Paul’s old-man/new-man language is not ontological, but relational or positional in orientation. Paul is not describing

²⁵This same interpretation would seem to be found in the NASB and KJV.

²⁶Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (reprint of 1883 ed.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), p. 244. Also, C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 1979), 1:309.

²⁷Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 373.

aspects of the individual, but the person as a whole. The contrast between the old and new man does not refer to a change in nature but a change in relationship. Our old man is “what we were ‘in Adam’—the ‘man’ of the old age, who lives under the tyranny of sin and death.”²⁸ The old man is my old unregenerate self. The new man is my new regenerate self. Thus, the believer is properly described as only a new man. While one can, as I have argued, correctly speak of a believer as having both an old and new nature; “it is,” as Murray reminds us, “no more feasible to call the believer a new man and an old man, than it is to call him a regenerate man and an unregenerate.... The believer is a new man, a new creation, but he is a new man not yet made perfect. Sin dwells in him still, and he still commits sin. He is necessarily the subject of progressive renewal.”²⁹ Paul’s point, then, in the old-man/new-man contrast is that there has been a radical change in the believer’s relationship to sin. While the believer still sins, he is no longer a slave to sin, sin no longer reigns (Rom 6:14, 17, 18, 20)—that is the condition of the old man, the unregenerate person.

However, if this is true, and the believer is no longer an old man, but a new man, we still face a problem with the Ephesians passage, where, as we have seen, Paul seems to be commanding Christians to “put off the old man” and to “put on the new man.” How can Paul command the putting off of the old man if the old man is the old unregenerate self? The answer is that Paul is probably not giving commands in Ephesians 4:22-24; instead, he is describing a past event for the Ephesian believers, the same situation we saw in Romans and Colossians. To understand Ephesians in this way, one might look to Murray’s solution, which takes the infinitives in v. 22 (“put off,” ἀποθέσθαι) and v. 24 (“put on,” ἐνδύσασθαι) as indicating result. Thus he translates: “But ye have not so learned Christ, if so be ye have heard him and have been taught by him as the truth is in Jesus, so that ye have put off, according to the former manner of life, the old man who is corrupted according to the lusts of deceit, and are being renewed in the spirit of your mind, and have put on the new man who after God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.”³⁰ Though Murray presents a well-reasoned grammatical case for his translation, it is probably not the best way to understand Paul’s syntax; result infinitives are not likely here. Wallace suggests they are more likely infinitives used in indirect discourse, following the verb “taught” (ἐδιδάχθητε),

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 218–19.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 215–16.

which could represent an indicative in the direct discourse.³¹ Thus we should translate: “you have been taught in him...that you have put off...the old man...and that you have put on the new man...” This is supported by the “therefore” (διό) in 4:25, which usually follows a statement of fact in order to make an application; that is, because the Ephesians have already put off the old man and have put on the new man, they should “therefore...speak truth,” etc.³²

The conclusion to be drawn is that, although it has been common to equate old nature/new nature with old man/new man, this is not a correct understanding of how Paul uses the terms old man/new man. This lack of correlation does not in and of itself deny the legitimacy of the two-nature, only that the old-man/new-man contrast has a different point to make. We will now turn to two passages which do directly describe the believer’s struggle with sin.

GALATIANS 5:16–17

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.

It is universally recognized that this passage describes the believer’s battle with sin—the flesh against the Spirit. Though Paul sometimes uses flesh (σάρξ) for the physical aspect of man, it is widely conceded that in this passage we find Paul’s well-known “ethical” use of the term—fallen human nature. Longenecker explains:

It has often been noted that σάρξ used ethically has to do with humanity’s fallen, corrupt, or sinful nature, as distinguished from the human nature as originally created by God.... Translating σάρξ as “flesh” in ethical contexts (as KJV, ASV, RSV) has often encouraged ideas of anthropological dualism, with the physical body taken to be evil per se and the mortification of the body viewed in some manner as necessary for achieving a true Christian experience. In reaction to such ideas, various translators have tried to give to the expression a more interpretive and descriptive rendering....

Probably the best of the interpretive translations are those that add the adjective “corrupt” or “sinful” to the noun “nature” (i.e., KNOX, NIV), thereby suggesting an essential aspect of mankind’s present human condition that is in opposition to “the Spirit” and yet avoiding the idea that the

³¹Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 605.

³²For a different view of how to harmonize the Ephesians passage, see Moo, *Romans*, pp. 374–75.

human body is evil per se.³³

Paul's use of "flesh," or "sinful nature" as the NIV renders the term, in Galatians 5:16–17 is viewed by two-nature advocates as a direct reference to the believer's old nature—his continuing tendency to sin or rebel against God. Those who argue against the two-nature view would not refer to the flesh as a nature, yet they still define flesh similarly. Packer, for instance, says:

Believers find within themselves contrary urgings. The Spirit sustains their regenerate desires and purposes; their fallen Adamic instincts (the "flesh") which, though dethroned, are not yet destroyed, constantly distract them from doing God's will and allure them along paths that lead to death (Gal 5:16–17; James 1 :14–15).³⁴

Galatians 5:16–17 does not say that there is, in the believer, a struggle between the old nature (flesh) and new nature, but between flesh (old nature) and Spirit. However, Lenski, following Luther, among others, has understood "Spirit" as "spirit" and interpreted it as a direct reference to the new nature.³⁵ But this view has found few supporters, and, as Fung observes, "is highly unlikely in view of the Spirit-flesh contrast Paul develops elsewhere (cf. Rom 8:4–6, 9, 13), particularly in Gal 3:3, and in view of the clear reference to the divine Spirit in both the preceding and the following verses (5:16, 18, 22, 25)."³⁶

Because Paul's language speaks specifically of a struggle between the flesh (old nature) and the Spirit, does that mean it is invalid to characterize that struggle as also one between the old and new natures? It is interesting to read Calvin's discussion of Galatians 5:17, where, in the same paragraph he speaks of the "Spirit" as both the "Spirit of God" and "the renewed nature, or the grace of regeneration."³⁷ While, as Pink observes, "we must distinguish between the Holy Spirit and the principle

³³Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), pp. 239–40.

³⁴*Concise Theology*, p. 171.

³⁵R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1946), p. 281; Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, ed. Philip S. Watson (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 501. Also, J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (reprint ed.; Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 21.

³⁶Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 249.

³⁷John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans–Galatians* (reprint ed.; Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), p. 1921.

of which he imparts at regeneration,³⁸ and while it is almost certainly true that Paul's contrast in Galatians 5:16–17 is between the flesh and the Holy Spirit, we should not attempt to drive a wedge between the Spirit himself and the new disposition (new nature) he imparts at regeneration. Stott concludes: "By 'the Spirit' he seems to mean the Holy Spirit Himself who renews and regenerates us, first giving us a new nature and then remaining to dwell in us."³⁹

Even those who oppose the two-nature viewpoint strongly affirm that the Holy Spirit works in conjunction with the believer's new disposition. Warfield, perhaps the greatest foe of the two-nature view, says that in the process of sanctification the work of the Spirit includes "the development of the implanted principle of spiritual life and infused habits of grace,"⁴⁰ and, in addition, "holy dispositions are implanted, nourished and perfected."⁴¹ As was previously observed, Packer says that while "believers find within themselves contrary urgings, the Spirit sustains their regenerate desires and purposes," and Packer ends this sentence with a reference to Galatians 5:16–17.

So, it may be concluded that the struggle which Paul describes in Galatians 5:16–17 as being that of the flesh against the Spirit is no less a struggle between the believer's old and new natures.

ROMANS 7:14–25

Paul's description of the struggle between the old and new natures is not confined to the flesh/Spirit contrast of Galatians 5:16–17. Paul can, as Romans 7:14–25 illustrates, use somewhat different terminology to describe the same conflict. Though there is considerable debate about this section of Romans, there would appear to be more than sufficient reasons for understanding this passage as describing Paul as a regenerate person. Some of the more important ones would include: (1) The shift

³⁸Arthur W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), p. 245.

³⁹John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), p. 146. Cf. Homer A. Kent, Jr., "It is preferable, therefore, to regard the contrast as between the old nature of man ('flesh') and the new nature controlled by the Holy Spirit" (*The Freedom of God's Sons: Studies in Galatians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976], p. 156) and William Hendriksen, "Verse 16 clearly implies that there is a conflict between the Spirit and the flesh, therefore also between the believer's new, Spirit-indwelt, nature and his old, sinful, self" (*Exposition of Galatians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968], p. 214).

⁴⁰John E. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 2 vols. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 2:327.

⁴¹B. B. Warfield, "On the Biblical Notion of Renewal," in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), p. 372.

from the past tenses of verses 7–13 to the present tenses beginning in verse 14 is inexplicable unless Paul has now shifted to his present regenerate status. (2) In verse 22 Paul says: “For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,” and in verse 25b: “I myself with my mind am serving the law of God.” Murray argues that “this is service which means subjection of heart and will, something impossible for the unregenerate man.”⁴² (3) In answer to the longing of verse 24, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” Paul gives a triumphant answer in the first part of verse 25, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” This is the confession of Paul, the regenerate man, which is immediately followed by a concluding summary concerning his continuing struggle with sin as a believer: “So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.” This is the same struggle which has been recounted beginning in verse 14.

Numerous verses in 7:14–25 describe Paul’s struggle with sin. There is, in general, a conflict between “willing” (θέλω, used 7 times) and “doing” (various words used 11 times). Paul says: “I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate” (v. 15). “For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish” (v. 19). Sometimes Paul’s description sounds like he is split into two persons: “So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me” (v. 17). “But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me” (v. 20). The key here is to understand that Paul uses “I” in a more comprehensive sense in verses 15 and 19 than in verses 17 and 20.⁴³ The “I” in the former verses is the comprehensive Paul, the “I” who wishes to do good but finds himself doing evil. The “I” in the latter verses is viewed more narrowly. Thus, when Paul says, “if I [#1] am doing the very thing I do not wish, I [#2] am no longer the one doing it,” it may sound like there are two different personalities inside him. But, in fact, Paul is attempting to describe, within the limits of language, the experience of every Christian. He is viewing himself from the conflicting dispositions (natures) resident within himself. “I” (#1) is Paul viewed from the aspect of his old nature; “I” (#2) is Paul viewed from the aspect of the new nature: “If I [viewed from the perspective of my old nature] am doing the very thing I do not wish, I [viewed from the perspective of my new nature] am no longer the one doing it” (v. 20). We should not necessarily be surprised at Paul’s language since he makes similar, seemingly

⁴²John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2 vols. in one (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 1:258.

⁴³Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Struggle Between Old and New Natures in the Converted Man,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 5 (May 1962): 47.

contradictory statements in other places. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). “I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (1 Cor 15:10). As Hodge notes: “No one supposes that the labours and life here spoken of were not the labours and life of the apostle.”⁴⁴

Obviously, Paul is not trying to evade responsibility for his sin when he says “I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me” (v. 20). Moo explains:

His point is that his failure to put into action what he wills to do shows that there is something besides himself involved in the situation. If we had only to do with him, in the sense of that part of him which agrees with God’s law and wills to do it, we would not be able to explain why he consistently does what he does not want to do. No, Paul reasons, there must be another “actor” in the drama, another factor that interferes with his performance of what he wants to do. This other factor is indwelling sin.⁴⁵

When Paul says “I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me,” the conflict is specifically between the “I” of the new nature and sin. But “sin,” as Moo continues, “is not a power that operates ‘outside’ the person.”⁴⁶ Neither is it some abstract concept or some alien force in the believer, but the corruption of the old nature itself. Just as the conflict between the old and new natures can be described in Galatians 5:16–17 as a conflict between flesh (old nature) and Spirit, so here in Romans it can be described as a conflict between sin and the new nature. But it is still the same struggle. “Sin” is not an alien force distinct from the believer, but the corruption of the old nature itself. Hodge observes: “Sin, in this, as in so many other places in Scripture, is presented as an abiding state of the mind, a disposition or principle, manifesting itself in acts.”⁴⁷

As was noted previously, Paul describes this same struggle in verse 25: “So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.” Here the struggle is described as between the “mind” and the “flesh.” “Mind” is used here, as Hodge reminds us, to refer not to “the reason, nor the affections, but the higher or renewed nature.”⁴⁸ So we conclude that although Paul expresses his struggle with sin in Romans 7:14–25 using a

⁴⁴Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (reprint of 1886 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 232.

⁴⁵*Romans*, pp. 457–58.

⁴⁶*Ibid.* p. 458.

⁴⁷*Romans*, p. 232.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 237.

variety of terminology, in reality he is describing one and the same conflict, the same conflict found in Galatians 5:16–17. While it is true that Paul never mentions the Spirit in Roman 7:14–25, this is only a factor of Paul's emphasis at this point in Romans. As Calvin notes, commenting on 7:15: "This conflict, of which the Apostle speaks, does not exist in man before he is renewed by the Spirit of God."⁴⁹ It is only, as Ferguson observes, "the presence of the Spirit that produces these conflicts."⁵⁰

CRITICISMS OF THE TWO-NATURE VIEW

Though I have argued that the two-nature view is a theologically accurate way to describe the believer's struggle with sin and that Scripture itself supports such a view; nevertheless, the two-nature view has been subjected to severe criticism. That criticism has come mainly from within the Reformed camp. One of the most outspoken critics was B. B. Warfield. His views are found in an article entitled, "The Victorious Life," which was originally written for the *Princeton Theological Review* in 1918 and later reprinted as part of his two-volume work, *Perfectionism*, in 1931.⁵¹ Equally important is Warfield's review of Lewis Sperry Chafer's book, *He That Is Spiritual*, which appeared in the *Princeton Theological Review* in 1919.⁵² The significant point to note about Warfield's opposition to the two-nature view is that his criticism was based on a particular formulation of the two-nature view. Warfield criticized Chafer's presentation of two natures in the believer, not so much because of his two-nature terminology, but because Warfield believed Chafer's particular two-nature viewpoint was defective as it related both to regeneration and sanctification. Warfield's chief objection to Chafer was theological, not semantic. That this is the case can be demonstrated from the fact that Warfield's own teacher in theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Charles Hodge, used two-nature terminology,⁵³ and, as we would expect, Warfield's views on regeneration

⁴⁹Romans, p. 1419.

⁵⁰Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Reformed View," in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 63.

⁵¹The most important essays from the two-volume set have been reprinted in one volume by Presbyterian and Reformed (1958).

⁵²See note 7 above.

⁵³Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:221–224. Cf. John F. Walvoord, "The Augustinian-Dispensational Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 200.

and sanctification are in full agreement with those of Hodge.⁵⁴ A more recent Reformed theologian, Anthony Hoekema, whose views are substantially the same as Warfield's, also firmly supports the concept of two natures in the believer.⁵⁵

The two-nature view, as it was understood by Chafer and those who have followed him, is open to a number of criticisms. The Chaferian view⁵⁶ of the two natures is defective, not because it is a two-nature view, but because of how the two natures are defined. Let us begin with Chafer's explanation: "Having received the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4) while still retaining the old nature, every child of God possesses two natures; one is incapable of sinning, and the other is incapable of holiness."⁵⁷ This definition of the two natures is immediately problematic because it moves away from the truth that a nature is a complex of attributes, a set of characteristics, a disposition that characterizes the individual. To say that the new nature cannot sin suggests that it is an autonomous, separate entity, since only an entity can sin. This opens up the Chaferian view to the charge of an additional personality within the believer. Though Chafer naturally denies any suggestion of two personalities,⁵⁸ nevertheless, it is still a problem, as Warfield illustrates:

⁵⁴Warfield's textbook in his theology classes was Hodge's *Systematic Theology* (David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, 2 vols. [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994, 1996], 2:204). Warfield's immediate predecessor in the chair of theology at Princeton, A. A. Hodge, also used two-nature terminology (A. A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology* [London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1890], p. 296).

⁵⁵"The Struggle Between Old and New Natures in the Converted Man," pp. 42–50 and *Saved by Grace*, p. 214.

⁵⁶This label has been suggested by Charles C. Ryrie ("Contrasting Views on Sanctification," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell [Chicago: Moody Press, 1982], p.191). As Randall Gleason has pointed out ("B. B. Warfield and Lewis S. Chafer on Sanctification," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 [June 1997]: 245), Chafer's view on sanctification and the two natures is exactly the same as his mentor, C. I. Scofield (cf. Scofield's view in his *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* [Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, n.d.], pp. 66–74). It is also, according to Charles Ryrie, the view of himself and John F. Walvoord ("Contrasting Views on Sanctification," p. 199). In his own article on sanctification, Walvoord calls his view "The Augustinian-Dispensational Perspective" (in *Five Views on Sanctification*, pp. 199–226). Whatever the title, Walvoord's view is essentially that of Chafer. Gleason observes that "Walvoord's expression 'the Augustinian-Dispensational perspective'...appears to be a misnomer, since there is little theological relationship between Chafer's unique perspective on sanctification and his dispensational distinctives" ("Warfield and Chafer on Sanctification," p. 241, n. 2).

⁵⁷Lewis S. Chafer, *Major Bible Themes* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1927), p. 161.

⁵⁸*Systematic Theology*, 2:347.

At any rate it belongs ineradicably to “the Christian” to turn on the old carnal nature, or the new Spiritual nature, as he may choose, and let it act for him. Who this “Christian” is who possesses this power it is a little puzzling to make out. He cannot be the old carnal nature, for that old carnal nature cannot do anything good—and presumably, therefore, would never turn on the Spirit in control. He cannot be the new Spiritual nature, for this new Spiritual nature cannot do anything evil—and the “Christian” “may choose to walk after the flesh.” Is he possibly some third nature: We hope not, because two absolutely antagonistic and noncommunicating natures seem enough to be in one man.⁵⁹

The Chaferian view of the natures is also defective because it denies that they are subject to change. The new nature is, according to Chafer, “incapable of sinning” and the old nature is “incapable of holiness.” The new nature “is a regeneration or creation of something wholly new which is possessed in conjunction with the old nature so long as the child of God is in this body.”⁶⁰ Thus the believer has two equally powerful natures which remain in him as long as he lives and which remain unchanged during that time. This, of course, leads to a continual conflict within the believer and results in a view of sanctification which Ryrie calls the “counteraction of the new nature of the believer against the old.”⁶¹ The believer makes progress in sanctification as he yields to the Holy Spirit who is able to counteract the old nature and empower the new. Lawrence explains it well:

The flesh will never change.... This means that the flesh will always and only do what sin, under the control of Satan, directs it to do. All efforts to change the flesh are futile; the only thing that can be done with the flesh is to bring it under the control of a greater power.⁶²

That “greater power” is the Holy Spirit who counteracts the old nature as believers are filled with the Spirit. “The filling of the Spirit,” as Walvoord says, “is the secret to sanctification.”⁶³

The problem with the Chaferian view is that it seems to leave a part of the individual—the old nature—untouched by either regeneration or sanctification. Again, this sounds like the old nature is some sort of autonomous entity. But if the old nature is a part of the individual, which,

⁵⁹*Perfectionism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958), p. 374.

⁶⁰Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 2:347.

⁶¹“Contrasting Views on Sanctification,” p. 191

⁶²William D. Lawrence, “The Traitor in the Gates: The Christian’s Conflict with the Flesh,” in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), pp. 128–29.

⁶³*Five Views on Sanctification*, p. 101.

of course, it must be; then some aspect of the believer would appear to be unaffected by regeneration and resulting sanctification. The same could be said for the new nature. If, as Chafer says, it is incapable of sinning, we are left with another part of man that needs no saving.

The more correct and more “biblical teaching is rather that the Christian’s total self is progressively renewed and restored throughout the sanctifying process.”⁶⁴ At regeneration a new disposition (new nature) is created within the soul. Sanctification affects both this new disposition as well as the old (old nature). Hoekema defines sanctification “as that gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which he delivers us from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to him.”⁶⁵ By “pollution” Hoekema means the “corruption of our nature which is the result of sin and which, in turn, produces further sin.” He adds: “In *sanctification* the pollution of sin is in the process of being removed (though it will not be totally removed until the life to come).”⁶⁶ This was Warfield’s point when he argued that in sanctification God

cures our sinning precisely by curing our sinful nature; He makes the tree good that the fruit may be good. It is, in other words, precisely by eradicating our sinfulness—“the corruption of our hearts”—that He delivers us from sinning.... To imagine that we can be saved from the power of sin without the eradication of the corruption in which the power of sin has its seat, is to imagine that an evil tree can be compelled to bring forth good fruit.⁶⁷

Warfield’s use of the term *eradication* may seem somewhat strange to those of us who have been used to using the term in a pejorative sense as it is applied to those types of Christian experience which tend toward perfectionism—the complete eradication of the sinful nature as a present experience for the believer—but, of course, Warfield was violently opposed to any such idea of sanctification. By eradication, Warfield means a progressive and gradual process, not an instantaneous one. Neither does Warfield diminish the role of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s sanctification. But he argues

that the Spirit dwells within us in order to affect us, not merely our acts; in order to eradicate our sinfulness and not merely to counteract its effects. The Scriptures’ way of cleansing the stream is to cleanse the fountain; they

⁶⁴Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness*, p. 111.

⁶⁵*Saved by Grace*, p. 192

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 192–93.

⁶⁷*Perfectionism*, p. 368.

are not content to attack the stream of our activities, they attack directly the heart out of which the issues of life flow. But they give us no promise that the fountain will be completely cleansed all at once, and therefore no promise that the stream will flow perfectly purely from the beginning. We are not denying that the Spirit leads us in all our acts, as well as purifies our hearts. But we are denying that His whole work in us, or His whole immediate work in us, or His fundamental work in us, terminates on our activities and can be summed up in the word “counteraction.” Counteraction there is; and suppression there is; but most fundamentally of all there is eradication; and all these work one and the self-same Spirit.⁶⁸

At regeneration the believer is changed, but it is not a change of substance. Instead, it is a change in direction, a change in disposition. Whereas the unbeliever has only one direction, one disposition—toward sin and away from God—the believer is now a “new creature” (2 Cor 5:17) with a new direction, a new disposition—toward God and holiness. He now has characteristics or attributes which incline him toward holiness—a new nature—what Warfield calls the implantation of holy dispositions.⁶⁹ Though *genuinely* new, the believer is not *totally* new.⁷⁰ Therefore, he still retains those old characteristics or attributes which incline him toward sin—his old nature—what Warfield calls the “native tendencies to evil.”⁷¹ In sanctification the old nature is progressively being eradicated and the new nature is being “nourished”⁷² so that it will ultimately supplant the old. However, ultimate perfection, final and complete sanctification—the total eradication of the old nature and the complete implantation of the new nature—is not, as Scripture makes clear, the believer’s portion as long as he dwells in this mortal body; but it is the ultimate destiny of every believer, for one day “we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).

PROBLEMS WITH THE ONE-NATURE VIEW

Properly delineated, the two-nature view can accurately and correctly represent the Bible’s teaching on regeneration and sanctification, but so can the one-nature view, *if* it is properly delineated. An advantage for the two-nature view—and thus a minor difficulty for the one-nature view—is that the two-nature view more easily describes the believer’s struggle with sin. As we have previously observed, one-nature advocates

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 371.

⁶⁹“On the Biblical Notion of Renewal,” p. 372.

⁷⁰Hoekema, *Five Views on Sanctification*, p. 231.

⁷¹“On the Biblical Notion of Renewal,” p. 372.

⁷²Ibid.

usually end up using two-nature terminology even though they disavow the term *nature*. A potential and much more serious problem for the one-nature view can arise if that one nature is not carefully defined. For instance, Warfield says: “For the new nature which God gives us is not an absolutely new somewhat, alien to our personality, inserted into us, but our old nature itself remade.”⁷³ Thus Warfield can call the believer’s one nature, the new nature. But, of course, Warfield is careful to explain that something old remains in that new nature.

Unfortunately, sometimes, those who argue for the one-nature position have been unable to correctly express it. A well-known example of someone who has misunderstood one-nature terminology is John MacArthur, Jr. By mixing elements of the Chaferian view of the two natures while at the same time denying the two-nature view, MacArthur has sketched out a picture of the believer’s struggle with sin which is theologically problematic. As was previously noted, MacArthur denies that the believer has two natures: “No matter how radical our outer transformation at the time of salvation may have been for the better, it is difficult to comprehend that we no longer have the fallen sin nature and that our new nature is actually divine.”⁷⁴ Thus, right away MacArthur has presented us and himself with a dilemma. If the believer has only one nature, and that nature is “divine,” then how do we account for the believer’s sinning? We get a glimpse of MacArthur’s solution when he says: “Although sin is not the product of our new self, we’re still bound to some degree by the body we dwell in.”⁷⁵ Apparently, we are to understand that since we no longer have a fallen nature but only one new divine-nature, which cannot sin, the believer’s sinning must be due to his physical body. This becomes clearer:

As every mature Christian learns, the more he grows in Christ, the more he becomes aware of sin in his life. In many places, Paul uses the terms *body* and *flesh* to refer to sinful propensities that are intertwined with physical weaknesses and pleasures.... New birth in Christ brings death to the sinful self, but it does not bring death to the temporal flesh and its corrupted inclinations until the future glorification. Obviously, a Christian’s body is potentially good and is intended to do only good things, else Paul would not have commanded believers to present their bodies to God as “a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1). It can respond to the new holy disposition, but does not always do so.⁷⁶

⁷³Review of *He That Is Spiritual*, p. 215.

⁷⁴John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Romans*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991, 1994), 1:334.

⁷⁵“The Good-Natured Believer,” p. 20.

⁷⁶*Romans*, 1:325–26.

We can only assume that the body's failure to "respond to the new holy disposition" is due to some failure (sin) in the body.

But if we had any doubts that the believer's sinfulness is to be located in the body we only have to read a little further:

Because a believer is a new creature in Christ, his immortal soul is forever beyond sin's reach. The only remaining beachhead where sin can attack a Christian is in his mortal body. One day that body will be glorified and forever be out of sin's reach, but in the meanwhile it is still mortal, that is, subject to corruption and death. It still has lusts—because the brain and the thinking processes are part of the mortal body.... [God] does not warn about sin reigning in our souls or our spirits, but only about its reigning in our bodies, because that is the only place in a Christian where sin can operate.⁷⁷

MacArthur's argument is perfectly logical, if we accept his premise. Since the believer's "immortal soul is forever beyond sin's reach"—after all "sin is not the product of our new self" and "our new nature is actually divine"—there remains only one location left for sin to dwell—the body with its "brain" and "thinking processes." Sin is not to be located in the believer's immaterial being, his soul or spirit, but only in the physical body. But all this assumes MacArthur's premise, that the believer's immaterial part, his soul and spirit, is sinless. This is far afield from orthodox theology, but it is in perfect agreement with the radical dualism of the Greek philosophical tradition, which viewed the body as inherently evil. To be fair, MacArthur disavows any connection with that tradition,⁷⁸ but, unfortunately, his denials cannot overturn his clear statements to the contrary.

We might ask ourselves how MacArthur could have wandered so far from the way of orthodox theology. Here one can only speculate, but if we read enough of MacArthur on this subject, it soon becomes clear how indebted he is to the teaching of John Murray on the old-man/new-man contrast, to which we have previously referred.⁷⁹ Murray correctly demonstrates, as we have previously explained, that the old-man/new-man contrast is not the same as the old-nature/new-nature contrast, but that the old man is the unregenerate person as a whole, while the new man is the regenerate person as a whole. It is this understanding of the old man/new man that appears to be behind MacArthur's thinking:

⁷⁷Ibid., 1:337.

⁷⁸Ibid., 1:386.

⁷⁹Murray's discussion of the old-man/new-man contrast in *Principles of Conduct* is cited by MacArthur in *Romans*, 1: 324 and "The Good-Natured Believer," p. 20.

The old man, the old self, is the unregenerate person. He is not part righteous and part sinful, but totally sinful and without the slightest potential *within himself* for becoming righteous and pleasing to God. The new man, on the other hand, is the regenerate person. He is made pleasing to God through Jesus Christ and his new nature is *entirely godly and righteous*.⁸⁰

What MacArthur has apparently failed to grasp from Murray is that although Murray said “the believer is a new man, a new creation,” he went on to add that “he is a new man not yet made perfect. Sin dwells in him, and he still commits sin.”⁸¹ And, more importantly, when Murray said “sin dwells in him,” he meant the believer’s immaterial being, not his body.⁸² The believer is a new man in whom sin dwells, not in his body but in every aspect of his immaterial being.

But perhaps there is another source for MacArthur’s view of the sinful body. After all, does not Paul himself speak of “our body of sin” (Rom 6:6) and “putting to death the deeds of the body?” (Rom 8:13). Orthodox theology has always rejected any interpretation of these statements which would suggest that sin resides in the corporeal. There are two ways in which Paul’s language might be explained. If, on the one hand, Paul does in fact mean the physical body in these verses, then the genitive modifier (“of sin”) would not mean that the body is inherently sinful but “that the body is particularly susceptible to, and easily dominated by, sin.”⁸³ This would seem to be Ladd’s explanation:

The body is not only weak and mortal but also an instrument of the flesh. Sin and death do not, however, reside in corporeality itself or in the natural body but in the flesh. Since sin can reign in the mortal body (Rom 6:12), the body viewed as the instrumentality of sin can be called a sinful body (Rom 6:6); and therefore the person indwelt by the Spirit must put to death the deeds of the body (Rom 8:13). This, however, is not mortification of the body, itself, but of its sinful acts.⁸⁴

Another possibility, not unrelated to the first, is that Paul is using the word *body* (σῶμα) metaphorically to refer to the whole person, a figure of speech called synecdoche—“a part for a whole.” This clearly seems to be the case in Romans 6:12–13, where Paul tells his readers, “do not let sin reign in your mortal body” and “do not go on presenting the

⁸⁰Romans, 1:318.

⁸¹*Principles of Conduct*, p. 219.

⁸²Cf. his *Romans*, 1:221, n. 11.

⁸³Moo, *Romans*, p. 375.

⁸⁴George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. and ed. Donald A Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 508.

members of your body to sin,” but, on the contrary, “present yourselves to God.” In these verses “yourselves” is equated with “body” (cf. also Rom 12:1–2). Thus it is the person who indwells the body who is sinful, not the body itself. Whichever way we may view Paul’s language, it is clear that the Bible does not teach that the body is inherently evil but that sin resides in man’s immaterial being, not his physical; yet the body is where we commonly see the outworkings of sin.

However MacArthur arrived at his view, the “good-natured believer” as he calls it in one place, it is clearly out of step with orthodox theology and a proper understanding of the one-nature view.

CONCLUSION

I have sought to demonstrate that it is perfectly valid to speak of the believer as having two natures—old and new—as long as the term *nature* is understood to refer to a complex of attributes, a set of characteristics, or disposition. These natures are not substantive entities and do not act. But the believer himself can be viewed as acting from the perspective of his old or new nature—his disposition may be toward sin or holiness. While some two-nature advocates have used two-nature terminology to present a view of sanctification which is inherently defective, the fault lies with their deficient theology, not with two-nature terminology itself. Two-nature terminology combined with a proper understanding of regeneration and sanctification accurately represents the believer’s struggle with sin as presented in Scripture.