

A.W. Pink:

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6); “The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other” (Gal. 5:17). These and similar passages clearly connote that there are two distinct and diverse springs of action in the Christian, from which proceed evil and good works. The older expositors were accustomed to speak of these springs of action as “principles”—the principles of evil and holiness. Modern writers more frequently refer to them as “the two natures in the believer.” We have no objection against this form of expression, provided it be used to represent Scriptural realities and not human fancies. But it appears to us that there are not a few today who speak of the “two natures” and yet have no clear conception of what the term signifies, often conveying a faulty idea to the minds of their hearers.

In ordinary parlance “nature” expresses, first, the result of what we have by our origin: and second, the qualities that are developed in us by growth. Thus, we talk of anything bestial or devilish as being contrary to human nature—alas that the beasts so often put us to shame. More distinctly, we speak of a lion’s nature (ferocity), a vulture’s nature (feeding on carrion), a lamb’s nature (gentleness). A “nature,” then, describes what a creature is by birth and disposition. Now the Christian has experienced two births, and is subject to two growths. Two sets of moral qualities belong to him: the one as born of Adam, the other as born of God. But much caution needs to be exercised at this point, lest on the one hand we carnalize our conception of the new birth, or, on the other hand, dwell so much on the two natures that we lose sight of the person who possesses them, and thus practically deny his responsibility.

In the interests of clarity we must contemplate these two natures separately, considering first what we are as children of men, and then what we are as children of God. In contemplating what we are as men, we must distinguish sharply between what we are by God’s creation, and what we became by our fall from that uprightness in which we were originally made, for fallen human nature is radically different from our primitive condition. But here, too, great care must be taken in defining that difference. Man did not lose any component part of his being by the Fall: he still consists of “spirit and soul and body.” No essential element of his constitution was forfeited, none of his faculties were destroyed. Rather was his entire being vitiated and corrupted, stricken with a loathsome disease. A potato is still a potato when frozen; an apple remains an apple when decayed within, though no longer edible. By the Fall man relinquished his honour and glory, lost his holiness, and forfeited the favour of God; but he still retained his human nature.

It cannot be insisted upon too strongly that no essential part of man’s complex make-up, no faculty of his being, was destroyed at the Fall, for multitudes are seeking to shelter behind a misconception at this very point. They suppose that man lost some vital part of his nature when Adam ate of the forbidden fruit, and that it is this loss which accounts for all his failures. Man imagines he is far more to be pitied than blamed. The blame, he supposes, belongs to his first parent, and he is to be pitied because deprived of his capability of working righteousness. It is in such a manner that Satan succeeds in deceiving many of his victims, and it is the bounden duty of the Christian minister to expose such a sophistry and drive the ungodly out of their refuge of lies. The truth is that man today possesses identically the same faculties as those with which Adam was originally created, and his accountability lies in the use he makes of those faculties, and his criminality consists in his abuse of the same.

On the other hand, there are not a few who believe that at the Fall man received a nature which he did not possess before, and in his efforts to evade his responsibility he throws all the blame of his lawless actions on that evil nature. Equally erroneous and equally vain is such a subterfuge. No material addition was made to man’s being at the Fall, any more than that some part was taken from it. That which entered man’s being at the Fall was sin, and sin has defiled every part of his person—but for that we are to be blamed and not pitied. Nor has fallen man become so helplessly the victim of sin that his accountability is cancelled: rather does God hold him responsible to resist and reject every inclination unto evil, and will justly punish him because he fails to do so. Every attempt to negate human responsibility must be steadfastly resisted by us.

The youth differs much from the infant, and the man from the immature youth; nevertheless it is the same individual, the same human person, who passes through these stages. Men we are, and shall ever remain: whatever internal change we may be subject to at regeneration, and whatever change awaits the body at resurrection, we shall never lose our essential identity as God created us at the first. Let this be clearly understood and firmly grasped.

At the outset: we are the same persons all through. Neither the deprivation of spiritual life at the Fall, nor the communication of spiritual life at the new birth, affects the reality of our being in possession of what we

commonly call human nature. By the Fall we did not become less than men; by regeneration we do not become more than men. That which essentially constitutes our manhood was not lost, and no matter whatever be imparted to us at regeneration, our individuality is never changed.

If the above distinctions be carefully borne in mind, particularly between what our nature essentially consists of and what it “accidentally” became by virtue of the changes passing upon it, then there should be less difficulty in our understanding what is signified by the Lord’s assuming our nature. When the Son of God became incarnate, He took to Himself human nature. He was in every respect true Man, possessing spirit and soul and body: “in all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren” (Heb. 2:17). This does not explain the miracle and mystery of the Divine incarnation, for that is incomprehensible; but it states the fundamental fact of it. Christ did not inherit our corruption, for that was not an essential of manhood. He was born and ever remained immaculately pure and holy; nevertheless, He took upon Him our nature intrinsically considered.

Reverting for a moment to our opening passage: “that which is born of the flesh is flesh.” Here “the flesh” is the name given to human nature as fallen—it must not be restricted to the body (as in a few passages it is), but understood (as generally in the New Testament) of the entire human constitution. In affirming, “that which is born of the flesh is flesh,” Christ reiterated the basic and unchanging principle—repeated no less than nine times in Genesis 1—that every creature brings forth “after his kind.” The quality of the fruit is determined by the nature of the tree that bears it: an evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit. Man’s fallen nature cannot yield that which is sinless. No matter how much fallen man may be educated, civilized, or religionized, in his natural state he cannot produce that which is acceptable to the thrice holy God. In order to that he must be born again—a new and sinless nature imparted to him.

“But that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” A new, a spiritual life is communicated, from which the grand moral change in its subject proceeds. This communication of Divine life to the soul is viewed in the New Testament under various figures. It is likened to the implanting of an incorruptible “seed” in the soul (1 Peter 1:23; 1 John 3:9); to a cleansing of the heart, a “washing of water by the Word” (Titus 3:5; Eph. 5:26); to a renovation of the will, or a writing of God’s Law in the mind (Heb. 8:10). The figure of the “seed” conveys the idea of a subsequent growth; the washing of water suggests a process of cleansing only commenced; while that of God’s writing His Law in our minds intimates the durability and permanence of His work of grace. It is from this new life or nature, imparted by the Spirit, that all spiritual life proceeds.

We have no desire to belittle the marvel and miracle of the new birth: so far from it, we freely accept our Lord’s declaration that it is a mystery beyond man’s power to solve (John 3:8). If the communication of natural life be an enigma to human understanding, much more so is the impartation of spiritual life. Thus, in our efforts to simplify one aspect of regeneration we seek to guard against falsifying it at another. What we wish to make clear is, that at the new birth no new faculties are added to man’s soul, no addition is made to his essential threefold constitution. Previously, he possessed a spirit and soul and body; he does not now have a fourth thing bestowed upon him. It is the man himself who is born again. As at the Fall his person was vitiated, now his person is regenerated—the full effects of which will only appear at his glorification.

Having thus considered, very briefly, the two natures in the Christian, we must now distinguish sharply between them and the individual in whom they reside. A nature and a person are in many respects widely different. Whether unconverted or converted, the person is constitutionally the same: it is the one who was dead in trespasses and sins who has been Divinely quickened. It is identically the same individual who formerly was a child of disobedience, under condemnation, who is now justified and sanctified. And, my reader, it is to the person and not to his nature that accountability attaches. Deeds belong to the individual and not to his nature. No amount of quibbling can gainsay the fact that in his heart even the unregenerate is conscious that he is responsible to act and live contrary to his fallen nature, and that he is justly culpable if he yields to his depraved inclinations. It is on this very ground that God will judge him in the Day to come, and so self-evidently righteous will this be that “every mouth will be stopped” (Rom. 3:20) and God “will be clear when He judges” (Psa. 51:4).

Plain and simple though it be, yet we feel we must labour the point a little further. How many professing Christians today speak of “the flesh,” in themselves and in others, in such a way as if its being an exhibition of the flesh thoroughly explained matters. Were one to rebuke another for conduct unbecoming a child of God, and he replied, Yes, that is the flesh working in me, such language would plainly evidence an attempt to escape responsibility. If evil deeds by a Christian were excusable on the ground that the flesh still remains within him, then by parity of reason every sinner on earth could excuse himself, and how then could God judge the world? In point of fact the unregenerate do, everywhere, fall back on their sinful nature to escape condemnation, whereas if they listened to conscience they would certainly know that their nature never compelled them to

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commit a single sin. It inclined them, but they were responsible to control and resist it, and the essence of their guilt is that they did not.

It is the man, then, who sins, and is the sinner; it is the man who needs to be forgiven and justified; it is the man who is responsible to walk not in the flesh but in the Spirit. It is the same person all through. It is the man who is born again, and not a nature. True, at the new birth he receives a new life or nature, so that he now has two natures, and his responsibility is to mortify the old and feed, strengthen, and be governed by the new. The flesh is in no wise improved by the presence of the "spirit," any more than weeds are bettered by planting flowers in their midst. The flesh and the spirit are contrary to each other, and my responsibility lies in making no provision for the former, acting according to the dictates of the latter.