

# On the Nature of Holiness

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## Introduction

In an earlier paper I point out that Christ's body was borrowed, as it were, from us.<sup>1</sup> In the incarnation He took upon Himself an alien nature. We could say that because He took human flesh it was His. He did in fact take it. Or we could say that because the flesh He took was human it was ours. What I wish to emphasize below is the latter statement. In taking human nature Christ accepted something that did not otherwise pertain to Him.

The righteousness of Christ to which we assimilate over time as Christians is also borrowed. In saying this I have special reference to the imparted righteousness commonly associated with sanctification. It is ours in the same sense that Christ's body was His.<sup>2</sup> What we receive from Christ in this regard or any other becomes ours because He gives it to us. And yet my point is that His imparted righteousness after He gives it to us is just as alien to us as His imputed righteousness. It is alien in the sense that if He had not given it to us it would not be ours.<sup>3</sup>

Looking away from ourselves (except to covet) does not come naturally to mankind. It is a learned behavior. But when we do this--i.e., when we become captivated by Christ's characteristics,<sup>4</sup> when talking about them no longer constitutes changing the subject<sup>5</sup>--that is evidence that we are assimilating to His image, because this is the relationship that He in turn had with His Father. A fascination with what makes Him other than ourselves is the only context in which such assimilation can take place. One does not assimilate to characteristics he already has.

## The Experience of Paul

Seeing Jesus as He is can only emphasize the fact to us that we are not like Him. This is just as it should be. It is the function of the law which He embodies to do this. When we allow the law to perform its rightful function of bringing us to a knowledge of sin (see Rom 7:7),<sup>6</sup> we are able to appreciate what Paul is saying in Rom 7. At that point we have true and reliable evidence that conversion has taken place.<sup>7</sup> What unconverted person would have any basis for contrasting himself with Christ and thus seeing his own sinfulness with such painful accuracy as Paul does? To fail at this point is to demonstrate that we are still Laodicean (see Rev 3:18). It is only when we see Christ as He truly is that the contrast between His character and ours comes sharply into focus or becomes evident at all. Until then a person's spiritual life takes place on a satisfied level at which he confronts no one but himself.<sup>8</sup> That is the condition to which all of us are born. Socially of course the unconverted are aware of other people, but I speaking here of spiritual things.

The law can be read with human wisdom and anyone can understand the words it uses, if they are presented in a language he knows. That, however, is not what Paul means when he says, "Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died" (Rom 7:9). It is when not only the words but the force of what they say comes home

to the heart that sin springs to life and the sinner realizes, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, that his breaking of that law condemns him to die. The process of achieving such awareness is conversion. Nor, having come, does it ever go away--unless we stifle the voice of the Holy Spirit. Consider a specific example. In *Acts of the Apostles* Ellen White writes:

Paul told the Thessalonian Jews of his former zeal for the ceremonial law and of his wonderful experience at the gate of Damascus. Before his conversion he had been confident in a hereditary piety, a false hope. His faith had not been anchored in Christ; he had trusted instead in forms and ceremonies. His zeal for the law had been disconnected from faith in Christ and was of no avail. While boasting that he was blameless in the performance of the deeds of the law, he had refused the One who made the law of value.<sup>9</sup>

Let us relate the above paragraph line by line to Rom 7:9. Under one heading ("Once I was alive apart from law") we would have to put Paul's "former zeal for the ceremonial law," his confidence in "a hereditary piety, a false hope," his life during the period when he was "disconnected from faith in Christ," when he "refused the One who made the law of value." Unless I have a fundamental misunderstanding of what Ellen White is saying in the above passage, this description applies to Paul before his conversion. It would not apply afterward.

Under another heading ("but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died") we have another experience that is different from and stands in contrast with the first. When in Paul's life did the commandment come in the sense of Rom 7:9? At "the gate of Damascus." And what experience did Paul have afterward? It was the one described in the rest of Rom 7, as well as Rom 8. The two chapters must be studied together. They cannot be meaningfully separated. The fellowship that we enjoy with Christ as His followers (in Rom 8) is the oneness that the law teaches us to cry out for (in Rom 7).

There is a deep irony in all of this. So long as Paul was under law he felt comfortable with the law and had a carnal sense of security in doing what it said. This is the period he has in mind when he says, "Once I was alive apart from law; . . ." (Rom 7:9a). Having the law on a carnal level he was without the law on a spiritual level, i.e., for him the law of God was nothing more than a legal instrument. For him the letter of the law was the whole law. There was nothing more to consider. After this "the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died" (Rom 7:9b). Under grace Paul was in a position to see the law of God on a spiritual level, the full enormity of sin became evident to him, and he now read in the law not a basis for ever increasing pharisaical pride but his own death warrant. Crying out, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (vs. 24), is not the same as saying, "Who will rescue me from this terrible awareness of my fallen condition?" Once that comes, it stays. More than this, it intensifies over time as we gain a progressively clearer knowledge of the heights and depths and fullness of Christ's perfect character.

## What Can We Learn From Paul's Experience?

The experience of Paul in Rom 7 is ground that Laodicea must also cover. It is the experience to which the counsel of the True Witness will surely bring us as we accept and apply

the heavenly eyesalve. If the function of the eyesalve is not to show us our true condition relative to Christ, what is it for?

(17) "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. (18) I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see." (Rev 3:17-18)

Laodicea is not primarily criticized for not having but for not knowing. "You say, [this] . . . But you do not know that . . ." Indeed, if the claim "'I am rich'" (vs. 17) refers to having a knowledge of God's law, then the claim is not altogether unfounded. The irony here is that what Laodicea has is precisely the means by which they might have learned what God criticizes them for not knowing. They have the law. That is good. But what have they learned from it? They have learned nothing at all, because they still do not know that they are "'wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked'" (Rev 3:17). But what other function does the law have than to tell people these things? That is what it is for. It is a "schoolmaster" (Gal 3:24, KJV) "put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal 4:23, NIV). What are we to be justified from by faith? From the deficiencies we discover as we compare ourselves with Christ, whose character is described article by article in the law. But Laodicea has learned none of this.

When Paul cries out: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24), he shows that he has learned the lesson Laodicea is so reticent to face. Laodicea does not realize that it is wretched; Paul does. The Greek word *talaiporos* ("wretched") is identically the same in both Rom 7:24 and Rev 3:17. What Rom 7 does is show us what kind of experience a person will have who has received the heavenly eyesalve and put it on. But if Paul has not yet received it in that chapter, how is it that he sees his own condition in so clear and undistorted a manner? We must have this same experience if we are ever to appreciate what the apostle is saying in Rom 7 or 8. It is a level of insight to which Christ has been trying to lead us all these many decades.

Let us stop arguing back and forth about whether Rom 7 describes the experience of a converted man. If the type of self-knowledge in relation to Christ that it illustrates is not an epitome of what conversion is all about, there is no such thing as conversion. Conversion is that process by which the realization that we need Christ is driven home to the heart. Do we then progress beyond our initial need for Christ (misreading Rom 8)? Or is it a mark of maturity to stop realizing the fact that we need Him (misreading Rom 7)? Unless we intend to answer both questions affirmatively, let us get down on our knees and start praying for the same heavenly eyesalve that Paul received at the gate of Damascus. Not one person will ever get past his or her Laodicean condition who neglects to receive it.

## How Will Such Knowledge Shape Our Own Experience?

When the sinner begins to see something of Christ's holiness and the knowledge causes him to stop short of sin when he is tempted in some specific situation, that is a reflection of Christ's righteousness. When Christ's righteousness appeared in His own life, that was His own righteousness. When identically the same qualities appear in our lives, it is evidence that the

Savior has imparted His righteousness to us. But my point is that this outworking of inner principles is not a reflection of something in us but of something in Him. Righteousness, like life, does not reside within us (see 1 Tim 6:16; Rom 7:18). It resides in the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit, deity. If our practical actions are not influenced by Christ's righteousness, we do not reflect it. But when they are, the item reflected is something that pertains to Him rather than us, even though what we are talking about here is imparted rather than imputed righteousness. One does not reflect something that originates in Himself. That is not the nature of reflection.

The moon does not reflect its own light; it reflects the sun's light. It has none of its own and yet it shines brightly. Here is the context for understanding what Christ says in Matt 5:14 ("You are the light of the world") as compared with John 8:12 and 9:5 ("I am the light of the world"). Both statements are true. This is also the context for Ellen White's statement that, "Those who receive the seal of the living God and are protected in the time of trouble must reflect the image of Jesus fully."<sup>10</sup> Always before we have emphasized the word "fully," but we are not ready to do that until we understand the implications of the word "reflect." One cannot do something fully before doing it at all. Until the verb is put solidly in place we are not ready to add an adverb to it. First we must be very clear on what reflecting means, then we will be in a position to understanding what it means to reflect Christ's righteousness fully.

## Discussion

When the church shines with the reflected glory of Christ's own imparted righteousness--the only kind of righteousness the world will ever see--"this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14). Indeed, these words have identically the same intent as those of Ellen White quoted above ("[We] must reflect the image of Jesus fully") and of Rev 18:1-3 (see below). These quotations all say the same thing. If such comparisons are justified, the adverb "fully" means shining to a full extent as well as shining to a full degree. It means shining over all the world. Now consider Rev 18:1-3.

(1) After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. (2) With a mighty voice he shouted:

"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!  
 She has become a home for demons  
 and a haunt for evil spirits,  
 a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.

(3) For all the nations have drunk  
 the maddening wine of her adulteries.  
 The kings of the earth committed adultery with her,  
 and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her  
 excessive luxuries." (Rev 18:1-3)

The work of this other angel is not accomplished by angels but by the church under the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Cor 5:14). Notice that what the angel of Rev 18 says is a repetition of the second angel's message in Rev 14:8 ("A second angel followed and said, 'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries'). The above message has been given by Laodicea--lethargically--for about a

century and a half now. The message itself has not changed. Rev 18:1-3 says substantially the same things as Rev 14:8. Only the manner of their presentation is different. The other angel of Rev 18 "had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted: . . ." (vs. 1). What gives his message such power at this later time in history when the same words had been scarcely heard before?

Let me try to clarify this matter by asking a separate but related question. "The officers who were sent to Jesus came back with the report that never man spoke as He spoke [John 7:46]. But the reason for this was that never man lived as He lived."<sup>11</sup> What connection was there between the way Jesus lived and the force His words had on His hearers as He spoke? Whatever it was, the same connection exists between the way we live and the force our words have (or do not have) on our hearers as we speak.

The message of Rev 18--in a manner exactly parallel to the message of Rom 7--is given under post-Laodicean conditions. The church can never call sin by its right name if, in its own life, it cannot call sinfulness by its right name. But when it does, it can finally see holiness for what that is and call people's attention away from themselves to Christ. When it does this forcefully--and I mean with wrenching severity, when it vomits out its own righteousness instead of making Christ do so--then the whole system is pure and the cry of the second and third angels becomes loud. In John's description it is deafening.

## Conclusion

When the truths of the gospel become living realities and affect the way we live, then our message will come across as something more than "a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1). This is what it means to reflect the image of Jesus. It does not mean that we must reach a point where we have holiness in ourselves. That is just what it does not mean. It means letting the image of Jesus shine through without obstructing it by anything that we hold up in ourselves. As we recede farther into the background, He can move farther into the foreground (see John 3:30). The light with which Christ commands us to shine (see Matt 5:16) is a reflected light. Reflecting it both does and does not make it ours. It is ours in the same way that Christ's human body was His. It is not ours in the larger sense that Christ's human body was that of a creature--borrowed as it were for the incarnation and retained forever afterward.

Let me emphasize that the command to shine is not a command to produce light. It is a command to cleanse the reflective surface until no imperfections remain that would obscure what Christ wishes to convey to all His other children through us--i.e., His own unsullied likeness. When the light that people see in and around what we say is this alien light--this borrowed or reflected light--then our words will take on all the power that pertains naturally to it. This is the "true light that gives light to every man" (John 1:9), woman, and child. When we reflect it, our words will have the same power that moved people so deeply when Jesus spoke. It will be the same power because what conveys it is the same light. When the world sees something on this order in our lives it will be enlightened by what we say.

Will this happen? On the authority of Rev 18:1-3 we know it will. Does the present model put too weighty a responsibility on the human instrument? How? It is not the reflecting that people are to see but the light Christ shines upon us. What I am saying has exactly the opposite effect of taking the burden of responsibility away from the church and puts it back where it belongs, on the ultimate Source of all light. Here also is the spiritual significance of Sabbath

keeping, i.e., of resting in Jesus, of standing aside--not through inactivity but through the humility that comes from seeing ourselves as we really are.

Results such as these will not occur because our reflecting activity is performed with spiritual virtuosity. If it were, that would only be a distraction. Instead such results follow because the substance of the gospel, as revealed in God's written Word, is conveyed by a people who do not obstruct any part of it by the way they live. When the whole world has been enlightened in the above manner (which is the only way it will ever be enlightened in any manner) "then the end will come" (Matt 24:14). Then at long last we will see Jesus--not in a glass which offers only "a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face" (1 Cor 13:12).

## Epilogue

In an earlier paper I took the controversial position that Christ experienced part of the same internal struggle against the flesh that Paul records in Rom 7.<sup>12</sup>

After his conversion Paul's relationship toward the sinful heritage he had received from Adam was one of rejection. He was strongly repelled by the sin he could see at work in his members. What can we say, then, about the experience of One who was infinitely repelled by it? What I would now say is that the experience Paul describes is one in which a person has some part of the same internal struggle against the flesh that Christ had. This was not a struggle against the Holy Spirit. Christ was fully one in heart and purpose with the Holy Spirit. But His rejection of the sinful heritage He had received from Adam (and Abraham, and David, and Mary) was also absolute and complete--as complete and absolute as His corresponding acceptance of all those who share that heritage with Him. I do not think anyone would wish to make that strong a claim for Paul. It was the latter's experience which more or less faintly reflected that of Jesus and not the reverse.

Let me clarify what I mean by using the word "faintly." Paul says, "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing" (Rom 7:19). Jesus, on the other hand, says, "The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29). These facts need to be correctly understood. They do not imply that Paul's experience was fundamentally different from that of Jesus or the reverse. The two experiences are not different in kind but in degree. Paul's rejection of sin was robust but not complete. Jesus' rejection of sin was infinite. But both started on identically the same ground as regards the nature of the inheritance each received from Adam.

When Christ went to the cross He bore in His body the sins of all mankind (see 2 Cor 5:21), and doing so crushed out His life. But before He got there as well, He bore the sins of generation after generation of His own ancestors. He Himself did not sin. He was the spotless Lamb of God. But when the Scriptures state that in the womb He was "that holy thing" (Luke 1:35, KJV), they are not commenting on the physical makeup of the fetus that would eventually be His body. Holiness does not reside in flesh. It is a quality of mind. If we could once make this distinction, much of our difficulty in understanding the earthly life of Jesus could be surmounted. The two factors are not the same, as Christ demonstrates by separating them--or should I say by uniting them?

But my point is that in bearing the sins of others on the cross He was not doing something unique to that moment or for the first time. Instead His experience of sin bearing on

Golgotha was the epitome and summing up of everything that had gone before. Jesus' whole life was lived in the shadow of the cross--not only in the sense that from the age of twelve He had known those events would occur but in the larger sense that throughout His life--in principle if on a smaller scale--He was even then bearing the sins of the world in the body He inherited from His ancestors. We have considerably more to learn about Rom 7 and about the human nature of Christ and about ourselves than we have so far been able to assimilate.

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Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

<sup>1</sup>See Hardy, "The Human Nature of Christ in View of Rom 8:3 and 1 Cor 15:45," *Historicism* No. 21/Jan 90, pp. 9, 12 (read the whole paper); "Bible Study and Sanctification," *Historicism* No. 25/Jan 91, p. 56. See also idem, "The Christology of Heb 1-2," *Historicism* No. 25/Jan 91, pp. 2-12.

<sup>2</sup>I am not talking here about holy flesh. Holiness does not reside in flesh. In any event, we are talking about Christ's flesh rather than our own.

<sup>3</sup>In the same way life is alien to us. It pertains to Him inherently but is only given to us as He sees fit (see John 1:4; Rom 6:23; 1 Tim 6:15-16).

<sup>4</sup>See Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup>See Hardy, "More on Christian Perfection," *Historicism* No. 23/Jul 90, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup>Bringing us to a knowledge of sin is widely different from bringing a knowledge of sin to us (see Gen 3:5). The one form of awareness is necessary and we cannot be saved without it, because without it we will not realize our need of salvation. The other represents one part of the condition from which we need to be saved.

<sup>7</sup>See Hardy, "The Human Nature of Christ in View of Rom 8:3 and 1 Cor 15:45," *Historicism* No. 21/Jan 90, pp. 2-24; see especially pp. 15-22.

<sup>8</sup>"Again in [Rom] 7:14 the Apostle says: 'I am carnal, sold under sin.' That is the proof of a spiritual and wise man. He knows that he is carnal, and he is displeased with himself; indeed, he hates himself and praises the Law of God, which he recognizes because he is spiritual. But the proof of a foolish, carnal man is this, that he regards himself as spiritual and is pleased with himself" (Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller [Grand Rapids: Kregel 1976], p. 112).

<sup>9</sup>(Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1962), p. 228.

<sup>10</sup>Ellen White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1945), p. 71.

<sup>11</sup>Idem, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1942), p. 469.

<sup>12</sup>See Hardy, "Human Nature of Christ," p. 18.