

# ARE WE BORN SINNERS?

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The April 21, 1997 issue of *U.S. News & World Report* ran this cover article:

A picture of a baby with the title “Born Bad?”

When this issue came out, I couldn’t help smiling at the thought of those in contemporary Adventism who think the debate over sin and salvation in our church is somehow irrelevant to the world around us.

More recently, the January 2013 issue of *Smithsonian* magazine featured a toddler with horns, and the question, “Born to be Bad?”

Obviously, as violent crime and other destructive behaviors tear at society’s fabric, people wonder out loud whether nature or nurture—destiny or choice—is the determining factor in human conduct.

And while this issue of *U.S. News & World Report* came out 18 years ago, it is certainly fair to say these questions are still being asked by thoughtful men and women.

But the reason this question is so important for us today is that it lies at the very root of the debate over the doctrine of salvation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today.

This weekend we’re going to be covering several issues connected with the current salvation controversy in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And the question of “What is sin?” lies at the foundation of this entire controversy, a point on which both camps in the discussion agree/

Here we have the two primary gospels in contemporary Adventism:

## The Two Gospels in Contemporary Adventism

*Classic Adventism*

*Evangelical Adventism*

Sin as Choice

Sin as Nature

Post-Fall Human Nature of Christ

Pre-Fall Human Nature of Christ

Salvation by Both Justification  
and Sanctification

Salvation by Justification Alone

Justification as Both Declaring

Justification as Declaring Righteous  
Only

and Making Righteous

Sinless Obedience Possible in This  
Life, Through God's Power

Sinless Obedience Impossible  
in This Life, Even Through  
God's Power

Two statements, from opposite sides:

“What is sin? Why are we concerned about a subject which seems so negative? Simply because one's conclusions about righteousness by faith depend on the definition one gives for sin.”

Dennis Priebe, *Face to Face With the Real Gospel* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Assn, 1985), p. 22.

“When it comes to sin, there is one point that all sides of the discussion agree upon. Namely, that people's understanding of sin will determine their understanding of salvation.”

George R. Knight, *End-Time Events and the Last Generation: The Explosive 1950s* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Assn, 2018), p. 93.

Now as I said, these two authors come from opposite sides in the current debate. But they agree that the nature of sin lies at the foundation of the discussion.

There is something else both sides agree on.

They both agree that God's law demands perfect obedience as a condition of salvation.

But that's where the agreement stops.

The question of how this condition is fulfilled is where the two sides part company. And the reason they part company here is because of the definition of sin.

Classic Adventism teaches that men and women become sinners through choice, and that through this same power of choice we can claim heaven's power to subdue our sinful natures and stop sinning one hundred percent.

Evangelical Adventism, by contrast, holds that human beings are condemned sinners from the moment they enter this world, and that humanity's sinful nature so pervades our entire being that even through imparted divine strength, it is still impossible to perfectly obey God's law.

And this is the reason why this particular gospel teaches that only through a legal declaration of righteousness—or, as others will claim, through a let-go-and-let God relationship—can human beings get to heaven.

So the definition we choose for sin affects our entire understanding of the gospel and salvation.

What becomes equally clear, as we study the landscape of contemporary Adventism, is that how we understand the gospel affects our entire attitude toward such key Adventist doctrines as the sanctuary, the Sabbath, the remnant-church theology, as well as lifestyle and worship standards.

In other words, the doctrine of sin and salvation affects everything about our faith and practice as Seventh-day Adventists.

## **The Basis of Authority**

Let us be clear, once again, regarding who and what is our authority.

**1. All Scripture, both Old and New Testament, is inspired and authoritative (II Tim. 3:15).**

**2. Scripture does not contain mere human opinion, but the moving of the Holy Spirit which causes men and women to speak (II Peter 1:20-21).**

**3. What the Spirit inspires is to be understood by comparison with itself (I Cor. 2:12-14; Isa. 28:9-10).**

Ellen White is clear, despite what some are telling us, that her writings were intended to keep the church from doctrinal error:

EW 78:

“God has, in that Word (the Bible), promised to give visions in the last days, not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth.”

3SM 32:

“The Lord has given me much light that I want the people to have; for there is instruction that the Lord has given me for His people. It is light that they should have, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little. This is now to come before the people, because it has been given to correct specious errors, and to specify what is truth.”

And like Scripture, Ellen White’s writings are to interpret themselves:

1SM 42:

“The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture.”

So when we find inspired statements which seem on the surface to disagree with each other, we look at the context of these statements, and at the inspired consensus, to resolve the dilemma.

Inspiration is its own interpreter. Scholars and theologians are not needed to explain inspired statements to us.

And let me make one point as clear as possible. You will hear me say this over and over again, as we discuss the issues of salvation, or any other set of doctrinal issues:

Unless a doctrinal conclusion takes into account all inspired statements on the subject, it is invalid.

When you're giving a Bible study to a Sunday-keeper, who asks you about the disciples coming together to break bread on the first day of the week, you don't pretend the verse isn't there.

And the same is true when dealing with issues inside the church.

## **Sin as Choice**

We're going to look at some key Bible and Spirit of Prophecy passages, including some that are used to support the idea of people being born sinners.

As I said, we have to consider all relevant inspired statements if we expect to come into harmony on these questions.

Eze. 18:20:

"The soul that sinneth, it shall die: the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son."

James 1:14-15:

"Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.  
"Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin."

KH 140:

"There are thoughts and feelings suggested and aroused by Satan that annoy even the best of men; but if they are not cherished, if they are repulsed as hateful, the soul is not contaminated with guilt and no other is defiled by their influence."

James 4:17:

"Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin."

And how is good, and that which is not good, defined in God's Word?

Eccl. 12:13:

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."

So, if the duty of man is to keep God's commandments, how does the Bible define disobedience to those commandments?

I John 3:4:

"Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law; for sin is the transgression of the law."

Ellen White is clear, over and over again in her writings, that this passage contains the only definition of sin found in God's Word.

7BC 951:

“Sin is the transgression of the law.’ This is the only definition of sin.”

GC 493:

“Our only definition of sin is that given in the word of God: it is ‘the transgression of the law;’ it is the outworking of a principle at war with the great law of love which is the foundation of the divine government.”

FW 56:

“Now we want to understand what sin is, that it is the transgression of God’s law. This is the only definition given in the Scriptures.”

OHC 141:

“What is to bring the sinner to the knowledge of his sins, unless he knows what sin is? The only definition of sin in the Word of God is given us in I John 3:4: ‘Sin is the transgression of the law.’”

RH July 15, 1890:

“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law; for sin is the transgression of the law.’ This is the only definition of sin given in the Holy Scriptures, and we should seek to understand what sin is, lest any of us be found in opposition to the God of heaven.”

GCB, March 2, 1897:

“The only definition of sin, given in God’s Word, is the transgression of the law. It is not excusable, and has no defense or justification.”

1SAT 228:

“It is the privilege of every sinner to ask his teacher what sin really is. Give me a definition of sin. We have one in I John 3. ‘Sin is the transgression of the law.’” Now this is the only definition of sin in the whole Bible.”

1SM 320:

“The only definition we find in the Bible for sin is that ‘sin is the transgression of the law’ (I John 3:4).”

ST Nov. 24, 1887:

“If we have not the faith that works by love, and purifies the soul from every stain of sin, then we have a spurious faith. Christ is not the minister of sin. And what is sin? The only definition given in God’s word is, ‘Sin is the transgression of the law.’”

ST March 3, 1890:

“In order to let Jesus into our hearts, we must stop sinning. The only definition for sin that we have in the Bible is that it is the transgression of the law.”

Now, of course, I am sure some will ask, What about Romans 14:23, which tells us, “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin”?

Isn’t that another definition?

No, it is not. This is because elsewhere the apostle Paul writes, in Hebrews 11, verse 6: “Without faith it is impossible to please [God].”

Only through faith is it possible for fallen human beings to produce in their lives the obedience God’s law requires.

We’re going to talk about faith in greater depth as our series proceeds. Too many have come to believe that “by faith” means someone else does the work.

Just read through Hebrews, chapter 11, and that theory is exploded quickly.

So in reality, I John 3:4 and Romans 14:23 are saying the same thing. Sin is the transgression of the law, and without faith, we are powerless to keep from transgressing the law.

Free choice lies at the heart of the struggle between sin and salvation. But in the end, we only have two choices.

Like one teacher of mine said years ago, “You either enlist in God’s army, or you’re drafted into Satan’s army.”

5T 177:

“No man can be forced to transgress. His own consent must be first gained, the soul must purpose the sinful act, before passion can dominate over reason, or iniquity triumph over conscience.”

ST Dec. 18, 1893:

“It is not in the power of Satan to force anyone to sin. Sin is the sinner's individual act. Before sin exists in the heart, the consent of the will must be given, and as soon as it is given, sin is triumphant, and hell rejoices.”

This is an important statement to remember.

Because if you believe babies are born sinners, sin exists in that child’s heart long before the consent of the will is ever given.

Listen to the following statement from Ellen White:

FH 151 (ST March 9, 1882):

“The light of life is freely proffered to all. Every one who will may be guided by the bright beams of the Sun of Righteousness. Christ is the great remedy for sin. None can plead their circumstances, their education, or their temperament as an excuse for living in rebellion against God. Sinners are such by their own deliberate choice.”

## **Separation from God**

Now the question is asked:

Are human beings born separated from God?

Let's be careful, of course, how we define our terms. All human beings are born separate from the tree of life and from the intimate fellowship our first parents had with God in Eden.

But that isn't the same as being born involuntary sinners.

How, according to inspired writings, do human beings separate from God?

Isa. 59:2:

“But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you.”

RH July 12, 1887:

“Just as soon as we separate ourselves from God by sin, which is the transgression of His law, Satan takes control of our minds.”

1SM 235:

“By choosing to sin, men separate themselves from God, cut themselves off from the channel of blessing, and the sure result is ruin and death.”

*1888 Materials*, p. 1011:

“God does not separate from His people, but His people separate themselves from God by their own course of action.”

Ma 95:

“So long as the people of God preserve their fidelity to Him, so long as they cling by living faith to Jesus, they are under the protection of heavenly angels, and Satan will not be permitted to exercise his hellish arts upon them to their destruction. But those who separate themselves from Christ by sin are in great peril.”

Nowhere can you find an inspired statement which says we separate from God simply by being born.

It is the choice to sin which separates us from God.

### **Answering Common Objections**

Now Romans chapter 5 is a passage often used to support the doctrine of involuntary—otherwise called original—sin.

Romans 5:12-19:

“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.

“For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed where there is no law.

“Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of Him that was to come.

“But not as the offense, so also is the free gift. For if through the offense of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift be grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many.

“And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offenses unto justification.

“For if by one man's offense death reigned by one: much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.

“Therefore as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

“For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.”

**Three points**, among others, stand out in these verses:

**1. Life and death, as described in this passage, are eternal rather than temporal. This becomes clearest in verse 17, which speaks of how those “which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.”**

Obviously this refers to the future eternal reign of the saints with Christ.

Rev. 5:10:

“And hath made us unto our God kings and priests, and we shall reign on the earth.”

Elsewhere in Romans Paul, when speaking of life and death in a spiritual sense, refers to eternal rather than temporal reality:

Rom. 8:13:

“For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”

Here Paul uses this language in the same way as Jesus, who declared: “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matt. 19:17); “This do, and thou shalt live” (Luke 10:28).

So when Romans 5:12 speaks of death passing upon all men, temporal death (though certainly very real) is not the primary focus.

The claim that newborn babies must be sinners because they experience physical death, is obviously exploded by the fact that animals experience such death as well.

“Birds die. Are they sinners?”

**2. The phrases “judgment came” and “the free gift came,” found in verse 18, are supplied, which is why the King James Version places them in italics.**

This is especially significant because this verse is often the cornerstone of the claim that both Adam's condemnation and Christ's justification have been accomplished for all, whether they like it or not.

But without these added phrases, it is easier to harmonize this verse with others in this passage which indicate the decisive role of choice in making real the provisions of both sin and salvation.

**3. Three verses in this passage (verses 12,17, and 19) make it clear that whatever the role played by Adam and Christ in the human saga, free choice is what makes humans either condemned sinners or justified saints.**

Regarding condemnation, Romans 5:12 declares that “death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.”

Notice it doesn't say death (eternal) has passed on all men because Adam sinned, but rather, because all have sinned.

The same holds true for justification. Despite the claims of some, Paul isn't saying here that all men and women have been involuntarily justified by the events of Calvary.

Rather, he states that the ones justified are those who “receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness” (verse 17).

Verse 19 clarifies the same point, which declares that “as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.”

Obviously, just as the many being made sinners has occurred because “all have sinned” (verse 12),

---so the many being made righteous is here depicted as a future event determined by the choice of individuals, not a past event occurring once for all at the cross.

Let's also remember what we read from Eze. 18:20:

“The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son.”

If in fact all children born into this world bear the iniquity of their father Adam, Ezekiel would be wrong.

The Bible is consistent with itself.

**The theme of Romans 5** is really quite simple:

**Adam led the world into sin, and Christ has offered to lead us out of it.**

But just as the choice to sin is ours, so is the choice to accept Christ's righteousness.

Someone asks, what about Psalm 51:5?

Psalm 51:5:

“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

What is most significant about this verse, for our discussion, is what it does not say.

First, it doesn't say, "as a sinner did my mother conceive me." It simply says, "in sin." All of us have been born into a world of sin, into a sinful environment.

Secondly, David does not—interestingly—apply this statement to all of humanity. Yes, all human beings since Adam have been born into a sinful world. But the fact remains that David doesn't say this.

Some have wondered whether he is speaking here of particular, perhaps negative circumstances connected with his own birth. We don't know.

If nothing else, David is simply saying his mother was a sinner, and so was he. But nothing in the passage or its context implies that he had no choice in becoming a sinner.

In no way does this verse identify all human beings as becoming sinners just by being born.

Here's another passage some have used to prove that all become sinners at birth:

Psalm 58:3:

"The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies."

But notice how this verse doesn't speak of all mankind. It only speaks of the wicked.

Ellen White tells us what happens from the earliest moments of a child's experience if parents neglect their God-given work:

RH March 28, 1893:

"Children are left to *come up* instead of being *trained up*. The poor little children are thought not to know or understand a correction at ten or twelve months of age, and they begin to show stubbornness very young" (italics original).

CG 289:

"I tremble especially for mothers, as I see them so blind, and feeling so little the responsibilities that devolve upon a mother. They see Satan working in the self-willed child of even but a few months of age. Filled with spiteful passion, Satan seems to be taking full possession."

3SM 117-118:

"The book (*Education*) that is coming out will have much to say in regard to the great principles that are to be carried out in training the children, from the very baby in arms. The enemy will work right through those children, unless they are disciplined. Someone disciplines them. If the mother or the father does not do it, the devil does."

Now often, when the voluntary nature of sin is pointed out, the question is asked,

Does a newborn baby need a Savior?

And the answer is Yes.

But first we need to ask, What does it mean to need a Savior?

What does the work of a Savior involve?

According to the Bible, the work of a Savior is to save people from their sins:

Matt. 1:21:

“Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins.”

And according to the Bible, the work of saving human beings from sin involves:

Forgiveness (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7)

Empowerment (II Thess. 2:13; Titus 3:5)

Jesus obviously didn't need the saving work of forgiveness, because He never sinned.

But did He need the saving work of empowerment?

John 5:30:

“I can of Mine own self do nothing.”

DA 123:

“He (Christ) was fitted for the conflict by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”

DA 664:

“Jesus revealed no qualities, and exercised no powers, that men may not have through faith in Him. His perfect humanity is that which all His followers may possess, if they will be in subjection to God as He was.”

Now we're going to address a key point in understand both the nature of sin and the human nature of Christ:

### **The Lower and Higher Natures**

The inspired consensus is clear that both lower and higher forces exist in human nature.

More than any other point, this aspect of inspired teaching helps to clarify the true nature of sin in human beings, as well as certain seemingly contradictory Ellen White statements on the human nature of Christ.

Jesus spoke of this distinction when He said to His disciples, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41).

Paul said the same thing when he wrote, “I keep under my body and bring it into subjection” (1 Cor. 9:27).

5T 513:

“The will is not the taste or the inclination, but it is the deciding power.”

Other passages spell out this clear distinction:

MH 130:

“The body is to be brought into subjection. The higher powers of the being are to rule. The passions are to be controlled by the will, which is itself under the control of God.”

MYP 237:

“If enlightened intellect holds the reins, controlling the animal propensities, keeping them in subjection to the moral powers, Satan well knows that his power to overcome with his temptations is very small.”

RH Aug. 11, 1887:

“Intemperance of any kind benumbs the perceptive organs, and so weakens the brain nerve power that eternal things are not appreciated, but are placed upon a level with common things. The higher powers of the mind, developed for elevated purposes, are brought into slavery to the baser passions.”

Another statement makes it clear that the flesh of itself is incapable of sin:

AH 127:

“The lower passions have their seat in the body and work through it. The words “flesh” or “fleshly” or “carnal lusts” embrace the lower, corrupt nature; the flesh of itself cannot act contrary to the will of God.”

It is through the higher powers of our being that moral and spiritual choices are made.

Neither sin nor righteousness is possible unless the higher nature is exercised.

Evil passions and sinful propensities can only be contained in the lower nature, which the above statement declares to be incapable of sin.

But these passions and propensities can be cast out of the higher nature, which involves the will and character.

The following statements make this clear:

DA 305:

“The only power that can create or perpetuate true peace is the grace of Christ. When this is implanted in the heart, it will cast out the evil passions that cause strife and dissension.”

7BC 943:

“We must realize that through belief in Him it is our privilege to be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. Then we are cleansed from all sin, all defects of character. We need not retain one sinful propensity.”

Clearly, when Ellen White speaks of evil passions cast out and sinful propensities not retained, she is not teaching holy flesh, for in another statement we read:

CT 20:

“Appetite and passion must be brought under the control of the Holy Spirit. There is no end to the warfare this side of eternity”

PK 84:

“So long as life shall last, there will be need of guarding the affections and the passions with a firm purpose. Not one moment can we be secure except as we rely upon God, the life hidden with Christ. Watchfulness and prayer are the safeguards of purity.”

FH 297:

“Just as long as Satan urges his temptations upon us, the battle for self-conquest will have to be fought over and over again; but by obedience, the truth will sanctify the soul.”

Here is how, at long last, we can resolve what appears to be conflict between those Ellen White statements which say, on the one hand, that Jesus did not have evil propensities or like passions as we, and others which say clearly that He did.

The one set of statements refer to His higher nature, where the will and character choices reside.

The other set of statements refer to His lower, fleshly nature, which “of itself cannot act contrary to the will of God” (AH 127).

Those wishing for a more in-depth study of how this distinction between lower and higher forces in human nature resolves the current Adventist discussion on the human nature of Christ, are invited to consult the present writer's article, ‘The Lower and Higher Natures: The Key to Resolving the Adventist Christology Debate,’ available at [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/c20146\\_bd20fb8cdacb453bb66db7d7877e1bfe.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/c20146_bd20fb8cdacb453bb66db7d7877e1bfe.pdf)

## **Conclusion**

The *U.S. News* article quoted at the beginning states the issue remarkably well:

“Hereditry might be involved in some kinds of alcoholism. But no gene can make you buy a bottle of Scotch, pour a glass, and toss it down.”

Wray Herbert, “Politics of Biology,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 21, 1997, p. 78.

They might as well have quoted Ellen White:

KH 140:

“There are thoughts and feelings suggested and aroused by Satan that annoy even the best of men; but if they are not cherished, if they are repulsed as hateful, the soul is not contaminated with guilt and no other is defiled by their influence.”

PP 421:

“The strongest temptation cannot excuse sin. However great the pressure brought to bear upon the soul, transgression is our own act. It is not in the power of earth or hell to compel anyone to do evil. Satan attacks us at our weak points, but we need not be overcome. However severe or unexpected the assault, God has provided help for us, and in His strength we may conquer.”

In closing:

ST Aug. 29, 1892:

“There are many who in their hearts murmur against God. They say, ‘We inherit the fallen nature of Adam, and are not responsible for our natural imperfections.’ They find fault with God’s requirements, and claim that He demands what they have no power to give. Satan made the same complaint in heaven, but such thoughts dishonor God.”

Now, look at this one, perhaps the strongest one of all:

9MR 238:

“As we see the condition of mankind today, the question arises in the minds of some, ‘Is man by nature totally and wholly depraved?’ Is he hopelessly ruined? No, he is not. The Lord Jesus left the royal courts and, taking our human nature, lived such a life as everyone may live in humanity, through following His example. We may perfect a life in this world which is an example of righteousness, and overcome as Christ has given us an example in His life, revealing that humanity may conquer as He, the great Pattern conquered.”

Notice why Ellen White says humanity is not *by nature* totally and hopelessly depraved.

Not—at least not according to this statement—because we can be born again.

But because Jesus came in *our nature* and lived a perfect life, through the same power available to you and to me.

Finally:

7BC 929:

“The Lord now demands that every son and daughter of Adam, through faith in Jesus Christ, serve Him in human nature which we now have. The Lord Jesus has bridged the gulf that sin has made. He has connected earth with heaven, and finite man with the infinite God. Jesus, the world’s Redeemer, could only keep the commandments of God in the same way that humanity can keep them.”