

Thought Paper Concerning The Baker Letter
Presented to the Gospel Study Group meeting at Andrews University
November 7-9, 2008

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There are persons who attach great importance to a passage in a letter written by Ellen White to an Elder William Baker and his wife. Some feel that the discovery of Ellen White's letter to Baker warranted the change in our Christology during the 1950s. Most admit that this is "a very controversial letter." One person states: "It's one in which Ellen White addresses the nature of Christ more specifically, more directly, more extensively than just about any other place."

That is a highly interpretive statement, however. The place where Ellen White "addresses the nature of Christ more specifically, more directly" and "more extensively" than "any other place" is in *The Desire of Ages*. This book is a clear Biblical, theologically accurate and philosophically sound statement. And it was published for public use for the express purpose of giving the correct viewpoint on the divine/human nature of Christ. This book is not private correspondence to correct an aberration of the doctrine of Christ. The Baker letter is. Let's consider, then, the historical and the literary context of the Baker letter.

The Historical Context

Presently we do not know Baker's exact teaching concerning the human nature of Christ. Therefore, the historical context of what was taught regarding Christ's nature during the time of the Baker letter is extremely important.

William Baker worked in the Pacific Press in 1882. Later he was sent by the General Conference to Australia where he labored for many years as an evangelist, then as president of several of the Australian conferences. While working in public evangelism he taught a doctrinal aberration about the kind of human nature Christ took. In late 1895 (or early 1896) Ellen White wrote a letter to Elder Baker and his wife about several things.

In her letter she cautioned elder Baker concerning his presentations about the humanity of Christ. Some critics of Jones and Waggoner have wrongfully used the Baker

letter to suggest that Ellen White was rebuking those two men for their teaching on this subject. However, not a shred of evidence has been given to support the allegation.

Ellen White knew the issues involved. She knew what the 1888 messengers and Prescott were presenting. No one to date has been able to produce any correspondence from her, to these three men, correcting them on their position in regard to the human nature of Christ.

George Knight refers to the discovery of the Baker letter as “one major stimulus for a shift in the position of several denominational thought leaders in the 1950s” (from the 1888 emphasis on the human nature of Christ to the popular evangelical teaching).¹

Following is that part of the Baker letter which is being used to nullify the law of heredity in the human nature of Christ.

Be careful, exceedingly careful as to how you dwell upon the human nature of Christ. Do not set Him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin. He is the second Adam. The first Adam was created a pure, sinless being, without a taint of sin upon him; he was in the image of God. He could fall, and he did fall through transgressing. Because of sin, his posterity was born with inherent propensities of disobedience. But Jesus Christ was the only begotten son of God. He took upon Himself human nature, and was tempted in all points as human nature is tempted. He could have sinned; He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in him an evil propensity. He was assailed with temptations in the wilderness, as Adam was assailed with temptations in Eden.

Brother Baker, avoid every question in relation to the humanity of Christ which is liable to be misunderstood. Truth lies close to the track of presumption. In treating the humanity of Christ, you need to guard strenuously every assertion, lest your words be taken to mean more than they imply, and thus you lose or dim the clear perceptions of his humanity as combined with divinity....

Never, in any way, leave the slightest impression upon minds that a taint of, or inclination to, corruption rested upon Christ, or that He in any way yielded to corruption. He was tempted in all points like as man is tempted, yet He is called that holy thing. It is a mystery that is left unexplained to mortals that Christ could be tempted in all points like as we are, and yet be without sin. The incarnation of Christ has ever been, and will ever remain a mystery. That which is revealed, is for us and for our children, but let every human being be warned from the ground of making Christ altogether human, such an one as ourselves: for it cannot be. The exact time when humanity blended with

¹ George Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy*, p. 140.

divinity, it is not necessary for us to know. We are to keep our feet on the rock, Christ Jesus, as God revealed in humanity.

I perceive that there is danger in approaching subjects which dwell on the humanity of the Son of the Infinite God. He did humble Himself when He saw he was in fashion as a man, that He might understand the force of all temptations wherewith man is beset.²

During the time frame of the Baker Letter, at the General Conference in 1895, A. T. Jones spoke very plainly about the human nature of Christ. Not even a caution from Ellen White to Jones has been found concerning the way he presented the subject then and later.

A. T. Jones (1895)

Thus all the tendencies to sin that have appeared, or that are in me, came to me from Adam; and all that are in you came from Adam; and all that are in the other man came from Adam. So all the tendencies to sin that are in the human race came from Adam. But Jesus Christ felt all these temptations; he was tempted upon all these points in the flesh which he derived from David, from Abraham, and from Adam. . . . And there is such a thing as heredity.

Now that law of heredity reached from Adam to the flesh of Jesus Christ as certainly as it reaches from Adam to the flesh of any of the rest of us; for he was one of us.

Thus in the flesh of Jesus Christ,—not in himself, but in his flesh,—our flesh which he took in the human nature,—there were just the same tendencies to sin that are in you and me. And when he was tempted, it was the ‘drawing away of these desires that were in the flesh.’ These tendencies to sin that were in his flesh, drew upon him, and sought to entice him, to consent to the wrong. But by the love of God and by his trust in God, he received the power, and the strength, and the grace to say, ‘No,’ to all of it, and put it all under foot. And thus being in the likeness of sinful flesh, he condemned sin in the flesh....

All the tendencies to sin that are in human flesh were in his human flesh, and not one of them was ever allowed to appear; he conquered them all. And in him we all have victory over them all.

Many of these tendencies to sin that are in us have appeared in action, and have become sins committed, have become sins in the open. There is a difference between a tendency to sin, and the open appearing of that sin in the actions. There are tendencies to sin in us that have not yet appeared; but multitudes have appeared. Now all the tendencies that have not appeared, he conquered. What of the sins that have actually appeared? ‘The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (Isa. 53:6); ‘Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree’ 1 Pet. 2:24. Thus it is plain that all the tendencies to sin

² *Letter 8, 1895, Ellen White to Elder William Baker.*

that are in us and have not appeared, and all the sins which have appeared, were laid upon him. It is terrible; it is true. But, O, joy! In that terrible truth lies the completeness of our salvation. . . .

O, he is a complete Saviour. He is a Saviour from sins committed, and the conqueror of the tendencies to commit sins.³

Speaking about the importance of the human fallen nature Christ assumed and salvation, Jones previously taught that “. . . the salvation of God for human beings lies in just that one thing.”⁴

E. J. Waggoner

E. J. Waggoner, earlier than Jones, made the connection between our justification and the human nature of Christ: “God sent His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, to condemn sin in the flesh, that He might justify us.”⁵

To insist that the Baker letter is a normative interpretive statement concerning an Adamic sinless human nature for Christ is to give the lie to the message of 1888 given by God, through Jones and Waggoner, regarding the kind of human nature Christ took and the corollary message of justification for the end time setting of the pre-advent judgment.

During the time Ellen White wrote to Baker, Prescott preaching in Australia said: “This truth (concerning the kind of human nature Christ took) is the very foundation of all truth.” I quote at length from Prescott in reference to the time of the Baker letter and the place where Baker, Prescott and Ellen White were then laboring—Australia.

W. W. Prescott (1895, 1896)

He who had all glory with the Father, now lays aside His glory and becomes flesh. He lays aside His divine mode of existence, and takes the human mode of existence, and God becomes manifest in the flesh. This truth is the very foundation of all truth.

³ A. T. Jones, “The Third Angel’s Message”, No. 14, *General Conference Bulletin*, 1895, pp. 266, 267.

⁴ A. T. Jones, “The Third Angel’s Message”, No. 13, *General Conference Bulletin*, 1895, p. 233.

⁵ E. J. Waggoner, “Bible Study in the Book of Romans” #12, *General Conference Bulletin*, 1891.

And Jesus Christ becoming flesh. God being manifest in the flesh, is one of the most helpful truths, one of the most instructive truths, the truth above all truths, which humanity should rejoice in.

I desire this evening to study this question for our personal, present benefit. Let us command our minds to the utmost, because to comprehend that the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, demands all our mental powers. Let us consider, first, what kind of flesh: for this is the very foundation of this question as it relates to us personally.

“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted” (Heb 2:14-18). That through death, being made subject to death, taking upon Him the flesh of sin, He might, by His dying, destroy him that had the power of death....

Now verily, He helps the seed of Abraham by Himself becoming the seed of Abraham. God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the righteousness of the law might be revealed in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

So you see that what the Scripture states very plainly is that Jesus Christ had exactly the same flesh that we bear,—flesh of sin, flesh in which we sin, flesh, however, in which He did not sin, but He bore our sins in that flesh of sin. Do not set this point aside. No matter how you may have looked at it in the past, look at it now as it is in the word: and the more you look at it in that way, the more reason you will have to thank God that it is so. . . .

Jesus Christ came, of flesh, and in the flesh, born of a woman, made under the law; born of the Spirit, but in the flesh. And what flesh could He take but the flesh of the time? Not only that, but it was the very flesh He designed to take; because, you see, the problem was to help man out of the difficulty into which he had fallen, and man is a free moral agent. He must be helped as a free moral agent. Christ’s work must be, not to destroy him, not to create a new race, but to re-create man, to restore in him the image of God... “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.” (Heb. 2:9).

God made man a little lower than the angels, but man fell much lower by his sin. Now he is far separated from God; but he must be brought back again. Jesus Christ came for that work; and in order to do it, He came, not where man was before he fell, but where man was after he fell. This is the lesson of Jacob’s ladder. It rested on the earth where Jacob was, but the topmost round reached to heaven.

When Christ comes to help man out of the pit, He does not come to the edge of

the pit and look over, and say, Come up here, and I will help you back. If man could help himself up to the point from whence he has fallen, he could help himself all the way; but it is because man is utterly ruined, weak, and wounded and broken to pieces, in fact, perfectly helpless, that Jesus Christ comes right down where he is, and meets him there. He takes his flesh and becomes a brother to him. Jesus Christ is a brother to us in the flesh: He was born into the family.

He came to redeem the family, condemning sin in the flesh, uniting divinity with flesh of sin. Jesus Christ made the connection between God and man, that the divine spirit might rest upon humanity.⁶

W. C. Wilcox (1900)

Four or five years after the Baker letter was written, in an evangelistic magazine that was sent to the general public, we read in an editorial the word “propensity” in relation to the human nature of Jesus:

That body was His body of sinful flesh, taken in the womb of His virgin mother, and having within itself all the propensities to sin that the flesh of the sons of Adam have. He was not only made “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” Rom. 8:3, but He bore the sinful flesh.⁷ [Emphasis supplied].

It must be stated here that as with Jones, Waggoner and Prescott, there has been found no rebuke or even a caution from Ellen White to Elder Wilcox for his use of the term “propensity to sin” as used in his editorial.

So, the historical context of that which was taught by some of the leaders of the Adventist message concerning the kind of human nature Christ took is evidence that the then unknown Baker was presenting something other than that which they taught.

The Literary Context

The paragraph from the Baker letter, quoted above in its historical context, needs to be repeated here so we may have it clearly in mind in its literary context:

⁶ W. W. Prescott, Sermon: “The Word Became Flesh.” Preached at Australian camp meetings at the end of 1895, and published in *Bible Echo*, Jan. 6, 1896, pp. 4, 5; and Jan. 13, 1896, pp. 12, 13.

⁷ W. C. Wilcox, editorial, *The Signs of the Times*, January 3, 1900, p. 1, col. 2.

Be careful, exceedingly careful as to how you dwell upon the human nature of Christ. Do not set Him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin. He is **the second Adam**. The **first Adam** was created a pure, sinless being, without a taint of sin upon him; he was in the image of God. He could fall, and he did fall through transgressing. Because of sin, his posterity was born with inherent propensities of disobedience. But **Jesus Christ** was the only begotten son of God. **He** took upon Himself human nature, and was tempted in all points as human nature is tempted. **He** could have sinned; **He** could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in him an evil propensity. **He** was assailed with temptations in the wilderness, as **Adam** was assailed with temptations in Eden.

The literary structure of this passage in the Baker letter contrasts the two Adams. The sentence “But Jesus Christ was the only begotten Son of God” does not refer to the previous sentence: “Because of his (Adam’s) sin his posterity was born with inherent propensities of disobedience.”

The disjunctive conjunction “but” refers back to the “first Adam” for its antecedent and not to the phrase “inherent propensities” in the preceding sentence. The antecedent “the first Adam” is described as a created being. Then his sinless condition, his temptation, fall and the consequences of his sin are stated. The last half of the paragraph presents Christ in contrast to Adam. The next three paragraphs are cautions to Baker concerning his teachings about Christ’s humanity and His divinity. The fourth paragraph again contrasts the two Adam.

CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE TWO ADAMS

ADAM

JESUS

was created a pure, sinless being	took upon Himself human nature
was...without a taint of sin upon him	[no] taint of...corruption rested upon Him
was assailed with temptations	was assailed with temptations
[notice what’s missing here]	was tempted in all points as human nature is tempted
he could fall	He could have fallen
he did fall through transgression	He held fast to God and His word

Another sentence that needs to be studied contextually is: “He could have sinned; He could have fallen, but **not for one moment** was there in Him an evil propensity.” [Emphasis supplied].

Christ “could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity” is not a statement exempting Him from the working of the law of heredity. The phrase “not for one

moment” has to do with duration of time. Furthermore, this statement is not a denial of Christ inheriting tendencies or “propensities **to** sin” as written by Wilcox.

Ellen White’s statement “He could have sinned; He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity” should be compared to the following statement found later in this section of the letter: “. . . His **faith** in His Father’s goodness, mercy, and love **did not waver for one moment.**” [Emphasis supplied].

“**. . . not for one moment** was there in Him an evil propensity” is equivalent to saying that “**His faith . . . did not waver for one moment.**” [Emphasis supplied].

If Christ’s faith had wavered “for one moment” there would have been “in Him an evil propensity” which would have caused His damnation and eternal destruction. Even though Christ “had all the strength of the passion of humanity, never did he yield to temptation to do that which was not pure and elevating and ennobling.”⁸ He never crossed the line between sin and righteousness and so there was never “in Him an evil propensity” not even for “one moment” of time. And because He overcame inherited propensities **to** sin “we need not retain one sinful propensity.”⁹

It must never cease to amaze us that scholarship, within the Adventist community since the 1950s, could accept a previously isolated sentence or paragraph within an unpublished letter addressing an unclear or unknown perversion of a teaching by a local Conference evangelist concerning the divinity and the humanity of Christ and use it as the chief cornerstone upon which to build a doctrinal structure identical to the evangelical teaching of an immaculate conception (one generation removed from the Papal doctrine of the same) which produces a Christ with no ability to meet sin in the devil’s lair nor to defeat it there—in our sinful human nature.

⁸ Ellen White, *Signs of the Times*, November 21, 1892.

⁹ Ellen White, *Review and Herald*, April 24, 1900.