

## EDWARD IRVING ON THE SINFUL HUMAN NATURE OF CHRIST: A RESPONSE AND CRITIQUE FROM AN ARMINIAN/ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE

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Edward Irving argued that Christ during the incarnation assumed humanity's fallen, sinful human nature. He made it clear though, that Christ never committed actual acts of sin. He affirmed that Christ was fully God and fully human, yet qualified his stance that Christ's divinity was quiescent during the incarnation. He attributed Christ's victory in sinful flesh to the power of the Holy Spirit and therefore sinless living is possible as well for fallen humanity, with the aid of the same power. Irving's attempt to establish that sinless living is possible through Christ's condescension to the same level of fallen humanity, while noble, essentially results in a Christology that is questionable. This study attempts to prove that it is not necessary for Christ to assume sinful human nature in order for Him to be humanity's Savior. Moreover this study proves that although Christ's human nature was sinless, yet He holds no distinct advantage over our humanity in our struggles against temptations.

*Key Words: Christology, Holy Spirit, incarnation, quiescent, assume, corrupt propensities, sinless, sinful, humanity, divinity.*

### 1. Introduction

Edward Irving (1792–1834) began his ministry in his native Scotland, but rose to prominence in the late 1820s in London.<sup>1</sup> In fact, his rise to a position of influence was rather meteoric, but then his "fall" from favor was also rather dramatic within the Church of Scotland. And the key factor which caused his "fall," and most likely his premature death (he died at the age of 42), was the censuring of his controversial views on the sinful nature of the "substance" of Christ's humanity. In fact, it was relatively late in his brief career that not only censure, but also the revocation of his ordination was meted out by the Church of Scotland on account of his views on the humanity of Christ

<sup>1</sup> A concise life-sketch of Irving is given by David Dorries, *Edward Irving's Incarnational Christology* (Fairfax, VA: Xulon Press, 2002), 23-71.

Irving's importance to the developments in Trans-Atlantic Evangelical Protestantism during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is becoming better recognized. He is now seen as a key contributor to not only the resurgence of Pre-Millennial eschatology in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but also as a harbinger of the rise of the Pentecostal/Charismatic revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Yet his role in Christological developments has been relatively unrecognized. This is most likely due to the benign neglect that the issue of the humanity of Christ (whether seen as peccable or impeccable) has been subjected to in the last two hundred years of evangelical theological discourse.<sup>2</sup>

In all probability, however, it was his views on the sinful human nature of Christ which provide the key to a proper understanding of not only his Pneumatology, but also his teachings on justification, sanctification, perfection, and the atonement. And all of this was most closely associated with his views on the pre-millennial second coming and its greatly anticipated imminence.

This article will review and then critically respond to Irving's Christology. While both authors have experienced a lengthy involvement in the Seventh-day Adventist debates over the issue of the humanity of Christ,<sup>3</sup> it is only recently that we have become aware of the importance of Irving to these rather prolonged exchanges. Thus, while having an intimate familiarity with most of the issues associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> through early 21<sup>th</sup> centuries debates over the humanity of Christ, it is only recently that we have made a more extensive study of Irving's primary documents.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> There are certainly notable exceptions to this benign neglect in both Dogmatics and Biblical Studies, including Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970), 2:154; T. F. Torrance, Colin Gunton, Harry Johnson *The Humanity of the Saviour* (London: The Epworth Press, 1962), 167-78; and C. E. B. Cranfield. See Dorries, xxi. But the issue has not gained much traction in either the Reformed or Wesleyan circles in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>3</sup> See Woodrow W. Whidden, II, *Ellen White on the Humanity of Christ: A Chronological Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1997) and a published paper entitled "The Humanity of Christ Debate—What Did She Actually Teach?," *"Ellen White and Current Issues" Symposium*, Vol. 2, 2006, Jerry Moon and Merlin Burt, ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Center for Adventist Research of Andrews University, 2006), 41-74.

<sup>4</sup> Remwil Tornalejo, "A Comparative Study of the Christology of Edward Irving, Ellet Joseph Waggoner and Alonzo Trevier Jones" (MTh Thesis, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite Province, the Philippines, 2009). The Historical and Theological Studies faculty of the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies has, in recent years, been made the beneficiaries of the outstanding

Tornalejo's thesis, which Whidden directed, has mainly sought to explore the influence of Irving's thought on Christological developments in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Seventh-day Adventism. After an informative survey of Irving's Christology, he has presented plausible evidence of the influence of Irving on two of the most important figures in Seventh-day Adventism's early debates over the humanity of Christ, E. J. Waggoner<sup>5</sup> and A. T. Jones.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Key Issues in Focus

The debates which Irving sparked in early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain, along with the later debates in Seventh-day Adventism, have been preoccupied with the question of whether Christ, in the incarnation, took an essentially fallen ("post-fall") or unfallen ("pre-fall") human nature. This article will (1) initially focus on the conceptual "what" of the substance of Irving's teaching on Christology, especially His humanity. Then it will venture (2) an interpretive appraisal of the "so-what's," or the theological implications of his influential convictions and interpretations of Christ's fallen, sinful humanity. Special attention will be devoted to the coherent adequacy of the arguments generated by Irving.

## 3. An Overview of Irving's Christology

David Dorries has identified five key characteristics<sup>7</sup> of Irving's Christology:

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work done by Aecio Cairus. Professor Cairus has traced the influence of Irving's eschatology on Millerite developments from the late 1820s up through the Second Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844. This has provided a window for a clearer view of the possible influences of Irving's thought on subsequent 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries developments in the Seventh-day Adventist debates over the humanity of Christ.

<sup>5</sup> Woodrow W. Whidden, *E. J. Waggoner: From the Physician of Good News to Agent of Division* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2008). This is the first detailed, scholarly biography of Waggoner and includes detailed analysis of the unfolding of the key facets in his theology, including Christology.

<sup>6</sup> George R. Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy, The Case of A. T. Jones* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1987). This is the only scholarly biography of Jones and is in the process of revision for re-release in 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Dorries, 349 ff.

1. The foundational key to his Christology is the principle of God as gracious love and Christ as the incarnate embodiment of God's love, especially God's filial love for lost sinners.
2. Christ has been verily (truly) God from all eternity and became verily man (human) during His earthly incarnation and has retained His humanity since His ascension. Irving is very much in the classical orthodox tradition of Christology. He would have received no anathemas from either Athanasius or the church Fathers at Chalcedon. The Person of Christ was consubstantial with both God and humanity. There was neither the slightest scent of Eutychianism nor Nestorianism.
3. The humanity which Christ assumed, or took, was infected with "fallen flesh." As this aspect of Irving's theology is so central to his controversial convictions, a more detailed elaboration of this phase of his thought will be given after the following two key characteristics are described.
4. The full deity of Christ was fully present in His Person, but was also fully "Quiescent" during the Incarnation. This was an especially strong point for Irving and all subsequent "post-fall" advocates in the broader Adventist tradition. Though Christ came with all of the "fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col 2:9), yet He never utilized His inherent divine powers and prerogatives in either working miracles to His own advantage or resisting the temptations of the Devil. Thus Christ was alleged by Irving to have assumed no advantages over those whom He came to redeem, at least when it comes to the great struggle with the flesh, the world and the enticements of the Devil. This aspect of Irving's expositions will prove to be especially central in the subsequent history of how his Christology has been received in the Adventist tradition.
5. Though Christ's inherent, consubstantial deity was quiescent during the incarnation, the gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed on Him was understood to be abundantly active. Christ, in His sinful, dependent humanity, was the "Receiver of the Holy Spirit." And here is the final, key aspect of Irving's explanation as to how Christ could be born with a sinful nature, in full consubstantial solidarity with fallen, sinful human flesh, and yet remain immune to the lingering effects of original sin and be totally victorious over all temptations, completely refraining from actual acts of sin. For Irving, the sinlessness of Christ was the result of the empowering gift of the baptism of the Holy Spirit—even from the moment of

His “miraculous conception” in the womb of Mary.<sup>8</sup> This latter point proved to be centrally important to Irving’s account of the sinlessness of Christ—especially when compared to every other baby known to have been conceived in human history (at least from the Protestant perspective—thus excluding the Roman Catholic concept of the Immaculate Conception of Mary).

### 3.1 “Fallen Flesh”

What did Irving mean by the expression “Fallen, Sinful Flesh of Christ”? He was not averse to using the most explicitly clear language to express his convictions. He was very forthright that the humanity of Christ was as sinful as the “substance of the fallen Adam” (or the “substance of fallen manhood”); His experience was not just a matter of mere appearances.<sup>9</sup> His humanity was not only afflicted with the effects of sin; it was infected with sin, analogous to a wide-ranging, systemic, viral infection. The “principle of sin” was inherent in His “flesh” and made “it mortal and corruptible” all of His life—that is until His resurrection, which purged the effects of sin from His human nature in vindication of His victorious, sinless life.<sup>10</sup>

Thus even such expressions as sinful and corrupt “propensities,” “dispositions,” and “inclinations” to sinfulness were not foreign to the conceptions and terminology of Irving. He disdained any explanation of the impeccable nature of Christ that was akin to the Catholic doctrine of the “Immaculate Conception” of Mary. He was absolutely clear that Christ took the “fallen substance of Mary’s humanity.”

It is vitally important to understand that Irving held that the source of Christ’s sinless holiness was not caused by any inherent change in the “substance” of the humanity which He received from Mary during the Incarnation. Christ was thus sinful in His humanity, yet sinless in a derived sense—derived from the influences of the Holy Spirit, beginning at the moment of His human conception and lasting until His death.

Thus it is very clear that the Holy Spirit never changed the “substance” of Christ’s sinful, fallen human nature, but continuously subjugated its evil effects and infection until the atoning death was accomplished: “The eternal Son of God, in becoming the Son of Man, took our very nature into union with himself, with all the infirmities brought upon it by the Fall; but upheld

<sup>8</sup> Edward Irving, *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving* (ed. G. Carlyle; London: Alexander Strahan, 1864), 2:195, 262.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 2:100-101; 2: 219.

<sup>10</sup> Irving, cited by Dorries, 357.

it from sinning, and sanctified it wholly, and constrained it (in his person) to do the entire will of God."<sup>11</sup> Dorries sums up the issue quite well: "Irving never contended that Christ's flesh contained inherent moral evil, but only the natural evil of Mary's fallen substance, which He ever kept morally pure through the operation of the Spirit."<sup>12</sup>

If all of this terminology seems a bit harsh to many evangelical theological ears, the issue is further complicated by some anomalous sounding statements made by Irving as he sought to explicate the sinful, yet sinless humanity of Jesus. Carefully ponder the following:

Whenever I attribute sinful propensities and dispositions and inclinations to our Lord's human nature, I am speaking of it considered apart from Him, in itself . . . we can assert the sinfulness of the whole, the complete, the perfect human nature, which He took, without in the least implicating Him with sin.<sup>13</sup>

Some have understood such language to suggest that Irving was seeking to make a distinction between the "nature" and the person ("apart from Him") of Christ. Marcus Dods, an early 19<sup>th</sup> century contemporary critic, reacted by suggesting that "Nature cannot exist excepting in a person," therefore "if a fallen nature exists at all, it can exist only as a nature of a fallen person."<sup>14</sup> And quite possibly Dods was correct. But before any facile conclusions can be reached, there is the need to ponder another similar statement:

"But as Christ was man, and not a man, he cannot be spoken of as a human person, without being brought in guilty of original sin. As a divine

<sup>11</sup> See Dorries, 360. cf. Edward Irving, *The Orthodox and Catholic Doctrine of Our Lord's Human Nature*, (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1830), 22. Cited 24 January 2008. Online: <http://www.schoolofthespirit.info/OCDLHN.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Edward Irving, "On the Human Nature of Christ," *The Morning Watch or Quarterly Journal on Prophecy and Theological Review*, vol. 1 (London: Ellerton & Henderson, 1829): 75. Cited 22 September 2008. Online: <http://books.google.com.ph/book?id=2Hc3AAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=editions:0cWazVvLJ;;mrOadNh7j&hl=en>.

<sup>13</sup> Dorries, 331.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus Dods, *The Incarnation of the Eternal Word* (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1831): Cited 11 November 2008. Online: [http://books.google.com.ph/books?hl=en&id=ZVoXAAAAYAAJ&dq=The+of+the+Word,+Marcus+Dods&printsec=froncover&source=web&ots=bRRW1umNY1&sig=zy4Ktc\\_4ixmQM6t5Q7z0sy1WFNE&sal=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=1&ct=result#PPA378,ML](http://books.google.com.ph/books?hl=en&id=ZVoXAAAAYAAJ&dq=The+of+the+Word,+Marcus+Dods&printsec=froncover&source=web&ots=bRRW1umNY1&sig=zy4Ktc_4ixmQM6t5Q7z0sy1WFNE&sal=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result#PPA378,ML)



person he is clear of it, and no one can impute it to him. His not having natural generation, clears him of it altogether."<sup>15</sup>

Dorries suggests that what Irving is here getting at has to do with the subtle parsings of the "anhypostatic" speculations made by Cyril of Alexandria: Cyril taught that a distinction can be made between "ordinary generation" (being created or naturally born into this world) and "extraordinary generation;" and Irving seemed to be in agreement with this distinction.<sup>16</sup> Thus Christ was granted the gift of an "extraordinary generation" by the Holy Spirit, in clear contrast to the "ordinary lineage" shared by all other human beings who have descended from Adam.<sup>17</sup>

Now it could be that Dorries is correct and that Dods and others have not seen this subtlety in the thought of Cyril of Alexandria and Irving.<sup>18</sup> But what is absolutely clear is that Christ was somehow granted a unique, "miraculous," "extraordinary," "generation," or "conception" that shielded him from any infection of sin received by all the rest of the sons and daughters of Adam. This issue will later be further elaborated, but there are a couple of other factors in Irving's thought which need further attention if one is to get a credible handle on his views, including the manner in which sin did or did not infect Christ's humanity.

Most certainly the previous discussion raises the question of the meaning of "original sin" in the thought of Irving? And it seems that for Irving, there was simply no such thing as "original sin," that is, in terms of some sort of original guilt. Sin has, however, been manifested in the lingering effects of the sin of Adam which afflicted Christ with strong "inclinations," "dispositions" and "propensities" to do wrong acts. But such sinful predispositions

<sup>15</sup> Edward Irving, *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving in Five Volumes* (ed. G. Carlyle; London: Alexander Strahan, 1865): 5:563-565. Cited 23 September 2008. Online: <http://books.google.com.ph/book?id=2Hc3AAAAMAAJ7printsec=frontcover&dq=editio ns:0V719QYvXZ68P-qdkT;Internet>.

<sup>16</sup> Dorries, 418.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>18</sup> When one tries to wrap the mind around the discussions of *ousia*, *hypostasis* and their beguiling subtleties, it tends to leave the mental capacities somewhat "challenged." Justo L. Gonzalez offers the following suggestion: "Some interpreters have understood him (Cyril of Alexandria) to mean that in Jesus the divine nature took up human nature in general, and that therefore, as to his humanity, Jesus was not an individual. Most likely, what Cyril means is simply that the human nature of Jesus has no subsistence of its own, but subsists in its union with the divine" Justo L. Gonzalez, "Anhypostatic Union [Anhypostasis]," *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2005), 8.

(or bents or aptitudes) involved no corrupting guilt, unless they happened to flower into actual acts of sin.

Therefore for Irving, the sinlessness, or impeccability of Christ's humanity was almost totally bound up with His character record which consisted of habituated, Holy Spirit empowered acts of righteousness and the avoidance of acts of sin. Thus, while Christ was understood to be afflicted with inherited inclinations to sin, He never manifested any initial, habituated acts or cultivated tendencies to sinning.

### 3.2 Why So Strong an Emphasis on Sinful Nature?

For Irving, if Christ did not take the full, consubstantial sinfulness of human nature, there could be no atonement for sin and salvation from it. And thus it is appropriate to give consideration to the role of two additional key-principles drawn from the early church Fathers that strongly informed Irving's Christology (and his thoughts on atonement, justification, sanctification, and perfection):

(1) Christ could "only redeem that which He assumed." This concept was one of the key maxims of Gregory of Nazianzus and was closely related to (2) the theme of Irenaeus that Christ must recapitulate the experience of fallen humanity if He is to effectively redeem sinners from sin. Both were much in evidence in the Christological and soteriological thought of Irving.

Thus drawing on Gregory and Irenaeus, Irving aptly sums up the issue: "If Christ took not our substance in its fallen, but in its unfallen state, and brought this unto glory, then nothing whatever hath been proved with respect to fallen creatures, such as we are. The work of Christ is to touch not us who are fallen; there is not reconciliation of the fallen creature to God. God is not in Christ reconciling a sinful world, but he is in Christ reconciling an unfallen world; for it is the unfallen creature and the Godhead which have met in Christ."<sup>19</sup>

In the thought of Irving, the atoning work of Christ was just as focused on the birth and life of Christ as it was on His death and resurrection. If Christ could not triumph over sin and temptation in the assumed and recapitulated sinful, fallen nature of lost humanity, there could effectively be no atoning death and resurrection.

<sup>19</sup> Irving, *The Collected Writings*, 5:154.



#### 4. The Problematic Nature of Quiescence and the Gift of the Spirit

With this background, it now seems appropriate to commence a review of the critiques which Irving's Christology has received. While one could quibble with Irving's understanding of the nature of sin, original sin, Christ's recapitulation and assumption of sinful nature for the purposes of redemption, and the meaning of such expressions as the sinful substance of human nature, the following is abundantly evident:

Whatever "sin" there was which dwelt in the humanity of Christ, it was somehow neutralized by the gifting of the Holy Spirit. And this special gifting commenced at the time of Christ's earthly "conception" and continued with sustained effect to the moment of His death on the Cross.

Thus, while Christ's inherently divine substance was seen to be quiescent during His entire sojourn as the Incarnate Son of God, the gifting work of the Holy Spirit in His life was continually proactive. And it is these convictions which have sparked most of the reflections on and criticisms of Irving's Christology.

First of all it is important to note that this review of Irving's views on the humanity of Christ reveals almost nothing new to anyone familiar with the debates over this issue that have unfolded in Protestantism from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the present. And while such notable 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologians as Karl Barth, T. F. Torrance, Colin Gunton, Harry Johnson, and Clark Pinnock have embraced significant portions of Irving's thought, it has provoked relatively little debate among both Roman Catholics and Protestants (including Wesleyans,<sup>20</sup> with their strong emphasis on holiness). But there is one notable exception—Seventh-day Adventism.

In Sabbatarian Adventism, the issue has been at the heart of a protracted debate over the issue of holiness and Christian perfection. In fact, the issues in the Seventh-day Adventist debates over the meaning of the humanity of Christ (and its implications for holy living) are so similar to those sparked earlier by Irving, that it does lead to the suggestion of whether Irving is the ultimate source for what has been called the Seventh-day Adventist "post-fall" or "post-lapsarian" view of the humanity of Christ. Thus, what follows will be a brief review of the issues from an Adventist/Arminian perspective.

<sup>20</sup> The Wesleyan Tradition simply seems to have followed Wesley in this strange neglect. He affirmed the humanity of Christ, but provided little sustained, substantive comment on the issue.

The heart of Irving's Christology centers in his attempts to remove any unfair advantage granted to Christ in His struggles with temptation through the alleged quiescence of His inherently consubstantial deity. And this is the key concept which becomes the source for much of the subsequent debate.

Essentially two schools of thought have evolved: the above-mentioned "post-fall" thinkers and their "pre-fall" opponents. The arguments of the "post-fall" thinkers have hardly varied in principle from those of Irving. Thus the key arguments that will be rehearsed are those of the "pre-fall" critics of Irving and his subsequent admirers.

The core of the "pre-fall" case is encapsulated in the following question: Hasn't Irving granted Christ a profound advantage over the rest of sin infected humanity who have not been blessed with the gift of the Holy Spirit from their very conceptions? To the "pre-fall" respondents, the following facts seem self-evident:

While Christ was "miraculously" conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, the rest of humanity have been birthed with sinful flesh and do not normally receive the converting work of the Holy Spirit<sup>21</sup> until many years later in life. Thus sinful humans bear not only the burden of being conceived, gestated, and born with sin-infected natures, but are further cursed with years of the habituated practice of sin.

One observer of the "pre-fall" versus "post-fall" Christology debate has framed the issue this way: "Right here there remains a massive gap between Christ and the sinner. At best, Christ can only face initial temptation, but He cannot be brought down to the level of the alcoholic who faces the temptation to indulge in strong drink for the thousandth time . . . Christ never knew the power of habitual sin and cannot meet fallen man on that level. . . . And any attempt to drag Him down fully to our level collapses on the bedrock of our history of universally habitual sin."<sup>22</sup>

Tornalejo has expressed similar reservations: If "Christ was preserved from original sin and guilt through the miraculous conception, why was such a miraculous way of birth not made common to all humanity? By this all humanity could have started from where Christ started?"<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> In evangelical parlance, this work which transpires at conversion is normally understood to be a spiritual "conception," or the "New Birth."

<sup>22</sup> Eric C. Webster, *Crosscurrents in Adventist Christology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984; later republished by Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, MI, 1992), 419, 420.

<sup>23</sup> Tornalejo, 77, 78.

To Irving's "pre-fall" respondents, simple logic seems to indicate that Webster and Tornalejo are onto something quite critically important. Maybe the issue could be re-phrased this way: If all that Christ can help sinful humans with is the initial temptation to sin, how, in this sin-infested world, can He be of any help in succoring (Heb 2:18) those (the entirety of the human race) who have to struggle with years and even decades of cultivated, habituated tendencies to acts of sinning?

Thus the "pre-fall" partisans not so subtly suggest that Irving, by giving Christ the unique gifting of the Holy Spirit at His conception, has created a "massive gap" between all of the rest of sinful humanity and Christ. And thus, with the one hand, what Irving thought he has taken away in affirming the quiescent handicap of the full Deity of Christ, he has, with the other hand, given back to Christ with a unique, head-start gifting of the presence and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit during the occasion of His miraculous conception. Thus the "pre-fall" critics go on to claim that it is small comfort for believers to be told that Christ was not advantaged with the "immaculate conception" of His mother Mary, and then be promptly informed that He was given a unique "immaculate reception" to which all the rest of sinners have had no effective access.

#### 4.1 Was Christ Advantaged by His Full Deity and Sinlessness?

As many "pre-fall" thinkers have pondered the various Scriptural passages on the humanity of Christ, especially those key New Testament verses invoked by Irving and his "post-fall" admirers in support of their position, they claim that Irving and company are reading quite a bit into the texts that is not necessarily there. Here one immediately thinks of such passages as Heb 2: 14, 16–18; 4: 15, 16; and Rom 8: 3 (just to name the most often cited). After seeking to absorb the interpretations which the "post-fall" partisans have so persistently sought to convey and giving further review to their own interpretations of these passages, the "pre-fall" thinkers have offered the following responses:

While acknowledging the "post-fall" suggestions, they have not yet seen any of these passages explicitly saying that "total depravity," "total corruption", or sinful "propensities," "inclinations," "tendencies," "bents," "dispositions," or natural proclivities to sin were the inheritance of Christ's humanity. They also honestly admit that the "pre-fall" interpretation of the key texts does not necessarily and explicitly say what they claim is the truth of Christ's sinless human nature. Neither case is all that explicitly compelling in support of their respective positions.

But the “pre-fall” teachers then go on to point out what they sense is truly compelling for both the “pre-” and “post fall” arguments: they both end up with a Christ who is sinless, in the sense that He never committed any acts of sin, or cultivated tendencies to evil. Thus it is claimed that both schools of interpretation must confront one very stubborn fact of evangelical biblical interpretation—that Christ is the only Person since the Fall Who has somehow achieved a record of sinless character. And the key point that all the participants in this debate must struggle with, especially the “post-fall” partisans, is the question of how to explain this sinlessness of Christ—that is, without giving Him some sort of explicit, or tacit advantage. So what is to be made of this situation?

The “pre-fall” thinkers have put forth the following, somewhat unremarkable suggestion: Why don’t both schools admit that in contemplating Christology all are dealing with heavy mystery that simply defies a fully satisfactory explanation. This is essentially the same thing most theologians do when confronted with any number of other issues in Christian theology.

And here one’s thoughts easily turn to such questions as (1) the hypostatic union manifest in the person of Christ, a Being Who remains both human and divine; (2) a Godhead of three divine Persons who co-exist in the being of one God; and (3) the problem of evil (especially the question of why a good and merciful God seems to continue to put up with so much unmitigated evil when He allegedly has the power to instantly bring it all to a merciful end? The “pre-fall” participants then suggest that what both sides are dealing with regarding the humanity of Christ is simply a mystery that is too profound to ever fully fathom. But if such seems like a cop-out to the “post-fall” admirers of Irving, the following concession and suggestions are offered:

It is apparent, in the face of such mystery, that there might be some explanatory power in the careful use of sanctified theological discourse which can help point the way out of the conundrum that Irving has sought to settle with his appeal to a quiescent deity which ends up being not quite so quiescent. This conundrum is especially evident in the previously mentioned unique timing of the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit’s protection of Christ against the alleged ravages of sinful propensities, corruption and systemic viral depravity. A re-appraisal of the issue can be put forth in the following terms:

For Irving, the key issue in defining Christ’s sinlessness was almost totally exhausted by negatively defining Christ’s impeccability as the absence of acts of sin, or positively as acts of perfect obedience. While all of this has been readily acknowledged by both schools of interpretation, the “pre-fall” advocates go on to suggest that such a limited definition of righteousness

conjures up a somewhat superficial view of the complexity of the phenomena of sin (and righteousness). They then suggest that there have always been deeper, more foundational aspects of sin and temptation which Irving and his "post-fall" tradition have either inadvertently overlooked or conveniently ignored.

For instance, what about the deeper issue of the divinely bestowed gift of God-dependence versus the human generated, subtle deceitfulness of self-dependence? Who has the greater temptation to trust self, one who is sinlessly perfect from the very moment of conception and fully advantaged with inherent deity, or one who is sinful (in both nature and acts) and totally devoid of the gift of inherent deity?

The seeming lynch-pin of the "pre-fall" argument suggests that one of the more fundamental or radical aspects of the nature of temptation and sin lies in a key definition of sin found in Rom 14:23—"whatsoever is not of faith is sin." And here lurks the most salient thought: at the root or heart of every temptation to sin is the issue of self-trust versus self-denying trust in God. The truly "original sin" of the biblical Adam and Eve was the sin of not maintaining faith in God and His revealed "word." One of the most compelling facets of Jesus' resistance to temptation was His constant dependence on the grace which was imparted to Him in response to His clinging faith in His Father's assuring, guiding Word, and the Spirit's sustaining power.

All would concede that Irving was right about the quiescent deity of Christ. But Irving seemed to be strangely neglectful of one very important facet of sin: that sin consists of not just a catena of bad acts, but is also more radically evident in a badly directed faith. And could it be that the key to Christ's good acts was a good faith?

The heart or core of the "pre-fall" response seems imbedded in the Rom 14:23 definition of sin which has been manifested in every instance of temptation—the issue of God-dependence versus self-dependence. Thus the "pre-fall" question regarding who it is that has the greater temptation to trust self? Is it the Person who has the great advantages of full, inherent deity, an impeccably pre-fall nature, and a squeaky-clean character history of sinless actions and thoughts? Or is it the penitent soul who is naturally sinful, failing, and bearing the legacy of a lengthy "rap-sheet"?

The "pre-fall" appeal concludes with the following: When all interpreters carefully ponder the issue of temptation from this angle, it becomes somewhat ironically plausible to see that all of Christ's inherent advantages begin to morph into points of disadvantage. As one able homiletical rhetorician so vividly put it: Who has the greater temptation to break speeding laws? Is it



those who have a huge power-plant under the hood, or those who drive a fuel efficient Hybrid" or a "Mini"?<sup>24</sup>

It is then further suggested that when penitent sinners commence to experience the converting power of the Holy Spirit, this is when the realization begins to emerge as to how little all believers naturally have under their spiritual "hoods," and thus the utter futility of trusting self. But by way of contrast and comparison, all are requested to consider Christ's experience when tempted (1) to depend on His sinless, divine Self and (2) to neglect an attitude of continual trust in the imparted power that was on offer from the Father, mediated to Him through the work of the Holy Spirit.

#### 4.2 A Review of the "Pre-Fall" Response

When temptation and sin are viewed in the light of Christ's evident advantages, temptation, understood as self-dependence (versus constant, faithful dependence on the imparted power of the Father, through the Spirit), then sin and righteousness take on a somewhat different perspective. Did Christ have advantages in His inherent deity and His sinless humanity? The biblical evidence points in this direction. But seen in the light of Rom 14:23, both of these advantages become clear channels of explanation for Christ's profound identity with sinful, dependent, mortal human beings.

Therefore the key temptation for Christ was the same as it is for all humans—the desire to go it alone and depend upon self rather than to lean upon divinely imputed and imparted power (on constant offer from Christ). Did the fact that Christ had all sorts of advantages truly advantage Him? Ironically or paradoxically enough, they became the key occasions of His great disadvantages in His struggles with every species of temptation.

Furthermore, the "pre-fall" perspective suggests one other facet in the history of temptation. The biblical narratives of Adam and Eve, the fall of Lucifer and one-third of the angelic host (Is 14, Ezek 28 and Rev 12) point to a rather simple fact of the angelic and human experience with temptation: *having natural tendencies to sin is not essential to being tempted*. Certainly God did not create either the Angels, or the primal parents of humanity as in any way flawed. Yet they did yield to temptation. And thus the fact that Christ could have come into this world with a neutralized, sinful nature did not automatically free Him from temptation—especially the bent to trust His advantaged Self. Thus it appears that the tortured "post-fall" arguments and strained interpretations of Scripture which seek to set forth a Christ who is corrupt

<sup>24</sup> This is a rough, somewhat updated paraphrase of the rhetoric of contemporary Seventh-day Adventist revivalist and author, Morris Venden.



and depraved, yet sinless in behavior, are obviated. Once more, it could be that the key bible texts mean what the "post-fall" advocates say they mean. But the "pre-fall" thinkers sense that they just might be reading a little too much into them. In fact, based on the quite self-evident interpretation of Rom 14:23, the following alternative interpretation of the key post-fall texts is put forth:

Christ was a rather typical first century human being and it thus seems best to express the freedom from sin in His "spiritual nature" this way: While He certainly was *affected* by sin, He was not *infected* with it.<sup>25</sup> Somehow at His conception and during His gestation, as He took the "likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3), he was *affected* by weakness which was caused by physical degeneracy, but He was not *infected* in His human nature with any sort of selfishness and lusts of the flesh.

Probably the best illustration of this difference has to do with the variations which arise when a comparison is made between the scars which result from bad cuts (and the limps which result from broken bones) with such terminal, viral infections as AIDS. The former are largely lingering *effects*, the latter are deep-seated, systemic *infections*. Thus it is possible to say that Christ was marked by sin, but was not doomed by an incurable (from the human perspective) infection. From the "pre-fall" perspective, this line of illustrative argument suggests a more coherent exposition of the key biblical texts than do the interpretations of Irving and his admirers.

## 5. Conclusion and Summation

Both "pre-fall" and "post-fall" advocates acknowledge that Irving has made a number of helpful contributions to a fuller understanding of the humanity of Christ and its implications for the atonement and personal salvation. While the "post-fall" interpreters have, in principle, embraced almost all of the key assumptions and conclusions of Irving's teachings on the humanity of Christ, the "pre-fall" interpreters have expressed serious reservations about his advocacy that Christ's humanity included sinful, corrupt propensities, tendencies, inclinations, and bents to sin. And thus they have offered an alternative treatment of the humanity of Christ, based on Rom 14:23. This line of thought has maintained the full impeccability of

<sup>25</sup> For this simple, distinguishing terminology, the "pre-fall" school is indebted to 20<sup>th</sup> century Seventh-day Adventist theologian, Edward (Ted) Heppenstall, *The Man Who Is God* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977), 133.

both Christ's human nature and character, and yet understands Him to be in a condition where He is fully able to "succor," or aid struggling sinners in their battles with temptation. The issue revolves around the central issue of all specific occasions of temptation, the alternatives of deadly self-dependence or life-giving faith dependence on the imparted divine power of the Father which is administered through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus any advantage gained by Christ in the Incarnation is negated by the subtle disadvantages of being both sinless and divine.