

The war within is different for each of us...

The apostle Paul says that the law of sin dwells “in [our] members” (Rom. 7:23) and further exhorts us not to let it reign in our mortal bodies (Rom. 6:12), suggesting that it is present there. If the principle of sin remains with us, and the term sin nature refers to this principle, then how can Neil Anderson maintain that Christians no longer have a sinful nature?

Anderson gets into theological trouble because of his inadequate understanding of what the term nature means. Nature here refers to one’s disposition, inclination, or bent — the principle or law that governs one’s behavior. When Anderson writes that “no person can consistently behave in a way that is inconsistent with how he perceives himself,”¹ he fails to recognize that it is not one’s self-perception but rather one’s nature with which one cannot behave inconsistently. If Christians had only a Christlike nature they could only behave like Christ.

The reason Christians are capable of both righteousness and sin is that they have two natures from which to draw. Now, there is another, larger sense in which the term nature is used that refers to an entity’s collection of defining attributes. In this sense, all human beings have only one nature that includes one moral faculty that is capable of both good and evil. Using the narrower sense of the term nature (disposition determined by principle or law), this moral faculty takes the form of the sin nature when it is governed by evil and the new nature when it is governed by good.

In addition to the orientation around the interests of self that all mortals possess, Christians are given an additional orientation around the interests of God. The new orientation inclines them toward good and thus wages war with their original orientation, which inclines them toward evil. The New Testament clearly describes Christians in a state of inner conflict in which they must deny one set of natural inclinations or the other (see Gal. 5:16–17; Rom. 7:15–25; James 4:1–3; 1 Pet. 2:11).

It isn’t as though Christians start with three-fourths of the original nature and one-fourth of the new and must work to decrease and increase the respective percentages. The old nature is still there in its full strength and ugliness — but they are no longer slaves to it. They can and must choose daily which orientation they are going to “clothe” themselves with or “put on” (Rom. 13:14; Eph. 4:22–24; Col 3:1–14). Sanctification consists of increasingly learning to live according to the new capacity, which is accomplished as the Word of God is applied to every area of one’s life² (e.g., Ps. 119:11, 105; James 1:22–27; Heb. 4:2; 5:12–14; 1 John 2:4–5).

The Bible calls the old nature sin or the flesh. The new nature is referred to as the spirit, and the individual as determined by these natures is identified either as the old man (self: NIV, NASB) or the new man. The spirit is the moral nature of Christ, just as the flesh is the moral nature of Adam after the Fall that he passed on to his descendants. Christ is the second man, the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:42–50). All human beings are identified with Adam by birth and thus do by nature the things that Adam would do. Those who are identified with Christ by faith and second birth have transferred from the headship of Adam to that of Christ (Rom. 5:12–21), and now, by the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ, have a second nature to do what He would do. In the next world, this will be the only possibility. But in this world, sin remains “in my members.” By this, Scripture is teaching that the very fact of human mortality carries with it not only physical corruptibility but moral corruptibility as well.

It is because of the spiritual corruptibility that is inseparable from the mortal body that Paul cries, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24), and that believers, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, “groan inwardly” as they eagerly await the redemption of their bodies from mortality to immortality (Rom. 8:23). As long as we remain in our mortal state we will also remain vulnerable to the tendencies to corruption that define mortality.³ Anderson’s insistence that mortal believers no longer have a sinful nature is therefore as much a non sequitur as the insistence of “faith” teachers that mortal believers should live perfectly free of sickness and physical deterioration.

This inextricable relationship of the sinful nature to our mortal bodies is why Paul calls the sin nature the “flesh.” It is human nature apart from the redeeming influence of the Spirit of God, and thus Paul can say, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom. 7:19). Since sin remains “right there with” every believer (Rom. 7:21), he or she must make a conscious choice to walk according to the new nature and mortify in his or her day-to-day life that which forensically and ultimately was put to death on the cross (Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:24; Col. 3:5).

1 John 1:8 specifically states, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Note that John speaks of having sinned, not sinning. The term sin in its singular form is frequently used in the New Testament to refer to a principle or law that results in acts of disobedience rather than specific acts of disobedience themselves (John 8:34; Acts 8:23; Rom. 5:12–21; 6:2, 6–7, 10–23; 7:7–27; 8:2; Gal. 3:22; Heb. 12:1, 4).

Anderson responds to this observation by arguing, “‘Having’ sin and ‘being’ sin are two different concepts.”⁴Indeed, they are. But those who argue that Christians still have a sinful nature do not claim that Christians are in. If Christians were sin they would be incapable of anything but evil. But if they have sinned it means that they possess a disposition toward evil that must be counteracted by the new disposition toward good they’ve received in Christ. Only if sinning is rooted in natures they will continue to possess for the rest of their lives does the apostle John’s statement make sense. If, as Anderson teaches, sin is merely rooted in conditioning that can be changed, it is theoretically possible to stop sinning permanently — which would contradict 1 John 1:8.

The Bible does generally call Christians saints and not sinners (believers are called sinners in 1 Timothy 1:15, James 4:1–9, 5:19–20, and Galatians 2:17) because the term sinner usually connotes someone whose life is characterized by unrepentant sin (e.g., 1 Tim. 1: 9; 1 Pet. 4:18). The apostle John referred to this kind of sin when he affirmed that someone who is born of God does not sin (1 John 3:9). But it is no more unbiblical for us to say we are sinners than it was for Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15,⁵ for “nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh.”

Anderson makes a gallant attempt to reconcile his doctrine of sin to one of its most difficult biblical challenges — Romans 7: “Notice that there is only one player in these two verses \[15-16\] — the ‘I,’ mentioned nine times. Notice also that this person has a good heart; he agrees with the law of God. But this good-hearted Christian has a behavior problem....He agrees with God but ends up doing the very things he hates.” After quoting vv. 17–21 Anderson asks, “How many players are involved now? Two: sin and me. But sin is not me; it’s only dwelling in me....Do these verses say that I am no good, that I am evil, or that I am in? Absolutely not. They say that I have something dwelling in me which is no good, evil, and sinful, but it’s not me.”⁶

Paul’s dissociation of himself from the evil within him is not to deny that that evil is part of his own nature (see, e.g., vv. 14, 17, 18, 21). His point in Romans 7 is rather to illustrate the crisis the child of God eventually reaches where, even after his or her mind has become fully possessed by the desire for the things of God, still he or she cannot break the shackles of sin (see, e.g., v. 18). Such experiences demonstrate the principle that sin is fused into his or her very mortality and, therefore, willpower is insufficient to bring deliverance. Paul discusses the Christian’s only recourse in the larger context of Romans 6:1—8:4: to identify by faith with Christ. Because they have judicially been executed for their sin in the person of Christ and are therefore no longer under the law of God (which excites the sin nature into action), their lives need and should no longer be dominated by sin, but rather by the grace of God (Rom. 6:1—8:4). As Paul triumphantly concludes, “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Rom. 8:2).

In Victory Anderson never explains exactly who this second “player” that is not “me,” but dwells “in me,” is. His answer is provided in Released from Bondage:

I believe that the word sin in Romans 6:12 is personified, referring to the person of Satan Satan is sin: the epitome of evil, the prince of darkness, the father of lies. I would have a hard time understanding how only a principle (as opposed to an evil personal influence) would reign in my mortal body in such a way that I would have no control over it. Even more difficult to understand is how I could get a principle out of my body. Paul says, “I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good” (Romans 7:21). What is present in me is evil — the person, not the principle — and it is present in me because at some time I used my body as an instrument of unrighteousness. (emphases in original)⁷

When we examine the previously cited New Testament passages referring to sin in the singular, we see that it is implausible to interpret them as referring to Satan. The word sin is sometimes used interchangeably with the phrase law of sin, showing that the subject is a principle and not a person.

The fact that Anderson has a hard time understanding this is exactly the heart of his problem. Whether we are dealing with impersonal sin or the personal devil determines our response. If we are combating an inner disposition toward evil, we respond to it by identifying ourselves with the crucified and risen Christ and aligning ourselves with His will (Rom. 6:5–14). On the other hand, if we are combating an alien personality working within our very beings, we will focus our response directly on him — as does Anderson’s entire approach to spiritual warfare. But the former response is the biblical response, for although Satan uses the world and the flesh to tempt us, it is our own sinful choices that get us into trouble. Our own tendency toward sin, therefore, is what needs to be dealt with directly, not the devil. As will become painfully clear in Part Two, Anderson’s inadequate view of the flesh has led him to an exaggerated view of the devil.

It’s not that Anderson denies that sin can originate from the Christian’s own mind. But his definition of the flesh as merely the “residue of your negative conditioning”⁸ is inadequate to account for the gross evil Christians often encounter within themselves. To explain this, only the devil will do.⁹ In fact, Anderson reasons that it is harmful to Christians to attribute truly evil thoughts to themselves:

Assure the counselee that any thoughts which do not “joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man” (Romans 7:22) are from Satan.¹⁰

She replied, “Sometimes when I go to church, I think these awful thoughts about God and dirty thoughts go through my mind.” “That’s not you,” I assured her. Half an hour later she understood the origin of those thoughts and Satan’s tactics; the thoughts were gone and so was her fear. If those thoughts had been her thoughts, then what could she have concluded about her nature? “How can I be a Christian and have those kinds of thoughts?” she reasoned, and so do millions of other well-meaning Christians.¹¹ (emphasis added)

Those who say a demon cannot influence [read: control] an area of a believer’s life has left us with only two possible culprits for the problems we face: ourselves or God. If we blame ourselves we feel hopeless because we can’t do anything to stop what we’re doing. If we blame God our confidence in Him as our benevolent Father is shattered. Either way, we have no chance to gain the victory which the Bible promises us.¹²

[A woman named Anne wrote to Anderson in the middle of one of his conferences:] “I didn’t know what it meant to take every thought captive. I tried to do this once, but I was unsuccessful because I blamed myself for all this stuff. I thought all those thoughts were mine and that I was the one who was doing it. There has always been a terrible cloud hanging over my head because of these issues. I never could accept the fact that I was righteous because I didn’t feel like it. Praise God it was only Satan —, not me. I have worth!”¹³

There is a biblical basis for saying some of our evil thoughts are provoked by Satan (e.g., 1 Chron. 21:1; Matt. 16:23; John 13:2; Acts 5:3), but there is no biblical basis for saying all of them do (James 1:14;

4:1; Rom. 8:7; 1 Pet. 2:11; Gal. 5:17). Anderson fails to recognize that evil can originate from ourselves (our flesh) and yet we can still gain victory over the power and guilt of sin through Christ's cross and indwelling Spirit (see, e.g., Heb. 9:13–14; Gal. 5:16–25). His desire to protect us from responsibility for the evil in our hearts contradicts his own emphasis that we should take responsibility and not fall into a "devil made me do it" mentality.

This is a serious error. The biblical answer to what Anne was experiencing is first to agree with Paul that "nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18) and then to see that her righteousness is entirely in Jesus Christ. Only after one reaches the point of utter self-despair that cries out with Paul, "What a wretched man I am! Who will set me free from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24) can one experience the deliverance that also proclaims with Paul, "Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25). So, Anderson inadvertently perpetuates the very bondage he wants to free people from by feeding rather than confronting that fleshly concern to feel worthy in and of oneself.

Christians can never stand before God with total confidence until they find their righteousness strictly outside of themselves, in the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:3–9; 1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 10:3–4). Only then will Christ's imparted righteousness take shape in their lives (Gal. 6:14–15; Rom. 8:1–4). As soon as they begin to consider that imparted righteousness as their righteousness they will find themselves walking after the flesh again (Gal. 1:18—2:14; 2 Cor. 3:5; 1 Cor. 10:12; Prov. 16:18; Rev. 3:17–18). Therefore, it does not matter whether a thought originates from Satan or the Christian because the Christian should not be making any claims to personal righteousness before God in the first place.