

Flesh & Spirit in Rom. 5-8 Old Man & New Man in Col.3 and Eph. 4

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Over the years all sorts of theories about human nature (two nature, dichotomy, trichotomy), sanctification (entire, perfect love), and holiness (Higher Life, Keswick, two and three stages of spiritual development) have sprung up.

They are often taught as gospel truths and yet when they are examined closely they are often based on faulty translations of key Biblical passages. Rather than being helpful, they can lead us to become confused with respect to our true identity in Christ. Generally we need to get back to more literal translations such as the NASB and the ESV.

Please read *No Quick Fix* by Andrew David Naselli. It is very helpful on the history and teachings of the Keswick and Higher Life movements in the late 1800's until the present. "Let Go & Let God", "Be Still", "Exchanged Life" are central concepts in some of these theories that are quite popular but while attractive, they can be misleading.

The Greek word for body is *soma* (as in "psychosomatic") and flesh is *sarx* (as in "sarcophagus" – lit. a flesh eater or coffin). These two words are different and yet they overlap. "Flesh" can refer to (1) the entire body – and is on occasion translated as "body"; (2) the skin – i.e. our literal flesh itself; and (3) in an ethical sense especially in Paul, to the fallenness of not only our physical bodies (*soma*) and the outer man but also our minds, emotions, or heart – the "inner man". See 2 Cor. 4:16.

Total Depravity means not that each of us is as evil as we might be, but that all areas of our lives are deeply affected by sin, through both original sin and our own sins.

"Flesh" is actually a much better literal translation for the word *sarx* in Romans 5-8 and elsewhere as a reference to our fallen tendencies (in both the outer and inner person) and also to indwelling sin; i.e. the "sin that dwells in us" (Rom. 7:17-18, 20).

The NIV, in an effort to be more readable and to overcome the notion that the body itself is evil as taught in Platonic and Docetic thought which Christianity does not teach embrace, has changed *sarx* from "flesh" to "sinful nature" (1978). The NIV (**dynamic equivalence**) is meant to be more readable but it sacrifices on accuracy. It is more of a thought-for-thought translation than the NASB (1971/1977/1995/ 2020) and the ESV (2001) which are **formal equivalency** translations – i.e., more accurate, word-for-word translations that are still quite readable.

In Col. 3:9-10 and Eph. 4:20-24 the older RSV (1952 National Council of the Churches of Christ Version) translated the phrase, *palaios anthropos* (literally "old man") and *kainos anthropos* (literally "new man") as "old and new nature". The most literal translation is "old and new man".

The NIV, NASB, and ESV all use old and new "self" as a reference to the person as a whole and to be more gender neutral.

The difficulty arises when folks use “old and new nature” as equivalent terms to “flesh” and “spirit” and then confuse what are actually distinct categories of thought. *Phusis* or “nature” is used only 14 times in the NT and only once in the sense of fallen human nature. That is in Eph. 2:3 speaking of the unregenerate persons “who were by nature (*phusis*) children of wrath”.

Both Douglas J. Moo in *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: The Gift of the New Realm in Christ* (2021) and Herman Ridderbos in his book, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (1997) speak of the “old man” and “new man” as essentially what it means to be “in Adam” or “in Christ”. Both are epochs of time in salvation history (Creation until the first coming & the First Coming through Eternity) as well as existential categories. One is experientially either “in Adam” or “in Christ” but not both.

Existentially (in experience) and in time, the unregenerate move from being “dead in their trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1-3) which is to be “in Adam” to being “alive in Christ (Eph. 2:5). Nonbelievers move from being “in Adam” to being “in Christ” at the time of their conversion. Both Moo and Ridderbos connect these to Paul’s use of the “First and Last Adam” as a concept in I Cor. 15:45 and Rom. 5:12-21

In my humble estimate, it is far better to translate the terms in Col. 3:9-10 and Eph. 4:20-24 as “old and new man” (“self” is ok) that refer to complex sets of fleshly or Spirit produced attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors but they should be never be translated as “old and new nature”. The old and new man refer to all that we were in Adam and are now in Christ, not to two separate natures within the Christian that are battling it out. These concepts are not ontological in nature. The “two nature” theory of mankind is incorrect.

The battle we actually experience as Christians is between our “flesh” (*sarx*) which affects our entire being in both body and spirit/ outer and inner man) and the Spirit of God who is now indwelling us once we come to faith in Christ (Rom. 8:9-13). Sin continues to dwell in us but we are no longer slaves to sin, the Law, or death (Rom. 7). Instead, we have become slaves to Christ and in Him, we find true freedom.

“Old and new man” are separate categories that describe who we were “in Adam” and the fact that at conversion we definitively “put off” or “laid aside” the old man and we “put on” the new man. Therefore we are told to stop living like this old pattern of life as though we were living in the old epoch of time and to actively put such habits of living off today. It is an anachronism to live as old men and women. The Imperative command for today is always rooted in the Indicative state of affairs. Elsewhere Paul describes this battle as one between the “desires of the flesh” and the “desires of the Spirit” (capital “S” as in Holy Spirit – not our spirit).

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