

Fellowship Bible Church

A THEOLOGICAL AND EXEGETICAL EXAMINATION OF THE “OLD MAN” VERSUS
“NEW MAN” CONTRAST

by

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Introduction

A brief examination of the theological literature regarding the Christian concept of the “old man” and “new man” reveals that there is much debate as to the meaning of these terms. In fact, it may be better to say that there is much *confusion* since a lack of precision is evident in many works that use these terms. There are at least three ways that these ideas are confused.

First, some authors do not precisely define their concepts of the old man, old nature, sin, new man, and new nature. As an example, Pentecost lumps many biblical terms together in his definition of the old man. The old man is said to be: “the old mind, heart, and will...the old sinful nature, the total personality, corrupted by the fall of Adam...emphasizes the source of the corruption...refers to the total unregenerate person, and the nature which he has received because of his connection with Adam...refers to the old unrenewed self...what we were before God in salvation made each believing sinner a new man in Christ Jesus...relates us to Adam.”¹ Such sweeping statements do not give a very clear definition of the old man. Such imprecision, however, has not been a serious problem in practice, since many of those who write such statements are totally orthodox conservative Christians who are honestly attempting to explain these ideas.

Second, some authors clearly contradict themselves by teaching that the “old man” is said to be a part of the Christian’s life, while at the same time saying that it is not. For example, in his commentary on Colossians, W. H. Griffith Thomas says, “What is the ‘old man’?...It is a description of what we were like in Adam as a result of his fall...It is, as Bishop Moule points out, ‘an abiding element (Gal. 5:16, 17) in even the regenerate and spiritual’ ...and is incurable...”²The

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Pattern for Maturity: Conduct and Conflict in the Christian Life*, (Chicago, Moody), 1966, p. 82, 91, 92.

² W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Studies in Colossians and Philemon*, (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel), 1986, p. 105.

“old man” therefore, according to Thomas, is an abiding element in the life of a Christian. But in the next paragraph, he continues, “If the old man stands for the unregenerate self, we cannot be at once regenerate and unregenerate...That which a person once was, unregenerate, the moment he becomes regenerate he ceases to be.”³ Therefore, according to Thomas, the old man is an abiding element but since it stands for the unregenerate self, it ceases to exist once a person becomes a Christian. Which is correct? Again, this is a common confusion and is not nearly so serious as the last of the three ways in which the ideas and terms are confused.

Third, others take a more extreme position in order to avoid a “two natured” person. In such a view, the old person before salvation is totally gone, and the new person comes onto the scene. Sin is not “the true me” but is in the physical, mortal body. The “true me” does not desire to sin at all in this view. Such a view leads to a diminished view of personal responsibility for sin. It is coupled with a faulty interpretation of 1 John 1 which equates fellowship with salvation and confession of sin as a requirement for salvation for unbelievers. It also implies a heretical “matter is evil” dualism which was set for centuries ago by the Gnostics and is universally rejected in orthodox Christianity. It tries to distinguish between judicial or positional truth and “actual” truth, effectively eliminating the clear Reformation pillars of the positional righteousness provided for those in Christ. Such a position is taken by David Needham. Smith, in his review of Needham’s book, points out that the “primary concern seems to be with improving a believer’s self-image.” Without taking this view, it is claimed, the believer “cannot have ‘true meaning’...or experience real joy in his Christian life.”⁴ Smith also charges Needham with unclear and confusing use of the common terms used in the debate, the first area of confusion we identi-

³ Ibid., p. 106.

⁴ Charles R. Smith, review of *Birthright: Christian, Do You Know Who You Are?* by David C. Needham, GTJ 3 #2 (): 289. See also Frederic R. Howe, review of the same book, BSac, 141 (Jan-Mar 1984): 69-79.

fied above.⁵

The terms “old man” and “new man” are not frequently used in the Bible, a fact which does not help to reduce the confusion. Though the *idea* is present in a number of passages, only three passages use these terms explicitly to refer to the individual Christian: Romans 6:6, Ephesians 4:22-24, and Colossians 3:9-10. In the first of these, only the term “old man” is specifically mentioned. In the first and third, a past transformation from old man to new man is in view. In the Ephesians passage, there is an exegetical problem which raises debate as to whether the transformation between the old and new is a past event or a present exhortation. Generally the assumption is made that in all three passages, Paul is referring to the same entity when he mentions the old and new man.⁶

While the two specific terms are not used very often, there are many other terms which are related to them, and these are often at the heart of the debate. These other terms include *man, nature, flesh, self, disposition, tendency, capacity, person, position* and *state*.

While it would be interesting to delve into all the particulars of these various terms in their biblical and theological usage, the goal of this paper is more limited. The aim is to properly define the terms “old man” and “new man” in light of the relevant biblical data. While doing so, we will show how the “old man” and “new man” relate to the life of a Christian and to his continuing struggle with sin.

Our plan to reach this goal includes four steps. First, we will survey the approaches taken to the “old man/new man” contrast. Then, we will examine the various exegetical considerations in the primary passages where Paul discusses the old man and new man (Rom 6:6, Eph 4:22, 24,

⁵ Ibid., p. 287; See also Howe, review of *Birthright*, p. 79.

⁶ The NIV and NASB translate all of these occurrences as the “old self” or “new self.”

and Col 3:9-10). Third, we will examine how the primary passages can be harmonized one with another. Fourth, we will examine the relationship of the term “man” to the term “nature” since these are closely connected with the problem at hand. We will conclude with what we believe is the best biblical definition of the terms “old man” and “new man.”

Survey of Approaches to the “Old Man/New Man” Contrast

There are several questions that face the expositor regarding the new man and the old man. One question is: what is the relationship between the old man and the old nature? Are they equivalent? What about the new man and the new nature? A second question is: does the old man remain after the transformation, and if so, in what form? Another question is: when does the transformation from old man to new man take place? Finally, does the old man/new man contrast refer to the individual's “being” or to a relationship? We will examine these questions in this section and then summarize our findings.

What is the Relationship between the “Old Man” and “Old Nature”? The “New Man” and “New Nature”?

The basic question is whether the terms “nature” and “man” are to be equated. Moule indicates that they are different when he says, “It may be explained as *'the old state,'* the state of the unregenerate son of Adam, guilty under the sentence of eternal law... To *'take off'* the old Man is to quit that position, stepping, in Christ, into the position of acceptance and of spiritual power and liberty.—*'The old Man'* is thus not identical with *'the flesh,'* which is an abiding element (Gal. v. 16, 17) in the regenerate....” Here Moule says that the terms “man” and “flesh” are not to be equated. We follow the common understanding that “flesh” and “old nature” or “sin

nature” are synonymous, as does Thomas.⁷ Renald Showers makes it even more clear when he says, “the 'old man' is not the sinful disposition”⁸ He further states that “the 'new man' is not the new disposition. The 'new man' is the human person viewed ethically in his regenerate state...The new disposition is in the 'new man,' but it is not the 'new man.’”⁹

John Witmer notes that others essentially equate the terms “man” and “nature” when he says, “Many dispensationalists do speak of the old nature and the new nature in the Christian because Scripture speaks of 'the old man' (τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον) and 'the new man' (NASB, 'old self' and 'new self') (Eph 4:22–24; cf. Col 3:9–10) and of being 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet 1:4). They do not consider these natures as selves or souls or psychological entities...”¹⁰ He does recognize a tension in using the term nature, when he adds, “ In fact dispensationalists themselves have been discussing whether it is appropriate to use the word “nature” because of possible misunderstanding.”¹¹ F. F. Bruce likewise equates the old man with the old nature, and the new man with the new nature: “You have stripped off the 'old man' that you used to be...the stripping off of the whole 'body of flesh'—the renunciation of the sinful nature in its entirety...But what was that new nature? It was the 'new man' who was being continually renewed...”¹² Murray Harris follows suit, saying that the contrast in Colossians 3:9-10 speaks all

⁷ Griffith Thomas, *Colossians*, p. 106.

⁸ Renald Showers, “The New Nature,” Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1975, p. 225. See also Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) p. 373.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227. Walvoord also distinguishes between the ideas of “man” and “nature.” See Melvin E. Dieter, Anthony A. Hoekema, Stanley M. Horton, J. Robertson McQuilkin, and John F. Walvoord, *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1987, p. 208.

¹⁰ John A. Witmer, review of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, by John Gerstner, *BSac* 149 (Apr-Jun 1992): 143.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹² Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, p. 146.

at once of the old self, new self, old nature, and new nature.¹³

Does the Old Man Remain After the Transformation?

There are two answers given to this question: one is “no,” and the other is a qualified “yes.” Showers, for example, answers with an emphatic no:

It was noted that the 'old man' is the human person viewed ethically in his unregenerate state as characterized by the position of slave under the sinful disposition and by the sinful way of life. As a result of the person's identification with the death of Christ, he ceased being the 'old man,' for the person died ethically in the sense that he ceased being an unregenerate man characterized by the position of slave to the sinful disposition and by the sinful way of life.¹⁴

Showers supports a distinction between the old man and old nature. Thus, it is not a problem for him to say that the old *man* is eliminated while the believer still struggles with sin, because the old *nature* continues.

Some Reformed theologians also say that the old man is eliminated at salvation, but since they believe the believer has only one nature (a new nature), they are forced to say that the old nature is eliminated as well. Charles Smith notes that this position is tenuous because it seems to move toward Wesleyan perfectionism.¹⁵

Chafer answers our question (“does the old man remain after the transformation?”) with a qualified yes, that the old man does remain in the believer. More specifically, he argues that the old man is gone yet at the same time it is present: “*Positionally*, the 'old man' has been put off for

¹³ Murray J. Harris, *Colossians & Philemon*, in *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 151. See also Curtis Vaughan, *Colossians*, in vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 213.

¹⁴ Showers, “The New Nature,” p. 225. See also Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 251. Morris does leave room, however, for the old man to continue on, saying that “there is a sense in which a death has taken place once...but there is another in which he dies every day.” p. 251.

¹⁵ Charles R. Smith, “Two Natures—Or One? An Attempt at Theological Clarification.” *Voice*, July/August 1983, p. 21.

ever. *Experimentally*, the 'old man' remains as an active force in the life which can be controlled only by the power of God.”¹⁶ This old man is “incapable of holiness”¹⁷ and apparently remains full strength in the believer, for “it denotes that which is the very structure of the being of the unregenerate man. It remains as a vital part of the regenerate person's being and abides and is the occasion of an unceasing conflict against the indwelling Spirit.”¹⁸

Because Chafer equates the old man with the old nature,¹⁹ he is forced to admit that the old man/nature continues in the believer, otherwise there would be no seat of sin in the life of the believer, an obviously un-biblical conclusion.²⁰ Those who do not equate the old man with the old nature have an easier time describing the believer's struggle with sin²¹ because they are able to say that the old man is removed but the old (sin) nature remains in some form.²²

*When does the Old Man Transformation Happen?*²³

Most interpreters, in agreement with the seemingly plain sense of many Bible passages, understand that something decisive happens to the old man at the time of one's conversion. How-

¹⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), p. 113. See also Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 2:348.

¹⁷ Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, p. 190.

¹⁸ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 2:330-331.

¹⁹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, revised ed., 1974), p. 190: “The old nature, sometimes called 'sin' (meaning the source of sin) and 'old man,' is a part of the flesh...”

²⁰ See for example, 1 John 1:8, 10, Gal 5:16-17.

²¹ William W. Combs, “Does the Believer Have One Nature or Two?” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 2 (Fall 1997): 99.

²² The author recognizes this phrasing makes the “sin nature” sound as if it is a substance. We are only saying it that way for convenience; we do not understand a “nature” as a substance, as will be discussed below.

²³ At this point in the paper, we stick with generic terms such as the old man's “transformation” in order to avoid taking one side or the other as to whether the old man continues after salvation or not. We could just as easily come out and say “the old man's elimination” since that is our position!

ever, three other views are suggested.

Harrison concludes that the transformation happens at the believer's water baptism:

When was the old put off? Judging from Galatians 3:27, it was at baptism, for then the baptized put on Christ, as the apostle states. This in turn should be linked to Romans 6:6, where Paul explains that our "old man" was crucified with Christ. Baptism proclaims death with Christ to sin and resurrection with Him to walk in newness of life. Consequently, in the passage we are considering, the reminder is given that they 'have put on the new man' (Col 3:10), fittingly symbolized by the fresh, clean clothing given to the baptized in place of their old garments.²⁴

Bruce apparently agrees with this emphasis when he says that the Colossians were an established church, "whose baptism had signified the putting off of their old ways; if Ephesians is addressed to new Christians on the occasion of their baptism, the imperative 'put off...put on' would be very much in order."²⁵

Another possible answer to the question of the time of the old man's transformation is that the old man is removed gradually, as part of the sanctification process. Louis Berkhof says that "The negative side of sanctification consists in this that the pollution and corruption of human nature which results from sin is gradually removed. The old man, that is, human nature in so far as it is controlled by sin, is gradually crucified, Rom. 6:6, Gal. 5:24."²⁶ The last sentence, by equating the old man and human nature, manifests the lack of precision and confusion that we mentioned earlier in this paper.

Finally, another position is supported by Douglas Moo, who says, "the 'moment' of our being 'crucified with Christ' cannot be fixed, either at the cross or at conversion-baptism. The

²⁴ Everett F. Harrison, *Colossians: Christ All-Sufficient*, in *Everyman's Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press), 1971, p. 84.

²⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 358.

²⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933), p. 268. See also his *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth Trust: 1958, 1998 reprint from the 1949 edition), p. 533.

'redemptive-historical' participation of the believer in the crucifixion of Christ is such that temporal categories cannot helpfully be applied to it...²⁷ In other words, Moo is saying the time of the old man's crucifixion is indefinite or not susceptible to precise definition. This seems to be due to his desire to not fix the believer's time of entrance into salvation's benefits: is it in eternity past when the believer's election occurred, or at the cross, or at the moment in time of his salvation? Obviously this position does not add much to clarify the issues at hand.

What is the Relationship Between the Individual and the Old Man/New Man?

Some interpreters, as Harrison, understand that the old man/new man contrast is one where both individual and corporate aspects are seen. He states, "Similarly, the new man in Christ is not only the individual believer but in the corporate sense includes all who make up the body of Christ, to which Paul immediately directs attention (v. 11)."²⁸ Harrison's corporate position says that the new man simultaneously refers to the individual and to the body of Christ.²⁹

Moo takes the reference more exclusively as a corporate one, though he is referring to a different kind of "corporate" when he refers to the old man/new man contrast: "Rather, they designate the person as a whole, considered in relation to the corporate structure to which he or she belongs. 'Old man' and 'new man' are not, then, ontological, but relational or positional in orientation. They do not, at least in the first place, speak of a change in nature, but of a change in relationship...Rather, the 'old man' is what we were 'in Adam' – the 'man' of the old age."³⁰ This cor-

²⁷ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) p. 372.

²⁸ Everett F. Harrison, *Colossians*, p. 85.

²⁹ For a similar statement, see also Robert L. Saucy, "Sinners' Who are Forgiven or 'Saints' Who Sin?" *BSac* 152 (Oct-Dec 1995): 402-403; F. Duane Lindsey, review of *Colossians, Philemon* of the *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol 44, in *BSac* 142 (Apr-Jun 1985): 188.

³⁰ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 373.

porate structure has do with the old man's relationship to Adam or the new man's relationship to Christ.

Moo's positional versus ontological³¹ argument is helpful in our understanding of the old *man*/new *man* contrast because it gives us a basis on which to clearly distinguish between the “man” (the whole person) and his positional relationships. However, his argument does not invalidate the ontological aspect entirely, because the old and new *natures* involved in the debate do describe ontological aspects of the person.

Walvoord describes the old man/new man as an individual concept, where the old man is the former manner of the person's life, and the new man is the new manner of life.³²

Summary

Smith gives a helpful summary of the some of the positions we have outlined above.³³ We have adapted it to our presentation in an outline form. We do not include the time of the transformation since we assume that it is effected at the individual's salvation. The letters (second indent level) represent the three positions that are commonly taken.

1. Old nature distinct from old man.
 - A. Old nature replaced by new nature and old man replaced by new man.
 - B. Old nature continues and old man replaced by new man and new nature added.
2. Old nature synonymous with old man.
 - A. Old nature/man continues after salvation and new nature/man added.

Note that position 1A represents those who hold to a one-nature view of the believer; 1B represents those who hold a two-nature view of the believer and who see the old man as discon-

³¹ Ontology is “the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being, reality, or ultimate substance...a particular theory about being or reality.” See David B. Guralnik, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition, Prentice Hall Press, 1986, s.v. “ontology,” p. 995.

³² Walvoord, *Five Views on Sanctification*, p. 208.

³³ Charles Smith, *Two Natures—Or One?* p. 20.

tinued at salvation; 2A represents those who equate the old nature and old man and also see two natures in the believer after salvation, i.e. the new man/nature and the continuing old man/nature.

Exegesis of the Three Primary Passages

We will now examine the three passages that use the old man/new man terminology.

Romans 6:6

⁶Knowing this that our old self [man] was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin. – Romans 6:6, NASB

Paul has dealt with the guilt and judgment of man in 1:18 through 3:20. From 3:21 through chapter 5, he writes about justification and its results. In the last portion of chapter 5, the text speaks of the entrance of sin into the world through Adam, and then that death followed on the heels of the entrance of sin. In chapters 6 through 8 Paul changes subjects to talk about sanctification. In chapter 6 in particular, another kind of death is in view, namely a death which results in the removal of the believer from the dominion of sin. This forms the basis for the ability of the Christian to live a sanctified life.

In other words, chapter 5 deals with the arrival of death *through* sin (5:12), whereas chapter 6 speaks about the Christian reality of death *to* sin (6:2, 6-7, 11). Paul is talking about two different kinds of death here: the former is physical, the latter is positional. Sin brought physical death in the first case, and in the second, the order is reversed so that the forensic death of the old man brings freedom from sin's dominion.

One thing is certain in this passage, namely that the old man has been eliminated in some sense. The term for crucifixion, obviously related to the means of our Savior's death, is too strong to indicate anything other than a complete death of the old man. In addition, the verb for “crucified” (συνεσταυρώθη) is an aorist passive, indicating a past and completed event, where

the old man was operated upon by God (thus the passive). We believe that this crucifixion or elimination of the old man was accomplished at the cross of our Lord and applied to us individually at the time of our salvation.

The precise sense of this elimination, however, causes interpreters to debate about this passage. Moo writes in an enlightening fashion regarding this difficulty:

Many popular discussions of Paul's doctrine of the Christian life argue, or assume, that Paul distinguishes with these phrases between two parts or “natures” of a person. With this interpretation as the premise, it is then debated whether the “old nature” is replaced with the “new nature” at conversion, or whether the “new nature” is added to the “old nature.” But the assumption that “old man” and “new man” refer to parts, or natures, of a person is incorrect. Rather, they designate the person as a whole, considered in relation to the corporate structure to which he or she belongs. “Old man” and “new man” are not, then, ontological, but relational or positional in orientation. They do not, at least in the first place, speak of a change in nature, but of a change in relationship...The 'old man' is what we were “in Adam” – the “man” of the old age, who lives under the tyranny of sin and death.³⁴

Assuming then that the old man *is* completely crucified (a point which Berkhof, for example, seems to deny, as we saw above), we are next faced with a $\iota\nu\alpha$ purpose clause. This clause states that the purpose of this death of the old man was so that the “body of sin might be done away with...” The word *might* in the English translation (see also KJV, NIV) should not be taken to suggest some kind of potentiality whereby the Christian’s co-crucifixion with Christ has not fully secured the breaking of sin’s power over him. Paul harbors no doubt as to the result of the co-crucifixion: sin’s defeat is a sure thing. In English the words *may* or *might* are used to translate a purpose clause in a more formal way than to simply say “to do away with.” We could correctly translate this portion of the verse by “in order to do away with the body of sin” or “in order that the body of sin shall be done away.” What God purposes to do, he can do and does

³⁴ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 373-374.

without fail.³⁵

BDAG says that the verb here translated “done away”, καταργέω, means “to come to an end or to be no longer in existence.”³⁶ Moo argues otherwise, that the verb should be translated as “rendered powerless.”³⁷

It is obviously problematic that the dictionary definition of this word seems to have the sense of “eliminated” but the commentators take it differently. Strong’s concordance has a definition that includes both possibilities;³⁸ other dictionaries also recognize the wide semantic domain of the word. We understand the word in light of a seemingly similar use in Heb 2:14, where Satan is said to be “destroyed” (KJV). We know from other Scriptures that Satan is presently active and will be, excepting for the 1000 year millennial period, until the end of history (1 Peter 5:8; Rev 12:9; 20:2, 7, 10). Therefore, “destroyed” or “done away” is not the proper translation; neither is “inactive.” Rather, it is better to render this verb as “defeated and deposed” or “set aside” in whatever way is in view. In Heb 2:14, Satan is defeated and thus deposed from the standpoint of his rule over death; in Rom 6:6, the body of sin is defeated and thus deposed from its dominating rule over the believer. We could also legitimately say that the body of sin is “set aside” as far as the believer is concerned. It is not in his way of serving God any more, it is permanently out of the way. The believer may still stub his toe on it, but it does not dominate him

³⁵ A similar purpose clause is seen in John 3:16, where the KJV has “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish.” Most would agree that the phrase “should not perish” does not denote any kind of uncertainty as to the final salvation of the believer.

³⁶ BDAG, s.v. “καταργέω,” p. 525.

³⁷ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 375. See also Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 252, footnote 38; Everett F. Harrison, *Romans*, in vol. 10 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 70; Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, p. 123.

³⁸ James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Lynchburg, Virginia: The Old-Time Gospel Hour Edition.

any more or block the pathway to service for God.

Another consideration in the understanding of this passage is the term “body of sin.” Does it mean “sinful body”? Obviously not, as this would mean the physical body itself is sinful. This cannot be the case, for the body of the Christian is not termed sinful—instead, the body is joined to Christ, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and it is to be used to glorify God (1 Cor 6:15, 19, 20). To say the body is sinful amounts to a Gnostic flesh-is-evil, spirit-is-good dualism which we reject out of hand. After all, Christ had a body which was not sinful, a fact which indicates that flesh is not inherently evil in itself.³⁹ Instead, interpreters suggest that the “body of sin” refers to the sin nature⁴⁰ or to the body as the means of expressing sin.⁴¹ We opt for the former since the sin nature is the seat of sin and source of its expression through the body.

Another interesting aspect of this text is that Paul *distinguishes* between the old man and the body of sin. On the one hand, the old man is crucified. On the other, it is crucified *so that* the body of sin might be rendered powerless. Since the first is crucified and the second has a different destiny, i.e. it is rendered inoperative, they are evidently distinguished. It is thus biblical to make a clear distinction between the old *man* and the old *nature*.

The result of all this is that we are no longer slaves to sin, as Paul emphasizes throughout this chapter (see 6:6, 7, 18, 20, 22). Sin is obviously present (not “done away”) though it is not reigning in the life of one whose old man has been crucified. There is no doubt that at salvation,

³⁹ This indicates how to properly interpret Paul’s statement in Rom 7:18: “I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwells no good thing. He is not speaking of his skin and bones but of his whole person. This should not be a surprising interpretation, for Paul often mixes the figures he uses to refer to the whole person or self. See Rom 6:12 and 13, where he says that sin is not to reign in the “mortal body,” nor are the “members” to be yielded to unrighteousness, but instead “yourselves” are to be yielded unto God. Obviously, *mortal body*, *members*, and *yourselves* are synonymous and speak of the whole person, not just skin and bones.

⁴⁰ Pentecost, *Pattern for Maturity*, p. 99.

⁴¹ Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, p. 123; see also Harrison, *Romans*, p. 70.

a new relationship to sin is established. The believer was under its binding power before salvation, but not afterwards. Notice the text in Rom 6:1-2, 4 where Paul inveighs against continuing in sin and exhorts a walk “in newness of life.” This grand occurrence of sin’s defeat is for the believer the ground for the commands in 6:11-13 against sinful behavior.

In Romans 6 there is a second new relationship established for the believer at his salvation, and that is the believer’s new relationship to Jesus Christ. Rom 5:10 says that the unbeliever is an enemy of God before salvation. At salvation, the believer is identified with Christ through the baptism of the Holy Spirit and placed into the body of Christ. This baptism identifies us with His death and resurrection. We are *united* with Him instead of being *enemies* against Him (6:3-5). We are united to him instead of being united to Adam (5:12; cf. 1 Cor 15:22).

The believer is also established in a third new relationship according to Rom 6, and that is his new relationship to life. Before salvation he was subject to death (Rom 5:12-21). After salvation, however, he is in the realm of life, with our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:8, 1 Cor 15:22).

What we are suggesting is that the old man not only relates to the “body of sin” but also to the person’s relationship to Adam and to death. These relations are all changed at salvation. These three relationships help us to understand more exactly the definition of the “old man.” After examining the other passages we will draw all of this into a concise definition of the “old man” and the related terms.

Ephesians 4:22, 24

²¹If indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, ²²that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self [man], which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, ²³and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴and put on the new self [man], which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. – Ephesians 4:21-24, NASB

In the context of Ephesians, Paul has stated the great doctrinal truths regarding salvation

by grace through faith. In chapter 4, he begins arguing that the Ephesians should “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which” they have been called (4:1), and that they “walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind” (4:17). This “walk” is the behavior that should be exhibited by the Ephesians as Christians, and is the subject of many exhortations in the verses ending chapter 4, and following into chapters 5 and 6.

The verses after 4:21-24 indicate that Paul is focused on the behavioral aspect of the Christian's life. Some interpreters and many Bible translations therefore take the infinitives (“lay aside...be renewed...put on”) as commands related to the Christian's behavior and his necessary struggle against sin.⁴²

However, many other interpreters take it that these are not commands but are instead the content of the past teaching that the Ephesians received and are therefore statements which indicate that the putting off of the old man and putting on of the new happened in the past, at the time of salvation.⁴³ Instead of emphasizing the following context, this view links the “put off/put on” with the immediately previous context, as indicating a major change from the unsaved life to the saved life. The following verses, starting at 4:25, have a “therefore” with specific behavioral modifications necessary for the believer. Bruce gives a brief summary of the interpretive problem in a footnote in his commentary on Ephesians:

The infinitives ἀποθέσθαι, ἀνανεοῦσθαι, and ἐνδύσασθαι in vv. 22, 23, and 24 are to be treated as complementary to ἐδιδάχθησαν and as virtually indirect commands: what they were taught was “Put off ... be renewed ... put on ...” They have occasionally been treated,

⁴² See for example, KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV; F. F. Bruce *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, p. 358; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 374-375.

⁴³ See William W. Combs, “One Nature or Two?”, pp. 89-90; John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), p. 1810; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 2:348.

however, as indirect statements... 'ye have ... been instruction in him ...; [namely] your having put off ..; and being renewed ...; and [your] having put on....⁴⁴

Chafer seems to support this latter view when he says, "In the second passage in which the term 'old man' is used, that fact that the old man is already crucified with Christ is the basis for an appeal: "That ye [did] put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt...and that ye [did] put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).⁴⁵

Wallace also says that these infinitives are not commands, but are infinitives of indirect discourse. As such, they represent an indicative statement in the direct discourse that happened when Paul was present in Ephesus.⁴⁶ In other words, Paul taught the Ephesians when he was with them that becoming a Christian included the elimination of the old man and its former conduct and principles as a basic force in the life of the believer (instead of the "Gentile walk in 4:17). Becoming a Christian also included a renewal of the mind, which was not only immediate but also had a continual aspect (instead of the ignorance and futility of the Gentile mind in 4:17-18). And finally, becoming a Christian also included the addition of the new man with a new life principle of righteousness and holiness (instead of the life of "uncleanness" in 4:19).

⁴⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, p. 358, footnote 127.

⁴⁵ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, p. 113. This is interesting, because Chafer also takes the other two passages (Rom 6:6 and Col 3:9-10) as referring to the past event of the old man's demise. So all three passages, to Chafer, are taken to represent the past putting off of the old man. We might expect otherwise, i.e. that Chafer, because he supports the two-nature view of the believer and equates the old man with the old nature as an explanation of the continuing experiential struggle of the believer with sin, would take the Ephesians passage as indicating a present command to the Ephesian believers to put off the old man. Instead, he finds that the "old man" idea in Ephesians in Colossians "suggests...the corresponding experience...*Positionally*, the 'old man' has been put off for ever. *Experimentally*, the 'old man' remains as an active force in the life which can be controlled only by the power of God." (p. 113). Our main point is that it seems confusing to say the old man is put off but still remains. Instead, we suggest it is better to understand that the old *man* is put off and the old *nature* remains.

⁴⁶ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 457, 555 (footnote 3).

Wallace suggests that the debate is not yet closed with regard to this question⁴⁷ but he gives several items that may contribute to his and our understanding, including 1) Paul's view of the "old man"; 2) the use of "therefore" in verse 25, indicating an application is made from the earlier verses; 3) the repetition of the verb "put off" in verses 22 and 25, one apparently indicating a past event, the other a present exhortation; and 4) the shift in tenses used with the infinitives in vv. 22-24, namely, the "putting off" and "putting on" are aorist while the "being renewed" is present tense.⁴⁸

This last item is somewhat of a problem for our interpretation which we will now address. Sullivan suggests this present, ongoing process of "being renewed," since it is sandwiched between the two aorist infinitives "put off" and "put on" "overrides" those aorists and dictates that the "put off...put on" are also present, ongoing processes.⁴⁹

While it is clear that the Scriptures teach this *idea* as part and parcel of sanctification, this passage is not so exclusively addressing sanctification. Instead in context it refers to the Ephesians salvation, speaking in 4:17-19 of the characteristics of unbelievers. Vv. 17-18 mention the unbeliever's walk, futile mind, darkened understanding, alienation from the life of God, ignorance, hardness of heart, being past feeling, and giving over of himself to all kinds of uncleanness. Paul then goes on to say that he taught how the unsaved situation would be "inverted" at the point of salvation (4:20-24), followed by present commands to exhort that behavior must

⁴⁷ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 605.

⁴⁸ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 605. I have extrapolated from Wallace's preferred interpretation what he is suggesting for the "other items that may contribute." He does not explicitly go so far with these statements, but what I have written seems to be the understanding he has of these "items."

⁴⁹ Mike Sullivan, *Five Views on Sanctification: An In-Depth Analysis*, <http://www.xenos.org/ministries/crossroads/OnlineJournal/issue1/fiveview.rtf>, p. 6.

match the new creation God has made in the believer (4:25ff).

The new man “has been created in righteousness and true holiness.” Holiness is devoutness, piety, the state of a proper attitude toward God.⁵⁰ Instead of being excluded or alienated from the life of God, Christians are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), a creation that is a righteous and holy character made after the image of God. Since this righteousness and holiness is the immediate context of the behavior commands in 4:25ff, we know that this is not the legal declaration of imputed righteousness that happens at the moment of salvation. Instead, this kind of holiness speaks of the holy lifestyle that the new man has been created to carry out in day to day living. We will later see that this is (must be) an ever increasing portion of the believer's life, so that we cannot say “I'm created holy and so God is finished with me!” That this idea is foreign to the Scriptures can be seen in Paul's declaration in Php 3:8, “Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect...”

In his comments on 4:22, MacDonald gives a very clear statement of what we understand the text to teach:

In the school of Christ we learn that at the time of conversion we put away our old man which grows corrupt through deceitful lusts. The old man means all that a person was before his conversion, all that he was as a child of Adam...As far as his position in Christ is concerned, the believer's old man was crucified and buried with Christ. In practice, the believer should reckon it to be dead...Here Paul is emphasizing the positional side of the truth – we have put off the old man once for all.⁵¹

Colossians 3:9-10

⁹Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self [man] with its evil practices, ¹⁰and have put on the new self [man] who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him. – Colossians 3:9-10, NASB

⁵⁰ BDAG, s.v. “ὁσιότης,” p. 728.

⁵¹ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 1938.

A similar context is seen around this passage as that which surrounds the Ephesians passage. Paul has moved into the realm of Christian behavior in chapter 3 of the Colossian letter and here is mentioning sinful behaviors that are to be cast away and Christian behaviors that are to be embraced.

The aorist passive participles here, “you laid aside...and have put on...” are much less debated among interpreters than the infinitives of Ephesians 4:22-24. The translations and interpreters we quoted as disagreeing on the Ephesians passage all agree here, that these statements in Colossians speak of a past event that is done for the Colossians.⁵² Harris backs up this conclusion with six reasons why these participles should be taken “as causal adverbial participles, specifying the two fold ground for the injunction” not to lie to one another.⁵³ In other words, because the Colossians had “put off” the old man and “put on” the new, they were to mortify or put off all kinds of bad deeds which were part of the old man (3:5-9a) and instead, put on all kinds of Christian virtues (3:12ff). The “put off/put on” in vv. 3:9-10 form the basis and reason for the other “put off/put on” in 3:8, 12 regarding Christian behavior. Without the first, the latter could not be done. In a sense then, salvation has to do with “putting off and putting on” (3:9-10); likewise, sanctification has to do with “putting off and putting on” (3:8, 12).

Verse 3:10 notes that the new man “is being renewed to a true knowledge...” There is a sense, then, in which the new man is not a static entity. It is growing, improving, etc. The new man is to be increasingly manifested in the life of the believer as he or she grows in sanctification. This improvement process leads the Christian to become like “the image of the One who

⁵² F. F. Bruce *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, p. 146; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 374; William W. Combs, “One Nature or Two?”, pp. 89-90; John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), p. 1810; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, II:348.

⁵³ Murray J. Harris, *Colossians & Philemon*, p. 150-151.

created [the new man].” This text seems to say that the new man is not exactly the image of Christ, but that it is being changed into that image. That is to say, God, the new man’s creator, is fashioning the believer into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29).

Harmonizing the Three Primary Passages

Two approaches have generally been taken to harmonize these passages: the first is to take them all as referring to the past putting off of the old man, including an explanation of the infinitives in Ephesians 4:22-24 in that light. Combs, among many other interpreters, takes this approach.⁵⁴ The other approach is to take the infinitives in Ephesians 4:22-24 as imperatives to presently put off the old man and admit there is a sense in which the old man has been crucified (Romans, Colossians) but is not yet “finished off” (Ephesians). Moo takes this latter approach.⁵⁵

We follow the former approach, that for the believer, the old man is gone and that Paul is not commanding us to “put him off” as a surface reading of Ephesians 4:22-24 in English would suggest.⁵⁶ Perhaps better said, the Christian is not an old man any more. He is a new man. A decisive break between old and new has occurred (2 Cor 5:17). This drives the exhortations in the Scriptures to stop sinning and to begin and continue living a holy life. In the section on Ephesians we have argued for this position and will not rehash it here.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ William W. Combs, “*One Nature or Two?*” p. 90. See our discussion above of the Ephesians passage for others who support this conclusion.

⁵⁵ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 374.

⁵⁶ KJV, NASB, NIV all render the text this way.

⁵⁷ One issue which is not frequently addressed in the discussion of the harmonization of these passages is this: does Paul necessarily refer to the old man and new man in the same way in each of the three contexts? In other words, most interpreters have simply *assumed* that these all have exactly the same idea in Paul’s mind. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that the idea in Ephesians is actually the “characteristics” of the old man, named simply under the all-inclusive heading “old man.” The “old man” in Ephesians would serve then as a metonymy for the old nature or characteristics. [A metonymy is the “use of the name of one thing for that of another associated with or suggested by it (Ex.: ‘the White House’ for ‘the President’)”. See Guralnik, *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, s.v. “metonymy,” p. 895.] This is not impossible in the context. In addition, Paul explicitly uses the phrase “in reference

The idea in Ephesians is that the readers were taught, when they heard the gospel, that in being saved, the old man is put away, and the new man is put on. This new man does not gradually come on the scene (though it is subject to growth and improvement), but is an immediate creation by God, “created [by God] in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph 4:24). This new life in the believer has a major impact upon him. The overall tone of the passage is that the believer is to be obedient to the Lord by living righteously instead of sinfully. He is to stop former habits and sinful desires. He is to replace these with holy activities instead.

Our interpretation leaves at least one open question, however, and that has to do with the old nature. If the old man is gone, what about the old nature? Where does the believer's sin come from?

“Man” versus “Nature”: Some Clarifying Definitions

We believe that the confusion cited at the beginning of this paper can be solved by understanding first what happens to the old and new man at the point of salvation, and second by understanding the Scriptural distinction between the old *man* and the old *nature*. We have already shown in the exegesis of Rom 6:6 that this latter distinction is made in the biblical text. In this section, we will concern ourselves primarily with the theological definitions of the terms “man” and “nature” to support this position.

In discussing the natures and person of Christ, Berkhof attempts a definition of the term “nature”: “The term 'nature' denotes the sum-total of all the essential qualities of a thing, that which makes it what it is. A nature is a substance possessed in common, with all the essential

to your former manner of life.” This “manner of life” could be interpreted as specifying the “outworking of the remnant (old nature) of the old man” rather than to the whole of the old man. This outworking of the old nature is the subject of Paul's command to “put off.” An interpreter might safely take this position if he is careful not to create a believer with multiple personalities or with a sin nature that can be eradicated. See Smith, “Two Natures—Or One?” p. 20-21.

qualities of such a substance.”⁵⁸ It is unfortunate that he confuses the “qualities” and the “substance” of a thing. A nature is not something that can be surgically removed from a person!

We prefer the definitions used by Smith: “The most helpful of the systematic theology texts, in this regard, is Buswell's. In three succinct sentences Buswell eliminates the semantic confusion: 'A person is a non-material substantive entity, and is not to be confused with a nature. A nature is not a part of a person in the substantive sense. A nature is a complex of attributes, and is not to be confused with a substantive entity.’”⁵⁹

Following Buswell's distinction between a person and a nature in this definition brings some clarity to the old man/new man debate. We take it that the term “man” is synonymous with “person” in our context. Therefore, the old man/person is not the same as the old nature, that set of attributes which characterize the old man. Similarly, the new man/person is not the same as the new nature, which is the set of attributes that characterize the new man.

Such a distinction between the old man and the old nature which follows on the heels of this understanding is not novel. For example, Walvoord distinguishes between the ideas of “man” and “nature” in this way:

There are some ground to question this identification of the old man with the sin nature and the new man with the new nature...It is obviously impossible to put off the old man or the old self, just as it is impossible by human effort to put on the new man or the new self, if these refer to the old and new natures. The old self mentioned in Romans 6:6 and Colossians 3:9-10 seems to be related to the former life rather than to the former nature. Likewise, the new self as indicated in Ephesians 4:24 seems to refer to the new manner of life stemming from the new nature and manifested in a Christian's experience.⁶⁰

Regarding the new nature more specifically, Smith points out that it is acceptable to

⁵⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 321.

⁵⁹ Smith, “Two Natures—Or One?” p. 20.

⁶⁰ Walvoord, *Five Views on Sanctification*, p. 208.

speak of the believer's as having one chronologically “new” nature, if that nature is seen as including the characteristics of the new man as well as some of the characteristics of the old man. This is *chronologically* a new nature because it comes into existence as a *package* at the time of salvation. *Alternatively*, it is acceptable to speak of the believer as having two qualitative natures, one old nature which is a set of characteristics that haunt us from our former unregenerate state, and one new nature which is a set of *qualitatively* new characteristics given to us at regeneration.⁶¹

Conclusion

Such definitions of “man” and “nature” biblically address the problem faced by many interpreters who recognize that the old man is gone but characteristics of the old man remain in the set of all the characteristics that define the believer (some new attributes and some old). These old character traits are the basis for the believer's struggle with sin (Gal 5:16-17, Rom 7:13-25). Therefore, note the following important definitions which form the conclusion of this study.

The *old man* is the whole of the unregenerate person in his old relationship to Adam and his old subjugation under sin and death. The crucifixion of that old man in Romans 6 shows the shift that the person undergoes at the moment of salvation: out of the realm of the unregenerate into the realm of the regenerate; out of his old relationship to Adam and into a new relationship with Christ; and out of his old subjugation under sin into a new freedom from the power of sin. This is a positional change but is not *only* a legal or judicial fact in the mind of God with no

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 21. We added the *chronological vs. qualitative distinction* to make it clear that the one new nature view speaks of a new nature *in time*, whereas the two nature view speaks of a new nature in quality which is distinct from the old nature in its qualities. The former includes the old man characteristics that are the basis of sin in the life of the believer. Because it is called a “one nature” view, it can be easily confused with the view of the same name which teaches that the believer has a single new nature with no old nature remaining. This is obviously an incorrect view in light of the extensive Biblical revelation regarding the believer’s continual struggle with sin.

other implications. In fact, it has a major impact on the Christian's experience. The believer does experience his new regenerate realm, his new relationship with Christ, and his new freedom from the power of sin. This change is the basis for sanctification in the life of the believer, both as to why it is necessary and how it is possible.

The *new man* is the whole of the regenerate person in his new relationship to Christ, sin, and life. He is regenerated, related to Christ, free from the dominating power of sin, and has life instead of death. While the old man has been fully crucified with Christ and is therefore gone, the characteristics of the old man (its nature) have carried over to some extent into the new man, though in broken form. A Christian is thus a new man with a new nature.⁶² The old man, that is, the pre-Christian person in all his relationships, is no longer in existence, but characteristics from the old nature remain, including primarily the tendency toward sin.

The *old nature* is to be equated with the "flesh" in its sin-related metaphorical uses in the New Testament. It is also equivalent to the "sin nature." It is that set of attributes or characteristics or properties which mark a person (either before or after salvation) as having a tendency to sin, to desire sinful things, think sinful thoughts, etc. That nature is defeated at salvation as to its ultimate binding power over the believer, but still remains in a very vexing way in the life of the believer (Gal 5:16-17).

The *new nature* is that set of attributes or characteristics that are given to us by God at our salvation, which enable us to live godly lives. It is synonymous with the "divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). The subsequent verses in that passage indicate that we can grow in such characteris-

⁶² This is not to say that the "person" who is saved is a different person than he was before he was saved, as if there were two persons. There is only one person whose "old man" relationships have been severed ("crucified" in Rom 6:6 terms) and whose "new man" relationships have been established. In other words, Matt Postiff before salvation is still Matt Postiff after salvation.

tics, e.g. faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love (cf. 2 Peter 3:18). This is similar to Col 3:10, where the new man is being renewed. Obviously these are related to the fruit of the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives (Gal. 5:22-25).

In this way, we understand that a Christian is a new man with a new nature and an old nature. He is not an old man any more. With that in mind, we may answer the key questions we posed earlier in the paper for which there were so many varying opinions in the literature. The old man is not the same thing as the old nature. The transformation of old man to new man takes place at conversion. The transformation relates to both the person's being (as far as his character traits) and to his relationships.

We will let MacDonald state it another way: "Our old man refers to all that we were as children of Adam – our old, evil, unregenerate selves, with all our old habits and appetites. At conversion we put off the old man and put on the new man, as if exchanging filthy rags for spotless clothing (Col. 3:9, 10)...Just as the old man refers to all that we were as sons of Adam, with an unregenerate nature, so the new man refers to our new position as children of God."⁶³

Therefore in Colossians 3:9-10, Paul is basically saying that believer was removed from the old relationships and placed under the new ones. This great transaction has occurred, and is the cause for proper Christian behavior. Ephesians 4:22-24 has a similar emphasis, namely that belief in the basic Christian doctrine of such a great change would foster proper behavior. The Romans passage says that the transformation that occurs at salvation is a decisive one where the old man is eliminated (crucified). Though that passage does not specifically mention the "new man," it does clearly say the sin nature is defeated, but never indicates that it is removed.

⁶³ MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, pp. 1701-2, 2009.

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