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THE NATURE OF THE CHRISTIAN: A REFLECTION

by

D. Vincent Palmer

The question "What is man?" still remains one of the most difficult amongst social scientists today. To ask about the fundamental character of the believer only compounds the difficulty. With an ever increasing post-modern outlook even biblical scholars are beginning to doubt whether the foregoing questions can be answered in any meaningful way.¹ Notwithstanding the above uneasiness, my purpose in this article is to attempt a working definition of the believer in Christ in the light of the Scriptures, with a little help from the discipline of psychology in order to better understand a certain area of Christian experience over which there is little agreement in Christian circles.

The need to constantly strive for a better understanding of man is underscored by Cosgrove when he writes:

Surprisingly, the accumulated wealth of knowledge from the past several thousand years has advanced only slightly our understanding of human nature. Even with the aid of scientific technology in fields like psychology and biology, the critical study of man has lagged far behind . . . (Cosgrove 7).

He points out that part of the problem is the difficulty of the subject matter. Man is truly a complex being. Is the problem really compounded when the subject is regenerated man? John 3:8 seems to give an affirmative answer. The question therefore is, What really

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¹For a useful survey, though somewhat dated, see Stevenson (1974); for the post-modern challenge in this regard, see Drane (322-40), Carson (1996) and Geisler (1997). The second question has been boldly addressed by Needham (1979).

is a Christian? Taking 2 Corinthians 5:17 as our point of departure, with what kind of "creature" are we dealing?

Creature Of Dignity?

The constitutional nature of the Christian can only be understood at first by seriously reflecting on the biblical concept of the *imago Dei*, because the Creator gave special attention to Adam and Eve in contrast to the lower life forms. In this context man's unique nature and life must be considered along with the other complexities involved, such as personhood. "Personhood for the integrationist," say Carter and Narramore "is rooted in the fact that the human being is created in the image of God. All thinking about the human being is coloured by the view we take of human origin and *destiny*" (Carter and Narramore 107, italics added). Elsewhere the significance of man's being the image of God is highlighted by Narramore: "The biblical view of man raises human worth to its highest level" (B. Narramore 1978, 352). But what exactly is this image?

Does man today really bear this divine likeness? In an attempt to explore the issue, Grudem delineates four or five aspects of the question: the mental, moral, spiritual, relational and the physical (445-449). We may review these in reverse order. Grudem is careful to point out that God's spiritual nature precludes any notion of corporeality (John 4:24). However, it should not be forgotten that it is *man himself*, according to Grudem, that is created in the divine image, so both the substantial and spiritual aspects of man's existence simultaneously, though in different ways, bear out that fact (Silva 23). In regard to the relational aspect, it is now a truism that man is an intensely gregarious being.

Although animals no doubt have some sense of community with each other, the depth of interpersonal harmony experienced in human marriage, in a human family when it functions according to God's principles, and in a church when a community of believers is walking in fellowship with the Lord and with each other, is much greater than the interpersonal harmony by any animals. In our family relationships and in the church, we are also superior to angels, who do not marry or bear children or live in the company of God's redeemed sons and daughters (Grudem 447).

Grudem thus alludes to man's spiritual nature, which was made to function "according to God's principles." This presupposes that generic

man is made “a little lower than God” (Psalm 8).² We are therefore enabled to worship our Maker and enjoy him forever. Closely connected to this is our capacity to relate to God and to one another in moral and ethical ways. Here our accountability becomes crucial and our conscience necessary. Interestingly, the universal recognition of conscience is a phenomenon that some evolutionists find inexplicable.³ Finally our ability to use our minds to communicate both rationally and logically, in the opinion of many, definitely points to the fact that we are in the image of God (Silva 20-22).

Other areas such as sexuality and immortality are also explored by theologians. For example, Mary Hayter, beginning with Barth’s affirmation that the basis of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is to be found in the relationship between the sexes, seeks to understand the limits of such a thesis by the examination of crucial terms like *elohim* in the creation narrative. Rejecting the position of those who would say that human sexuality reflects that of deity, Hayter concludes that “the term . . . as applied to Yahweh can denote that the God of Israel incorporates and transcends masculinity and femininity” (87-92).⁴

It is in the New Testament that the image of God in man in general and in the Christian in particular comes into sharp focus. Both the fact of the incarnation specifically and many features of the teaching ministry of Christ indicate the dignity of humankind. It is the Christ himself in the

²New Revised Standard Version, v. 5. The LXX (Rahlfs 2:6) renders *elohim* as “angels” in this psalm; modern scholars seem to favor “God” or “heavenly beings” (Van Gemeren 1:402; Craigie 105-110). Whereas the New International Version appears to reflect the LXX, the Revised English Bible has the intriguing “you have made him a little less than a god.”

³“The most important difference between man and animals is his moral sense, and this presents difficult evolutionary problems . . . [e.g.] This leads to the paradox that, despite his claimed moral sense, man is the only species in the animal kingdom that will perform wholesale massacres of its own members . . . ” (Goetz 18:995). It does seem that an acceptance of the Biblical doctrines of Creation (Gen. 1-2) and rebellion (Gen. 3) resolves Tinkle’s “paradox” (Goetz 18:995).

⁴“Although God does use a comparison to a woman in childbirth (Isa. 42:14), nonetheless there is a strong scholarly consensus that God is regarded as non-sexual . . . This consensus finds explicit support in Deut. 4: 15-16, “you saw no form of any kind the day YHWH spoke to you at Horeb . . . so that you do not make for yourselves an idol or an image, in any shape, whether formed like a man or woman” (Waltke and O’Connor 198; cf. Coggins 1990).

Gospel records who is portrayed as the only human being fully reflecting the *imago Dei* (Adamo 23-33). It should come as no surprise, then, that Christians are the very ones who are being renewed after the *imago Christi* (2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-10; Elwell 366). But how perfectly does the believer in Christ bear this divine image? Put another way, To what extent does adamic corruption still affect the Christian, in at all?

Creature of Depravity?

Some theologians, and not a few psychologists, within evangelicalism take exception to the description of the Christian as a sinner saved by grace. The question, therefore, that confronts us at this point has to do with the relation of evil and the believer in Christ. A decade ago psychologist Bruce Narramore shared with his CGST students some of the lively discussions on this topic he used to have with his father-in-law, whom he described as a dedicated Christian gentleman. Whereas Narramore believed in the possibility of sin in the Christian life, this was strenuously denied by his beloved father-in-law. Recently New Testament scholar, Douglas Moo, recounts an experience he had involving someone who had a similar view to Narramore's father-in-law:

About ten years ago I was invited to speak in a church that was becoming divided over a certain view of the Christian life propagated by one of its . . . members. This individual made a great deal of Peter's claim that Christians have a "divine nature." He insisted that this meant that a Christian was given an entirely new nature, basically incapable of sinning. After all, he reasoned, God's "nature" is obviously a sinless one: if we had this nature, then it stood to reason that we could not sin! The whole matter "hit the fan" in this church when he counseled a Christian woman to "submit" to her non-Christian husband's demands that she have sex with him and another man at the same time—after all, she had a "divine nature" that could not be touched by such sin! (Moo 1996, 34).

I think both stories illustrate the dire need for us to have a proper understanding of the character of the Christian living in a fallen world. Certainly those theologians who say that the essential nature of the Christian is that of a saint are correct. However, that statement does not go far enough in addressing the question of the possibility of sin in the Christian life. If the believer is not just a sinner saved by grace, does this mean that s/he is not in some sense depraved? Whether used of

Christians or non-Christians the term “depravity” is problematic.⁵ If the term is used in the general sense to mean that sin affects every facet of a person’s being, then we can begin to explore to what extent this is true in the Christian life.

In this regard, one passage that almost invariably enters the discussion is Romans 7:14-25. Here the apostle’s language is sometimes jarring to the ears of theologian and therapist, especially the latter who is anxious to have God’s people maintain proper self-esteem. What, for example, does Paul mean by the statement, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (v. 18, NIV)? Is the apostle describing his own struggle with indwelling sin in this passage, or is he giving a vivid testimony of his existential encounter with the law prior to his conversion? Cranfield has no doubt that the former is correct. Commenting on the entire chapter and verse 14 in particular, he writes:

With regard to the objection that it is incredible that Paul could speak of a Christian as “a slave under sin’s power,” we ought to ask ourselves whether our inability to accept this expression as descriptive of a Christian is not perhaps the result of failure on our part to realise the full seriousness of the ethical demands of God’s law (or Gospel) . . . Is it not true that the more the Christian is set free from legalistic ways of thinking about God’s law and so sees more clearly the full splendour of the perfection towards which he is being summoned, the more conscious he becomes of his own continuing sinfulness [depravity?], his stubborn all-pervasive egotism? (Cranfield 158).

In substantial agreement with the above is Cranfield’s colleague at Durham, professor James Dunn (387-412), as well as J. I. Packer (268), who seems to locate the moral weakness of the believer within the unredeemed body (Gundry 204-216). But this reading of Romans 7 has not gone unchallenged and recent commentators on Romans have sought to demonstrate how erroneous this understanding of the Christian really is. One such is Moo (1986, 122-123; 1991, 453-4). We have seen above that he does not believe that the Christian is sinlessly perfect. But neither does he subscribe to the idea that the Christian ought to be described as depraved or merely a sinner saved by grace. So how then does he

⁵“The Bible clearly states that all aspects of man’s being are corrupt. Every facet is affected by original sin . . . intellect . . . affections and will” (Owen 17). For the lingering effects of these on the believer, see Carson (1992, 1-29), Wenham (80-94) and Lawrence (115-131).

understand Paul's "testimony" in Romans 7:14-25? His latest summary of the controversial passage is as follows:

Vv. 14-25 describes the situation of an unregenerate person. Specifically, I think that Paul is looking back, from his Christian understanding, to the situation of himself, and other Jews like him, living under the law of Moses. Of course, Paul is not giving us a full picture of the situation; he is concentrating on the negatives because this is what he must do to prove how useless the law was to deliver Jews from their bondage to sin. We might say, then, that Romans 7:14-25 describes from a personal viewpoint the stage in salvation history that Paul delineates objectively in Gal. 3:19-4:3 . . . Paul in Romans 7 uses ego to represent himself, but himself in solidarity with the Jewish people (Moo 1996a, 447-448).

Pentecostal scholar, Gordon Fee (509-515), is also a supporter of this position, which seems to be the dominant one among scholars in this century.

Romans 7 aside, it does seem that whatever label we choose to use of the Christian, the New Testament presents the believer as one who is sometimes dangerous to himself/herself and to the community of God's people. How else can we read passages like 1 Corinthians 5, Galatians 5 (especially vv. 16-21), and the host of other strong passages which warn the believer against living a life of depravity?

The probe concerning the fundamental nature of the Christian may even be carried on from the perspective of psychology, with special reference to what is called the mechanisms of defense. These are "indirect and typically unconscious manners of gratifying a repressed desire" (C. Narramore 1960, 288). They are ways and attempts to deal with conflicts with a view to protecting and enhancing a person's self-concept (C. Narramore 1960, 288). According to certain other authorities in the field, all people employ psychological defenses and "the only human who never used . . . defense mechanisms is Jesus Christ,⁶ whose self-esteem was valid and who had no sinful motives to be aware of" (Meier et al., 231). McLemore believes that defense mechanisms can also be viewed as forms of dishonesty, sinful unconscious mental activities (Benner 286). If these assumptions are granted, i.e. that psychological defenses are both unrighteous and

⁶Instead, Christ is the healer of all kinds of human pathology; his salvation "impacts and revolutionizes the whole person (Lk. 19:10), including the psychological domain" (Beck 13; cf. Allen 1995).

universal, does it mean, then, that even Christians are engaged in this subtle form of deception?

An affirmative answer is given by Melvin Nelson (37-43) in his study of James chapter 1 and forms of psychological maladjustment. Nelson sees James describing various kinds of self-deceptions resulting from double-mindedness. These acts of self-deception in turn distort spiritual formation and are similar to some defense mechanisms often found following prolonged inner struggle associated with anxiety and guilt. What are the “defenses” seen in the book of James? Nelson is careful to point out that it is not the author’s objective to delineate these defenses, per se, but to expose the distorted thinking of his first-century audience. Nelson sees five defenses in James 1.

Rationalisation. In rationalisation, a “person gives well thought-out and socially acceptable reasons for certain behaviour—but these reasons do not happen to be the real ones” (Sue et al. 1994, 47). Nelson sees such kind of disguise in vv. 6-8, and warns that rationalisation of this nature can seriously distort one’s prayer life.

Projection. In vv. 13-17 may be present yet another distorted way of thinking, stemming from spiritual conflict. This entails the shifting of threatening desires outside oneself by perceiving others as experiencing the difficulties that are actually one’s own (Sue et al 1994, 47). Projection in the life of the believer, according to Nelson, not only gives a false sense of relief, but, as is the case in vv. 13-17, also twists the truth of God’s character.

Repression. Nelson sees this defense in vv. 22-25. It may be defined as “a protective device by means of which forbidden impulses or painful memories are banished from consciousness.”

Two more defenses are to be seen in vv. 17-21 and 24-27. These are *intellectualisation* and *reaction formation*. While the former keeps the believer from receiving the engrafted word, the latter leads him or her into ceremonialism (Nelson 39-40).

But is this kind of integrative approach valid? Can psychological analysis shed light upon the biblical text? If so, what method should the interpreter employ to yield the best results? These are just some of the questions raised by Nelson’s article. Well over a decade after Nelson’s publication biblical scholar, Jerry Gladson and professional counselor, Charles Plott, tackled them in an interdisciplinary study of an Old Testament discourse. The study pre-supposed that the universal principles in a text may be compared to more general conclusions in the field of psychology. They ask, for example, about the “conflicted self” as a psychological category vis-a-vis a similar experience biblically and/or theologically described. Would the stark “admissions” of, for instance,

Romans 7:22-23 qualify (Gladson and Plott 56)? In this context, are therapists and theologians bound to give mutually exclusive explanations (Clarke 1990, 309-17; Carter 1994, 377-85)?

Much caution needs to be exercised whatever answer one gives to these questions, particularly on account of the fact that several genres are represented throughout the Bible, all needing to be handled with sensitivity (Johnson 1992, 346-55). In addition, the question of which psychological theory/theories should be applied in various cases is critical. When the matter of historical distancing is added to the equation, one wonders if the whole enterprise is feasible. Notwithstanding, Gladson and Plott are still optimistic that some progress, however incremental, can be made:

Despite limited data available to assess a character in Scripture, it is nonetheless possible to gain some insight into the behaviour—or even attitudes - by using what information is available. When psychologists analyze someone's journal, without immediate access to the writer, they use a similar approach (Gladson and Plott 61).

Isn't this what Biblical scholars do, especially redaction critics, when they attempt to probe the motives and authorial disposition of the Bible's writers (Gladson and Plott 61)? What is surely to be avoided, though, is the kind of extreme analysis reported by Muilenburg in his commentary on the book of Ezekiel:

Psychologically Ezekiel presents problems of great difficulty. His ecstatic transports and symbolic prophecies are very strange. They have been accounted for in various ways—catalepsy, schizophrenia, Freudian presupposition, etc. But most of these diagnoses fail to point out that this 'abnormality' is consistent with his theology . . . Ezekiel was one of the greatest spiritual figures of all time, in spite of his tendency to psychic abnormality—a tendency which he shares with many other spiritual leaders of mankind. A certain "abnormality" is required to divert a man's thoughts and his emotional experiences from the common treadmill of human thinking and feeling (Muilenburg 369).

But these crude assessments do suggest what Gladson and Plott call a "common humanity" which demonstrates itself, for example, in the process of grieving observed both cross-culturally and diachronically. They also add the further caveat that any psychological theories about

the biblical material must remain inferential, since the kind of empirical rigour that is needed is certainly beyond our competence (Gladson and Plott 61).

In light of the foregoing, are we now in a better position to evaluate Nelson's suggestions based upon his "scientific" analysis of James 1? Can his conclusions be validated given the above strictures? If the common-humanity criterion is invoked and strictly applied, one could say that Nelson's attempt to apply the relevant Freudian theory to the text is at least plausible, but not necessarily compelling. Certainly, the careful observation of experts on people's maladaptive behaviour appears to be capable of some kind of comparison with the prophet's commentary on the "psycho-pneumatic" condition of his own countrymen (Jer. 17:9). Here then it may be said that Nelson's study is more intuitively correct than empirically sound. All this, though, has still left unanswered the absorbing question of Christian depravity, or whether or not the believer can still be described in these terms. Hopefully some light will be shed on this question in the following section.

Creature of Destiny?

Recently Robert Saucy addressed the question of the true identity of the Christian. One of the first things he pointed out was that what emerges from the scriptural material in this regard is a curious "mixture" of purity and impurity. This, of course, partially accounts for the difficulty in gaining a consensus among theologians, especially concerning whether or not believers should be labelled as (to use the title of Saucy's article) "Sinners" who are forgiven or "Saints" who sin. While Saucy is quick to admit the presence of evil in believers' lives, he is equally eager to stress that the biblical portrait of the woman or man in right relation to God is usually very positive. This is true in regard to both Testaments, but particularly the New, which frequently refers to Christians as "saints" (Acts 9:32; Eph. 1:1, etc.), "sons" (Rom. 8:14), "sons of light" (1 Thess. 5:5) and "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17), all terms by which their new status and nature are highlighted.

The weight of this kind of evidence, Saucy feels, is overwhelmingly in favour of not seeing the believer as merely a sinner saved by grace but a *saint* who is being delivered from the grip of Satan and sin (Saucy 402-4; see fig.1). Since the term in the original bears the idea of holiness (Louw and Nida 1:745), the people of God can properly be designated as "holy ones." Isn't this how the writer to the Hebrews addresses his/her

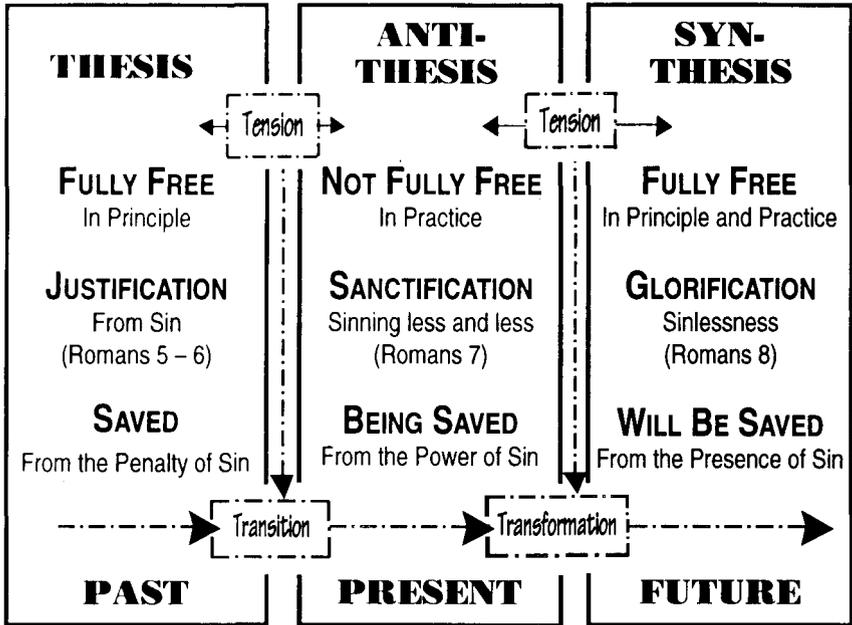


Fig. 1. Wo/Man in Transition –& Tension: *Dialectic of Christian Experience*

audience (Heb. 3:1)?⁷ It is difficult to doubt that Saucy is on the right track. Where I think his thesis could have been strengthened is in the fertile area of the New Testament’s eschatological vision of the believer. Here, I believe, is where lies the most promising locus for anyone who wishes to understand the character of the Christian.

Because we are destined for glory and at the same time already glorified (Rom. 8:30b),⁸ it is not an easy task to fully grasp the essential character of the Christian life. Given this fact, it is no surprise that some writers only stress the present dimension of the new life. Bruce Narramore, for example, writes:

God already considers us to be new persons . . . (2 Cor. 5:17). The moment we place our faith in Jesus Christ we are different. We are alive to spiritual principles, open to the voice of God, and actively involved in a process of total restoration (1978, 19).

⁷Interestingly the term used in two versions of the NT in Hebrew is *kedoshim*, which is an OT appellation for God (Prov. 9:10).

⁸Glorification is among the “five undeniable affirmations” of vv. 29-30 (Stott 248-249).

No one can gainsay this. A revolutionary change has taken place in a person's life when s/he enters God's kingdom.

However, what some NT exegetes are concerned about at this very point is that the change in question should be explicated within its proper eschatological context in order for its character to be fully appreciated. It is stressed that the concept of newness found in the New Testament is a reality, the expectation of which is rooted in the Old Testament. This makes the new creation "the glorious end of the revelation of God's salvation . . . the supreme goal of the entire biblical *Heilsgeschichte* (history of salvation)" (Ladd 522). Seen in this light the continuum of newness that the New Testament envisages embraces the entire period between the Incarnation and the Eschaton, the consummation of which holds out the strong hope of total universal transformation (Rom. 8:21). The significance of this for defining the New Testament concept of the Kingdom, and for identifying its true citizens, should not be missed. Although the Kingdom has broken into the old aeon with radical effects, this present aeon still continues. What this means for those related to the King/Kingdom is nothing less than liberation from the present aeon, which is evil to the core (Gal. 1:4), as well as a radically new "Suzerainty-vassal pact" in effect (Mt. 26:26ff). Additionally, a new "metamorphosis" is not only possible but imperative for Kingdom citizens, with the corresponding refusal to be shaped by a rapidly ageing dispensation (Rom. 12:1-2; 1 John 2:15-17). As these last two pieces of Scripture indicate, an ethical response is nonetheless demanded (Gal. 5:16), and the responsibility to reflect the glorious light of the Kingdom, in terms of good works, is no less diminished (Matt. 5:16; Eph. 2:10). In the words of Ladd,

The underlying idea [here] is that while believers live in the old age, because they are in Christ they belong to the new age with its new creation (indicative) and they are to live a life that is expressive of the new existence (imperative) (Ladd 522-523).

But to return to the question with which we were occupied in the previous section, Why is it that sin often creeps into the believer's life when s/he is supposed to "live a life that is expressive of the new existence"? Ladd again provides a plausible answer:

In a sense, even believers are still in Adam, for they die; they are still in the old aeon for they live in a sinful world and share the fallenness of creation. But redemptively, . . . they have entered into a new existence in Christ—the life of the new aeon (Ladd 525).

The struggle, then, in the life of the believer is rooted in the fact that s/he is (to adapt one of Collins' titles⁹) "a Wo/Man in transition - and tension" (Fig. 1). While Christians experience the inner transformation wrought by the divine Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18), they at the same time "work out" their salvation in tension—always with the possibility of overwhelming success (Rom. 8:37) or miserable failure (Rom. 7:24; Fig. 1).

Conclusion

Bearing the *imago Dei* with the hope of fully reflecting the *imago Christi* (1 John 3:2), the Christian stands as a creation of dignity and destiny. Though s/he still struggles with human "depravity,"¹⁰ s/he should not be viewed as such.

A believer conscious of his or her shortcomings does not need to say, Because I am still a sinner, I cannot consider myself a new person. Rather, he or she should say, *I am a new person*, but I still have a lot of growing to do (Hoekema 82, emphasis added).¹¹

The implications of all this, I believe, have no little moment for psychology (Carlson 19ff) and Caribbean Theology (Noelliste 52-56),

⁹Collins (1971), an elementary text on developmental psychology.

¹⁰Although this thought seems somewhat contradictory, it is certainly in line with Carter and Narramore's (118) "tolerance of ambiguity" and Narramore's (1972, 166) clarification in an earlier work. Someone once "commended" the Corinthian congregation for its "consistency" in not only believing in total depravity but practising it! Among the many fine works on consistent Christian living, see Hamilton (1966), Wenham (80ff), Daughters (10-21), Ward (1997), Taylor (1995), Evans (1994), Zemek (205-22), Bruce (300-304) and Vassell (1988). For approaches to spiritual formation, see Gayle (14-21) and Hingley (86-91).

¹¹The following is also apt:

The new self in the New Testament . . . is not equivalent to sinless perfection...it is...not static but dynamic . . . [therefore] we live a life of victory, but it is a *qualified victory*. we are not yet what we shall be. We are not yet totally like Christ (1 John 3:2). We live in the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. We are genuinely new persons but not yet totally new (Hoekema 82, 190, emphasis added); see also Southard (52) and Fig. 1.

for therapy¹² on the one hand, and preaching on the other.¹³ The perspective shared above is deemed to be advantageous since it is squarely based on the Judeo-Christian tradition and some of the more established results of the discipline of psychology.

Using the former, I have attempted to offer a definition of the very nature¹⁴ of what it means to be a Christian in terms of bearing the divine likeness, the residual adamic image (cf. Gen. 5:3), as well as the *imago Christi* in both its present and future manifestations. From the point of view of psychology, a measure of support was sought particularly in the area of the human tendency toward self-deception.

Much more could be done. For example, How does the indwelling Spirit contribute to a better understanding of what it means to be a Christian? What does it really mean to be “in Christ”? Is it possible to appreciate the nature of the Christian apart from the context of the Messianic community (Taylor 1995, Wright 1992)? These are just some of the questions that would need to be addressed if a better understanding of the essential character of the person in Christ is to be had.

While such a study is, perhaps, beyond the capability of one person and the scope of a medium such as this, I do believe that what would emerge can be placed within the parameters of the “Genesis (dignity)—Revelation (destiny)” model employed above.

¹²In this regard, see Gregory’s (3-39) thought provoking article on contextual counseling, as well as Chisholm’s (1997) stimulating short essays.

¹³*The Daily Gleaner*, (January 31, 1998), for example, carried a summary on Dr. Woodrow Kroll’s opening Keswick address on human significance and the creation story, a message that is deemed very relevant in a context of self-hate and identity crisis (Mulrain); but see McAllister (1990)!

¹⁴By nature is meant the essential quality of a thing. Much confusion surrounds the term in Christian circles; for instance, if we say that Christ has two natures in terms of his divinity and humanity, what do we mean when we say that the Christian has two natures? Of course, the semantic range of the term may include both concepts. What is being pleaded for here is less equivocation.

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