

How Misinterpreting the Term “Flesh” Tarnishes One’s View of the Scriptures

This section addresses two examples of how misinterpreting the term “*flesh*” has brought confusion to Christ’s body. (1) The New International Version’s definition of “*flesh*” (2) Reformed Theology’s view of “*flesh*” (Reformed Theology being extreme and hyper-Calvinism—observe Diagrams 13-15 in the Reference Section). This portion of our study should be tremendously encouraging, for the identity principles (“who we are in Christ”) taught in this *Advancing in Romans* commentary exposes the error in both of these scenarios.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. (Romans 8:1-9 NASB)

Reformed Theologians (extreme and hyper-Calvinists) use these passages, especially Romans 8:5-9, in an attempt to uphold their definition of the “T” of the TULIP, Total Depravity—that the depraved (lost) are spiritual corpses incapable of exercising repentance and faith. They do so by viewing the phrases, “*those who are according to the flesh*” (Romans 8:5), “*the mind set on the flesh*” (Romans 8:6), and “*the mind set on the flesh*” (Romans 8:7), as describing the depraved (lost)—never the saved. They draw this conclusion based on their definition of the term “*flesh*”—an extremely important term included in each of those passages. Reviewing what we have gleaned from the Scriptures will allow us to determine whether their assumption is in agreement with the full counsel of God’s Word.

God’s Word teaches that we were born a child “*of wrath*” (Ephesians 2:3) due to the sinful nature (the “*old self*”—Romans 6:6) inherited from Adam. The compelling news is that the sinful nature (Adamic nature, old self, old man, or dead spirit—all synonymous terms) is eradicated when a person during the church age accepts Christ as Savior (Romans 6:6; 7:1-4; and Galatians 2:20). Hence, when we were justified (saved), the sinful nature (“*the old self*”—Colossians 3:9) was replaced by the “*new*” creation (2Corinthians 5:17), the “*new self*” (Colossians 3:9-10), who is “*holy*” (Ephesians 1:4), “*sanctified*” (Hebrews 10:10), “*perfected*” (Hebrews 10:14), “*glorified*” (Romans 8:30), “*justified*” (Romans 5:1), “*forgiven*” (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 2:13; 1John 2:12),

“complete” (Colossians 2:10), and much more. This truth verifies that the New Testament believer is not dual natured, “old self” and “new self” (bad dog and good dog) as some teach, but the “new self” only.

Some believers would question the validity of this teaching, for it surely “feels” as if the old self (sinful nature) is alive at times. However, Romans 6:6, 7:1-4, and Galatians 2:20 teach otherwise—that the old self (sinful nature) is totally eradicated in the New Testament saint. Hence, the old self (who we were before we met Christ) does not war against the new self (who we are now). Rather, the “flesh” wars against the new self (new man). Thus, Paul wrote to the believers at Galatia:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. (Galatians 5:16-17)

The New Testament believer’s struggle is with the “flesh”—not the sinful nature. This truth is extremely liberating, for the sinful nature is who we used to be—the Adamic nature, old self, old man, dead spirit—all synonymous terms. The “flesh” is certainly not the sinful nature (old self, old man, dead spirit, Adamic nature).

While living in our lost state, with the sinful nature alive and well, we performed deeds that the Bible classifies as sinful. Sitting on the throne of our lives, we lived for “me, my, and I” only. In fact, the most natural thing we did as unbelievers was sin. We sinned not only because it was natural, but because “sin,” Satan’s agent, placed lies in our minds that we bought as the truth. This reality is verified by Romans 7:7-13, where Paul describes how sin worked through the Law while in his depraved state—Paul eventually realizing his need for a Savior (while depraved) through failing to measure up to the righteous standard required by the Law:

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. (Romans 7:7-13)

The remainder of Romans 7 (verses 14-25) describes Paul’s battle with “sin” after he became a believer.

Continuing our review, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* defines the noun "sin" as "an organized power."ⁱ "Sin" (the power of "sin") is not a demon, but a power controlled by Satan himself. (Satan is not omnipresent, so he uses the power of "sin" as his agent for the purpose of deceiving man.) As a result of accepting the power of sin's lies as truth while depraved (lost), patterns (habits) were formed in the brain (the brain being a piece of meat, or "flesh") that programmed us to think, feel, and act in particular ways when exposed to sin's stimulus. As you are well aware, all of these sinful patterns (habits) were not erased when we were made new in Christ. Consequently, when the New Testament believer allows "sin" (which lives in the New Testament believer's body only—Romans 7:23) to activate one of these ungodly patterns in the brain (the brain being a piece of flesh), he is walking "according to the flesh" (Romans 8:4-5). Simple as that! Yet, in some theological circles, "flesh" is equated with the sinful nature. Both the New International Version of the Bible (the NIV) and Reformed Theology commit this fatal error, so let's examine the ramifications of their improper thinking.

Man is born with a sinful nature, but the term "flesh" (used in Romans 8:4-5 for instance) is definitely not equivalent to the sinful nature inherited from Adam. Yet, the New International Version (the NIV) took the liberty to translate "flesh" (NASB) as "sinful nature" (NIV) in verses 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12 and 13 of Romans 8. (The King James, New King James, Revised Standard, Modern, Amplified, New American Standard—even the Greek Interlinear—use "flesh" instead of "sinful nature.") The NIV also translated "sinful flesh" (NASB) in verse 3 as "sinful man" (NIV), and "the things of the flesh" (NASB) in verse 5 as "what that nature desires" (NIV). Also, in verse 6, the phrase, "the mind set on the flesh" (NASB), is translated "the mind of sinful man" (NIV). This incorrect rendering in the NIV does not affect the overall meaning of some of these verses, but in other instances (such as in Romans 8:5-7) the meaning is altered altogether. The severity of this problem will become evident as we read Romans 8:1-14 in the NIV, which is recorded below. [Note: I have inserted the NASB rendering in brackets (the proper rendering from the Greek) to reveal how the NIV misrepresents these extremely critical passages. Evidently, those responsible for generating the NIV viewed the New Testament believer as possessing two natures (sinful nature and new self) and therefore took the liberty to replace "flesh" with "sinful nature" due to assuming that the "sinful nature" and "flesh" are one and the same. They could not have been more mistaken. Remember, the original Greek (not any particular version or paraphrase of the Bible) has the final say in every case. Presented below is the rendering of Romans 8:1-14 in the New International Version with the corrections in brackets for clarification.]

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature [flesh], God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man [sinful flesh] to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man [the flesh], in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature [the flesh] but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the sinful nature [the flesh] have their minds set on what that nature desires [on the things of the flesh]; but those

who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man [the mind set on the flesh] is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind [the mind set on the flesh] is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature [those who are in the flesh] cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature [are not in the flesh] but by [in] the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature [the flesh], to live according to it [the flesh]. For if you live according to the sinful nature [the flesh], you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (Romans 8:1-14 NIV)

Interestingly, the NIV sometimes places a number beside “*sinful nature*,” indicating that the reader is to reference the margin for the more correct rendering. In such cases, the word “*flesh*” is found in the margin. Many people who read the Bible disregard the margins. Thus, speak with individuals who use the NIV and they will normally tell you that the sin nature is alive and well in the New Testament believer. What a shame!

Reformed Theology’s view of Romans 8 is also affected by misinterpreting the term “*flesh*.” In fact, several extremely visible Reformed theologians fail to comprehend the difference between the “*sinful nature*” and the “*flesh*.” Hence, they view the phrase, “*the mind set on the flesh*,” in Romans 8:7 as pointing to that which is experienced by the lost (the depraved). Yet, when studied in the context of Romans 8:4-6, Paul is describing the disobedient New Testament believer. The fact that the believer can be controlled by the “*flesh*” is verified by Romans 7:25 as well (remember that Romans 7:14-25 describes Paul’s struggle with “*sin*” as a believer):

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. (Romans 7:25)

Some people would argue that Romans 7:24 negates this conclusion—that Paul had to be recounting his days prior to believing:

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? (Romans 7:24)

The word “*wretched*” in this case actually means “*distressed*” or “*miserable*.” Thus, Paul was not saying that he was a wretched person in the sense of being lost, for he knew he was a saint who sometimes sinned, and not a lowly sinner in need of salvation. He

was basically communicating that he was “distressed” (as a believer) over the battle that raged in his mind as a result of the power of sin working through the avenue of his body (“*the body of this death*”). He eventually matured as a believer and found victory through Christ’s life dwelling within him:

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. (Romans 7:25)

From all indications, Reformed theologians generally agree with the New International Version’s definition of “*flesh*” in Romans 8:1-14 (equating it with the sinful nature)—a view which violates the Greek text altogether. Hence, both the NIV and Reformed Theology misinterpret the term “*flesh*” in Romans 8:5-7—the NIV viewing it as confirming that the New Testament believer possesses two natures (sinful nature plus new man), Reformed Theology generally viewing “*flesh*” as confirming that to walk “*according to the flesh*” (“*according to the sinful nature*”—NIV) is making reference to the lost (depraved).

Romans 8:5-7 (when studied in context) describes New Testament believers—not once mentioning what transpires with the depraved. We again witness the unbiblical conclusions drawn by Reformed Theology while attempting to protect its unjustifiable view of the “T” of the TULIP, Total Depravity. We also observe the fallout when one’s preconceived notions are allowed to affect one’s view of the Scriptures. Those responsible for generating (producing) the NIV’s version of Romans 6-8 evidently viewed the New Testament believer as possessing two natures—resulting in their redefining “*flesh*” as sinful nature. This mistake has generated a theological nightmare beyond comprehension!

Thus, when the “*flesh*” is improperly viewed as synonymous with the sinful nature, we discover that the following errors can occur: (1) The NIV teaches that the New Testament believer is dual natured—old self and new self (2) Reformed Theology normally perceives verses 5 through 7 of Romans 8 as describing behavior exemplified by the depraved.

Paul follows in Romans 8:8-9 by relating what it means to be “*in the flesh*” versus “*in the Spirit*”:

and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. (Romans 8:8-9 — emphasis added)

The apostle first states that a person who is “*in the flesh*” cannot please God (Romans 8:8). This fact verifies that to be “*in the flesh*” is to be lost—a vast difference from the New Testament believer walking “*according to the flesh*” (Romans 8:4-5). Romans 7:5-6 confirms this same truth:

For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter. (Romans 7:5-6 — emphasis added)

Reformed theologians suggest that Romans 8:8 disproves “free willism” and endorses their view of total depravity—that the depraved cannot repent and believe and are, therefore, spiritual corpses. Does it? Quite the contrary! This verse is not teaching that a person cannot repent and believe while depraved, but rather that the depraved cannot live in a manner that is pleasing to God on an ongoing basis—described as walking “*according to the Spirit*” in Romans 8:4-5, a lifestyle characterized by the Spirit’s leading. By missing the context of Romans 8:8 (through misinterpreting the biblical and, thus, contextual meaning of the term “*flesh*”), Reformed Theology improperly interprets Romans 8:5-7. Thus, they present an argument that is a-contextual and false.

Romans 8:5-7 describes New Testament believers—which totally negates the standard Reformed view of these passages (Reformed Theology is addressed in much depth in our *God’s Heart* series).

The first phrase, “*in the flesh*” (Romans 8:8 and 9), refers to a person who does not know Christ. The second, walking “*according to the flesh*” (Romans 8:4-5), refers to those times when a New Testament believer gives in to an ungodly habit pattern due to believing the power of sin’s lie. As has already been established, the power of sin dwells in the New Testament believer’s body and sends messages into the mind by means of the ungodly habit patterns stored in the brain, which is a piece of “*flesh*.”

ⁱ Ibid