

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	122		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE ENMITY OF THE NATURAL MAN

Union with Christ, in the words of John Murray, “embraces the wide span of salvation from its ultimate source in the eternal election of God to its final fruition in the glorification of the elect. It is not simply a phase of the application of redemption: it underlies every aspect of redemption both in its accomplishment and in its application. Union with Christ binds all together and insures that to all for whom Christ has purchased redemption he effectively applies and communicates the same.”¹ This theme of union with Christ (*in Christ*) is contrasted in 8:5-8 with those who are still *in Adam*. This is further elaborated by expressions like *spirit* (in Christ) and *flesh* (in Adam). Likewise, note the emphasis Paul places on the imagery of walking, i.e., how one lives. Which in turn is connected with the *mind*. “Those *in Adam* and those *in Christ*, walk separate ways, each according to their respective *minds*.”² The person described as being *in Adam* is the *natural man*, i.e., unregenerate. He is characterized by enmity against God, by rebellion against Him, and by the fact that he is dominated by the mind of the flesh. He is as unable to hear the voice of God in the Word as is a deaf man judging a music contest. He is the totally depraved man, whose whole being is touched by sin. Further, Paul says that the man cannot be subject to the Law of God. In fact, in the eighth verse he says the same thing again in a more concrete form. He is the man who cannot please God. His sphere of life is in the flesh (cf. v. 5). The verse is a clear statement of the inability of man. Fallen mankind does not possess the kind of Libertarian free-will that Arminians ascribe to humanity. The eighth verse is one of the clearest texts teaching that an unregenerate man cannot please God until a work of the Spirit has been performed on his inner man. In fact, it is a verse that plainly teaches God (cf. Heb. 11:6), but they that are in the flesh, the unsaved individuals, cannot please God. Thus, they cannot exercise faith as long as they are in the flesh. They exercise faith only after the Holy Spirit in efficacious grace takes them out of the flesh and puts them in the Spirit by giving them new life. The first activity of the new life is to believe (cf. 1 John 5:1). The man dead in sins is given new life, which manifests itself in saving trust through the gospel. The late James Boice, in his analysis of this passage, asked, “What is it that most characterizes an unsaved person? These verses define the unbeliever in four important ways: (1) in regard to his thinking, (2) in regard to his state, (3) in regard to his religion, and (4) in regard to his present condition.”³ Let’s examine the first of these in some detail.

- I. **WHAT’S ON YOUR MIND?** Paul has asserted that the only people in whom the law’s righteous requirement can be fulfilled are those who live not *kata sarka* (according to flesh) but *kata pneuma* (according to spirit, or better, the Spirit), that is, those who follow the promptings and surrender to the control of the Spirit rather than the flesh. It is this emphatic antithesis between flesh and Spirit, which Paul now develops in verses 5-8. Implicitly or explicitly, it recurs in every verse. Paul’s purpose is to explain why obedience to the law is possible only to those who walk according to the Spirit. John Stott helpfully begins with some definitions. By *sarx* (flesh) Paul means neither the soft muscular tissue which covers our bony skeleton, nor our bodily instincts and appetites, but rather the whole of our humanness viewed as corrupt and unredeemed, “our fallen, ego-centric human nature,” or more briefly, “the sin-dominated self.” By *pneuma* (spirit) in this passage Paul means not the higher aspect of our humanness viewed as “spiritual”

(although in verse 16 he will refer to our human spirit), but rather the personal Holy Spirit himself, who now not only regenerates, but also indwells the people of God. This tension between “flesh” and “Spirit” is reminiscent of Galatians 5:16-26, where they are in irreconcilable conflict with each other. Here Paul concentrates on the “mind,” or (as we would say) “mindset,” of those who are characterized by either *sarx* or *pneuma*.⁴ J. V. Fesko makes this important point: “To contrast the difference between what Christ has accomplished versus the impotence of those still trapped under the dominion of Adam, Paul writes: *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God* (Rom. 8:5-8). Anyone still under the federal headship of Adam has a complete inability to meet the righteous requirements of the law. Anyone who is in *the flesh* – that is, still in Adam – cannot please God. Again, recall Paul’s contrast between the two worlds:

First Adam	Last Adam
flesh	Spirit
sin	righteousness
law	grace
condemnation	justification
death	life
creation	new creation

Anyone in Christ is in the new creation and therefore indwelled by the Holy Spirit. Only those who live *according to the Spirit* can set their minds on the things of the Spirit (Rom. 8:5b).⁵

NOTE: A lot of confusion follows if Paul’s language in 8:5-7 is not properly understood. For example, one commentator declares: “A Christian’s choice called for in v. 5 will determine the outcome explained in v. 6. Thus **to be carnally** (Gk lit. *the flesh*) **minded** (*phronēma* from *phroneo* above which means a strong focus and strive) **is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.** These contrasting outcomes mentioned here do not refer to eternal *death* versus eternal *life*. Contextually, Paul’s exhortation is to believers. Hence *death* refers to a death experience (6:16, 21, 23; 7:10-13, 24; 8:13; Gal 5:16-17, 19-21), a result of heeding one’s fallen disposition (known as *the flesh*; 7:18-21; 8:1) that is still a part of all believers (cf. 6:6). Conversely, the meaning of *life* refers to that experience available to all believers who orient themselves to the things of *the Spirit* (cf. v. 5; Gal 5:22-25; 8:13). If so, a believer will experience the *peace* of God (14:17, 19; 15:13, 33; 16:20) available *only* to the obedient. That is altogether different than peace *with* God available to all believers (cf. 5:1).⁶ Notice that this author mistakenly says that those who *are* of the flesh are equated with those who walk according to the flesh, thus putting the emphasis on behavior rather than being. Schreiner correctly points out that, “What Paul communicates in verses 5-11 is that those who *walk* by the flesh or the Spirit do so because they *are* of the flesh or the Spirit. In other words, his argument is that behavior stems from the being or nature of a person. Incidentally, this is powerful evidence that *flesh* and *Spirit* involve the *nature* of human beings.”⁷

A. **First, our mindset expresses our basic nature.** On the one hand, there are *those who live according to the sinful nature*. They are not now those who “walk” according to it (4, literally), but those who simply “are” like this (5, literally). These people *have their minds set on what that nature desires*, whereas *those who live in accordance with the Spirit* (literally, “those according to the Spirit” – there is no verb) *have their minds set on what the Spirit desires* (5). The meaning surely is not that people are like this because they think like this, although that is partly true, but that they think like this because they are like this. The expressions are descriptive. In both cases their nature determines their mindset. Moreover, since the flesh is our twisted human nature, its desires are all those things which pander to our ungodly self-centeredness. Since the Spirit

is the Holy Spirit himself, however, his desires are all those things which please Him, who loves above all else to glorify Christ, that is, to show Christ to us and form Christ in us. Now to “set the mind” (*phroneō*) on the desires of *sarx* or *pneuma* is to make them the “absorbing objects of thought, interest, affection and purpose.” It is a question of what preoccupies us, of the ambitions which drive us and the concerns which engross us, of how we spend our time and our energies, of what we concentrate on and give ourselves up to. All this is determined by who we are, whether we are still “in the flesh” or are now by new birth “in the Spirit.”

- B. ***Secondly, our mindset has eternal consequences.*** *The mind of sinful man* (literally, “of the flesh”) *is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit* (literally, “of the Spirit”) *is life and peace* (6). That is, the mindset of flesh-dominated people is already one of spiritual death and leads inevitably to eternal death, for it alienates them from God and renders fellowship with him impossible in either this world or the next. The mindset of Spirit-dominated people, however, entails life and peace. On the one hand they are “alive to God” (6:11), alert to spiritual realities, and thirsty for God like nomads in the desert, like deer panting for streams. On the other hand, they have peace with God (5:1), peace with their neighbour (12:15), and peace within, enjoying an inner integration or harmony. We would surely pursue holiness with greater eagerness if we were convinced that it is the way of life and peace.
- C. ***Thirdly, our mindset concerns our fundamental attitude to God.*** The reason the mind of the flesh is death is that it *is hostile to God*, cherishing a deep-seated animosity against Him. It is antagonistic to his name, kingdom and will, to his day, his people and his word, to his Son, his Spirit and his glory. In particular, Paul singles out his moral standards. In contrast to the regenerate who “delight” in God’s law (7:22), the unregenerate mind *does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so* (7), which explains why those who live according to the flesh cannot fulfill the law’s righteous requirement.
- D. ***Finally, note the impossibility of pleasing God that characterizes the natural mindset.*** They *cannot* please him (8) because they *cannot* submit to his law (7), whereas, it is implied, those who are in the Spirit set themselves to please him in everything, even to do so “more and more.” To sum up, here are two categories of people (the unregenerate who are “in the flesh” and the regenerate who are “in the Spirit”), who have two perspectives or mindsets (“the mind of the flesh” and “the mind of the Spirit”), which lead to two patterns of conduct (living according to the flesh or the Spirit), and result in two spiritual states (death or life, enmity or peace). Thus our mind, where we set it and how we occupy it, plays a key role in both our present conduct and our final destiny.⁸

CONCLUSION: W. G. T. Shedd (1820-1894) was one of the great Reformed theologians of the 19th century. Speaking of the condition of the natural man, he writes: “in no relation to law and justice and is deserving of no punishment. This aversion toward God is called *enmity* (Rom. 8:7), the positive hostility of the inclination, the disinclination of the will in its deepest recesses. This hatred of a fellow creature is the repugnance of the will and is murderous in its quality; for *he that hates his brother is a murderer* (1 John 3:15). Accordingly, in Scripture, holy desire is holy inclination: *My soul thirsts for you, my flesh longs for you* (Ps. 63:1); *so pants my soul after you* (42:1). Such desire is the object of command: *Delight yourself in the Lord* (37:4). The sum of the moral law is a command to love: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart*. And evil desire is evil inclination: *The desire of the wicked shall perish* (112:20); *grant not, O Lord, the desires of the wicked* (140:8); *the expectation of the wicked shall perish* (Prov. 10:28); *depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of your ways* (Job 21:14).”⁹ He goes on to say: “Sin blinds and darkens the understanding by destroying the consciousness of divine things. For example, the soul destitute of love to God is no longer conscious of love, of reverence is no longer conscious of reverence, etc. Its knowledge of such affections, therefore, is from hearsay, like that which a blind man has of colors or a deaf man of sound.

God, the object of these affections, is of course unknown for the same reason. The spiritual discernment spoken of in 1 Cor. 2:6 is the immediate consciousness of a renewed man. It is experimental knowledge. Sin is described in Scripture as voluntary ignorance: *This they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old* (2 Pet. 3:5). Christ says to the Jews: *If I had not come and spoken unto them they had not had sin -- the sin of not knowing him that sent me* (John 15:21-22). But the ignorance in this case was a willing ignorance. They desired to be ignorant.”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ John Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1955), p. 165.

² Paul Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God's Righteousness* (Christian Focus, 2003), p. 180.

³ J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expositional Commentary II* (Baker, 1992), p. 807.

⁴ J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (IVP, 1994), p. 222.

⁵ J. V. Fesko, *Romans: The Lectio Continus Expository Commentary on the New Testament* (RHB, 2018), p. 195.

⁶ R. A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver* (21st Century Press, 2005), p. 164.

⁷ T. R. Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary On The New Testament* (Baker, 1998), p. 410.

⁸ This section is taken from Stott, *op. cit.*

⁹ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Third edition, P&R, 2003), p. 514.

¹⁰ Shedd, p. 567.