

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

*A look at the new birth experience and its implications on  
the believer's ongoing battle with sin.*

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I believe the Bible teaches that human beings have but one nature. Think of this as a single “human nature” received at birth. A person having only natural birth is morally “fallen” and dead to God because every man, woman, and child has inherited a corrupt human nature from our original parents (**Rom 5:12; Eph 2:1-3; 1 Cor 15:22**).

The Bible tells us that “sin” (i.e. “self-idolizing nature”) is a disposition (i.e. a “bent” or “inclination”) which entered the human race through Adam and this disposition generates acts of sin. This disposition polluted our human nature. The sinful acts it produces defy the law of God and result in our guilt before him (**Rom 8:7**). Therefore, our human nature is justly condemned by God (**Rom 3:20; John 3:16-18**).

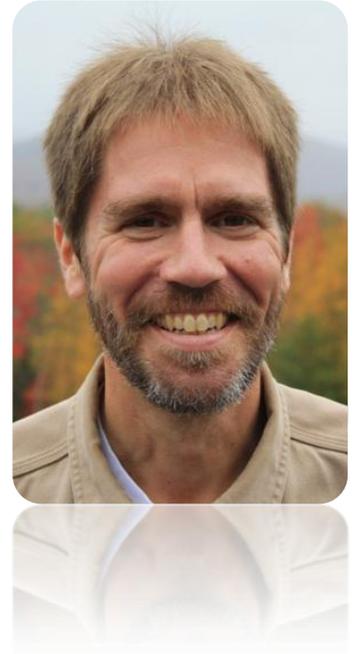
Many read the "old man" versus "new man" references in the New Testament (with its added commands to "put off" and to "put on") and assume that Christians have two natures contending for control (e.g. **Col 3:10** and **Eph 4:22-24**). In these passages, however, Paul refers to the present spiritual state of a sanctified Christian versus his/her former life as a condemned sinner.

At a point in time, the sinner (having a morally fallen and judged human nature, see **Gen 6:5**) made a conscious and deliberate choice to receive forgiveness from God and become justified in his presence based on the righteousness of the living Christ (added to our account), **Rom 4:5, 25; 5:1; Eph 1:7; 2 Cor 5:17, 21**.

The sin-corrupted human nature is the “old man” we deliberately and consciously “put off” the moment we trusted in Jesus and received all the spiritual benefits to be adopted into the family of God (**Tit 2:12; Rom 8:16-17**). Paul explains this “new man” in terms of being "in the Spirit" (**Rom 8:9**) with the ability to live a new life in him (**Rom 6:1-4; Eph 1:13**).

Prior to our salvation we could not please God and we could only serve the dictates of our corrupt human nature (heart) inherited from Adam (**Jer 17:9; Ezek 36:26; Rom 3:10-12; 1 Cor 15:22**).

Being born again (**1 Pet 1:23**), the Spirit of God has given us new life (regeneration) in Christ (**Titus 3:5; 2 Cor 5:17**). What does this mean? This means that my human nature now conforms (answers) to the presence of a new power within. I no longer serve sin (**Rom 6:14**), but heed the dictates of the Spirit (**Rom 8:13**).



At the moment we receive this new birth (**John 3:5**) the Spirit of God takes up residence within our being (**1 Cor 6:19-20; Rom 8:9**). This means we now participate in the divine nature (**2 Pet 1:4**). I still sin (**1 John 2:1**), but do so either knowingly or ignorantly when I yield to temptation occasioned by a variety of sources: (1) the *willfulness* of my own human nature, (2) the *allurement* of the world, or (3) the *enticement* of the devil (**Rom 7:14-25; 1 John 2:15-17; Jas 1:13-14; Eph 6:10-12; 1 Pet 5:8**).

I sin by my own volition and am responsible for the sinful acts I commit which *quench* (**1 Thess 5:19**) and *grieve* the Spirit of God (**Eph 4:30**). Having been crucified with Christ (**Gal 2:20**), my sin nature has been rendered powerless (**Rom 6:6**), but not eradicated.

I refer to my nature now as a “human nature” under the influence of the Spirit of God who renders me capable of conforming to the will of God.

Yet, I must yield to that influence. I could not do this before. I did not have the occasion or the power. I could only serve sin. The Christian struggles with sin because he/she has the capacity to sin. If we had no capacity to sin, then no amount of temptation could be successful.

Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days by the devil (**Luke 4:1-13**). He *did not sin* because he *could not sin*. **Luke 4:1** tells us that he was "full" of the Spirit. This is not the reason that he could not sin. Prior to his "filling" at the Jordan (**Luke 3:22**) he was sinless. Jesus had *no capacity to sin*. The temptation was real, but ineffective.

Our temptation, whether *self-induced*, or via the *worldly system*, or *demonic forces*, is based on the power of an internal impulse that bears upon the will to act in a manner contrary to the will of God (**Jas 1:14**). That impulse or principle is the "flesh" (or human nature).

It succeeds because we have the capacity to sin. This means that regenerate (or re-born, **John 3:5**) Christians still have within their nature the capacity to sin. Knowing this, we must guard our hearts (**Pro 4:23**), remain vigilant against the enemy's devices (**Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8**), and become disciplined followers of Christ (**Jas 1:21-22**).

At conversion (regeneration), our human nature (old man-self) died in the sense that it was transformed into a new man-self (human nature) aided by the Spirit of God to live according its renewed status.

We are then becoming in our thoughts and conduct what God has already made us in Christ (**2 Cor 5:17**). The Spirit of God is the transforming agent, but we must yield to his influences (**2 Cor 3:18**). Our ability to sin has not been eradicated. We are called to “sin-less” (often), but we will never become “sinless” until we stand in the presence of God (**Eph 1:14**).

Think of it this way. We have been delivered from the *penalty* of sin. We have been delivered from the *power* of sin. But, while we live in this world we still must reckon with the *presence* of sin.

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The devil is a major part of this world's system and his temptation is fierce, but all sin is not a matter of his stratagems. If we experience guilt, it is no longer *objective* in the sense of standing condemned in the presence of God (**Rom 8:1, 31-39**).

Our guilt is *subjective* in the sense of having grieved the Holy Spirit. His presence within us translates into personally experienced sorrow until we confess our sins and renew our fellowship with the Father (**2 Cor 7:10; 1 John 1:9**).