

WHAT IS “THE FLESH?”

A RED MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY CHURCH POSITION PAPER

This is both an interesting and important issue, because it has to do with the cause of sin and immorality in the lives of Christian people. Why are our news broadcasts and newspaper headlines constantly telling us of the inconsistencies and outright moral failures of Christian people? The Bible teaches that the source of their sordid failings is “the flesh.” Therefore, understanding “the flesh” will help us successfully deal with our own failures and with the failures of those we think should never fail.

The precise meaning of the biblical term “flesh,” especially as used by Paul in the New Testament, is a fairly complex issue. A false understanding can lead to some very dangerous conclusions. Yet there is room for disagreement. Legitimate differences in views exist among evangelicals. We believe the importance of the issue requires us to lay down some broad parameters we wish to stay within while considering this concept of “the flesh.” After making some general observations regarding the term, we will then state what it is we affirm and then certain concepts about “the flesh” we would want to avoid teaching at Red Mountain. Our intent is to provide a biblical understanding of the source of sin within us so that we can lead more holy lives.

“The flesh” is not understood by simply looking up the definition of the Greek word. In fact, it is precisely the breadth of the term’s meaning that has led to much misunderstanding of it. In Scripture this Greek word can mean one of several things. It can be used to speak of meat or muscle tissue. It can mean the physical body. It can refer to this earthly life. Finally, it can be used of the sinful urges that reside within us. Regarding this last usage, the NIV uses two words, “sinful nature,” to translate the Greek word for “flesh” wherever they believe this meaning is in view. The reader should be aware of the fact that the original term is simply “flesh.” “Flesh” then, can mean anything from physical tissue to an ethical force living within us. Because this word is used in a number of ways, the context surrounding each usage must be carefully considered. It is only then that the precise meaning in view in each particular passage of Scripture can be established with a measure of confidence, and from there an accurate understanding of the cause of sin in our lives can be constructively pondered.

WHAT WE AFFIRM

1. The Christian is a new creature in Christ and has a new nature, which is not sinful.

When a person comes to Christ in faith, God gives that person a new spirit or a new nature. In the past, this person was opposed to the things of God. Now, a big change has taken place. In their inmost being, he or she wants only to please God. This new desire is one of gifts we receive from God when we are born again. When the new believer tries to act on this new desire, however, he or she will meet external resistance from the world and internal resistance from the flesh.

2. All Christians still deal with sin because of their “flesh.”

The presence of the new nature in the life of the believer does not remove the tendency to sin. This tendency to sin is what the apostle Paul called the “flesh.” Both Romans 7 and 1 John 1:8 make it clear that every Christian must continue to deal with sin in their life. If we say we have no sin, we delude ourselves, and we ignore the truth to our own peril. By ignoring our sin, we open ourselves to its dangers even more. We must face our sin and confess if we are to have victory over it.

3. When used in its ethical sense in scripture, “flesh” refers to that power within us that leads us to sin.

The word flesh in this sense represents everything that is wrong in us, everything that remains hostile to God (Romans 7:18 and 8:7). It is that force or tendency within us that continues seek our own will and resist God’s will. Some understand the flesh to be our old nature, that is, our natural self before being saved. The believer is seen, then, to have two natures, the old and the new. However, we think it best to say that the believer has but one nature, the new nature. The flesh, then, is best viewed as a sort of hangover or infection left over from our old life before salvation. This hangover or infection affects our whole being, save our new nature or spirit.

4. Victory over the flesh can be experienced as we grow in faith and obedience.

Thanks be to God; we are no longer under condemnation because of Jesus Christ. We are now set free from the law of sin and death.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. — Romans 8:1-2

By the new spirit God has placed within us we now have a right desire to please God. By the Holy Spirit who indwells us we now have the power to obey God and avoid sin. As we grow in faith and practice of obedience, allowing the Holy Spirit more and more control over our lives, we experience more and more victory over sin and the flesh.

5. Total sanctification, or moral perfection, is not possible in this life.

Although growth is possible, and really to be expected in a healthy Christian life, the goal of perfection is not attainable in this life. As long as we live in these mortal bodies, sin is a reality we must deal with (see point 2). Perfection is the goal we strive for and by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit we can make progress toward that goal. Yet we will reach that goal only when we pass on to the next life.

6. Believers will be released completely and thoroughly from the power of the flesh when this mortal life ends.

When this mortal life is done, and the mortal takes on immortality, we shall finally be delivered from the presence of sin. We will no longer be in a sinful environment and the internal tendency to sin (i.e. the flesh) will be finally and completely removed. We will be made fit to live forever in the Lord’s presence, clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Our redemption will be finally complete.

CONCEPTS TO AVOID

1. The physical body is inherently evil: The scriptures refer to our physical bodies as being weak and susceptible to evil influence. However, it categorically does not characterize the physical body or physical nature as evil in itself. The physical world was originally good at creation and it will be recreated good as well. The resurrection body will be some sort of physical body. Our physical nature in and of itself is not evil but it is weak and easily succumbs to sin's temptation and becomes an instrument for sin.
2. An ascetic lifestyle (beating the body, denying oneself material goods, etc.) leads to holiness: While fasting and other forms self-denial are useful disciplines for promoting spiritual growth, self-denial in and of itself produces nothing. Neither does it make us more holy nor does it earn us favor with God. For self-denial to be productive spiritually it must be coupled with a positive spiritual goal. For example, abstaining from food in order to give to the poor or to better focus our attention on the Lord or a specific issue He is having us deal with.
3. "The flesh," however it is understood, as an excuse to deny personal responsibility for sin: Just as Flip Wilson used to say, "The Devil made me do it," some Christians might like to say, "My flesh made me do it," absolving themselves of any personal responsibility for their sin. Scripture is clear, however, that we are still responsible for our sin. Though both the world and our flesh pull us in the direction of sin, the decision to sin is ours and ours alone and we must own it. If we fail to own it, we will fail to take the steps to correct it (see point 2 in the previous section: What we affirm).
4. Believers can attain perfection (being without sin), in this life: See point five above.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. — 1 John 1:10