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Baker, William Lemuel Henry (1858–1933)

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Denis Fortin is professor of historical theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Since joining the seminary faculty in 1994, he has served in several administrative roles, including dean (2006-2013). Among the most recent of his many publications on Adventist history and theology are *One in Christ: Biblical Concepts for a Doctrine of Church Unity* (Pacific Press, 2018) and the annotated 125th anniversary edition of the Ellen G. White classic, *Steps to Christ* (Andrews University Press, 2017).

W. L. H. Baker was an evangelist, conference administrator, and Bible teacher in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, and recipient of a letter from Ellen G. White that has figured prominently in the varying explanations of the human nature of Christ debated within Adventism.

Early Years

Born March 12, 1858 at Kellogg, Iowa, William Baker was ten years old when his parents joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. William was baptized in 1873 and attended Battle Creek College for one year (1877-1878).¹

In 1882, Baker was employed as a printer by Pacific Press, in Oakland, California, where he worked for about five years. There he met Josephine L. Cochran, who also worked for Pacific Press as a proof reader and for some time as copyist for Ellen White. They were married on August 25, 1885.²

Ministry in Australia and New Zealand

Two years later, the Bakers left for Australia, where William worked first for the church's publishing house near Melbourne. He was next asked to work as an evangelist, laboring for a while with M. C. Israel, and Josephine worked as a Bible worker. Between 1896 and 1913, Baker was president of the following conferences in Australia and New Zealand.

New South Wales Conference (Australia) 1896-1898

New Zealand Conference, 1901-1905

Victoria Conference (Australia), 1905-1908

Tasmania Conference (Australia), 1908-1909

Western Australia Conference, 1909-1913³

In 1914, Baker was appointed Bible teacher at the Australian Missionary College (later Avondale University College), and later served as pastor in Sydney.⁴ During her time in Australia (1891-1900), Ellen White often referred to the Bakers in her letters and diaries, and seemed well acquainted with them.



William Lemuel Henrie Baker
Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

Final Years in the United States

In 1921, William and Josephine Baker returned to America, where he received medical help in the Washington Sanitarium, and acted as chaplain there for a year. Between 1923 and 1927 he was the Bible teacher at Oakwood Junior College, in Huntsville, Alabama.⁵

For health reasons, Baker then sought medical help at the sanitarium headed by Dr. T. J. Evans in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and served as its chaplain for five years. The Bakers' last place of residence was Springdale, Arkansas, where William died in 1933.⁶ Josephine died in 1941.⁷ They had two children: one son, Dr. Henry Merton Baker, of Boston, and an adopted daughter, Elsie (Enid) Cantoreggio,⁸ of Harding, Massachusetts.

The Baker Letter

While Baker served as evangelist and conference president in Australia in 1896, Ellen White wrote him and his wife a long letter (Letter 8, 1895, dated February 9, 1896). Her letter was obviously a response to one he had sent her (no longer extant) with a number of questions. While most of her letter consists of her personal appeal for more efficiency in their evangelistic and pastoral work and invites them to be totally committed to Christ, one section in the middle of the letter has drawn much attention since its first publication in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (vol. 5, 1128-1129) in 1956 and then in part in *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* in 1957. In this section, Ellen White discusses the theological significance of the humanity of Christ and warns Baker to be careful how he presents this subject to his listeners.

Be careful, exceedingly careful, as to how you dwell upon the human nature of Christ. Do not set him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin. He is the second Adam. The first Adam was created a pure, sinless being, without a taint of sin upon him; he was in the image of God. He could fall, and he did fall through transgressing. Because of sin, his posterity was born with inherent propensities of disobedience. But Jesus Christ was the only begotten Son of God. He took upon Himself human nature, and was tempted in all points as human nature is tempted. He could have sinned; He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity. He was assailed with temptations in the wilderness, as Adam was assailed with temptations in Eden.

Bro. Baker, avoid every question in relation to the humanity of Christ, which is liable to be misunderstood. Truth lies close to the track of presumption. In treating upon the humanity of Christ, you need to guard strenuously every assertion, lest your words be taken to mean more than they imply, and thus you lose or dim the clear perceptions of his humanity as combined with divinity. His birth was a miracle of God; for, said the angel, "Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." [Luke 1:31-35.]

These words do not refer to any human being, except to the Son of the Infinite God. Never, in any way, leave the slightest impression upon human minds that a taint of, or inclination to corruption rested upon Christ, or that He in any way yielded to corruption.

He was tempted in all points like as man is tempted, yet He is called "that holy thing." [Luke 1:35.] It is a mystery that is left unexplained to mortals that Christ could be tempted in all points like as we are, and yet be without sin. The incarnation of Christ has ever been, and will ever remain, a mystery. That which is revealed is for us and for our children, but let every human being be warned from the ground of making Christ altogether human, such an one as ourselves, for it cannot be. The exact time when humanity blended with divinity, it is not necessary for us to know. We are to keep our feet on the Rock, Christ Jesus, as God revealed in humanity.

I perceive that there is danger in approaching subjects which dwell on the humanity of the Son of the infinite God. He did humble Himself when He saw He was in fashion as a man, that He might understand the force of all temptations wherewith man is beset.

The first Adam fell; the second Adam held fast to God, and His Word under the most trying circumstances, and His faith in His Father's goodness, mercy, and love did not waver for one moment. "It is written" was His weapon of resistance, and it is the sword of the Spirit which every human being is to use. "Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me"—nothing to respond to temptation. [John 14:30.] On not one occasion was there a response to his manifold temptations. Not once did Christ step on Satan's ground, to give him any advantage. Satan found nothing in Him to encourage his advances.⁹

Since its publication, this section of the letter has been at the core of the Adventist debate on whether Christ, in his human nature, had a postlapsarian (post Fall) or prelapsarian (pre Fall) nature. In the history of this debate, this letter has been the principal document used to sustain a prelapsarian position. In recent years, Woodrow Whidden has offered the use of a better terminology to get at the core of this discussion. Whidden points to aspects of Christ's human nature that are identical or similar to us and of those aspects that are unique or different from us. In the *identical*

category Jesus' human nature had profound similarities to all other human beings while he was at the sametime *unique* from other humans in his sinlessness.¹⁰

An indirect yet important theological dimension of this entire discussion also revolves around the definition of sin, particularly the impact of the sin of Adam and Eve on their descendants (original sin) and the extent to which sin affected and infected the human nature of Jesus. A number of contrasts alluded to or mentioned in the letter support a distinction between the two aspects of *identical* and *unique*, and have implications for the doctrine of original sin (i.e., whether Jesus inherited sinful tendencies to sin, or concupiscence).

Among the important contrasts Ellen White made in this letter we can list the following:

Jesus did not inherit "propensities of sin" or "inherent propensities of disobedience" which all humans since Adam inherit.

Humans are descendants of the first Adam, but Jesus, as the second Adam, "was the only begotten Son of God."

Jesus never had in him "an evil propensity."

While both the descendants of Adam and Jesus have the possibility of being tempted and of sinning, Jesus' temptations in the wilderness were similar to Adam's before the Fall.

Because of his miracle birth described in Luke 1, Jesus' human nature was unique from all human beings in that he was "that holy thing," implying an ontological holiness humans do not have, and had no "taint of, or inclination to corruption."

Jesus' humanity was unique from other human beings and consequently she warned not to explain Christ's nature as "altogether human, such an one as ourselves, for it cannot be."

When tempted, Jesus had "nothing in Him to encourage his [Satan's] advances," implying by this that humans do.

The uniqueness of Jesus' human nature is the focus of her comments in this letter. In comparing and contrasting Jesus' human nature with that of Adam before the Fall and of the descendants of Adam after the Fall, Ellen White emphasized Jesus' uniqueness in that he never sinned. He was the sinless Son of God. She also described his uniqueness as including the absence of inherited and evil propensities of sin, also referred to as "taint" and "inclination to corruption." Her use of this terminology to refer to the sinful inherited aspects of human nature are components of the traditional doctrine of original sin. While all human beings inherit such ontological aspects of the nature of sin, she claimed Jesus did not. Jesus was thus a real and true human being, as Adam was before and after the Fall, and could fully identify with us, but he was also unique from other human beings since he was born without evil propensities and inclinations to corruption.

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NOTES

1. W.L.H. Baker Biographical Information Blank, GCA, Secretariat Missionary Files, RG 21, Record 114875.?
2. F.S. Hartwell, "William Lemuel Henry Baker obituary," *ARH*, March 30, 1933, 22; "Josephine L. Baker obituary," *ARH*, September 4, 1941, 22.?
3. Hartwell, "William Lemuel Henry Baker obituary."?
4. *Ibid.*?
5. *Ibid.*?
6. *Ibid.*?
7. "Josephine L. Baker obituary."?
8. Josephine Baker's biographical information in the Secretariat Missionary Files gives her daughter's first name as Elsie, while the obituaries for both W.L.H. and Josephine in *ARH* give it as Enid.?
9. Ellen G. White to W.L.H. and Josephine L. Baker, February 9, 1896, Letter 8, 1895, Ellen G. White Writings, <https://m.egwwritings.org/en.>?
10. Woodrow W. Whidden, *Ellen White on the Humanity of Christ* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1997), 15-16.?

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