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Conducted by  
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**"What does the phrase 'by nature' mean in passages like Rom. 2:14 and Eph. 2:3? What are the implications of its meaning?"**

This is an interesting question because phrases like 'by nature' and 'it's natural' are in common use in our language; I presume they must mean **something** to us, or we wouldn't use them. There is, however, a fairly complex distinction relative to the state of the people who use such phrases, e.g., when a non-Christian uses a phrase such as 'it's natural', he is referring 'nature' to his own condition as a natural man. A Christian, on the other hand, who has been 'born again' and is the recipient of the in-dwelling Holy Spirit, may come to the point when his **spiritual** condition becomes **natural** to him, although he is still a natural man, according to the world's definition. We must, then, try to find out what 'nature' means.

### **NATURE**

Let's think about the Jews and the Gentiles (non-Jews). The Israelites (Jews) had a favoured position relative to God. Stephen, before the Jewish Council, reminded them that Moses had been given the oracles of God; he also reminded them of the perfidy of the nation at that time and after. (Read Acts 7:37-43). Paul in Rom. 3:2 also reminds them of this, and

the advantages they had over other nations. They had been given the Law to guide them, but their perfidious and rebellious conduct had angered God, so much so, in fact, that in the end only a remnant of that once great and proud nation would be spared. (Read Ezek. 6, and Rom. 11). They looked upon the Gentile nations with total disdain, and it must have come as a profound shock when Paul rounded on them and told them that they were no better than the Gentiles. (Read Rom. 3:9ff). The Gentiles, of course, had no similar provision or protection from God; they were 'natural' men.

### THE CONSTITUTION OF MAN

When man was created, his classification was 'good', indeed, he couldn't be anything else since he was created from the Source of Goodness. The defection came with the advent of Satan into Eden, and man, who had been created essentially good, became somewhat **less than good** because he had become tainted with sin. He did not become **totally depraved** because there was that within him which could respond to goodness. We may argue that man slipped into a near-depraved condition, hence the destruction of the world by the Flood. We must remember, though, that Noah and his family were of **the same created stock** as the rest, so there must have been - and there still is - something in man which responds to goodness.

However, if there is in man the propensity for goodness (how would we respond to the Gospel if there wasn't), there must also be in man, because of his post-Eden nature, the propensity to sin. It has always been a serious problem to many people as to how a good God could condemn potentially good people to Hell. Surely, they argue, people who live their lives morally and ethically 'good' deserve something better. But that isn't the point. The propensity in man to sin will ultimately make him a 'sinner', and in that condition, as Adam and Eve were banished from God's presence, so we, too, shall be; as Paul says, "**There is none righteous, no not one . . . All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.**" The reason is straightforward. Ultimate Goodness cannot tolerate any semblance of evil, therefore, man must be cleansed from sin, made totally righteous with God, and that can only be done in Christ Jesus. This became necessary for both Jews and Gentiles. We must always bear in mind that God will only **account** for sin when the person becomes **accountable**. This removes the obscene idea that new-born babes can be sinners, and dispels the concept of **original sin**.

### SO WHERE ARE WE?

Well, eventually at Rom. 2:14. If what I have said up to this point is right, then the 'nature' of man will make him do 'natural' things; these will, generally speaking, reflect what God would require. It seems equally true that the 'nature' of man can make him do 'unnatural' things, and these would be in direct opposition to what God would require. This, I believe, is made clear in Rom 1:26, 27 ". . . **even their women did change the natural use** (of their bodies, presumably) **into that which is against nature** (unnatural; the Greek word is *PHUSIS*, with *PARA*, against). **And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of women, burned in their lust one toward another . . . etc.**" See also Jude, who pin-points the advanced stage of corruption some can come to. This makes me conclude that there is a **regular** law or order of nature, which must not be corrupted.

Taking this reasoning a stage further, I believe we can understand what Paul means in Rom. 2:14. He rightly makes the point that the Gentiles did not have the Law. However, because of the 'nature of man' that I have referred to, they will at times do 'natural' things, i.e., their reactions will at some point coincide with the requirements of a Law which they

do not have; at such coincidental points, they will become a 'law unto themselves'. Being a 'law unto themselves' does not mean that they are at liberty to do **whatever** they want; no, they become a law unto themselves when their natural actions are coincidental with God's requirements as per the Law given to the Jews. The reader must understand clearly **that at no point here** are we talking about **salvation**. Paul asserts that both Jew and Gentile **must** have the righteousness of God, as personified in His Christ. Read Rom. 3.

### IMPLICATIONS

*First and foremost* is this: if my analysis of the human condition is correct, then it means that the sinful part of my nature will exclude the Divine Presence, i.e., the Holy Spirit cannot in-dwell me, therefore, I cannot be saved. I must be cleansed from sin, and this can only be accomplished in Christ Jesus. See Acts 2:37ff.

*Secondly*, if my first implication is right, then the saved person, the Christian, has no right to confuse other people by his or her conduct of life. The Christian life must always reflect the righteousness of the God in whom we have placed our trust. I have been challenged a number of times about my interpretation of Rom. 7, the chapter in which it is said by some that Paul shows how much he is controlled by the sin of the flesh. I believe that Paul is speaking about his **pre-conversion** state, and I also believe the key is found in verse 14, where Paul says, "**For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.**" Are we seriously suggesting that when he wrote this letter, the great Apostle was 'carnal' and sold under sin? And are we further suggesting that "**the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus**" is not capable of overcoming the sins of the flesh? If we are, then it would have been far better if we had remained in our 'natural' state, and ignored the Gospel. Perhaps some see the Apostle's so-called Christian life as 'soft option' for them to keep on allowing the flesh to control the Spirit.

*Thirdly*, the nature of God demands that if we want to return to the relationship which God had with Adam and Eve pre-Satan-intervention, then we must accept the sacrifice of Himself in Christ Jesus. That was the ultimate price which had to be paid.

*Fourthly*, for the Christian Paul's words must be valid in Rom. 6, "**Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body . . . etc.**" (But read the whole chapter. Incidentally, this is the same Apostle speaking. Could it be that he was exhorting others to do what he **couldn't** do? Which of us would believe **that**).

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