The Holy Flesh Movement: 1898-1901
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I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the two main issues of the “Holy Flesh Movement” within the Indiana Conference of Seventh-day Adventists during the time frame of 1898-1901. The issues were doctrinal and experiential. The doctrinal issue was the human nature of Christ and the experience was the consequence of the doctrine. We will note the influences of Albion Ballenger and S. S. Davis that led to that “Movement.” We will use only contemporary sources of the time frame named above, with one exception and that is by one presently alive, R. W. Schwarz, who wrote a college textbook on the history of the Advent Movement. We will conclude with Ellen White’s strongest statements regarding the human nature of Christ, written during the years of the “Holy Flesh Movement.”

Within the Seventh-day Adventist church in 1888 a new emphasis on righteousness by faith began. In March of 1889 Ellen White reported about meetings conducted by Jones, Waggoner and herself in South Lancaster, Massachusetts. Those meetings were conducted starting January 11: “We felt the necessity of presenting Christ as a Savior who was not afar off, but nigh at hand.” RH March 5, 1889. The message presented Christ’s righteousness as the power of God to overcome sin.

Slowly, this message made its way within other segments of the church. But some believers could not discern clearly between that message and popular holiness teachings of the day. An example of this is found in the accusation made concerning A.T. Jones—that he received his message from Hanna Whithall Smith’s book, *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*. In 1893 Jones commented concerning that charge:

There is that book that a great many make a great deal of, *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*. I have seen people who have read that book and got a considerable good out of it, as they thought, and what was to them great light, encouragement and good, but even then they could not go to the Bible and get it. Brethren, I want every one of you to understand that there is more of the Christian's secret of a happy life in the Bible than
in ten thousand volumes of that book. [Congregation: “Amen!”] I did not see that book for a long time. I think it was about five or six years ago when I first saw it. Somebody had it and was reading it and asked me if I had seen it. I said, “No.” I was asked if I would read it. I said, “Yes I will read it,” and I did. But when I did read it, I knew that I had already got more of the Christian's secret of a happy life out of the Bible that there is in that book to begin with. I found that I got more of the Christian's secret of a happy life in the Bible than she has in that book. I wish people would learn to get out of the Bible what is in it, direct. [Congregation: “Amen!”] If that book helps people to get that secret in the Bible, with a good deal more of it, all right. But I knew that that book has nothing like the Christian's secret of a happy life that every one can get in the Bible. Oh I did hear once, I did get the news once, that I got my light out of that book. There is the Book where I got my Christian's secret of a happy life (holding up the Bible), and that is the only place. And I had it before I ever saw the other book or knew it was in existence. And I say again, When I came to read the other I knew I had more of the Christian's secret of a happy life than there is in that book to begin with. And so will every one else, who will read the Bible and believe it.

The Holy Flesh Movement within the Church in 1899-1900 was in essence the same as the popular holiness movements of that time. Two issues were connected with the holiness movement in the Indiana Conference. One was experiential, the other doctrinal. The experience was this: the “holy flesh” believers contended that in order to overcome sin, in conversion, one had to have a change in sinful human nature to eradicate inherent sinful tendencies thereby preventing them from sinning and also releasing them from dying. It was believed that no one could overcome sin because of inherited tendencies to sin.

So, the “holy flesh” advocates were to receive and to experience a sinless human nature as Adam had before he fell. The experience was based on their doctrine. Their doctrine was that Christ took Adam’s sinless human nature. In 1899, A. T. Jones, the editor of the Review and Herald, wrote an editorial entitled “Sinful Flesh” in which he dealt with those two issues – of doctrine and of experience.

THERE is a serious and very bothersome mistake, which is made by many persons.
That mistake is made in thinking that when they are converted their old sinful flesh is blotted out.
In other words, they make the mistake of thinking that they are to be delivered from the flesh by having it taken away from them altogether.
Then when they find that this is not so, when they find that the same old flesh, with its inclinations, its besetments, and its enticements is still there, they are not prepared for it and so become discouraged and are ready to think that they never were converted at all. 

When it is decided and constantly maintained that the flesh of the converted person is still sinful flesh and only sinful flesh, he is so thoroughly convinced that in his flesh dwells no good thing that he will never allow a shadow of confidence in the flesh.

And this being so, his sole dependence is upon something other than the flesh, even upon the Holy Spirit of God. His source of strength and hope is altogether exclusive of the flesh, even in Jesus Christ only. And being everlastingly watchful, suspicious, and thoroughly distrustful of the flesh, he never can expect any good thing from that source, and so is prepared by the power of God to beat back and crush down without mercy every impulse or suggestion that may arise from it, and so does not fail, does not become discouraged, but goes on from victory to victory and from strength to strength.

Conversion, then, you see, does not put new flesh upon the old spirit but a new Spirit within the old flesh. It does not propose to bring new flesh to the old mind, but a new mind to the old flesh. Deliverance and victory are not gained by having the human nature taken away, but by receiving the divine nature to subdue and have dominion over the human—not by the taking away of the sinful flesh, but by the sending in of the sinless Spirit to conquer and condemn sin in the flesh. 

The Lord Jesus took the same flesh and blood, the same human nature, that we have, flesh just like our sinful flesh, and because of sin, and by the power of the Spirit of God through the divine mind that was in Him, “condemned sin in the flesh.”

II. Albion Ballenger’s Influence

Through A. F. Ballenger’s influence in the late 1890’s the seeds of the holiness movement sprouted within the Adventist church. In 1898, Ballenger spoke at the Indiana Camp Meeting.

One Indiana worker, S. S. Davis, was particularly moved by Ballenger’s statement that “It was too late to sin in thought, word, or action; for it is time to receive the Holy Ghost in all of his fullness.” In His work with the “Helping Hand” welfare mission in Evansville, Davis contacted a number of Pentecostal Christians. He was deeply impressed by their enthusiasm, remarking to a fellow Adventist worker, “they have the ‘spirit’; we have the truth, and if we had the ‘spirit’ as they have, with the truth we could do things.”

III. The Emotional Issue
Davis became the Indiana Conference revivalist. He presented what he called the “cleansing message.” His meetings were highly emotional. In His revival meetings many musical instruments were used. These included the organ, violins, tambourines, flutes, horns, and bass drum. This was to heighten the emotional effect of his appeals. “Listeners were encouraged to raise their hands to heaven, to shout and clap in their quest for the anointing of the Holy Spirit.”

In the midst of these emotional experiences individuals frequently fell prostrate and were then carried to the rostrum, where they were surrounded by singing, praying, shouting members. Once a stricken member revived, he was declared to have passed “through the garden experience” which Christ had in Gethsemane. This experience demonstrated that a person was a “born” son of God, fully cleansed from sin and sinful tendencies and released from the power of death; he was now ready for translation. Those who did not have the “garden experience” might still be saved, but as ‘adopted sons’ of God they would have to go ‘to heaven on the underground railroad’ – that is, they must die first.”

After R. S. Donnell, president of the Indiana Conference, accepted the teaching of Davis and nearly the whole working force of preachers fell into line. The method of worship was a combination of Salvation Army, Pentecostalism and Adventism. It was an amalgamated confused species of worship.

**IV. The Doctrinal Issue**

There were three related concepts regarding the kind of human nature Christ took in the incarnation:

1. Christ took Adam’s pre-fall human nature.
2. Christ’s body was free from its fallen spiritual nature, but not from its fallen, or deteriorated physical nature.
3. In conception, Christ was preserved from the law of heredity by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Elder Breed and Elder Haskell attended the Muncie, Indiana camp meeting. Haskell discussed the humanity of Christ with the leaders of the Conference. He believed Christ took upon Himself sinful human nature. The Indiana Conference men opposed him
and even misrepresented what he said. Haskell wrote to Ellen White immediately following the meetings. He wrote specifically about the doctrinal issue and consequent experience of the Holy Flesh Movement.

It is the greatest mixture of fanaticism in the truth that I ever have seen. I would not claim that we managed it the best way in everything, and yet I do not know where I made any mistake. We tried to do the very best we could, and had they have not talked against us and misrepresented our position, there would have been no confusion with the people. But when we stated that we believed that Christ was born in fallen humanity, they would represent us as believing that Christ sinned, notwithstanding the fact that we would state our position so clearly that it would seem as though no one could misunderstand us.

Their point of theology in this particular respect seems to be this: They believe that Christ took Adam’s nature before he fell; so He took humanity as it was in the garden of Eden; and thus humanity was holy, and this was the humanity which Christ had; now, they say, the particular time has come for us to become holy in that same sense, and then we will have “translation faith”; and never die.  

Elder Haskell wrote the above letter to Ellen White informing her of the specific point of the “holy flesh” advocates’ doctrine concerning their belief about the human nature of Christ. This was written September 25, 1900. One week later, on October 2, Haskell wrote an editorial in the Review and Herald entitled “Christ in Holy Flesh, or A Holy Christ in Sinful Flesh.” His employment of alternative propositions marked the specific stage when rival interpretations were being advanced for consideration. The entire article was devoted to the second alternative: “A Holy Christ in Sinful Flesh.” He quoted both the Bible and The Desire of Ages. Following are excerpts from his editorial.

After quoting The Desire of Ages, he continued:

Again, on pages 361, 632 [our present edition 311, 312]: “Christ is the ladder that Jacob saw, the base resting on the earth, and the topmost round reaching to the gate of heaven, to the very threshold of glory. If that ladder had failed by a single step of reaching by a single step of reaching the earth, we should have been lost. But Christ reaches us where we are. He took our nature and overcame, that we through taking his nature might overcome. Made ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh,’ he lived a sinless life. Now by His divinity he lays hold upon the throne of heaven, while by his humanity he reaches us.”

Then he commented:
This is *fallen* humanity with all its hereditary inclinations. He who was spotless while on earth as when in heaven took our nature, that he might lift man to the exaltation of himself by his righteousness.

Quoting further:

Again, on page 119, 120 [present edition page 112], of the same book, we read: “Not withstanding that the sins of a guilty world were laid upon Christ, notwithstanding the humiliation of taking upon himself OUR FALLEN NATURE, the voice from heaven declared him to be the Son of the Eternal.”

This was, of course, in contrast to the “holy flesh” advocates belief that Christ took Adam’s pre-lapsarian human nature as noted above. Haskell again quoted from *The Desire of Ages*.

Once more, in speaking of the condition of Adam, the writer says, on pages 49, 50 [present edition page 49]: “It would have been an almost infinite humiliation for the Son of God to take man’s nature, even when Adam stood in his innocence in Eden. But Jesus accepted humanity *when the race had been weakened by four thousand years of sin.* Like every child of Adam, he accepted the *results* of the working of the great law of *heredity.* What these results were is shown in the history of his earthly ancestors. He came with *such a heredity* to share our sorrows and temptations, and to give us the example of a sinless life.”

He next dealt with the human heredity of Jesus:

The Bible is the only reliable history of his ancestors. In the Gospel of Matthew four women before Mary, the mother of Jesus are mentioned by name: Tamar (Matt. 1:3), who acted the part of a harlot with her father-in-law (see Genesis 38); the harlot Rahab (see verse 5; also Joshua 2); Ruth, a Moabitess, a descendant of the daughter of Lot by her own father (see Gen. 19:30-38); and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Bathsheba’s course with David has been a reproach in the mouth of scoffers for thousands of years. This is not the way that *men* would naturally write a history of the ancestors of Christ. They would select the good women and the men of influence, whose birth and lives were exemplary. But it is God’s way and it presents hope to the fallen. Even if we have inherited tendencies and appetites of the worst kind, there is hope. It was Christ through David who said: “Behold I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” This states plainly the nature of the humanity in which Christ was conceived. The same prophet, in Ps. 22:9, says: “But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother’s breasts. I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother’s belly.” This illustrates how it was with
Christ, and how it is with every believer in Christ who has the righteousness of Christ.

After quoting Hebrews 2:16-18; 4:15,16, Haskell concluded with this thought:

Our Saviour, then, is a holy Christ in sinful human nature, who by his presence in sinful nature sanctifies fallen humanity, so that humanity, by the presence and holiness of the sinless Saviour, can be saved to the uttermost.  

Jones, as well as Haskell, addressed the Christological issue raised by Elders Davis and Donnell of the Indiana Conference. Jones wrote a series of articles in the *Review* entitled, “The Faith of Jesus.” Beginning December 11, 1900 this series continued until January 29, 1901. (These articles, and others of his editorials, became the basis for his book about Christ in Hebrews entitled *The Consecrated Way*). In those articles Jones repeatedly dealt with the foundational doctrinal issue of the “holy flesh” advocates. He presented Christ as having taken mankind’s inherited sinful nature.

Donnell, president of the Indiana Conference, countered Jones by writing his own article entitled “The Faith of Jesus” in the *Indiana Reporter*. This view was opposite the series by Jones. Donnell presented Christ with Adam’s unfallen nature.

He (Jesus) must possess that which He offers us . . . . If Christ proposes to restore man to his first estate, he must come to man standing in that estate himself. He must come standing where Adam, the first owner, stood before he fell.  

The only reason why God does not dwell in man is because sin is there, and in order for God to again dwell in man sin must be eradicated. The body of Christ was a body in which God was incarnate, and as God and Satan cannot dwell together, the body of Christ must have been a body from which even every tendency to sin must have been wholly eradicated.  

Where did Adam stand before his fall? . . . . He was holy. Now, in order to pass over the same ground that Adam passed over, Christ would most assuredly have to begin just where Adam began! . . . . Now, we know that his divinity was holy, and if his humanity was holy, then we do know that thing which was born of the virgin Mary was in every sense a holy thing, and did not possess the tendency to sin.  

Later, after dismissal from his duties as president of the Indiana Conference, following the General Conference of 1901, Donnell wrote about his belief concerning the
human nature of Christ:

He took a body which showed by its deteriorated condition, that the effects of sin was shown by it, but His life proved that there was no sin in it. It was a body which the Father had prepared for Him. Heb. 10:5. Christ’s body represented a body redeemed from its fallen spiritual nature, but not from its fallen, or deteriorated physical nature. It was a body redeemed from sin, and with that body Christ clothed His divinity.¹¹

Elder I. J. Hankins succeeded Elder Donnell to the presidency of the Indiana Conference. He wrote to S. S. Davis asking him certain questions about his beliefs. Eight questions were asked. Half of them were concerned with the incarnation. Following are two of them:


Question #7: Is every child born into the world naturally inclined to evil, even before it is old enough to discern between good and evil? Answer – “Yes, unless preserved from the law of heredity in conception by the power of the Holy Ghost.”¹²

V. Testimonies from others who understood the doctrinal issue:

Accompanying the sinless flesh doctrine is another we will now consider, Viz., that at conversion the desires, inclinations, and propensities of the flesh, and the hereditary tendencies are all taken away; that the warfare with the flesh ceases and that from thenceforth our temptations are all from without – none coming from within.¹³

After the camp meeting, Sister White, Elder Eugene Farnsworth and others, came to the Indianapolis church. Sister White bore decided testimony against this error. She stated that the workers who had been involved should not remain together, but that they should separate, and at the close of her discourse, said, “When I am gone from here, none are to pick up any points of this doctrine and call it truth. There is not a thread of truth in the whole fabric.”¹⁴

VI. General Conference April 2-23, 1901

The General Conference of 1901 dealt with, and stopped, the “Holy Flesh Movement” within Adventism for the time. (Nevertheless, the theory, music, methods and experience of that Movement will be, and perhaps already are in place again as stated
During that 1901 General Conference session the two most publicly vocal opponents of the “Holy Flesh Movement” were E. J. Waggoner and Ellen White. Waggoner spoke several times. He addressed the doctrinal issue concerning the nature of Christ. Ellen White, while warning against their teaching, also addressed the false experience.

The evening of April 16, E. J. Waggoner spoke pointedly and decisively. Hebrew 10:4-10 was the text he used:

For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins. Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and offering for sin thou wouldest not, neither hadst pleasure therein; which are offered by the law; Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

This was one of the key texts used by the advocates of the Holy Flesh doctrine.

After reading the text Waggoner said:

After speaking here the last time that I was here, there were two questions handed me, and I might read them now. One of them is this: “Was that Holy Thing which was born of the virgin Mary born in sinful flesh, and did that flesh have the same evil tendencies to contend with that ours does?” . . .

Before we go on with this text, let me show you what there is in the idea that is in this question. You have it in mind. Was Christ, that holy thing which was born of the virgin Mary, born in sinful flesh? Did you every hear of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the immaculate conception? And do you know what it is? . . . . The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception

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1 The things you have described as taking place in Indiana, the Lord has shown me would take place just before the close of probation. Every uncouth thing will be demonstrated. There will be shouting, with drums, music and dancing. The senses of rational beings will become so confused that they cannot be trusted to make right decisions. And this is called the moving of the Holy Spirit....

Better never have the worship of God blended with music than to use musical instruments to do the work which last January was represented to me would be brought into our camp meetings....

[Last January the Lord showed me that erroneous theories and methods would be brought into our camp meetings, and that the history of the past would be repeated. I felt greatly distressed. Ellen White Letter 132, 1900, pp. 5-8. (To Brother and Sister S. N. Haskell, October 10, 1900, Manuscript Releases, Vol 21, p.128-130; also Selected Messages, Vol 2, pp. 36-37).]
is that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was born sinless. Why? – Ostensibly to
magnify Jesus; really the work of the devil to put a wide gulf between
Jesus the Saviour of men, and the men whom He came to save, so that one
could not pass over to the other. That is all.

We need to settle, every one of us, whether we are out of the church of
Rome or not. There are a great many that have got the marks yet. . . .

Do you not see that the idea that the flesh of Jesus was not like ours
(because we know ours is sinful) necessarily involves the idea of the
immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary? Mind you, in him was no sin,
but the mystery of God manifest in the flesh, ... is the perfect
manifestation of the life of God in its spotless purity in the midst of sinful
flesh. . . .

Please let everybody who have [sic] held a mistaken idea have that idea
obliterated from your mind, just for your own sakes, that you may be
saved from error, and not simply from theoretical error, but from sin.
Think of this for yourselves, that the idea of sinless flesh mankind is the
deification of the devil, because sinlessness belongs only to God, but sin is
of the devil. . . . Sinlessness is an attribute of deity. Sinless flesh,
therefore, would mean that the spirit that worketh in the children of
disobedience, in the lusts of the flesh, is God. But it is not.15

The next day Ellen White presented a testimony concerning the holy flesh
experience and its teaching:

Instruction has been given me in regard to the late experience of brethren
in Indiana and the teaching they have given to the churches. Through this
experience and teaching the enemy has been working to lead souls astray.
The teaching given in regard to what is termed “holy flesh” is an error.
All may now obtain holy hearts, but it is not correct to claim in this life to
have holy flesh. The apostle Paul declares, “I know that in me (that is, in
my flesh) dwelleth no good thing”. Rom 7:17. To those who have tried so
hard to obtain by faith so called holy flesh, I would say, you can not obtain
it. Not a soul of you has Holy flesh now. No human being on earth has
holy flesh. It is an impossibility. . . .

While we cannot claim perfection of the flesh, we may have Christian
perfection of the soul. Through the sacrifice made in our behalf, sins may
be perfectly forgiven. Our dependence is not in what man can do: it is in
what God can do for man through Christ. . . .

We may enjoy the favor of God. We are not to be anxious about what
Christ and God think of us, but what God thinks of Christ, our Substitute.
Ye are accepted in the Beloved. . . .

When human beings receive holy flesh, they will not remain on earth, but
will be taken to heaven. While sin is forgiven in this life, its results are not
wholly removed. It is at his coming that Christ is to “change our vile body,
that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body.” (Phil. 3:21). When
Christ shall come with a great sound of a trumpet, and shall call the dead
from their prison house, then the saints will receive holy flesh.\textsuperscript{16}

\section*{VII. Papal Foundation}

Elder S. G. Huntington, like Waggoner, linked the holy flesh doctrinal theory to the papacy:

In adopting the theory of sinless flesh, though its advocates have ever been loathe to admit it, they are nevertheless, unconsciously led into the papal error of the immaculate conception and other heresies of the Catholic Church. The theory of sinless flesh is pre-eminently papal – the foundation upon which the Catholic Church stands. Remove this, and the whole structure of the papacy, as a religion, falls to the ground.\textsuperscript{17}

The expression “sinless flesh” is nowhere found in the Bible: Then why adopt such an expression. . . . The record says that Christ was “made in the likeness of sinful flesh,” (Rom. 8:3) “of the seed of David,” (Rom. 1:3) “of the seed of Abraham” (Heb. 2:16). Then let us believe that it was just that way without trying to spiritualize these plain declarations to suit a perverted fancy, and by so doing entangle ourselves in an inextricable web of inconsistencies.\textsuperscript{18}

\section*{VIII. Ellen White's strongest statements concerning the human nature of Christ came during the Holy Flesh Movement (emphasis added).}

It is of special interest to note that Ellen White’s strongest statements on the kind of human nature Christ took in the incarnation came during the time of the Holy Flesh Movement. She wrote that He took “the offending nature of man,” a nature “degraded and defiled by sin,” “the nature of Adam, the transgressor.”

\subsection*{An Offending Nature United to His Own Sinless Nature}

The love Christ manifested can not be comprehended by mortal man. It is a mystery too deep for the human mind to fathom. \textit{Christ did in reality unite the offending nature of man with his own sinless nature}, because by this act of condescension he would be enabled to pour out his blessings in behalf of the fallen race. Thus he has made it possible for us to partake of his nature. (Emphasis supplied).\textsuperscript{19}

\subsection*{A Degraded and Defiled Nature}

Think of Christ’s humiliation. \textit{He took upon Himself, fallen, suffering human nature, degraded, and defiled by sin.} He took our sorrows, bearing our grief and shame. He endured all the temptations werewith man is
beset. He united humanity with divinity: A divine spirit dwelt in a temple of flesh. ‘The word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,’ because by so doing He could associate with the sinful, sorrowing sons and daughters of Adam. (Emphasis supplied).

The Nature of Adam the Transgressor

In Christ were united the divine and the human – the Creator and the creature. The nature of God, whose law had been transgressed, and the nature of Adam, the transgressor, met in Jesus – the Son of God, and the Son of man. (Emphasis supplied).

Summary and Conclusion

We have considered the two main aspects of the “Holy Flesh Movement” during the time of 1898-1901 which were the doctrinal issue, namely the human nature of Christ and consequential experiential issue of “holy flesh.” We considered contemporary sources of that time, concluding Ellen White’s strongest statements regarding the human nature of Christ which were written during the years of the “Holy Flesh Movement.”

Endnotes

2 A. T. Jones, Review and Herald, April 18, 1899.
3 R.W. Schwarz, Light Bearers to the Remnant, p. 447.
4 Ibid. 447.
5 Ibid.
6 S. N. Haskell Letter to Ellen White, Battle Creek, MI, September 25, 1900 (DF 190, White Estate).
7 S. N. Haskell Review and Herald, October 2, 1900.
8 R. S. Donnell, “The Faith of Jesus” Indiana Reporter, Article One, p. 4
10 R.S. Donnell, “Article Two,” pp. 6,7. (Written while president of the Indiana Conference. In 1907 these were published in a tract entitled “What I Taught in Indiana.” DF 190, White Estate).
16 Ellen White, General Conference Bulletin April, April 17, 1901, pp. 419-420.
18 Ibid.
19 Ellen White, Ms 166, 1898 (Manuscript Releases Volume Seventeen, p. 26); Review and Herald, July 17, 1900.
20 Ellen White, Youth Instructor, December 20, 1900 (quoted in 4BC 1147).
21 Ellen White, MS 141, 1901 (7BC 926).