

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Grace Theological Journal* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_grace-theological-journal.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_grace-theological-journal.php)

# ROMANS 7:14-25: PAULINE TENSION IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

DAVID S. DOCKERY

*The interpretation of Rom 7:14-25 has been problematic historically. Does the passage reflect Paul's pre-conversion experience under the law? This was a major interpretation of the church fathers. Or does this passage describe Paul's tension in the Christian life? The latter position is defended here by an interpretation of the exegetical considerations and an examination of the theological implications.*

\* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

ROM 7:14-25 has without exaggeration been described as "the most discussed and fought over part"<sup>1</sup> of the epistle. In this grand epistle there are several perplexing problems for the interpreter. Without a doubt, Rom 5:12-21 and 9:1-11:36 guarantee a difficult task for the interpreter.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as MacGorman says, "My nomination for the most difficult passage in this letter to interpret is Romans 7:1-25."<sup>3</sup> Nygren says:

It presents us with one of the greatest problems in the New Testament. It was already recognized in the first century; and since that time it has never come to rest.<sup>4</sup>

The predominant question in the interpretation of these verses is one on which there have been deep-seated differences of judgment in

<sup>1</sup>A. Nygren, *A Commentary on Romans*, translated by C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949), p. 284.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. S. L. Johnson, Jr., "Romans 5:12—An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 298-316, and B. Corley, "Romans 9-11," in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 19 (Fall, 1976) 43ff.

<sup>3</sup>J. W. MacGorman, "Romans 7 Once More," in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 19 (Fall, 1976) 31.

<sup>4</sup>Nygren, *A Commentary on Romans*, 284.

the history of the church.<sup>5</sup> This essay will seek to answer the important exegetical questions and attempt to relate it to Paul's theology. Romans 7 is thus seen as one of the pivotal passages in Paul's theology.

Since the passage is located at the heart of Paul's explanation of the outworking of one's salvation, the view which is adopted will have a tremendous impact upon one's theology of the Christian life. "One side sees too much bondage to sin for a Christian, and the other sees too much desire for the good for a sinner."<sup>6</sup> A proper understanding of the nature of indwelling sin will have a significant effect upon the first of these views, if indeed it can be demonstrated that this passage refers to the Christian experience.

In this section and the previous verses (7-13), Paul appears to be speaking autobiographically. The reader cannot help but notice the extensive use of the personal pronoun "I." In vv 7-25, Paul uses "I," "me" and "my" no less than 46 times, as translated in the NASB. In the Greek text, the eight emphatic uses of the personal pronoun "I" further enhance that aspect. The question which must be answered is whether this usage is rhetorical, typical, or autobiographical.<sup>7</sup>

In vv 14-25, Paul continues to speak in the first person singular, but he leaves the past tense and turns to the present tense. The meaning and significance of this change has great bearing upon one's interpretation. The problem that should be considered "concerns the temporal reference of the passage and the identity of the subject."<sup>8</sup> What sounded like past testimony in vv 7-13 seems to be present experience in vv 14-25. Present tenses regularly describe action or state of being which is contemporary with the writer. The present tenses also signify a characterization of condition.<sup>9</sup>

The third problem is the meaning of the anthropological or psychological terms which are so frequently used, as well as the

<sup>5</sup>J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 256.

<sup>6</sup>D. Moody, *Romans*, in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (12 vols., Nashville: Broadman, 1970) 10.207.

<sup>7</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield in his commentary on Romans lists several suggestions which have been proposed. He concludes that it is "an example of the general use of the first person singular." He continues saying that this is "due not merely to a desire for rhetorical vividness, but also to his deep sense of personal involvement, his consciousness, that in drawing out the general truth, he is disclosing the truth about himself. Cf. *Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) I. 343.

<sup>8</sup>R. Y. K. Fung, "The Impotence of the Law: Toward a Fresh Understanding of Romans 7:14-25," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 34.

<sup>9</sup>The present tenses are sometimes taken as historical presents to describe the past in a vivid manner, but this is the exception and not the normal interpretation.

intensity of the language expressed in military terms. The definition of these terms will be most important for a proper understanding of the conflict described.

The fourth major problem is the usage of "law." The interpreter must seek to determine whether it is law as principle, the law of God (Torah), or another possible meaning. The context will aid greatly in the consideration of this question.

#### VARIOUS VIEWPOINTS

Throughout the history of the Church, many interpretations have been offered for this much-debated passage. It is not my purpose to explain each of these views, but only to summarize briefly those which are significant. The various interpretations, as it will be seen, cannot necessarily be grouped into certain theological or denominational camps. Does the passage describe his present struggle as a Christian or his former experience as a man under law? Or does it possibly transcend the "then" and "now" categories?<sup>10</sup>

##### *View 1*

It is much debated whether the experience recounted is that of Paul as an unregenerate or as a regenerate person.<sup>11</sup> The former position has generally been the prevalent view of most interpreters. Interpreters who take this position point especially to v 14, "I am made of flesh sold under the bondage of sin," and affirm that this could hardly be said of a Christian, especially in light of Paul's statement in Romans 6. The Greek fathers generally adopted this position, as have Althaus, Kertelge, Kürzinger, Dodd, Sanday-Headlam, Moffatt, and Wesley.<sup>12</sup> Kürzinger says that to understand Romans 7 as referring to Paul's post-conversion experience is a misunderstanding of Paul's intent.<sup>13</sup>

The change of tense is explained by exponents of this view in terms of a close logical connection between the two sections; the latter section merely describes the result of the irrevocable history

<sup>10</sup>J. W. MacGorman, "Romans 7 Once More," 34.

<sup>11</sup>For a detailed summary of the various views, the reader is encouraged to see S. Lyonnet, "L'histoire du salut selon le chapitre vii de l'épître aux Romains," *Bib* 43 (1962) 117-51, and A. Nygren, *A Commentary on Romans*, 284ff.

<sup>12</sup>See the listings in K. von Kertelge, "Exegetische Überlegungen zum Verständnis der paulinischen Anthropologie nach Römer 7," *ZNW* 62 (1971) 105, and MacGorman, "Romans 7 Once More," 35. C. H. Dodd is probably the outstanding representative of this view. Cf C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Fontana, 1959) 125-26.

<sup>13</sup>J. Kürsinger, "Der Schlüssel zum Verständnis von Rom 7," *BZ* 7 (1963) 274.

narrated in the earlier section, but both the history and result are a part of the past.<sup>14</sup> One of the difficulties involved in this view is v 25b, if actual deliverance has arrived in the preceding verses (14-25a). Thus, men like Michel attempt to transpose the verses,<sup>15</sup> but there is absolutely no textual evidence for such a transposition.<sup>16</sup> The suggestion involves supposing a drastic change in subject between v 24 (non-Christian) and v 25a (Christian).<sup>17</sup>

Bornkamm notes that there seems to be a growing consensus that this interpretation is the case of Paul, that of viewing his non-Christian experience through his present experience. Thus, this view holds that Paul is writing in general about man under the law, man before conversion, man seeking to live righteously by his own efforts. He makes his account vivid, therefore, by illustrating its verification through his own experience. The above interpretation primarily views this section as autobiographical, though this does not rule out the possibility of typical application.

This perspective owes its revival in modern theology to Pietism and was the dominant interpretation of Romans 7 at the beginning of this century. It is thus seen in contrast to Romans 8, which describes the transition for Paul from law to grace.

## View 2

There are some interpreters who understand the emphasis of the passage to be the law. It says that it is "the experience of any man who tries the experiment, whether he be regenerate or unregenerate."<sup>18</sup> Thomas sees these verses as describing "a man who is *trying* to be good and holy by his own efforts and is beaten back every time by the power of indwelling sin."<sup>19</sup> Thus he concludes that the conflict represented is not between the two natures of the believer, but refers to the effect of the law on a heart that recognizes its spirituality.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Cf. G. Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience* (2 vols., New York: Harper and Row, 1969), I, 93. The present tenses are viewed as historical presents.

<sup>15</sup>O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1955) 179.

<sup>16</sup>R. Y. K. Fung, "The Impotence of the Law," 35.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.* Also cf. J. Kürzinger, "Der Schlüssel zum Verständnis von Rom 7," 271, who says that v 25b is the key to this interpretation.

<sup>18</sup>W. H. Griffith Thomas, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans: A Devotional Commentary* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1911) 42.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.* It must be stated in response to this view that the present tenses in these verses cannot be understood as tendential presents. The present tenses cannot be handled in such fashion due to contextual considerations.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

Similarly, C. L. Mitton states that the text is

a description of the distressing experience of any morally earnest man, whether Christian or not, who attempts to live up to the commands of God 'on his own' (αὐτὸς ἐγώ), without that constant reliance upon the uninterrupted supply of the resources of God which is characteristic of the mature Christian. It is essentially applicable to a man 'under the law,' even if he be nominally a Christian. . . . It can also be true of the converted Christian who has slipped . . . into a legalistic attitude to God and to righteousness.<sup>21</sup>

In this interpretation, "the present tenses describe not merely a past experience but one which is potentially ever-present."<sup>22</sup> Lightfoot notes that the important aspect of this interpretation is the understanding of αὐτὸς ἐγώ.<sup>23</sup>

This view is regarded as autobiographical by some interpreters and non-autobiographical by others.

### View 3

There have been some commentators who have understood this passage to refer to the years immediately following Paul's conversion. It is thus a picture of someone who loves the law of God and longs to do it but is forced by a stronger power than himself to do things which he detests. This is "no abstract argument but the echo of the personal experience of an anguished soul."<sup>24</sup> It is supposedly a description of Paul still living under the law before learning of the life according to the Spirit. While being primarily autobiographical, it can also be understood representatively of all young or immature believers.

There are many who either expound this view or lean in its direction. It has become very prevalent in parts of evangelicalism, especially in "victorious life" circles.<sup>25</sup> The basis for such an interpretation is the conspicuous absence of the Holy Spirit and the prevalent usage of "I." This is contrasted with the relative absence of "I" in Romans 8 and the emphasis upon the Holy Spirit. Those advocating this position see the passage as a struggle between the two natures in

<sup>21</sup>C. L. Mitton, "Romans vii Reconsidered," *ExpTim* 65 (1954) 133.

<sup>22</sup>A. M. Hunter, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: SCM, 1955) 74.

<sup>23</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (London: Macmillan, 1895) 305. It should be noted that this interpretation is dependent on many other important factors which lead to this position.

<sup>24</sup>M. Gougel, *The Birth of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 213.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. L. S. Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1918), 115-18.

the believer. In Romans 7, the old nature is viewed as the victor because he has chosen to be under the law and not under grace (cf. Rom 6:14 and Gal 5:16-21). Thus, defeat is inevitable because there is no spiritual victory under the law. Romans 7 "describes the abject misery and failure of a Christian who attempts to please God under the Mosaic system."<sup>26</sup>

Concerning the inability of a Christian to live a successful spiritual life under the law, it can be said that,

The child of God, in his inner nature, desires to obey the Mosaic commandments, but his sin nature immediately thwarts his noble intentions. The fault lies not with the law, but with the Christian. It is important then to see that the conflict of the believer in Romans 7 takes place under the law.<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, Fung, with reference to the Christian's inability, comments that

the implication of the present passage would seem to be that the Christian is not to live *hypo nomon*, submitting to the law of God as a legal code and trying to keep it by his own efforts, for neither these nor God's law can enable him to overcome his indwelling sin; but that he is to walk *kata pneuma*, who imparts that power which the law cannot supply, and who alone can break the domination of sin and flesh in the Christian's life and enable him to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law.<sup>28</sup>

These men agree that this is not spiritual victory and add that one does not permanently remain in Romans 7, but moves upward into Romans 8, which is a higher level of the Christian life.<sup>29</sup> Ramm asks, "What mature Christian has not occasionally felt I'm in Romans 7 again?"<sup>30</sup> He then adds, "How well many of us know that we cannot get to Romans 8 without going through Romans 7."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Romans 7 is viewed as the picture of a carnal believer or one on a lower plain of spirituality. This view is both autobiographical and typical in that it can apply to all believers.

<sup>26</sup>S. D. Toussaint, "The Contrast Between the Spiritual Conflict in Romans 7 and Galatians 5," *BSac* 123 (1966) 312.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>Fung, "The Impotence of the Law," 45-46.

<sup>29</sup>B. Ramm, "The Double and Romans 7," *Christianity Today* 15:14 (April 9, 1971) 18.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

## View 4

Augustine at one time understood Paul to be speaking in the name of the unregenerate man, but later retracted his earlier view and maintained that Paul was speaking in his own name as a Christian.<sup>32</sup> This perspective has been adopted to a large extent by the Western Church, by the Reformers, the Puritans, and by some of the ablest scholars of recent times.<sup>33</sup> The Reformers said that Rom 7:14-25 is a picture of a righteous man who is still a sinner. Luther said, "*homo simul iustus et peccator bezogen*."<sup>34</sup> Calvin also adopted this view but had difficulties applying v 14 to a Christian, so he regarded the transition as taking place at v 15.<sup>35</sup> Those who take this to be the condition which characterizes the Christian life point to v 22, "I joyfully agree with the law of God in the inner man." These commentators argue that an unconverted person could hardly speak in such a manner. Furthermore, great significance is placed upon the consistent use of the present tense throughout the passage. J. I. Packer maintains that "the only natural way for Paul's readers to interpret the present tenses of verses 14ff. is as having a present reference," since there is no recognized linguistic idiom which will account for the change of tense.<sup>36</sup>

This final option, probably the minority interpretation, is offered in this paper. The two primary reasons for this position are: (1) that it seems to be the most normal interpretation of Romans 7 itself and of Romans 7 in its immediate context, and (2) it presents a picture of Paul's larger understanding of what the experience of grace means to each believer in his present state. It is a picture of tension, that of life in the Spirit and the flesh in the dual nature of Christian experience.

## EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Chapter seven might be characterized as the great contradiction. It has been said that, "nowhere else in the letters, and nowhere else in

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Cranfield, *Romans*, I. 345, n. 4.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 345-46, lists advocates of this view as Methodius, the Latins, Augustine, Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, Augustine, Aquinas, Barth, Nygren, Barrett, and Murray.

<sup>34</sup>Cited by Kertelge, "Exegetische Überlegungen," 106. This simply means that a person is righteous and a sinner at the same time.

<sup>35</sup>J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947) 149.

<sup>36</sup>J. I. Packer, "The Wretched Man of Romans 7," *Studia Evangelica* 2:1 (1964) 624. He adds that the use of the historic present in the gospels to give vividness to the narrative does not provide a parallel, for here the narrative part is in the aorist, and what is in the present is not narrative, but generalized explanatory comment.

ancient literature, Greek or Jewish, is there such a penetrating description of man's plight and contradiction as in Rom. 7:7-25."<sup>37</sup> The first six verses of the chapter assert strongly the fact of the believer's death to the law. This is done by a somewhat imperfect analogy with the husband and wife. The following verses demonstrate the character of the law, i.e., it is "holy, just and good." This is done by expressing the character of the law and its relation to Paul in his transitional experience before his conversion (7:7-13). This can be demonstrated primarily by the past tense verbs. The shift to the present tense in vv 14-25 is indicative that this section describes Paul's struggle with sin as a believer. Vv 24 and 25 form a conclusion to this difficult section.

There are three cycles that can be seen in the apostle's discussion of the problem of indwelling sin. The first cycle contains vv 14-17. The second cycle, which is almost a repetition of the first, involves vv 18-20. The conclusion of the passage, containing vv 21-25, composes the third cycle. The results arrived at in each cycle are the same. All reveal the unhappy condition of one who is a bondsman to indwelling sin.

In v 14, there is a significant change in the verb tenses. The present tenses thus inform the reader that the statements of vv 14-25 are characteristic of the apostle's life, and by application this characterization still holds true for all believers. This is the first reason for interpreting this much disputed passage as applicable to the Christian. Some have suggested that these are historic presents but, following Packer, this is to be rejected.

Paul, inversely, wants it understood that he is not depreciating the law. In the first section of this chapter, he says that the law is spiritual. Harrison takes this to mean that it is "emanating from God (vv 22, 25) who is Spirit (John 4:24)."<sup>38</sup> Paul then proceeds to contrast this with the character which is "fleshen, sold under the bondage of sin." For those who recognize this section as referring to the Christian, this phrase presents the most difficult problem.<sup>39</sup>

The law is recognized as spiritual, which refers to its divine origin and character. Since it is spiritual, it is possessed of those qualities which are divine—"holy, just and good." In vv 14, 16, and 22, the apostle is primarily referring to the Mosaic law.

The comprehension of ἐγώ, which occurs in vv 14, 17, 20, and 24 takes the interpreter a long way toward the interpretation of vv 14-25.

<sup>37</sup>G. Bornkamm, *The New Testament: A Guide to Its Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 107.

<sup>38</sup>E. F. Harrison, "Romans," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 10. 82.

<sup>39</sup>Bruce Corley and Curtis Vaughan, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 87.

The best solution is to apply the *ἐγώ* to the life of every Christian and the dialectic *simul iustus et peccator*. The "I" should be referred to the unregenerate state in vv 7-13, but to the regenerate in vv 14-25.

The first person singular is used just as it has been throughout the chapter, but now for the first time with the present tense. Some expositors want to insist that this idea belongs to a stage of the Christian life which can be left behind, a stage in which the Christian is living under the law or struggling in his own strength. But Cranfield says,

We are convinced that it is possible to do justice to the text of Paul—and also to the facts of Christian living wherever they are to be observed—only if we resolutely hold chapters 7 and 8 together, in spite of the obvious tension between them, and see in them not two successive stages but two different aspects, two contemporaneous realities, of the Christian life, both of which continue so long as the Christian is in the flesh.<sup>40</sup>

The domination of sin describes Paul's condition. Because of the similar statement in 1 Kgs 21:20 and 2 Kgs 17:17,<sup>41</sup> it has been said that this phrase (Rom 7:14b) is proof that the passage could not refer to the regenerate.<sup>42</sup> In the OT passages, the person is the active agent; in the Romans passage, he is subjected to a power that is alien to his own will. Thus, Paul is seen to deplore this power which has domination over him. He recognizes it for what it truly is—sin. Though on the surface the phrase appears to prove that the passage cannot refer to a regenerate person, the situation is actually quite the opposite.<sup>43</sup> "The more seriously a Christian strives to live from grace and submit to the discipline of the gospel, the more sensitive he becomes to the fact that even his very best acts and activities are disfigured by the egotism which is still powerful within him—and no less evil because it is often more subtly disguised than formerly."<sup>44</sup> Yet this is no excuse for complacent Christian living, but even more of an exhortation to push forward in the Christian life.<sup>45</sup> The dilemma involves that which is willed contrasted to that which is done.<sup>46</sup> This man wills and fails to do and does what he does not will.

<sup>40</sup>Cranfield, I. 356.

<sup>41</sup>The Hebrew is the Hithpael הִתְמַכְּרָה.

<sup>42</sup>So J. Denney, "St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (5 vols.; reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 2. 641.

<sup>43</sup>Murray, *Romans*, 260-61. It is possible that the emphasis of victorious life teachings has led many to misunderstand this difficult text.

<sup>44</sup>Cranfield, *Romans*, I. 358.

<sup>45</sup>For an excellent discussion of this important subject, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 59ff.

<sup>46</sup>G. Schrenk, "θελω" *TDNT* 3 (1965) 50.

The willing and doing are irreconcilably opposed.<sup>47</sup> "Willing" is linked with *κατεργάζομαι* in vv 15, 18, and 20; *πράσσειν* in vv 15 and 19; and *ποιεῖν* in vv 15, 16, 19, 20, and 21.<sup>48</sup>

It is here (v 15) that Paul begins the series of contradictions which are taking place in his life. "For that which Paul is continually doing, he does not know." Paul, by *οὐ γινώσκω*, probably does not mean "I do not know," but "I do not delight in" or even better, "I do not understand."<sup>49</sup>

Paul knows what he is doing, but does not approve of it. This power of sin, to which he is enslaved, dominates him. Again it should be observed that he recognizes sin for what it is and is judging it as evil. This is an act which only a regenerate man can do—that is, to agree with God concerning sin.

With Paul, the willing is present, but the doing is absent. Paul is willing to do good. "Willing" denotes "definite purpose and readiness to do the divine will" and is opposed by his "doing."<sup>50</sup> The verse ends with the phrase describing his hatred for his actions. He despises that which he is doing because it is opposed to the divine will of God.

The problem is the indwelling sin, which not only existed and wrought in him, but had its abode in him, as it has in all those who are regenerated and will have so long as they are in the body. Paul's intention is not to escape from his responsibility for his actions, but rather "to show how completely he is under the thralldom of indwelling sin."<sup>51</sup> Man's history is so obviously in opposition to God that he must acknowledge in effect, "Adam is in me."<sup>52</sup> Such is Paul's statement in v 17, which is restated and amplified in vv 18-20.

Murray identifies three propositions for vv 17 and 18:

- (1) The flesh is wholly sinful—no good thing dwells in it.
- (2) The flesh is still associated with his person—the flesh is *his flesh* and it is *in him*.
- (3) Sin is also associated with his person, for it is in his flesh that sin inheres.<sup>53</sup>

Sin is not external, but it is internal because it is "in my flesh." Flesh, therefore, should not be understood as an external, peripheral

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid. Also cf. C. Maurer, "πράσσω" *TDNT* 4 (1967) 636-38.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Murray, *Romans*, 261.

<sup>50</sup>Schrenk, "θέλω," 50.

<sup>51</sup>Fung, "The Impotence of the Law," 43.

<sup>52</sup>R. Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 92.

<sup>53</sup>Murray, *Romans*, 263.

factor.<sup>54</sup> The meaning of "flesh" in Paul's thought is "the willing instrument of sin, and is subject to sin to such a degree that wherever flesh is, all forms of sin are likewise present and no good thing can live in the flesh."<sup>55</sup>

It is clear that the word has an ethical sense and refers to man or man's human nature, considered from the standpoint of his weakness and creaturely state in contrast to God, and also as the seat of sin . . . the flesh has absolutely no good in it. This is because it is ruled by the sin principle, not because there is inherent evil in the flesh.<sup>56</sup>

Flesh can have a purely neutral sense. It is because of its association with "sin" in vv 17 and 25 that it has this ethical sense.<sup>57</sup>

Dunn comments on Paul's usage of flesh:

As is generally recognized, σάρξ in Paul is not evil, otherwise he could not use it in a neutral sense, or speak of it being cleansed (2 Cor. 7:1). Flesh is not evil, it is simply weak and corruptible. It signifies man in his weakness and corruptibility, his belonging to the world. In particular it is that dimension of the human personality through which sin attacks, which sin uses as its instrument (Rom 7:5, 18, 25)—thus σάρξ ἁμαρτίας. That is to say, σάρξ ἁμαρτίας does not signify guilty man, but man in his *fallenness*—man subject to temptation, to human appetites and desires, to death. The "sinful flesh" is nothing other than the "sinful body" (Rom 6:6), the "body doomed to death" (Rom. 7:24).<sup>58</sup>

Paul indeed desires to achieve what is good. But actually he achieves the evil which he does not desire, namely death.<sup>59</sup> He explains that there is a great contradiction between his principles and his conduct. The reason is that in his flesh there "dwells no good thing." In himself, he was entirely depraved. He was definitely a renewed man, but in his flesh, there was nothing good.

The final verses bring about the conclusion to this difficult section. One of the features which makes the last five verses of chap. 7 especially problematic is the repeated use of the word "law." Also, the emphasis of the conflict is amplified with the usage of the military terms. The concluding verses have been viewed by many as

<sup>54</sup>F. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Lutterworth, 1961) 191.

<sup>55</sup>BAGD, 751.

<sup>56</sup>S. Lewis Johnson, "A Survey of Biblical Psychology in the Epistle to the Romans," Unpublished Doctor of Theology Dissertation (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1949) 75.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. R. Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms* (Leiden: Brill, 1971) 145ff.

<sup>58</sup>J. D. G. Dunn, "Paul's Understanding of the Death of Jesus," *Reconciliation and Hope*, ed. R. Banks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 127-28.

<sup>59</sup>A. C. Thiselton, "Flesh," *NIDNTT*, 1. 676.

the determining factors for the correct understanding of this passage. V 21 is used to introduce a conclusive statement, thus introducing the conclusion to the entire argument.

The law is perceived by some as the Mosaic law,<sup>60</sup> but it seems best to explain it as a rule or principle of action.<sup>61</sup> The usage of the article with νόμος in these verses does not mean that it refers to the Mosaic law necessarily. The adjective or genitive construction associated with "law" gives the correct identity. The law is to be interpreted to mean a principle in vv 21, 23, and 25.<sup>62</sup>

The genitival construction leaves no doubt that the "law" in v 22 refers to the Mosaic law. The "other law" (v 23) is equated with the "law of sin" (v 23) or the sin principle.<sup>63</sup> This verse along with the present tenses, is a most deciding factor in determining the identification of "I" in this context as Paul in his regenerate experience.

Συη̄δομαι is an emotional statement and means, "I rejoice in." Barrett's "I agree with God's law."<sup>64</sup> is far too weak for the intent of the apostle. Delight in the law that is celebrated in Psalm 119 takes place in the inward man or inmost self.<sup>65</sup>

Paul delights in the law in his "inner man." It would seem reasonable to interpret the phrase "inner man" in the same manner as the similar usage in 2 Cor 4:16.<sup>66</sup> It is the "inner man" which can delight in the law of God and also recognize the inner conflict which is being described.<sup>67</sup> The delight is not peripheral, but belongs to that which is deepest in his spiritual being.<sup>68</sup> Cranfield comments that the meaning of "inner man"

must be much the same as that of ὁ νοῦς μου in v. 23 and ὁ νοῦς in v. 25, which must be understood in the light of the reference to the ἀνακαίνωσις τοῦ νοῦς in 12. 2. The mind which recognizes, and is bound to, God's law is the mind which is being renewed by God's

<sup>60</sup>Cf. H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1892) 200.

<sup>61</sup>Cf. Sanday and Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; T. & T. Clark, reprinted, 1977) 182.

<sup>62</sup>H. H. Esser, "Law," *NIDNTT* 2. 443ff.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. R. St. John Parry, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1912) 107.

<sup>64</sup>Barrett, *Romans*, 150.

<sup>65</sup>Cf. *Psa* 19:8; 119:14, 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92.

<sup>66</sup>R. A. Harrisville, "Is the Coexistence of the Old and New Man Biblical?" *The Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (Fall, 1956) 22. Also cf. *Eph* 3:16; 4:24; *Col* 3:10 and *Rom* 6:6. For an excellent discussion, cf. Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms*, 391ff.

<sup>67</sup>G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 466.

<sup>68</sup>Murray, *Romans*, 266.

Spirit; and the inner man of which Paul speaks is the working of God's Spirit within the Christian.<sup>69</sup>

The previous observations explain the antithetical role of the law of the mind and the law of sin.<sup>70</sup> "Another law" is obviously a law different from the law of God in v 22. The other law is waging war with the law of his mind. It also seems quite normal to understand "law of mind" to be the same as the "law of God."<sup>71</sup> Bruce identifies the other law as the tyranny of indwelling sin<sup>72</sup> and thus is synonymous with the "law of sin."<sup>73</sup>

It is quite natural to understand "my mind" to mean "that which my mind acknowledges"<sup>74</sup> and to identify "the law of my mind" with "the law of God" (v 22). When understood in this manner, vv 22 and 23 depict two laws in opposition to each other.

In contrast, the law of sin represents the power, the authority, the control, exercised over believers. Thus the power of indwelling sin is warring and usurping the position of the Word of God; such is the essence of Paul's conflict. There are two laws or governing principles at war in his life. His faculties and powers are in enemy-occupied territory. Sin had invaded them and was fighting to stamp out every attempt at resistance—and succeeding again and again. "The strength of the expression is analagous to 'sold under sin' in verse 14 and should be interpreted in the same way."<sup>75</sup> He is thus led captive to the law of sin. This captivity is expressed in strong military language.

The military figure of warfare is carried on and is expressed in the clauses "bringing me into captivity" and "waging war." Both terms are common in Pauline literature.<sup>76</sup> The indwelling sin is warring against the apostle and taking him captive in what he calls "my members."

The meaning of this term should be viewed in the sense of the same usage in Rom 6:13, 19. Murray suggests:

If the thought is focused on our physical members, as appeared necessary in the earlier instances, we are not to suppose that 'the law of sin' springs from or has its seat in the physical. It would merely indicate, as has been maintained already, that the apostle brings to the

<sup>69</sup>Cranfield, *Romans* 1. 363.

<sup>70</sup>Harrisville, "Coexistence," 26.

<sup>71</sup>It is best to understand two different laws and not four, as Calvin proposes.

<sup>72</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 154.

<sup>73</sup>Cranfield, *Romans* 1. 364. For a view which contrasts the interpretation given above, cf. Paul Tillich, "The Good I Will, I Do Not," *USQR* 14 (1959) 17-23.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup>Murray, *Romans*, 267.

<sup>76</sup>There are similar terms in Rom 7:8, 11; Gal 5:17; 2 Cor 10:5; and 1 Pet 2:11.

forefront the concrete and overt ways in which the law of sin expresses itself and that our physical members cannot be divorced from the operation of the law of sin. Our captivity to the law of sin is evidenced by the fact that our physical members are the agents and instruments of the power which sin wields over us. But again we are reminded, as in 6:13, that, however significant may be our physical members, the captivity resulting is not that merely of our members but that of our persons—"bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members."<sup>77</sup>

Paul begins the final remarks to this section with "a wail of anguish and a cry for help."<sup>78</sup> The phrase "wretched man am I" is a nominative of exclamation. The nominative is used without a verb when it is used to stress great distinctness. Many commentators have stated quite dogmatically that it cannot be a Christian who speaks here. Some would like to view this as Paul looking back on days as a young Jew or a Pharisee. Longenecker describes this position.

It has frequently been suggested that Paul had an unhappy adolescence, crushed under legalism and casuistry of his religion and longing for something of love and inwardness. This supposition is based in large measure on an autobiographical interpretation of Romans 7:7-25, where in Paul is viewed as describing a time in his boyhood when he came to realize the awful demands of the Law and was therefore plunged into a perpetual and fruitless struggle with an uneasy conscience. It has sometimes also been supposed that this tension was the basis for his persecution of Christians: that he was attempting to externalize the conflict within by identifying what he detested in himself with some other body and was trying to silence his doubts by activity.<sup>79</sup>

But such is not the case. This is an attempt to read some of the dramatic conversions like those of Augustine or Luther into Paul's experience. This is mere conjecture. Rather, it is better to view it as the height of one's spiritual condition. True spirituality is recognizing and judging sin in one's own life. This is the case when one views sin in his life as an offence toward a holy God and not just loss of personal victory! As one matures and progresses in his spiritual pilgrimage and knowledge of God, such will be the case. Granted that the word "wretched" indicates a state of distress, but it is not a state of hopelessness.<sup>80</sup> Cranfield's comments on this are excellent:

<sup>77</sup>Murray, *Romans*, 268.

<sup>78</sup>E. H. Gifford, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: John Murray, 1886) 143.

<sup>79</sup>Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul*, 29.

<sup>80</sup>Corley and Vaughan, *Romans*, 89.

The truth is, surely, that inability to recognize the distress reflected in this cry as characteristic of Christian existence argues a failure to grasp the full seriousness of the Christian's obligation to express his gratitude to God by obedience of life. The farther men advance in the Christian life, and the more mature their discipleship, the clearer becomes their perception of the heights to which God calls them, and the more painfully sharp their consciousness of the distance between what they ought, and want, to be, and what they are.<sup>81</sup>

The greatest difficulty in this verse concerns the meaning of "who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Even though "this" is taken with "body" in the NIV, NEB, and RSV, the emphasis seems to be on death and thus "this" should be taken with "death" (NASB). It is therefore properly used in a predicate construction.

"Body" in v 24 refers to the material human organism, as in Rom 6:6. "Paul uses  $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$  for human life enslaved to sin (Rom. 1:24; 6:6; 7:24; 8:10, 13; cf. Col. 3:5).<sup>82</sup> The body is not inherently sinful, but the sin principle is still operating in its members, the natural result of which is death.

The emphasis of this passage seems to fall on "this death." It is "this death" which comes from the indwelling sin. Even though Paul is renewed and justified, death is still a reality.<sup>83</sup> Hence what Paul longs for is deliverance from sin in all its aspects and consequences. The body can be regarded as the body of this death—the bodily members are the sphere in which the law of sin is operative unto that death which is the wages of sin.<sup>84</sup> Barth concludes, "Indissolubly and undistinguishably one with his mortal body, he bears about with him always the reminder that he—yes, precisely he—must die."<sup>85</sup>

V 25 gives an indirect answer to the question of v 24. The deliverance is to be taken as future in the resurrection (Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 15:57). Fung, however, opts for a present deliverance which is available from the sin which dominates him.<sup>86</sup> He supposes a change of speaker between v 24, which he views as the Christian, and v 25, whom he understands to be Paul.<sup>87</sup> This presents quite a difficulty in his exegesis. Thus, it is proper to apprehend deliverance as future. It

<sup>81</sup>Cranfield, *Romans* I. 366. It is a picture of honesty in the Christian life. There seems to be no reason to view this phrase as Paul looking back on his days as a Pharisee.

<sup>82</sup>R. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (SNTSMS 29; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976) 36.

<sup>83</sup>Cf. Rom 6:23; 8:1ff. Paul knew that future deliverance was a reality (8:23).

<sup>84</sup>T. Barrosse, "Death and Sin in Saint Paul's Epistle," *CBQ* 15 (1953) 438-59.

<sup>85</sup>K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1933) 269.

<sup>86</sup>Fung, "The Impotence of the Law," 45.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*

is true because v 25b would seem to sum up the present experience. This section concerns the struggle with indwelling sin which characterizes the normal Christian condition. Those who advocate v 25a as a present deliverance have no answer for Paul's summary statement in v 25b.

The indirect answer suggests that the speaker knows either that God has already fulfilled for him the wish expressed by the question or that God will surely fulfill it for him in the future. He has not been delivered but he knows that God will surely deliver him from it in the future. The key to the right understanding of v 25a is the recognition that the man who speaks in v 24 is already a Christian, for that saves us from the necessity of conjecturing a drastic change between vv 24 and 25a.

The previous understanding prevents the embarrassment of having to ignore v 25b or view it as a textual gloss.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, far from being an anticlimatic or incongruous intrusion, it is a summing up of the entire argument begun at v 14.

Αὐτὸς ἐγὼ is translated "I myself" and not "I by myself" or "left to myself" (NEB margin). The latter translations view v 25a as a present delivery from the indwelling sin and then 25b as harking back to the prior state of 25a when the believer who lives at a lower level of spirituality or even the unbeliever is again left to himself. This is a definite misunderstanding of Paul's summary phrase. The reiteration of vv 14-24 in v 25b indicates that the triumphant thanksgiving in the early part of the verse does not itself bring to an end the conflict which has been described. The warfare continues, but Paul is upheld and strengthened because of the confident assurance that finally there will be complete deliverance.

The text is gripped with tension. It paints for the readers a picture of the Christian life with all its anguish and its simultaneous hopefulness. This is the struggle with which the Christian is involved throughout his life. Deliverance is promised, but it is an eschatological hope. The interpretation is not to be taken as an excuse for a slothful Christian life or for a life of continual sinning. Such a view would be quite out of line with the rest of Holy Scripture. Yet the present tenses indicate that this state is characteristic of the Christian throughout his life. The recognition of the law as good and spiritual and the determined will to practice the good are evidences that this passage speaks of a regenerate man. The continuance of indwelling sin is the reason that the struggle is one which remains for the believer in this present life. At the same time, it is the picture of a man constantly and honestly persevering for the good.

<sup>88</sup>E.g., J. Moffatt, *The New Testament: A New Translation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).

Both the struggle of chap. seven and the deliverance of chap. eight are true and real in the believer's life. Although Paul speaks autobiographically of the tensions of life as he experienced them, it is apparent that he speaks by implication for all who have the struggle and need for God's guidance and blessing.<sup>89</sup>

#### THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It has become widely accepted that Paul's soteriology is characterized by an "already/not yet" tension, the eschatological tension present between the "already" of Jesus' resurrection and the "not yet" of his *παρουσία*.<sup>90</sup> The believer is caught between fulfillment and consummation. The old age of flesh is still in existence, even though the new age of resurrection has already begun. No one has elaborated this aspect of Pauline theology more helpfully than Oscar Cullmann: "It is characteristic of all N.T. salvation history that between Christ's resurrection and his return there is an interval, the essence of which is determined by this tension."<sup>91</sup>

This tension is very much present in the Christian experience of grace, particularly as it relates to the theology of Rom 7:14-25. For Paul, the Christian experience is a continuing experience of death as well as of life.<sup>92</sup> The present experience of the believer is characterized by weakness, suffering, and death. This is clearly seen in other passages, such as Rom 8:17, 2 Cor 12:9; 2 Cor 4:7-5:5, and Phil 3:10-14.

Romans 7 is man as flesh, man in his frailty, mortality, corruptibility, man as heading for a death which he cannot escape.

'The body is dead because of sin' (8, 10), because death entered the world through sin, as the consequence and outcome of sin (5, 12). Here it becomes evident that 'death' for Paul has a spectrum of meaning similar to that of *θάψ*—that is, it includes both a physical connotation (death of the body) and a moral connotation (man as sinner dead to God, the believer as having the responsibility to kill the deeds of the body—8, 13). The death and dying which Paul welcomes is a complex experience of the frailty and corruption of the physical and the suffering of persecution, of the deadness of one dimension of the personality through sin and the mortification of selfishness. He welcomes it because this dying is for him a participation in Christ's sufferings, a growing conformity even to Christ's death, as so holds promise of a growing participation in Christ's resurrection power and ultimate

<sup>89</sup>G. Vanderlip, *Paul and Romans* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1967) 59.

<sup>90</sup>Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 110-15.

<sup>91</sup>O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (London: SCM, 1967) 202.

<sup>92</sup>J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 55.

resurrection like his. It is the recognition of this spectrum of meaning of both  $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\kappa\acute{\alpha}$  and "death" in Paul's thought that enables us to appreciate more fully the paradox of Christian experience for Paul.<sup>93</sup>

Our entire Christian life is to be lived in the light of the tension between what we already are in Christ and what we hope to be some day.<sup>94</sup> Thus, the already/not yet balance in Paul's soteriology must be maintained. This is quite different from the popular view advocated by men who view Rom 7:14-25 as the experience of the Christian who is living at a level of the Christian life which can be left behind, who is still trying to live the Christian life either under the law or in his own strength. Conversion is only the beginning; the new has not swallowed up the old. While it is true that Paul says "we died to sin" (Rom 6:2ff; Gal 2:19; Col 2:11, 20; 3:3), death is not an event past and gone in the believer's experience.<sup>95</sup> Rather it is an emphasis of the "already" aspect just as the "not yet" aspect is seen in Rom 8:10; 2 Cor 4:10; and Phil 3:10ff.<sup>96</sup> The balance in Paul's theology must be maintained. To overemphasize either aspect leads to perfectionism or gnosticism.

The struggle in which the Christian is involved is a life-long one. Hoekema comments:

To be sure, we cannot attain sinless perfection in this life. But our continuing imperfection does not give us an excuse for irresponsible living nor imply that we may just stop trying to do what is pleasing to God. We can, in fact, continue to live with the not yet only in light of the already.<sup>97</sup>

The Christian never reaches a state of perfection in this life, nor is he ever freed from life/death tension.<sup>98</sup> The believer remains in the conflict of which he is ever aware and responsible. Even though he wills to do God's will and is constantly exerting himself onward, the only way of escape is death.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>93</sup>J. D. G. Dunn, "Romans 7:14-25 in the Theology of Paul," *TZ* 31 (1975) 270.

<sup>94</sup>A. Hoekema, "Already, Not Yet: Christian Living in Tension" *The Reformed Journal* 29 (1979) 18.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup>Cf. H. Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 267-72.

<sup>97</sup>Hoekema, "Already, Not Yet," 16.

<sup>98</sup>David Needham's new work, *Birtright*, comes dangerously close to teaching absolute perfectionism.

<sup>99</sup>It should be mentioned that the admonitions such as Rom 8:13, etc., must be taken seriously. The Christian must persevere in this struggle so as not to be characterized as living according to the flesh. Yet the complete transformation does not

Finally, this aspect of Paul's theology must be included in the church's proclamation. "Proclamation of a gospel which promises only pardon, peace and power will result in converts who sooner or later become disillusioned or deceitful about their Christian experience."<sup>100</sup> While this understanding is not an excuse for slothful living, the believer need not be depressed nor conclude that grace has lost the struggle. On the contrary, the struggle is an indication of life for the believer. The true, persevering believer will be constantly struggling with this indwelling sin and judging its manifestations as an offence toward a holy God. The tension of the struggle, the paradox of life and death, must be maintained to the end. Rom 7:24 is the life-long cry of frustration; 7:25a is his thanksgiving of eschatological hope; and 7:25b is the expression of realism. Paul's conflict is not a picture representing only a minority of the regenerate community, but of the whole church struggling with the tension of sin and constantly in need of God's enablement and blessing.

---

take place until the consummation. David Wenham's "The Christian Life: A Life of Tension?—A Consideration of the Nature of Christian Experience in Paul" in *Pauline Studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 80ff. has grasped the seriousness of maintaining the Pauline tension.

<sup>100</sup>Dunn, "Romans 7:14-25 in the Theology of Paul," 273.