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*A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*  
Volume 7 • Number 3 • SUMMER 1998

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Everything above us speaks of the greatness of God, not of man.

—WILLIAM S. PLUMER

Identification with the world and its needs is one thing; imitation of the world and its foolishness is quite another.

—WARREN W. WIERSBE

## THE CONVERSION OF THE MAN IN ROMANS 7

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*Tom J. Nettles*

A division exists in evangelicalism over the identity of the person Paul describes in Romans 7:14ff. Formerly, the lines of division were drawn between Calvinists and Arminians; currently, the case is not quite so clear.<sup>1</sup> Calvinists, in harmony with Calvin and other Reformed interpreters, generally identified the struggle as one of a regenerate person who is growing in awareness of the intensity of the fight induced by the death throes of the flesh. Calvin comments,

For the purpose, therefore, of understanding the whole of this argument with more certainty and fidelity, it should be noted that this conflict mentioned by the apostle does not exist in man until he has been sanctified [i.e., set apart to saving faith] by the Spirit of God (*Commentary on Romans*; see on 7:14).

Arminius, however, contends that the entire section describes the inner workings of the mind of an unregenerate person. For 234 pages of learned argumentation and close reasoning Arminius defends the thesis that the person described there is unregenerate; to consider him otherwise is "injurious to the grace of regeneration, and hurtful to good morals" (*The Writings of James Arminius*, trans. Bagnall, 2:432). The person is under the impressions of the law in his conscience but still spiritually the

slave of sin. The person in Romans 7 is one whose "resistance that immediately preceded the perpetration of sin, was not from the Holy Spirit who regenerated and inhabited, but from the mind which was convinced of the righteousness and equity of the law" (p. 434).

Arminius's discussion has at least two important positive points: One, it emphasizes that regeneration grants a life in the Spirit which produces high moral character and significant mortification of the flesh. Two, it urges the one who does not possess these qualities toward a "serious and sure examination respecting himself, to attain a correct knowledge of *the state of regeneration*, and sedulously to distinguish between it and *the state before the law*, and chiefly between it and that *under the law*" (Ibid., 435).

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*One of the differences between Arminians and Calvinists is their understanding of the degree to which grace must operate in both the new birth part of regeneration and the sanctification part of regeneration.*



We must remark, however, that while these two points are important, they are not distinctive of Arminianism. The original unArminianized Reformed faith as found in the *Heidelberg Catechism* and *Belgic Confession* had no meager teaching on the certainty of sanctifica-

tion as a corollary to regeneration as well as the care one must take in self-examination.

One of the differences between Arminians and Calvinists is their understanding of the degree to which grace *must* operate in both the new birth part of regeneration and the sanctification part of regeneration. Calvinists affirm the necessity of an efficacious call, or irresistible grace, in the first, because sin manifest as the power of the flesh is utterly, or surpassingly, sinful (Rom. 7:13). Arminians believe in the necessity of prevenient grace, or that God gives grace before we would be willing to respond to His call, but this grace is not in itself efficacious, that is, it is not irresistible.

While the doctrine of sanctification is very similar for Arminians and Calvinists (see *Arminius*, 2:119-21), again their view of the power of the sin to be overcome is different. Romans 7 is an apt description of the darkness, deceitfulness, wickedness and subtlety of the flesh. When a person is saved and becomes aware of the human heart in its sinful deformity and captivity to the flesh by having it laid bare by the power of the Word (Heb. 4:12), the infinite grotesqueness of any degree of disobedience to that which is holy, righteous, and good inflames the mind with a desperate desire to escape its clutches entirely. The regenerated soul sees itself justly skewered by the blade of God's righteous wrath. It dies to self-righteousness; it dies to vain attempts to justify itself by legal obedience.

But when in Romans 7 does the shift occur from the relationship of the lost person to the law and begin investigating the relationship of the saved person to the law? The pivotal description occurs in verses 9-13. It is an expansion of Paul's summary of his conversion in Galatians, "For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God" (Gal. 2:19). That is the story of the

man in Romans 7. His conversion is recorded in these words: "When the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; . . . this commandment . . . proved to result in death for me; . . . sin taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. . . . Through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful" (Rom. 7: 9-13). This death comes about in seeing himself crucified with Christ because of the ordinances of the law that condemn him.

The following verses, 14-25, follow chronologically, describing the now-regenerated person's growing awareness of the depths of indwelling sin even in light of the alteration of his mind and heart in regard to the loveliness of the requirements of God's law. All views which do not see this as the experience of the regenerate see verses 14-25 as further exposition of the struggle initiated in verse 7 ("I would not have come to know sin except through the Law"), and manifest in a death struggle in verses 8-13.

Several phrases, however, fail in their impact if asserted for the unregenerate. He "desires" the things of the law and "hates" that which is opposed to it. His intense resistance to his own failings shows that he confesses that the law is "good," that is, clearly consistent with and expressive of the holy beauty of God. The person in this struggle knows that good does not live in his flesh, for the desire he has for good can not be worked by his flesh, (v. 18). He wants the good and does not want the evil (v. 19). This person serves the law in the *inner man* (v. 22). That phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:16 and Ephesians 3:16 refers to a reality in the regenerate that is the source of spiritual growth and conformity to Christ. The law of his mind, probably synonymous with the inner man, is different from the law in his members. Apparently, this serves as the foundation for Paul's

admonitions in Romans 6 to present their members as instruments of righteousness. This is a person who recognizes the moral disparity between God's law and the law of sin at work in his flesh (v. 25; cf. Gal. 5:16-18). The former he serves with his mind. He is not like those of Romans 8:5 who have their minds set on the flesh; rather he has his mind set on the Spirit.

According to those who argue that this person is unregenerate, these descriptions aptly apply to unregenerate Jews who had a high regard for God's law. Moo says that the Jews had "a genuine and proper regard for the law."<sup>2</sup> He claims that they were not faulted for having low regard for the law but for misunderstanding its ultimate intention. That assertion, however, hardly seems to square with Jesus' presentation of the law as opposed to that of the scribes and Pharisees. It was precisely their disregard for the law in both scope and spirituality that brought about his corrective treatment. Apparently they were those who would annul "one of the least of these commandments, and teach others to do the same" (Matt. 5:19). One's understanding of the righteousness of the law must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees or he will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20). When he called them blind guides and hypocrites and accused them of neglecting the weightier matters of the law and said that they were inwardly full of hypocrisy and lawlessness, he would not at the same time say that with their mind they served the law of God or delighted in that law in the inner man.

When Paul lived as a Pharisee, he considered himself blameless concerning the law (Phil 3:6). The Romans 7 picture is of one whose evaluation of the righteousness of the law is so high that he would never consider himself blameless. Rather he would count all his supposed righteousness as loss. The picture he gives of the Jew's

respect for the law in Romans 2:17-20 does not at all conform with the internal spiritual passion for the law as seen in Romans 7. The Romans 2 picture shows one who approves the law because he is quite confident that possessing it makes him superior to others. The Romans 7 person has a more profound passion for the spiritual and moral perfection of the law and knows, therefore, that in himself he can claim no degree of conformity to its true demands.

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*The law uncovers sin and in doing so reveals that it is "utterly" sinful. The sinner is slain to all hope in himself and his righteousness and becomes aware that apart from the mere mercy of God in Christ his future holds only eternal condemnation.*



The existential and moral horror of sin increases in the sensitivity of the Christian having the effect of intensifying both repentance and hope. Calvin remarks, "They condemn their sins, not only because they are compelled by the judgment of reason, but because they abhor them with genuine feeling of the heart and detest their conduct in committing sin" (*Commentary*, 7:15). Of course, that is not all that happens in conversion. But that is an apt description of the converted person's view of sin. This

same person, struggling with sin in chapter 7, is still groaning in chapter 8 with this unfulfilled redemption. While he struggles away from sin, he struggles toward hope, the redemption of his body and his full standing in sonship before the triune God (Rom. 8:22-25).

We must become more focused today in our evangelism on this aspect of conversion. The law uncovers sin and in doing so reveals that it is "utterly" sinful. The sinner is slain to all hope in himself and his righteousness and becomes aware that apart from the mere mercy of God in Christ his future holds only eternal condemnation. The conversion of the person in Romans 7 happens in verses 9-13. May God grant us more Romans 7 Christians.

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#### *Notes*

1. For a discussion of the history of interpretation and examples of the growing number of interpretative options, see Doug Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 441-67. Moo, Calvinistic on the distinctive issues, interprets the text as the experience of the

unregenerate living in existential fashion the historic law/gospel drama described in Galatians 3:19-4:3. The narrative emerges as Paul, the one who now has a Christian perspective, analyzes the desperate conflict of a sinner, particularly a Jew who believes the law, as he experiences his moral powerlessness vis-à-vis the moral height of God's law.

2. Ibid., 550.