

### Wretched or Blessed?

An essay entitled “Saint or Sinner” appeared in the January, 1988, issue of *The Gatepost*, provoking unsettling thoughts in some quarters. The disturbance has not died out yet. We received some commendations and some criticisms, most of which were gracious and reasonable. None of the negative responses took issue with my exegesis in any particular point, but rather charged me either with favoring Arminianism or being brash enough to take a position contrary to that of eminent men. One particular brother who has been (and still is) supportive of our work was considerable exercised over the fact that the thoughts set forth in the paper seemed to contradict the traditional Reformed view of Romans seven. This man has been kind enough to send me a copy of James Montgomery Boice’s Bible Studies Magazine of the Romans series, entitled *The Christian’s Struggle Against Sin*, in which he takes up Romans 7:14-25 and Romans 8, a massive chunk of theology-loaded Scripture to run through one little 32-page booklet. This does, however, provide an opportunity for me to review the elusive riddle of Romans 7 in an interaction with statements made by Dr. Boice, who, as successor to the late Donald G. Barnhouse in the pastorate of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, is eminently qualified to represent the dominant Reformed view of Romans 7:14-25. That view is that the “man” of Romans 7 is Paul’s own personal, ongoing testimony of his experience as a mature Christian, and as such, is a true representation of any Christian in the highest possible state of grace in this present life.

#### Originations and Specifications

One of the main sources of the defects of this view appears very quickly on page 5, where Dr. Boice accepts the NIV rendering of Romans 7:18, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells,” as “For I know that nothing good lives in me (that is, in my *sinful nature*)” [italics mine]. The text will not bear that translation. The Greek *sarx* is translated “flesh” 147 times in the AV, four other times as “carnal” or “fleshy”. It cannot, by any stretching of semantics, be translated as either sinful or nature. It bears no resemblance to either idea. Rendering “flesh” as “sinful nature” is necessary to establish a doctrine not taught in the Bible, namely, that the Christian has a sinful nature. Dr. Boice repeatedly employs this utterly unscriptural term throughout his argument: Page 6: “Christians do indeed have a sinful nature.” Page 7: “In Romans 7 Paul is describing the struggle between himself as a new creature in Christ, the new man, and that old, sinful, un-Christian nature that he nevertheless retains in some measure.” Page 9: “the hopelessly sinful nature of man apart from the Holy Spirit” (Is he telling us that the Christian is apart from the Holy Spirit?) Page 11: “The Christian life is a warfare, a warfare within against our inherently sinful natures.”

#### Ramifications and Refutations

The irrefutable truth about all this is that the Bible nowhere teaches that the person who has been made a new creature in Christ has two natures, one of which is hopelessly sinful. An attempt is being made to establish the doctrine here by using words that cannot be translated from the Greek text. *An interpretation is masquerading as a translation.*

Is the struggle here really that of a Christian against his own nature? Hardly. Considering that Boice derives “sinful nature” from what the Bible calls “flesh”, we have this fierce and futile struggle of a spiritual man against his own flesh. Where is the Biblical support for this? We are told in Ephesians 5:12 that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. This is clearly not a conflict of a man against himself, but against spiritual powers other than himself. The enemy is not the essence of man at all, but spiritual entities! Paul writes to young Timothy, “*Flee also youthful lusts*” (2 Timothy 2:22). How can a man run away from himself? Again, he writes of the conflict of the flesh against the Spirit in Galatians 5:17, “*For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.*” But this cannot support the view of a Christian’s struggle against himself, for the Galatian picture is of *Spirit* against flesh.

Dr. Boice has the outcome of this conflict a total, abysmal, hopeless defeat for the Christian. Even the victory cry of Romans 7:25 is merely an anticipation of what is to come at the end of this life in the putting-off of the mortal body and the putting-on of the immortal one. Christ is not permitted to rescue His people from the power of sin in this present life. The outcome of the conflict pictured in Galatians 5:17, however, is one of victory for the Christian: “*Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.*” That is the overall teaching of the New Testament concerning the outcome of our struggles against sin, and it is the victory cry of the mature Christian, not a wail of despairing defeat! Dr. Boice apparently searches the New Testament in vain to find a parallel passage to support the “wretched man” theory, for he is compelled to call attention to Paul’s phrase in 2 Corinthians 1:8, “despaired even of life,” which he admits is not a conflict against sin, but with physical hardships. This, he tells us, is an example of the kind of conflict the mature Christian continually has with sin, of which he can find no record in the Bible except the one that has been imposed upon Romans seven, *an interpretation for which the Sinful Christian Nature was invented.*

For the sake of illustration, let us consider that Dr. Boice’s view is correct. In order to appreciate the practical outworking of this doctrine, we will flesh out the theological skeleton handed us in a real-life scenario. In verse 14 of Romans 7, Paul tells us that in his highest spiritual growth he is carnal, sold unto sin, a *slave* to sin, mind you. He is not saying that he slips into sin occasionally; he is saying that he can do nothing but sin! In verses 15 and 19, he tells us that the good and right that he wills to do, he does not do it, and that the evil which he hates and wills not to do, he does it. Verse 19 tells us in stronger language that he actually *practices* this evil, that it is the tenor of his life, his usual behavior. How shall we imagine this good and evil in concrete terms? Paul willed to preach the gospel in truth and sincerity, but he was utterly unable to do it. Instead, he did what he hated. He preached lies in deception and insincerity in order to make a good living. He willed to help the fatherless, the widows and the poor in their affliction. Instead, he

robbed and abused them for his own selfish ends. He willed to live a chaste, celibate life. Instead, he was an incurable fornicator, unable to restrain himself from seducing every virgin or vulnerable wife he came across. He willed to be meek, gentle, loving, and gracious. But he always acted in a haughty, arrogant manner, was hateful in his behavior, a brawler who struck out at the least provocation and never forgave anyone who crossed him.

All of this is, of course, absurd, but it becomes horrendous when we consider that Paul urged us to imitate him. "*The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do . . .*" (Philippians 4:9). But if that flesh does not fit the wretched man skeleton, what does?

"Oh, no," we are told, "Paul did not actually do those bad things. He just had them in his heart. Of course he did do those good and right things, but his motives were not pure, so that the doing of them was actually sinful." But that is not what the text tells us. On the contrary, we are told in the text that his motives were pure and right, that he delights in God's good law and that in the inner man. He wills and chooses to do everything right for the right motive. He in his heart hates the evil way. The problem is not in his impure thoughts and affections. It is in his *deeds*. He is actually not doing anything good. And all he is doing is evil. The text will bear no other interpretation.

"No, no!" we are now told, "you must not think that Paul did those overt sins. You must not suppose Paul that Paul was prevented from doing *some* good. That is not the case at all. Paul is simply saying that he was unable to do *some* of the good he chose to do, and that he was unable to restrain himself from doing *some* of the things he hated." Boice quotes J. I. Packer in this respect, "but he finds that he cannot achieve the total compliance at which he aims. Whenever he measures what he has done, he finds that he has *fallen short* (italics mine)." We agree with Dr. Packer on the truth of this statement, but protest that it is not what is taught in this text. He has given the text a qualified, rather than an absolute, interpretation, by inserting the adjective *total* and the term *fallen short*, instead of the radical "captivity to the law of sin" supplied in verse 23. It is within the parameters of sound scriptural exegesis to give an absolute statement a qualified interpretation when the context permits and reason or analogy of faith dictates. That is not the case here. The context will permit nothing but a literal, absolute rendering. Verses 14 and 23 tell us that this man is a powerless slave to sin. He is not just having a rough time overcoming sin; he is failing completely. And, according to Dr. Boice, he can expect nothing better in this present life. With this as the dominant view of the Reformers, no wonder they branded those who lived holy and exemplary lives as great hypocrites!

It is more than likely that this qualified interpretation arises, not from the analogy of faith – there is no such common belief – but from an analogy of unbelief! The dominant view of the Primitive Church was that the "man" of Romans seven was an unconverted one. The idea of a Christian wallowing helplessly in the torments of sin all his life was utterly alien to them. It was not until Augustine formulated a theology that accommodated the unholy mixture of state, society, and church, that the wretched man theory appeared. The Reformers, compelled to retain the church-state corruption in order to survive (so they judged), continued to embrace this view, perhaps because of their high esteem for Augustinian theology and partly because this "Christian Sinner" was so dominant in their churches.

Dr. Boice mirrors this defective Reformed view of sanctification on page 16. "And yet we are to go on fighting and struggling against sin, and we are to do so with the tools made available to us, chiefly prayer, Bible study, Christian fellowship, service to others and the sacraments." There are no Christian sacraments by which we receive efficient grace. That is a tattered rag carried over from Romanism. The most powerfully effective means of deliverance from the power of sin is left unmentioned by Boice. That is *truth*, the knowledge and belief of it. It is the one promised by Christ. "*And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*" (John 8:32). As long as a person is made to believe the lie that he is a sinner, that he has a *nature* that enslaves him to sin, that he can never have any measure of victory over it in this present life, you can be sure that he will never be free.

But if, on the other hand, he learns and believes the truth that he, being born from above, is a new man created according to God in righteousness and true holiness (Ephesians 4:24), that he is set free from sin (Romans 6:18), is dead to sin (Romans 6:2), indeed, *cannot* practice sin (1 John 3:9), that the "body of sin" has been rendered powerless (Romans 6:6), and that he does not live in the flesh but in the Spirit (Romans 8:9), the body being dead (Romans 8:10), and that the same Spirit that brought Christ from the dead gives life to this *present mortal body* (Romans 8:11), that we should bring righteous fruit *in it* unto God (Romans 6:4, 8:2-4), he will find that he has ample resources in Christ to free himself from any sinful passion. These passages are but a token of the enormous body of Scripture which declare the Christian to be a saint, not a sinner.

Dr. Boice suggests on page 10 that sanctification is achieved by a growing realization of how sinful we are, so that we will turn more and more to Christ. It is true that as we grow in grace we do realize how far short of Christian perfection we fall, and how much more blessed it is to rely on Christ than the arm of flesh. But this is a consequence, not a cause, of our spiritual growth. Morbid introspection on how rotten and corrupt we are will produce nothing but more morbid introspection. We learned our utter depravity, our helplessness and impotence when we were apart from Christ. Now we must learn the truth that we are forever in living union with Christ, that our life is in Him, and that His life is now ours. We must learn that victory is not in the flesh but in the Spirit. And we must believe the promise Christ gave us that the Spirit, when He has come, will abide with us forever (John 14:16). This "Christian apart from the Holy Spirit" that Dr. Boice speaks of on pages 9 and 12 is a hypothetical non-entity. No such creature exists.

We grow in grace, not by looking at ourselves and our sinfulness, but by looking at Christ Who is our Life and to Whose image we are to be conformed. "*Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*" (Matthew 11:28). "*but . . . grow up in all things into Him who is the head . . . Christ*" (Ephesians 4:15). "*Let us lay aside . . . the sin which so easily ensnares us, . . . looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith*" (Hebrews 12:2). "*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever*" (2 Peter 3:18).

Actually, Dr. Boice's gospel has no sanctification in it. Justification is everything. Having denied any deliverance from the power of sin in this present life, he nevertheless offers a section on pages 20-22 under the heading "Deliverance From Sin's Power."

He begins by reaffirming that the deliverance spoken of in the text is a future deliverance, not a present one. Then he belabors three points: 1. We are sinners and will continue to be sinners throughout our Christian lives. 2. Jesus died to save sinners, and this is what He is doing. Christ's substitutionary work, he says, "has made us dead to the past and given us a new and happy future." Notice, we still have nothing *now* but forgiveness of sins. 3. The assurance of future victory (at the end of this mortal life) seems to be then touted as some sort of psychological hype to keep us from despair while we are floundering inexorably all our lives in sin. Is that not as astounding as it is pathetic? Here we are flat on our backs, while this bully sits astride us, pounding us to a bloody pulp. Our "victory" over this bully is our knowledge that it cannot go on forever.

It does not get any better in Romans 8. Dr. Boice tells us that verses 1-4 again speak of justification only, in spite of the fact that verse 4 spells out "that the righteous requirements of the law might be *fulfilled in us*" (not imputed to us in justification), that is, in this present mortal body. But it gets worse. We are told correctly that verses 5-13 speak of deliverance from sin's power over us. He cannot afford to develop that thought, since he has already precluded any such experimental deliverance. So he merely says that this means we are sons of God and as such are led by the Spirit of God. That is quite true; but when we remember the life that he has assigned to us under the dominion of our omnipotent sinful nature, this makes the Spirit of God either impotent against sin – or a collaborator with it. I know this sounds blasphemous; but what other conclusion can be reached, if we are led by the Spirit of God to go on practicing sin as a way of life?

The fact that so many holy and godly men have held this incorrect view of Romans seven down through the centuries merely tells us, happily, that some men's lives are far more pure than their theologies. True Christianity is the life of God in the believer that has, and will continue, to survive all the assaults of men's false doctrines. Tell a saint that he is a sinner, and let him try to be one. He will find that he cannot. Our great God came to save sinners from their sin, and He will do it, whether they admit it or not.

### Identification and Qualification

Who, then, is this "man" in Romans seven? I think the early church was correct in that they pronounced this man unconverted. It was unthinkable to them that the Sovereign Christ failed in what He came to do . . . to save men from their sins. The idea of a dual nature had not yet been developed. To them, the Christian was a new creation raised up to *replace* the now dead old man, not to *cohabit* with him. They rightly believed that we live in only one sphere at a time, either to sin or to righteousness. To be alive to one was to be dead to the other; no person could be a slave to God and to the devil at the same time. Salvation, to them, meant present and forever deliverance from the power of sin. They did not, in this, teach a sinless perfection. They recognized the workings of sin in the mortal body and a continual struggle in this life against it. But they did not believe man was his mortal body. They believed that the Christian has a mortal body in which sin dwells, but that when he puts off that body, he will not be diminished on iota. He will simply have dropped the vehicle of sin which has troubled him all his earthly life.

That is what the Scripture teaches. The Christian is a holy person living in a sinful body. The body is something that the Christian *wears* and must never be confused with the person. They also believe that this continual conflict with sin in the members was not one of despairing defeat, but of glorious victory. What a mockery this wretched, defeated Christian makes of Romans 6:14, 18, 22; 8:37; 2 Corinthians 2:14 and Philippians 4:13!

But this unconverted man of Romans seven must be carefully qualified. He is not just any unconverted man. He is indeed a very unusual one. The usual sinner is comfortable and content in his sin, but this man is in a life and death struggle against sin. He no longer loves it. In fact, he loathes it and longs to be rid of it. He is no longer at war with God and His law. He has seen the law's beauty, perfections, and goodness, and is striving to walk in its precepts. But he finds no resources within himself to perform the good he aspires to. In fact, he finds just the opposite – an evil power residing in his body dragging him down into the sin he abhors.

There are other extraordinary things about this unconverted man. He is using his mind aright. His reasoning is remarkable sane concerning his predicament, and he is making conclusions that ordinary sinners would never come up with. In verse 14 he affirms the spirituality of God's law, that it transcends the realm of all earthly things, including flesh and blood. He therefore sees it in a sphere out of his reach. He also has correctly deduced in verse 15 that the law must be good, since it is set against the sin which he opposes. And then in verse 17, he isolates himself – that is, the *true life to which he now aspires* – from the effective dynamic of evil in him. "It is no longer I that do it but sin that dwells in me." The unusual thing about this man is that although he is not yet soundly converted, he is *not lost!* He has been regenerated by the singular, unaided agency of the Holy Spirit. He now has the life of God by the Holy Spirit, an inner man "*created after God in righteousness ad true holiness*" (*Ephesians 4:24*). He is done with sin, yet has not learned the power to shake it. He longs to do right, but finds no strength to perform it. He is in that awful, soul-wrenching, upheaval that can only culminate in full conversion through the *truth of the gospel*, and blessed rest in Christ.

We are trying to navigate uncharted waters when we try to analyze in concrete terms the workings of God in the soul of man. It is as seed that a man sows in the ground "*and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how*" (*Mark 4:27*). But we do know that regeneration is a sovereign work of God in which a lost sinner is subjectively awakened to spiritual reality. Conversion, on the other hand, is that awakened sinner's learning and laying hold on objective truth that saves him from his sins and sets him free.

That this is what the apostle Paul is describing here is consistent with the preceding line of thought. Verses 7 through 13 most certainly describes a process of awakening to the spiritual content of the law, an aggravation of sin consciousness, and the beginnings of deep despair and "death" experienced by many convicted sinners. It would have been entirely inappropriate for the apostle to set out to describe this process, and then suddenly jump to a testimony of his normal everyday life as a mature Christian, then drop back to contrasting new life in the Spirit to old life in the flesh in chapter 8. But if we let verses 14-25 tell us of this struggling sinner's conversion, the whole passage has unity and progression.

### **Troubling Thoughts**

Some are troubled by the switch from the past tense in verse 11 to the present tense in verses 14 through 25. It is likely that the apostle did not wish to leave us with a chronological, blow by blow description of the conflict. The Holy Spirit's wisdom is evident in this. In the first place, no one can accurately describe all that goes on in such a struggle. In the second place, if we were given such a detailed historical account, we would try to make it a rigid pattern and demand it as a criterion for every conversion. There is too much of that sort of thing as it is. Rather, Paul dramatizes the general nature of such an experience in the first person present tense. This is what happens in a person's conversion. This is something which everyone in similar circumstances can identify. The outcome of such distress is the cry for deliverance expressed in verse 24 and the blessed fullness of deliverance in Christ found in verse 25. There is no need to postpone that deliverance until the victim dies. Our God is a very *present* help in the time of trouble.

### **Hampering Fears**

Perhaps the main reason more Reformed teachers have not embraced this view is their fears of two other doctrines which are implicit in it. The first is that the *enslaving power* of sin in the members is an evil entity distinct from the person and his body. It is not flesh at all, but spirit – demons. The unredeemed body is the sphere and vehicle in which this evil dynamic works, but unaided, it does not have the captivating power indicated. We may not be rid of our mortal body until we die, but we may be rid of the spiritual powers that we have contracted through sin and unbelief. The scriptural evidence for this truth is overwhelming – Ephesians 2:2, 6:12; Colossians 1:13; 2 Timothy 2:26, to name a few. The aversion of some learned men to the supernatural can be a great curse to their spiritual lives and to their ministries.

The second doctrine is that there may be an interval between regeneration and conversion. Many fear this idea because of the abuse of it by some Primitive Baptists. Others see it as hostile to gospel regeneration. But the Scripture will not support a dogmatic assertion that regeneration and conversion must be simultaneous. Where there is no clear mandate to the contrary by the analogy of faith, we have nothing to fear from letting the Scripture say what it says.

### **Final Observation**

One other observation is worthy of our attention here. This man in Romans 7:7-25 speaks of a sojourn that does not include Christ until he gets to verse 25. He is clearly seeking peace with God, justification, forgiveness of sin, deliverance from condemnation. He is not willing to rest as long as he is a slave to sin. He will have no justification apart from sanctification. This is surely the prevailing thought of the apostolic churches. Salvation from the penalty of sin must be evidenced by salvation from its power. We would do well if we returned to this emphasis in our gospel

- C. M.