

SOLD OUT AT ROMANS 7

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The Church fathers, until Augustine in the fifth century, generally interpreted Romans 7 as pre-Christian experience. According to Augustine the conflict of Romans 7 remains the highest stage of Christian experience. To this day Calvinists usually follow Augustine, interpreting Romans 7 as Christian experience. "The Arminian controversy really began upon the exegesis of this passage," according to M. B. Riddle in Lange's Commentary.⁽¹⁾

Jacob Hermansz was a Dutch theologian of the late sixteenth century. We know him by his Latin name, Jacobus Arminius. He went to Geneva to study under John Calvin's son-in-law and successor, Theodore Beza. He returned to Amsterdam to pastor. He had the reputation of being a brilliant preacher, a gifted Bible exegete, and a humble and dedicated Christian. His expositional preaching drew large crowds.

He was considered the greatest scholar of his day. He was the first ever to receive the Doctor of Divinity degree from the University of Leiden. He was later professor of theology at the university, until his death in 1609.

In 1589 Dirck Coornhert declared that the supralapsarian theory of Beza actually made God the author of sin. Arminius was commissioned to answer this charge. He finally concluded that Coornhert was right. No one could refute his scholarship, but preachers began to openly attack him from the pulpit. His words were twisted out of context and his enemies tried to destroy his influence. Finally, he asked for a public hearing, but he died before the synod convened. He was about 49 when he died, and his death was probably hastened by the stress he was under.

Although it was Arminius who had called for an open forum, the Synod of Dort (1618-9) only solidified the Calvinistic position. His followers, the Remonstrants, were not allowed to enter into the debate. They were either put to death, banished, or imprisoned. They were unable to hold any office in the church or state until 1625, when they were granted limited tolerance.

The writings of Arminius have been compiled in three volumes. The second longest treatise we have is his "Dissertation on the True and Genuine Sense of the Seventh Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans." It runs 258 pages.

Within one hundred years after his death, the Remonstrants had drifted toward Pelagianism. It was John Wesley who led a move back to evangelical Arminianism, even naming his magazine *The Arminian*.

The early Methodists held that Romans 7 was not a description of Christian experience. Wesley said, "To have spoken this of himself, or any true believer, would have been foreign to the whole scope of his discourse."⁽²⁾ Wesley saw verses 7-25 as a digression by Paul. Adam Clarke stated, "The very genius of Christianity demonstrates that nothing like this can, with any propriety, be spoken of a genuine Christian."⁽³⁾ John Fletcher devoted an entire section to Romans 7 in his "Last Check to Antinomianism."⁽⁴⁾ He challenged the Calvinists to drop "the yoke of carnality which they try to fix upon St. Paul's neck."⁽⁵⁾ Richard Watson summarized the seventh and eighth chapters of Romans, saying:

The moral state of man is traced in the experience of St. Paul as an example, from his conviction for sin by the law of God revealed to him in its spirituality, to his entrance into the condition and privilege of a justified state.⁽⁶⁾

The Holy Spirit is only mentioned once in the entire chapter (verse 6). He is referred to some twenty times in the following chapter. Romans 7 makes no mention of the grace of God. It is a classic psychological analysis of the struggle between the conscience and the will. Every sinner knows the conflict between what he ought to do and what he wants to do. Desire usually wins out over duty.

The Greek personal pronoun ego is used eight times in this description. In Greek, as with many other languages, the subject is understood in the verb. Paul supplied an additional word (ego) for emphasis. He does not use it once in chapter 8. Chapter 7 closes with a double pronoun in verse 25, "I myself." Paul describes a man trying to be a Christian by himself.

But many people are bothered by a change in the verb tense. Through verse 13, the aorist tense was used. Then Paul switched to the present tense and used it through the end of the chapter. J. I. Packer declared, "Grammatically, therefore, the natural way to read it would be as a transcript of Paul's self-knowledge at the time of writing...." He argued the present tense must have a present reference and describe something distinct from the past experience of the previous verses.⁽⁷⁾

Calvinists are correct in observing the fact of the tense change. They are incorrect in their interpretation of what that fact signifies. In this case, a careful reading of the context will shed a great deal of light on the commentaries! This digression is introduced by the clear statement found in 6:14 and concluded by an equally clear summary in 8:2. Salvation delivers from sin.

How can the context be harmonized with the switch in verb tenses? In *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, we are told one of the special uses of the present tense is the "historical present." "The present tense is thus employed when a past event is viewed with the vividness of a present occurrence."⁽⁸⁾ Today this literary technique is called a "flashback." Whether or not this is accepted as the proper interpretation for Romans 7:14-25 probably depends upon your own theological presuppositions. The

explanation that Paul is remembering his pre-Christian experience is allowed by Greek grammar, however.

Recently a leading Calvinistic exponent, Anthony Hoekema, Calvin Seminary professor emeritus, reversed himself and declared that he no longer believes Romans 7 describes a regenerate person. He stated:

The mood of frustration and defeat that permeates this section does not comport with the mood of victory in terms of which Paul usually describes the Christian life. The person pictured is still a captive of the law of sin (7:23), whereas the believer described in 6:17-18 is no longer a slave to sin.⁽⁹⁾

That kind of intellectual honesty is rare. How would he have fared at the Synod of Dort?

While Hoekema's comments are refreshing, it is very disheartening to read comments and hear sermons coming from the holiness movement on Romans 7. Keep in mind that these men consider themselves defenders of Wesleyan-Arminian orthodoxy. W. B. Godbey said:

Every Christian, when converted, sets out to obey the Lord on earth like the angels in heaven, thus keeping the law in the beauty of holiness; but destined to defeat, failure, mortification despondency, culminating in desperation, like Paul in the verse when he cried out, "O wretched man that I am!"⁽¹⁰⁾

H. C. Morrison wrote:

The Christian reader will at once recognize the undoubted truthfulness of these Scriptures for they are corroborated by the every-day experience of believing souls, who, struggling against the "old man," have often been made to cry out, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

For Morrison, the solution to this problem is to receive the baptism with the Holy Ghost, which he equates with entire sanctification.⁽¹¹⁾ Early Methodism taught that occurred along with justification.⁽¹²⁾

Charles Ewing Brown explained what he thought Romans 7:7-25 meant:

Assuming, then, that we have in this chapter an account of the experience of a true and even of an advanced Christian, we learn that in every Christian there is a mixture of good and evil....⁽¹³⁾

In *Great Holiness Classics: Holiness Teaching Today*, not only are the statements by Morrison and Brown reprinted, but Milton Agnew describes Christian experience:

After conversion he discovers in himself a new nature that does "joyfully concur with the law of God" (Romans 7:22). But he learns to his distress that he also has an old nature, an

"old self," aroused and battling for supremacy. There occurs a profoundly disturbing struggle between the two natures, the two "I's" of 7:14-25...."⁽¹⁴⁾

William Greathouse, writing in *Beacon Bible Commentary*, admits the primary meaning of Romans 7 is the unrenewed man. Yet he claims that the passage has a secondary meaning in which it describes a carnal babe in Christ.⁽¹⁵⁾ We are warned in *Biblical Hermeneutics* that "if the Scripture has more than one meaning, it has no meaning at all."⁽¹⁶⁾

Nazarene scholar Ralph Earle encouraged preachers to apply romans 7 both before and after conversion in *Word Meanings in the New Testament*.⁽¹⁷⁾ Therefore, fellow Nazarene, Kenneth Grider seems to be overly optimistic when he asserts that "anyone in the Holiness movement knows that a regenerate person does not sin willfully, and yet this person depicted in Romans 7 seems to do that." He blames the "folk theology" of ministers and teachers for spreading the idea that Romans 7 depicts a saved man.⁽¹⁸⁾ But as long as his denomination is reprinting *Great Holiness Classics*, which are not necessarily great classics nor Wesleyan, it is hard to pin all the blame on the uneducated.

Is it any wonder the pew is confused when the pulpit sounds an uncertain note? Is it any wonder the student is unclear when the teacher tries to ride the fence?

It does matter what we believe about Romans 7. Our interpretation of the passage is like a watershed. Whichever way we go will lead us to drastically different theological conclusions. The man described in Romans 7 was a slave to sin. It is true that he is unsanctified; he is also unsaved. We need not discount regeneration in order to make room for sanctification. For too long the holiness movement has tried to establish the need for a second work by demonstrating the failure of the first work.

Let us declare a moratorium on such illustrations as supposed Christians losing their temper and kicking the cow, biting the cow, or beating the cow. According to Galatians 5:20, outbursts of anger are a work of the flesh. Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh. Those who walk after the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God. True Christians are enabled by the Spirit to control sinful desires. Entire sanctification is a completion or perfection of what God began in regeneration. If nothing changed when we got saved, then we are simply making two trips to the altar to get saved, and claiming we have the second blessing. If we accept the second blessing on the basis of logical deduction, it is possible to have made two or more trips forward and still be a slave to sin.

The holiness movement has adopted the theology of John Calvin, while claiming to be the defender of John Wesley. No wonder we profess so much and live so far short of our profession.

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