

“I AM CARNAL, SOLD UNDER SIN”

Rodney Pitts

Text: Rom. 7:14-25

Introduction:

- I. The identity of the “I” spoken of by Paul in Romans 7:14-25 has been the subject of much debate.
 - A. The number of interpretations and positions argued seem to have no end. New approaches, especially new twists on older positions, are continually being presented in commentaries and religious journals.
 - B. The two main positions, however, that have dominated this debate concern whether Paul is discussing his experience *as a Christian* or whether he is discussing his, or “a”, *pre-Christian* experience while under the Law.
 1. The “Christian” interpretation focuses on the idea that Paul is using his own experience *in Christ* to address the struggles that we face in trying to obey God’s law as a Christian and how we continually find ourselves falling short of God’s standard of holiness.
 2. The “Pre-Christian” interpretation focuses on the *failures* of Paul as he sought to serve God and seek justification *by the law* and its complete contrast to the victory that is spoken of for Christians through Christ.
- II. This debate is spawned by many factors.
 - A. First, there are doctrinal issues that can influence a person to lean towards one or the other position.
 1. Calvinists would tend to lean toward the “Christian” view, although many non-Calvinists accept this view as well.
 - a. It is believed that the words of Romans 7:14-25 tend to fit Calvinism’s “dualistic” approach toward the makeup of a Christian (i.e., man’s flesh remains tainted with the sin of Adam, while Christ’s righteousness is imputed into our hearts to save us).
 2. Non-Calvinists tend to lean toward the “Pre-Christian” view of Romans 7:14-25, although there are likely some Calvinists who accept this view, because the description of what appears to be *servitude to sin* does not fit what is believed to be the condition of a Christian.
 - B. Second, emotional issues can play a part in one’s view of this chapter.
 1. Many are steered toward agreement with the “Christian” position because of a feeling of “comradeship” with Paul in their experience as a Christian in attempting to overcome sin.
 - a. In this case comfort is found in the understanding that Paul, an apostle of Christ, still struggled with sin as do they.
 - b. And, there is the comfort of a real hope expressed for final victory in Christ to those who are experiencing much the same hardships as they see here in Paul.
 2. Others, however, can relate to the “pre-Christian” view because they have felt their own *past* slavery to sin outside of Christ believed to be seen in Romans 7:14-25 and the contrasting victory over sin found *in Christ* as expressed in Romans 6 and 8.

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- III. A very important point, however, to remember in this study is that no position is without its strengths and weaknesses.
- A. This is not to say that these verses do not have one correct understanding. For, I believe they do.
 - B. Yet, because of their difficult nature (1 Peter 3:16), we, in our limited understanding, must proceed with caution when attempting to interpret these verses.
- IV. We, however, as Christians are bound to the word of God, the text itself, to determine the correct interpretation of these difficult verses.
- A. We cannot come to the passage with preconceived ideas and doctrines and attempt to press the passage into those ideas and doctrines.
 - B. Nor, as Christians, can we allow emotions to cause us to stray from the teaching of scripture.
 - C. So, it is with the intention to focus on the text that I present the following material for your consideration.

Body:

I. ARGUMENTS CONCERNING POSITION 1: PAUL SPEAKS OF HIS OWN EXPERIENCE AS A CHRISTIAN.

Arguments in favor of the “Christian” interpretation:

The “Christian” interpretation has no conflict with Paul’s use of the **first person singular** and the **present tense**.

It is claimed that Paul’s use of the first person clearly indicates “the Apostle speaks of that which is very real to him in his own experience...transcribing a section of his own spiritual autobiography.”¹

Since the present tense is continually used throughout the verses under consideration, it is only natural to understand that Paul is speaking of his present experience as a Christian.

One should note the distinctive change in tense between Romans 7:1-13 (past tense) and 7:14-25 (present tense), which would seem to indicate that Paul in this final section is referring to his present condition as a Christian.²

Cottrell writes, “The sudden shift from past to present between vv. 13 and 14 indicates a change in perspective. If Paul were continuing to talk about some past stage of his life, he would only be confusing the issue by using the present tense.”³

The “Christian” interpretation is argued to fit within the **context** of Romans 5-8, where it is claimed that the subject is the meaning of the life of a Christian.

David H. Campbell writes: “Romans, as James Dunn points out...is a carefully planned letter. It is therefore rather unlikely...that here in the midst of a sustained and coherent exposition of the Christian life (Rom, 5-8), we have a portrait of the unbeliever practically unequalled in terms of depth and vividness anywhere in Paul’s writings. Perhaps the most serious error one could commit in attempting to make sense of Rom. 7 is to isolate it from its natural context.”⁴

Nygren, in his commentary on Romans is summarized as presenting much the same argument:

“‘Throughout chapters v.-viii, the subject is the meaning of the Christian life.’ Why should Paul, without any clear indication of what he is doing, turn away from the Christian life, and plunge into a description ‘of the anguished and discordant status of the soul of the man who is under the law?’”⁵

The “Christian” interpretation is argued to fit with the **character** of one who is “**in Christ**,” not in the world.

The speaker in these verses is described as “one who delights in God’s Law and in willing the good...and that he does so ‘according to the inward man’ (7:22), an expression used elsewhere in Paul (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16 for the closest parallel) to refer to the Christian believer.”⁶

It should also be noted that the conflict stated in Romans 7:14, although used as strong proof against this section referring to a Christian, is echoed by Paul in Galatians 5:17 when he states of a Christian: “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.’...Since Paul, in Galatians, can say that about the Christian, why should it be impossible for him to say it in Rom. 7:14-25?”⁷

Note: Sometimes it is argued that the statements of 7:14-25 refer more closely to the state of being of a *new* Christian, while a more mature Christian does not face these struggles as greatly.⁸

The weaknesses of the “Christian” interpretation:

Although the use of the present tense in relationship to the first person singular (e.g., “I am carnal...”) is considered strong evidence for the “Christian” interpretation, it may fall far short of being conclusive.

In the epistles as well as other N.T. books we find various examples of the present tense referring to what is already past. Some examples are as follows (and there are others):⁹

Matthew 17:11-12 – “Jesus answered and said to them, “Indeed, Elijah **is** coming first and will restore all things...”

Hebrews 10:9-10 – “then He said, ‘Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.’ He **takes** away the first that He may establish the second...”

Romans 5:14 – “...who is a type of Him who **was** to come” (Note: “Was” is actually a part of the translation of a present, active, participle, although only in the NIV and YLT could I find any indications of this).

See also 1 Corinthians 13:12.

The change of tense from past to present in 7:13 to 14 is said to be made almost imperceptibly, that one could read the whole of the narrative without noticing a change.¹⁰

Paul places no real emphasis on the change of tenses. Thus, to make this a strong point is, at best, subject to criticism.

This objection, although carrying with it some merit in my mind, is a bit *subjective*.

To argue that because the “context” of Romans 5-8 addresses the “meaning of the life of a Christian” we should, therefore, assume that Romans 7:14-25 also addresses the life of a Christian is to assume too much.

First, Romans 7:7-8 appears to deal with the experience of one who is outside of Christ, who faces “Law” for their first time, and because the Law points out “covetousness” to be sin, he then finds sin in his life and spiritual death.

One such as Paul, a trained Pharisee, would have known long before his conversion to Christ that what was forbidden by the 10 Commandments was sin.¹¹

If Romans 7:7-8 lie outside of the Christian experience, and I believe it does, is it not possible that 7:14-25 may as well?

In addition to this first point, Jim McGuiggan writes: “Besides, Paul’s point in this section is to defend the Law and demonstrate its awful holiness. This he needs to do because he has been saying people need to be brought out from under Law to acceptably serve God and so people might get the impression the Law is in some way evil. Paul wishes to show that it is not only *not* evil, it is too holy for him; it keeps him enslaved to sin. So under Law (and without Christ) he is a ‘wretched man.’”¹²

Thus, the addition of a parenthetical statement concerning the hopelessness of seeking righteousness under the Law and apart from Christ would, very effectively, stress the great deliverance and blessing we have in and through Jesus Christ.

It is difficult, in my opinion, to claim that the character of the “I” in Romans 7:14-25 is more closely aligned with that of a Christian than of one outside of Christ.¹³

First, let me say that it is true that this individual is truly concerned about obeying God’s will, serving Him properly and in a holy fashion.

Yet, consider the following descriptions of the “I” and whether they are acceptable references to a Christian and whether they comply with the context of chapter 7.

The person under discussion is said to be “sold under sin” and a “servant of sin.” This appears to be contradictory to the condition of a Christian who is said to be “delivered” and “set free from sin” by Jesus Christ (Romans 6:22 – “But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life”; see also Romans 6:4, 6, 7, 11-13, 14; 8:1, 3-4, etc).

The person under discussion is “captive to the law of sin and death.” Yet, the Christian has been “freed from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2).

The person under discussion has the “law of sin” in his members. As a Christian, however, sin is not to “reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts” (Romans 6:12).

The person under discussion lives in a “body of death,” while Christians are to “present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God” (Romans 6:13).

Thus, to claim that the “I” of Romans 7:14-25 fits more closely with the Christian than the non-Christian is difficult to accept.

Nygren’s use of Galatians 5:17 in relationship to Romans 7:14 as an attempt to show that Paul’s language concerning “carnality” and “slavery” to sin are not out of line with the Christian life fails to address the Galatians passage properly.

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.”

J. W. D. Smith points out the flaw in the reasoning of many in relationship to Galatians 5:17 when he states, “By omitting from the quotation the words which immediately precede Gal. 5:17, he has seriously distorted Paul’s meaning. Whereas v. 17, quoted in isolation, sounds a powerful ally to [the “Christian” interpretation], when it is linked with v. 16, it can more easily be claimed as support for [the “Pre-Christian” interpretation].¹⁴

In verse 16 we are told to “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh,” which indicates that through Christ the means are present to subdue the flesh.

In attempts to address this troublesome issue many resort to Calvinistic doctrinal stances, while others, in effect, attempt to “have their cake and eat it too.”

Nygren attempts to address this problem by arguing for a Calvinistic distinction between “righteousness of faith” and “moral righteousness” (i.e., righteous living in our fleshly bodies). In other words, although in the heart and soul we are “freed from sin” and in an acceptable relationship with God (i.e., likely imputed righteousness, *rp*), our bodies, or our flesh, are still riddled with the sin of Adam and held captive.¹⁵

Such an approach, although attractive to a Calvinist, falls far short of the biblical teaching concerning what God calls true “righteousness.”

This proposed distinction between “righteousness of faith” and “moral righteousness” is unscriptural, seeing that although our righteousness is not based upon our perfect obedience, but rather on faith in Christ and forgiveness, true righteousness includes “practicing righteousness” (1 John 3:6-8).

Others, however, such as Moses Lard, have attempted to straddle the fence by interpreting the passage as follows: “I Paul am fleshly; though redeemed, and pardoned, and accepted, I am still fleshly; not wholly so, but fleshly, fleshly still in a body of flesh, from the influence of which, so long as I am in it, I can never become entirely freed. Not only so; I am fleshly, and therefore *sold under sin*, not completely so, as before my conversion, but still under it, and under it to a certain extent as abjectly as is the slave under his master. For struggle against sin as I may, I still commit it. I seem powerless to abstain from it entirely... Only let his language not be taken too strongly, and it presents no difficulty.”¹⁶

Thus, in effect, Lard is arguing for a “limited slavery” on the part of a Christian.

McGuiggan says of this: “This is no Christian!!! ‘Sin,’ says A.T. Robertson, ‘has closed the mortgage and owns the slave.’ This is a Christian? God forbid! And this person isn’t just ‘sold to’, he is ‘sold under’. Godet reminds us of the strength of this statement. It stresses, says he, ‘the shameful state of servitude which has followed the act of sale.’ This is no God-loving and Christ-adoring believer struggling with wickedness in his or her life. This is a slave under the cruel and wicked ownership of Sin. This is a human who, though longing for holiness and fellowship with God, is being shamed and humiliated by his foul owner!”¹⁷

I am inclined to agree with McGuiggan here; for I read of no “partial slavery” in Christ and as a Christian we are told that we cannot “serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24).

ARGUMENTS CONCERNING POSITION 2: PAUL SPEAKS OF HIS PRE-CONVERSION EXPERIENCES.

The arguments in favor of the “Pre-Conversion” interpretation:

The description of the “I” in Romans 7:14-25 and the “losing battle” characteristic of the life of this individual are incompatible with the freedom from slavery to sin effected in the Christian.

Yet, it is in accordance with the life of one outside of Christ seeking to be righteous in accordance with the Law.

Note again the descriptions of the “I” in this passage: (1) he is “carnal, sold under sin”; (2) being brought “into captivity to the law of sin”; (3) in a “body of death,” etc.

For comment on these descriptions see the above section II. C. under the “Christian” interpretation.

In addition to the above, consider the language of Romans 7:18-19.

Is it true of a Christian that he/she finds no way in Christ to “perform what is good” (7:18)? Surely not, for in Christ we are “created for good works” (Ephesians 2:10), and are to be people that are “zealous for” and that “maintain” good works (Titus 2:14; 3:8).

Even if this were pointed out to refer to what is the “general rule” for the Christian life, it would still fall short of what God would desire and expect of our lives.

Is it true that a Christian is one that “practices” evil (7:19)? No! The Christian is to practice righteousness (Romans 6:16, 18; 1 John 3:3-9).

The description of the “I” is indicative of the view a mature Christian would have of his past struggles as a Jew in seeking to be righteous under the law and outside of Christ.

Although Paul realized that in his past he truly did “delight in the law of God according to the inward man,” this delight and desire to be righteous by that law did not result in true righteousness. With each sin

he saw the victory of “sin” as it brought him “into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” (see Romans 7:22-23)

Despite the fact that Paul describes himself as “blameless” in accordance with the “righteousness which is in the law” (Philippians 3:6), his complete view of his condition after obeying the gospel was far different than what it was while outside of Christ.

First, note that all that is mentioned in Philippians 3:6, including the “blameless righteousness” he had in accordance with the Law, was “counted as loss for Christ” (Philippians 3:7).

Second, Paul’s view of his past position as a Pharisee and persecutor, although living in “all good conscience” during that time (Acts 23:1), was seen *in Christ* to be evil and worthless (1 Timothy 1:12-13, 15 – “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting *me* into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief... This *is* a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief”).

In describing the plight of his brethren and his great desire for their salvation, Paul says of them “...they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10:2-4). **Would this not apply to Paul as well before his conversion and fit nicely within Romans 7:14-25?**

Finally, Paul expresses that “by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight...” (Romans 3:20) and that “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘*Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them*’” (Galatians 3:10). **Does this not also describe Paul’s Jewish past?**

The pre-Christian interpretation fits with the context of Romans 7.

That Paul would address the inadequacies of seeking righteousness by law alone after a discourse concerning how a Christian has “become dead to the law through the body of Christ” (7:4) and “been delivered from the law, having died to what you were held by” is quite understandable.

Paul has expressed the fact that Christians have been delivered from the law (7:1-6).

Paul then addresses the fact that although we are delivered from the law, the law is not evil, seeing that through it sin (i.e., what is unacceptable to God) is known (7:6-13).

Yet, with these points established, Paul could have naturally addressed the question answered by 7:14-24: “If the law is good, holy, and just, why have we been delivered from it?”

In addressing the purpose of Romans 7:14-25, McGuiggan makes a very valuable point:

“But what has all this to do with the issue under consideration? Once more, Paul is dealing with the perversion of his Gospel. The claim is that his approach to law (see 5:20 and elsewhere) undermines Law and encourages people to live in sin that grace may abound. Paul has been claiming that saints *logically* should live a life of holiness. However, he has claimed, a life of holiness which is acceptable before God cannot be accomplished while a man is under Law unless it be that he is sinless. If he cannot do a sinless job he must get out from under the law. This he does by uniting with Christ in death. But if the saint must be freed from Sin and freed from law in order to be acceptable before God, doesn’t that make the law sin? This is where we are in the discussion. 7:7-25 is extolling the law and stressing its moral majesty which is (as it works out) too much even for a man of deep inner integrity and longing. In the end, such a man confesses that the holy law is too much for him and he is enslaved to Sin.”¹⁸

Jan Lambert writes: “One can ask why Paul in this section of his letter, devoted to the justified life of the Christian (chapters 5-8), speaks at such length of this pre-Christian, unregenerate situation, a condition of death. Our answer must refer to what has already been underlined: only through and after justification Paul did duly realize

his pre-Christian state of estrangement and misery. This is, however, not yet the entire answer... Through the negative picture of the Jew before and without Christ he evidently wants to promote the appreciation of Christian existence and, at the same time, to encourage a life which corresponds to the gift of the Spirit.”¹⁹

The “now” in Romans 8:1 helps to justify the view that there is a distinct difference in the time frame addressed and concluded with the “then” of Romans 7:25 with its anguish and failure and the “now” of Romans 8:1ff with its expressions of life and victory.²⁰

It should be noted that the “then/now” construction is used by Paul elsewhere to refer to the “pre-Christian/Christian” time distinction within the context (Romans 6:20-22; see also the possibility of Romans 7:5-6).

Romans 8:1 describes victory (i.e., “no condemnation”) for all who “walk...according to the Spirit.”

It appears to me that there is a significant difference between the end results of the actions of the man of Romans 7:14ff and the one of Romans 8:1ff, despite the fact that both were seeking to obey God’s will as best they possibly could.

The man of Romans 7 “delights in the law of God”—he is not a characteristically wicked man, living a life centered on evil and personal gratification, but one who is seeking after God. Yet, because of the lack of forgiveness in Christ, his deeds end in failure.²¹

Note: There is an interesting discussion by McGuiggan in his commentary on Romans on pp. 218-219 concerning the distinction between the Greek word “Sarkinos” (found in Romans 7:14) and “Sarkikos” found elsewhere and defined as “fleshly.” In this discussion, although he admits that these words are often interchangeable, he argues that Paul is saying he is “fleshy,” or limited by the weaknesses of the flesh, not “fleshly,” or centered in fulfilling the desires of the flesh. This definition would fit with the words of Paul in Romans 8:3-4.

The man of Romans 8 is one who continues to seek after God through faith and obedience (i.e., “walks in the Spirit”), but whose end result is victory through what Christ supplies (Romans 8:3-4).

In Romans 8:2 Paul, again using the first person singular (i.e., “me”), exclaims, “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.”

This does not fit with the one plagued with spiritual failure while living in a “body of death” that is addressed in Romans 7:14ff.

It should be noted that “made...free” is actually “aorist” tense, referring to what has taken place in the past—to past action completed and continually affecting the present.

The weaknesses of the “Pre-Conversion” interpretation:

One of the strongest arguments against the “I” of Romans 7:14-25 referring to Paul’s pre-Christian past is, again, his use of the 1st person singular.

It is argued that if Paul had intended to refer to his past, why then the sudden change from the past tense to the present (i.e., between 7:13 and 7:14)?

From a grammatical standpoint, this objection is not easily set aside; for, as Mark Seifrid points out on page 318 of his article entitled “The Subject of Romans 7:14-25,” in *Novum Testamentum* XXXIV, 4 (1992), other verses that use the present tense in much the same fashion are located in close context that are heavily marked by past time narratives (i.e., Matthew 17:11-12; Hebrews 10:9-10).

He continues by pointing out that when one studies Romans 7:14-25 “one finds instead indicators that Paul’s utterances are set in present time...Secondly, and decisively, the opening and closing of the passage contain implicit present-time markers.” (p. 318)

Note: Mr. Seifrid presents a position called the “Confessing ‘Ego’ of Early Judaism” as an answer to these difficulties that will be briefly addressed in the last section of this discussion.

Yet, one can forcefully argue, as we have already pointed out, that the “context” of Romans 7:14-25, by its very nature leads us to adopt the “historical present” view.

The description of the “I” here with its failures does not seem to be in accordance with the description of a Christian (i.e., Romans 6:22 – “But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life”).

Is there not some possible credence to the statement of A. E. Garvie who was quoted as saying, “To apply all that precedes this verse [7:25] to Paul as a Christian, however, would be to admit practically that the grace of God is as powerless against sin as the law is.”²²

The contrast between the “then” of Romans 7:25 and the “now” of 8:1 seems to indicate a definite change in the time frame of the two chapters.

Although I do not perceive this point as truly a weakness of the “pre-Christian” position, some argue that Paul’s description of the person in Romans 7:14-25 does not fit with Paul’s description elsewhere of his life or that of others before coming into Christ.²²

The insecure view of the man of Romans 7:14ff and his lack of ability to do what is pleasing to the Lord does not fit with Paul’s statements concerning his days as a Pharisee as recorded in Philippians 3:6.

Note the air of self-confidence expressed by Paul when he states: “...concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” and how it is contrasted with the lack of self-assurance expressed in Romans 7:19—“For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.”

This objection has been basically dealt with in section III. B. 2 above.

Yet, it is also helpful to note in answering this objection that Paul in Philippians 3 is using this list of accomplishments “in the flesh” to prove that *although he places no confidence in the flesh*, if anyone could do so it would be him (Philippians 3:3-4).

Paul is, therefore, using this to answer those of the circumcision that would try to cause the Philippian brethren to stray from their faith in Christ.

He is, in effect, saying that although he outshines them all in matters of the flesh under the Law, he had given it all up as “loss” because of how much more he gained in Christ (Philippians 3:7-8).

Yet, one must admit that the statement was true; so, some merit has to be given to this objection.

Another side of this argument states that Paul’s view of one outside of Christ as revealed in Romans 1:18-32 is far different from the man of Romans 7 whose “delight” is in the “law of God according to the inward man” (v. 22) and who “wills” to do good (v. 18-19).

This objection, however, I believe misses the point of Romans 7:14ff, seeing that Romans 1:18ff addresses the spiritual condition of the Gentiles who had rejected the word of God for their own lusts and human wisdom (as opposed to the Jews – Romans 2:1ff).

Romans 7:14ff, on the other hand, may very well address the view of a Christian *looking back* on his condition as a Jew who knew God’s law and was seeking to be righteous before God through obedience to it.

The view that Romans 7:14-25 addresses Paul’s pre-conversion state while living as a Jew fails to give a proper explanation of 7:25.

It is argued that Paul’s statement in 7:25a speaks of Christ as the deliverer of the “wretched man,” while 7:25b deals with the condition of the man *after* he has been delivered, which is the same as the man described in 7:14-24. Thus, this chapter must refer to Paul’s experience as a Christian.

Upon first reading of the chapter this objections seems to carry some weight. Yet...

The deliverance sought in 7:24 is “future” (i.e., “who *will* deliver me...”) and although Christ is stressed to be the deliverer in 7:25, no indication is given that this person is yet delivered until 8:1.

If the “then” of 7:25b carries any weight, it would appear to indicate a “summing up” of the condition of the man of 7:14-24 who is outside of Christ, while the “now” of 8:1ff is presented in striking contrast showing the victory and life in Christ (i.e., the results of the “through Jesus Christ our Lord” statement of 7:25a).

The force of the “then/now” construction in Romans 7:25 and 8:1 as proof of a time change from pre-conversion to post-conversion is weakened by the use of some of the same type terms in relationship to the Christian life in Romans 8.

Mark Seifrid states, “The same overlap of ‘now’ and ‘then’ is reflected in Paul’s description of life in the Spirit in Rom 8 also, so that one cannot dismiss this interpretation by an appeal to ‘salvation-historical’ progress from Rom 7 to Rom 8. Even in Rom 8 Paul envisions sin as a continuing reality, inherent to life in the body of the fallen human being. The new realities have overcome, but have not yet eliminated the juridical and ontological conditions of the old order. The body of the one who is in Christ is ‘dead’, i.e. subject to death, because of sin’s presence (8:10). Likewise, the bodies of believers are..., ‘mortal bodies’ (8:11). Those who are led by the Spirit ‘continue to put to death the deeds of the body’ (8:13). There is an unending battle against sin until the ‘redemption of the body’ (Rom 8:23).” (“The Subject of Rom. 7:14-25”, *Novum Testamentum XXXIV*, 4, 1992, p. 331).

The above argument, although speaking the truth about the fact that Christians still struggle with sin, may fall short in many other areas.

First, does the fact that the “body is dead because of sin” mean that it is “subject to death, because of sin’s presence,” or could it not more appropriately mean, in accordance with the context, that when Christ is truly in you, you have “put to death” the body of sin and no longer live in accordance with it.

This would fit with the “if” clause preceding the “body is dead” statement.

And, this approach is in line with the general context of Romans 8, where Paul has already discussed that those who come into Christ through baptism have “done away with” the “body of sin,” having crucified it with Christ (Romans 6:5-6).

Notice also the comparison between Romans 8:10-11 and Romans 6:8-13, where the power of God seen in the resurrection of Christ is applied to the Christian’s life as means of refusing to give in to the rule of sin.

There is a major difference in the “tendency to sin” that faces a Christian and the “slavery” to sin that is spoken of in Romans 7:14-25.

The “I” of Romans 7 appears to be ruled by sin (Romans 7:15-19).

Yet, the Christian of Romans 8, although faced with the possibility of sin, is not to make sin the “probability” in his life (Romans 8:13-15).

Cottrell, in his *Commentary on Romans*, argues that the description given of the man (i.e., “I”) of Romans 7:14-25 fits with other descriptions of Paul himself and should not, therefore, be considered as weighty evidence in favor of the “pre-Christian” position. (*The College Press NIV Commentary: Romans, Vol. 1 & 2*).

He states: “Surely these confessions are no worse than Paul’s declaration that ‘I am’ (...*imi ego*, present tense) ‘the worst’ of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Only a Christian would be aware of such conflict and admit it with such sorrow. We should remember that it is necessary for regenerate Christians to be exhorted and warned about sin (6:1-2, 12-13, 19; 8:12-13).” (Cottrell, 444)

Although 1 Timothy 1:15 does have Paul confessing a state of great sin before the Lord, it appears that this statement fits into the category of the present tense standing for the past as Romans 7:14-25 appears to do.

Note that Paul is discussing how grace was given him despite his own unworthiness as a “blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man, who was ignorant and unbelieving”(1 Timothy 1:12-14).

God is then praised for the fact that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15).

This statement would appear to be a reference to the present were it not for the following statement of 1:16 that seems to imply that Paul is still talking about his past and initial salvation (1 Timothy 1:16 – “However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life”).

Note that Paul is still discussing how he “obtained mercy,” past tense, which seems to imply that he is still referring to his lost condition in 1:15 before salvation came.

Also, notice that Paul says that he “obtained mercy, that in me *first* Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering,” which again seems to indicate that 1:15 is a reference to his past condition.

ARGUMENTS CONCERNING POSITION 3: PAUL IS USING THE “I” IN A “RHETORICAL” FASHION

The “Rhetorical I” positions interprets the use of “I” and the present tense to be a literary device.

By this approach, the direct application to Paul’s life is somewhat, if not completely, avoided, although some include a hint of personal reference. And, any problems with the present tense are also minimized.

Jan Lambrecht explains this position by saying, “...Paul as a good dramatist had to heighten and to simplify. Paul ‘works out a kind of abstraction, not one, however, which depicts from the concrete reality, but one which intensifies the experience of reality by concentrating it into its essential dimensions.’ He goes on to say, ‘Paul had to depict as sharply as possible the contrast between light and darkness: ‘real existential experience is set in bright light.’”²³

It is said that the narrative of Romans 7:14-25 is, without doubt, an exaggeration because “...all the ‘I’ does is (always) sin. One could also remark that such assertions do not concur with what he says elsewhere in the letter. In 2:14, for example, Paul seems to accept the possibility that (at least some) Gentiles who do not have the law do what the law requires.”²⁴

Thus, this position allows the reader to consider the words of Paul to be presented in the most drastic of terms so as to clearly define, and possibly more readily persuade his listeners of, the position he is seeking to argue.

An interesting twist on this position is given by Mark A. Seifrid in *Novum Testamentum*, where he sees Paul’s statements of Romans 7:14-23 to be very similar, if not exactly like what he calls the “...pattern found in early Jewish penitential prayer and confession, from the limited perspective of his intrinsic soteriological resources.”²⁵

In his application of this position he states: “As the broader context shows, Paul portrays life under the Law in 7:14-25 in order to gain the confession of his audience that the Gospel brings freedom from the Law for believers, not in order to prevent them from abandoning faith in Christ in favor of the Law. His argument therefore does not have to do with a ‘shattered moralism of the past’ but with realities current to his audience as fallen human beings, as the dual assertion of 7:25 indicates” (p. 331)

He goes on to say, “Although the “ego” of Rom 7 cannot be divorced from Paul’s own experience, we have seen that recognition of the rhetorical nature of the presentation is essential to a proper interpretation of the passage. The confessing first-person is used in both early Jewish materials and in Rom 7:14-25 to

reinforce theology and behavior. In a pendulum swing therefore, the questions which have characterized much of the interpretation of the text in the last sixty years have missed its central feature.” (p. 333)

He concludes with the statement: “The significance of Paul’s use of this way of viewing himself should not be overlooked, either. He portrays himself in this manner in order to move his readers to agree that the condemnation worked by the Law is still applicable to them, even though it has been overcome extrinsically in Christ.” (p. 333)

Others, however, including Clinton Hamilton in his commentary on Romans (*Truth Commentary Series: Romans*, Guardian of Truth Foundation, Bowling Green, KY, 1998) believe the passages to be rhetorical in nature, while not exaggerating any of the conditions of the person outside of Christ seeking to please God. (pp. 442-461).

In his concluding remarks concerning Romans 7:25 he states: “He simply brings his observations to a concise summary showing the conflict between the mind and the flesh. Although this is the situation with all men under law prior to receiving grace from God through Jesus Christ our Lord, he rejoices in the rescue from his miserable predicament that is shared with every other individual” (p. 461).

He continues by saying, “Although the interpretation of the *ego* referring to Paul’s personal experience as a Christian is a popular one, it does not appear to agree with the larger context in Romans. He is using himself rhetorically to demonstrate or illustrate what every individual experiences. Each person, as were Adam and Eve, was alive (not in sin) once, but the commandment comes and the enemy Satan through the flesh leads men to sin. Once trapped in this predicament, law is of no help even though one might wish to do good because of the law of sin working in the flesh he is condemned.” (p. 461)

Weakness of the two “rhetorical I” positions listed above:

Although one can possibly eliminate the problems of the first person and the present tense, this position still must face the same test (and difficulties) concerning “who” this “rhetorical I” actually refers to (i.e., a Christian or a non-Christian).

Mark Seifrid’s “early Jewish penitential prayer and confession” position ultimately applies these verses to Paul’s own experiences as a Christian, claiming that they refer to the “fallen self” of the flesh that remains in the Christian although overcome extrinsically by Christ.²⁶

This, of course, is basically a Calvinistic position that says man still holds in him the sin of Adam in his flesh, while Christ and His righteousness is imputed to us so that we can be saved despite this inherited and continual presence of sin.

I must admit that the rhetorical position as presented by Clinton Hamilton is very inviting, for the most part, because of certain problems it eliminates.

Yet, it must still fall under the scrutiny of *some* of the objections concerning the Pre-Christian view.

Yet, the fact that it eliminates many of the problems associated with the first person pronouns and the present tense should cause us to give it a second look.

Conclusion:

- I. Although there is much to be considered about the two main interpretations, they can be basically summarized as follows:

The *Christian* interpretation is summarized as, “On the one hand, says Paul, he is a slave to the law of God with his mind. Here the mind represents the entire inner man, the spirit or soul. In his spirit the Christian has already been delivered from slavery to sin (6:6), and from unwilling slavery to the law (7:6). Nevertheless he still submits himself as a slave to God’s law; but he does so freely, from his heart (6:17), because he delights in the law in his inner being (7:22). This kind of slavery is surely the mark of a Christian... On the other hand, Paul says he is still a slave to the law of sin with his... (*sarx*), his flesh (not his

‘sinful nature,’ contra the NIV). His as-yet-unredeemed body is still under sin’s sway and thus is at cross-purposes with his mind. (Cottrell, 454)

The gist of the *Pre-Christian* interpretation of Paul’s words is summarized as, “No, the law isn’t evil and Paul knows that for he serves it with his mind; he adopts it as his law. The problem is, in his flesh, he doesn’t live up to it and so is the servant of Sin. His virtues and good desires don’t count; his sins are imputed to him and so he is Sin’s servant. Standing in his own Adamic, human nature, in his flesh, he is unable to live up to what his mind freely recognizes and wants. He ends up sinning and so judicially as well as practically he belongs to sin.” (McGuiggan, 227)

In considering all the argument presented above, I am inclined to accept the *Pre-Christian* view as the one containing the least amount of problems.

Yet, in either case, I can rightfully praise the Lord that the weaknesses of my flesh have been overcome through Christ so that I can rejoice in the hope of redemption and eternal life.

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Endnotes

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21. C. Leslie Mitton, pt. 1, p. 78
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26. Mark A Seifrid, pp. 313-333
27. Ibid, p. 333