

**Zeitschrift:** Theologische Zeitschrift  
**Herausgeber:** Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel  
**Band:** 31 (1975)  
**Heft:** 5

**Artikel:** Rom. 7, 14-25 in the Theology of Paul  
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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878674>

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## Rom. 7,14–25 in the Theology of Paul

Tyndale Lecture delivered in Cambridge 1974

Rom. 7 is one of those key passages in Paul's writings which offers us an insight into a whole dimension of Paul's thought and faith. Even more important, it is one of the few really pivotal passages in Paul's theology; by which I mean that *our* understanding of it will in large measure determine our understanding of Paul's theology as a whole, particularly his anthropology and soteriology. As interpretations of Rom. 7 differ, so interpretations of Paul's anthropology and soteriology markedly alter in content and emphasis. Dispute about a tense, a phrase, a half-verse in Rom. 7 means in fact dispute about the whole character of Paul's gospel.

As is well known, opinions regarding this passage have been divided *three ways* – a division which has persisted from the earliest centuries until today<sup>1</sup>. The different views can be summarized thus: (a) Rom. 7,14–25 is Paul's autobiographical account of his own pre-conversion experience; (b) Rom. 7,14–25 is *not* autobiographical, but depicts man in general, or the Jew in particular, apart from Christ, under the law; (c) Rom. 7,14–25 describes Paul's own experience even as a believer<sup>2</sup>.

a) The first of these owes its revival in modern theology to Pietism and was the dominant interpretation of Rom. 7 at the beginning of the present century: Rom. 7,14–25 describes *Paul's* pre-Christian experience, the torment of his vain attempt to gain righteousness by his own efforts. I quote from one study of Paul picked almost at random:

"In this conflict (7,15.21ff.) Saul lived, as Pharisee and persecutor. Heavier and heavier did the curse of the law become to him, the more he studied it and the more exactly he tried to keep the commandment. The 'principle of evil' of which he had heard, and which he had fancied was easy to overcome, became for him a visible personal reality; and it was just his vehement, proud and fiery temperament that longed after good so passionately, just this separated him farther and farther from God. What struggles must have raged through his conscience, until, conquered at last, he breaks out in the despairing cry: 'I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing. For to will is present with me, but to do that which is good is not. So now it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwelleth in me!' . . ."<sup>3</sup>

On this interpretation Rom. 8 describes the transition for Paul from experience under the law to experience under grace; and at once we have a clear psychological insight into Paul's conversion and into its importance in his theology. In particular, we gain a better understanding of Paul's attitude to the law and a better understanding of what his gospel of liberation meant for him in the reality of his own experience.

<sup>1</sup> See W. G. Kümmel, *Römer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus* (1929), chap. 4; O. Kuss, *Zur Geschichte der Auslegung von Röm. 7,7–25: Der Römerbrief* (1957), pp. 462–85.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is concerned primarily with 7,14–25 as such; but on 7,7–13 see below pp. 000.

<sup>3</sup> H. Weinelt, *St. Paul, the Man and his Work* (1906), pp. 74f. Kümmel (n. 1) cites more than 50 proponents of this interpretation, p. 141, n. 2.

b) The important monograph by W. G. Kümmel in 1929 signalled the end of this autobiographical interpretation for most continental scholars. For Kümmel Rom. 7 was not so much Paul's experience under the law as Paul's Christian portrayal of *man* under the law. The frequently used "I" of Rom. 7 was not Paul himself but rather a stylistic form making for a more vivid style than our colourless "one"<sup>4</sup>. It is this interpretation of Rom. 7 which lies at the heart of Bultmann's influential existentialist analysis of Paul's theology. Here is the fullest expression of Paul's understanding of human existence apart from faith<sup>5</sup>. Here, if I am not mistaken, is one of the central supports, perhaps the central support, for two of Bultmann's most famous assertions: that "Paul's theology is, at the same time, anthropology"<sup>6</sup>; and that the existentialist demythologizing of the N.T. is validated by the understanding of human existence which the N.T. itself enshrines<sup>7</sup>.

c) Continuing to commend some support, but very definitely a minority view in modern exegesis, is the classic interpretation of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, of Luther and Calvin, that in Rom. 7 Paul describes his continuing experience as a believer. Where the majority interpretations read Rom. 7 as a transcript of an experience which belongs to the past, an experience which Paul the Christian no longer knows, if he ever knew it, this minority interpretation reads Rom. 7 as Paul's expression of his own experience *now*, even as a Christian<sup>8</sup>. Here quite clearly is involved not merely a different interpretation of Rom. 7, but a quite different understanding of what the gospel meant in existential reality for the Pauline believer.

This third, the minority interpretation, commends itself most strongly to me. It does so for two main reasons. First, it is the most natural interpretation of Rom. 7 itself and of Rom. 7 in its immediate context. Second, it is wholly of a piece with Paul's larger understanding of what the experience of grace means for the believer in the here and now. The rest of this paper will be devoted to an elaboration of these two claims. Its main contribution to the debate will, I hope, come in the exposition of the continuing two-sided nature of Christian experience, as an experience of flesh as well as of Spirit, of death as well as of life.

# 1.

The autobiographical interpretation of Rom. 7,14–25 has an immediate appeal – Paul speaks in the first person because he speaks of his own experience. But *no one*, especially those more familiar with one of the two *autobiographical* interpretations of Rom. 7, should underestimate the strength of the case argued by Kümmel. It gains its greatest strength from two observations.

<sup>4</sup> Kümmel (n. 1), pp. 117–32.

<sup>5</sup> R. Bultmann, *Romans 7 and the Anthropology of Paul: Existence and Faith* (1960, repr. 1964), pp. 173–85; *Theology of the New Testament* (1952), pp. 245–48.

<sup>6</sup> Bultmann (n. 5), *Theology*, p. 191.

<sup>7</sup> R. Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*: H. W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth* (1953), p. 12; note the reference to H. Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem* (1930).

<sup>8</sup> Maintained most forcefully in recent years by A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (1952), pp. 284–303. See also J. Knox, *Romans: Interpreter's Bible*, 9 (1954); J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1960), pp. 257ff.; K. Stalder, *Das Werk des Geistes in der Heiligung bei Paulus* (1962), pp. 291–307; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1963); J. I. Packer, *The "Wretched Man" of Romans 7: Studia Evang.* 2 (1964), pp. 621–7; J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul* (1965), pp. 2–37; L. Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of St Paul* (1967), p. 442; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1 (1975), pp. 341–7. 356–70.

First, the contrast between the condition so graphically portrayed in Rom. 7,14–25 and that described by Paul in Rom. 6,1–7,6 and Rom. 8. The “wretched man” of 7,23 laments, “I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members”. But Paul the Christian exults in 7,6, “Now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive . . .” How can this be the same person, the same condition? The “wretched man” of 7,14 confesses sorrowfully, “I am carnal (*sárkinos*), the purchased slave of sin”. But Paul the Christian cries joyfully, “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death” (8,2). How can this be the same person, the same condition?<sup>9</sup> If appeal be made to Gal. 5,17 – “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for they are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would” (RSV) – Kümmel replies that the cases are different. A choice lies before the man of Gal. 5,17 – he may walk according to the Spirit or he may gratify the desires of the flesh. The man of Rom. 7 has no choice – he is the slave of sin and knows no liberator, he cannot do what he would, the possibility of walking according to the Spirit has not yet been given him. To be sure the Christian always is in danger of serving the flesh, but the continued and uninterrupted failure and despondency of Rom. 7 is something different<sup>10</sup>.

The second critical observation of Kümmel is that the “I” of 7,7–13 can hardly be autobiographical. For one thing Paul says in 7,9, “I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died”. If one wanted to describe the dawning consciousness of sin in oneself, this is hardly the most natural language to choose; in particular, a Jew would hardly describe his childhood as a time “without the law”<sup>11</sup>. For another, 7,7ff. is intended primarily as an apology for the law, not as an autobiographical report; it can only serve as such if it describes a more than merely personal experience of the law<sup>12</sup>. And for another, we may add, the autobiographical interpretation of 7,7–13 implies a pre-Christian religious experience of Paul which runs directly counter to Paul’s own description of his pre-Christian attitude of mind in Gal. 1,13f. and Phil. 3,6 – “as to righteousness under the law, blameless”<sup>13</sup>. Such considerations have led some to the conclusion that the “I” means Adam, or the Jewish race (cf. 7,9f. with 5,13), but Kümmel to the conclusion that the “I” is a rhetorical form. And if the “I” of 7,7–13 is a figure of style, so is the “I” of 7,14–25<sup>14</sup> – a conclusion

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kümmel (n. 1), pp. 10ff.; P. Althaus, *Zur Auslegung von Röm. 7,14ff.*: *Theol. Lit.zeit.* 77 (1952), col. 479; F. J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1961), pp. 182f.; H. W. Schmidt, *Der Brief an die Römer* (1963), pp. 126f.; P. von der Osten-Sacken, *Römer 8 als Beispiel paulinischer Soteriologie* (1975), pp. 215–8.

<sup>10</sup> Kümmel (n. 1), pp. 104ff.; Althaus (n. 9), pp. 478f.; C. L. Mitton, *Romans 7 Reconsidered*: *Exp. Times* 65 (1953–54), p. 102; E. Gaugler, *Der Brief an die Römer* (1958), pp. 236f.; O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (<sup>12</sup>1963), p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> See also G. Bornkamm, *Sin, Law and Death: Early Christian Experience* (1969), p. 93; H. Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (1969), p. 233.

<sup>12</sup> Kümmel (n. 1), pp. 76–84.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Gaugler (n. 10), pp. 238f.; Schmidt (n. 9), p. 127; E. Käsemann, *An die Römer* (1974), p. 183.

<sup>14</sup> Kümmel (n. 1), pp. 85–97. See also Bornkamm (n. 11), pp. 92ff.; P. Althaus, *Der Brief an die Römer* (<sup>10</sup>1966), pp. 74, 79ff. For the interpretation of “I” in terms of salvation-history see particularly E. Stauffer, *Theol. Wört.* 2 (1936), pp. 358–62; S. Lyonnet, *L’histoire du salut selon la chapitre VII de l’Épître aux Romains*: *Rev. bibl.* 43 (1962), pp. 117–51.



which Kümmel backs up by suggesting parallels both within Paul and in contemporary literature where the first person singular is not intended to be taken autobiographically<sup>15</sup>.

These two points give us the heart of the case against the minority interpretation of Rom. 7,14–25. In fact however the case so far presented does *not* have as much cogency as its proponents claim. This I hope will become evident from the following considerations, the first two of which respond to the points argued by Kümmel in more general terms, the rest being concerned with more detailed points of exegesis.

1) Kümmel repeatedly insists that the condition depicted in Rom. 7 is different from that presupposed in Rom. 6 and 8. But in that case Rom. 7,7–25 becomes an unnecessary interruption and digression in Paul's train of thought, much more suited to the context of Rom. 2–3 than that of 6–8. Yet Romans is a much more carefully planned work than any of his other letters, so that it is more likely that 7,7–25 belongs where it does by deliberate choice. In which case it is probable that Paul's thought flows consistently from Rom. 6 through 7 to 8<sup>16</sup> – in the course of which he looks in turn at the Christian in relation to three key realities of his experience: to sin (6), to sin and the law (7), to the law and the Spirit (8,1–8) and to the Spirit (8,9–30). The difference between 7,7–25 and the rest of these chapters may therefore denote not different conditions but the same condition viewed from different aspects. The "wretched man" of Rom. 7 may be the believer seen only in terms of the flesh, law and sin. That is to say, Rom. 7,7–25 may describe a continuing dimension of the believer's *experience, even as a believer*. Certainly the language of 7,14, 23 is strong. But is it no more possible for the Pauline believer to say, "I am fleshly, and as such the slave of sin", and, "Even as a Christian I am captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members"? I believe that Paul's answer is Yes, and will hope to demonstrate it in the next section.

2) There is nothing in Rom. 7 which demands that the frequently repeated "I"/"me" (about 20 times) be understood in a way which distances Paul from the experience he is describing. It is certainly quite probable that in 7,7–13 at least he is describing *typical experience* of an "I"<sup>17</sup>, but the existential anguish and frustration of vv. 15ff. and 24 is too real, too sharply poignant to permit any reduction of the "I" to a mere figure of style. Whatever else this is, it is surely Paul speaking from the heart of *his own experience*<sup>18</sup>. I must confess that it seems to me a rather convoluted process of reasoning which argues both that the "I" does not denote Paul's personal experience but that it does denote the experience of everyman – everyman, except Paul<sup>19</sup>! Surely the "I"-style is chosen to denote typical experience, precisely because it is so typical that it includes

<sup>15</sup> Kümmel (n. 1), pp. 121–32. The Pauline passages cited are, Rom. 3,5. 7, 1. Cor. 6,12. 15, 10,29f., 11,31f., 13,1–3. 11f., 14,11. 14. 15, Gal. 2,18.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. particularly Nygren (n. 8), pp. 287f.

<sup>17</sup> II Baruch 54,19:

Adam is therefore not the cause, save only of his own soul,  
But each of us has been the Adam of his own soul.

That Paul here uses Adam typology is widely recognized. See e.g. C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1957), pp. 143f.; Leenhardt (n. 9), pp. 186ff.; E. Brandenburger, *Adam und Christus* (1962), pp. 215f.

<sup>18</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1932), pp. 106f.; cf. M. Goguel, *The Birth of Christianity* (1953), pp. 213f.; Cranfield (n. 8), p. 344. E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (1955), p. 275, n. 239, thinks that Kümmel's "rhetorical-universal interpretation founders on Gal. 2,15".

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e.g. Bultmann (n. 5), p. 177: "this 'willing' is the trans-subjective propensity of human existence as such"; Leenhardt (n. 9), pp. 183ff.; G. Bornkamm, *Paul* (1971), pp. 125f.

my experience. This is true of most of the “I”-passages Kümmel quotes from Paul to support his view that “I” is merely rhetorical: apart from the one or two which quote the objections of (real or imaginary) objectors, in the rest Paul uses “I” as including me, not “I” meaning anyone but me<sup>20</sup>. And it is true also of Rom. 7,7–13. To be sure, the contrast particularly with Phil. 3,6 is very marked. But then we must not make the mistake of taking Phil. 3,6 out of its polemical context and erecting it into a dogmatic statement about Paul’s pre-Christian past. In Phil. 3,6 Paul describes his pre-Christian experience from his *then Jewish* standpoint in language that would most impress the Jewish mind. But in Rom. 7,7–13 he describes his pre-Christian experience from his *now Christian* standpoint. Elsewhere he thinks of the pre-Christian condition in terms of death, and of conversion as a being made alive (Rom. 4,17, 6,13, 11,15, 2. Cor. 3,6f., Col. 2,13, Eph. 2,15, 5,14). So there is no real difficulty in concluding that the “I died” of Rom. 7,9 is Paul’s *Christian* recognition of the real relation he had to the law before “the revelation of Jesus Christ” came to him on the Damascus road<sup>21</sup>. If the autobiographical interpretation of “I” is defensible for 7,7–13, it is all the more plausible for the rest of 7.

These first two more general points have not answered all of Kümmel’s case, but they do put several large question marks against it. The following points of exegesis do not constitute an exhaustive exegesis by any means, but they are the points most relevant to the debate since Kümmel, and they do I think begin to tip the scale in favour of the view that Rom. 7,14–25 describes Paul’s own experience as a believer.

3) The tense of *édein* in v. 7: “I would not have known (*édein*) what it was to covet had the law not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” *édein* is a pluperfect with imperfect sense<sup>22</sup> – that is, Paul probably intends it to describe the beginning of a *continuing experience*; he still experiences lust. The covetousness which, as he now recognizes, characterized his pre-Christian past (n. 21), is still a feature of his Christian present. Consequently 7,7–13 is not an interruption to the flow of thought through 6 to 8 (point 1. above)<sup>23</sup>, since it in fact describes the beginning of an experience which continues for the believer – one aspect of Paul’s experience even as a Christian. Even as a Christian there is still a sense in which he can and must say, “I died and am dead because of sin” (cf. 8,10 below).

4) The change of tense between vv. 7–13 and 14ff. In 7,7–13 Paul speaks in the past tense – of a stage of experience which was behind him. In vv. 14ff. he speaks in the

<sup>20</sup> Cf. K. Kertelge, *Exegetische Überlegungen zum Verständnis der paulinischen Anthropologie nach Römer 7*: Zs. ntl. Wiss. 62 (1971), pp. 107f. To Gal. 2,18, Kümmel, “Individualgeschichte” und “Weltgeschichte” in Gal. 2,15–21: *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament. Stud. in Honour of C. F. D. Moule* (1973), pp. 157–72, would now add Gal. 2,19–21. But however typical the “I” in these verses it must surely include Paul himself and arise in large part at least out of his own experience; cf. E. D. Burton, *Galatians* (1921), p. 132; A. Oepke, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* (1964), p. 62.

<sup>21</sup> It is unnecessary to fix on a specific event or date, as when he was made a bar-mitzwah, son of commandment, at the age of 13 (?) – see W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (1948), pp. 24ff. Paul is here rather describing his recognition now, in the light of his faith in Christ, that his earlier coveting of righteousness by means of the law was in fact an abuse and a breach of the law – so that his very longing and striving for the life that the law promised only enmeshed him ever more firmly in the power of death.

<sup>22</sup> Barrett (n. 17), p. 142; Cranfield (n. 8), p. 348.

<sup>23</sup> Against Althaus (n. 9), col. 477; Mitton (n. 10), p. 101.

present tense – that is, of his present experience as a Christian<sup>24</sup>. The fact that Paul does not make much of the transition, that his thought moves from past to present almost unconsciously, underlines the degree of continuity which Paul recognizes between his pre-Christian experience and his experience as a Christian. But there is a difference. In vv. 7–13 there was no resistance: sin launched its attack<sup>25</sup>, struck him down, and left him for dead with no fight in him. But in vv. 14ff. we see battle joined – we see Paul with a resistance and firmness of purpose which was lacking in vv. 7–13. He is still defeated, but he is now fighting. Where the strength of the counter attack comes from we will not learn till chapter 8, but the suggestion is already implicit that it is the Spirit joining battle in Paul with the flesh (Rom. 8,2ff.).

5) “The inner man” (ho *ésō anthrōpos*) of v. 22 – “I delight in the law of God in my inmost self”. This phrase most probably refers to the believer as part of the new age, renewed by the Spirit, belonging to Christ the last Adam<sup>26</sup>. This is certainly the sense Paul intends in 2. Cor. 4,16, the closest parallel to the usage in Rom. 7,22<sup>27</sup>. There it stands in contrast to “the outward man”, that is man as part of the old age, man in solidarity with the first Adam. And the parallel is clear with Paul’s later contrast between “the new man” and “the old man” (Col. 3,9f., Eph. 4,22ff.; cf. Gal. 3,27 with Rom. 13,14), as also with his contrast between Spirit and flesh (see below). The implication is therefore that Rom. 7,22 refers to Paul the Christian, the man who is both in Christ *and* in Adam at one and the same time and whose experience is characterized precisely by the tension and frustration of divided loyalties.

6) A particularly crucial verse is 7,25b – “I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.” This is the central pivot on which our whole understanding of Paul’s gospel turns. It is the stone on which the majority interpretations of Rom. 7,14–25 break and fall – hence the rather feverish attempts to omit the verse as a later gloss<sup>28</sup> or to rewrite the last section of 7 with v. 25b interposed between v. 23 and v. 24<sup>29</sup>. There is no textual support for either hypothesis. In such cases the soundest judgment is almost always that the hypothesis defended is more suspect than the text emended. The significance of 7,25b is that it comes after 7,25a and that it is the conclusion to chapter 7 as a whole<sup>30</sup>. Even after the shout of thanksgiving Paul still

<sup>24</sup> Nygren (n. 8), pp. 285, 288f.: Rom. 7,7ff. can indeed be described as an “apology for the law” (Kümmel), but the apology is complete with v. 13. Vv. 14ff. deal primarily with the relation between the “I” and sin rather than between the law and sin (vv. 7–13). Cf. U. Luz, *Das Geschichtsverständnis des Paulus* (1968), p. 159, n. 86; Cranfield (n. 8), pp. 344f.

<sup>25</sup> For *aformē* as evoking military imagery cf. Arndt & Gingrich, s.v.; Barrett (n. 17), p. 142.

<sup>26</sup> Barret (n. 17), p. 150; Cranfield (n. 8), pp. 346, 363. Kümmel (n. 1), pp. 59ff., attempts to restrict the meaning of *ho ésō anthrōpos* in v. 22 in an artificial way. Käsemann (n. 13), pp. 196f., recognizes the sharpness of the problem posed by this phrase without resolving it satisfactorily.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Eph. 3,16, the only other occurrence of the phrase in the Pauline corpus.

<sup>28</sup> R. Bultmann, *Glossen im Römerbrief*: *Theol. Lit. Zeit.* 72 (1947), 198f.; G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: Schweich Lectures 1946* (1953), p. 16; Kuss (n. 1), p. 461; Luz (n. 24), p. 160; H. Paulsen, *Überlieferung und Auslegung in Röm. 8* (Diss. Mainz 1972), pp. 44–50; cf. Bornkamm (n. 11), p. 99; Leenhardt (n. 9), p. 195; E. Schweizer, *Theol. Wört.* 7 (1964), p. 133, n. 276; Käsemann (n. 13), pp. 201f.

<sup>29</sup> Moffatt’s translation; Dodd (n. 18), pp. 114f.; F. Müller, *Zwei Marginalien im Brief des Paulus an die Römer*: *Zs. ntl. Wiss.* 40 (1941), pp. 249–54; Michel (n. 10), pp. 179f.; G. Eichholz, *Die Theologie des Paulus im Umriss* (1972), p. 257.

<sup>30</sup> Rom. 8,1 does not provide a conclusion to Rom. 7, but gathers up the whole of the preceding section 5–7, as Kümmel (n. 1), p. 69, recognizes.

has to confess, “I, I myself, this same I, serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.” The “mind” here must be the mind renewed by the Spirit (cf. Rom. 12,2), since Paul nowhere else speaks so positively of the “natural” mind<sup>31</sup>. “Mind” is then more or less synonymous with “the inner man” of v. 22. Hence, both before and after v. 25a Paul expresses his experience *as a believer*. It is as one who knows Christ as Lord that Paul confess, “I with my flesh, as flesh, go on serving the law of sin.” Here then is Paul’s conclusion to his discussion of the Christian’s relation to sin and law – it is not a relation which has been left behind<sup>32</sup>, rather it is a relation which continues even for the man who also experiences the Spirit. The antithesis between the inward man and the flesh is not overcome and left behind, it continues through and beyond the shout of thanksgiving – as a continuing antithesis between mind and flesh. The “I” is still divided. In other words, the struggle so vividly depicted in 7,14–25 does not end when the Spirit comes; on the contrary, that is when it really begins<sup>33</sup>. Service of the law of God means victory for the Spirit; service of the law of sin means victory for the flesh; and there is no battle in which the flesh is wholly the loser till the last battle. This is the paradox and tension of the believer’s experience so long as this age lasts – *simul iustus et peccator*<sup>34</sup>.

7) Rom. 8,1ff. At first sight 8,1ff. seem to speak of a wholly different experience. In fact however these verses only elaborate the other side of the paradox. Rom. 8,2 cannot denote complete liberation from the power of the flesh and of death – even men of the Spirit die (1. Thess. 4,13, 1. Cor. 15,26). Rather v. 2 speaks of an experience where with the coming of the Spirit the law of sin is no longer the sole determiner of present conduct or the final determiner of ultimate destiny<sup>35</sup>. And in 8,4ff. Paul does not contrast believer with unbeliever<sup>36</sup>; rather he confronts the believer with both sides of the paradox, both sides of his nature as believer. If he lives solely on the level of the flesh, solely as flesh, then his ultimate destiny is death (vv. 6ff., Gal. 6,8a). But if he allows his walk to be determined by the Spirit, then his ultimate destiny is life – life in death, life through death, life beyond death (vv. 6,10f., Gal. 6,8b). In v. 10 the continuity of thought between 7,14–25 and 8 is perhaps most clearly evident and the continuing paradox of

<sup>31</sup> A difficulty also recognized by Kümmel, pp. 27ff.; see further above n. 26.

<sup>32</sup> To read Rom. 7,25b as a summary of the pre-Christian experience of 7,7–25: A. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *Romans* (5 1902), p. 184; Kümmel (n. 1), pp. 65f.; Gaugler (n. 10), p. 282, makes too light of v. 25a and leaves 7,25b as a pathetic anti-climax. Nor does it really solve the problem to take 7,25b with 8,1ff. rather than with 7; J. Kürzinger, *Der Schlüssel zum Verständnis von Röm. 7: Bibl. Zs. 7* (1963), pp. 270–4. The case is not strengthened by forcing the *autòs egō* into the unparalleled sense, “I left to myself”, as by J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St Paul* (1895), p. 305; Sanday and Headlam, p. 178; Mitton (n. 10), pp. 133f.; Schmidt (n. 9), p. 133; R. N. Longenecker, *Paul Apostle of Liberty* (1964), pp. 111f. But see also Packer (n. 8), p. 625; Luz (n. 24), p. 160, n. 89.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Calvin on 7,15: “It has been well said that the carnal man plunges into sin with the consent and concurrence of his soul, but that a division at once begins as soon as he is called by the Lord and renewed by the Spirit.”

<sup>34</sup> Luther, *Commentary on Rom. 7,25*: “This is the most telling passage of all. Notice that one and the same man serves both the law of God and the law of sin, that he is righteous and at the same time he sins.”

<sup>35</sup> If the law of v. 2b is the Mosaic law, then the liberty of which Paul speaks is freedom from the law as a means to righteousness. In neither case does he imply that the believer is free from temptation or from sinning.

<sup>36</sup> Against H. Lietzmann, *An die Römer* (5 1971), pp. 79f. In 8,9 note the *eíper*; see J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (1970), p. 148.



flesh and Spirit, death and life, comes to striking expression: "If Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness<sup>37</sup>." The body is dead because the Christian is still as flesh a member of the first Adam — dead towards God, dead in sin, heading for death; the "body" of which Paul speaks in 8,10 is the same "body of death" for deliverance from which he longs in 7,24. But the Christian *also*, at the same time, has the Spirit, also shares the life of the last Adam, the life-giving Spirit; as such he is alive towards God, dead to sin. In short, the Christian lives on two levels at once — he knows both life and death at the same time<sup>38</sup>. Finally 8,12f. — "So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live." Notice that it is to Christians that Paul utters this word — both of warning and of encouragement. The seriousness of the warning underlines the fact that the Christian even as Christian still lives in the realm of flesh, may still allow his whole life to be dominated by the appetites and weaknesses of the sin-dominated dimension of his present life. In which case he will die as flesh and be destroyed with the destruction of the flesh. Only if he allows the Spirit also to determine his relationships with the world and its values, to contest his wordly appetites and weaknesses, only then will life have the last say through death and beyond death. But in the meantime the believer is both flesh and has the Spirit, knows both death and life and he must constantly choose whose prompting he will follow.

In the last two paragraphs in particular two themes began to emerge which have obvious repercussions for our understanding of Paul at this point, as indeed for our understanding of Paul's soteriology as a whole — the relation between the Christian and *flesh* and the relation between the Christian and *death*. These themes must now be taken up and elaborated if we are to demonstrate that the interpretation of Rom. 7,14–25 here proposed is wholly of a piece with the rest of Paul's theology.

## 2.

Since the rediscovery of the eschatological dimension of N.T. faith and experience it has become widely accepted that Paul's soteriology is characterized by an Already/Not yet tension, the tension between the Already of Jesus' resurrection and the Not yet of his parousia. For Paul the believer is caught between fulfillment and consummation; he lives in the overlap of the ages, where the new age of resurrection life has already begun, but the old age of existence in the flesh has not yet ended, where the final work of God has *begun* in him but is not yet completed (Phil. 1,6). No one has elaborated this aspect of Pauline thought and of N.T. thought in general more helpfully than O. 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>39</sup>."

<sup>37</sup> RSV is wrong in translating *sôma* and *pneûma* as the plurals "bodies" and "spirits". Most modern commentators recognize that in the context *pneûma* almost certainly means (Holy) Spirit.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. W. Grundmann, *Theol. Wört.* 1 (1933), p. 313; M. Dibelius, *Paulus und die Mystik: Botschaft und Geschichte* 2 (1956), p. 150; W. Pfister, *Das Leben im Geist nach Paulus* (1963), p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (1967), p. 202; see also pp. 248–68 and *Christ and Time* (<sup>3</sup>1962).

As I have pointed out elsewhere<sup>40</sup>, this tension underlies the whole of Paul's soteriology. We see this perhaps most clearly in the *metaphors* he uses to describe the Christian's experience of the new age, and in his understanding of the *Spirit*. Thus he uses key metaphors like "justification", "redemption" and "salvation" both of that which is already realized or being realized in the believer's experience and of that which is yet outstanding<sup>41</sup>. Again, believers have already received the Spirit of adoption and are God's sons, but they still await adoption as sons (Rom. 8,14f., 23). In 1. Cor. 6,17 Paul describes the believer's relation with Christ in terms of a marriage already consummated; but in 2. Cor. 11,2 he thinks of conversion as a betrothal and of life in the present as preparation for the not yet consummation of marriage itself (cf. Eph. 5,25ff.). In all these cases the two-sided nature of Paul's experience as a believer is clearly evident; the joy of already liberation is balanced by the sigh of frustrated longing for the complete liberty of the sons of God (Rom. 8,19–25, 2. Cor. 5,1–5).

So too the Spirit of God is essentially the eschatological Spirit – that power of the not yet which is already at work in the believer<sup>42</sup>. Hence as the risen Jesus is the *aparché*, the first fruits, the beginning of the eschatological harvest of resurrection (1. Cor. 15,20, 23), so the Spirit is the *aparché*, the first fruits, the beginning of the eschatological harvest of resurrection power (Rom. 8,23). The Spirit is the *arrabón*, the first instalment of resurrection life which guarantees the full bestowal of resurrection life in the future (2. Cor. 1,22, 5,5; Eph. 1,14). The gift of the Spirit is the first part of the eschatological inheritance of sonship and kingdom into which the believer will enter at the final consummation (Rom. 8,15–17, 1. Cor. 6,9–11, Gal. 4,1–7, Eph. 1,14)<sup>43</sup>. In short, the gift of the Spirit is the beginning of that process of salvation and redemption which will not be completed until the Spirit has extended his sway over the whole man, that is, until the believer has become a spiritual body, that is, until the resurrection of the body (1. Cor. 15,44–50).

All this is fairly common ground. Often less fully appreciated is what all this means for the believer in relation to the *flesh* and to death. Only when we have begun to appreciate how the Christian stands in relation to the flesh and to death in Paul's thought, only then will we begin to appreciate how deeply Rom. 7,14–25 is embedded in Paul's soteriology and how clearly it reflects his understanding of Christian experience.

1) As is the case with all writers who are influenced more by Hebrew than by Hellenistic thought, Paul's anthropological terms view man as a whole from different aspects rather than by subdividing him into different parts. *Sárx* then is an aspectival or relational term rather than a partitive term – man is flesh, not, man has flesh. Man as

<sup>40</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (1975), § 53; cf. *idem*, *Spirit and Kingdom: Exp. Times* 82 (1970–71), pp. 36–40.

<sup>41</sup> E.g. justification – Rom. 5,1, but cf. Gal. 5,5; redemption – Rom. 3,24, Col. 1,14, but cf. Rom. 8,23, Eph. 1,14; Salvation – cf. Rom. 5,9f., 13,11, 1. Thess. 5,8f. with tenses used in 1. Cor. 1,18, 15,2, 2. Cor. 2,15 and Eph. 2,5, 8.

<sup>42</sup> See particularly G. Vos, *The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Concept of the Spirit: Biblical and Theological Stud.* (1912), pp. 211–59; H. D. Wendland, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes in den Gläubigen nach Paulus: Theol. Lit.zeit.* 77 (1952), col. 457; N. Q. Hamilton, *The Holy Spirit and Eschatology in Paul* (1957).

<sup>43</sup> See particularly J. D. Hester, *Paul's Concept of Inheritance* (1968), pp. 96–103.



flesh is man in his creaturliness, in his weakness (see e.g. Rom. 3,20, 1. Cor. 15,50, 2. Cor. 7,5, Gal. 1,16)<sup>44</sup>.

2) *Sôma* and *sárx* overlap in meaning in that both can refer to the physical body, man in his physical relationships (see particularly Rom. 8,13, 1. Cor. 6,16). But where *sôma* is generally a neutral concept, *sárx* regularly has negative connotations. *Sôma* denotes man in the world; *sárx* denotes man belonging to the world. *Sôma* can be used negatively, but almost always the negative connotation is given by the qualifying adjective or phrase (e.g. mortal body – Rom. 6,12, 8,11; body of sin – Rom. 6,6); whereas *sárx* is more regularly negative in itself without a qualifying phrase<sup>45</sup>. *Sárx* by itself means mortal body, body dominated by weakness and corruptibility; *sárx* by itself means body of sin, body ruled by sin. When Paul wants a pejorative contrast he uses *katà sárka*, not *katà sôma*. Two examples bring out this relationship between *sôma* and *sárx* most clearly: Col. 1,22, 2,11, where Paul speaks of “the body of flesh” – that is, the neutral word (body) is given a more negative connotation by qualifying it with the word “flesh”; 1. Cor. 15, where Paul asserts that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (15,50), whereas the body will be raised from the dead and/or transformed (15,44–54) – that is, man in his relatedness to this world (body) is transformed, whereas man in his belongingness to this world (flesh) is destroyed<sup>46</sup>.

3) Conversion does not mean that the flesh has been left behind. Man as a Christian is still part of this world, still belongs in some sense to this world (Rom. 6,19, 1. Cor. 1,29, 6,16, 7,28 etc.). Man as a believer still lives in some sense at least “in the flesh” (2. Cor. 10,3, Gal. 2,20, Phil. 1,22, Phm. 16). He has begun to experience the “life-giving Spirit”, that is true, but he is still “a living soul”; he belongs to the last Adam, that is true, but he is still of the stock of the first Adam (1. Cor. 15,45)<sup>47</sup>. His life in the flesh, his belongingness to this world, will not cease, cannot cease, until he becomes a spiritual body at resurrection or *parousia*. For his body is still at this stage a mortal body, a body of flesh. Only at the consummation will the Spirit extend his control to the body, only then will the flesh be left behind, only then will the believer’s solidarity with this present age be finally broken<sup>48</sup>.

4) This fleshliness of the believer, his belongingness to this world, is almost always something negative, something which runs counter to his relationship with the Spirit of Christ, something which hinders and prevents life in Christ coming to full expression in the present age. A majority of Pauline commentators want to separate Paul’s use of *sárx* into two clearly distinct compartments – *sárx* in a merely physical, non-pejorative sense, and *sárx* in a moral, pejorative sense<sup>49</sup>. I do not believe that such a distinction can be

<sup>44</sup> See Bultmann, *Theology*, p. 233; W. D. Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man* (1956), pp. 154ff.; Schweizer (n. 28), pp. 125ff.; A. Sand, *Der Begriff “Fleisch” in den paulinischen Hauptbriefen* (1967), chap. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Paul never quite says that *sárx* itself is evil; see Dunn, *Jesus – Flesh and Spirit*, an Exposition of Romans 1,3–4: *Journ. Theol. Stud.* N.S. 24 (1973), p. 46, n. 1. Barrett (n. 17), p. 148, goes too far when he says of v. 18: “Here at least and at v. 25, the flesh is radically evil.”

<sup>46</sup> Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (1952), p. 31; E. Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (1971), p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> See also Dunn, *1. Corinthians 15,45 – Last Adam, Life-giving Spirit: Christ and Spirit* (n. 20), pp. 127–41.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Sand (n. 44), chap. 6.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. W. D. Davies, *Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, *Flesh and Spirit*: K. Stendhal (ed.), *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (1957), p. 163; Schweizer (n. 28), pp. 125–35.

maintained<sup>50</sup>. *Sárx* represents a range of meaning rather than a number of discrete points – which means that the full range of meaning often lies under the surface, even when the immediate emphasis is more narrowly defined in a particular context. That is to say, even when *sárx* is used in a physical sense, there is almost always a moral overtone present; and when *sárx* is used in a moral sense, a physical connotation almost always lurks in the background. This means that almost every use of *sárx* in Paul has pejorative overtones in one degree or other, and that on no occasion of soteriological significance does Paul use *sárx* in a morally neutral sense. I can illustrate this best by a brief look at the phrase “in the flesh”. In Rom. 7,5 and 8,9 Paul uses the phrase in a pejorative sense of the life his converts no longer lead. But elsewhere he uses it of the believer’s present life (2. Cor. 10,3, Gal. 2,20, Phil. 1,22.24, Phm. 16) in a less hostile way, but still denoting the weakness and inferiority of the present condition by way of antithesis to life “in the Lord”, life “with Christ”. The fact that Paul can use “in the flesh” with such a sweep of meaning indicates that he did not draw a clear line of distinction between a living “in the flesh” which is inevitable and a living “in the flesh” which is blameworthy. In other words, life in the flesh and life according to the flesh merge into each other and cannot easily be distinguished in Pauline thought. Even Christ’s earthly life can be described as *katà sárka* (Rom. 1,3)<sup>51</sup>.

5) It follows from this that the believer, even as believer, is a divided man, a man at war with himself. As a man of the Spirit he is at war with himself as a man of flesh. It is important to grasp what this means for Paul. It does not mean that sometimes the believer acts as a man of the Spirit (*katà pneûma*) and only sometimes does he act as a man of flesh (*katà sárka*). It is not a case of either-or, one or other. It is rather a case of both-and. For since he belongs to the world as flesh, even as a believer, so everything he does, even at the Spirit’s prompting, is conditioned and determined in some degree or other by the flesh. It is not possible for the believer to escape his fleshness, and to live a life of unalloyed good even for an instant so long as this age lasts. All his high ideals and aims as a Christian are all in greater or less degree misdirected or frustrated by his flesh. He must of course constantly choose to live *katà pneûma* and to resist life *katà sárka*, putting to death the deeds of the body by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8,13), but that is a war he cannot win so long as the body is the body of flesh. So long as he is “in the flesh”, his life as a believer is a life of tension, a life of frustration.

This aspect of Paul’s soteriology comes to clear expression in Gal. 5,16f.: “Walk by the Spirit and do not fulfil the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit and (the desires of) the Spirit are against the flesh; for each is in conflict with the other, so that what you will to do you cannot do.” Here quite evidently Christian experience is depicted as a conflict between flesh and Spirit, a conflict that is between the believer’s desires as a man of this age and the compulsion of the Spirit. Most striking of all is the last clause of v. 17: the conflict takes place, “*hína* you may not do what you want to do”. The *hína* could be taken in a final sense (“in order that”)<sup>52</sup>. But final *hína* makes for a very compressed sense; and does Paul intend to say that the Spirit fights against the

<sup>50</sup> Dunn (n. 45), pp. 44–9.

<sup>51</sup> This is the thesis argued in Dunn (n. 45). Other occasions where *sárx* is used pejoratively of Christians include particularly 1. Cor. 3,1ff., 2. Cor. 7,1, Gal. 3,3. Cf. Stacey (n. 44), p. 162: “an automatic association between life in the flesh and sin (Rom. 7,5, 8,8, 2. Cor. 7,1, etc.)”.

<sup>52</sup> Burton (n. 20), pp. 301f.; H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (1965), p. 249; F. Mussner, *Der Galaterbrief* (1974), p. 377.

flesh in order to prevent the believer doing what he wants to do (cf. Rom. 7,15f. 18–21)? More appropriate to the movement of thought is *hina* with consecutive force – “so that what you will to do you cannot do” (NEB)<sup>53</sup>. That is to say, the two dimensions of the believer’s existence run counter to each other and prevent his living wholly in one or other; the Spirit prevents his fleshly desires coming to effect, but so too does his fleshliness prevent the Spirit inspired desires coming to effect. In consequence the believer finds himself torn in two by conflicting desires and impulses, and his experience as a man of Spirit in the flesh is one of continuing frustration.

As our earlier exegesis suggested, we have in Rom. 7,14–25 that man in conflict with himself<sup>54</sup>, in fact a man in the throes of the very conflict just described. To be sure Paul expresses himself in very strong terms: 7,14 – “I am fleshly, sold under sin”; 7,23 – “captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members”. But this is because the believer even as believer is fleshly, and as a man of flesh is indeed sold under sin, experiencing a captivity to the law of sin which will not be finally broken till the flesh where sin makes its headquarters is destroyed in death and in the resurrection of the body. In these verses what in fact comes to the surface is Paul’s consciousness of the two-sided nature and paradox of the believer’s present condition, the consciousness of his fleshness, of his belonging to the world as flesh – even as a believer. It is this consciousness which rends the cry from his throat in 7,24 – “Miserable creature that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” – the cry not so much of despair<sup>55</sup> as of *frustration* – the frustration of one who has to try to follow the leading of the Spirit while still in the flesh, the anguish of trying to express the life of the Spirit through the body of death, the longing to be free of the tension between old humanity and new, the longing for the life of the Spirit to have a spiritual body as its embodiment and means of expression (cf. Rom. 8,22f., 2. Cor. 5,4). In a word, it is not the cry of the non-Christian for the freedom of the Christian; rather it is the cry of the *Christian* for the full freedom of Christ<sup>56</sup>.

Some of course have jibbed at such an interpretation of Paul’s soteriology. For them the logic of Paul’s thought indicates that the coming of the Spirit meant the end of the flesh and of life in the flesh. Thus, for example, W. Bousset could speak of Paul’s “consciousness of the perfection of his present Christian state”; “the natural being has completely died in him”<sup>57</sup>. Schweitzer could write, “As a consequence of being in the Spirit, believers are raised above the limitations of the being-in-the-flesh”<sup>58</sup>. And Windisch could maintain that the Pauline imperative was a mere stylistic form, that after all he did hold an “ethic of sinlessness”<sup>59</sup>. This indeed is the logical corollary to the view that Rom.

<sup>53</sup> M. L. Lagrange, *Epître aux Galates* (1950), pp. 147f.; Oepke (n. 20), pp. 135f.; P. Bonnard, *L’Epître de Saint Paul aux Galates* (1953), p. 113; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (2 1959), p. 142; J. Eckert, *Die urchristliche Verkündigung im Streit zwischen Paulus und seinen Gegnern nach dem Galaterbrief* (1971), p. 137 and n. 1.

<sup>54</sup> On the divided “I” of Rom. 7,14–25, cf. Bultmann (n. 5), p. 178, “Man is the split”; Bornkamm (n. 11), pp. 96ff.; Kuss (n. 1), p. 563; T. W. Manson, *On Paul and John* (1963), p. 44; Conzelmann (n. 11), pp. 234f.; Eichholz (n. 29), pp. 258f.

<sup>55</sup> Against particularly Mitton (n. 10), p. 101; Leenhardt (n. 9), p. 182. Cf. Cranfield (n. 8), p. 366.

<sup>56</sup> I do not think with Nygren (n. 8), pp. 296f., 302f., that Rom. 7,14–25 is really dealing with the question of attaining righteousness by the law, but rather with the fact of sin as a continuing reality in the life of the believer.

<sup>57</sup> W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (repr. 1970), pp. 170, 174.

<sup>58</sup> A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (1931), p. 167.

<sup>59</sup> H. Windisch, *Das Problem des paulinischen Imperativs*: *Zs. ntl. Wiss.* 23 (1924), pp. 265–71.

7,14–25 and Rom. 8,1ff. speak of quite different conditions. Kümmel of course and existentialist interpretations have attempted to drive a middle path between these alternatives – that is, in effect, that the man of Rom. 8 may be threatened by the condition of Rom. 7, may on occasion lapse into the condition of Rom. 7, but otherwise lives solely *katà pneûma* and not at all *katà sárka*<sup>60</sup>. But thus to weaken the antithesis of Rom. 8,4ff. is to undercut the contrast between Rom. 7 and Rom. 8 on which Kümmel's whole case was built, without making the case any more plausible. For in fact there is no middle way. Either the believer has to all intents and purposes left the flesh behind, and Paul maintains a form of gnostic dualism and perfectionism; or the believer is still in the flesh, still in all too real a sense a man of flesh, still experiencing the dominion of sin in an integral dimension of his present existence. As exegetes of Paul we have no choice but to accept the latter alternative as the truer exposition of his thought on this point, and to accept that Rom. 7,14–25 is integral to Pauline soteriology.

### 3.

We turn now to the other aspect of Christian experience particularly relevant to the exposition of Rom. 7,14–25 – that is, Paul's understanding of Christian experience as a continuing experience of *death* as well as of life. I have elaborated this insight into Paul's religious experience elsewhere<sup>61</sup>, and need not go into much detail. But some grasp of this motif in Pauline soteriology is necessary if we are to understand Paul's talk of death, "the body of death" in Rom. 7,24 and 8,10.

So far as Paul is concerned, Christian experience in the present is characterized by weakness, suffering and death – that this is inevitable in the present age, and indeed is to be not merely accepted as such, but also rejoiced in, for such experience is the necessary concomitant to the experience of the Spirit in the present, and an indispensable part of the process of salvation. Reference to only a few key passages should be sufficient to demonstrate the point.

1) Rom. 8,17 – "... if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided that (*eíper*) we suffer with him in order that (*hína*) we may also be glorified with him". Suffering is the way to glory – suffering is necessary if the sonship of the present is to become the full sonship of the future<sup>62</sup>. This is why of course Paul rejoices in his sufferings (Rom. 5,3), because he sees in them the expression of *life*. Suffering is not some defect in God's way of salvation – it is part of the saving process itself. Suffering is the necessary outworking of the Not yet of salvation, the inevitable consequence of trying to live *katà pneûma* while still "in the flesh".

2) 2. Cor. 12,9 – "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weakness, that (*hína*) the power of Christ may rest upon me." Against the false apostles of Corinth who obviously

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Kümmel (n. 1), pp. 98ff.; Mitton (n. 10), p. 132; Kertelge (n. 20), pp. 112ff.; Käsemann (n. 13), p. 187: "In der Rückschau auf die eigene Vergangenheit unter dem Gesetz erfährt der Pneumatiker die Wahrheit über sein 'Einst' und die noch von seinem weltlichen Dasein hergegebene religiöse Bedrohung seines 'Jetzt' in der Kontinuität Adams." Cf. also H. Jonas, *Philosophical Meditation on the Seventh Chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*: J. M. Robinson (ed.), *The Future of our Religious Past. Essays in Honour of R. Bultmann* (1971), pp. 333–50.

<sup>61</sup> Dunn (n. 40), p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Käsemann (n. 13), p. 219.



maintained that divine power and human weakness were antithetical, that the Already swallowed up the Not yet, that Spirit left no room for flesh, Paul insists that divine power manifests itself precisely as power in weakness<sup>63</sup>. God's power does not drive out human weakness; on the contrary, it only comes to its full strength through weakness. The paradox of Already/Not yet, of Spirit and flesh is not surmounted. The tension dare not be abandoned or slackened, for therein lies disaster. For it is only when I am weak that I am strong (12,10).

3) The clearest expression of Paul's thought on this point is probably 2. Cor. 4,7–5,5, in particular vv. 10ff. – "... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, in order that (hína) the life of Jesus also may be revealed in our mortal flesh. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, in order that (hína) the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you." Two thoughts are linked together here. First, that the experience of suffering is the experience of the power of death continually asserting itself over its continuing domain – the flesh, the mortal body, the body of death. Second, that if the life of Jesus is to achieve visible expression in the believer's present existence, that can only be through the body – but that means through this body, the body of flesh. Paul links these two thoughts by hína: death must have its say in the believer's present experience in order that the life of Jesus may come to visible expression also; the life of Jesus manifests itself precisely in and through the dying of the body; life and death are two sides of the one process. Here indeed is the paradox of Christian existence – death is a power which claims man and so is antithetical to the Spirit; at the same time it is essential that it should continue to assert its power over the flesh if the life of the Spirit is to win out in the end<sup>64</sup>.

4) Phil. 3,10f. – "... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead." Here again it becomes plain that for Paul religious experience is an experience not only of life but of suffering and death. Notice that he does not think of suffering as a temporary antecedent to resurrection power: on the contrary, he mentions the experience of suffering and death after the talk of experiencing resurrection power. That is to say, experience of resurrection power does not leave suffering and death behind; on the contrary, the power of Christ's resurrection manifests itself precisely in and through the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. Both sides of the death-life paradox remain in full force in the believer's experience till the end; he must experience the full outworking of death as well as of life if (eí pōs) he is to experience the resurrection from the dead<sup>65</sup>.

"The body of death" (Rom. 7,24) 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 sárx – 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

<sup>63</sup> Cf. e.g. G. Stählin, *Theol. Wört.* 1 (1933), p. 491; E. Käsemann, *Die Legitimität des Apostels: Zs. ntl. Wiss.* 41 (1942), pp. 53f.; G. O'Collins, *Power Made Perfect in Weakness* (2. Cor. 12,9–10): *Cathol. Bibl. Quart.* 33 (1971), pp. 535f.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. H. Windisch, *Der Zweite Korintherbrief* (9 1924), pp. 144f.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. J. Gnllka, *Der Philipperbrief* (1968), pp. 196f.

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, and so holds promise of a growing participation in Christ's resurrection power and ultimate resurrection like his. It is the recognition of this spectrum of meaning of both *sárx* and "death" in Paul's thought that enables us to appreciate more fully the paradox of Christian experience for Paul. For that paradox comes to one of its sharpest expressions in the double attitude Paul seems to adopt towards flesh and death. On the one hand the flesh is a continuing source of danger and of potential disaster, and death is the last enemy. But on the other hand, the flesh is the place where the life of Jesus and the divine power comes to its fullest expression, and death is part of the experience of that life and power. This is the complexity of the believer's experience of Spirit and resurrection life in the present – for the Spirit manifests himself in flesh and through flesh and yet as opposed to flesh, and life manifests itself in death and through death and yet as opposed to death. It is this complexity which underlies the paradox of Christian experience so vividly depicted in Rom. 7,14–25.

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If we have rightly understood Pauline soteriology, certain *corollaries* follow and are worthy of mention.

a) First, we must preserve the Already/Not yet balance in Paul's soteriology: conversion is a decisive event of the past, something new has entered the believer's experience and begun to have a determinative influence on his life; but, conversion is only a beginning, the new has not yet wholly swallowed up the old, there is still a significant degree of continuity between man's state prior to faith and his state under faith. In particular, this means that we should not attempt to abstract Paul's talk of conversion-initiation as an event of dying in the past from the Already/Not yet paradox. When Paul says, "We died to sin" (Rom. 6,2ff., Gal. 2,19, Col. 2,11ff.20,3,3), he does not mean that the believer is no longer a man of flesh, that death is an event past and gone in the believer's experience<sup>66</sup>. He is simply emphasizing the Already aspect of the believer's condition – just as elsewhere he emphasizes the Not yet aspect by stressing that death is part of the believer's continuing experience (e.g. Rom. 8,10, 2. Cor. 4,10ff., Phil. 3,10f.). Death, like salvation, redemption, adoption, etc., belongs to the Not yet as well as to the Already<sup>67</sup>. The dying of conversion-initiation therefore is only the beginning of a process, a process of dying of the old fleshly nature and dying to the old fleshly nature, a life-long process which will not be completed till the resurrection or transformation of the body. Thus also the sharp and keen antitheses in Rom. 8,4ff. do not indicate that the struggle between flesh and Spirit is already finished, but rather they underline the importance of prosecuting the war against the flesh to life's end (8,12f.). This is why in Romans, Galatians and Colossians Paul follows up the earlier bolder statements about conversion with exhortations which on the face of it seem to contradict them. So, for example, Rom.

<sup>66</sup> Against Dodd (n. 18), p. 108.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. particularly R. C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ* (1967).



6,11 does not mean, “Pretend that you are dead to sin; assume that you can no longer sin”; but rather, recognize the death at work in you and the life at work in you and choose the death and life of the Spirit rather than the life and death of the flesh (cf. Gal. 5,16ff., Col. 3,5ff.). Paul was neither gnostic nor perfectionist in his soteriology.

b) Second, there is no escape possible for the believer from his divided condition in this life — the cry of anguished frustration in Rom. 7,24 is the life-long cry of the Christian. Neither conversion, nor any other experience of the Spirit in this life raises the believer above this life-death tension, this Spirit-flesh warfare. The Spirit does not bring the wretched man’s struggle to an end; on the contrary, his presence and activity in the believer heightens the conflict. There is no higher experience which exempts the believer from the reality of his divided state as man of Spirit and man of flesh; so long as the believer remains in the flesh he cannot enjoy the full life of the Spirit. There are only two ways of escape, and both are ways of death: one is the way forward — to engage in the Spirit/flesh conflict till its end in physical death; the other is the way backward — to abandon the conflict, to retreat into a life lived solely on the level of the flesh, the level where death alone reigns, the way of death. In short, the only way of escape is death — either the death of the body, or the death of the whole man.

c) Thirdly, it follows from this recognition of the nature of Christian experience that apostasy is a real possibility and danger for the Christian. We must take a passage like Rom. 8,13 with the seriousness it deserves: Paul warns his fellow Christians, “If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live”. The choice here presented to the believer is no artificial, academic one. It is possible for the Christian to live his whole life *katà sárka*; if he does so, if he abandons the struggle and reverts to a solely fleshly existence, he will die; he will not know the daily renewal of the Spirit towards wholeness, but instead only the daily deterioration of the flesh towards destruction. Only if and as he prosecutes the struggle between Spirit and flesh, only as he lets the Spirit have a say in the shaping of his daily life, only then will he know that process of transformation from one degree of glory to another which in the end will make him like Christ (cf. 2. Cor. 3,18).

d) Fourthly, it may not be inappropriate to draw attention to a pastoral corollary of some significance. If we have understood Paul aright, and if Rom. 7,14–25 is a valid insight into Christian experience, then we must not hide or ignore this. 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. If Rom. 7,14–25 is a transcript of Christian experience, then any gospel which ignores it is unrealistic and in the end counter-productive. Furthermore, pastoral counselling of Christians should remember that paradox and conflict is an integral part of religious experience. The believer need not be depressed at defeat nor conclude that grace has lost the struggle. On the contrary, spiritual conflict is the sign of life — a sign that the Spirit is having his say in the shaping of character. Since life now must be life in this body of flesh, the Spirit can be present only as paradox and conflict. Consequently it is this paradox and conflict which is the mark of healthy religious experience — not its absence. “The Spirit is absent when we stop fighting, not when we lose<sup>68</sup>.”

To sum up then, in no other place does Paul describe so fully the moral experience of the Christian as in Rom. 7,14–25. In these verses the believer’s experience is clearly depicted as an experience of warfare between flesh and Spirit. It is not a warfare from

<sup>68</sup> H. Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (1965), p. 78.

which the believer can distance himself and in which he can take sides as though he were a neutral observer or umpire. On the contrary, he finds himself on *both sides*; even as believer he lives on both levels, flesh and Spirit, at the same time; the division runs right through the believing “I”. It is because he lives on two levels at once that he has constantly to choose between the two levels – flesh or Spirit. “I” in my “inner man”, as renewed mind, as man of Spirit, have to choose against “I” as flesh, as body of death. And even when, by the power of the Spirit, “I” may choose against the flesh, even then “I” still remain a prisoner of the flesh, captive to sin, and my good is frustrated and distorted. Yet, despite this, hope remains, for the presence of the Spirit, and the will to good is a beginning of the process of redemption, a process of salvation which is accomplished precisely by means of the conflict not by ending it, precisely by holding the tension of the paradox of life and death, Spirit and flesh, firm to the end, not by its resolution before then. In short, if Rom. 7,24 is the believer’s life-long cry of frustration, 7,25a is his thanksgiving of eschatological hope, and 7,25b his calm realism for the present in the light of both.

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