

## Who Is the Subject of Romans 7:7 ff?

According to C. E. B. Cranfield [Romans, Vol 1 International Critical Commentary, pp. 344-346], the possibilities are as follows:

1. It is autobiographical, the reference being to Paul's present experience as a Christian
2. It is autobiographical, the reference being to his past experience (before his conversion) as seen by him at the time referred to
3. It is autobiographical, the reference being to his pre-conversion past but as seen by him now in the light of his Christian faith
4. It presents the experience of the non-Christian Jew, as seen by himself
5. It presents the experience of the non-Christian Jew, as seen through Christian eyes
6. It presents the experience of the Christian who is still living at a level of the Christian life which can be left behind, who is still trying to fight the battle in his own strength;
7. It presents the experience of Christian generally, including the best and most mature.

Says Cranfield, in answering this question about the subject of Paul's discussion

We may set **2** aside at once on the ground that which is said in these verses is altogether contrary to the verdict which, according to Phil 3.6b — "*As to legalistic righteousness, faultless*" and Galatians 1:14 "*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my father.*"

**4** May be set aside, as inconsistent with the picture of Jewish self-complacency which Paul gives us in chapter 2.

Against **3**, and also against **2**, the use of the present tense throughout vv. 14-25 weighs heavily; for the use of the present [tense] is here sustained too consistently and for too long and contrasts too strongly with the past tenses characteristic of vv. 7-13 to be at all plausibly explained as an example of the past tense used for the sake of vividness in describing past events which are vividly remembered.

A further objection to **3**, which also lies against **2**, **4**, and **5**, and also against **6** is the order of the sentences in vv. 24-25. Verse 25b — "*so then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin*" — is an embarrassment to those who see in v. 25 the cry of an unconverted man or of a Christian living on a low level of Christian life and in v 25a — "*Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord*" — an indication that the desired deliverance has actually arrived, since, coming after the thanksgiving, it appears to imply that the condition of the speaker after deliverance is just the same as it was before it. All the attempts so far made to get over this difficulty have about them an air of desperation.

The difficulty in the way of accepting **1** or **7**, which has been felt by very many from early days on, is of course that the acceptance of either of them seemed to involve altogether too dark a view of the Christian life and, in particular, to be incompatible with that which is said of the believer's liberation from sin in 6:6— "*our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should be no longer slaves to sin,*" 6:14— "*for sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace,*" 6:17ff— "*though you used to be slaves to sin...you have been set free from sin,*" 6:22— "*you have been set free from sin,*" 8:2— "*because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death*". And this objection to both **1** and **7** has seemed to a great many interpreters completely conclusive [in the Reformed tradition, Herman Ridderbos and Anthony Hoekema, as well as Douglas Moo, have argued for this view].

But there have also been those who have accepted one or other of these two explanations. They include, among the Greeks, Methodius, the Latins, Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, and Augustine, in the Middle Ages, Aquinas, the sixteenth century Reformers, and among recent commentators, Barth, Nygren, Barrett, Murray [and Dunn, Morris].

That it is these latter interpreters rather than the other who have rightly understood Paul's mind, we do not doubt; for it is only along the lines of either **1** or **7** that we can really do justice to the text. The man who speaks here is one who wills the good and hates the evil (vv. 15, 16, 19, 20), who as far as his inner man is concerned delights in God's law (v.22, who serves it with his mind (v 25b). Not so does Paul describe the unregenerate man. It is particularly instructive to set the statement in v. 25b (*so then I myself with my mind serve the law of God*"), alongside of 6:17, 18, 20 according to which the Roman Christians were [servants] of sin, before their conversion, but have now become slaves of righteousness, and also 8:7 which states that the [sinful mind] of the flesh is not subject to God's law and indeed cannot be. In the ego which wills the good and hates the evil, in the mind of vv. 23 and 25b, in the 'inner man' of v. 22, we must surely recognize the human self, or any part of the self, of the still unconverted man. In fact a struggle as serious as that which is here described can only take place where the Spirit of God is present and active (cf. Galatians 5:17— "*for the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.*"

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But what about a Christian being freed from sin and yet unable to do the good and avoid the evil? The answer is to be found in Paul's eschatological categories. At the beginning of the Christian life, something definitive happens—the Christian is moved from the realm [dominion] of Adam, into the realm [dominion] of Christ. And yet, we remain in some sense in Adam until death or the resurrection at the end of the age. Though the new age has come, the new age will not be fully realized until the *eschaton*. This is the tension throughout the New Testament, between the "already" and the "not yet."

Thus either **1** or **7** are correct.