

ROMANS 7: AN OLD COVENANT STRUGGLE SEEN THROUGH NEW COVENANT EYES

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Romans 7 is possibly one of the most cherished texts in church history. But it is also one of the most controversial passages in Scripture. Many resonate with Paul's ambivalence and insist that Paul is speaking about the Christian's daily struggle with sin. Others strongly disagree and purport that Paul's struggle is too defeating for the Christian life, and he must be speaking for unbelievers. However, it will be argued in this article that both sides of the debate have been speaking past each other for centuries because both sides are asking the wrong question. This is not a passage about whether Paul is speaking as a Christian or not, but whether Paul is speaking as someone under the Old Covenant or the New Covenant. Thus, when the reader's perspective is properly adjusted, he can rightly ascertain Paul's spiritual status in the passage—Paul is speaking as a believer under the Old Covenant before the inauguration of the New Covenant.

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Introduction

Most people do not realize it, but their vision is clouded. This is not referring to physical blindness or short-sightedness, but to the popular evangelical perception of one biblical passage—Romans 7:14–25. Today, this text is as popular as it is controversial.¹ Not only is the passage well-known, it has actually been one of the most cherished biblical texts in history. This is especially the case for those who have advocated that Romans 7 conveys the Christian's battle with sin, because many have discovered an inviting home in this emotional, heart-wrenching text. Sincere Christians have seen this as a personal validation in believing that the “great” apostle Paul struggled so fiercely with his sin. Many have been consoled with the thought, “If Paul

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, NAC 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 166. Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949), 284. J. Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self: Apostolic Teaching for Personal Wholeness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 171.

so labored with his sin as a Christian in Romans 7, then I know that my sinful struggles are not out of the ordinary.” Though not applicable to all, many Christians’ perceptions of the passage are subjected to these feelings, and any attempts to convince them otherwise are met with emotional roadblocks. In this way, application precedes diligent observation and accurate interpretation. Experience drives exegesis.

This article has been titled “Romans 7: An Old Covenant Struggle Seen through New Covenant Eyes” because this writer will argue that this is what has been taking place for nearly two thousand years of church history when it comes to this passage. While many Christians feel validated by this text, most have missed its point altogether. A clear vision of the passage as Paul intended it is muddied by their haste to see its truths strictly from a New Covenant perspective that correlates with their personal situation.² Therefore, they have imposed their experience on the text and have highlighted observations that serve to proof-text this understanding. “This sounds and feels like my struggle with sin” turns into “This must be Paul’s (and every Christian’s) struggle with sin.”³ They have assumed that Paul is speaking about the New Covenant Christian; therefore, they have overlooked or ignored details in the text that direct them to the Old Covenant Law. In reality, by hastily seeking validation for one’s experience in Romans 7, the reader’s trajectory is off from the start. Therefore, his arguments may have some logical consistency at best, but his beginning point is wrong, and therefore his conclusion as well.

Asking the Right Question

Throughout church history, many have asked, “Is Paul speaking as a Christian or as an unbeliever in Romans 7?” But this question is misguided, and it leads to improper conclusions. Instead, the question should be asked this way, “Is Paul speaking about someone under the Old Covenant or someone under the New Covenant?”⁴ With Paul’s emphasis on the Law in Romans 6–7 and his contrast of the Old Covenant Law and the New Covenant Spirit between Romans 7 and 8, this question better

² This is not to say that the New Covenant should not influence the Christian’s understanding of biblical truth or how they apply it, but it is easy to apply New Covenant principles to areas of Scripture that were under Old Covenant domain. For instance, it is easy to assume that believers under the Old Covenant were provided equal benefits of sanctification that New Covenant believers are afforded. But of course, if that was the case, then what is new about the New Covenant?

³ A qualification must be made—it is not being suggested that Christians do not struggle with sin, even passionately so at times (cf. Gal 6:1; Jas 4:1–10). It is also not being suggested that Christians never feel ambivalent in the flesh as seems to be depicted in Romans 7. Evidently, Christians can share similar *feelings* to what Paul expresses in Romans 7. However, just because a Christian experientially relates to Paul in Romans 7 does *not* necessitate that he is relating a Christian’s experience. This is because Paul is not only expressing subjective *feelings* about his struggle against sin, but his objective *status and relationship* with sin and the Law. As will be presented in the remainder of the article, Romans 7 is too Jewish, too Law-focused, too rhetorical, too defeating, too enslaving, too hopeless, too Spirit-less, and too fruitless to be a Christian’s experience.

⁴ By rallying all views (many of which are listed in the next section of this article) around this one question, the number of positions to this query is reduced to two—either the person is under the New Covenant or under the Old Covenant. There is no third view. All prominent views may act as subcategories under one of these two positions.

honors the context and grammar of the passage and will lead readers to the right conclusion.⁵ Furthermore, this question is appropriate, not only because it aligns the Romans 7 problem more faithfully with the context, but it also takes into account the burning question in most readers' minds when it comes to the passage, "Is Paul speaking as a Christian or not?" Whether Paul is speaking as a Christian in Romans 7 is best answered when the reader first satisfies the query as to whether he is speaking as someone under the New Covenant or under the Old Covenant.

This short article⁶ will reveal eight misconceptions about Romans 7 that have historically prevailed in evangelical circles for over fifteen hundred years and provide a response that will hopefully realign the reader's understanding to a faithful and careful reading of the text. If the reader is willing to approach Romans 7 from a fresh and reasoned perspective, he should come away with the conclusion that Paul is not speaking about a New Testament Christian's experience, but about a *believer's* experience under the Law *before* the New Covenant.

The Christian View

Most scholars engaged in this debate admit that there are many views with which to contend beyond the typical Christian view. A recent work entitled *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: 3 Views of Romans 7*⁷ makes it seem as though there are only three views in the Romans 7 debate. But in reality there are quite a few perspectives to consider. Several of the more prominent views of whom Paul is speaking for in Romans 7 include the following:⁸

- Paul (Christian)⁹
- Paul (unbeliever-Pharisee)¹⁰

⁵ With this right question in mind, the reader affirms Paul's twenty three uses of the word 'law' in Romans 7 and other grammatical clues of covenantal language that bookend Romans 7:7–25, including "newness of the Spirit" (New Covenant; 7:6), "oldness of the letter" (Old Covenant; 7:6), "Law of the Spirit of Life" (New Covenant; 8:2), "Law of Sin and of Death" (Old Covenant; 8:2), "under grace" (New Covenant; 6:14), and "under Law" (Old Covenant; 6:14).

⁶ The complexity of the Romans 7 debate is enormous to say the least. A short article like this will not satisfy the hungry mind that wants to explore its depths. If the reader wants to pursue this argument more, this writer recommends his thesis on the topic, from which much of the content of this article derives. See John David Street III, "Looking with New Covenant Eyes at an Old Covenant Problem: Resolving the Romans 7 Riddle" (ThM thesis, The Master's Seminary, 2018).

⁷ Terry L. Wilder, ed., *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: 3 Views of Romans 7* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011).

⁸ This writer consulted two sources primarily for the compilation of these views, while also being influenced by many other authors and commentaries on the subject. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 425–26; 445–47. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 33:463–66.

⁹ Cranfield supports this view. See C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 1979).

¹⁰ For a basic critique on this view, see Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1978), 286.

- Everyday Christian (representative)¹¹
- Immature Christian (representative)¹²
- Adam (Garden of Eden)¹³
- Israel¹⁴
- General unbeliever (representative)¹⁵
- Unbeliever becoming a believer (representative)¹⁶
- Jewish unbeliever (representative)¹⁷
- Old Testament believer (not New Testament Christian; representative)¹⁸

Even the ten views listed here are not comprehensive, nor do scholars feel as though there cannot be overlap between the views. Furthermore, these positions are not demarcated by consistent rules. In other words, some positions are more defined according to the person whom Paul is speaking for in the passage (e.g., himself, Adam, Israel, etc.), while others are more delineated according to this person's ethnicity, conversion state, or maturity (e.g., any general Christian, an immature Christian, Jewish unbeliever, etc.).

But one of the most popular views in evangelical history is the Christian view, and that to some degree or another Paul is portraying his daily experience with sin at the time he wrote Romans.¹⁹ In this case, these proponents would necessarily say that Paul is speaking as someone under the New Covenant with the indwelling ministry

¹¹ It seems that Steven Patrick Black lands close to this view. See "The Spiritual Condition of *Egō* and His Relationship to the Law in Romans 7:14–25" (MDiv thesis, The Master's Seminary, 2005).

¹² This writer has heard many lay persons and pastors claim this view as distinct from the everyday Christian view.

¹³ For a prominent advocate of this position, see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 39 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988).

¹⁴ For evaluation of this perspective, see Michael Paul Middendorf, *The "I" in the Storm: A Study of Romans 7* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Academic Press, 1997), 139–43 and Jan Lambrecht, *The Wretched "I" and Its Liberation: Paul in Romans 7 and 8* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 62–64.

¹⁵ Stauffer notes this in his contribution to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. See Ethelbert Stauffer, "ἔγώ," *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 2:358–62.

¹⁶ Lloyd-Jones is known to have held this view. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 7.1–8.4: The Law: Its Functions and Limits* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

¹⁷ Douglas Moo, in *The Epistle to the Romans*, is a primary proponent of this view.

¹⁸ Dr. Michael Vlach at The Master's Seminary advocates this view, and so does this reader. Also, Walt Russell has written an excellent article promoting this understanding of the passage. See Walt Russell, "Insights from Postmodernism's Emphasis on Interpretative Communities in the Interpretation of Romans 7," *JETS* 37, no. 4 (December 1994). Craig Keener also considers this a valid explanation of the passage. See Craig S. Keener, *The Mind of the Spirit: Paul's Approach to Transformed Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016).

¹⁹ Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, 176.

of the Holy Spirit for sanctification. It is this view that will be critiqued in this article.²⁰ Before doing so, it will be advantageous to briefly address the history and main tenets of the Christian view.

History

The Christian view of Romans 7 did not begin in the earliest days of the church²¹ as some might anticipate. Rather, it was not until the mid-to-late 300's that Augustine adopted this understanding of the passage²² that subsequently became popular throughout Christendom until this day. It was especially attractive to the Roman Catholic Church during the medieval era, as many found the Romans 7 struggle with sin a fine explanation for the Christian's reasoning power to fuel his battle against the flesh.²³ Though Reformers like Luther and Calvin reacted vehemently to Roman Catholic authority, they too maintained a similar position to Romans 7—that Paul is speaking as a believer under the New Covenant dispensation.²⁴ And of course, the modern era of Christian scholars and commentators has had a contingent of proponents for the Christian view, including the eminent Karl Barth.²⁵

²⁰ Space is limited to critique all the other views that are listed, especially another more popular one among evangelical laymen and laywomen today—Paul is speaking for *unbelievers generally*. The advantage of the unbeliever view is that it shares with the Old Testament believer view the same perspective that Paul is speaking as someone under the *Old Covenant*. Rather, it is of most interest to critique the Christian view that suggests that Paul is speaking as someone under the New Covenant. Evaluation at this level is far more important than whether he is a believer or an unbeliever under the Old Covenant.

²¹ Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, 177.

²² Augustine, *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans: Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Roman*, trans. Paul Fredricksen Landes, Text and Translations Early Christian Literature Series (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 19. Also see Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans*, IBC (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1985), 120.

²³ Jean Doutre, "Romans as Read in School and Cloister in the Twelfth Century: The Commentaries of Peter Abelard and William of St. Thierry," in *Medieval Readings of Romans*, ed. William S. Campbell, Peter S. Hawkins, and Brenda Deen Schildgen (New York: T&T Clark International, 2007), 46. Doutre was speaking in context to William of Saint Thierry's remarks in his commentary, *Expositio in epistolam ad Romanos*.

²⁴ Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1967), 112. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, Calvin's Commentaries, trans. Ross Mackenzie, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 146–47, 150.

²⁵ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 270. Along with Barth, many commentators would agree, including Chamblin, Nygren, Dunn, Mounce, Osborne, Cranfield, Bruce, Schreiner (at least as of Spring 2018—he has gone back and forth by his own admission [Thomas R. Schreiner, "Here We Go Again!" Chapel Message at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLBA1qC8OOEJC8F3hlnuiEHSOMEodh_JMG&time_continue=1318&v=7vbV8wKH1nI (accessed December 3, 2019)]), etc.

Main Tenets

The core evidence mustered by those with the Christian view derives mainly from a few keystone arguments. First, probably the most common assumption that Christian view advocates maintain is that Paul is speaking from his own situation when he says ‘I’, ‘me’, or ‘my’ in Romans 7.²⁶ Even Douglas Moo, who is not a Christian view proponent of this passage, anticipated what the average Christian might be wondering, “‘What is all the fuss about!’... Who else except Paul would it be?”²⁷ Indeed, many scholars have concurred; when Paul says ‘I’, he means Paul. This is the most natural way to understand it.²⁸ Nevertheless (and this may come as a surprise for some lay Christians), most scholars today—even those in the Christian view—confess that Paul is not speaking purely about his situation, but also representatively on behalf of others.²⁹

But second to this assumption is probably one of the most commonly used arguments in the Christian view—that Paul speaks in the present tense in Romans 7:14–25, and therefore, he is speaking about his current Christian experience.³⁰ It is hard for the today’s Western mind to conceive that Paul would be speaking in the present tense without the situation actually taking place in the present. For many Christian view advocates, this is the “nail-in-the-coffin” argument to any non-Christian views of Romans 7.³¹

Finally,³² there are several go-to verses in Romans 7:14–25 that Christian view proponents will cite in defense of their position. For instance, Paul admits in 7:22, “For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.”³³ How can pleasure of this kind in God’s Law come from anyone other than a Christian? Or, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (7:24). How can someone without the Holy Spirit admit his wretchedness? Or, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25a). No one but a New Covenant Christian can praise God for sending Jesus Christ as victory over death and sin. It seems clear that he is speaking as a Christian.

²⁶ In fact, the assumption is so basic for many in this camp that most laymen and laywomen who believe that Paul is speaking as a Christian do not realize that this is even a debated issue. As a teacher for a Romans class at The Master’s University, this writer has read *many* students who insist that they never realized this was a matter of debate.

²⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 425.

²⁸ Grant R Osborne, “The Flesh without the Spirit: Romans 7 and Christian Experience,” in *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: 3 Views of Romans 7*, ed. Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011), 6.

²⁹ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 378. For instance, Cranfield takes a hybrid view—Paul is speaking for himself and “in the shoes” of other Christians. See Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1:341.

³⁰ J. Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self*, 172.

³¹ Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, 183.

³² For sake of space, other arguments will be addressed throughout the various misconceptions that frame the rest of the article.

³³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations will be taken from the New American Standard, 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), abbreviated as NAU.

These tenets, among many others, act as the bedrock for the Christian view. While all of these observations are valid, the interpretation that derives from these observations is short-sighted because it is missing other key observations from the passage that must be accounted for. In other words, because the Romans 7 debate has diverged into two popular positions historically, that Paul is either speaking as a Christian or as an unbeliever, advocates of these two views have been speaking past one another for centuries. This is because both sides have observed valid truths that support their positions, but rarely have all the observations been put together cohesively and convincingly.

This article will realign the reader's understanding from a Christian versus non-Christian question to an Old Covenant versus New Covenant question and argue that Paul is speaking on behalf of Old Covenant believers, not New Testament Christians or pagan unbelievers. Throughout the rest of the article, eight misconceptions about Romans 7 will be presented and responded to, so as to reshape the reader's view of the passage toward the Old Covenant versus New Covenant contrast that Paul establishes in Romans 7 and 8. With this corrected understanding, the Old Testament believer position gains significant credibility.

To begin, each misconception of the Christian view will follow the same formula: *Paul is speaking as a Christian because....*

Misconception 1: Romans 7 Is in the Sanctification Section of the Book

This misconception has often been advocated by those in the Christian view.³⁴ Essentially, the argument goes—since Romans 7 falls within Romans 5–8, which has much to do with sanctification, then Romans 7 must be speaking about the Christian who is being sanctified. The argument is anchored in how most scholars outline Romans 1–11 as a chronological walkthrough from sin (1:18–31), to indictment (2:1–3:20), to justification (3:21–4:25), to sanctification (5:1–8:17), to glorification (8:18–39), etc. However, although it is generally true that Paul develops his gospel argument in Romans 1–11 chronologically from sin to glorification, the fallacies in this assumption are that this is the primary superstructure of Romans 1–11, that Paul is restricted to this chronology, and that he in fact strictly holds to this chronology.

³⁴ For example, Robert Mounce drew his conclusion of Romans 7 from what he subjectively deemed is more likely for Paul to communicate to his readers at this point in the letter. Mounce wrote, "At this point in his discussion of sanctification, would Paul have been more apt to tell his readers about his struggle with sin before he became a Christian or describe his ongoing difficulty in actually living out his deepest spiritual desires?" Mounce, *Romans*, 167. But that question presumes that sanctification is the primary superstructure of Romans 5–8 (i.e., "The Righteousness in Which We Are to Grow"; *Ibid.*, 57) that influences the meaning of Romans 7 instead of the thirty or more rhetorical questions in Romans 3–11. It is concerning that this is a watershed issue for Mounce and other scholars when it comes to the Romans 7 debate. See also Everett F. Harrison and Donald A. Hagner, "Romans," in *Romans-Galatians*, EBC 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 126.

In reality, the outline of Romans 1–11 (or at least Romans 3–11) is constructed grammatically by the rhetorical questions that Paul employs.³⁵ This better honors the author's intended outline with objective *grammatical* features, not the reader's perceived outline with subjective *thematic* features. These questions act as discourse markers that transition Paul's thoughts from one concept to another.³⁶ For the most part, Paul leverages these questions to speak for and with an imaginary Jewish opponent (which begins in 2:1) to educate³⁷ his mostly Gentile audience³⁸ how to defend the gospel.³⁹ The method is significantly rhetorical and a tool that was used by many Greek rhetoricians in Paul's day.⁴⁰

Two of these rhetorical questions find their home in Romans 7:7 and 7:13. With these two questions, Paul focuses on the Law's relationship to God's people and seeks to vindicate the Law from any moral devaluation.⁴¹ With this focus on the Law, nearly all scholars⁴² (including Christian view scholars) confess that Romans 7:7–12 is not about the Christian experience, but is a description of the unbelieving state for

³⁵ For a full listing of all the rhetorical questions in Romans, the following has been compiled: 3:1 (2x), 3, 5, 7–9, 27 (2x), 29, 31; 4:1, 9–10; 6:1, 15; 7:7, 13; 8:31; 9:14, 19, 30, 32; 10:14–15 (?) (4x), 18–19; 11:1, 7, 11. The inclusion of a rhetorical question in the list is debated by scholars, but the number of questions is significant no matter which list a reader consults. Stanley Kent Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, SBL 57 (Chino, CA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1981), 122–23.

³⁶ Of course, Paul is not restricted to using a rhetorical question to transition his thoughts (e.g., 8:17–18), but when he employs a rhetorical question, he makes a transition.

³⁷ Osborne, "The Flesh without the Spirit," 14.

³⁸ The background to the Roman church is essential to understanding the argumentation and purpose of the book. The church (or churches) was likely began by sojourning Jews and proselyte Gentiles who were converted by Peter's message at Pentecost (Acts 2:10). David A. Fiensy, *New Testament Introduction*, CPNIV (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994), 223. See also Boyce W. Blackwelder, *Toward Understanding Romans: An Introduction and Exegetical Translation* (Anderson, IN: The Warner Press, 1962), 28. As secular historical documentation also confirms, Jews were expelled from Rome in AD 49 by Emperor Claudius (cf. Acts 18:1–2) over what he thought was a Jewish revolt. After he died in AD 54, so did the Jewish ban, and both Christian and non-Christian Jews began returning to their churches and synagogues, respectively. Fiensy, *New Testament Introduction*, 222, 224. Hence, when Paul writes in AD 57 or 58, the mostly Gentile audience (with a few Christian Jews who had returned) needed exhortation to accept one another (14:1–15:7). But mostly, Paul was concerned about establishing the first apostolic authority for this church (1:1–15; 15:14–33) and about teaching a keen defense of the gospel so that the Gentiles would know how to respond to the Jewish skeptics returning to their synagogues. That is why Romans 1–11 comprises the majority of the book, even though the audience was "filled with all knowledge" about the gospel contents (15:14). They still needed to learn how to *argue* what they knew.

³⁹ A. H. McNeile, *St. Paul: His Life, Letters, and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 190. Though McNeile devalued the local Jewish confrontation in Rome, the lofty *apologia* of Romans and the local Jewish setting are not mutually exclusive. In fact, since Paul likely anticipates that the Roman Christians will experience opposition from returning orthodox Jews, he composes a comprehensive *apologia* so that they will be ready for any kind of attack. Because the confrontation had yet to precipitate, he did not have any specific theology for which to train the Romans as he does in other epistles for churches he knows so well.

⁴⁰ Stanley K. Stowers, "Romans 7.7–25 as a Speech-in-Character (προσωποποιΐα)," in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 180–202.

⁴¹ Osborne, "The Flesh without the Spirit," 14–15.

⁴² There are some who suggest that Paul is speaking of the Christian experience throughout 7:7–25. Osborne noted a few: Augustine, the Latin Fathers, Dunn, and Packer. *Ibid.*, 24.

someone who first encounters the Law.⁴³ With such statements like, “I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died” (7:9) and “sin... deceived me and through [the commandment] killed me” (7:11), it is evident to most that this cannot be the Christian experience.

In this case, 7:7–12 discontinues the sanctification trajectory. Paul evidently returns to a time “before Christ” when he relates a person’s relationship with the Law. However, what is surprising is that scholars overlook this exception and claim that the subsequent section of 7:14–25 must be a Christian experience because the passage resides in the “Sanctification Section of Romans” (5:1–8:17). But if 7:7–12 is an exception, is it not possible that the exception continues through 7:13–25, especially since both sections focus on a person’s relationship with the Law? Sadly, this is ignored or overlooked by many. That is why it is a misconception to insist that Romans 7:14–25 must be a Christian experience because of the “Sanctification Section.” It is simply an argument that disregards the contextual evidence.

Misconception 2: Paul Is Speaking to Gentiles

It is often supposed that Paul is speaking to Gentiles in Romans 7 because Romans is written to a mostly Gentile church⁴⁴ and the themes of sanctification saturate Romans 5–8. But this assumption misses a key observation—Paul delimits his focus in Romans 7 to the cross-section of his audience that has experience under the Law. In 7:1 Paul remarks, “Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the Law)...” The word “know”⁴⁵ typically conveys “experience” and “acquaintance” in its sphere of connotation, as opposed to the assent of facts.⁴⁶ In other words, most in Paul’s audience, if not all, knew *about* the Law, but there was a smaller section of Jews (and possibly a few Gentile proselytes from Pentecost) who knew the Law intimately. This cross-section of his readership was experienced living under the Law and could relate with the struggle of 7:7–25.

But some have argued that Paul is insisting that *all* of his audience knew the Law.⁴⁷ In other words, Paul would be saying, “Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to [an audience] that know[s] the Law.” D. Theodor Zahn suggested that Paul should have written “I am speaking to *you* who know the Law” if he was speaking to a section of his audience, not to all (cf. 11:13).⁴⁸ But this argument rests upon

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23. This writer argues that Paul is speaking rhetorically on behalf of Israel in corporate solidarity of all Jews under the Law (cf. 7:1, “I am speaking to those who know the Law”), and that 7:7–12 is representative of Israel at Sinai receiving the Law. For more on this, see Misconceptions 2 and 3.

⁴⁴ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 395–96.

⁴⁵ The Greek term in 7:1 is γινώσκουσιν.

⁴⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, “γινώσκω, γνῶσις, ἐπιγινώσκω, ἐπίγνωσις,” *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 1:690. Bultmann proposed that “acquaintance” is a good translation for this word in 7:1.

⁴⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 412.

⁴⁸ D. Theodor Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer*, in *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche, 1910), 328. Emphasis added. The Greek would look something like this: τοῖς ὑμῖν

what the text speculatively should read, not what it actually says.⁴⁹ And more significantly, this argument creates more problems than it solves. Apparently, whomever Paul is addressing in Romans 7:1 are also those who have “die[d] to the Law” and were “released from the Law” according to 7:4 and 7:6, respectively, and were at one time so subjected to the Law’s influence in their lives that their “sinful passions... were aroused by the Law” (7:5). It is difficult to conceive that this mostly Gentile audience had such “knowledge” of the Law that their sinful passions were aroused by this Law.⁵⁰ Only those who lived under the Law could resonate with this experience. The life-situation depicted in 7:1–6 is nothing more than Jewish life under the Old Covenant, which sets up perfectly for 7:7–25.⁵¹ Therefore, it is a misconception to presume that Romans 7:14–25 must be referring to a Christian because Paul is speaking to his entire audience of mostly Gentile Christians. Actually, Romans 7 is targeting Paul’s Jewish audience starting with verse one.

Misconception 3: Paul Is Speaking from His Experience

The heart of the Romans 7 debate is whether Paul is speaking autobiographically, rhetorically, or both. Today’s Western minds have a hard time conceiving that Paul might speak for anyone but himself when he says ‘I’, ‘me’, or ‘my’ in Romans 7. But it is a misconception to hastily presume that Paul is not speaking rhetorically here, and there are seven reasons why.

First, according to Moo, the rhetorical use of ‘I’ has been well established by Werner Georg Kümmel and is now widely accepted among commentators.⁵² Such a stylistic device has been called “Character-in-Speech,”⁵³ and it was a common phenomenon in Greek literature of Paul’s day. As Stowers put it, it was “a rhetorical and literary technique in which the speaker or writer produces speech that represents not himself or herself but another person or type of character.”⁵⁴ In colloquial vernacular, the author would “step into the shoes” of someone else and pretend to speak for him. Greek authors such as Cicero, Quintilian, Hermogenes, and Aphthonius made use of

γινώσκουσιν νόμον. Compare this with Paul’s address to his Gentile audience in 11:13, “Now I am speaking to you who are Gentiles.” Gk. Ὑμῖν δὲ λέγω τοῖς ἔθνεσιν.

⁴⁹ Although there is sometimes warrant for arguments based upon what an author should have said, especially when there is a precedent to do otherwise elsewhere, these arguments are typically weaker and should be evaluated with caution.

⁵⁰ Even Moo, who asserts that Paul is speaking for his entire audience in 7:1ff, communicates that 7:4–6 is primarily referring to Israel, which acts as a paradigm for Gentiles. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 417. See also footnote 42.

⁵¹ Mark A. Seifrid, “Romans 7: The Voice of the Law, the Cry of Lament, and the Shout of Thanksgiving,” in *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: 3 Views of Romans 7*, ed. Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011), 138–39.

⁵² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 427.

⁵³ Or *prosōporoia* (προσωποποιῖα). Stanley K. Stowers, “Romans 7.7–25 as a Speech-in-Character (προσωποποιῖα),” 187.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

this clever educational tactic.⁵⁵ Even “Euripides’ tragedies were prime fodder for the anthologies of quotations used for the instruction of schoolboys in rhetoric.”⁵⁶ Plutarch and Euripides also conveyed passionate thoughts from someone else’s perspective that sound closely akin to statements found in Romans 7!⁵⁷ Clearly it is not outside the bounds of reason to speak with passion from the perspective of someone else, despite what some authors have argued.⁵⁸ And that is exactly what Paul is doing in Romans 7. He is conveying thoughts as representative of his Jewish audience and their struggles under the Law. Clearly, there is a historical precedence.⁵⁹

Second, this rhetorical use of ‘I’ is not foreign to Romans at all. In fact, Paul steps into the shoes of his opponent at various times throughout the book (3:1, 5; 9:19; 10:18, 19),⁶⁰ including 3:7 when he counter-argues against himself, “But if through *my* lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am *I* also still being judged as a sinner?” Certainly, there is a contextual precedence in Romans.

Third, Paul not only speaks several times rhetorically from someone else’s viewpoint, he also speaks rhetorically to an imaginary opponent with eighty-five instances of second-person singular pronouns or verbs in Romans.⁶¹ Combining these instances

⁵⁵ Ibid., 180–202. As part of a Hellenized student’s studies, Stowers explained, “In every passage the student had to ask, ‘who is speaking’. Homer, for example, was the favorite text for elementary instruction although many others were also used. Sometimes Homer speaks in the authorial voice; sometimes one character or another speaks but often without the poet specifically indicating that such-and-such has begun to speak by keeping the words in character with the speaker.” Ibid., 183.

⁵⁶ Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 225.

⁵⁷ For instance, Plutarch quoted Euripides, crying out, “Wretched I am, this evil comes to men from God...” (compare with Romans 7:24). Euripides rhetorically exclaimed, “I am being overcome by evils. I know that what I am about to do is evil but passion [wrath] is stronger than my reasoned reflection and this is the cause of the worst evils for humans” (compare with Romans 7:17, 23). Ibid., 223–26.

⁵⁸ Black, “The Spiritual Condition of *Egō* and His Relationship to the Law in Romans 7:14–25,” 48. In a similar vein, Lambrecht evoked: “[I]t cannot be denied that in this pericope Paul speaks in a vivid, emotional and pathetic manner. Personal experience is presumably to a large extent responsible for this kind of speech.” Jan Lambrecht, *The Wretched “I” and Its Liberation*, 78. Thus, many scholars cannot but see Paul’s personal experience in Romans 7:7–25 due to the evocative emotional language he conveys therein. Gundry would agree and remarked that Paul’s cry in 7:24–25 “would be incredibly theatrical” if he spoke rhetorically and not autobiographically. Robert H. Gundry, “The Moral Frustration of Paul before His Conversion: Sexual Lust in Romans 7:7–25,” in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on His 70th Birthday*, ed. Donald H. Hagner and Murray J. Harris (Devon, England: Paternoster Press, 1980), 229.

⁵⁹ In fact, not only is there a historical precedence, but there is a modern precedence as well. It is common in modern English to speak for others in the first person (see the example in the first paragraph of this article when this writer said, “If Paul so labored with his sin as a Christian in Romans 7, then I know that my sinful struggles are not out of the ordinary.”). For instance, in the classroom, a teacher might find that the best way to communicate a point to his students is to place himself “into their shoes.” He might relate, “I know what you are thinking about this math problem; I want to find ‘x’, but I do not want to take the long way around. If I use the Pythagorean Theorem, the solution is quick and easy.” The teacher uses the first person singular to represent what the students might be thinking. This is what Paul is doing in Romans 7:7–25. He is representing how his Jewish readers used to think under the Law.

⁶⁰ In fact, many of Paul’s rhetorical questions in Romans may be from the perspective of his theoretical Jewish opponent.

⁶¹ In fact, he uses the rhetorical use of the second person singular in Romans at least four times the amount of any other use of the second person singular. Nearly every other use of the second singular ‘you’

with the thirty or more rhetorical questions in the book, Paul's extensive personification of sin and the Law, and several diatribe tactics, it is evident that Romans stands head and shoulders above any other New Testament book when it comes to rhetorical devices and strategy. Therefore, it should not be surprising that a lengthy rhetorical representation of Jews under the Law is found in Romans 7 at the heart of Paul's gospel argument. There is a stylistic precedence.

Fourth, while some commentators have propagated the notion that there is no precedence in Pauline epistles to express the first person singular rhetorically in such a large span of Scripture,⁶² it is important to recognize the unique nature of Romans 7:7–25. It is not like any other section in Paul, and therefore the reader should not expect it to be like his other uses of 'I'. This is because Romans 7:7–25 is the densest use of first person singular pronouns and verbs in Pauline epistles, but unlike any other dense sections in Paul, there is no personal characteristic, time, or location that can associate this section to Paul and no one else.⁶³ Every other section in Paul that is dense with first person singulars contains at least one or more characteristic, time, or location that associates the description to Paul or his current situation. Therefore, Romans 7 is in a league of its own because it is timeless and generic in every way. Autobiography is not the focus. In fact, it must be assumed into the text. Patently, there is an exceptional precedence.

Fifth, the rhetorical questions in 7:7 and 7:13 are unique and instructive to Paul's rhetorical strategy. In 7:7 Paul rhetorically asks, "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?" and follows with the response, "I would not have come to know about sin...." The "What shall we say then" question is a common formula in Romans (3:5; 4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 30) that implies a diatribe tactic.⁶⁴ Throughout Romans this is

is contained in an Old Testament quote. Hence, nearly all uses outside of Old Testament quotes are rhetorical in Romans. A comprehensive search of second-person singular pronouns and verbs in Romans, using Logos Bible Software provided the following results, organized as follows: *Rhetorically* (85x): 2:1 (5x), 3 (3x), 4 (2x), 5 (3x), 17 (4x), 18 (2x), 19 (2x), 21 (3x), 22 (2x), 23 (2x), 25 (3x), 27; 8:2; 9:19, 20 (2x); 11:17 (3x), 18 (5x), 20 (4x), 21, 22 (5x), 24 (3x); 12:21 (2x); 13:3 (3x), 4 (3x), 9 (2x); 14:4 (2x), 10 (6x), 15 (4x), 20, 21, 22 (4x); *Old Testament Israelite* (20x): 7:7; 10:6 (2x), 8 (3x), 9 (5x); 12:20 (4x); 13:9 (5x); *God* (12x): 3:4 (4x); 8:36; 9:20; 11:3 (2x), 10; 15:3, 9 (2x); *Abraham* (3x): 4:17, 18; 9:7; *Pharaoh* (2x): 9:17 (2x).

⁶² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 427. Black, "The Spiritual Condition of *Egō* and His Relationship to the Law in Romans 7:14–25," 48.

⁶³ For a passage to qualify, this writer set a minimum of 10 verses for a paragraph to contain a significant number of first person singular pronouns and verbs. Romans 7:7–25 contains the highest first-person singular instances to verse ratio at 52 instances in a span of 19 verses, achieving a 2.74 instance-to-verse ratio (if one delimits the focus of the passage to Romans 7:14–25, it contains a 39/12 ratio, equaling a 3.25 instance to verse ratio). A close second is 1 Cor 9:15–10:1 at 37/14 = 2.64. The rest of the significant paragraphs in Paul were calculated as follows: 2 Cor 11:1–13:3 = 122/57 = 2.14; 2 Cor 2:1–13 = 26/13 = 2.00; Gal 4:11–21 = 19/11 = 1.73; 2 Tim 4:6–20 = 25/15 = 1.67; Philm 4–24 = 34/21 = 1.62; Gal 1:6–3:2 = 66/42 = 1.57; Phil 2:12–3:1 = 31/20 = 1.55; 1 Cor 14:11–19 = 17/11 = 1.545; Phil 3:4–4:4 = 31/22 = 1.41; Rom 15:14–32 = 26/19 verses = 1.37; 1 Cor 4:14–5:3 = 15/11 = 1.36; 1 Cor 16:1–17 = 23/17 = 1.35; Col 1:23–2:5 = 16/12 = 1.33; 2 Tim 1:3–2:2 = 24/18 = 1.33; 1 Tim 1:11–2:1 = 14/11 = 1.27; Phil 1:3–2:2 = 36/30 = 1.20; 2 Cor 7:3–8:3 = 19/17 = 1.12; 1 Cor 10:14–11:3 = 21/23 = 0.91; 1 Cor 7:6–40 = 21/35 = 0.60.

⁶⁴ Osborne, "The Flesh without the Spirit," 14.

Paul's way of asking what the audience should say in response to the rhetorical question. For instance, in 7:7, "What should we [the audience] say [in response to the antagonistic Jew]? [Should we say that] the Law is sin? May it never be!" Then, Paul follows the rhetorical question with what the *audience* should say, "I would not have come to know sin except through the Law...." Since 7:7 is the only instance in which Paul transitions from a first person *plural* rhetorical question to a first person *singular* rhetorical answer,⁶⁵ then the audience should expect that Paul is relating *their* response for them in 7:7–25; he is not communicating his own response or experience.

Then in 7:13 Paul asks a rhetorical question with the first person singular. But what is striking is that Paul does not use the first person singular with reference to himself in any rhetorical question in Romans.⁶⁶ Therefore, since the question in 7:13 is rhetorical, the 'I' that follows is rhetorical as well. And if the 'I' is rhetorical, then every instance of 'I', 'me', and 'my' in 7:7–25 is rhetorical. In other words, this is not Paul's question in 7:13, but someone else's question, and this is not Paul's experience in 7:7–25, but someone else's experience. There is a rhetorical precedence.

Sixth, after the rhetorical question in 7:7, Paul does not use another first person *plural* except in 7:14 ("we")⁶⁷ and 7:25a ("our"). Paul stays in the 'I' almost entirely throughout Romans 7:7–25. But in 7:25a, he interrupts the numerous uses of 'I' to say 'our', and then he returns to 'I' in 7:25b. The only adequate way to explain this anomaly is that Paul intentionally interrupts his representation of Jews under the Law

⁶⁵ The only other instance in Romans in which a first-person plural rhetorical question is followed by a first-person singular response is found in 3:5–6, but clearly in this case, Paul steps out of character in the first person singular to momentarily explain to his audience that he is speaking in human terms (i.e. speaking on behalf of others).

⁶⁶ If the reader supposes that 10:18, 19; 11:1, 11 are referring to Paul, then the Λέγω (i.e., "I say") in each of these verses necessarily falls outside the rhetorical question and therefore does not qualify as a first-person singular in a rhetorical question.

⁶⁷ However, this is more debatable than scholarship has given credit. Textual criticism actually gives credence to a convincing variant. Instead of "For we know" (Οἶδαμεν γὰρ), it may be rendered "For on the one hand I know" (Οἶδα μὲν γὰρ). Although variants are slim in support of the latter (minuscule 33, Jerome, and a few manuscripts), the earliest texts must be *factored out* of the decision because these majuscules were composed with no spaces between words (i.e. ΟΙΔΑΜΕΝΓΑΡ). In other words, the text "For I know" is based exclusively on the decision of eighth- and ninth-century scribes who interpreted ΟΙΔΑΜΕΝΓΑΡ as ΟΙΔΑΜΕΝ ΓΑΡ and not ΟΙΔΑ ΜΕΝ ΓΑΡ. The important majuscules that play a watershed role in every New Testament variant (Codex Sinaiticus [σ], Alexandrinus [Α], Vaticanus [Β], etc.) cannot be included in the assessment because they do not take a side on the issue. Therefore, there are two arguments in favor of the plural "we know," and they include the minuscule textual evidence and how common Paul employs "For we know" in Romans and Corinthians. See Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1:355. However, in favor of the singular "I know" is the fact that Paul uses "For I know" in the immediate context (7:18; οἶδα γὰρ), the first-person singular continues uninterrupted from 7:7b–7:24 if 7:14a is singular, the μὲν... δὲ construction is preserved in the verse, and the awkward shift from "For we know" to "but I am" in the same sentence is avoided. For examples where γὰρ follows μὲν, when it is fronted by a word, see Acts 23:8; Rom 2:25; 5:16; 14:5 (there is a textual issue here, whether γὰρ appears at all or not); 1 Cor 5:3; 11:7; 12:8; 14:17; 2 Cor 9:1; Heb 7:18, 20; 12:10. The search result also yielded no examples in which γὰρ precedes μὲν near the beginning of any sentence in the New Testament. Most of these examples are Pauline, and if Hebrews is at least influenced by Paul, it gains more credence. Therefore, the order of the words, Οἶδα μὲν γὰρ, is grammatically acceptable and common. The statistic was compiled using a Logos Bible Software search.

to praise God for the New Covenant that he *and his readers* know has been inaugurated.⁶⁸ But the person whom Paul represents in 7:7–25 has no concept of this deliverance. Hence, whenever Paul speaks with ‘I’ in 7:7–25, it is not his story, but the story of someone under the Law. Evidently, there is an intentional precedence by Paul.

Seventh, and most convincingly, Paul employs a second singular ‘you’ in 8:2.⁶⁹ As noted before, there are eighty-five instances in Romans in which Paul uses a second singular pronoun or verb to speak rhetorically. Almost all others are found in Old Testament quotes. This singular ‘you’ is likely rhetorical as well. Its isolated instance here can only be explained if Paul is speaking rhetorically to the person he just represented in 7:7–25.⁷⁰ In other words, after stepping into the rhetorical shoes of a Jew under the Law in 7:7–25, Paul steps back into his own shoes in 8:2 to speak *to* that person about the freedom found in the New Covenant. Romans 7:7–25 is rhetorical because Romans 8:2 is rhetorical. There is a grammatical precedence.

With these seven reasons, evidently the case for the rhetorical ‘I’ is sound. It is not merely a secular, Greek tactic imposed on the Romans 7 text. The rhetorical ‘I’

⁶⁸ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 467.

⁶⁹ Gk. σε. There is a textual variant here that is worth noting. Though “us” (ἡμᾶς) is one of the variants replacing σε in some manuscripts, it is found in only a few insignificant texts (Ψ and the Bohairic texts). It is easy to see why a minority of scribes would have changed the text to fit the flow of second-person plural pronouns that continue in the subsequent context. The only other variant is more difficult to determine against the stated text: instead of “you” (σε), other manuscripts have “me” (με)—only a one letter difference in Greek. It is possible that σε was reduplicated when a scribe accidentally mistook the final three letters of the previous word (ἡλευθέρωσέν) for the second person pronoun “you” (σε) and subsequently dropped off the final *nun* (ν). With the words running together in the original manuscripts, this would have been an easy foible for a scribe to make. Furthermore, the first-person singular pronoun seems to correspond with the context of 7:14–25 (though against it is the temptation to amend the text to fit the context; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. [Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007], 456). Even more so, the textual witnesses for με include Alexandrinus (A), the Western Text (D), the Majority Text and a few other minuscules, textual groups, and attested by Clement of Alexandria. However, Metzger does a fine job sorting through the evidence and explains, “Impressed by the weight of the combination of Alexandrian and Western witnesses [particularly κ and B], a majority of the Committee preferred σε as the earliest attainable text.” Ibid. Stauffer’s explanation of the emendation is also highly convincing. See Ethelbert Stauffer, “ἐγώ,” *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 2:361n154. It is also the harder, but very reasonable, reading and should be preferred. Thus, it is best to stay with the text as it is.

⁷⁰ This also makes sense because a singular ‘you’ (verbal form) is used in an Old Testament quote in 7:7, “*You shall not covet*” (Οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις). The tenth commandment shares the second singular in both Masoretic Hebrew (תִּשְׁתַּחַדֵּשׁ) and Septuagint Greek (οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις) in Exodus 20:17 and Deuteronomy 5:21. Paul is certainly making an exact citation. Nevertheless, the commandment was written to corporate Israel and was to be fulfilled individually in unity for the greater solidarity of the whole. Hence, the second singular reflects the corporate unity assumed in the command. So too, Paul uses the second singular to speak *to* Israel corporately (7:7) and *for* Israel corporately (7:7–12) so that each Israelite might fulfill the Law individually in unity together (7:13–25). Therefore, the singular ‘you’s’ of 7:7 and 8:2 act as bookends that signal the *beginning* and *end* of the rhetorical ‘I’ section of 7:7–25. This cannot be a coincidence.

of Romans 7 is established historically, contextually, stylistically, exceptionally, rhetorically, intentionally, and grammatically. These reasons cannot be ignored or dismissed.

Misconception 4: Paul Is Speaking about His Current Experience

Probably the most common misconception coming from the Christian view of Romans 7 is that Paul must be speaking about his current Christian experience because he employs present-tense verbs in 7:14–25.⁷¹ But there are four reasons why this is a misconception.

First, even though the present tense is common in both modern English and Koine Greek, these tenses are not employed identically in both languages, even though there is plenty of commonality between them. Greek scholars have noted that Koine Greek verbs do not intimate the element of time as much as English verbs do.⁷² In Greek “[t]he kind of action is always predominant over the time of the action.”⁷³ In this way, the fact that an author in the New Testament uses the present tense is not sufficient enough of an argument to prove that the author must be speaking about his current situation.

Second, there is plenty of precedence for the present tense in the New Testament that is not speaking about current situations. For instance the gospel narratives are regularly written in the present tense.⁷⁴ Paul also employs the present tense in his letters when not speaking about his current situation, such as the present participles in Philippians 3:3–6 when speaking of his past life in Judaism,⁷⁵ or the present indicative verbs when relating his past intention to see the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:17). In these examples, Paul employs the present tense to relive the moment for his readers so that they can “step into his shoes” and relate with him as though it is happening right now. Even today, modern English speakers do this all the time to narrate or write evocatively.⁷⁶ So too, Paul conveys his graphic struggle in Romans 7:14–25

⁷¹ Chamblin, *Paul and the Self*, 172.

⁷² Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2005), 25.

⁷³ Wesley J. Perschbacher, *The New Testament Greek Syntax: An Illustrated Manual* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 278.

⁷⁴ Scholars call this the historical present. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 529. In fact, so extensive is the use of historical present in gospel narratives that the editors of the NAU supply a star next to each occurrence that directs the reader to the preface, where they explain, “Greek authors frequently used the present tense for the sake of heightened vividness, thereby transporting their readers in imagination to the actual scene at the time of occurrence.” See Lockman Foundation, ed., *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), vii.

⁷⁵ Gundry, “The Moral Frustration of Paul before His Conversion,” 228.

⁷⁶ For instance, modern English speakers do this well when relating a story, “I flew to Denver the other day, and I had a strange thing happen to me. We took off and during the flight one of the stewardesses began getting orders for drinks. As she *comes* to my row, I *am* unaware that my foot it slightly in the aisle. Then, we *hit* some turbulence, and the cart *slams* against my foot!” All italicized words in the previous

with the present tense for vividness sake. Because of the turbulent inner conflict in these verses, there is hardly a better passage in the New Testament for him to be using the present tense for vividness.

Third, and maybe most important of all, if Paul is speaking rhetorically for someone else in Romans 7:7–25, then his present-tense verbs in 7:14–25 have no bearing whatsoever on when this struggle took place because it is hypothetical. Certainly many Jews have faced this internal ambivalence in the past, but if Paul is speaking representatively for others, then the turmoil of 7:14–25 is representative and timeless.⁷⁷ Thus, if Paul is speaking rhetorically here, then the present-tense argument from the Christian view completely dissolves.

Fourth, because of the variety of uses of the present tense in Greek, it is best not to nitpick at the verb tenses to prove whether a passage is speaking to a current situation or not. Rather, scholars have shown that Greek *adverbs* are often the true telltale sign of the passage’s relationship to time.⁷⁸ In Romans 7 there are no temporal adverbs in 7:7–25. However, the passage is bookended with two temporal adverbs—*nūni* and *nūn*⁷⁹—in 7:6 and 8:1, respectively. This is not a coincidence. Paul intentionally addresses his and his readers’ current situation under the New Covenant in 7:6 and then returns to their current situation in 8:1. Otherwise, for everything else between (i.e. the entire section of the rhetorical ‘I’ in 7:7–25), no temporal adverbs exist.⁸⁰ Therefore, the section is a timeless representation of life under the Old Covenant.

These four reasons capably demonstrate why it is a misconception that Paul’s present-tense verbs in 7:14–25 prove that he is speaking about his current Christian experience. Instead, it is best to conclude that the struggle of 7:7–25 is timeless, and the present tense verbs in 7:14–25 are used to evocatively convey a theoretical event.

Misconception 5: Paul’s Godly Desires Are Evidence of the Spirit and Fruit

One of the more troubling misconceptions about Romans 7 is that that the Holy Spirit and righteous fruit-bearing can be found in Romans 7. To evince this, scholars

sentence are written in the present tense. Such a tactic is natural for modern English speakers even if the event took place in the past. In fact, this is one of the best ways to convey a story evocatively. It is also common practice in English school systems to train students to write their essays in the present tense to communicate in vivid ways. In fact, this writer has been doing this throughout the article by conveying Paul’s words in Romans with the present tense, as though what he is saying is happening today. This method helps the reader engage more closely with Paul and his words. It is shame how quickly readers can limit what they think biblical writers can or cannot do when they practice such things all the time!

⁷⁷ This is because hypothetical (or theoretical) situations require the present tense because if a future or past tense verb is used (at least in English), it anchors the event in real space and time, and the reader is led to believe that the situation may not be hypothetical.

⁷⁸ Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 25.

⁷⁹ Gk. νῦν and νῦν.

⁸⁰ The adverb νῦν in 7:17 is a logical, transitional use of the adverb, not temporal. As Moo put it, “‘But now... no longer’ is logical, not temporal; it states what must ‘now,’ in light of the argument of vv. 15–16, ‘no longer’ be considered true.” Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 457.

have claimed that Paul's godly desires in Romans 7 are evidence of the Spirit-filled life⁸¹ marked by fruit and even victory.⁸² But this is a misconception because it is only an implication of the passage, not a textual observation.

In fact, the Spirit is not mentioned once in Romans 7:7–25.⁸³ Some may claim this as an argument from silence fallacy—just because the Spirit is not mentioned in the passage does not mean He is not intended there. While that argument would normally have some warrant here, it actually fails in this case because Paul intentionally bookends 7:7–25 with the Spirit in 7:6 and 8:2.⁸⁴ This is a far cry from an argument from silence fallacy. Rather, Paul intentionally bookends the section with the Spirit and leaves Him out of the discussion between these verses because he is contrasting life under the Old Covenant (7:7–25) with life under the New Covenant (7:6; 8:1ff). Even more so, Paul juxtaposes his fleshly nature with “the spiritual” in 7:14, “For we know that the Law is *spiritual*, but I am of *flesh*....” What would normally be a perfect time to champion the indwelling of the Spirit, Paul actually contrasts his flesh with the “spiritual” Law⁸⁵ to magnify the need for all people under the Law to partake of the New Covenant. In essence, the people of God cannot fulfill a *spiritual* Law without the *Spirit*.

Yet, some have suggested that the Spirit is working in Paul's upright desires in the passage,⁸⁶ such as when he says, “For I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man” (7:22), or “So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the Law of God...” (7:25b). But if the reader is honest with what Romans 7 is saying, such an observation actually reduces the Spirit to the agent of good desire *without* good fruit because, according to the passage, these desires are insufficient to translate into fruit. This actually defies and redefines what the rest of the New Testament says about the Spirit under the New Covenant—that He is first and foremost the agent of good fruit (Rom 7:6; 8:3–17; Gal 5:16–26; 2 Pet 1:3–11; 1 John 3:4, 7–8, etc.).

Simply put, many have fallaciously supposed that Romans 7:14–25 is a Christian's story of “sometimes doing good and sometimes doing bad.” For instance, some have assumed that 7:18a is a clear implication of the Spirit versus the flesh in the Christian life.⁸⁷ But in reality, there is no mention of Paul ever *doing anything good*

⁸¹ Chamblin, *Paul and the Self*, 175. See also Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 411–12.

⁸² Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 114. See also Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 268.

⁸³ Russell, “Insights from Postmodernism's Emphasis on Interpretative Communities in the Interpretation of Romans 7,” 525.

⁸⁴ In 7:6 Paul calls to mind the “newness of the Spirit” (καινότητι πνεύματος; a metonym for the New Covenant) by which Christians should walk. In 8:2 he relates the “Law of the Spirit of Life” (ὁ... νόμος τοῦ πνεύματος τῆς ζωῆς; i.e. another metonym for the New Covenant) that governs Christian living. These are patently absent from his discussion in 7:7–25.

⁸⁵ Mounce, *Romans*, 168.

⁸⁶ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 270.

⁸⁷ Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1:360–61. Here Paul declares, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.” The last phrase, “that is, in my flesh” (τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου) is what some believe is an implication of the Spirit. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 458. In other words, when Paul is walking in the flesh, no good dwells in him, but something good dwells in him when he is walking in the Spirit.

in this passage.⁸⁸ He only *desires* to do the good. He is *never* able to bring that desire to fruitful fulfillment. Commentators who make the unfounded claim that Spirit and fruit are implied in 7:18a often ignore Paul's own explanation⁸⁹ in 7:18b, "for the *willing* is present in me, but the doing of the good is not." Paul is not making a distinction between the flesh and the Spirit as he does in Galatians 5:16–26 or other similar New Testament passages. It is actually a battle of mind versus flesh (7:25b), not Spirit versus flesh. The former is a battle of the Old Covenant as a believer is left to his own resources (i.e. his mind, will, flesh) to fulfill the Law (e.g., Rom 7:14–25). The latter is a battle of the New Covenant where the believer is granted the Spirit for the producing of righteous fruit (e.g., Gal 5:16–26). This passage is not about good fruit versus bad fruit. It is about good *desires* versus bad fruit.⁹⁰ It is willing versus doing (7:18), not good-doing versus bad-doing. It is not victory in defeat under the New Covenant. It is *inability* to produce fruit under the Old Covenant.

The New Testament always boasts that fruit is the evidence of Spirit-filled living, not desire irrespective of fruit (cf. 8:4, 12–13; Gal 5:16–26). But the Christian-view of Romans 7 has regrettably overemphasized Paul's success in loving God and His Law as preeminent in the passage. In reality, the true emphasis of Romans 7 is the frustration and inability to convert godly motives into action. That is why it is a misconception to assume that Spirit and fruit are inherent in the text. Actually, the Spirit is intentionally left out, and fruit-bearing is nowhere to be found.

Misconception 6: Paul Is Enslaved to God

One marquee verse for the Christian view is 7:25b, "So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin."⁹¹ Evidently, Paul must be speaking for the Christian because just as the Christian has been enslaved to righteousness (6:18), so the person in 7:25b is enslaved to God and His Law. But this is a misconception because it misunderstands the distinction between mind and flesh in the passage.

⁸⁸ Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, 290–91.

⁸⁹ The explanatory conjunction γάρ in 7:18b indicates that Paul is further expounding what he means in 7:18a.

⁹⁰ In fact, a simple question can be posed that unravels the Christian view of Romans 7—is Paul's godly desires Spirit-driven? If 'No,' then the Christian view has no evidence of support. But if 'Yes,' then why are these desires insufficient to produce fruit? At this point, the Christian view of Romans 7 is placed in a near self-refuting situation. Should the Christian advocate respond by claiming that the godly desires must occur at a different time from his sinful actions, then he should be reminded that Paul's argument rests heavily on the godly desires happening in unison with his ungodly actions; otherwise, he could not conclude, "So no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me" (7:17, 20). Paul's perception of sin as the culprit only makes sense if the desires and deeds happen simultaneously and if Paul has an alibi during the crime (i.e. that he agrees with the Law [7:16] at the time of the sinful deed [7:15, 17]); otherwise, Paul cannot be sure that a law of sin is truly the culprit that imprisons his godly mind (7:23, 25). Paul's godly motives are actually evidence that he is *not* a Christian in this passage, because his godly desires are insufficient for fruit-bearing.

⁹¹ Osborne, "The Flesh Without the Spirit," 25.

As noted in the previous misconception, Paul is not insisting in 7:25b that he sometimes walks in the Spirit and other times walks in the flesh. Rather, he is depicting two different arenas—his mind and his actions. His mind is set upon God, but his actions are set upon sin.⁹² Moreover, this misconception overlooks clear terminology of enslavement to sin that is foreign to Christian living. This is demonstrable in four phrases found in 7:14–25 that would otherwise contradict the immediate context of Romans 6–8 if Paul is speaking as a Christian.

First, Paul not only claims that he is unspiritual by contrast of the “spiritual” Law in 7:14a, he also asserts that he is “sold into bondage to sin” (7:14b). The words “sold into bondage” are an interpretative translation of the Greek term *πῖρᾰσκῶ* (*pipraskō*), which means “to sell,” and in the arena of human slavery as a commercial transaction, the connotation always engenders enslavement⁹³ and ownership⁹⁴ in Scripture. In other words, Paul is illustrating the selling of a human into slavery in 7:14, implying a master-slave relationship.⁹⁵ Furthermore, with the perfect tense,⁹⁶ Paul insists that the slavery which began in 7:7–12 continues into 7:14 and following. But the Christian has died to the Law (7:4) and has been released from the Law (7:6). He is not “sold into bondage to sin” as 7:14 unequivocally declares. If Paul is speaking as a Christian in 7:14b, then he is contradicting what he made known in 7:4, 6.

Second, Paul elucidates that he is unable to do good in 7:18b, “[F]or the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.” As noted in the previous misconception, Paul is not implying the Spirit in 7:18a, but rather he is contrasting his willing and his doing.⁹⁷ There is good that resides in his intentions (7:16, 22, 25b), but there is no good that comes forth from his deeds (i.e. his flesh; 7:15, 18, 19, 23, 25b). Essentially, when seeking to fulfill the Law apart from the New Covenant Paul is unable to do anything good, even though he desires it. But if Paul is speaking as a Christian in 7:18, then it defies what he says about Christians in 8:1–4, that Christians are enabled by the Spirit to fulfill the righteous requirement of the Law.

Third, Paul communicates prisoner-of-war terminology in 7:23 when he says, “[B]ut I see a different law in the members of my body, *waging war* against the law of my mind and making me a *prisoner* of the law of sin which is in my members.” The battle is not back and forth skirmishes or a stalemate conflict. Paul is not suggesting that he is slowly gaining traction against sin as he fights for adherence to the

⁹² This is why his enslavement to God and his enslavement to sin can be seen as simultaneous in 7:25b.

⁹³ Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 461.

⁹⁴ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 454n38.

⁹⁵ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 474.

⁹⁶ The verb is written *πεπραμένος* (*pepramenos*). Since the perfect tense is not as frequent in the New Testament as the present, aorist, future, or imperfect tense, it can be surmised that “there is usually a deliberate choice on the part of the writer.” Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 573. In contrast with the aorist and imperfect tenses, the perfect tense implies a past event with an emphasis on its results felt in the present. *Ibid.*, 573–75. Applying this understanding to *πεπραμένος* (literally, “having been sold”) and considering Paul’s use of the preposition “under” (*ὑπο*; *ὑπό*) which follows the verb in 7:14b, Paul stresses the effects of slavery.

⁹⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 459.

Law. Rather, as Moo put it, “the result of the battle between ‘the law of sin’ and ‘the law of my mind’ is an unqualified victory for the former. . . .”⁹⁸ Though his mind has put up an admirable fight, he learns the harsh reality that has been true all along—he is a prisoner of war, and he can do nothing about it. It is total defeat.⁹⁹ He is owned by sin (7:14b). But if Paul is speaking as a Christian in Romans 7, then this would oppose what he will announce four verses later, that the law of the Spirit of life has freed such a person from the law of sin and of death. The wording is not coincidental. The Law of Sin that made Paul a prisoner of war in 7:23 is the same Law of Sin from which Christians are truly freed in 8:2. There is no going back. Once free, always free (cf. John 8:36). Certainly Christians can subjectively *feel* enslaved to sin from time to time, but objectively they will never *be* enslaved again. But Romans 7 is not simply what Paul *feels* is true about his struggles with sin; it is what Paul *knows* is true—he *is* enslaved to sin.

Fourth, Paul is not only enslaved to God with his mind, he is enslaved to sin with his flesh (7:25b). Here Paul concludes and summarizes what he depicted in 7:7–25.¹⁰⁰ His willing is for God, but his doing is for sin. Desire is not converting into fruit. Some scholars seemingly want to emphasize hopefulness in these verses and promote a balance between desiring good and practicing sin in 7:25b.¹⁰¹ But in reality, Paul intends a pessimistic conclusion because good desire without good fruit is still failure. There is no balance of good versus evil here. It is only good motives obscured (or suppressed) by evil deeds. The same word “serve”¹⁰² governs both actions so that the best Paul can say is that he is internally committed to God. Otherwise, his mind already lost the battle to the law of sin so that he is unable to produce the good (7:23). This same (or similar) root for “serve” is also found in 6:18, 22 and 7:6 where Paul avers that Christians serve God, not only with their intentions, but for the bearing of fruit. But if Paul is speaking as a Christian in 7:25b, then it would stand antithetical to these propositions.

In these four verses (7:14, 18, 23, 25b) Paul portrays a person unambiguously enslaved to sin. His enslavement to God in 7:25b is only that of mind and will. However, the central theme of Romans 7:14–25 is that his mind and will are not translating into fruit. That is *not* the definition of Christian living (cf. John 15:1–8). That is the definition of *inability* under the Old Covenant.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 465.

⁹⁹ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 396.

¹⁰⁰ John D. Harvey, *Romans: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2017), 186.

¹⁰¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 298. Mounce, *Romans*, 171.

¹⁰² Gk. δουλεύω.

Misconception 7: Paul's Godly Desires Are Christocentric¹⁰³

It is easy to suppose that Paul's devout intentions in Romans 7 highlight Christ as the focus. The reasoning goes like this—if Paul is relating a Christian experience, then his godly motives must be the result of the New Covenant gospel.¹⁰⁴ But this is reading into the text what is simply not there. In fact, a careful reading of Romans 7:7–25 reveals that Paul speaks *nothing* of the standard New Testament graces that he regularly communicates in his epistles, such as faith, the gospel, forgiveness, repentance, redemption, reconciliation, hope, mercy, love, peace, grace, the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁵ Instead, the reader must prejudice the text with these themes to make this claim. In reality, the words and themes that occur regularly in Romans 7 are the Law (e.g., 7:1, 4, 22, 25b, etc.), death (7:5, 13, 24), sin (7:7, 13, 14, 23, 25b), enslavement (7:5, 14, 23, 25b), inability (7:15, 18, 19), defeat (7:14, 23–24), hopelessness (7:24), and wretchedness (7:24). In essence, this passage is not about godly ambition for Christ, the gospel, or the New Covenant, but rather godly ambition *for the Law* and an inability to fulfill it. This is evident because Paul uses the term 'law' twenty three times in the passage, most of which refer directly to the Old Covenant Law.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, many scholars overlook these facts.

Other scholars reinterpret the meaning of 'law' in Romans 7 to maintain the Christian view.¹⁰⁷ But throughout Romans, beginning in 2:12, 'law' has been used exclusively to refer to the Old Covenant Law of Moses (2:12–29; 3:19–21, 27–31; 4:13–16; 5:13, 20; 6:14–15, 19). In fact, while the Law took somewhat of a backseat in Paul's gospel presentation in Romans 4:1–6:13, it was reintroduced in Romans 6:14 to set up for the dense discussion in Romans 7. In 6:14, Paul declares, "For sin

¹⁰³ This writer is using this term differently than the Christocentric hermeneutic expression that has become well-known in modern biblical scholarship. He means it purely in the sense that Paul's desires are centered on Christ, fully aware of His first coming and work.

¹⁰⁴ Mounce, *Romans*, 170.

¹⁰⁵ There is one exception to this fact. In 7:25a Paul exclaims, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (χαίρις δὲ τῷ θεῷ διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν). The phrase "Jesus Christ our Lord" is the only instance in 7:7–25 in which Paul mentions any New Testament theme. However, as noted in Misconception 3, his use of 'our' in "Jesus Christ *our* Lord" is not coincidental. The fact that Paul implements a first-person plural for only the third time in the passage (see 7:7, 14 for the other two; however perhaps 7:14 is a first-person singular; see footnote 67) suggests that Paul is stepping out of character in the rhetorical 'I' of 7:7–25. The instance of 'our' here makes little sense otherwise. In other words, the 'I' of 7:7–25 knows nothing yet of Jesus Christ. Rather, Paul's praise in 7:25a is a momentary stepping out of character to thank God *with his readers* for the New Covenant. In fact, this explains why Paul subsequently says, "So then... *I myself*..." in 7:25b. He infers to his readers that he is stepping back into character one more time by drawing attention to the first-person singular with two pronouns "I myself" (αὐτὸς ἐγὼ). Contra R. St. John Parry, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, CGTSC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 107.

¹⁰⁶ Probably eighteen of these instances refer directly to the Law of Moses (i.e. the Old Covenant), and five act as paronomasia on the word to personify sin and the mind (7:21, 23 (3x), 25b). See also the play on the word 'law' in 8:2 with the "law of the Spirit of life" (i.e. the New Covenant).

¹⁰⁷ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 187.

shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”¹⁰⁸ Reversing the logic, Paul insists that when God’s people are under Law, sin is their master. But if they are under grace, they are free from sin (cf. 7:4, 6; 8:2). Therefore, according to the reasoning of 6:14, while Israel (both believing and unbelieving) was under the Law—without the inauguration of the New Covenant and the Spirit—all Israelites were mastered by sin. It was not until the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the New Covenant rescued Israel from the Law and placed them under grace (Gal 4:4–5).¹⁰⁹ That is why Paul portrays a frustrating situation for those under the Law in Romans 7. It is a life marked by enslavement to sin with no access to the Spirit for the bearing of fruit.

Simply put, it is easy to rummage the passage for application before ascertaining its meaning. Modern readers peruse Romans 7 wearing Gentile-Christian glasses that conform the meaning of the passage to something more applicable to the reader rather than conforming the reader to the passage.¹¹⁰ As Russell put it, “Our interest in the west in the internal struggle of the persons represented in this passage has caused us to make rather facile leaps in interpreting key terms within the passage.”¹¹¹ In other words, passion for the Law in Romans 7 is reinterpreted as passion for the gospel. When this misconception is corrected, the reader should wonder why Paul is singularly trying to fulfill the Law in the first place? Paul’s warning in Galatians 4:21 and 5:1 would be more apt for the person in Romans 7, “Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?... It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”

Therefore, it is a misconception to assume that Paul’s pious ambitions in Romans 7 are informed by New Covenant graces, such as knowledge of Christ’s first-coming ministry or the power of the Spirit for sanctification. Actually, his desires are *exclusively* attentive toward the Law in this passage, which would be strange, if not dangerous, for someone who has been freed from the Law (Rom 7:4, 6; Gal 5:1).

Misconception 8: The Reader Is Asking the Right Question

As noted at the beginning of this article, most people approach Romans 7 with the question, “Is Paul speaking as a Christian or not?” But this question approaches the text seeking the reader’s intent, not the author’s. When this perspective takes a hold, it becomes the driving force that obfuscates the reader’s judgment. He sees what

¹⁰⁸ The phrases “under Law” and “under grace” are metonyms for the Old Covenant and the New Covenant eras, respectively.

¹⁰⁹ Certainly all of God’s people are saved by grace, but being “under grace” refers not to the means by which a person is saved, but to the era of God’s redemption plan.

¹¹⁰ Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 225–26. In fact, if the reader is patient to discover the true meaning of the passage, often he will find the application far more rewarding than the superficial help he initially desires.

¹¹¹ Russell, “Insights from Postmodernism’s Emphasis on Interpretative Communities in the Interpretation of Romans 7,” 523.

he wants to see and ignores or reinterprets anything in the passage that does not conform to it. But a careful, impartial approach to the passage will note that whether Paul is speaking as a Christian or not is a secondary query to the more prominent issue, “Is Paul speaking as someone under the Old Covenant or the New Covenant.”

The surrounding context of Paul’s representation of Jews under the Law in 7:7–25 is intentionally saturated with terminology that signifies the Old Covenant and New Covenant. Phrases such as newness of the Spirit (7:6) versus oldness of the letter (7:6), law of the Spirit of life (8:2) versus law of sin and of death (8:2), and under grace (6:14) versus under Law (6:14) are just a few of these indicators. Other concepts, such as the bookending uses of “now” and the Spirit in 7:6 and 8:1–2 reflect a life under grace (8:1–17) in contrast to a life under the Law (7:7–25). In other words, Romans 7 is not so much about a contemporary issue of a converted or unconverted Christian, but more about an Old Covenant era no longer valid for the modern Christian. By doing this, Paul is not avoiding application for modern readers. Rather, he is educating his audience and all future Christians as to why the Law, though holy and pure (7:12), has no part to play in a Christian’s sanctification. He is growing the reader’s appreciation for the New Covenant and the Spirit—blessings that Old Testament Israel did not possess.

In fact, so clear is this Old Covenant versus New Covenant theme that Paul actually provided a blueprint for this discussion in 7:4–6. Several grammatical similarities between 7:4 and 6:1–23, 7:5 and 7:7–25, and 7:6 and 8:1–11 indicate that Paul deliberately summarizes where he came from in Romans 6 (7:4) and where he is going in the rest of Romans 7–8 (7:5, 6).¹¹² By addressing the necessity of fruit in the Christian life in Romans 6, Paul recaps this in 7:4 before prefacing the rest of Romans 7 and 8 about the contrast between the Old Covenant (7:5) and the New Covenant (7:6) in 7:7–25 and 8:1–17, respectively.¹¹³ In other words, the grammatical similarities elucidate that if 7:5 is about the Old Covenant experience, then 7:7–25 is intended to be so as well.

But what is even more of interest are two characteristics that define the Christian in 7:4 and 7:6. The Christian has died to the Law “to bear fruit for God” (7:4) and “to serve in newness of the Spirit” (7:6). These two purpose statements set the boundaries for true Christianity for this context—Christians bear fruit and walk by the Spirit. But surprisingly neither of these concepts can be found in 7:7–25. This is no coincidence. These two features are patently missing because Paul intentionally left them out. He is not describing the Christian experience marked by fruit and Spirit in 7:7–25. Instead, he is referring to the frustrating aspects of life under the Old Covenant before these blessings were available to God’s people.

¹¹² Grammatical terms and themes shared between 7:4 and 6:1–7:3 include *death to sin* (6:2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11; 7:2–3), *association with Christ’s body* (6:3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12–13), and *fruit* (6:21, 22). Likewise 7:5 and 7:7–25 share terms and themes, including *flesh* (7:14, 25b), *passions* (7:7, 8, 15, 16, 18, 19, 22, 25b), *aroused by the Law* (7:8, 17, 20, 23), *working or producing* (7:8, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20), and *death* (7:10, 13, 24). Finally, comparing 7:6 and 8:1–11, grammatical terms and themes include the word “now” (8:1), *release or freedom* (8:2), *serve* (8:15; contrast with 7:23, 25b), and *Spirit* (8:2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16).

¹¹³ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 420.

Essentially Romans 7 is the Old Covenant; Romans 8 is the New Covenant. Those who believe that Paul is speaking as a Christian must downplay the stark contrast Paul is making between the two chapters. As Russell aptly related, “We have entered a new covenant and thereby a new era in God’s program. Our lives are not to be characterized primarily by human frailty but by divine enablement.”¹¹⁴ Thus, Romans 7 can be summarized by one word—*inability*. Under the Law of the Old Covenant, man is unable to be all that God wants him to be. Praise the Lord for the New Covenant!

Summary and Implications

Now that the eight misconceptions have been addressed, a brief summary of them is in order, followed by a few vital implications for the reader’s thinking when it comes to this passage.

First, it is a misconception to claim that Paul is speaking as a Christian in Romans 7 just because he is in the “Sanctification Section” of Romans. Actually, the rhetorical questions in Romans 3–11 plot the trajectory of Paul’s argument which can backtrack to a time before Christ (e.g., 7:7–12). Second, Paul is not speaking to Gentiles primarily in Romans 7, but he delimits his audience to the minority of Jewish readers starting in 7:1. Third, Paul speaks rhetorically for Jews under the Law in 7:7–25, not about his own situation, and this was proved historically, contextually, stylistically, exceptionally, rhetorically, intentionally, and grammatically. Fourth, since Paul speaks representatively in this passage, the present tense is the most appropriate way to vividly portray a representative experience for those struggling with sin under the Law. He is not using the present tense to indicate that this is his current experience. Fifth, the Holy Spirit and fruit-bearing are intentionally mentioned in 7:4–6 and 8:2–4, but missing everywhere in between because Paul is signifying that he is speaking about life without the Spirit in 7:7–25. Sixth, Paul is not enslaved to God in his deeds, but only in his mind. Instead, terminology in the passage demonstrates that he is externally enslaved to sin (7:14, 18, 23, 25b) and that his mind is stifled (or buried) by this slavery. Even if he desires good, he is still failing because he is not bearing fruit. In fact, how ironic it is that his godly desires are not enough to convert into fruit. Seventh, Paul is not conveying godly motives for Christ, the gospel, and other New Testament graces in this passage. Rather, he is seeking adherence to the Law of Moses, which is foreign to New Testament Christian living. Eighth, the proper question is not whether Paul is speaking as a Christian or a non-Christian, but whether he is speaking as someone under the Old Covenant or under the New Covenant.

Having summarized the contents of the article, there are a few implications that cannot be ignored, especially as it relates to the Christian view. It is important that the reader carefully consider these matters as they affect his view of sanctification. These are briefly related as follows.

First, those who believe that Paul is speaking for Christians in Romans 7 must conclude that the Christian abides in an awkward tension between Romans 7 and

¹¹⁴ Russell, “Insights from Postmodernism’s Emphasis on Interpretative Communities in the Interpretation of Romans 7,” 525.

Romans 8, even though Romans 8:2 has already proclaimed freedom for the Christian. The Christian aspires to chapter 8, but regrettably, he will remain in chapter 7 for the rest of his life. So a contradiction remains—he is imprisoned and enslaved as Romans 7:23 and 7:25b insist, but he is also free as Romans 6:18, 22 and 8:2 declare. He is unable to bear fruit according to Romans 7:18, and yet he is somehow able to bear fruit according to Romans 7:6 and 8:4. But for those who believe that Paul is speaking for the Old Testament saint, they completely avoid this contradiction.

Second (and this does not apply to all in the Christian camp), very often Paul, not Christ, becomes the standard of godliness for those who are convinced he is speaking as the everyday Christian in Romans 7. Too often, many Christians find solace in the fact that someone as godly as Paul struggled so powerfully with sin as he does in Romans 7:14–25. Rather than being an impetus to righteous living, this notion actually makes Christians more comfortable in their sin. In this way, the person may feel better because he is in “good company” with Paul, but the situation before God has not changed. Sin has not been addressed. In fact, it is often not dealt with as quickly or effectively because Paul evidently had a hard time dealing with his sin quickly and effectively. Instead of aspiring to holiness, the Christian almost unconsciously reduces the standard from Christ to Paul. One does not need to travel far before he hears a Christian speaking about how encouraging Romans 7 is because Paul mightily struggled with sin. But that is the opposite of sanctification. Any time Christians become more comfortable in their sin because they see someone else that they deem more spiritual than they struggling with his sin, they are going the wrong direction.

Third, if the position that Romans 7 is about the everyday Christian experience is adopted, then there is a subtle lie that the Holy Spirit can only aid in victory over *some* sins, not all, and this becomes the humdrum tune of the Christian life. So, Christians inevitably neglect the powerful promise found in Galatians 5:16, which insists that when God’s people “walk by the Spirit... you will *never* carry out the desire of the flesh.” Or as 2 Peter 1:10 says, “For as long as you practice these things, you will *never* stumble.”¹¹⁵ As Romans 8 announces, the Spirit was given so that Christians *never have to* walk in the flesh again. It is vital that the church proclaim this truth to its people, otherwise they will always settle for a lesser standard of righteousness that is not worthy of the calling they have been called to (cf. Eph 4:1).

Fourth, if Romans 7 is not the Christian view, but the Old Covenant experience under the Law, then the onus resides on the Christian today to start walking in righteousness today, because he has all the resources given to him to abide in the Spirit and resist the flesh *immediately*. Certainly to maintain a life of walking in the Spirit is not easy and requires discipline, training, and perseverance. Sinful habits are hard to break because Christians have conditioned themselves to give in to temptation. But because they have the Spirit, they *always* have the freedom to choose what is pleasing to God right now, and they will spend the rest of their lives learning how to

¹¹⁵ In both of these passages, this writer translated the word “never” because Paul and Peter use double Greek negative particles (οὐ μὴ) to reinforce how impossible it is for the Christian to walk in sin when he is walking in obedience by the Spirit. Emphasis in translation mine.

sustain a walk in the Spirit without breaking stride.¹¹⁶ Christians can never use Romans 7 as an excuse and claim, “Well, inevitably I *will* be defeated (or enslaved) by sin from time to time.” Anytime they concede this excuse, they deny that they *always* have a conscious choice to start walking in the Spirit and thus avoid the flesh. They subtly negate that they are responsible for their choices to sin. They ignore that God has granted them immediate ability to resist temptation today (2 Pet 1:3–4). In other words, *it is never inevitable to sin when a believer has the Spirit*. This truth is not taught enough in today’s churches.

Fifth, the Christian view of Romans 7 defines a Christian according to desire, not action. This is dangerous because it promotes the idea that godly fruit is not a necessary by-product of being a Christian, only desire is. The hyper-grace (or free-grace) movement that is systemic in churches today insists that having strong affections and feelings for God is all that Christians really need to be Christian. Obedience is semi-optional at best, or often it is regarded as hard-nosed legalism and too behavior-focused. For those in this camp, Romans 7 is one of the primary proof-texts for this kind of thinking. If Paul is a Christian in Romans 7, then the best one can say about Christians from this passage is that they have strong passions for God *without* the ability to obey Him. But the church today cannot have it both ways. Either Romans 7 teaches the Christian view and that being a Christian is strictly defined by good desire, not godly fruit, or the case for the Christian in Romans 7 is weak and unsustainable.

Sixth, and finally, as Russell aptly remarked, “If this understanding of the passage is correct, then the experience of Rom 7:7–25 is not worthy to be brought under the banner of the new covenant.”¹¹⁷ In other words, the themes of total defeat and inability as described in Romans 7 do not belong in the New Covenant discussion. This is not to negate that Christians struggle with sin on a daily basis. Many New Testament passages are clear that Christians have challenging struggles with temptation and sin (Gal 5; 1 John 1:8, 10). Even so, there are many genuine Christians that can become enraptured by sins and feel addicted and enslaved (Gal 6:1). But *feeling* enslaved and *being* enslaved are two different things. What Paul is describing in Romans 7 is not the feeling of enslavement, but the objective reality of being enslaved. It is a passage that is devoid of the Spirit (7:14), defeating (7:14b), fruitless (7:18), imprisoning (7:23), enslaving (7:25b), and hopeless (7:24). Such a portrayal as found in this passage more disgraces the New Covenant than provides a justification for it. The Christian who feels enslaved to his sin has hope to start walking in obedience today, unlike the Old Testament saint under the Law as described in Romans 7. Therefore, as a final warning: The reader must be careful how he perceives what Paul is saying, lest his New Covenant vision obscure the truth of this Old Covenant text.

¹¹⁶ That is why 1 John 1:8 and 1:10 insist that Christians will not be perfect in this life, because, as Galatians 5:25 implies, the Christian’s process of sanctification is a lifelong lesson of keeping in-step (στοιχῶμεν) with the Spirit through the unique trials and temptations that they all face. Yet, Christians *always* have the unhindered choice and ability to do what is right because the Spirit *always* dwells within them.

¹¹⁷ Russell, “Insights from Postmodernism’s Emphasis on Interpretative Communities in the Interpretation of Romans 7,” 527.