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The Patristic Interpretation Of Romans 7:14-25

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For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.
Rom 7:14-15

Part 1, The Early Christian Witness To The Arminian Interpretation

Perhaps no other verses have been the subject of such intense debate as the above passage. To the Calvinist this passage represents a never ending struggle with sin which will inevitably end in failure until the day one dies. For the Arminian it represents the life of spiritual struggle that God wants to deliver mankind from via the experience of regeneration.¹

While the best way to interpret a passage will always be to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture there is also much to be gained by studying the ways that the early Christians who followed in the footsteps of the Apostles interpreted a passage. It will be the purpose of this article to examine the ancient Christian interpretation of Romans chapter seven.²

An extensive search of Christian literature up until the fifth century revealed that prior to the fourth century no known Christian writer interpreted Romans seven in a Calvinistic manner, rather it was always understood up until that time to be either an unbeliever or, in one case, to describe a Christian who had *evil desires* that he did not want to have but never *evil actions*.³

The earliest existing writer to comment directly upon this passage was Irenaeus of Lyons (120-202AD) in the second century who connected Paul's statement "that there dwells in my flesh no good thing" as typical of human infirmity which Jesus came to

¹ This is descriptive of most Arminians. There is a small minority who would hold that this passage represents a believer who has not yet experienced entire sanctification, with chapter eight representing the sanctified believer. This, however, was not the interpretation that John Wesley gave to the passage.

² Along with new research this paper incorporates information from James Arminius' *A Dissertation Of The True And Genuine Sense Of The Seventh Chapter Of St. Paul's Epistle To The Romans* found in Volume 2 of his collected works. All references from Arminius have been checked in their original sources. The reader desiring a more comprehensive investigation into this issue is referred to Arminius' much fuller *Dissertation*.

³ Throughout this paper I have focused only on those writers who commented directly upon Romans 7. There is a good amount of indirect testimony to this subject in the form of statements which indicate that various early Christian writers understood the Christian experience to be one that entailed complete victory over sin. These quotes have been left out for brevity sake but if included would add even more weight to the conclusion that no writer before the fourth century assigned the traditional Calvinistic interpretation to this passage. All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, & A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. (Christian Literature Company, Buffalo, NY: 1885) and *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Philip Schaff, ed. (Christian Literature Company, Buffalo, NY: 1886). In some cases I have modernized the 19th century English.

deliver men from.⁴ In commenting upon the parable of the two sons in which one represented the repentant sinners of Jesus' day, the other the unrepentant Pharisees (Mt 21:28-32) Irenaeus described the Pharisees using Romans 7.⁵

Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.220), a North African Christian teacher, in a refutation of Gnosticism, indicated his belief that when Paul emphasized the war between the law of God and the law of his mind (Ro 7:22-23) it was only to show that Jesus rescues men from this through salvation.⁶

Tertullian (c.150-240), another North African Christian leader, indicated that the Holy Spirit makes men free from the law of sin and death in our members (Ro 7:23) and that after this experience of being set free "Our members, therefore, will no longer be subject to the law of death, because they cease to serve that of sin, from both which they have been set free."⁷ Elsewhere he noted his understanding that Paul was referring in Romans 7 to his pre-Christian days as an unbelieving Jew stating that "even if he has affirmed that 'good dwelleth not in his flesh,' yet he means according to 'the law of the letter,' in which he 'was'; but according to 'the law of the Spirit,' to which he annexes us, he frees us from the 'infirmity of the flesh'."⁸

Origen (185-c.254), an early Christian writer, in commenting upon Romans 7 stated that "Yet when he says, 'But I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin,' as if a teacher of the Church, he has now taken upon himself the *persona* of the weak...Paul becomes fleshly and sold into slavery under sin and he says the same things that are customary for them to say under the pretense of an excuse or accusation. He is therefore talking about himself as if speaking under the *persona* of these others...it seems to me that whoever assumes that these things have been spoken under the *persona* of the Apostle smites every soul with hopelessness. For there would then be absolutely no one who does not sin in the flesh. For that is what it means to serve the law of sin in the flesh."⁹

Methodius (d.311) wrote that "the expressions: 'That which I do, I allow not,' and 'what I hate, that do I,' are not to be understood of doing evil, but of only thinking it. For it is not in our power to think or not to think of improper things, but to act or not to act upon our thoughts. For we cannot hinder thoughts from coming into our minds, since we receive them when they are inspired into us from without; but we are able to abstain from obeying them and acting upon them. Therefore it is in our power to will not to think these things; but not to bring it about that they shall pass away, so as not to come into the mind again; for this does not lie in our power, as I said; which is the meaning of that statement, 'The good that I would, I do not'."¹⁰

Lactantius (260-330) wrote in response to those who said it "is my wish not to sin, but I am overpowered; for I am clothed with frail and weak flesh... I am led on against my will; and I sin, not because it is my wish, but because I am compelled" that Jesus

⁴ *Against Heresies*, 3:20:33

⁵ *Against Heresies*, 4:36:8

⁶ *Stromata*, 3:76-78

⁷ *On The Resurrection Of The Flesh*, Ch. 46

⁸ *On Modesty*, Ch. 17

⁹ *Commentary On The Epistle To The Romans*, Book 6, Chaps. 9:4 and 10:2. Scheck, Thomas, tr., *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 104 (The Catholic University Press of America, Washington, DC: 2002).

¹⁰ *The Discourse On The Resurrection: A Synopsis Of Some Apostolic Words On The Same Discourse*, Part 1. See also Photius' *Bibliotheca*, Codex 234.

refuted them by being “clothed with flesh, so that he may show that even the flesh is capable of virtue...that by overpowering sin he may teach man that sin may be overpowered by him.”¹¹ Elsewhere he very plainly says in refutation of those who taught that Paul referred to his Christian experience as “wretched man that I am” that “it is impossible for a man to be wretched who is endowed with virtue.”¹²

In the anonymous third-century documents that have come to be called the *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity* it states in reference to Paul’s statement “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwells no good thing” that Paul could say this of his himself “because the Spirit of God is not in it”.¹³

Macarius the Egyptian (c.300-390) noted his understanding of Romans 7 connecting it back to Adam who, in his sin sold his soul to the Devil and it was for this reason that Paul cried out “*Who will deliver me from the body of this death?*” He then went on to compare life in the Spirit as the answer to life in the flesh as it was portrayed in Romans 7.¹⁴

Epiphanius of Salamis (c.310?-403) was a dedicated scholar of the early church whose area of expertise was heretical groups. In commenting upon Origenism he quoted the above mentioned Methodius’ interpretation of Romans 7 without any indication of disagreement.¹⁵

Cyril of Jerusalem (c.315-c.386) in commenting upon this passage noted for his students to “learn this also, that the soul, before it came into this world, had committed no sin, but having come in sinless, we now sin of our free-will. Listen not, I pray thee, to any one perversely interpreting the words, *But if I do that which I would not...*”¹⁶ and then went on to quote Isaiah 1:19-20, Romans 1:19, 1:28, 6:19, Matthew 13:15, and Jeremiah 2:21 as proof of the Arminian interpretation. In another place Cyril commented upon how Paul used the phrase “But I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity” to describe how the Devil had used the flesh against mankind since the time of Adam but that Jesus in taking upon himself human flesh had saved man’s nature.¹⁷

Basil the Great (c.330-379) in commenting upon Romans 7:14-17 states that Paul was developing fully the idea that it is impossible for one who is in the power of sin to serve the Lord and then goes on to indicate who will free a man from that kind of struggle with sin. He then continues that, in view of God’s free offer to redeem us from the life portrayed in Romans 7, that “we are under the strictest obligation...to free ourselves from the dominion of the Devil who leads a slave of sin into evils even against his will” as is happening with the man in Romans 7.¹⁸

¹¹ *The Divine Institutes*, 4:24

¹² *The Divine Institutes*, 3:12

¹³ *First Epistle*, Ch. 8

¹⁴ *Homily 1:7 on Ezekiel 1:4-2:1*. Maloney, George, tr. *Classics of Western Spirituality Series: Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter* (Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ: 1992)

¹⁵ *Panarion, Heresy 64:56:8-59:6*. See also 64:62:8-13. Section divisions are according to the Frank William’s edition. Epiphanius referred to Methodius as “a learned man and a hard fighter for the truth (63:2)”.

¹⁶ *Catechetical Lectures, Lecture 4:19*.

¹⁷ *Catechetical Lectures, Lecture 12:15*

¹⁸ *Concerning Baptism, Bk. 1, Ch. 1*. Wagner, Monica, tr., *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 9: Ascetical Works. (The Catholic University of America Press., Washington, DC: 1999)

Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-c.395?) quoted Paul's words in Romans 7:14 to describe all mankind as being "sold under sin" and then in asking what was the "method of release from this" directed his readers to the new birth.¹⁹

John Chrysostom (347-407) in commenting upon this passage indicated his belief that it was a man who was living under the Law of Moses noting that, "Wherefore he went on to say, 'but I am carnal;' giving us a sketch now of man, as comporting himself in the Law, and before the Law."²⁰

Paulinus of Nola (ca.353-431) indicating his belief that Romans 7 was a picture of a man in his pre-Christian days stated "For now the old war, in which the law of sin struggled with the law of God, is wiped out in Christ, for the spirit which serves God governs by faith the soul subjected to it, and the flesh in turn becomes the servant of the soul, accompanying it, as it serves God, in every duty of obedience."²¹ He would later write that the phrase "sold under sin" refers to an individual who has not been redeemed by Christ.²²

In analyzing the early Christian understanding of Romans 7 it has become very clear that the early church did not understand this passage to teach the necessity of sin in believers, usually attributing to it the interpretation that it was a man who was striving to please God under the Law of Moses. In fact this interpretation was so prevalent that when discussing this passage around 415AD Pelagius (c.350-c.420?) could write that "that which you wish us to understand of the apostle himself, *all Church writers* assert that he spoke in the person of the sinner, and of one who was still under the law..."²³ Augustine, in his attempt to refute this statement of Pelagius, was unable to offer any church writers who disagreed with Pelagius.

Part 2, The Men Responsible For Introducing The Calvinistic Interpretation

Four people from the fourth and fifth centuries, more than anyone else, seem to be connected with the push that led to Romans 7 being used to teach the necessity of sin in a believer's life. Before each of these men are examined it is important to make mention of the societal changes which were taking place during this time and their impact upon the church.

In the year 312 the Roman emperor Flavius Constantine converted to Christianity and the subsequent favor that he showed towards the church inadvertently opened the doors to a flood of nominal Christians. In times past becoming a Christian had oftentimes brought with it the death penalty but it was now favorable and to one's own advantage career-wise to become a Christian. The first Christians had understood all sin to be deadly and showed hatred for "even the garment spotted by the flesh" but with a large number of unregenerate persons joining the church for unspiritual reasons it became

¹⁹ *On Virginity, Ch. 13*

²⁰ *Homilies On The Epistle To The Romans, Homily 13, Commentary of Romans 7:14.*

²¹ *Letters of Saint Paulinus of Nola, Vol 1, Letter 12:6.* Walsh, P.G., tr., *Ancient Christian Writers Series, No. 35* (Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ: 1959)

²² *Ibid, Letter 20:5.*

²³ From his now lost work entitled "*In Defense Of The Freedom Of The Will*". Preserved in Augustine of Hippo's *On The Grace Of Christ And On Original Sin, 1:43.*

inevitable that people would look for a theology which would describe an unregenerate person as regenerated.

The first was Gregory of Nazianzen (c.330-389) who, in 362AD, presented his understanding that Romans 7 described the case of a believer who “by a long course of philosophic training, and gradual separation of the noble and enlightened part of the soul from that which is debased and yoked with darkness, or by the mercy of God, or by both together, and by a constant practice of looking upward” could overcome the desires of the flesh presented in Romans 7.²⁴ This was probably more of a confused reaction to the nominal Christianity that he encountered than an attempt at justifying sinful behavior. He probably just did not know how to reconcile the strict teachings of the Scriptures with the lukewarmness that was so prevalent in the church and came to the conclusion that men start out their Christian experience in a sinful state and over time are able to achieve the righteousness that is described in the New Testament.

Following closely in Gregory’s footsteps was Ambrose (c.340-397), the bishop of Milan. As late as 379 Ambrose appears to have understood this passage from the Arminian perspective indicating his belief that Paul’s statement of ‘I see a law of the flesh in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity in the law of sin,’ as a description of something to which “We are all attached...but we are not all delivered” from and then goes on to show how that that Jesus is the deliverer from this life of bondage.²⁵ Eight years later he gave a very strong Arminian interpretation indicating that “when ‘flesh’ is employed in reference to man, a sinner is meant, as in this passage: ‘...but I am carnal, sold into the power of sin. For I do not understand what I do, for it is not what I wish that I do, but what I hate, that I do’.”²⁶ However, by 394 it is clear that he had adopted the Calvinistic interpretation noting that “Well, we who are older sin, too. In us, too, the law of this flesh wars against the law of our mind, and makes us captives of sin, so that we do what we would not.”²⁷

Following Ambrose was his somewhat disciple, Augustine of Hippo (354-430). His name, more than any other, has been connected with the introduction of the Calvinistic interpretation of Romans 7 into the church. However, an analysis of his understanding of this passage will show that even he differed from the modern day Calvinistic interpretation.

By his own admission, Augustine originally believed that this passage referred to Paul *before* his salvation as a Jew striving to fulfill the Law of Moses:

And it had once appeared to me also that the apostle was in this argument of his describing a man under the law. But afterwards I was constrained to give up the idea...²⁸

²⁴ *Oration 2:91*

²⁵ *Two Books On The Decease Of His Brother Saytrus, 2:40-41*

²⁶ *Isaac, or The Soul, sec. 2.3. The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 65: Ascetical Works. (The Catholic University of America Press., Washington, DC: 1970). Compare also his Letter 37:40-45 written in the same year.*

²⁷ *Two Books Concerning Repentance, 2:8:74*

²⁸ *Against Two Letters Of The Pelagians, 1:22. For an example of Augustine’s early Arminian understanding of this passage refer to his Against Fortunatus The Manichaeon, Disputation Of The Second Day, Sec. 22.*

Surprisingly, however, in giving up the traditional Christian interpretation of the first three centuries Augustine did not embrace the modern Calvinistic understanding of the text. Rather, he chose to embrace the understanding that Methodius had given to it over a century earlier—that it described a man who had “evil, lustful desires” that he did not want, but not “evil actions”.

The Apostle therefore does what he would not: for he would not lust, and yet he lusts: therefore he does what he would not. Did that evil desire draw the subjugated Apostle to fornication and adultery? God forbid. Let no such thoughts arise into our hearts. He wrestled, he was not subjugated. But because he was unwilling even to have this against which to wrestle, therefore he said, *I do what I would not. I would not lust, and I do lust. Therefore I do what I would not; but yet I do not consent to lust. For otherwise he would not say, *You shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh; if he himself fulfilled them.²⁹**

For Augustine, this evil desire was located in the flesh and it was because of its location there, which ultimately made it a part of who a man was, that the Apostle Paul referred to it as *himself* doing the thing that he did not want to do:

I see another law, he says, in my members resisting the law of my mind. And because I would not that it should resist [my desire to do the right thing] (for it is my flesh, it is my very self, it is a part of me): what I would, that do I not; but the evil that I hate, that do I; in that I lust.³⁰

For Augustine this battle with fleshly lusts was the lifelong “fight of [the] Saints”³¹ which mankind will be forced to endure so long as in this body saying “*With the mind I serve the Law of God, by not consenting [to my fleshly desires]; but with the flesh the law of sin, by lusting...I at once delight in the one, and lust in the other; but I am not conquered...*”³²

Finally, Augustine would remind those who wished to use the Apostle’s words to justify their sinful behavior that it was only the desire to sin that Paul struggled with, not the act of sinning:

I have already told you, that what the Apostle says, *With the mind I serve the Law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin, is in such sort to be taken: that you allow nothing more to the flesh, than the desires, without which it cannot be.*³³

Lastly, it would be Jerome (c.340-420) who would lay the final capstone on the introduction of the Calvinistic interpretation of Romans 7 into the ancient church. Jerome was a monk who is best remembered for translating and editing the Latin Vulgate.

²⁹ *Sermon 151:6 (Benedictine edition), Sermon 101:6 in Fathers of the Church: Sermons On Selected Lessons Of The New Testament by S. Augustine, Vol. 2 (Oxford: James Parker & Co. and Rivingtons, London: 1875). Certain quotations from this source have been modernized.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid, Sermon 151:7 (Benedictine edition), Sermon 101:7 in Fathers of the Church*

³² *Ibid, Sermon 151:8 (Benedictine edition), Sermon 101:8 in Fathers of the Church*

³³ *Ibid, Sermon 102:2 (Benedictine edition), Sermon 152:2 in Fathers of the Church*

Though he is remembered for his exceptional scholarship and wealth of classical learning his testimony does not bear out the marks of a man who lived in genuine “meekness toward all men (Ti 3:2)”. His entry in the Catholic Encyclopedia describes him as a man of “harsh criticisms” who possessed a “ensorious spirit against authority”, “lack of good taste”, was “bitterly satirical”, “unsparingly outspoken”, who could be “scathing in sarcasm”, and employed an “imprudence of language”.³⁴

One of his own contemporaries described him as a man motivated by “envy”³⁵ and “jealousy”³⁶ who, though a distinguished Latin writer and cultivated scholar, “showed qualities of temper so disastrous that they threw into the shade his splendid achievements.”³⁷

Other writers have referred to him as a man with a “fiery temper”³⁸ and a “biting tongue”³⁹, “vehement and haughty”⁴⁰, “harsh and impetuous”⁴¹, a man whose temper was “unsanctified”⁴², “overbearing”⁴³, and “irritable”⁴⁴ and one who was motivated by “personal hostility”⁴⁵ and a “revengeful spirit”⁴⁶.

Not surprisingly it is an individual like this who is the first recorded theologian of whom we have any record to attempt to use Romans seven to justify his personal behavior.

In discussing his understanding of man’s struggle with sinful desires he noted that Paul’s words in Romans 7 indicated that all men (Christian and non-Christian) sin in actuality stating:

...we do not what we would but what we would not; the soul desires to do one thing, the flesh is compelled to do another. If any persons are called righteous in scripture...they are called righteous according to that righteousness mentioned in the passage I have quoted: ‘A just man falls seven times and rises up again,’...Zachariah the father of John who is described as a righteous man sinned in

³⁴ Saltet, Louis. "St. Jerome." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 8. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910.

³⁵ Palladius, *The Lausaic History*, 36:7. Clarke, W. K. Lowther, tr. *Translations Of Christian Literature, Series 1: Greek Texts*. (Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, London: 1918).

³⁶ *Ibid*, 41:2.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 36:6.

³⁸ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 10: T-Zuzim*, under the entry for *Vulgate*, Sec. 3:3.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ Henry Hart Milman, *The History of Christianity From The Birth of Christ To The Abolition Of Paganism In The Roman Empire*, Vol. 3, Ch.11, p.232 (London: John Murray, 1903).

⁴¹ *Vigilantius And His Times*, The Christian's Monthly Magazine and Review, Vol 2, p.255 (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1844)

⁴² *The Life Of Vigilantius, A Reformer Of The Fourth Century*, The Christian Guardian and Church of England Magazine, December 1844, p.456

⁴³ Augustus Neander, *General History Of The Christian Religion And Church*, Vol 2, p.585 (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1849)

⁴⁴ Philip Schaff, editor. *A Select Library Of The Nicene And Post-Nicene Fathers Of The Christian Church*, Series 1, Vol. 1, p.251, footnote 1 for Augustine of Hippo’s letter no. 28. (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1892)

⁴⁵ Henry Hart Milman, *The History of Christianity From The Birth Of Christ To The Abolition Of Paganism In The Roman Empire*, Vol. 3, Ch.11, p.232 (London: John Murray, 1903).

⁴⁶ *Vigilantius And His Times*, The Christian's Monthly Magazine and Review, Vol. 2, p.255 (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1844)

disbelieving the message sent to him and was at once punished with dumbness. Even Job, who at the outset of his history is spoken of as perfect and upright and uncomplaining, is afterwards proved to be a sinner both by God's words and by his own confession.”⁴⁷

Jerome by his own admission was a man prone to sin. In a discussion with Ctesiphon which involved Romans 7 he confessed “Yet, to lay bare my own weakness, I know that I wish to do many things which I ought to do and *yet cannot*. For while my spirit is strong and leads me to life my flesh *is weak and draws me to death*.”⁴⁸ And his testimony, as noted above, reflects the life of a man who relied on passages like Romans seven to justify his sinfulness.

In conclusion, the Apostle Paul never intended Romans 7 to convey the idea of the necessity of sin in the believer’s life. This unfortunate conclusion was arrived at during a time of moral laxness in the church and has been reinforced over the centuries by individuals who refuse to read it within the context of chapters six and eight. It will, however, serve as an encouragement to the Christian who has embraced the Arminian interpretation to know that there is no extant record of any Christian until the fourth century who saw this passage as teaching the necessity of a failed Christian experience.

⁴⁷ *Letter 122:3*

⁴⁸ *Letter 133:9*