THE IDENTITY OF THE “I”:
ROMANS 7:7-25 AND THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION

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THE IDENTITY OF THE “I”:
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Rom 7:7-25 are central verses for Paul’s doctrine of sanctification, but they are full of exegetical difficulties, particularly insofar as Paul introduces the pronoun “I” throughout this passage. How one identifies the “I” struggling with sin in these verses has profound implications for understanding the nature of the Christian life. At the heart of the divide is the question of whether Paul is speaking of himself, and, if so, if he is speaking of his regenerate or unregenerate self. The unstated question, then, is should a Christian expect to experience this kind of struggle against sin, or is such struggle a sign of deficient or even non-saving faith? For if Paul is speaking of his own experience in this passage, then a Christian is, to quote Luther, *simul iustus et peccator*. But such a view would be very problematic for a Wesleyan or Catholic view of sanctification, and thus they have interpreted this passage differently. Exegetes from all camps appeal to this text, yet “the interpretation of few passages has been more influenced by one’s broad theological perspective, experience, and sheer a priori assumptions than Rom 7:14-25.”¹ This, of course, is to put the cart before the horse. We must rather start with an honest look at the data of Romans 7, particularly the identity of the “I” that Paul describes, and build our doctrine of soteriology first and foremost on the testimony of Scripture.²

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² I am not, I must note, suggesting that complete objectivity is possible when it comes to reading the Biblical text; we are of course engaged in the “hermeneutical spiral” between text and context. Nevertheless, we need not abandon the notion that we can *sufficiently* enter Paul’s world - through the exegetical process - to arrive at reliable conclusions.
In this paper, I will first analyze several major interpretations of the “I” of Rom 7:7-25, seeking as much as possible to avoid beginning with any theological a priori. Only then, with the identity of the “I” exegetically established, will I examine how Paul’s doctrine of sanctification, as developed in this passage, coheres positively with the Reformed view of sanctification, while it does not cohere as successfully with the Wesleyan and Roman Catholic understandings.

**Interpretations of “I” in Rom 7:7-25**

*The Cosmic-Historical (Existential) Interpretation*

In this view, Paul speaks rhetorically of humanity, both corporately and individually, faced with God’s demands yet apart from Christ. This view has been promoted by Kümmel and Fitzmyer, among others.

Fitzmyer summarizes this interpretation as Paul “using a figure of speech to dramatize in an intimate personal way the experience common to all unregenerate human beings faced with law and relying on their own resources to meet its obligations.”

Fitzmyer views the statement “I once lived in the absence of law” in 7:9 as decisive for his argument. He insists “I” must have a universal meaning here because Paul was circumcised before puberty and thus before he knew the demands of the law, “hence the ego must refer to human beings, who existed before Christ’s coming and before the law was added, who were living lives in ignorance of the real nature of their evil conduct.” Paul’s next statement in 7:9, that “but with the coming of the law, sin became alive,” thus makes sense as a description of the giving of the Mosaic law, which made people aware of their sin and consigned them to the reign of death. In the next major section (7:14-25), Paul describes the futility of men trying to fulfill the demands

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4 Ibid., 467.
of the law apart from God’s grace. In summary, then, Paul “views unregenerate humanity with Jewish spectacles and depicts it faced with the Mosaic law and seeking to achieve the status of uprightness by observing such a law.”

While acknowledging Kümmel’s insight that “I” can be used rhetorically, Moo notes that this usage is very rare in Paul, occurring almost exclusively “in conditional or hypothetical statements,” in contrast to the “sustained narrative and descriptive use” of “I” in this passage. Moreover, he argues, the fact that the Mosaic law is most likely in view here excludes this view, because not everyone received the Mosaic law (either Gentiles or those Jews who lived prior to Moses). This interpretation should therefore be set aside as unlikely.

The Academic Interpretation

Paul, in this view, is referring exclusively to Adam in the garden. This view has been maintained by Longenecker and Käsemann, among others.

Käsemann distinguishes between interpretations that see the story of Adam as “projected into the present” and interpretations, such as his own, that insist it rather means “that we are implicated in the story of Adam.” Käsemann also appeals to Rom 7:9 for his interpretation, noting that only Adam truly lived before the commandment, and only Adam could say the giving of a commandment (the commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) could make the possibility of sin alive. The language of “deception” and “death” in 7:10-11 further harkens back to the account of the Fall in Gen 3. And as for the language of the law, which would seem to postdate Adam, Käsemann notes that some Jewish exegetes of the day “made Adam the prototypical recipient of the law and thus linked his story materially with that of Moses.” In conclusion, then, “there is nothing in the

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5 Ibid., 473.
6 Ibid., 464.
7 Moo, 427-428.
passage that does not fit Adam, and everything fits Adam alone;” therefore, this passage
cannot be viewed autobiographically because “the work of the law as a spur to sin can be
demonstrated only by Adam, and Jewish tradition offers the means for doing this.”

This view also stumbles over the issue of the Mosaic law, because Adam could not
have been responsible for the law when the law came through Moses. While it is true that
some Jewish traditions believed Adam was bound by the Torah, Paul’s argument in Romans is
that the law is not the climax of God’s redemptive purposes; rather, it is a later, “subordinate”
development to God’s promise to Abraham, the fulfillment of which stands at the center of
God’s redemptive program. Indeed, “a central part of Pauline theology is that the Mosaic law
came into existence at a certain point in redemption history,” and to deny this is to
“shipwreck” Paul’s argument in Galatians 3-4. This interpretation is also, therefore, unlikely.

The Salvation-Historical Interpretation

This view can be traced back to John Chrysostom and other church Fathers who saw
a figurative representation of Israel in this passage. Though this view is not commonly held
today, N. T. Wright is a modern advocate for what has come to be known as the salvation-
historical interpretation.

Wright builds on the Adamic view by identifying Israel’s “recapitulation” of Adam’s
sin. In other words, “the primary emphasis of the argument is on Israel, not Adam: what is
being asserted about Israel is that when the Torah arrived it had the same effect on her as
God’s commandment in the Garden had on Adam. For Wright, Paul’s emphasis is on Israel’s
vocation. This “paradoxical vocation,” which will be described in more detail in Rom 9-11, “is
that she should be the people of the covenant, even though that covenant condemns all those,

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9 Ibid., 196.
10 Moo, 429.
11 Thomas R. Schreiner, Romans, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 6
(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 361.
Israel included, who are in Adam.”\textsuperscript{13} The Torah was a good, holy, and gracious gift of God to Israel, but in her fallen nature she is unable to keep it and thus stands condemned before it; Rom 7:7-25 thus describes Israel’s struggle to keep the Torah.

Perhaps the biggest problem for this view is that to interpret the verbs in 7:9-10 consistently, one would be forced to conclude that Israel had eschatological life prior to the Mosaic covenant.\textsuperscript{14} Moo concedes that some OT passages use “I” to stand for Jerusalem (cf. Jer 10:19-22; Lam 1:9-22), but that this view makes primary what is a valid but secondary idea in a passage that (as argued below) is clearly autobiographical. Indeed, because the Jewish people believed in a corporate identity that is foreign to most modern Western Christians, and because it is true that some of the events described in this passage were not personally experienced by Paul (especially in 7:7-11), it is most likely that “Paul uses ego to describe himself - and, by extension, other Jews - in solidarity with the experiences of his people.”\textsuperscript{15} But to make Israel the exclusive interpretive key for this passage would be to miss Paul’s central purpose.

\textit{The (Recapitulated) Autobiographical View}

Strictly speaking, the autobiographical view understands Paul’s usage of “I” in this passage to be referring to his own life story. Of the many possible variants of such a view, I will describe - and then defend - a variation which I have termed the “recapitulated autobiographical view” on account of the fact that it insists on understanding this passage first and foremost through the lens of Paul’s own life story, yet (per Moo) it also allows for Paul to believe himself to be personally involved in the sin of Adam and of all of Israel as a result of his belief in corporate solidarity. The evidence for Paul alluding to the sin of Adam and of Israel, especially in 7:7-13, has been mentioned above; while conceding that Paul is in fact making

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 198.
\item Schreiner, 363. Of particular interest is the imperfect ἔζων in 7:9, which suggests ongoing action in the past, in the period prior to the giving of the law at Sinai.
\item Moo, 431.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
these historical allusions, it is the autobiographical nature of these verses that we will now examine.

Paul’s autobiographical use of the “I,” clouded by the language of corporate solidarity in 7:7-13, fully comes into focus in 7:14-25. The intense personal emotions used in these verses are strongly suggestive of a real, personal experience. While still seeing his personal journey as representing that of a typical Jew or Israel, Paul’s use of the emphatic αὐτὸς ἐγώ and the passionate “wretched man” outcry of 7:25 demands some kind of autobiographical rootedness. To suggest otherwise “seems so artificial and theatrical as to be absurd.”\textsuperscript{16} Historically speaking, this has been the view of Augustinians, Pelagians, the Reformers, and the Pietists.\textsuperscript{17} The dividing line, then, is whether Paul is speaking of his life before his conversion or after he came to know Christ. In other words, is this speaking of an unregenerate or regenerate person?

The Unregenerate Paul

This view reads 7:14-25 as Paul’s autobiographical description of his pre-conversion life. The strongest argument for this view is Paul’s bleak self-description in these verses. Paul uses language in these verses that he uses nowhere else to describe a regenerate person. For instance, the “I” is described as “having been sold under sin” (7:14), “practicing evil” (7:19-20), and a “prisoner of the law of sin” (7:23).\textsuperscript{18} But elsewhere in Romans, Paul is clear that every believer has been “set free from the law of sin and death” (8:2) and “set free from sin” (6:18, 22). The contrast is sufficiently strong that “it is difficult to see how they can be applied to the same person in the same spiritual condition without doing violence to Paul’s language.”\textsuperscript{19} The net effect is a description of a person who is not struggling with sin but who has been defeated

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 71-72.
\textsuperscript{18} Michael Paul Middendorf, The “I” in the Storm (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Academic, 1997), 29.
\textsuperscript{19} Moo, 448.
by it; “this is a more negative view of the Christian life than can be accommodated within Paul’s theology.”

This view thus suggests that Paul is reflecting on his life under Judaism from the perspective of his Christian life. Paul is “concentrating on the negatives because this is what he must do to prove how useless the law was to deliver Jews from their bondage to sin.” That Paul would have consciously felt this way prior to his conversion to Christianity is unsupported from the biblical data; we have no reason to think that Paul was a dissatisfied Jew before encountering the risen Christ.

The Regenerate Paul

While those who see Paul speaking of his unregenerate life appeal to the language of his self-descriptions, so also do advocates of the view that understands Paul to be describing his current struggles as a believer. After all, according to Romans, only a believer can truly “delight in God’s law” (7:22), “will the good,” (7:15, 16, 19, 20), and “serve [God’s law] with my mind.” In contrast, earlier in this very letter Paul has argued that Gentile unbelievers have been given up to a “useless mind” (1:28) and have become “futile in their thinking” (1:21).

Moreover, Paul’s use of the “inner man” (ἐσω ἄνθρωπον) in 7:22 is used elsewhere only in passages that speak of a regenerate person (2 Cor 4:16; Eph 3:16). After surveying Paul’s description of all unbelievers in Romans, Middendorf concludes, “The statements made by the ‘I’ in Rom 7:14-25 cannot be equated with the picture Paul paints of unbelievers throughout Romans,” especially in regards to their attitudes towards the Law, for the Gentiles have no desire to keep it and Jews are not aware that the Law puts them under and leads them into sin.

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20 Ibid., 445.
21 Moo, 448.
22 Middendorf, 36.
23 Ibid., 194.
This view also takes into account the shift from the aorist tense to the present tense starting in 7:14. This seems to naturally suggest that Paul’s current status is in view. Writes Packer, “The supposed rhetorical device of using the present tense for lively comment on what is past and gone does not exist in Greek, and so the shift of tense would be gratuitously misleading to Paul’s readers if it did not mark a narrative advance from past to present.”\(^{24}\) The use of the aorist, especially in 7:7-11 thus is best understood of as “Paul looking back from his Christian perspective and describing what was in reality happening prior to his conversion.”\(^{25}\) The rest of the chapter then speaks of Paul’s post-conversion life.

The conclusion to this passage seems to bear this out. Paul bursts into praise for God’s deliverance through Christ in 7:25a, but in the latter half of the verse he uses a causal conjunction (‘Ἄρα οὖν) to say that therefore he serves the law of God with his mind, yet he still serves the law of sin with his flesh. This statement “is just a clinching crystallization of what God’s law, which has been fomenting sin in us all along, finally tells the Christian about himself, and so is in entirely appropriate conclusion to the paragraph.”\(^{26}\) The only recourse of most exegetes who reject this view is to argue 7:25b is misplaced in the text or to view 7:25a as an interjection from Paul’s present Christian perspective. But one could be forgiven for feeling this to be a case of special pleading, and against the most straightforward reading of the text.

I take this final point to be decisive in favoring the view that Paul is speaking of his post-conversion life. But what of the objection that Paul’s self-description is too negative to describe a regenerate person? While some of the vocabulary he uses in this passage might be unique, Paul in the rest of Romans has already made the case that Christians are simultaneously justified and sinners (Luther’s simul iustus et peccator). Paul gives a cogent defense of this in 3:24, with the participle δικαιούμενοι subordinate to πάντες ἦμαρτον in 3:23,

\(^{24}\) Packer, 79.
\(^{25}\) Middendorf, 164.
\(^{26}\) Packer, 76.
in which the πάντες is anaphoric to the πάντας in 3:22, which is “all believers.” The interpretation of this verse is thus that God freely justifies those who believe even while they sin and fall short of the glory of God.

It is also possible that the negative nature of these verses is often exaggerated. Packer sagely points out that “Paul is not describing a total moral failure, as if behaviorally the ‘wretched man’ never gets anything right in any sense at all,” rather, he is describing a man who is “simply of a very much desired perfection not being attained.” Certainly, Paul thought of himself as a Christian who had not yet attained the maturity he aspired to (cf. Phil 3:12).

The key to understanding how a regenerate person could be described in such a negative way lies in the idea of inaugurated eschatology. Paul’s argument in Romans 5-6 speaks directly to this issue, taking as a foundational premise the fact that a believer is still one who has (in some sense) participated in Adam’s sin (5:12). Yet while we have already been reconciled to God (5:10) and we have been justified (5:16), we can still say that our final salvation is yet to come (σωθήσομεν, “we will be saved,” in 5:9 and 5:10). This then sets up the question, “What then shall we say? Are we to remain in sin that grace might increase?” (6:1). If Christians were entirely free from sin, Paul would have no need to give an elaborate response and extensive exhortation in 6:12-19. After all, Christians continue to live in mortal bodies (6:12), where the weakness of the flesh (6:19) still has power, though not dominion. In fact, Paul’s exhortation in 6:19, that believers should use their members not for sin but for righteousness, seems to be precisely the kind of struggle that he is describing in 7:14-25. This is right at home amidst the theme of inaugurated eschatology that permeates the entire New Testament, which “involves recognition that through the Spirit Christians enjoy the firstfruits, foretaste, initial installment, and dawning enjoyment of the life of the new aeon, the kingdom

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28 Packer, 77.
29 Middendorf, 203.
30 Ibid., 204-205.
era of redeemed existence, while the old aeon, the era of existence spoiled by sin, continues, and the fullness of new aeon life remains future.”

The future tense verb ῥύσεται (“will save”) in 7:24 also speaks of a future redemption and final deliverance from sin and death. Nor is this theme of inaugurated eschatology limited to Romans in the Pauline corpus. Gal 5:16-18 is just one example of a passage that clearly portrays a battle between the Spirit and the flesh within a believer.

Therefore, we can conclude that “the genius of Paul’s eschatology is that the future has invaded the present. Thus the certainty that believers will conquer death has implications for the present. [...] Believers experience substantial, significant, and observable victory over sin, and yet perfection is not theirs.”

Within such a framework, Paul’s description of a believer struggling with sin in 7:14-25 fits perfectly.

**Preliminary Conclusions**

In this section, we have concluded that the best way to understand the “I” in Romans 7:7-25 is that it describes Paul’s own life. The first section, 7:7-13, is Paul’s reflection on his pre-conversion life from his current Christian perspective, but he describes it in such a way that appears to recapitulate the stories of Adam, of Israel, and of every person. Then, in 7:14-25, Paul describes his own struggle with sin as he strives for holiness in his life.

This conclusion regarding the identity of the “I” in Rom 7:7-25 has important consequences for the doctrine of sanctification. Some of these have already surfaced in the above discussion on inaugurated eschatology, but in the remainder of this paper I will more clearly set out the implications of Rom 7:7-25 for the doctrine of sanctification, particularly in light of various theological perspectives on that doctrine.

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31 Packer, 77.
32 Schreiner, 391.
Implications of Rom 7:7-25 for the Doctrine of Sanctification

In the first part of this paper, I demonstrated that the identity of the “I” in Rom 7:7-25 is, primarily, Paul himself, and that 7:14-25 speaks of his post-conversion struggle with sin. In this section I will make a brief positive presentation of Paul’s doctrine of sanctification from this passage and find that it coheres with the Reformed view of sanctification, and then draw out its implications for the Wesleyan and Roman Catholic views.

Paul’s Doctrine of Sanctification in Rom 7:7-25

Clearly stated, Paul is in these verses describing sanctification as the outworking of a struggle between Paul’s regenerate self and his sinful flesh during the time between his initial justification and final glorification. Central to Paul’s self-understanding, then, is that “I do not do the good I want, but I do the very evil I do not want” (7:19). Put in other words, “I delight in the law of God in my inner being (7:22), but “I see a different law in my members waging war against the law of my mind and making me a captive to the law of sin that is in my members” (7:23). There are clearly two opposing forces at work in Paul (cf. Gal 5:16-18). Dunn thus rightly describes the Apostle as the “split Paul,” who is divided, along with the Law, “because each belongs to both epochs at the same time in this period of overlap between the epoch of Adam and the epoch of Christ, between the era of the flesh and the era of the Spirit.”

This much has been described above, but now we turn to examine the theological significance of this text for Paul’s doctrine of sanctification. What is Paul’s rhetorical purpose in these verses? It seems that Packer is close to the truth when he argues that Paul is describing a characteristic part of the Christian life for all believers, apart from any judgment on his own or any other person’s quality of faith, for the larger purpose of “delineating and celebrating the reality of the believer’s new life in and with the risen Christ, the life of temptation, trouble, and felt weakness that is lived under grace, through the Spirit, in the hope of the final glory of

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full redemption.” For this is the heart of Paul’s message in Rom 6-8, and we must not lose sight of the fact that “Paul’s purpose in these chapters is, only and precisely, to expound life in Christ and to minister theological therapy to any who had not before grasped the greatness of the grace of God or who suspected that Paul’s own grasp of it was leading him to undervalue the law in some way.”

Packer’s argument that we can only appreciate the full theological point that Paul is making in 7:7-25 in light of his general purpose in Rom 6-8 warrants further attention. If in chapter 6 Paul drew a clear contrast between the “epoch of Adam” and the “epoch of Christ,” and then in chapter 7 “soften[ed] the antithesis” in light of the tension he felt as a believer, now in chapter 8 he returns to “a fresh exposition of the reality of the salvation process in the present, this time in terms of the Spirit.” In other words, by juxtaposing verses such as 7:25b and 8:1, Paul is equally concerned to describe the complexity of the tension caused by inaugurated eschatology as he is to talk about the “grand simplicities of faith.” And here is the key: A healthy Christian must cling to both truths. In fact, one could argue that Rom 8:1 can only make logical sense on this view; the reason that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus is “because of their future (drawing the inference from 7:24) deliverance from death.” A further observation is raised by Schreiner, who calls attention to the tension that Paul describes in 8:10-13, which seems to clearly refer to a future redemption of the body, as compared to its current state of deadness. The entirety of Rom 8 “communicates that Christian experience is ambiguous and a struggle since the body still remains.” Inaugurated eschatology, therefore, is not limited to 7:14-25, but is woven into the fabric of this entire section of Romans.

34 Packer, 78.
35 Ibid.
36 Dunn, 416.
37 Ibid.
38 Schreiner, 391.
39 Ibid., 383.
40 Ibid., 383-384.
In particular, the immediately following paragraph (8:1-11), is illuminative. In 8:5, Paul is clear that only those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on the things of the Spirit. The man Paul describes in 7:7-25 certainly has his mind on the things of the Spirit; his problem is simply that he is unable to perform the things of the Spirit as he desires to. Thus, “unless we are to suppose that Paul has reversed his anthropology in less then ten verses we must conclude that in 7:14-25 Paul is describing, not a man in Adam, writhing under the condemnation of a law that he resents even as he acknowledges its authority, but a man in Christ, whose heart is now tuned to love the law and to bewail only his inability to keep it perfectly.” It is precisely the glorious declarations of Romans 8 that provides the answer to the question Paul poses in 7:24.

What, though, of the role of the Spirit, particularly in 7:14-25? We must not think that Paul does not believe the Spirit plays a role in the believer’s struggle with sin because the Spirit is not explicitly mentioned in this passage. The work of the Spirit, after all, is described in great detail in Rom 8. And, in Gal 5:16-18, Paul is clear that it is the Spirit that wars against sin and the flesh. As for why Paul does not explicitly mention the role of the Spirit here, we can only assume that he does not do so because he is not presenting us with a systematic account of his doctrine of sanctification. Paul’s primary focus in Rom 7:14-25 is the role and activity of the Law in the Christian life.

If this interpretation is correct, it gives strong credence to the Reformed doctrine of sanctification, which assumes a progressive - but never perfected - sanctification, in which struggle with sin is an expected part of the Christian life. We can therefore affirm with Packer

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41 Packer, 80.
42 Middendorf, 243.
43 While many Reformed theologians, such as Packer, believe Paul to be speaking of his regenerate self in this passage, some Reformed theologians do not. Moo, for instance, hesitatingly endorses the view that Paul is describing an unregenerate person. Nevertheless, Moo is emphatic that this does not in any way overturn the Reformed doctrine of sanctification; rather, it is simply not what Paul is addressing here. Thus, Moo writes, “Paul makes it abundantly clear, both explicitly - for instance, Gal. 6:1 - and implicitly - by the amount of time he spends scolding Christians in his letters! - that believers are not delivered from the influence of sin” (Romans, 449).
that “the wretchedness of the ‘wretched man’ then springs from thus discovering his continued sinfulness, and from knowing that he cannot hope to be rid of indwelling sin, his unwelcome and troubling inmate, as long as he is in the body - that is, while his present life lasts.”

**Implications for Wesleyan Sanctification**

John Wesley, the father of Methodism, developed the doctrine of entire sanctification (also known as Christian perfection). Wesley believed that while Christians could never be entirely free of the effects of sin in their lives, he did believe that by faith there could be “a personal, definitive work of God’s sanctifying grace by which the war within oneself might cease and the heart be fully released from rebellion into wholehearted love for God and others.” This belief in entire sanctification is not a tangential point to Wesley’s whole theological system. Rather, “this doctrine is so central to whole Wesleyan understanding of the plan of salvation that to leave Wesley at this point is to detour completely from the path he followed.” In other words, Wesley’s entire theological system stands or falls on this understanding of sanctification.

Melvin Deiter, a modern-day Wesleyan, holds up Rom 8 as a proof text for entire sanctification. Key to his understanding of Rom 8 is that it declares the Spirit-filled believer’s freedom from the power and presence of sin; this, not Rom 7, characterizes the life of a mature believer. Other possible objections to the Wesleyan view aside, the identity of the “I” in Rom 7:14-25 as the regenerate Paul threatens to sink the entire Wesleyan ship. For if even the spiritual life of the great Apostle was in such violent tension, what hope would there be for any of us? It seems that rather than embrace the tension of inaugurated eschatology, as do

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44 Packer, 76.
46 Ibid., 21.
47 Ibid., 35.
Reformed theologians, Wesleyans have embraced part of the truth to the exclusion of accepting the whole counsel of God on the matter of the Christian life.

**Implications for Roman Catholic Sanctification**

Roman Catholics believe that justification and sanctification are not distinct from one another. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “the grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins.” This has been the view of the Church since at least the time of the Council of Trent, which declared that “justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.” Thus, justification is explicitly defined in terms of sanctification.

Identifying the “I” of Rom 7:14-25 as the regenerate Paul poses potential problems for the Roman Catholic view, so Catholic exegetes have typically not followed that line of exegesis for this passage. If Paul were speaking of himself, Catholics would have to think that Paul’s salvation was in serious jeopardy; again, the question must be asked, if the great Apostle saw such little progress in justification/sanctification, what hope is their for the common man or woman? Paul’s exuberant outburst in 7:25a, not to mention his triumphant conclusion in 8:1, also seem to demand a level of assurance that this view of sanctification cannot provide. Catholics appear to not see the natural division in Romans between Paul’s teaching on justification (chapters 1-4) and on sanctification (chapters 5-8). The Catholic view of sanctification, just as the Wesleyan view, therefore fails to wrestle with Paul’s argument in Rom 7:7-25 and in the epistle as a whole.

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49 Ibid., §1989.
50 For instance Fitzmyer, a Roman Catholic exegete, holds to an existential interpretation.
51 That, at least, is roughly how most exegetes divide Romans. Cf. Moo, 33.
Conclusion

Too often, theological presuppositions have driven the exegesis of critical texts, none so much as Rom 7:7-25. But to the extent that such presuppositions can be set aside, we have found that the view that Paul is speaking autobiographically (while simultaneously recapitulating the stories of Adam, of Israel, and, typologically, of all men) to be the most exegetically sound interpretation of this difficult and controversial passage. Paul, as is consistent with other passages in which he speaks of this subject, embraces an inaugurated eschatology that allows for significant conflict within the life of a believer in regards to sin, which will only fully be done away with at the resurrection. This coheres well with the Reformed doctrine of sanctification, while it presents difficulties for the Wesleyan and Roman Catholic perspectives.

The significance for the believer cannot be overstated. The knowledge that Paul struggled with sin can provide invaluable assurance and encouragement for a believer who feels his salvation is in doubt on account of his continued struggle with sin. But Paul does not leave the argument there; rather, we are to overflow in our thanksgiving to God the Father (Rom 7:25a), who has provided both the forensic basis for our salvation in the Son and the means of our progressive conformity to the image of his Son by the power of the Spirit. The God who has begun a good work in us will surely perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:8)!
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