



## THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY.

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### ROMANS VII. 7-25.

**T**HE great question concerning this passage is—to whom does it refer? Is the person whose state is here portrayed a regenerate or an unregenerate man?

The earliest interpreters, the Greek Fathers, were of one accord in referring the passage to the unregenerate. While they differed in many particulars, they agreed in this; and the opposing theory was not brought forward until the time of Augustine. He at first shared the prevalent opinion; but later in his life he maintained that the experience of a Christian, in his conflict with indwelling sin, is here described. Some affirm that he was driven to the new position by the necessities of the Pelagian controversy; while others find evidence that he made the change before that controversy began, and must therefore have been influenced by other than polemical reasons. From the time of Augustine, his great authority in the church established this as substantially the only interpretation. At the Reformation the older opinion was revived, and interpreters became divided between the two. Calvin, Luther, Melancthon and Beza remained with Augustine; while the greater part of Roman Catholic commentators now deserted Augustine, and adopted the theory of the earliest Fathers. At the same time, the Arminian and Socinian scholars joined them in referring the passage to the unregenerate. Since that time the same division has existed, Calvinists being generally on one

side and Arminians on the other. This classification, however, has grown less distinct in more recent times. Within the last century, the most ancient interpretation has been gaining ground; and now, the great majority of commentators find in the passage the experience of the unregenerated. Tholuck, in 1842, counted "all recent expositors" as on this side, and considered that this view had now gained the victory; and perhaps no departure from the now common interpretation has since taken place which is of sufficient importance to invalidate his claim.

The opposition to the Augustinian view, however, has appeared in several forms. Some have maintained that "the apostle represented, in his own person, the history of mankind, before the law and under the law." This is an ancient interpretation, but is mostly abandoned in modern times. The more common view is thus expressed by Tholuck: the apostle "describes, out of his own life, the experiences of the working of the law which befall an Israelite who obeys it." Meyer says, more fully, that Paul "says concerning himself what is meant of every man in general who is placed under the Mosaic law, with reference to his relation to that law." "The subject is therefore man in general, in his natural state, under the law to which he is bound; as not yet redeemed through Christ and sanctified by the Spirit, and yet neither unnaturally hardened by legal righteousness, nor rendered secure and intractable by despising the law, and thus estranged from the moral earnestness of legal Judaism." Thus the passage portrays the experience of an earnest and conscientious Jew, in his efforts to obey the law. Some, however, who maintain this interpretation admit that the passage has a truth and meaning for the regenerate, although it was written as a description of the other class. Of the Augustinian theory, perhaps the following, slightly altered from Tholuck, is a statement sufficiently exact: "The passage represents the conflict between flesh and spirit which exists in a man who has entered through regeneration into life in Christ."

In this brief review, the passage has been treated, for convenience, as a whole; though what has been said has reference chiefly to the latter part, beginning at the fourteenth verse. It has been generally agreed that the first part, from the seventh verse to the thirteenth, presents an experience of sin and the law which precedes regeneration. This first section is essential to the understanding of the second; but the main question relates to the part in which Paul speaks not only in the first person, but in the present tense.

It is generally agreed that Paul is justified in using the first person, since he is recounting an experience which he can properly call his

own. It is also conceded that he is not speaking of himself alone, but that he speaks as the representative of a class, and describes the experience of many in the person of one. The great question is of the proper date of this experience. According to one view, the passage is true of the writer at the time of writing. According to the other, whether it is partly true at the time of writing or not, it is written as an account of what was true in an earlier and radically different period of his life.

The external facts about the passage certainly afford a presumption in favor of the Augustinian interpretation. We must look for a present experience until the contents of the passage force us to adopt the other theory. For Paul writes not only in the first person, but in the present tense. In verses 14-25, there are at least twenty-four verbs in the first person and present tense, and there is no verb in any other tense, except the one future, "Who shall deliver me?" Everything is present. The writer tells of what he is, of what he desires and what he hates, of what he does and fails to do, of the laws by which he is habitually affected. In its style and structure the passage is as truly and perfectly present as anything in the eighth chapter, or anywhere else in literature. Either this is an account of an actual present state, or Paul is personating his former self, and personating perfectly. If he personates, however, he personates without a hint of his intention to do so. Of course, the nature of the statements he makes in the first person may prove a personation; but there is no external hint, in assertion or in style, that the experience related is any other than a present experience.

This presumption is strengthened by the fact that this present form is suddenly adopted at the fourteenth verse. Up to that point Paul had treated of the awakening of sin by means of the law in men considered apart from all questions of regeneration. This, as an experience, of course was in the past. Here he used past tenses. If in the following section he intended to continue speaking of the same period, or of a period equally past in his own experience, it would be natural for him to continue the use of past tenses. It does not seem natural that two sections of past experience should be related, one as past and the other as present, without any sign that the tenses do not represent the facts.

An inspection of Paul's style, with reference to the habit of personating, leaves us with the same presumption. Paul frequently makes himself the representative of a class, and sets forth a common experience as his own; and therefore such expressions as "When I was a child I spake as a child," have been cited as proofs of personation

here. But such passages go no further than to confirm what no one doubts, that Paul speaks here as the representative of a class. The real question is, whether Paul ever makes himself the representative of a class to which he does not belong; whether he ever speaks from a character and position radically different from his own; whether he ever becomes, for the time, either his own former self, or some other man who is not a Christian. On this question there can be no doubt. Paul never does such a thing, unless he does it here. His tendency, in fact, is in the opposite direction. The queries of an objector are sometimes introduced in the midst of his argument, and it is often difficult to decide how much comes from the querist, and how much from the writer. But it is not because Paul has merged himself in the objector; it is because he has unconsciously merged the objector in himself. His peculiar and vigorous mind gave its own character to all that passed through it, and the objection which entered his mind as an un-Christian 'cavil' came out upon the page Paulinized, and half-answered in the process. He was not a man whom one would expect silently to drop his personality, and appear in that of the unregenerate.

Paul's peculiar history still adds something to the presumption. His writings abound in references to his past life, both as a legalist and as a Christian. But there is never any difficulty, unless it be here, in telling of which part of his life he speaks. He looks into his former life as across a gulf which he wonders that any man could pass. "Who before was a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and an insulter: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly, in unbelief." "I persecuted the church of God: but by the grace of God I am what I am." The old life, with him, is utterly distinct from the new, and he looks into it as from another world. The only case (unless this be another) in which he seems to enter, even for a moment, into the thoughts of the former time, is in the third chapter of his Epistle to the Philippians, where he recounts the advantages which he might claim, according to the Jewish law: "If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might glory in the flesh, I more," etc. But a moment later he spurns all such advantages from him, and declares himself a Christian, who counts all such gain but loss, and to whom the old position is utterly strange and foreign. This well-known contrast between the two periods certainly affords a presumption that when Paul speaks of a deep spiritual experience as though it were present, he is not speaking of the life he lived before his conversion.

No such presumption can stand, however, if the passage affirms what is true of the unregenerate, and cannot be true of Christians.