

"THEOLOGY IN APPLICATION: THE CHANGE"

(Romans 8:1-17)

(Frank Theilman)

Romans 8:1-17 describes the change that comes to the person God has freed from the sort of slavery to sin Paul depicted in 7:7-25. Because God's Spirit has now made his home within Christians, he has reoriented their lives. This has practical results for their present existence, and these practical results can be described in four ways.

The Fulfillment of the Law

First, the Spirit enables Christians to fulfill God's law (8:1-4). This is not the Mosaic law, at least not in the sense that first-century Jews defined it. For Paul, God's law included neither circumcision nor Sabbath keeping, for example, and no Jew would have said that someone who neglected the observance of such important commands was keeping the Mosaic law. God's law did include, however, the principle articulated in Leviticus 19:18, a principle that Paul interprets as covering the seventh through tenth commands of the Decalogue (Rom 13:8-10; cf. Gal 5:14). Paul's teaching at this point coincides with Jesus's teaching on the two greatest commandments (Matt 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34; cf. John 13:34).

The Spirit, then, enables Christians to make progress in loving others in the way that the ethical principles of the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus defined love. The importance that Paul gives to the Christian's fulfillment of the law in this new sense is evident from the position of the purpose clause in Romans 8:4. God used the incarnation and death of Christ to make it possible for Christians to fulfill God's desire that they love others. The Roman Christians needed to ponder the implications of this startling theological truth for their own attitudes toward one another (14:1,3-4,10-13,19; 15:1-2), and Christians in every age need to do the same.

A New Alliance with the Spirit

Second, Paul argues that Christians have a new alliance with the Spirit rather than the flesh and that this new alliance comes from a new mindset (8:5-8). Just as rebellion against God began with suppression of the truth, futile thinking, darkened hearts, and a failure to acknowledge God (1:18, 21, 25, 28, 32; cf. Eph 4:17-18), and just as this mental rebellion bore fruit in twisted and vicious behavior toward others (Rom 1:26-27, 29-30; cf. Eph 4:19), so now the Spirit brings Christians a new mind whose focus is life and peace.

The "for" that begins Romans 8:5 is important for understanding the logical relationship between the Christian's mind and the Christian's behavior. Christians walk according to the Spirit because they take the Spirit's side in the Spirit-flesh conflict and now think the way the Spirit wants them to think. Christians in ancient Rome were surrounded with messages, whether depicted on statuary and friezes or written in inscriptions, that proclaimed the eternity, power, and glory of



Rome, its emperors, and its gods. It would have been easy for this propaganda, sometimes conveyed through images of almost overwhelming size and beauty, to sway the Roman Christians toward thinking that its message was true. Paul tells his readers, however, that this mindset leads to death and that its opposing mindset—the mindset of the Spirit—leads to life and peace.

The cultures surrounding most Christians today proclaim a similarly persuasive and misleading message about the nature of human existence and the pathways to lasting happiness, to "life and peace" in Pauline terms. The message that comes through multiple media is often that consumption of goods and power over others leads to self-fulfillment and therefore to happiness. Paul's message in Romans 8:5-8 is that the Spirit enables Christians, despite such unrelenting propaganda ("the mindset of the flesh"), to opt out of this system and to have minds shaped instead by the word of God, what Paul calls "the law" in 8:4.

Hope for a Better Self and a Better World

Third, the Spirit's transforming power in the lives of believers does not mean that their lives will be completely free from sin or entirely peaceful. Believers still have bodies that are mortal, and the "flesh" with its sinful tendencies still affects these mortal bodies, urging them to rebel against God. Paul reminds his readers, then, that their future existence will be like Jesus's present existence. Just as God raised Jesus from the dead and gave him an immortal existence, so their bodies will one day leave behind the sin, suffering, and death that are an inevitable part of existence in the present world. If they follow the Spirit's leading and avoid succumbing to the persuasions of the unbelieving world around them, they will live in immortality and in sinless perfection with Christ in eternity. Similarly, Christians in the present can take comfort that the world is not now what it will always be, nor are they, as individuals, what God will one day make them. Perseverance in resisting the world's mindset is necessary, but Paul is optimistic that with the Spirit's enabling power believers can persevere through the spiritual dangers in the world around them and live eternally.

Acceptance from a Loving and Faithful Father

Fourth, Paul wants the Romans to understand that God has adopted them into his family, giving them the status of highly privileged children within it (8:15). Their status as sons and daughters of God is similar in important ways to Jesus's own status as God's Son. When they experience physical and emotional suffering, just as Jesus did before his passion, they too can cry out to God as their Father (Mark 14:36; cf. Rom 8:15). Their status as God's adoptive sons and daughters is a sign of God's love and permanent commitment to them, both now, in the midst of their suffering, and in eternity when they will share the family "inheritance" of a fully restored creation (8:17; cf. 8:23).

Like the first Christians, Christians often live today in societies that misunderstand, ostracize, and sometimes even punish them for their commitment to Christ. Paul's words to the Roman Christians, however, are true for believers of all times and places. Whatever the societies in which they live may think of them, Christians are nevertheless honored members of God's family. As their Father, God is concerned about their suffering and will bring all injustice, oppression, and suffering to an end.