

“SHALL WE CONTINUE IN SIN?”

An Exposition of Romans Six

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The sixth chapter of Romans is one of the more important chapters of Paul's most important Epistle. Paul is dealing with the fundamentals of the Christian faith in this letter. It has the nearest claim of any book of the Bible to being a systematic statement of Christian theology. We find in Romans some of the basic ideas that make the Christian religion different from all others. While the Gospels tell the history of Jesus, his work and his words, it is in Romans that we get the significance of both. Here are the theology, the framework, the basic truths.

In Romans 1:15–5:21 Paul describes the need, basis and rationale of justification. In Romans chapters six to fourteen Paul describes what should happen to Christians after conversion. As a sinner we repent and ask God to forgive us for Jesus' sake; and, in response to appropriating faith, we experience pardon and peace with God. Then Paul says, “What next?”

There are many people who assume that all the sinner has to do is to say “I believe in Jesus” and then be baptized. Many give the impression that this is the sum and substance of the Christian faith. But there are others who say this makes it too easy; this is “cheap grace.” Paul says that being converted is just the beginning, not the end. Does the sinner continue to commit sin after he believes in Jesus, is baptized and becomes a Christian? Should he continue his same habits, the same life style as before? There are many that say that the outward life is much

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the same as before; but that the sins which you commit after you believe in Jesus are not counted against you.

Paul faces this accusation of “cheap grace” and answers the accusation that his doctrine of faith alone deals with sin too slightly. Three times in the Book of Romans, Paul confronts the challenge. If it is so easy to get rid of sin by simply believing and if it is true that “where sin abounds, grace does much more abound”, would it not be well to do much sinning so we could have much forgiveness and a lot to be grateful for? In 3:8, 6:1 and 6:15, he faces the question: because we believe in Jesus, does it make any difference in whether or not we sin?

Paul’s answer is given in chapter six. “Know ye not that all who have been baptized in Jesus have been baptized into his death?” The believer is united with Jesus in a two-fold unity, a two-fold relationship. In the union with Jesus in His death and His resurrection Paul alludes to the practice of baptism.

The mode of baptism implied here is that of immersion because it best dramatizes the change. The sinner who goes into the water, completely out of sight, is, in a sense, “buried” with Jesus as Christ’s body was buried. When one rises from the water, Paul says it is comparable to Jesus’ resurrection. The old life passes away and the new life emerges completely.

This was a very meaningful metaphor with Paul, not only in Romans but in Colossians and Ephesians. “You hath he made alive who were dead in trespasses and sin! Is Paul’s metaphor too bold? Does he overstate the case? I think not, because it is just as great a miracle, if not greater, to change a sinner into a saint, to transform character, as it is to raise a corpse from the ground. So Paul uses this bold metaphor three times (Rom. 6:4; Eph. 2:1-6; Col. 2:12,13,20; 3:1). It is characteristic of his thought. He himself was apprehended by Jesus, on the road to Damascus; so he did not think it was any exaggeration to say that a person who was a Christian was one who really has had a spiritual resurrection. So he bears down on this idea, telling the Christians the relationship that they have, as believers, to their old way of life, declaring that there is real change as well as merely a theoretical one.

Paul wants to follow through with the results, the consequences, the implications, the specific ethical conduct of a person who is a real Christian. He continues, “We have been united with Him in the likeness of His death, we shall be united with Him in the resurrection.” “We know that our old man, our old nature, our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed and that we might no

longer be enslaved to sin for he who has died is freed from sin and if we have died with Christ, we believe we shall live with Him." Death has no more dominion over Christ and sin has no more dominion over the one who is "in Christ." Every believer is "in Christ."

He uses the analogy in another text of "putting off" old clothing. He says to "put off the old man" and "put on the new man." The analogy is that of going to a public bath. In Japan today, the typical businessman will come from his office in the hot, sultry afternoon, he will get his kimono, his soap and towel and go down to the public bath. There he will disrobe, immerse himself in hot water, stay a while, come out, and be rubbed down, perhaps have some attendants there help him in the process. Then he will put on some new clothing. When he comes back walking toward his home, he is a "new creature" in a way, with new clean clothes. He smells better, he looks better, he is refreshed.

Paul must have seen this often because every Greek or Roman city had a public bath. This was such a familiar occurrence that Paul uses this metaphor to show the difference between the old man, and the new, the person in sin and the one who is in Christ. So it is "putting off" of the "old nature."

What this means then is called "sanctification" or "holiness." Sometimes people say "I am saved but not sanctified." We understand what they mean and what they intend to say is true. But every person who is a Christian at all is at the same time sanctified in the Biblical sense of being set apart from the world and set apart unto God. Paul writes both to the Romans and to the Corinthians as those who are "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints," set apart. (Rom. 1:7; I Cor. 1:2). This is the elemental meaning of sanctification.

Every one "in Christ" is also sanctified in another Biblical sense of this term, in the sense that new life has come in. He is conscious by the grace of God, of a new inclination, a new disposition, a new relationship. Old things are passed away and all things have become new. He has been born of the Spirit and he is conscious of the Spirit of God giving him deliverance from enslaving habits, from the necessity of continuing to practice sin. So every Christian is also not only "positionally" sanctified in terms of his relationships, he is also becoming progressively sanctified by the Spirit of God imparted to him, creating in him the new disposition of love to God and neighbor.

But Paul goes even further. He says that we can be "entirely" sanctified in the sense of being fully delivered from the tyranny of the old nature, the "old man." He can find deliverance from the frustration so vividly described in chapter seven, his own experience before he was "in Christ."

Hans Lietzmann, professor of church history in Berlin, probably knew more about the early church than anybody of his time. This is his understanding of Paul's thought. Says Lietzmann, in *The Beginning of the Christian Church*: "At the beginning of this process of salvation is the decisive act of justification and a new birth through the Spirit in baptism. The Christian is now righteous, dead to sin, free from its power. The victorious warfare against sin which once took place in Jesus is repeated anew in every Christian to whom the Spirit has been given. The Spirit takes control of a man, breaks the power of the passions of the flesh and levels the road toward the life according to God's will."

Professor Lietzmann may not have agreed with Paul, but this is what he understands Paul to be saying, and I think he correctly understands Paul's language.

Paul indicates the believer is to have nothing further to do with sin. There is to be a clean break with the "old nature" and its tyranny. Later on, he defines it, for example in Colossians: "Lie not one to another, seeing ye have put off the old man with his deeds and put on the new man which is created after the image of God." In writing to the Thessalonians, he said: "This is the will of God even your sanctification that you should abstain from fornication." You say they should have known that without being told. But bear in mind that these are converts from paganism, and Paul has to be specific and say that these are the things that are excluded in the life of a Christian—lying, fornication, and stealing, for example. These things are familiar to us, but Paul, dealing with converts who had been pagans, is saying that now as Christians, you do not have to tolerate sin. These sinful habits are broken by Christ. Now you are to "reckon yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin."

First, he says there are some things that you "know." These are the declarative things, but there are also some imperative things. And we are to "reckon ourselves to be dead indeed to sin by faith in God, to make actual that which has become potential because of our identification with Jesus at conversion. So the converted person is not merely to take things as they come. He has to lay hold on the grace of God. The tenses of the verbs that he used indicate a certain cruciality about it, a certain decisiveness.

Another non-Wesleyan, J. V. Bartlet, says: "According to Paul, there is a state possible to Christians corresponding to the ideal of their calling in which they may be described as unblameable in holiness, into which they may be brought by the grace of God in this life; therein they stand hallowed through and through, every part of their being abiding by this grace in a condition fit to bear the scrutiny of the Lord's

presence without rebuke” (I Thessalonians 3:13).

Bartlet continues: “It represents a growth in holiness rather than into holiness out of something else. It is conceived as realizable by a definite act of faith claiming and appropriating its rightful experience by an act of the will informed by the living energy of the Holy Spirit rather than the cumulative result of a slow process after conversion. It is not the same as absolute perfection or its confirmation but it is rather the prerequisite with more rapid and steady realization.”

The important thing is then to respond positively, not to take growth for granted, but rather to lay hold on the potential that God makes available in Christ. This is the thrust of the word: “Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin but alive unto God.” It is a two-fold thing: “dead to sin but alive unto God.”

So what about sin in the life of the Christian? Some analogies or comparisons may help us, because to understand abstract ideas, we need figures of speech. We use figures of speech every day in which we say things which we do not really mean. Some people say they saw the sun rise. That is not true. They saw the sun appear on the horizon as the earth revolves on its axis, but they did not see the sun rise in the usual sense in which the word is employed. We use pictorial language rather than scientific language daily. And sometimes it is appropriate in theology and in preaching.

To indicate the relationship of the believer to sin, let me illustrate what some people believe about sin. I stepped on a nail once and got infection in the ball of my foot. It went on for some time and kept getting more painful. An x-ray showed that the little, flat bone underneath the ball of the foot, had an infection, which had eaten a little place in the bone. The doctor said an operation would be worse than the cure. To be without this bone would make one a cripple the rest of his life. He explained that the healthy blood corpuscles had insulated the infection, had “walled it in.” He said to be careful not to bump the foot or the infection would break out and spread. I did not like that situation, going all through life being careful about bumping my foot lest the infection spread.

Many people think that all the grace of God can do is to get this old man, this carnal nature, this “man of sin,” this “old nature” incapacitated or dormant or “walled in.” They say that is all one can expect in this life.

But, when God is the physician, he can heal better than that. He has a remedy and will not say, “You will have to put up with sin as long as you live.” I believe God has a better solution than rendering it

dormant. There are analogies that better express the good news that Paul brings us.

Another analogy is that of darkness. How do you get rid of darkness? You turn on the light! Darkness leaves when light enters. And as soon as you put out the light, the darkness returns. So the grace of God, coming into the life, expels the evil. It is a dynamic relationship.

Still another analogy is infection. A fever occurs when the infected blood corpuscles or tissue is surrounded by life giving corpuscles which fight the infection and try to localize it. You try to encourage or reinforce the effort of blood corpuscles to localize and finally eliminate the infection. The way to keep from getting infected is not to be isolated from all the germs. The only way to be free from germs is to live in a capsule.

We can not go through life isolated from evil, but the way to be victorious is to have a healthy spiritual life that is constant; while it is in contact with infection, it continually resists it, the same as our bodies do. But if we are careless, just as when resistance is lowered, infection may re-occur.

The good thing about the analogy of "eradication" is that it does stress the difference between the source and the result, the root and the fruit. The bad thing about the analogy is that it implies once out, always out. In "eradication" I believe in getting at the source.

To illustrate the strength of my belief in it, I am thinking of a time when I just bought a house, and in the backyard I was tearing down a small building. This was overgrown with vines which I tore down. A day or so later, my face swelled up beyond recognition. It was poison oak! The infection had covered my face so badly that I did not want to be seen in public. However, by previous arrangement there was a young couple coming from Ohio for me to perform their wedding ceremony. Although I went through with the marriage ceremony, I was very embarrassed and uncomfortable. Our neighbor, a retired Nazarene missionary, explained that the previous owner of my property, knew that this poison oak was there, and every year he would trim it back and try to keep it under control. He said that was the best you could do, just try to keep it under control and avoid it as much as possible. Well, in my frustration, in my embarrassment, in my distress and pain, I said this is not a very good solution to coexists with poison oak; there must be a better way to deal with it.

Back at my classes I asked the students for a volunteer who was not affected by poison oak or poison ivy. I found one, hired him, and told him just what to do. I had no disposition to compromise with this

poison oak in the backyard. So I had him pull off all the vines he could and burn them. Next I had him dig a deep hole and get out all the roots he could and burn them. Then I poured five gallons of kerosene in the hole and burned it. Perhaps I was over reacting, but I felt justified in so doing. I did not count the cost, but was prodigal in my expenditure of time and money to get rid of this poison oak once and for all if there was any possible way of eradicating it. After that, I got 100 pounds of rock salt and filled the hole with it. Then I built a concrete platform 8 feet long, 3 feet wide and 8 inches thick over the site. On top of that I built an outdoor fireplace which stands to this day. That is the extent to which I believe in “eradication”.

Those who follow Paul’s advice have a similar degree of intolerance for sin, a similar urge to be fully victorious, to have the grace of God operate completely. I do not find Paul affirming, as I heard many theologians saying, “You can not be free from sin until you get rid of your body; human nature is so permeated with sin that you cannot expect total deliverance as long as you are alive.” That is not as I understand Paul. He is saying that the grace of God is adequate to deal with sin while you are still living. “He wills that I should holy be, that holiness I long to feel, that full divine conformity to all my Father’s gracious will;” thus prayed Charles Wesley.

The believer’s relation to sin is that of separation and the believer’s relation to God is one of union. Paul concludes this chapter by saying: “As you once yielded your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin and death, now yield your same members as instruments of righteousness unto God.” If you do so, you will have “your fruit unto holiness and the end everlasting life.” He said, once when you were sinners, you performed the acts of sin. You were once slaves of sin, and sin is enslaving.

This is the analogy that Paul uses of sin. It is viewed as a tyrant. You are in bondage to sin if you are not a Christian. But if you are a Christian, you can expect full deliverance from this tyranny. But, Paul adds, you are still servants. You are bond slaves to Jesus. And Paul’s designation of himself was that of a slave of Jesus Christ. He gloried in this relationship of servitude. So the question here is not whether you will be a servant, but whom are you going to serve? It will be one or the other, and you have to make your choice. You are going to be in bondage anyway. Are you going to be in bondage to sin with its fruit which leads to death, or are you going to be a love slave to Jesus with the fruit of holiness and the end everlasting life? This is what I understand Paul to be saying.

He puts a challenge before us and follows through in chapters

eight and twelve specifying just what new life will emerge and the type of life that will follow. There are more subtle things, of course: sins of jealousy, pettiness, self-centeredness. Paul tells in chapter 12 in honor prefer one another. He exhorts us to love our enemies. These are some of the things that issue if we yield our members servants to righteousness unto holiness.

A girl in Mitchell, South Dakota, was from a rural German family. The father was hard working, and he saw to it that his wife was also. Their daughter saw that her father made her mother virtually a slave to the farm. The girl longed for a better way of life. She went to Mitchell Business College, because she said, "I want to be better than I am." (Do we?) Her father thought she ought to be helping with the farm work. But she went to school, repeating, "I want to be better than I am." In the sense that she meant it she did become better than she was. After her father died, she invited her mother to live with her and gave her in the evening of life some luxuries.

Do we want to be better than we are? If we do, then there is good news for us. If we do not want to be better than we are, it is quite certain that we never will be. But this humble farm girl aspired to something better. God

wants to be better, who wants to be more Christ-like, who wants to be delivered from sin and live a life of victory with fruit unto holiness and the end everlasting life.

Let us pray. "We thank thee, our Father, for the good news that Jesus stands ready to heal and make us entirely whole, not leaving us with some walled-in infection, or with some residue of sin that will arise later to entrap us and defeat; but by the grace of God, we can believe in a dynamic relationship with Jesus of daily victory. Help us to have the audacity to believe and to act upon our belief for Jesus' sake. Amen."