

## **Romans 8:1-17**

### ***The Spirit of God in the New Life of the Justified Sinner***

#### **A. Notes on the Text**

##### ***Verse 1***

"Condemnation": this word indicates the sentence imposed for breaking the law, and its execution.

"In Christ Jesus." Paul uses the formula, "in Christ," "in Christ Jesus," "in the Lord," or "in him," often, almost 200 times in fact. The believer is in Christ, and Christ is in the believer (Galatians 2:20). The formula means a great deal: under the covenant the believer is reckoned in Christ, the Mediator; he is included in him. This is an "organic" union like tree and branch, vine and branch (John 15). Under the covenant, of which baptism is the official seal, the believer is grafted into Christ, is spiritually one with him, and on reaching maturity is grafted into him by faith (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 20). Thus, there are two kinds of grafting (making one): by virtue of the covenant (see the Form for the Baptism of Infants) and by means of faith. To expand on this briefly: because we as believers are "in Christ" (included and reckoned), Paul can say elsewhere that we have now been crucified, dead, buried, raised and taken up into heaven with Christ (see Outline 11, Romans 6:3).

##### ***Verse 2***

"The law...": "Christ Jesus" and "life" belong together. The Holy Spirit gives us the life that is in Christ, the new life of the resurrection. That life is called "law." In this instance "law" means: the power of God to life. This law contains the rules and order for our life. Through that law, the believer has been set free from "the law of sin and death." Here "law" means: influence, power, force. That too is an order and rule of life, but a wrong one! (See Glossary #19.)

##### ***Verse 3***

"Condemned": as in verse 1, refers to sentence and execution. "By the sinful nature": Christ assumed the human nature (became flesh) and in this flesh sin was convicted and punished. (See Glossary #5.)

"In the likeness of sinful man." It says neither "in sinful man" nor "in flesh of sin," for although Christ did assume human nature weakened by sin, a nature capable of suffering from the results and burdens of sin, it was nevertheless a sinless nature. Thus, Christ did become true man, but not a sinful man.

The law could not deliver from sin; the law was given as a rule to live by, and so could only denounce and condemn sin.

**Verse 4**

"In order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us": the purpose of salvation is that we as believers once again begin to live according to all the commandments of God (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33 and A. 114). The law has not been abolished for the believer!

"Walk" [RSV]: the way the whole of life is being lived in word and deed.

"Not...according to the sinful nature": not directed and controlled by the sin in us.

"According to the Spirit": controlled and guided by the Holy Spirit, in faith, obedience and love.

**Verse 5**

"Their minds set on": not in the first place an inner state of mind, but more broadly that which the whole person is thinking of and mindful of (either sin or God).

**Verse 6**

"Life and peace": a life that is peace. (See Glossary #2 and #24.)

**Verses 7, 8**

The reason why "their minds [are] set on what that nature desires" is enmity against God.

**Verse 9**

"If the Spirit of God lives in you," or "else it would not be true that the Spirit of God dwells in you."

Paul does not throw doubt on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; rather he wants to stress: if the Spirit of God did not dwell in you, you would be nothing but unbelievers. Christ dwells in the heart of the believer (Ephesians 3:17), together with his Father (John 14:23) and the Spirit (Romans 8:9); not just God's Word (John 5:38) and power (2 Corinthians 12:9), but he himself (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16). (For more about the indwelling of the Spirit, see also 1 Corinthians 6:19, James 4:5.)

"If anyone does not": Paul reckons with the possibility that there are people in the church who do not have the Spirit of God because of their unbelief (cf. Galatians 3:2ff.: he who does not believe does not receive the Spirit; see Main Thoughts, 4).

**Verse 10**

"If Christ is in you": because Christ is in you. Paul does not doubt that Christ is in the believer. Indeed, he bases his argument on the fact that the Spirit does, indeed, dwell in the congregation.

“Your body is dead”: through the destructive action of sin and its consequences. The believer cannot escape from that either (see 5:12).

“Your spirit is alive”: is this the spirit of man or the Spirit of God? The commentators are divided on this, also the Reformed ones. I adopt the view of S. Greijdanus<sup>1</sup> and reject that of C. Vonk: the spirit of the believer, his inner being and his God-directed mindset. (See Glossary #22.)

“Because of righteousness”: through the mediating work of Christ, who made us right before God.

### **Verse 11**

Things will be all right with the body too, but not until the resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:35ff.).

### **Verses 12, 13**

“We have an obligation” etc.: we do not owe the flesh (sin) anything, and, thus, do not have to live according to the sinful nature (to give ourselves up to sin). Someone who has been set free by the Lord would be unable to do so (Romans 8:2).

The believer is obliged, through the Spirit of God, to put to death the misdeeds of the body. “Put to death the misdeeds of the body” does not mean asceticism (a teaching of abstinence in everyday life), but an abstaining from sin, such as carousing (see also Colossians 3:5).

In a time in which increasing affluence threatens to cloud even the spirit of Christians, it is very necessary to note this. A bizarre resistance to all kinds of products of modern technology, such as radio and television (and videos and computers) is no more foolish in God's sight than the unbridled urge to live it up in all kinds of amusements which occur in many so-called Christian families. In one way or another it will have to become clear that Christians have a different lifestyle than others. (A.F.N. Lekkerkerker)<sup>2</sup>

### **Verse 14**

What distinguishes God's children is that *they are led by the Spirit of God*.

Sometimes people understand this to be something very special and exclusive, such as a form of prophetic wisdom and heavenly insight in earthly decisions. I will not deny that that, too, is part of it, but at the same time I think that it is also a characteristic of the whole Christian life, in which Jesus Christ comes first. Thus, being led by the Spirit

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. Note: The view of the author, in agreement with S. Greijdanus, is also in agreement with the views held by J.A.C. VanLeeuwen and D. Jacobs in the commentary on Romans in the *Korte Verklaring*.

<sup>2</sup> Ed. Note: Quote could be from *Römer 7 und Römer 9* (1942).

means: knowing oneself to be dependent on God, needing him in all things, asking for his counsel, understanding one's own folly, setting one's compass by the Word of the LORD. Not regarding one's own wishes as the most important but what God decides is good for oneself, seeking for God's plan for one's life and praying for his guidance in specific situations! (W.H. Velema)<sup>3</sup>

Note carefully that the Spirit leads us, believers, with and by means of the Word of God! Thus, one must let oneself be led. Further, it does not say "*children of God*" [RSV] but literally "*sons of God*." [NIV]

"Child" (Greek: *teknon*) accentuates the source of life, born of God (1 John 2:29; 3:9).

"Son" (Greek: *huios*) normally connotes the child's freedom and emancipation, while it simultaneously points to his right of inheritance. However, Paul uses both words interchangeably without any apparent difference in meaning.

### **Verse 15**

"A spirit that makes you a slave": "spirit" is an attitude to life, the direction one's life takes; "slave" refers to sin. The *fear* is the fear of God's judgment over sin.

"The Spirit of sonship": the Holy Spirit who in love to God brings the prayerful address, "Abba," from the heart to the lips. "Abba" is the Aramaic word for father. In the New Testament this address in the covenant is *the* way of addressing the Lord (cf. the Lord's Prayer [Matthew 6:9-13]).

There were often exclamations in the worship services (sometimes in unison), in response to God's deeds and the preaching of God's Word, such as the Hebrew words "Amen", "Hallelujah" and "Hosannah." Even in the Augustine's time (354-430) members of the congregation used to exclaim "Amen", "Hallelujah" or "Praise the Lord" during the sermon.

The Greek text says simply: the Spirit of adoption. First, we were God's children (in paradise); then, because of sin, we became degenerate; and now, as covenant believers, we are once again God's children (see Heidelberg Catechism, A. 33).

### **Verse 16**

It does not say: the Spirit himself testifies *to* our spirit that we are God's children. Popular opinion has it that God's Spirit assures us in a special voice or a particular inspiration that we are children. That, however, is found nowhere in the Bible. Nor does it say: the Spirit himself testifies *by means of* our spirit that we are God's children. As if in our crying Abba (v. 15) the voice of the Spirit would

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<sup>3</sup> Ed. Note: Quote is from *Verkenningen in Romeinen* (1962).

join with ours, since the Spirit works this cry in us. The latter is true, but not the former. Further, it does not say: the Spirit himself testifies in the gospel, and our spirit bears the same witness, that we are God's children. In that case our spirit would repeat what the Spirit of God tells us in the gospel. It is quite true that also in this respect we echo God's Spirit in the gospel, but that is not what it says here!<sup>4</sup>

Rather, the text says that the Spirit himself testifies together *with* our spirit. There are two witnesses and two testimonies which say the same thing. They do not bear witness independently of each other. Through the gospel God's Spirit works in us the certainty in faith that we are children, but the point here is that we bear witness before God's judgment seat in heaven. When in our prayer we address God as Father (v. 15) and so bear witness that we are children of God (v. 16), the Spirit bears witness to the Father at the same time: these are, indeed, your children! In the Scriptures, the Spirit is often portrayed as taking part in a legal proceeding, a court action (e.g. John 16:7-11). So here also: the Spirit as witness for the Crown affirms our testimony before the Father. He is indeed the witness for the Crown, for as God the Spirit he knows us through and through, and he can give a complete, true testimony about us. Scripture says: "A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." (Deuteronomy 19:15; cf. Deuteronomy 17:6; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; and Hebrews 10:28).

Thus, from this revelation of Romans 8:16 we know that the Spirit of God affirms our testimony above when we call upon the Father, but he can also challenge our testimony, namely, when we are not true children of God. The Spirit also bears witness to that fact.

### **Verse 17**

Being a child is being an heir as of right. (On the concept of heir-ship, see Romans 4:13; Galatians 3:29; 4:1,7; Titus 3:7; Hebrews 1:2 [Christ heir of everything]. On the concept of inheritance, see Ephesians 1:14,18; Colossians 3:24; 1 Peter 1:4.) The inheritance is the new earth with its divine glory.

## **B. Main Thoughts**

1. The connection with what goes before can be described as follows: the apostle draws a conclusion from the foregoing (note the word, "therefore," in v. 1) in connection with the main point, how the sinner escapes condemnation by the law of God. How is the sinner justified, so that guilt and punishment of sin, indeed, sin itself, is not reckoned to him anymore? We find the answers to these questions in the third and following chapters.

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<sup>4</sup> Ed. Note: The views mentioned here are held by C. Vonk, R. Schippers and others.

2. When the apostle continues to speak about the new life of the believers, he must introduce the Spirit of God. For it is the Spirit who, serving Christ, distributes and develops the mediating benefits of Christ in those who belong to Christ. In salvation one can distinguish between *gaining* salvation and its *application*. Christ as Mediator has, by his suffering and death, resurrection and ascension, obtained deliverance from the guilt and condemnation of sin, even from sin itself (see Belgic Confession, Articles 20-23; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 11-19). It is the Spirit who makes this work bear fruit for the believer (John 16:5-15).
3. In order to do this work, the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost in the church and he lives in the congregation, in the hearts and lives of all covenant people.

In accordance with his name (Holy) he does the work of sanctification (making holy): he cleanses from sin and dedicates our lives to the Lord (see Belgic Confession, Article 24; Heidelberg Catechism, A. 51,53). Note that, as the heading indicates, Lord's Days 20-24 all speak about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. Everything that follows after "I believe in the Holy Spirit" in the Apostle's Creed is included in that, also the church-gathering work of Christ by his Spirit and Word (A. 54)!

In this sanctification there is the *struggle between the Spirit and the flesh*, i.e. the struggle of the Spirit against the sin which still dwells and remains in us. This antithesis of Spirit and flesh runs through all of Romans 8:1-17, like a thread. (See Glossary #12.)

4. An important question is how we obtain the Spirit of Christ. Through another outpouring from above into our soul? Several Pentecostal groups promote this.

However, the Scriptures give a different answer. Every person who is baptized receives the Spirit, for this Spirit comes to dwell in every child of the covenant (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). That is why Scripture warns all church members not to resist the Spirit (Acts 7:51), not to grieve him (Ephesians 4:30; Isaiah 63:10), not to quench the fire of this Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19), not to outrage him (Hebrews 10:29), nor blaspheme him (Matthew 12:31). This resistance, etc. is only possible because the Spirit is present and working in the members of the church. We must let the Spirit work in us (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 103) and pray for that Spirit (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 115), i.e. for his work of grace in our lives. For he can also cause us to harden in sin in accordance with God's will (cf. Romans 9:18).

In Galatians 3:2ff. Paul also speaks about receiving the Holy Spirit. He says there that the Galatian Christians received the Spirit by hearing the preaching of faith. That means that the Spirit uses the Word (preaching) as an

instrument. Thus, wherever the Word is, the Spirit is also. The Word is never without the Spirit. Thus, we can say that the Spirit has been given to a covenant believer and is being given to him over and over again whenever he hears the Word and receives it and prays for the Spirit (Luke 11:13).

Hearing and receiving the Word constantly renews the Spirit's activity in our life.

Therefore, we pray for the continuing indwelling and the sanctifying grace of the Spirit of God in our lives.

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