

Are Christians Sinners or Not? (Part 1)

By W.L. Breidenhof

At the back of our Book of Praise, we have a collection of fifteen prayers. These prayers have a long history in the Reformed churches, most of them going back to the sixteenth century, and from there back even further in some form or another to the early church. These prayers decidedly do not reflect the sensibilities of our age. Some people find the language of some of these prayers to be overly harsh. For instance, the third prayer, “A Public Confession of Sins and Prayer Before the Sermon” begins with these words: “*Heavenly Father, eternal and merciful God, we acknowledge and confess before your divine majesty that we are poor wretched sinners.*” Poor wretched sinners? Is that really what we are?

The Heidelberg Catechism uses the same kind of language in QA 126 when it explains the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer regarding the forgiveness of our sins: “...*do not impute to us, wretched sinners, any of our transgressions, nor the evil which still clings to us...*” Are we really “wretched sinners” or is this just a bit over the top? Doesn’t this contradict what we confess in QA 43? We say that we believe that our old nature is crucified and put to death. That means it’s done with. It’s dead. So if our old sinful nature is dead, how can we still say that we are wretched sinners?

A Big Lie?

These are not abstract theological questions. These are real questions that people ask and struggle with. Some have thought long on these questions. On the one hand, there are those who reject the language of our prayers and QA 126. They believe that sinners are the wicked, those who are under God’s curse. That’s not us. Yes, we sin, but we are not sinners. We have been redeemed by Christ; we are a new creation. They agree with many popular Christian writers today who call this idea of Christians being sinners a big mistake. In his popular book, *Wild at Heart*, John Eldredge is even bolder and calls it a big lie.

But on the other hand, we have those who have sensitive hearts and consciences. They’re all too aware of their unworthiness before a holy God. They know that they sin, they have sinned, they keep on sinning, and they are sinners. This awareness makes them doubt and question and wonder. They lack in assurance and they feel burdened when they hear those words “poor wretched sinners” in our creeds or in our prayers. For all these people and for the rest of us too, it’s important that we get these matters straight. What is at stake here is not merely an abstract point of theology. We’re considering our comfort in life and death and about how we live here and now before God.

We’re not the first ones to consider these important questions. You’ll find these things discussed repeatedly by Christians over the last two thousand years. However, with the coming of the Reformation, there was finally a wide consensus on the answers to these questions – at least among those who took the Bible seriously. Beginning with Martin Luther, the Reformation churches held that man is at the same time justified *and* a sinner.

There was a Latin expression they used for that: *simul iustus et peccator* [at the same time just and a sinner]. Luther and the other Reformers simply went back to the Bible. They came to this consensus by carefully reading the Scriptures, especially the letter to the Romans.

Pietism and John Wesley

With the passage of time, however, this consensus was eventually called into question again. During the 17th century a movement arose in Europe known as Pietism. In 16th century confessional Protestantism, a lot of emphasis was placed on the doctrine of justification – what God does for the believer and outside of the believer. However, beginning in the 17th century, certain voices were heard that placed more emphasis on sanctification – what goes on in the believer’s life and the believer’s obedience to God.

Philip Jakob Spener (1635-1705) was one of those voices. Spener was a Lutheran pastor in Germany. While formally adhering to the Reformation doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator*, he undermined it with an idealistic view of sanctification. Spener maintained that true Christians could not commit sin. They could **have** sin (as a sort of accident or weakness), but they could not willfully **commit** sin. According to Spener, true Christians may have sin, but they are not sinners. This idea became widely accepted in European Pietistic circles.

Pietism was one of the influences on the development of Methodism in England. John Wesley (1703-1791) came to believe that Christians may reach a stage in their spiritual development where they do not sin. The key was that Wesley defined sin as willfully and intentionally disobeying God. Wesley himself did not believe that he had reached this level of perfection, but was rather plagued by self-doubt.

It must be noted that Wesley did not deny that believers have a struggle within them between the flesh and the Spirit. He maintained that there was such a struggle and he insisted that the denial of that struggle was a novel and dangerous doctrine. However, all this did not guard him against questioning the doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator*. Writing about justification, he says, “It does by no means imply that God judges concerning us contrary to the real nature of things; that he esteems us better than we really are, or believes us righteous when we are unrighteous.” Through this sort of ambiguity, the ground was being prepared for the wide spread denial that Christians are at the same time justified and sinners.

Charles G. Finney

The doctrine of justification held by John Wesley was problematic. He denied the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. He denied what Martin Luther called “the great exchange”: that Christ has taken all our sin upon himself and that God has placed all the righteousness of Jesus Christ upon us. According to Wesley, this notion of justification is a legal fiction.

That idea made its way to America and found roots during the Second Great Awakening. Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) was one of the central figures and his explicitly Pelagian theology has been a perpetual source of mischief in American Christianity. Under the influence of Methodism, Finney followed in Wesley's footsteps and denied justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness – he called this absurd and nonsensical. According to Finney, such a doctrine would give no incentive for personal holiness.

Finney held that if they will it, Christians can perfectly obey God in this life and thereby achieve justification. He went so far as to say that obedience to God is a condition of justification and that no one can be justified so long as he has any sin remaining in him. With respect to *simul iustus et peccator*, Finney declared that this doctrine “has slain more souls, I fear, than all the universalism that ever cursed the world.”

If we are to look for a main source for the modern denial of the Reformation teaching that believers are both justified and sinners, it would seem that Charles Finney is our man. The important thing to realize is that this denial was and is part of an integrated system of theology. The denial of this doctrine has a theological development and it has serious implications. It grew out of problems with the Reformation doctrine of justification, specifically with the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Is the righteousness that functions in our justification our own righteousness or that of another? Pelagian that he was, Finney said the former; the Reformed confessions insist on the latter.

Now it may be possible to affirm the Reformation doctrine of justification (as found, for example, in Lord's Day 23) and to yet deny the doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator*. But to do so is inconsistent, unrealistic, and naïve. The Reformation doctrine of justification is that an alien righteousness (one that is not our own) is imputed to us. The notion of imputation involves the transfer of all of Christ's merits to our account. This transfer entirely removes the *curse* of sin, however the *power* of sin remains in some degree. Where the power of sin remains, people sin and are sinners. In Reformed theology, justification does not imply the full measure of sanctification or perfection, rather it *leads to* a battle for progressive sanctification.

We'll explore this battle in the next installment as we turn to the Scriptures...

The quote from John Wesley is from *the John Wesley Reader*, compiled by Al Bryant (Waco: Word, 1983), p.141. The quote from Charles Finney is from his *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976), p.57.

Are Christians Sinners or Not? (Part 2)

By W.L. Breidenhof

In the last installment, we surveyed the history of the denial of the doctrine that Christians are at the same time justified and sinners. We noted that whereas the seeds were sown in Pietism and Methodism, the tree came to bear “fruit” with the Second Great Awakening and Charles G. Finney. We saw that, historically, the denial of this doctrine comes packaged in a system of theology that has problems with the Reformation doctrine of justification.

What we need to do now is look closely at what the Scriptures teach. Specifically, we need to carefully consider the crucial passages of Romans 6 and 7. The first thing we need to do is acknowledge that for us these are difficult passages. The book of Romans in general has some difficult parts. When we come to difficult passages, we need to remember some basic rules for reading and understanding the Bible.

Basic Rules for Scripture Interpretation

One of those basic rules is that we need to take into account the immediate context. Remember: a text without context is a pretext. All manner of trouble happens when we don’t remember to look at the context. So, when we’re here in Romans 6, we should be looking back to Romans 1-5.

In Romans 1-3, Paul makes the point that all mankind is under the curse of sin. At the end of chapter 3 and up till the end of chapter 5, Paul explains how we can be right before a holy and just God. It is only through faith in Christ. Justification, God’s declaration of righteousness on account of Christ’s work, comes to us by faith in the Saviour. So, in Romans 5, right before the chapter we’re looking at right now, Paul is deeply in a discussion regarding justification. Then at the end of chapter 5, we find him teaching that grace abounds where sin abounds.

That is what leads to the question that we find at the beginning of chapter 6: “*Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase?*” Whenever Paul preached the free grace of God in Christ, legalistic folks would get up on their high horse and accuse Paul of being an antinomian, someone who opposes or undermines the law of God. They said, “If we’re saved by grace and not by works, then people will live like the devil!” Paul takes this question seriously. What does the doctrine of justification have to say to how we live? Does it mean that we can now just casually go on sinning as if nothing has changed?

Paul’s answer is a strong negative: “By no means! Certainly not! May it never be!” Why does he answer so strongly? It all has to do with our union with Christ. He mentions baptism in verses 3 and 4. Baptism is the sacramental picture of our union with Christ. It is the sign and seal of that union. Baptism points us to the fact that we are joined to him in his death and resurrection. It is the seal, the guarantee of these truths for those who believe.

The truth is we are united to Christ. In verse 5 Paul says that means that we are joined with him in his death and will also be joined with him in his resurrection. Verse 6 is the hinge on which this whole passage that we're looking at turns on. "*For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin...*" The key to understanding this is to remember the context. Chapter 5 spoke of justification – which speaks of how God regards us. So, when we read here that the our old nature was crucified with Christ through our union with him, we understand that to mean that from God's perspective, there is nothing in us any longer that deserves the curse of eternal wrath and judgment. We are no longer under the curse of sin, because Christ bore that curse for us and via our union with him through faith, we are right with God. This is "the great exchange": all of our sins were imputed to Christ and all his righteousness was imputed to us. The result is that God now regards us as he regards Christ: totally righteous. That is wonderful good news!

How shall we now live?

But how does that impact how we live? Remember, that's Paul's concern here. He wants to answer the objection that believing this is going to lead to evil living. He says that can't happen! Because believers are no longer slaves to sin. They are united to Christ. Now what believers need to do in their daily walk of life is fix their eyes on Jesus. As it says in verse 11, we consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. He is the one we're joined to. The slavery and dominion of sin has been broken. Believers are now slaves of God, slaves of righteousness. That's why Paul says in verse 14 that sin shall not be your master. To summarize the argument: God regards us as justified, we also have to regard ourselves in the same way when it comes to daily life. Be who you are!

The essence of all this is captured in QA 43 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The entire answer is basically a paraphrase of Romans 6:1-14. Because of Christ's death, our old nature is crucified and put to death and buried with him. The result? The evil desires of our flesh are no longer going to rule over us. There's a new master that we serve and his name is Jesus. It's in him that we are right. It's because of him that we're thankful and it's through his power that we live our lives in such a way that we show ourselves thankful. We show that we love him and will be forever grateful to him for all his benefits.

The greatest benefit we have received from Christ is peace with God. While we were enemies, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). Though previously we were at war with our Creator, Jesus Christ is our peace (Eph. 2:14). All believers can know for certain that there is peace with God. The external battle is over and peace has come. But this is a peace which starts another war, a different war. We have peace with God, but now we face the struggle for holiness. Our justification leads us to battle for sanctification. Though the *curse* of sin has been conquered, there remains a struggle with the *power* of sin. Offering ourselves to God as sacrifices of thankfulness is not as easy as it sounds.

Romans 7

That brings us to Romans 7, particularly verses 13-25. In this chapter, Paul seems to be singing a different tune. This has confused many people. In 6:18, he said that Christians were set free from sin and are now slaves of righteousness. But now he says in verse 14 of chapter 7 that he is “*unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.*” He says that he can’t do the good he wants to do, but keeps doing evil. In verse 24, he says that he regards himself as a wretched man, a man who still needs to be rescued. This seems to contradict what he was saying in chapter 6. Of course, everyone will agree that there are no real contradictions in Scripture. So some believers read this passage and they conclude that Paul must be talking about a different time in his life. Chapter 7 was before he became a Christian. Or some say, chapter 7 is referring to a different kind of Christian, a carnal Christian. This is a sort of spiritual autobiography and Paul made the move from being a carnal Christian to being a victorious Christian. He went from being a Romans 7 Christian to a Romans 8 Christian. Some say that also has to be our goal.

However, the long-established reading of this passage says something different. The Reformers and the Reformed churches followed the ancient reading of this passage which says that Paul was speaking in Romans 7 about himself at the very moment he was writing to the Roman believers. In other words, Paul is writing about the struggle faced by every believer. In every believer, remnants of the old nature remain and believers have to struggle and war against those remnants. While the *curse* of sin has been definitively dealt with in justification, the *power* of sin still has to be dealt with in sanctification. Another way of saying that is that justification is an accomplished event, but sanctification is an ongoing process. Or you could also say: the external war has been settled, there is peace with God, but the war within still rages and will rage until the day of our death or until the day Christ returns.

Let’s be clear that this battle is not between equals. It’s not that Christians are equal parts old nature and new nature. Rather, it’s the new nature against the remnants of the old nature. Further, Scripture is clear that the struggle against the old nature is one of progressive victory. So, even with what we read here in Romans 7, we have to be clear that acknowledging this struggle is not defeatism.

In the last installment, we’ll consider some of the reasons why we should read Romans 7 as describing a struggle that all Christians face.

Are Christians Sinners or Not? (Part 3)

By W.L. Breidenhof

In the last installment, we saw that we have a peace with God that has started a war. We are at the same time justified and sinners. I also mentioned that one of the most important things to remember when reading and studying the Bible is context. When we talk about context, we're not only speaking about the immediate context, the verses before and after the passage. When we deal with difficult passages, we have the context of the whole Bible to help us out. This has traditionally been summarized with the saying, "Let Scripture interpret Scripture." So when we deal with Romans 7, we should also look elsewhere in the Bible for help. We not only consider the immediate context, but also the broader context of all of God's revelation.

The Broader Context

As we do that, we come to a passage like 1 Timothy 1:15-16. There Paul describes himself as the worst of sinners. When he says this, he uses the present tense. He does not say, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I *was* the worst." He could have used the past tense. But he did not. He said, "of whom I *am* the worst." He is describing himself at the moment he is writing. This parallels what we have in Romans 7 where Paul calls himself a wretched man. Paul has no qualms about calling himself a sinner while at the same time being justified in Christ.

Here it needs to be pointed out that there are three different ways that the Bible uses the word "sinner." First, it's used to describe those who are objectively wicked in the eyes of God. In this sense, Christians are not sinners. Second, it is used to describe those who are wicked in the eyes of men. We see that usage in the gospels when Jesus is said to associate with sinners. Third, it is used to describe those who still struggle with the remnants of a sinful nature, even though they may be objectively righteous in the eyes of God. That is the sense in which Christians can still be described as sinners. That's also the sense Paul uses in 1 Timothy 1.

In Philippians 3, Paul writes about his pre-conversion life. Before Christ grabbed him, Paul thought he was living a good and righteous life. He saw himself as being blameless. There was no struggle like what we read about in Romans 7. So, we have to conclude that the struggle came after he was converted.

Still with the broader context, there is a parallel passage in Galatians 5. In that chapter Paul is clearly describing the experience of all Christians. When he writes to the Galatians, he's writing to Christians. Chapter 5, verses 16-17 has Paul encouraging the Galatians to live by the Spirit and in so doing they will "*not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*" When believers do not live by the Spirit, they are gratifying the desires of the old nature. And then in verse 17, he describes the struggle. And he says that the Spirit is contrary to the sinful nature. "*They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.*" Here again, this is all present tense. This is a present reality in all Christians. There is a conflict between the new nature (which is through the Holy

Spirit) and the remnants (desires) of the old sinful nature. This directly parallels what we read in Romans 7. Believers are both justified and sinners at the same time.

Therefore, the broader context supports the traditional Reformed reading of Romans 7. So does one more basic rule of proper Bible reading. Whenever we read the Bible, we should stick with its natural, literary sense. Paul was not playing games; he was writing to be understood. Let me make clear what we're getting at here. In the first verses of Romans 7, Paul uses the past tense throughout, also when speaking about himself. But in verses 14-25, he uses the present tense. If he was speaking about his pre-conversion life or about some kind of "carnal Christian" period in his life, we would expect him to go on using the past tense. Then he would say something like, "What a wretched man I *was*! I *was* a slave to sin in my sinful nature." However, he uses the present tense. It is only natural to read it as being a description of what he is presently like. To see it any other way does injury to the natural, literary sense of the passage.

Why This Matters

This is not an insignificant, petty matter. Understanding this properly is crucially important. God in his wise providence has left these remnants of the sinful nature in us. Romans 7:13 tells us why: so that sin might be recognized as sin. He has done this so that in this life we would continually fix our eyes on Christ. As we grow in grace, more and more our eyes are opened to the defects and weaknesses that still cling to us, we more and more see the sinfulness of sin. Our vision becomes more and more clear. It horrifies us. But more than that it makes us see how much we need Christ. We need him every day, every hour. We run to him because it is only in him that we have hope and salvation. When we look to him, we have the assurance that sin has been already defeated *for* us and soon will be wholly and utterly defeated *in* us.

Seeing ourselves as justified sinners is crucial **because it keeps bringing us to Christ**. Knowing this Biblical truth forces us outside of ourselves and drives us to the Lord Jesus. However, if we see ourselves as simply justified, what happens when we grow and we see that sin is a bigger monster in our lives than we initially thought? If I come to see a sinful nature against which I have to struggle, I must not be a Christian at all, or I must be a second class Christian. There can't be much hope for me. Is such a person going to be thankful? Is such a person going to be making much of God in their lives? I think not. Or what happens is that we deceive ourselves into thinking that everything about the old sinful nature has been totally eradicated. We don't have a sinful nature against which we have to struggle our whole life. It would be too crass to say it, but we're thinking that we're actually doing pretty good. While everybody else is groveling and confessing their sins, we can hold our chins high and carry on with confidence. All that's left is for us to praise God.

But what does Scripture say in 1 John 1:8? "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*" And a little further in verse 10, "*If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*" And if we have sinned, then we are sinners. That's reason to humble ourselves before God and

constantly fix our eyes on Christ, just as the Israelites fixed their eyes on the bronze snake in the wilderness. That's reason to also take seriously what it says in 1 John 1:9, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" Christ alone is our righteousness and holiness and sanctification before God!

Honesty and Reality

We need to read the Scriptures properly and we need to be honest with ourselves. The reality is that we are justified in Christ. Through his redeeming work, we are right with God right now. That is reality, glorious good news. Yet, the reality is also that we all have to struggle with sin. Consistently offering ourselves as sacrifices of thankfulness does not come easy. This is because of the remnants of the old sinful nature. Realizing this reality does not bring us to despondency and despair and leave us there. Instead, realizing it brings us closer to Christ. Romans 7:25, "*Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" We flee to him, because we need him not only for our justification, but also for our sanctification. Of ourselves, we're hopeless and helpless. Apart from Christ, we are nothing and our works are nothing. It is only when we are looking to Christ, when we are united to him in faith, that we will make progress in holiness. Furthermore, the fact that the struggle is there, that's not a sign of defeat, but a proof that Christ is indeed working sanctification in us. This is the normal Christian life.

So, as we go through this life, we have this struggle, this conflict. It causes us pain and frustrates us. On the one hand, justified. On the other hand, still a sinner. We have a peace that has started a war. What that war does is make us call out to God for the final act of the drama of redemption. The drama is not over. Christ still has work to do. He still must complete his work in us. He still must return with the clouds of heaven to inaugurate the age to come. I encourage you to look for his coming, because when he comes, the consequences of what happened on Golgotha on Good Friday will be fully realized. In the absence of sin, the fullness of both righteousness and peace will greet each other.

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