

“A Spiritual Portrait of a Believer”:

**A comparison between the emphatic “I” of
Romans 7, Wesley and the Mystics**

by

Chet William Cataldo

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Philosophiae Doctor

In the Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology

University of Pretoria

Promoter: Prof Gert J Steyn

November 2006

Foreword

In many ways, this project is the result of a lifetime; and in that sense it is necessary to thank everyone with whom I have crossed paths. Specifically, I truly have been blessed by everyone in all the congregations that I have served and by those with whom I have had the privilege to live and serve with in the Philippines and in Lithuania. It is within these settings that I saw in everyday life what “Christian Spirituality” truly is. It is also for these settings that this project was intended. It is Steven Van Zanen, my colleague at Lithuania Christian College, who was instrumental in the “birth” of the idea to pursue this project. I would like to thank Prof. Gert Steyn of the University of Pretoria, for his willingness to take me as a student. It was because of his guidance, patience and willingness to persevere during those times when I just wasn’t getting it, that undergird this project. I can still remember his comment to me: “Please take my comments as intended” that demonstrated his compassion which made me feel that I was more than just name.

I would like to thank my son Jeremiah and his wife Susan: for allowing me to be a fellow traveler with them in their own journey; for their love and support of me during some very difficult days and for their perseverance in continuing the journey themselves.

I would like to thank my son Tobin and his wife Marta: Tobin for his willingness and strength for moving to and living in Poland by himself for two years; Marta for her

willingness and love of Tobin that enabled her to leave Poland and family and move to the USA to live with Tobin; for their support and love of me during some difficult days.

I would like to thank my daughter Natalya for her love of me; for her joy of life; for her willingness to move cross-cultures; for her view of life that keeps mine from becoming “too fixed”.

I want to thank my wife, Jodi for her decision in 1975 to marry me; for her support of me since that day; for both her support during this project and her strength when I was tired and didn't know if I could continue.

I am extremely proud of my family for the people that they are. They are examples of love, which is so desperately needed in the world today.

Finally, I want to thank the Lord Jesus for without His love for me, his life, death and resurrection, this project couldn't even be an idea. It is for Him and His people that this project is intended. I pray that in some small way this project will help strengthen God's people.

Summary

The focus of this study is to discover the identity of the emphatic “I” of Rom 7 with the added purpose of attempting to “draw” a spiritual portrait of a mature Christian believer. To accomplish this purpose, the process was as follows: The examination of Rom 7, within its context, with the purpose of trying to discern the “*experience*” of the emphatic “I” in Rom 7 that Paul is describing. This examination consisted of a researching of Rom 1-8, (the context of Rom 7) and an examination of Rom 7, itself. The next step in the process was to compare the experience of the emphatic “I” of Rom 7, as found within its context of Rom 1-8, with what Paul wrote elsewhere on the experience of new life in Christ for Christian believers. The purpose of this comparison was to discover if Paul had a “consistent” portrait of spirituality and Christian maturity. The final step was to compare the experience described by Paul, both in Rom 7 and in the wider Pauline Corpus with the experience of Wesley, which he calls “perfection”, and the Mystical experience, which they call the “spiritual marriage.

The study of Wesley consisted in the study of what Wesley wrote concerning “perfection”. He stated that “perfection” was not sinless perfection, but purity of intention, a heart of love to God. The perfect, according to Wesley, still struggle with “infirmities”, areas of their lives that lead them to commit mistakes. Mistakes, Wesley said, were not sins, because they were committed against the will of the perfect. What is to be seen is that Wesley’s description of the “perfect” shows that the mature Christian believer has a heart, an intention to live for Christ, but at times falls short.

This was the same conclusion drawn from the Mystics’ teaching on the “spiritual marriage” which the Mystics describe as the highest experience a Christian believer can

experience in this life. This experience has been shown to be a heart for God, a desire to live solely for Christ. The “spiritual marriage” is not an experience of sinless perfection.

The study of Romans, Wesley, the Mystics, coupled with the wider study of the secondary literature, shows that there is a remarkable consistency in the teaching and understanding between Paul, Wesley and the Mystics that the closer a Christian believer gets to God, the more this Christian believer is aware of his or her own sinfulness.

The conclusion to be drawn from this study, and hence the “spiritual portrait of a believer”, is that the identity of the empathic “I” is of a regenerate Christian believer, one who is growing ever closer and closer to God and at the same time is in “pain” over the remaining effects of sin. This has important implications for Christian Spirituality and for the face of the Christian church in society.

Key Terms

1. Paul
2. Romans
3. Wesley
4. Mystics
5. Perfection
6. Spiritual Marriage
7. Spirituality
8. Experience
9. Justification
10. Sanctification

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Abbreviations

NIV.....	New International Bible
NASB.....	New American Standard Bible
NRSV.....	New Revised Standard Version
CEV.....	Contemporary English Version

Abstract

The focus of this study is to discover the identity of the emphatic “I” of Rom 7 with the added purpose of attempting to “draw” a spiritual portrait of a mature Christian believer. To accomplish this purpose, the process is as follows: An examination of Rom 7, within its context, is conducted. This examination is followed by an attempt at determining the experience of the emphatic “I” found within Rom 7. The next step in the process is to compare the experience of the emphatic “I” of Rom 7, as found within its context of Rom 1-8 with what Paul wrote elsewhere on the experience of new life in Christ for Christian believers. The purpose of this comparison is to discover if Paul had a “consistent” portrait of spirituality and Christian maturity. The final step is to compare the experience described by Paul, both in Rom 7 and in the wider Pauline Corpus, with the experience which John Wesley called “perfection”, and with the Mystical experience called the “spiritual marriage”.

The study of Romans, Wesley, and the Mystics, coupled with the wider study of the secondary literature showed that there is a remarkable consistency in the teaching and understanding that the closer a Christian believer gets to God, the more this Christian believer is aware of his or her own sinfulness. Paul, in describing the experience of the emphatic “I”, is describing a person who is becoming more and more aware of his or her own sinfulness.

The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that the identity of the emphatic “I” is of a regenerate Christian believer, one who is growing ever closer and closer to God and at the same time is in “pain” over the remaining effects of sin.

Ten Points

1. The identity of the “emphatic ‘I’” in Rom 7 is that of a regenerate Christian believer. This is established within the context of Rom 1-8 (the immediate context of Rom 7); the Pauline Corpus; compared with Wesley and the Mystics.
2. This study attempted to investigate the “experience” of such a regenerate believer. This calls for an interdisciplinary and an holistic approach.
3. The experience of Paul in Rom 7 and those of Wesley on “perfection” and the mystics on “spiritual marriage” are similar experiences.
4. The portrait of a spiritual believer looks as follows according to the experience described by Paul, Wesley and the Mystics: a heart desire to obey God; being single focused, Wesley described this as purity of intention; a heart of love to God and to neighbor; a “not yet having reached sinless perfection” aspect which results in a passionate pursuit of Christian growth.
5. The contribution of this investigation has far reaching implications for Christian Spirituality: by bringing together the various understandings of Christian Spirituality that exist in the Church today. These various understandings of Christian Spirituality tend to exclude these other understandings; thus a clearer understanding of Christian Spirituality will result in a far more agreed upon teaching to Christian believers and seekers.
6. The contribution of this investigation also has far reaching implications for the role of the church in society: first of all, if as is proposed, that Christian Spirituality and Maturity are indeed described within Rom 7, then an agreement on this may bring the various branches of the Christian Church closer together. This will result in a more “unified picture” of the Church and thus society will see the Church as more than a human institution. When society once again views the Church as more than a human institution, this will affect the relationship between the Church and society in positive ways.
7. A more universal agreement as to the nature of Christian Spirituality will do much to bring the Church closer together and thus to fulfill the words attributed to Jesus in John 17; that we might be one as he and the Father are one.
8. A clearer understanding of Christian Spirituality and Maturity will aid in the individual growth of Christian believers because it will provide a more focused “direction” and give “steps” to guide the believer along the way.
9. Whereas “becoming like Jesus” is an admirable goal, what does that mean for the one who is not sinless like Jesus? Can one be “like Jesus” and not be sinless? An understanding of Christian Spirituality not only gives a clearer understanding of Christian Maturity, but it also builds into this understanding the reality that Christian believers are not yet sinless, thus, relieving, in part, the guilt that is carried around by Christian believers.
10. A further contribution of this study is an understanding that sin results in many, often unconscious aspects of not only the individual but also of society. This clearer understanding will result in an attempt to change the individual’s and societies view and treatment of others.