Coping with Protestantism’s Dangerous Idea:
A Rubric for Evaluating Competing Interpretations

by

Paige Britton

The title of this essay echoes the title of Alister McGrath’s newly published primer on the origins, influence, and implications of Protestantism, Christianity’s Dangerous Idea (HarperCollins, 2007). In his book, McGrath identifies this “dangerous idea” as the right of every Christian to read the Bible for him- or herself, quite independent of priest or pope or council. From the time of the Reformation, such liberty has produced inevitably complicated results. As McGrath explains,

since every Protestant has the right to interpret the Bible, a wide range of interpretations cannot be avoided. And since there is no centralized authority within Protestantism, this proliferation of options cannot be controlled. Who has the right to decide what is orthodox and what is heretical? 1

In other words, as a popular assessment of the situation goes, “People can make the Bible say anything they like. So who’s to say that one person’s interpretation is better than another’s?”

Protestants could answer the question with a defeatist shrug, overwhelmed by the “proliferation of options” available to us. Or we could bow to postmodernism, accepting all interpretations indiscriminately and ignoring the logical contradictions that result. Or perhaps we should appeal to the democratic spirit within the Protestant movement and assess the majority opinion: surely so many believers cannot be wrong! We might even take a stance of firm conviction and state with R. C. Sproul that

the differences we see in interpretation are due to sin or an unwillingness to understand Scripture in its original context...Otherwise, we embrace a Christian irrationalism and relativism which says that our God speaks to His people in conflicting ways. 2

This last assessment may be true, much of the time; but I would gently suggest that even Dr. Sproul has respected colleagues whose interpretations occasionally differ from his, whom he would hesitate to accuse of irrational relativism.

The fact remains that Christians are faced with a multiplicity of messages, contemporary and historical, from the popular Christian press and speaking circuit to the pulpit and the commentary. Sometimes we need assistance to identify and evaluate what we have heard or read or concocted in our own minds. Of course, as Protestants, we may not appeal to any higher human authority for this evaluation; we must make our judgments according to the standard of the Bible itself. From part to whole, Holy Scripture is the measuring stick by which we must test the teaching we receive, whether at the level of sermons and books or at the level
of entire theological systems. But how are we to use Scripture to evaluate these things, if everyone’s interpretation of it, part or whole, is equally marred by faulty human understanding?

I suggest that we consider our ability to understand the Scriptures to be akin to our ability to know God at all. That is, just as we cannot know God exhaustively, but can know him sufficiently through his revelation of himself to us, so, too, we can expect to understand the Scriptures sufficiently, if not completely perfectly. As explained in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*,

> All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. (I.vii)

I suggest as well that it is possible to grow in our understanding of the Bible by paying attention to little details and larger movements in the Scriptures, for no interpreter can “make” a pronoun singular if it is plural, and no godly teacher can deny Jesus’ understanding that the whole Bible pertains to him.

With my brethren in the WRF, I stand within the Reformed expression of the faith, a theological system that we believe passes the test of orthodoxy as defined by the Bible. Those of us who shelter under the Reformed “umbrella” may yet be able to agree that alternate interpretations of biblical passages are not necessarily all heretical; but we can also say that all interpretations are not created equal. While it is not always possible (even for scholars) to judge with confidence between well-reasoned presentations on difficult passages, it is possible (even for laypeople) to follow a general rubric when faced with a range of interpretations, identifying those that are weak or unhelpful or representative of a certain extra-biblical agenda. This essay is offered as an attempt to spell out such a biblically-based rubric, to help us cope with competing interpretations.

**Who needs to know this?**

Pastors and others who regularly teach from the Bible will immediately recognize the necessity of weighing possibilities and making choices between interpretations. At a most mundane and practical level, time simply does not usually allow for more than one perspective on a passage to be presented in a lesson or a sermon. It is also the case that multiple perspectives will confuse and alarm some listeners, who may find it deeply troubling to discover that even pastors, scholars, and translators aren’t always a hundred percent sure what biblical words or phrases meant. Without the time to broach the subject gently and in a balanced way,
it is often best to avoid it. And, of course, some interpretations are unworthy of notice to begin with. We want to give people the proper food at the proper time (cf. Mt. 24:45).

Given time, experience, and a firm working knowledge of the biblical canon, regular preachers and teachers may find themselves evaluating and choosing between the interpretations they encounter (or develop) with an increasingly practiced eye. Doubtless, some choices are made more hastily and carelessly than others; but making choices is a routine part of deciding what material to present. To a less experienced layperson, however, encounters with multiple opinions about a passage can be bewildering, if not alarming. We find ourselves living out the Proverb that says, “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him” (18:17). We need a little help.

Awareness of alternate interpretations comes to us in different ways, often in the context of a new responsibility to present biblical material ourselves. It is not likely, in fact, that we will encounter historical differences of opinion during our own personal Bible study time, which may not stretch us past the biblical text any farther than the notes in our study Bibles. Taking responsibility for teaching a class or a leading a small group, however, will hopefully drive us to do a bit of digging, and thus we open a commentary or two and discover arguments and disagreements that we never knew existed. We begin to suspect that some scholars are delighted to have the chance to set up the opposition’s points and then take them down again, peg by peg; we wish we had half the experience and analytical skill to do the same.

Exposure to a variety of teachers, writers, and speakers in the contemporary Christian world may also eventually clue us in to the fact that a passage may be taught in widely different ways with wildly differing conclusions. Some of these conclusions should alarm us more than the fact that diversity of opinion exists! We need to be armed with a tool to evaluate what we hear, so that we may protect our own hearts and minds, and those of the believers who are in our sphere of responsibility. What follows is an outline of such a tool, and an application of it to a passage with its own history of interpretive controversy, Romans 7:14-25.

A Rubric for Weighing the Options

All homemade tools will have their flaws, and this suggested outline has at least two: first, it is more comprehensive than most laypeople will need it to be; and second, it is less thorough than it could be! There are always more questions that one could ask. (For those who wish to dig deeper, I have suggested some helpful reading material in the text and notes.)

Additionally, the evaluative process I am describing here is something distinct from the task of beginning with a biblical text and ending with an interpretation. The latter is a discipline that all believers do well to learn to practice responsibly; our present concern, though, has to
do with judging other people’s interpretations (though evaluating our own conclusions with this rubric would also be profitable).

I have divided this rubric into three main sections, with a series of questions under each. Though I recommend beginning with the first set, different situations will suggest different starting points. It will not always be necessary to ask every question listed here, or in the order listed; if a question early on eliminates someone’s interpretation from the running for you, then you’re done.

1. **Consider the Source.**

   - **“What theological umbrella is this person holding?”**
     
     Knowing the distinctive systems and their closest relatives – and not just those of the Reformed expression of the faith – can save us a lot of time and grief when evaluating interpretive options. For example, if I recognize the concept of a “second blessing” of the Holy Spirit in an author’s writing, I will realize that he or she has probably been influenced by Higher Life and Holiness/Pentecostal teaching, and I may well opt to close the book. (These Christian movements feature teaching on sanctification and the Holy Spirit that contradicts the biblical witness and places heavy burdens on believers.)

     Sometimes a person’s theological stance will influence part but not all of his or her teaching; sometimes it is pervasive and unavoidable, and also truly incompatible with the greater biblical message. To be sure, we can learn much from believers who do not stand under the Reformed umbrella; but as our time for study is precious, we can also afford to be discriminating when we identify a particularly flawed set of teachings.

     It is interesting to note that in the current “non-denominational” climate of North American evangelicalism, publishers often make it very difficult to find out an author’s church affiliation. Identifying the influence of recognizable sets of theological beliefs now mainly depends on spotting key words, phrases, or concepts, rather than overtly named denominations. An excellent basic resource for the Reformed Christian to have on hand for this task is Alan Cairns’ *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Ambassador-Emerald International, 2002). Cairns is a Presbyterian with a knack for summarizing entire systems of thought in dense bites.

   - **“Does this source have any particular product or agenda to peddle, or is teaching the Word of God the main concern of the work?”**
Sincerity deserves to be taken seriously and investigated according to the next tier of our evaluative rubric; registered trademarks, extensive quotes from an author’s own previous work, and highly publicized product lines should have us demanding quality content early on before we will give the teaching the time of day.

2. **Consider the Text and its Context.**

The questions in this section are arranged so that they cover elements of biblical data from smaller to larger. Just as a metalsmith tests the soundness of an object by striking it with a hammer at various spots to see if it rings true, we, too, can test the soundness of an interpretation by investigating an orderly array of details available to us from the biblical text in question. Teaching that passes these tests shows itself to be sound and worthy of our attention and respect. Teaching that is significantly weak regarding one or more of the smaller details might still be compelling and insightful, but we should hesitate to lean on it too heavily.

- **Original Language (A): “Can you do that with these words?”**
  
  When considering a portion of teaching, such as a sermon or a chapter in a book, a simple first evaluative step is to double check the original meanings of the words in the translation being used by the interpreter. Extensive personal knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is not necessary for laypeople to accomplish this, since we have the option of leaning on commentators whom we trust. Armed with our question, we do a little investigative digging regarding vocabulary, to determine whether the claims being made about these words can be sustained.

  Alternately, we might be able to flag potential trouble spots in an interpretation simply by noting a teacher’s translation choices. Rick Warren, for example, takes pride in pointing out the large number of Bible versions he has quoted in his well-known *Purpose Driven Life.* However, more than half of the selections he uses are taken from paraphrases and contemporary English versions, rather than translations that keep close to the original language; and some of his references are quoted from versions that just happen to use the English words he wishes to emphasize to make an interpretive point. Such details should alert us to the possibility of a disconnect existing between the texts in question and the author’s attempted interpretations.

- **Original Language (B): “Is that the way the words go?”**
Another basic starting point for evaluating an interpretation is to investigate original grammatical structure, including elements such as pronouns, verbs, prepositions, agreement (e.g., gender and number), and grammatical categories (e.g., indicatives and imperatives). We will probably need to lean on commentaries to tell us (for starters) about the tenses of verbs and whether “you” is in its plural or singular form. (This task need not be as technically involved as it sounds; we simply want to be sure that the biblical text is being given fair treatment.)

Again, a comparison of English versions can sometimes suffice to expose a teacher’s interpretive choice. For instance, Eugene Peterson’s popular paraphrase, The Message, gives this reading of Ephesians 2:10:

“He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, \textit{work we had better be doing.}”\textsuperscript{8}

The stern, imperative thrust of that last phrase should startle those who have worked with Ephesians in any close translation that faithfully preserves the fact that Paul used no general imperatives until chapter four!

\textbf{Immediate Context:} \textit{“Is this what is being talked about here?”}

There is always a temptation to build whole sermons, chapters, or lessons on verses that seem to support a theme because they use the right vocabulary words or phrases. When this occurs, an interpretation might indeed express part of God’s truth – just not the part the verses in question represented! A closer look at the context around these verses may reveal that the interpreter was not as careful an exegete as he or she might have been.

For example, the exhortation to Christians in general to “take care how you build,” with the application that we should invest our time and resources primarily in evangelistic endeavors because these will produce results that will survive the fires of judgment, ignores the context of 1 Corinthians 3 where these images are used. Paul is speaking here of the particular responsibility of \textit{preachers} to represent the Gospel fully and correctly, building on Paul’s Spirit-inspired teaching. It is the faithfulness of the words (and perhaps attitudes) used to convey the gospel that is under scrutiny here, not the Christian’s life choices more generally.

\textbf{Whole-Book Context:} \textit{“Does the interpretation fit with the overall message or genre of this book?”}

In some cases, the teaching we receive may reflect misguided assumptions about the purpose of a biblical book or section. In the ancient and medieval church, it was
common practice to read historical narratives figuratively, as allegories; nowadays it seems just as common to read figurative passages literally and historical narratives prescriptively. (Did Jonah really hit the floor of the Mediterranean, as his prayer suggests [Jon. 2:6], or is this an example of Hebrew hyperbole? Did David fight Goliath just so that underdogs can be inspired to do likewise?)

In other cases, lifting a biblical passage out of its context in order to make it the subject of a sermon or essay can open the door to messages that contradict the burden of the whole book or letter. By the time we reach Ephesians 6, for example, we ought to be thoroughly assured that everything good we have comes from God alone; but I am familiar with Christian educational material that teaches children that “the armor of God” is something they create by their own efforts. (“The belt of truth means telling the truth!”; “The breastplate of righteousness means doing what is right!”; etc.)

There is no substitute here for knowing the Bible well ourselves, so that the parts of a book hold together in our minds as an integrated whole. Then recognizing out-of-context teaching will be as natural as correcting someone’s false information about one of our closest friends.

For an excellent primer or review of biblical genres, pay attention to Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Zondervan, 2003).

- **Canonical Context:** *“Does the interpretation fit into the overarching story of God’s redemption?”*

  Very few Christians outside Reformed circles seem to operate with an integrated sense of the canon of Scripture. Instead, in their teaching Old and New Testament narratives are presented merely as moral examples, isolated instances of heroes who overcame with a little help from God, or villains who got what they deserved. The emphasis on the human actors in the stories translates into application that is likewise centered on human efforts and attitudes. According to these interpretations, the God of grace has mainly a supporting role in past and present. While his character may be recognizable in these scenes, his sovereign plan to sum up even these things in Christ is absent.

  If we limit our diet to moralistic interpretations, we are likely only to reinforce our naturally self-centered perspective. Jesus will be to us just one more exemplary actor on the stage of Scripture, not the One through whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together, the Vine in whom we must abide. Divorced from the comprehensive story begun in Genesis 1 and completed in Revelation 22, Christ
becomes instead a figure to be molded according to anyone’s preferences, from Black pride to white “milquetoast.”

3. **Consider the Big Picture.**

- **Letting Scripture interpret Scripture:** “Is the interpretation consistent with the rest of the biblical data?”

  Again, we may need to depend on wiser heads than our own when it comes to weighing a seemingly reasonable interpretation against the entire biblical witness. Confessional churches are at an advantage here, as they are equipped with historic summaries and catechisms designed to walk believers through the facets of sound biblical theology. Such a resource may help identify the better or weaker elements of the teaching we are evaluating. Two other accessible theological introductions are described in the notes.

  While we are in the early stages of gaining a whole-Bible perspective for ourselves, commentaries on particular books will be especially useful for attaining a big-picture view of the text that interests us. It is helpful to enter these commentaries with at least the awareness of two major strains of Protestant thought in mind, that is, Calvinism (or Reformed theology) and Arminianism, for these commitments will guide a writer’s emphases. Thoughtful commentators will present a sketch of interpretive options and carefully explain the merits and demerits of each, including the ones they favor; less dependable writers will often present and defend only their favorite ideas.

- **Wider Implications:** “If we follow this interpretation to its logical conclusions, do we arrive where the Scriptures intend us to go?”

  We should not neglect to follow the trajectory of an argument and assess its logical conclusions in light of the entire biblical witness. If all the other elements of the rubric are satisfied, it may be that the implications of an idea will tip the balance for us regarding the interpretation in question.

  It should be noted that sometimes it is difficult-to-impossible to judge between differing interpretations made by like-minded teachers. If the different interpretations can all be true at the same time, we may simply be seeing the same truth from multiple perspectives (after all, there are four Gospels!). But if two interpretations are mutually exclusive, as we shall observe in our final section, we shall either need to come down in favor of one, however tentatively; or refrain from making a judgment call in the hopes of encountering further data, better arguments, or the second coming of the One who judges all things flawlessly.
In what follows, we will briefly examine three interpretations of Romans 7:14-25, using questions from our rubric.

“Do Christians Still Struggle with Sin?” – Evaluating Interpretations of Romans 7:14-25

Perhaps the reason we find this passage in Romans so compelling is that it is a rare New Testament example of emotional soul-searching intermingled with theological data. Writing in the first person and in the present tense, Paul expresses frustration, desires, bewilderment, and dismay even as he spells out the spiritual realities behind these experiences. As literature, this passage is as moving as a Psalm; as theology, it is sobering.

Over the centuries, these verses have sparked impassioned disagreements over one main question: *Who is this wretched man? Is he a believer or an unbeliever?* Here I will briefly sketch three possible answers to this question, and then we will address them according to the evaluative rubric we have been considering. (As our purpose here is by way of illustration, I will not attempt to treat all the nuances and variations of these arguments.)

1. **Pre-Converted Paul (Take One):** *Paul is describing himself before conversion, because Christians do not struggle with sin in this way.* Behind this argument lies the assumption that believers, who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, are enabled to – and should usually expect to – have victory over temptation and sin. On this view, such a wretched struggle as Paul describes here is completely uncharacteristic of the Christian life. That the unsaved subject of the passage can “delight in the law” and consider it “good” indicates the stirrings of the Holy Spirit in a person’s mind prior to conversion.

2. **Converted Paul:** *Paul is describing himself as a believer who must continue a difficult struggle against sin.* Not only is Paul’s description an accurate and painfully familiar portrayal of the believer’s lived experience with the weakness of the flesh, but his use of the present tense precludes any argument to the contrary. Additionally, proponents of this view deny that an unbeliever could correctly be said to “delight in God’s law,” as the subject of Paul’s paragraph claims to do.

3. **Pre-Converted Paul (Take Two):** *Paul is describing himself prior to conversion, because this makes the most literary sense.* Without denying that Christians must struggle against sin and so may resonate with this passage for that reason, this argument suggests that the literary structure of Romans follows a certain trajectory, into which this passage fits on a logical continuum. In Chapter 5, Paul describes how
we are set free from death; Chapter 6 details our release from bondage to sin; and Chapter 7, including this final passage, treats our release from the demands of the law. These three themes then culminate in the joyful news announced in Chapter 8. While avoiding the language of “complete victory” over sin, this interpretation also preserves the force of the idea, found in Chapter 6, that the believer has a new ability to do what is right. As to “delighting in God’s law,” a pious Jew, like Paul the Pharisee, can be said in common speech to do so, even if (theologically speaking) he is an unregenerate rebel.

To illustrate the application of our evaluative rubric, I will group these three interpretations together for comparison, and we will consider only a select number of relevant questions from our list.

1. **Consider the Source: Theological Umbrellas**

   It is no surprise that many of my Methodist friends are at home with Interpretation #1, while my Reformed friends are accustomed to hearing Interpretation #2. Of the three options we are considering, these two have the longest pedigree, with strong support from James Arminius and John Wesley on the side of the first, and Augustine, Calvin and Luther defending the second.

   Contemporary teachers of Interpretation #1 include Methodists, Anabaptists, and others whose theology stresses that “grace brings a new life in Christ and victory, resulting in a life of holiness and obedience...The idea that the Christian is powerless and does ‘the very thing [he] hates’ is contrary to Christ’s call for repentance, discipleship, and holy living.”¹⁴ Many of John Wesley’s theological descendants (i.e., the various “Pietists”) have emphasized the possibility of living in spiritual victory, free of known sin, to the extent that the Christian who struggles with continuing sin is chastised for lack of faith. Reformed thinkers identify this kind of teaching as “triumphalistic,” meaning that it is an unjustified claim to possess *now* the complete “triumph” over sin that the believer will one day inherit when God makes all things new.

   Contemporary teachers of Interpretation #2 include most Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed evangelicals. Their theology embraces ideas such as the “Already – Not Yet” character of living as sinners saved by grace in a fallen world. Luther’s phrase, *simul iustus et peccator* (“at once saint and sinner”), captures the understanding that justified believers must still wage war against sin as a “concrete, dynamic reality within themselves.”¹⁵
Interpretation #3 is the contribution of a contemporary evangelical Lutheran scholar, Dr. Doug Moo. At home with Luther’s conclusions about the ongoing reality of the struggle with sin, Moo nevertheless argues for a contextual reading of Romans 7:14-25 that results in a different (and ultimately more hopeful) interpretation of the passage than that of most of his colleagues.16

2. **Consider the Text and Its Context: Present Tense and Spiritual Realities**

   Any interpreter who argues for evidence of a pre-conversion experience in this passage must deal with the fact that Paul writes of this struggle in the present tense. In an appendix to his book *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, J. I. Packer presents a daunting grammatical refutation of the claim that the present tense could indicate anything other than Paul’s personal experience at the time of writing. According to Packer, the shift to the present tense at 7:14 from the past tense of the previous paragraph must indicate a similar shift of focus from Paul’s past to his present experience; otherwise Paul is vulnerable to the charge of “wantonly obscuring his own meaning, and laying himself open to needless misunderstanding, by a change of tense for which there was no reason at all.”17

   In defense of Interpretation #1, commentators have suggested that Paul’s use of the present tense is a literary device meant to convey immediacy or vividness, or that it should be considered an example of “historical present” or a “flashback” scene.18 For his part, in his more scholarly commentary, Doug Moo does little more than note the fact of the present tense in this section;19 considering the source – Moo is a satisfyingly thorough scholar, as a glance at any of the thousand pages of this commentary will attest – it is possible that he judged this detail less important than the many others he wished to unpack. In a shorter commentary for laypeople, however, Moo notes simply that the present tense “is much better suited to this depiction of a regular state of affairs.”20

   Paul’s use of the present tense may pose a challenge to those who understand him to be depicting his pre-conversion past. On the other hand, those who wish to defend the point of view that this passage captures Paul’s experience as a believer must address some significant issues regarding context. For example, both the defenders of Interpretation #1 and Doug Moo point out that Paul returns to the metaphor of slavery to sin in Romans 7:14, 23, and 25, although he has just declared the believer definitively free from this bondage in Chapter 6 (vv.2, 6, 11, 18, 22). The “triumphalistic” conclusions of some interpreters aside, there is clearly an understanding given in Chapter 6 that it is now at least possible for the believer not
to sin (vv. 12-14) – a possibility that seems to be denied in this final section of Chapter 7, if indeed Paul is speaking these words as a Christian.

The arguments in defense of Interpretation #2, regarding this issue of the believer’s inner “spiritual reality,” are somewhat complex. On the one hand, commentators stress in dire terms the bleak situation of the Christian, who must live “under the constant necessity of breaking the law and doing what in effect is evil,” until released by physical death. Indwelling sin is described as a conquering power “from which [the believer] cannot emancipate himself.” The inability to do what is right, or bondage to sin, is thus truly characteristic of the Christian life, as every believer’s experience attests. (As one theologian puts it, Paul’s description “entirely suits the Christian, and in not one solitary feature does it wear the feeblest semblance of any other character.”)

However, these commentators also hasten to deny that the passage teaches that believers never succeed in performing the good. Rather, Paul is understood to be agonizing over his inability to “be perfectly conformed in heart and life to the image of God.” In a limited fashion, then – whenever, that is, the believer relies on the Spirit rather than the flesh – the Christian can live up to the high ideals already present in his renewed mind, and have victory over sin. Despite these qualifiers, it is undeniable that Interpretation #2 presents a view of the Christian life that is uncomfortably dark.

3. **Consider the Big Picture: Implications and Judgment Calls**

By this time, many of us will sympathize with the commentator who wrote resignedly of this passage, “We can do no more than present the general arguments for each position and choose the most reasonable path – which in this instance is the least unsatisfactory path – over the terrain.” Our review of the data has left us with this information so far:

**Interpretation #1:** The weakest choice, because of a tendency toward triumphalistic assertions. (That believers normally struggle with sin is evident simply from the fact that Paul’s letters continually exhort Christians to leave off sinning and pursue righteousness.)

**Interpretation #2:** Accounts for the present tense, but may not satisfy everyone regarding context (i.e., the spiritual reality of the believer’s ability to do what is right, as described in Chapter 6). Usually includes a strong emphasis on Christian experience for validation.
Interpretation #3: Suggestive reasoning regarding literary structure; preserves the positives of Chapter 6 without triumphalism; may not satisfactorily address Paul’s use of present tense.

Of the three, the latter two options offer the most promising choices to Reformed readers—though of course they are mutually exclusive. Interpretation #2 speaks with the weight of historical scholarship in its voice; but Doug Moo’s own fine scholarly work, as well as his theological commitments, give him a firm platform on which to stand while attempting to challenge the established opinion of centuries. As contemporary theologians interact with Moo’s reading of Romans 7:14-25, we may see reactions like that of the venerable John Stott, who calls Moo’s ideas “eloquent” but ultimately unsatisfactory; or we may hear dismissals of the sort expressed by one reviewer, who liberally praised Moo’s commentary on Romans but dubbed this area of his argument “wrongheaded.” Or perhaps we will gradually notice others under the Reformed umbrella who begin to affirm and defend his point of view.

In the end, the implications of Moo’s interpretation may tip the balance, one way or another, for those who become familiar with it. Is it safe to delight in Paul’s announcement that we are free from our bondage to sin, and now may, with Christ’s help, gladly (if imperfectly) “present [ourselves] to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and [our] members to God as instruments for righteousness” (6:13b, ESV)? Wouldn’t this sort of thinking merely reinforce our flighty tendency to forget about indwelling sin and make light of it? Wouldn’t an emphasis on our new ability to “bear fruit for God” (7:4) inevitably result in triumphalistic teaching about victory over sin?

There is something to be said for considering ourselves soberly. But is it being said in Romans 7? Our evaluative rubric alone cannot answer this satisfactorily; but hopefully the application of our tool to this challenging passage has illustrated how such a rubric can help us weigh and compare differing opinions in a reasonable way.

Some Concluding Reflections

One inherent danger of concentrating on the necessary tasks of practical instruction in the church is the temptation to compartmentalize “best practice” apart from a relationship with the Living God. Here we may be tempted to forget that Bible reading for the Christian is one part of a conversation with our Lord. No list of practical suggestions can substitute for this
relationship, and no amount of competence in the tasks of reading and analyzing can make us godly scholars. Indeed, according to Scripture itself, our ability to understand the meaning of the text at all depends on our spiritual location in Christ (1 Cor. 2:12-15). Certainly the humility required for gaining further understanding is found only in the context of our gratitude to him for saving us. Thus we must read the Bible in conscious, grateful dependence on the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, the Holy Spirit will not flex our muscles of discernment for us any more than he will lift the hammer we’re supposed to be wielding in a ministry of mercy. Following on the relational principle suggested in Romans 12:18, there really are some things that “depend on us” in this walk. It is a daunting but ultimately delightful task to get to know the Bible well; it is a useful thing to be well-versed in church history and theological distinctives. Gaining this knowledge demands effort and attention; growing in this knowledge makes us better able to “test everything” and “hold on to what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21) – surely a worthy goal for any Christian’s life, and ultimately a powerful blessing for the church.

Let us labor, then, in the peaceful seasons, to grow in this kind of useful knowledge. Far from being merely an intellectual pastime, it is a necessary work that will strengthen the church during seasons of strife, when it will be more important than ever to test all things and hold fast to what is God’s.

*Soli Deo Gloria.*

Paige Britton earned a BA in English from Haverford College (PA). She attends Faith Reformed Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Quarryville, PA, with her husband and two children.

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3 Commentaries written for laypeople, such as InterVarsity Press’s series, *The Bible Speaks Today, or* Zondervan’s *NIV Application Commentary* series, do not devote much time to the ins and outs of Greek or Hebrew vocabulary and grammar. However, where there has historically been a significant question about the original languages, these commentaries will usually make mention of it. Zondervan’s *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* series offers more information on original vocabulary, usage, and translation issues, while still providing a readable commentary suitable for laypeople. Online resources such as [www.blueletterbible.com](http://www.blueletterbible.com) do provide a variety of English language study materials in a convenient, free venue, but their commentary offerings are limited. More challenging commentaries may be available from the libraries of pastors, churches, and seminaries. Calvin College provides a website with access to hundreds of classic commentators at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).
6 For example, as his key verse for a section on “How to Restore a Relationship,” Warren uses 2 Cor. 5:18 from The Message: “God has called us to settle our relationships with each other” (Warren, p.154; italics in the original). In the ESV the same phrase reads “gave us the ministry of reconciliation,” which in context has to do with the reconciliation of human beings to their Creator, not quarreling Christians with one another.

7 English speakers are at a seeming advantage here, with our proliferation of versions. But it is likely that many of our international brethren have the greater advantage of being able to read in multiple languages, including languages more highly inflected than English.


9 Granted, Paul does teach in 1 Cor. 10:11 that OT narratives were written down “as examples,” but his point in context has to do with the Israelites’ negative example of apostasy, which we should not imitate. This is a shade different from teaching that assumes that we may, for example, “put out a fleece” like Gideon because this is a biblical example of finding out God’s will. Certainly the moral character of OT figures can also be exemplary in a positive way, and there is nothing wrong with holding these up to our view, so long as the canonical context of the figures is not habitually ignored.

10 African American theology has offered interpretations of Christ that include the political liberator and the Black baby Jesus. As attractive as the latter image is intended to be for inclusiveness and acceptance, it sadly ignores the good news of a particular baby, born into a storyline that was planned by God before the creation of the world, whose life, death, and resurrection open out into the redemption of “every nation, tribe and tongue.” On the other hand, religious sentimentalism, characteristic of many white congregations, has “very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him ‘meek and mild,’ and recommended Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies,” to quote Dorothy Sayers (Creed or Chaos?, Sophia Institute Press, 1999 edition, p.9). See also the fascinating results of Thabiti Anyabwile’s careful research in The Decline of African American Theology (InterVarsity Press, 2007).

11 An approachable introduction to the Reformed expression of the faith is J. I. Packer’s Concise Theology (Tyndale House, 1993). Theological topics are presented in manageable portions and explained clearly, with a minimum of academic rhetoric. Less linearly arranged, but at least as considerate of the newcomer, is John Frame’s introduction to systematic theology, Salvation Belongs to the Lord (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006). It should almost go without saying that God has given the church pastors and teachers who can address some of our questions in person, too!

12 Among the defenders of this point of view are those who disagree that the unbelieving subject of the paragraph actually is Paul. These commentators (including James Arminius and his theological descendant, John Wesley) argue that Paul is taking on a rhetorical “persona” to make his point. For the sake of simplicity, we will limit our summary to the argument that this is Paul recalling his pre-Christian experience.

13 Note that this argument introduces the evaluative element of human experience, which was not included in the rubric we have been considering. It is, however, one part of a fourfold rubric sometimes known as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” which lists Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience as our guides for understanding God’s Word. “Reason” enters our present rubric in the tasks of researching, comparing, considering implications, and evaluating. “Tradition” is involved whenever we lean on those who have done this work before us (e.g., formal Confessions and commentaries). Scholars differ in their willingness to acknowledge or make use of “Experience” in their arguments, as it is all too easy to slip into subjectivism. Used cautiously, however, the information gathered from the collective experience of believers over time can provide interpreters with the checks and balances of lived reality.


15 J. I. Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 221.


17 Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit, p.224.

Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p.424, 446, 451. The sole explanatory note given by Moo for the shift in tenses is the suggestion that “Paul first narrates past events [the law coming to the Jews at Sinai, represented in 7:7-13], then depicts the continuing status of those who were involved in those events [i.e., Paul’s experience as a Jew under the Mosaic law]” (451).


Hodge, p.141 (emphasis added).


“If possible, *so far as it depends on you*, live peaceably with all,” ESV, emphasis added.