

How is the Old Testament Law “Weak”?

Richard E. Averbeck
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield IL
mraverbec@tiu.edu

Abstract: The Old Testament law is holy, righteous, good, and spiritual (Rom 7:12, 14), but it is also weak because it cannot work in a human heart to make a person spiritual (Rom 7:14 with 8:3). No law can change a human heart, not even God’s law. The tenth commandment is an example (Rom 7:7–8): The command not to covet cannot stop the sinful human heart from coveting, but incites it to covet all the more. We remain all tangled up in our sin as long as we continue to depend on the human law for strength (Rom 7:14–25). But God has set us free from that enslavement to sin through the work of Christ (Rom 8:1), and enables us to live free in Christ by the power of the work of the Holy Spirit in our human spirit (Rom 8:4–16). We can live now by the Spirit who works a “spirit of adoption” rather than a spirit of slavery within us. The spirit of adoption works God’s love deeply within us so that we become more and more convinced of it and live out of the knowledge that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.

Keywords: law, weak, Spirit, spirit, adoption, the love of God

Introduction

The issue of the Old Testament law in the life of the church and the individual believer is one of the great problems of the church age. Some think it is the greatest of them all! The first church council referred to in Acts 15 was about this very topic: “Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:5, NIV).¹ Essentially, the question was whether or not the Gentiles who trusted in Christ needed to live out their Christian life as if they were Jews. How do we navigate this issue and the biblical approach to handling it? My work on this complex topic took a certain turn some twenty-five years ago and is now published, in a book on the Old Testament law for the life of the church (Averbeck 2022).

As the Apostle Paul put it in Romans 7, the law is holy, righteous, good, and even spiritual, present tense (Rom 7:12–14); but it is also weak and powerless according to Romans 8 (Rom 8:2). It was good in the Old Testament era. It was still good in the first century. It is still good today. If we are going to understand what to do with Old Testament law in the church and the Christian life today, we must hold firmly to its goodness. That being said, the Mosaic law, as good as it always was and still is, it always was and still is also “weak” (Rom 8:3). It has limitations. This does not make the law any less good, righteous, holy, and spiritual, but we are required to also consider what it cannot do. How is the law weak? What are its limitations? Unfortunately, in my experience, I have found that the tendency is to hold tightly to either its goodness or its weakness with the right hand, but let go of the same with the left hand, so to speak.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, this essay will cite biblical passages from the New International Version 2011 (NIV).

There is also a third guiding principle: the law is a unified whole. The unity of the Old Testament law became clear to me while working on the ritual sacrificial regulations in Exodus through Deuteronomy, especially Leviticus.² I was accustomed to hearing that the regulations in the Old Testament law could be divided into three parts – moral, civil, and ceremonial – and that the moral law applies to the church and the Christian life, but the civil and especially the ceremonial law do not apply any longer. Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial law for us, which, of course, is true. However, Jesus fulfilled the moral and civil law for us too, so that the law cannot condemn us. Does that mean the moral law does not apply to us either?

Without going into all the details, it became clear to me that the New Testament writers were also using the so-called “ceremonial” law to teach the church and the believer how to think and live as Christians. The church is the temple of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Eph 2:19–22; 3:14–21). Like Jesus, believers are stones being built into a spiritual house as priests who offer up spiritual sacrifices to God that are acceptable to God because we are in Christ (1 Pet 2:4–5). In fact, we are called to offer our very bodies as sacrifices that are acceptable to God (Rom 12:1). Jesus made himself a sacrifice for us. If we are going to be like him, we need to make ourselves sacrifices too. Many more references pointing in the same direction could be added from numerous New Testament passages.

I concluded that dividing the Old Testament law into the so-called moral, civil, and ceremonial categories does not work in the Old Testament and using that as a way to decide what applies and what does not in the New Testament does not work in the New Testament either. The question is not *whether* this or that law applies to the church and the believer, but *how* it applies. Some of it applies literally, some analogically or from a certain perspective, but it all applies meaningfully with applications and implications for the Christian life. It is all “written on the heart” (Jer 31:33).

The shift from the Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant causes transformations of the law for its application in the church because of the shift in the identity and circumstances of God’s kingdom people, and progress in his redemptive program. The church now includes Jew and Gentile without any divide between the two. Jesus has died on the cross, and the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. Israel was a nation in the Old Testament, but the church is not a nation. Instead, it is spread out in redemptive communities all across the globe. These and other factors influence how the Old Testament law comes through into the New Testament. In other words, adjustments are made along the lines of the shift from the Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant.

The regulations of the law changed already within the Old Testament, and even within the Torah itself, because of shifts in the circumstances of the people of God historically. For example, in Leviticus 17, while the Israelites were traveling together with the tabernacle to the promised land and during the wilderness wanderings, if a person wanted to eat a lamb from their flock they needed to bring the animal to the tabernacle to have it sacrificed there and have the blood and fat offered up on the altar (Lev 17:1–4). As Deuteronomy 12 tells us, however, when they conquered the promised land and occupied it, this would not be possible because too many of them would be living too far from the central sanctuary (Deut 12:15–16). Therefore, they could slaughter the animal and pour the blood

² See my essays on levitical terminology in VanGemeren (1997).

out on the ground where they lived. This is referred to as “profane slaughter”. Other such adjustments were also made to the law in Old Testament times.³

When the Lord spoke in anticipation of the New Covenant through Jeremiah the prophet, he announced that “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (Jer 31:33). The Lord is referring to the law that Jeremiah had been preaching throughout his ministry, the Old Testament Mosaic Covenant law. In Jer 6:16 we read: “This is what the LORD says: ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’” Jesus quoted from this passage in Matt 11:28–30 when he invited “all who are weary and burdened” to come to him so that he could give them “rest”; that is, “rest for” their “souls.” His yoke would be easy and his burden light because he is “gentle and humble in heart” toward those who come to him.⁴

In Acts 15:10 when he weighed in on the question of the imposition of the law on gentile believers (v. 5), Peter said, “why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?” The “yoke” here is the heaviness of the law as the Jewish teachers of the law and the Pharisees taught it (see Matt 23:2–4; Bruce 1954, 309). Jesus was offering a yoke of law that was easy and light. Other New Testament passages refer to it as “the law of Christ” (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2; cf. Jas 2:8). Basically, the law of Christ is the way Jesus has mediated the Old Testament law to those who come to him for rest. He does not want to load us down. He wants to lighten us up!

The Law in Romans 7

It is the weakness of the legal stipulations by themselves, without the heart of faith empowered by the Holy Spirit that Paul emphasizes in Romans 6–8. The passage begins with three images: baptism, slavery, and marriage. Our baptism makes us dead to sin and alive to Christ (Rom 6:1–14). We are therefore no longer slaves to sin but to righteousness (vv. 15–23). We are no longer bound to the law as in marriage, but have died so that we are free (Rom 7:1–6). Paul goes on to say that the law was and is absolutely good, but it is just as absolutely weak because it cannot motivate godly living. Instead, it incites sinful passions in the lives of corrupt people (Rom 7:7–13).

Interestingly, Paul uses the tenth commandment “You shall not covet” (v. 7) to help explain what he is getting at. Not even the Ten Commandments are “strong”. They are just as weak as every other part of the Mosaic law. The tenth commandment is good and right, of course, not sinful, but the sinful flesh takes advantage of the law to produce all sorts of coveting (v. 8). So the law was intended for my good, to give me life, but it yields death instead: “For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death” (v. 11). The sequence

³ For example, according to Numbers 4, the Lord commanded that the three clans of the Levites should carry the tabernacle as they travelled through the wilderness. However, after the temple was built there would be no more carrying of the tabernacle, so David changed their duties to assisting the priests in the temple service, guarding the sanctuary, and praising the Lord through song in worship (1 Chr 23:24–32; 25:1–8).

⁴ For a full treatment of Matt 11:28–30 in its context, see Averbek (2018, 5–22).

here reminds one of the original fall into sin in Genesis 3: sin to deception to death. We keep on replaying the dynamics of the fall. We inherited it, yes, but we keep on replaying it in our own lives too. After repeating the point that the law is holy, righteous, and good (vv. 12–13), we arrive at the fact that the law is spiritual, but I am not: “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin” (v. 14).

At this point the Apostle Paul begins his explanation of how tangled up we are in our own sin-filled nature, our “flesh” (Gk. *sarx*; 7:18, 25; 8:3–9, 12–13). He states (vv. 15–18):

¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

The passage overflows with frustration.

There has been an ongoing debate among New Testament scholars about how to understand these verses.⁵ Some think it describes the experience of Paul and others in their unsaved condition, especially Jewish unbelievers. They want to follow the law, but end up frustrated, if they are honest about it. Other scholars take the view that this passage describes the experience of Paul and others as believers in Christ when they try to keep the law. Even when they try really hard they end up experiencing their own corruption. They cannot get past their “flesh”. There are also some compromising positions. For example, some have thought this was the experience of a person under conviction for sin but not yet a believer. They are on their way to faith, but not there yet.

The debate continues, but, in my view, there is a better way to come at the passage. The use of “I” here is a rhetorical way to draw everyone into the passage, whether they know Christ or not. All people are fallen, including Paul. He has been arguing about the way the law works by its very nature in the heart of fallen people. His argument continues in these verses. Paul is treating the law generically in terms of its inherent dynamic if one attempts to live rightly by means of it as their principle of life. That which is good (the law, 7:8–11, 13) becomes in the depraved human heart an occasion for the outworking of the dynamics of deception unto death (see v. 11). In other words, the law that is completely good and spiritual (7:12, 14a) is likewise completely weak and ineffective at making you and me spiritual (7:14b). This part of the argument ends in despair: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (v. 24).

The argument then turns in the opposite direction. There is indeed an escape from the tangled up mess that we are: “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (v. 25a). Yes, when I seek to live by the Mosaic law as if it has power as my principle of life, I am a tangled up mess, but “... there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ...” (Rom 8:1). Aside from reference to the Mosaic law (Rom 7:7–14, 22, 25; 8:3, 4, 7), there are at least three other “laws”, metaphorically speaking, that Paul is concerned with in Romans 7–8. First, there is the “law of sin

⁵ See the extensive and helpful review of the debate in Moo (2018, 466–475) who takes it to refer to unbelievers, and my own conclusion in Averbek (2022, 293–297).

(and death)” at work within me (Rom 7:23, 25; 8:3). The identity of this law is clear starting in 7:21, “So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.” Second, this law is made manifest in the “waging war” (v. 23) between it and the “law of my mind” (vv. 22–23), which wishes to live according to God’s law and is enslaved by it (v. 25b). Third, victory and “freedom” in this waging war between these two laws is gained only by switching to another principle of law altogether, namely: “the law of the Spirit who gives life” (8:2). Paul develops this “law” in Rom 8:2–17.

The major turning point in this section of Romans is 8:1: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” As Rom 7:14–25 describes it, our struggle with sin ties us into one big tangled up knot. One can feel this just reading the passage. Some readers of this essay may have heard the expression “cutting the Gordian knot”. It comes from a legend about Alexander the Great (300’s BCE). There was a town named Gordius in the hinterlands of Phrygia in west central Turkey named after its king, Gordius. In that region there was a widely known oracle associated with a cart that was bound to a yoke with a knot that no one could untie. The knot was tight and had no ends visible. It was called the “Gordian knot”. The oracle stated that whoever could untie it would become the emperor of the Asian world. Alexander came up to Gordius in a campaign and learned of the oracle. His response was to draw his sword and cut through the knot with one fell swoop. Alexander, therefore, became the conqueror and ruler of all Asia, and we have the expression “cutting the Gordian knot”, referring to one drastic action that accomplishes all that is needed.

This is what God did on a cosmic scale for all eternity when he sent his Son to die for us. As our sin offering, Jesus accomplished all we need to be right with the Father. As Rom 7:14–25 puts it, our lives are a tangled knot of sinful corruption. Romans 8:1 tells us that by one fell swoop God cut through the knot so that if we are in Christ we are under no condemnation as far as he is concerned. We can now move on in life, but along a different path. We do not go back to try to untangle the knot, which would only get us all tangled up in ourselves again. Instead we get on with life by the power of the work of the Holy Spirit in us. The Holy Spirit can do the very thing that the law cannot do; that is, the Spirit works within us to change our heart so that we live by the good, holy, righteous, and spiritual standards of God’s law.

Jesus as a Sin Offering

I have drawn the terminology for this discussion from Rom 8:3, “For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh (lit., ‘in which it was weak through the flesh’), God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh.” Romans 7:14 anticipates this: “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.” The real problem is with me and you, not the law. We are captured by our own slavery to sin, our “flesh” (v. 18, NIV “my sinful nature,” lit. “my flesh”). No law, not even God’s law, can change a human heart. Law just does not do that. The Mosaic law is a spiritual standard of life, but it has no power to make any of us spiritual. That requires the work of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit to push back against the sin-filled “flesh” that each of us has operating within us.

The writer of Hebrews says something similar, but in a different way. The Old Testament priesthood was Aaronic, but Jesus was a priest after the priestly order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:1–10 and 7:1–28). Since the priesthood changed, “The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God” (Heb 7:18–19). The Mosaic regulations for sin and sacrifice made nothing and no one perfect. Hebrews 9–10 explains the difference between those sacrifices and the better sacrifice of Christ.

We cannot go into all the details of this here. In brief, the blood of the Old Testament sacrifices cleansed the earthly tabernacle, while the sacrifice of Christ cleansed the tabernacle in heaven (Heb 9:11–12 and 21–24). The blood of the Old Testament sacrifices cleansed the people “outwardly” (lit. “cleansed the flesh”), whereas the blood of Jesus cleansed our “conscience” (vv. 13–14). The Old Testament priests had to offer the same sacrifices of the Day of Atonement over and over, every year, but Jesus offered himself as our sacrifice once and for all, and finally, at the consummation of the ages (vv. 25–28). On the one hand, the Old Testament sacrifices could not make anyone “perfect”, as can be seen from the fact that they had to keep on offering them (Heb 10:3; cf. 7:18–19 above). It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take sin away permanently (v. 4). On the other hand, those who trust in the bodily sacrifice of Christ have been made permanently holy (vv. 5–10).⁶

All this brings us back to Jesus as a “sin offering” in Rom 8:3. The atonement, cleansing, and forgiveness comparisons and contrasts between the Old Testament sin offerings and that of Jesus in Hebrews 9–10 are all based on the function of the “sin offering” in the tabernacle (and later the temple), through the year and on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 1–16). This is at the heart of the shift from the Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant. Yes, the Old Testament system of offerings has been set aside, but not because it was not a good system in its day. It was ordained by God and accomplished what God intended for the ancient Israelites at that earlier time; that is, if they followed the law given at Sinai they would live well as community in their ancient Near Eastern world. Moreover, based on analogies to that system, we can understand what Jesus did for us on an altogether higher level and once for all. We no longer need the repeated old sin offerings because Jesus took us beyond them by becoming a sin offering for us that applies once for all and forever.

The Old Testament sin offering regulations are not left behind, but taken further. It is not that we do not need a sin offering to make a way for us to draw near to God. We do! Jesus is it. His bodily sacrifice brought the old system to completion and set it aside because it could never make anyone perfect before God. Only Jesus as a sin offering could do that, and he did: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). Jesus came “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3), but without the sin, so that he could be a “sin offering” for us to redeem us from our own sin-filled flesh. In this way, “the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death” (v. 2). This “setting free” is the topic of Romans 6–8. It is the Holy Spirit who brings the sin offering of Jesus to bear powerfully in the lives of those who come to God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone.

⁶ For details see Averbeck (2022, 199–205), and Averbeck (1997, 101–103).

The Spirit in Romans 8

The point of all this is that we are captivated by our own depravity, and the Old Testament law, as good as it is, cannot deliver us from that (Rom 8:3). This is what Paul means by the weakness of the law. His point is that we can now get on with living our life by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit working a “spirit of adoption” in our human spirit, so that the righteous requirements of the law can be fully met in us (Rom 8:4–17). This requires further explanation.

Instead of messing with the tangled up knot at the end of Romans 7, God has called us to get on with walking by the Spirit. He condemned sin in the flesh, “in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (v. 4). There is an ongoing dispute over the meaning of “in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us.” Some scholars take this to mean that the meeting of the requirement of the law has been accomplished for us by what Jesus did as a sin offering.⁷ It is forensic. This is true, of course, theologically, but the verse goes on to talk about how we live as believers “who walk ... according to the Spirit” (ESV). This hardly suggests that the meeting of the requirements of the law is forensic or positional in this context. It is about how we live our lives in Christ by following the lead of the Holy Spirit.

The other view is that Jesus became a sin offering for us (v. 3) with the purpose of enabling our pursuit of the righteous requirements of the law in our lives as believers, by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit (vv. 4–17).⁸ Jesus as a sin offering comes into our life by faith, and along with that faith comes the baptism of the Holy Spirit who empowers our life in Christ (see, e.g., Acts 2:38; 1 Cor 12:12–14). If we walk by the Spirit, we will fulfill the law, as God intended that his people would do. The following verses support this interpretation. For example, according to v. 7, “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.” The corresponding opposite is that only the mind governed by the Spirit can submit to the law. This, of course, is in accordance with the New Covenant promise that God would put the law of Moses in the minds and write it on the hearts of believers (Jer 31:33).

In the previous paper (“The Two Great Commandments in Their Old Testament Context”), I suggested that the “law of Christ” is the way the Old Testament law is mediated to us in Christ. At the core of the law of Christ are the two great commandments, upon which the whole Old Testament law has always depended and according to which we can understand and apply the law to the church and the life of the believer. The New Covenant does not leave the Mosaic law behind. As God put it in his New Covenant word through Jeremiah, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jer 31:33). A different expression of a similar thought is found in Ezek 36:27–28: “... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees

⁷ See, e.g., Moo (2018, 505–508). See also Calvin (1947, 283, 286–288).

⁸ For this view, see Cranfield (1975, 382–385). See also the church fathers Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom, and Augustine; see the citations in Bray (1998, 205–206 and 208–209) on Rom 8:4, 7 (see also Dunn 1988, 440–443; Hodge 1886, 262–263; Jewett 2006, 485–488; Thielman 2018, 381–384).

and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.”

Paul brings these two passages together in 2 Cor 3:3–6: “... (3) You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, *written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God* (from Ezekiel) not on tablets of stone but *on tablets of human hearts* (from Jeremiah). ... (6) ... ministers of a *new covenant* (from Jeremiah) – not of the letter but *of the Spirit*; for *the letter kills*, but *the Spirit gives life* (from Ezekiel).” The “Spirit” is the Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:27), who writes the law “on tablets of human hearts” (Jer 31:33). In the New Covenant (Jer 31:33), the Spirit “gives life” to “the letter” of the law, which kills without the Spirit. As Ezekiel puts it, “... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek 36:27).

In summary, Romans 7 tells us how the law is good, righteous, holy, and spiritual, but it also explains how the law *kills*: “... in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my *death*, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful” (Rom 7:13). We are all tangled up in our own corruption. “Who will rescue me from the body of this *death*” (v. 24). The answer, of course, is Jesus, who died as a sin offering for us. “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). He has chopped through the tangled up knot that can only yield death. This is the “law of the Spirit of *life* in Christ Jesus” (v. 2).

The Holy Spirit of God who inspired the writing of the Old Testament law to begin with is the same Spirit who now works powerfully within us to bring it to bear in our lives. The law is weak, but the Spirit is powerful. In the hands of the Holy Spirit, therefore, the law does not kill, but, instead, becomes a guide to loving God and people well. This is how God intends that the Old Testament law continues into the life of the New Covenant believer. No law can change a human heart, not even God’s law, but this is exactly what the Holy Spirit has the power to do.

The Spirit of Adoption

This brings us to the crux of the matter. How does the Holy Spirit do this? The answer is Rom 8:16, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” The Holy Spirit works to make a major change in my human spirit. The previous verse (Rom 8:15) tells us that this change is from “a spirit of slavery” to “a spirit of adoption.” The English versions and scholars disagree on how to read v. 15, but it is not my purpose, and I do not have time here to go into the details.⁹ The NRSV’s rendering of v. 15 is, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption” (cf. also NASB). This is the change the Holy Spirit is working for in and with my human spirit.

There is debate among scholars about whether “testifies with” (Greek *summartureō*) in v. 16 means that the Holy Spirit and human spirit both together testify to our adoption as the children of God, or whether the point is the Holy Spirit testifies to and assures our human spirit that God has adopted us

⁹ For a complete discussion of the issues here see Averbeck (2024, 42–49).

as his children.¹⁰ Actually, both are true. When a person comes to Christ as his or her savior, she or he receives the Holy Spirit (see, for example, Acts 2:38–39 and 1 Cor 12:13). Within the person, the indwelling Holy Spirit works confidence in our human spirit from the start, and, furthermore, continues to convince and assure us of our adoption to God as his child from that point forward. Yes, as believers we are already convinced in our human spirit, and that conviction bears upon us as we go forward in life. The vicissitudes of life and our own temptations, weaknesses, and corruption, however, require the ongoing testifying work of the Holy Spirit in and with our human spirit, pushing us along in our walk with the Lord. Thus, we walk by the Spirit.

The term “adoption” (Greek *huiiothesia*) appears only five times in the New Testament, all in Paul’s writings (Rom 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5), and three of them concentrated here in Romans 8–9. The small number of occurrences and its limited distribution, however, could be misleading. Paul puts “adoption” first in his list of what the church has inherited from God’s work in and through Israel (Rom 9:4). It probably comes first in the list because he has focused on adoption in Romans 8, and wants to emphasize its foundational importance in God’s relationship with Israel in the Old Testament.¹¹

It is especially significant that immediately after the mention of the “spirit of adoption” in Rom 8:15, v. 16 brings the divine Holy Spirit together with the human spirit: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom 8:16). Why does Paul put the two together in this pivotal passage? In my view, the answer is that the human spirit is the most direct “point of contact”, so to speak, between God and the human person. First Corinthians 2:10b–12 draws out the correspondence between the divine Spirit of God and the human spirit of a person in a helpful way:

¹⁰ ... The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For who among men knows the thoughts (lit., “the things”) of a man except the man’s spirit (lit. “the spirit of the man”) within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts (lit., “the things”) of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us” (Greek *charizomai*, “given by grace”).

According to this passage, the “spirit” of the man knows the deep things of the man, that is, his inner thoughts, feelings, attitudes, etc. (v. 11a). Similarly, the “Spirit” of God knows the deep things of God (vv. 10b and 11b). Since believers in Jesus have received the Holy Spirit, we can understand

¹⁰ Cranfield (1975, 403 and n. 1) argues forcefully for the view that the Holy Spirit testifies to our human spirit in the sense that it assures us that we are the adopted children of God (v. 16). See also, e.g., Hodge (1886, 267) long before Cranfield, and others since. Fee (1994, 568–569) objects to Cranfield’s view and those who follow him. He takes it to mean the Holy Spirit and the human spirit testify together that believers are the adopted children of God. In the end, however, he admits that the “inner witness” of the Spirit results from this testifying (p. 569). This inner witness of the Holy Spirit in our human spirit was important in Luther’s understanding of the passage (Luther 1959, 234–235).

¹¹ Later in this essay we will come back to the lack of explicit references specifically to adoption in the Old Testament. Two very helpful exegetical and theological monographs devoted to adoption, written in the last twenty years, draw special attention to the importance of this motif in Paul, the relative lack of attention to it, and misunderstandings of it in Christian theology over the past several centuries: Burke 2006, 23–31; Garner 2016, xxi–8. Burke, for instance, suggests that “justification” has taken central stage in our theology so that “adoption” has been made subordinate to it. Burke and especially Garner argue that the adoption metaphor has been treated too narrowly.

“what God has freely given us” (v. 12); namely, what God has provided for us in our reception of the Gospel by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone (see the focus on the Gospel and the Spirit in vv. 1–10a).

Coming back now to Romans 8, it is through this direct contact that the Holy Spirit empowers the move from a human spirit of slavery to one of adoption. The Holy Spirit does this work in and with our human spirit amid all the struggles and contingencies of life in this fallen world. See the “groaning” in creation and in our spirit in vv. 18–27. The Holy Spirit works in us through it all, even groaning for us. The constant goal, according to the will of God the Father, is to conform us to the image of his Son, Jesus the Messiah, through all that happens in our lives (vv. 18–30). This is a Trinitarian work of God. All three persons of the Godhead are fully involved in this process in and among those who know Jesus as their savior.

At this point it is important to attend to the meaning of “spirit” and the importance of the human spirit here and elsewhere in the Bible. As is well known, the primary terms for “spirit” in the Hebrew Old Testament (*ruach*) and in the Greek New Testament (*pneuma*) can mean breathe, wind, or spirit. Jesus drew upon it at the point of his physical death on the cross when he said, according to Luke 23:46, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (*pneuma*),” which is an expression from Ps 31:5a, “Into your hands I commit my spirit (*ruach*).” Jesus was referring to his own human spirit. The parallel in Mark 15:37 puts it differently, retaining the close link between “breathe” and “spirit”: “With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last” (i.e., “breathed out, exhaled; expired”; Greek, *exepneusen*, related to *pneuma*, cf. John 19:30). We learn from Jas 2:26, “... the body without the spirit is dead ...” The human “spirit” is the person who remains alive when the body dies.¹²

The Old Testament uses “spirit” (*ruach*) for the human spirit about 120 times.¹³ Sometimes it refers to the vitality of life: “the spirit of their father Jacob revived” (i.e., “became alive”; Gen 45:27b), when he heard that Joseph his son was still alive. Contrast Josh 5:1, when the people of Canaan “heard how the LORD had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts melted in fear and they no longer had the courage (lit., ‘there was no longer *spirit* in them’) to face the Israelites.” Similarly, when the Queen of Sheba saw all of Solomon’s wisdom and his royal court, “she was overwhelmed”; literally “there was no longer breathe (or ‘spirit’ *ruach*) in her” (1 Kgs 10:5b).

Sometimes “spirit” (*ruach*) refers to moral or spiritual character: “My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my *spirit* longs for you” (Isa 26:9). Sometimes it refers to capacities of mind and will: “the skilled workers to whom I (God) have given wisdom” (lit. “a spirit of wisdom”; Exod 28:3). In other cases, it refers to a person’s disposition: for example, “if feelings (lit. ‘a spirit’) of jealousy come over her husband” (Num 5:14), and “their resentment (‘spirit’) against him subsided” (Judg

¹² I will not engage here with the discussion in biblical anthropology concerning the two, three, four, or more elements that make up the human person. James 2:26 refers to the body and the spirit of the person. In other places, the two parts appear as body and soul (e.g., Matt 10:28). Still other texts suggest perhaps three parts (spirit, soul, and body; e.g., 1 Thess 5:23), or four (body, heart, soul, and mind; Mark 12:30), or five, with variations. In my view, generally, the terms for the “immaterial” person do not refer to different “parts” of us, but take different angles of view on what we experience in our inner person: cognitive, affective, volitional, and more.

¹³ See the more extensive discussion in Averbeck (2008, 30–33).

8:3). Proverbs 16:18–19 tells us a “haughty (‘high’) spirit” comes before a fall, in contrast to being “lowly in spirit.” Proverbs 17:22 refers to a “crushed spirit,” and, according to Prov 14:29, “Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered (lit. ‘short of spirit’) displays folly.” Many more passages in both the Old and the New Testament could be cited and discussed, but this is enough for our purposes here.

In sum, the term “spirit” in the Bible when used for the human spirit refers to whatever is happening within the person. It can refer to anything we think or feel, our likes or dislikes, how we look at things, our view of events or people, whether of ourselves or others, our wisdom or foolishness, our state of being at any moment, whether gentle, fearful, powerful, perceptive, self-controlled, discouraged, in despair, or whatever. The main point here is that we have received the Holy Spirit within us; that is, within our human spirit. It is because of this that we can truly understand and take into our human spirit the reality of all that God has prepared for those who love him.

Like the wind, the Spirit of God is a powerful force, and it is especially so in the human spirit. As described above, God intends us to experience the full force of the Spirit in our lives, setting us free from corruption that is our “flesh” (Rom 8:15–16). The point of the direct contact between God and us is between God’s Spirit and our human spirit. This is where and how the core of God’s transforming work takes place in us.

The Song of the Spirit

Christians are first of all and above all, worshippers. Worship is about getting impressed with God: who he is, what he has done, and what he has done for us. The problem is that we are so often more impressed with the wrong things. What we are impressed with is what we live for. This is why worship of God can be such a powerful transforming practice in our lives, perhaps the most powerful. The “spirit of adoption” that the Holy Spirit is working into our hearts and lives is all about being so impressed with God’s love for me that I think, feel, decide, and live based on it. Moreover, worship in the spirit of adoption is about seeing God while looking life squarely in the face. It is about becoming more and more impressed with him amid the ongoing groanings in our lives (Rom 8:18–30). We do not leave this worship behind as we face our issues and concerns in daily life. The Psalms make this clear. They are songs that come out of all kinds of experiences in life and take us to God from there.

This is what the last section of Romans 8 focuses on. Basically, it is like a worship song to the love of God in Jesus our Messiah. This is the song God wants us to be singing in our human spirit. By the power of the Spirit testifying to our spirit (Rom 8:16) we can embody a “spirit of adoption”. The song begins with God the Father’s adoptive love to us: “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:31–32). God is not fickle. When he commits, he stays committed. It is just the way he is. When we come to faith in God’s Son, God devotes himself to us in eternal love as an adopted child.

The song continues with Jesus's commitment to us as the one who stands in the throne room of the Father, speaking up in our defense. "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Rom 8:33–34). The following verses elaborate on the love Jesus has for us: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ..." (Rom 8:35–36).

The song concludes with an elaborate declaration of our victory in Christ. No matter what is happening in our world and in our personal life, the spirit of adoption we are singing in our human spirit lifts us up. All sorts of troubles come at us from various directions, but can any of them undo or overcome God's love for us? The answer is, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:37–39). This is the end of the matter. This is the song the Holy Spirit is working to produce in our human spirit. The "spirit of adoption" gets us caught up in the fact that we really are the adopted children of God, and of all things, heirs to the very Kingdom of God (Rom 8:16–17).

Conclusion

The Gospel is always good news to every one of us because, in our fallen condition, amid our groaning, there are always ways and places within us that the Gospel has not yet touched and changed. We are still looking forward to glorification. We are not there yet, but we are assured of it (Rom 8:30). In the meantime, the Holy Spirit is constantly working to see that all the nooks and crannies of my human spirit get occupied with this "spirit". We worship God from here: there is absolutely nothing from anywhere or on any level in this entire cosmos that can separate us from the love of God. The more deeply and comprehensively we are convinced of this in our human spirit by the Holy Spirit, the more there is nothing left to do but go love God and people. Nothing else makes sense to me anymore! I lose track of the other things that tend to tangle me up in my own passions and the darkness and groaning of this world. The law is weak, but the Spirit is strong.

Bibliography

- Averbeck, Richard E. 2008. "Spirit, Community, and Mission: A Biblical Theology for Spiritual Formation". *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1 (1): 27–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/193979090800100104>.
- . 2018. "A Rest for the Soul". *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 11 (1): 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790918767991>.
- . 2022. *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in the Light of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- . 2024. "Spirit, Spirit of Adoption, and the Love of God". *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 17 (1): 36–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19397909241251586>.
- Bray, Gerald. 1998. *Romans*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament VI. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Bruce, F. F. 1954. *Commentary on the Book of Acts*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Burke, Trevor J. 2006. *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 22. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Calvin, John. 1947. *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. Translated and edited by John Owen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Cranfield, C. E. B. 1975. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. ICC. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Dunn, James D. G. 1988. *Romans 1–8*. WBC 38. Dallas, TX: Word Books.
- Fee, Gordon D. 1994. *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Garner, David B. 2016. *Sons in the Son; the Riches and Reach of Adoption in Christ*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.
- Hodge, Charles. 1886. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Jewett, Robert. 2006. *Romans: A Commentary*. Hermenia. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb9365f>.
- Luther, Martin. 1959. *Lectures on Romans*. The Library of Christian Classics. Volume XV. Newly translated and edited by Wilhelm Pauck. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster.
- Moo, Douglas J. 2018. *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT. Second edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Thielman, Frank. 2018. *Romans*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- VanGemeren, Willem A., editor. 1997. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 volumes. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.