

THE ORGANIC In Romans 8 LAW

by John Pester

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?”—so laments Paul in Romans 7:24, and so lament many Christians who have been stumbled by a theology that neatly divides all of Scripture into two principles—Law and Gospel—that are rooted in a view of God’s salvation that is singularly judicial in nature. Paul, however, unlike many seeking Christians, quickly advanced in his experience of the divine economy of God. Recognizing his utter inability to please and serve God in the flesh, Paul experienced the exhilarating liberation that has been made available to all Christians who have obtained access into this grace in which we stand. This liberation is rooted not only in our experience of an organic gospel that joins and unites us with the Triune God, as revealed in Galatians, but also in our experience of an organic law that is the living and moving of the Triune God throughout our entire being, as revealed in Romans 8.

Romans 8, in stark contrast to Romans 7, presents the proper pattern for our Christian living. It is in another realm, an organic realm, that is introduced by reference to the law of the Spirit of life that has freed us in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and of death (v. 2). This liberation is more than just judicial in nature.

Certainly, the righteous requirement of the law has been satisfied by the death of Christ, who has been “set forth as a propitiation place through faith in His blood, for the demonstrating of His righteousness” (3:25). And our faith, apart from works, has certainly positioned us so that God’s righteousness can be judicially accounted to us (4:6, 11). But the liberation that Paul speaks of and that Christians long for is almost wholly the issue of the operation of the organic law in Romans 8. It is organic because Paul indicates that

the righteous requirement of the law, rather than just being judicially satisfied once for all, is continually being fulfilled in us as we walk according to the Spirit in our spirit (8:4).

Without an organic view of the law in Romans 8, several aspects of the divine truth in this chapter are difficult to comprehend, much less experience. These aspects include: 1) Paul’s continuing focus on the law through the operation of the law of the Spirit of life, 2) Paul’s interchangeable use of terms for God, Christ, and the Spirit in verses 9 through 11, 3) Paul’s emphasis on the subjective operation of the organic law in the various parts of man, and ultimately 4) the connection that Paul draws between the organic operation of this law and the fulfillment of God’s purpose.

The Organic Law Being the Subject of Romans 8

Within the thirty-nine verses of Romans 8, Paul covers an exhaustive array of topics related to the economy of

God’s salvation, including Christ’s incarnation (v. 3), death (vv. 32, 34), resurrection (v. 34), ascension (v. 34), and indwelling (v. 10); the Spirit’s indwelling (vv. 9, 11), leading (v. 14), witnessing (v. 16), and interceding (v. 27); and the believer’s pre-

destination, conformation, and glorification (vv. 29-30). Within the last category alone, Paul speaks of the love of God in initiating and safeguarding the believer’s position in Christ (vv. 35-39), the operation of the Spirit in conforming our inward parts to Christ (vv. 6, 10-11), and the arrangement of our outward environment for the fulfillment of God’s purpose (v. 28). Given the broad range of topics in Paul’s discourse, it is difficult to identify the subject of Romans 8. Many suggest that the subject of

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Romans 8 is the Spirit in contrast to the law in Romans 7. While this suggestion certainly satisfies the neat dichotomy that is proposed by proponents of the Law-Gospel hermeneutic of Reformation theology¹, it is insufficient when considered in the context of the first seven chapters of Romans.

In the chapters leading up to Romans 8, Paul spends a considerable amount of time dealing with the subject of the law, including the condemnation of God upon humankind generally for its failure to live up to the standards of God's righteousness, holiness, and glory (1:18-32), upon the self-righteous particularly (2:1-16), on the religious specifically (2:17—3:8), and on the world totally (3:9-20). In 3:21—5:11 Paul presents the matter of justification according to God's way, including the definition of justification in 3:21-31, the example of justification in 4:1-25, and the result of justification in 5:1-11.²

His treatment of the law in Romans, however, involves far more than just objective condemnation due to the fall and the entrance of sin into the world. He deals with sin and sins on an organic level because the consequences of the fall have wrought a level of destructive activity within us that is the very precipitate of God's condemnation. In Romans 5:12 Paul says, "Through one man sin entered into the world, and through sin, death; and thus death passed on to all men because all have sinned," and in verse 19 he says, "Through the disobedience of one man the many were constituted sinners." Because of the fall, our problem goes deeper than just the committing of some sinful acts; rather, we have a sinful nature, that is, we have been constituted sinners in our inner being. No amount of resolution in our will, change in our mind, or good deeds in our body will wipe away the fact that we have been constituted with a sinful nature as a consequence of Adam's disobedience.

The written Law of God exposes this reality to man. The ravages of death and sin were present in the world but generally unknown until the Law was given (5:13). The Law exposes our sinful nature (7:7), revealing that sin is an organic law that reigns in us (5:21), enslaves us (6:6), dwells in us (7:20), operates in our members, and captures us (v. 23). In Romans 7 the objective, written Law of God only exposes our utter inability to match God's standard of righteousness, holiness, and glory by activating the law of

sin and death in our members. The Law cannot release us from the bondage of the law of sin and of death; it only makes evident our need of the Gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes (1:16). It positions us to receive God's objective justification through faith, apart from works of the law (3:21), but it cannot deal with the problem of our inward sinful constitution. A higher law is needed for this. Justification reconciles us to God and brings us into an organic realm in which the life of God can operate in us as a law (5:10), inwardly enabling us to be constituted righteous by virtue of being joined to Christ through His death and resurrection (v. 19; 7:4).

Given the general focus on the subject of law in Romans 1:18—7, including Paul's reference to the Law of God which activates the law of good in his mind and exposes the operation of the law of sin and death in his members, it is short-sighted to say that the subject of Romans 8 is merely the Spirit. This is especially true since Paul begins this chapter with a triumphal declaration of freedom based on the working of the law of the Spirit of life. Contrary to the neat dichotomy of Reformation theology that suggests that the Law is

operative in Romans 7, but that the Gospel is operative in Romans 8, there is a continuity of thought within Paul in regard to the operation of spontaneous, natural, organic laws. Whereas the unregenerate can be motivated by the law of good in his mind, but crushed by the law of sin and death in his members, a believer who has been joined to Christ has another law operating in his being. Paul introduces the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus in verse 2, and then spends the remainder of the chapter developing a full definition of this law, including its organic nature, operation, and issue.

The Organic Law Being the Processed Triune God

Only an understanding of the nature of this organic law of the Spirit of life can explain Paul's experiential references to the Triune God in Romans 8. In the span of just three verses, for example, Paul refers to the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, Christ, and the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead with a startling degree of interchangeability (vv. 9-11). Paul is not making a theological statement about the Trinity in Himself in these verses, but rather about the Trinity in our experience of His economic

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salvation. Neither is he suggesting that three separate Gods indwell the regenerated believer, but rather that the Triune God, having undergone a process of incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, is now able to be fully realized in the believers. To touch the Spirit of God is to touch the Spirit of Christ, and to touch the Spirit of Christ is to touch Christ. In *Union with Christ: A Biblical View of the New Life in Jesus Christ*, Lewis B. Smedes comments:

One thing must be clear: to live in the Spirit and to live in Christ are one and the same. Probably the most striking passage is Romans 8:9-10: "But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you...But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness." Several things bid for attention in this passage. First, Paul makes no distinction between having the Spirit in us and having Christ in us. They are one and the same. Second, Paul does make a distinction between being "in

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the Spirit" and having the Spirit in us; evidently, having the Spirit within is a necessary corollary of one's being "in the Spirit." Being "in the Spirit" suggests one's involvement in an objective situation; having the Spirit in him suggests a change in the condition of one's own life. Third, Paul makes no distinction between the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God. And therefore he makes no distinction between the Spirit of God and Christ as a reality within us. (43-44)

In a conclusion to a discussion of 1 Corinthians 6:17 and 15:45, 2 Corinthians 3:6, John 6:63, and Romans 8:9-11, James D. G. Dunn states:

These passages make it abundantly clear that for Paul *no distinction can be detected in the believer's experience between exalted Christ and Spirit of God*. The experience of new life and of charismatic endowment can be referred equally to God, the Spirit and the exalted Christ; the experience of intimate union with the exalted Christ is only possible insofar as Christ can be understood and recognized in terms

of spiritual power. If Christ is the definition of the Spirit, then the Spirit is the medium for Christ in his relation to men. If the Spirit of God is now to be recognized only by the Jesus-character of the spiritual experience he engenders, then it is also true that for Paul Christ can be experienced now only in and through the Spirit, indeed only as the Spirit. (146)

The events and experiences of the Triune God in His process of becoming one with man and making man one with Him are the very elements of the "Jesus-character" that have been compounded into the Spirit and made available to the believers. This process involves incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, and Paul was clearly mindful of this process in his presentation of the definition of the law of the Spirit of life throughout the remaining verses in Romans 8. In verse 3 Paul begins by referring to the incarnation, establishing it as the initiation of God's dealing with sin. The presence of sin in the world and its all-encompassing reach necessitated a seminal event in the history of humankind: "God, sending His own Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin and concerning sin, condemned sin in the flesh" (v. 3). In the redeeming death of Christ, sin was condemned in His flesh on the cross, and His death destroyed sin, sins, death, and the one who has the power of death, the devil. In resurrection this all-conquering life has been made available through the Spirit: "And if the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you" (v. 11). A footnote to this verse in the Recovery Version of the New Testament summarizes the depths of the divine revelation in verse 11.

In this verse we have (1) the entire Triune God—"the One who raised Jesus from the dead," "Christ Jesus," and "His Spirit who indwells you"; (2) the process required for His dispensing, as implied in the words *Jesus* (emphasizing incarnation), *Christ* (emphasizing crucifixion and resurrection), and *raised* (emphasizing resurrection); and (3) His dispensing of Himself into the believers, as shown by the words *give life to your mortal bodies*, which indicate that the dispensing not only occurs at the center of our being but also reaches to the circumference, to our whole being. (Note 2)

Even the ascension of Christ has bearing on the believer's experience of the elements that have been compounded into the Spirit. He is interceding constantly in the heavens on behalf of the believers for their experience of "all things" for the purpose of the believers' full conformation to the image of the Firstborn (vv. 34, 28-29).

Without the process of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, the human condition would be

beyond hope, both without and within. Without, the objective standard of God, the Law, activates the reality of sin so that it becomes an insurmountable barrier separating us from God, making us His enemies, and ultimately inviting His well-deserved judgment. Within, the law of sin and death operates in our members to fully bring every aspect of our being into the realm of death. The death of Christ satisfies the objective standard of God on our behalf through the imputation of Christ as righteousness, and the operation of the law of the Spirit of life, being a stronger and higher law, counteracts and nullifies the effects of the law of sin and death.

The law of the Spirit of life is not only the issue of the process of incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension; it is the application and realization of the processed Triune God in our experience. "The law of the Spirit of life is the processed Triune God becoming the life-giving Spirit to dwell in us. This means that the processed Triune God is Himself the law of the Spirit of life. Just as sin is a person—Satan—so this law is also a Person—the Triune God" (Lee 696). The phrase *the law of the Spirit of life* implies that this law is related to the Spirit who, in turn, is related to life. This law is wholly organic in its nature, content, and function.³ Its nature consists of the life of God, which is available to man through the death of Christ. Its content is the processed Triune God, who is realized in our experience as the life-giving Spirit. And in its function, the righteous requirement of the law is spontaneously fulfilled as we walk according to the Spirit of life in our spirit that has been made life (v. 10).

The Organic Law Being Operative in the Tripartite Man

The organic aspect of the law of the Spirit of life also can clearly be seen in Paul's discussion of its operation within the parts of man. Since we have believed in Christ, the righteousness of God has been revealed not only judicially through our justification, but also organically through our spirit being made life because of righteousness (3:21-22; 8:10). The regenerated believer has been forgiven of his sins and trespasses and has been enlivened in his spirit with the divine, uncreated life of God which is realized in, by, and through the Spirit of life. Christ equals the Spirit of Christ who is in us; the Spirit of Christ equals the Spirit of God who is in us; and the Spirit of God equals the Spirit of life who is in us. As such, how can our spirit be anything but life? The operation of this organic law involves this life moving and spreading from our spirit to our soul, especially the leading part of our soul, the mind. Verse 6 says, "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the spirit is life and peace." When the mind is set on the flesh, it experiences the operation of the law of sin and death because the flesh is still present in us. Sinless perfection is not an issue of our redemption. When

our mind is set on the flesh, it does not just experience death—it is death (v. 6). Conversely, however, the mind set on the spirit is life. This indicates that the life of God can spread from our spirit to our soul, transforming us through the renewing of our mind (12:2).

In many respects, verse 6 succinctly restates the experiences of Paul in Romans 7 and 8. In chapter seven Paul describes the experience of the mind being set on the flesh, that is, being set on satisfying the requirements of the law of God (7:22-23). The result of his experience was utter defeat and death (v. 24). From a human standpoint, there was nothing base about Paul's motivation in Romans 7; he was responding to his delight in the law of God (v. 22). His pursuit, however, was defeated by the operation of the law of sin and death in his members. More cruelly, however, the law of sin and death took advantage of the Law and Paul's fleshly endeavors to keep the Law to utterly deceive him about the nature of God's

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salvation, which involves the giving of life, not the keeping of the law. In reflecting upon this experience, Paul concluded that nothing good dwelt in his flesh (v. 18). In chapter eight, however, Paul describes the experience of the mind being set on the spirit, that is, being set on the spontaneous operation of the life of God, which has been compounded with the elements of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. Only the elements in the Spirit of life, rather than our best efforts, can deal with the negative elements of death in our being and cause our mind to be life (v. 6).

Many Christians are still in Romans 7, because their experience is limited to the first half of Romans 8:6. Their mind is set on being good Christians, that is, merely being moral and ethical Christians. Moral teachings and ethical exhortations based on the New Testament have become standard fare in much of today's Christianity. But every effort to meet these new "commandments" ends up in defeat and failure. We purpose to love but end up despising. We purpose to share but end up coveting. We purpose to submit

but end up rebelling. We purpose to do good but end up doing evil. If we have any hope of moving beyond these recurring experiences of carrying around this body of death, we must, like Paul, move on to Romans 8 by moving on to the second half of Romans 8:6. We are joined to the processed Triune God in our spirit; we have His life, which operates in us as an organic law, bringing us into the experiences that have been compounded into the Spirit of life. As we walk according to the Spirit in our spirit, this law operates, spreading life from our spirit to our soul and ultimately to our mortal body (v. 11). "He is 'the Spirit of life,' He is 'the Spirit of God,' and He is also 'the Spirit of Christ' indwelling us that He may impart Himself as life to us. Christ not only imparts life to our spirit (v. 10), but also to our minds (v. 6) and to our mortal bodies (v. 11)" (Lee 192).

The Organic Law Being for the Fulfillment of God's Purpose

In Romans 8:13 Paul apparently begins to shift his focus from the inward operation of the law of the Spirit of life to the fulfillment of God's plan, from foreknowing in eternity past to conformity to the image of the Firstborn, both in this age and in eternity future. This shift, however, involving the revelation of the sons of God as heirs of God, the freeing of the creation from the slavery of corruption, the glorification of the predestined heirs who are inseparable from God's love, is utterly dependent upon the organic operation of the law of the Spirit of life. The glorious destiny of the predestined, called, and justified sons is a reflection of maturity in life, which is dependent upon the operation of the law of the Spirit of life. In this maturing process, some things are readily apparent. First, there is a witness of the Spirit in our spirit that we are children of God (v. 16). No matter what our condition is, the Spirit witnesses to our most elementary relationship with God. This provides a hope and encouragement for that which is often beyond our sight, namely any concrete or dramatic signs that we are growing in the life of God (vv. 24-25). Second, we are led by the Spirit in our spirit to advance in maturity, becoming sons and ultimately heirs in life (vv. 14, 17). Third, the Spirit joins in with our prayers, groaning in response to our weakness in knowing what is needed for our growth in

life (vv. 23, 26-27). Fourth, the Spirit intercedes for us according to God, that is, according to the life of God for the development of the life of God in us (v. 27). Finally, in response to the Spirit's groaning and intercession, our environment is arranged and ordered to bring us further on in the process of our conformation to the image of the Firstborn (vv. 28-29). This is the good that God desires through His ordering of "all things," and it is the ultimate issue of the operation of the organic law of the Spirit of life.

In Romans 8 an inexorable process of growth and development is presented, beginning with our initial status as children of God, and then advancing to our maturity as sons and ultimately as heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. From the perspective of both God and man, our destiny is to be transformed from sinners into sons of God through the organic operation of the law of the Spirit of life. In this operation, our inward parts are reconstituted as the life of God spreads from our spirit through our mind and ultimately to our body. This is the purpose for which we have been called; this is the purpose which touches God's heart; and this is the purpose for which God commends, pours out, and demonstrates His inseparable love (5:8, 5; 8:35-39).

The Organic Law and Organic Gospel Being One

Proponents of the Law-Gospel hermeneutic suggest that all of Scripture can be divided into one of two categories. The first category, Law, presents God's demands based on His righteousness, holiness, and glory, and ultimately speaks of God's condemnation and judgment upon all who fail to satisfy these demands. The second category, Gospel, presents God's provision of grace through the vicarious death of Christ upon those who are inherently undeserving. While avoiding the obvious difficulty that this hermeneutic has in addressing all of the biblical data concerning the organic aspects of our salvation,⁴ it is certainly clear that this dichotomy can only be sustained when the Scriptures are viewed from a purely judicial perspective. Judicially speaking, Christ is the end of the Law (10:4); that is, when the gospel of Christ becomes effectual through believing, the function of the Law as a child-conductor unto Christ ends. The beginning of the

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In contrast, the organic law in Romans 8 principally speaks of our union with the Triune God by bringing us fully into the realm and experience of God's divine, active, and flourishing life.

Gospel is the end of the Law in the judicial aspect of God's salvation.

There is, however, an organic aspect of God's salvation. We may be reconciled to God through the death of His Son, but we still need to be saved in His life (5:10). When this aspect is considered, the judicial hermeneutic of a distinction between Law and Gospel falters in its ability to explain the biblical revelation. More importantly, however, it falters in its ability to bring believers into the full experience of God's salvation. When the organic aspect of God's salvation is considered, instead of encountering a gospel that is merely judicially distinct from the law, we find a gospel that is organically one with the organic law of the Spirit of life. The gospel in Galatians is principally organic. It reveals that the issue of our believing is being joined and united to the processed Triune God. Believing in Christ, we received the Spirit as the blessing of Abraham. In our receiving of the Spirit, Christ is revealed in us for the purpose of living in us and becoming full-grown in us. At this point our identity as the seed of Abraham and Christ's identity as the seed are utterly joined as one. The law of the Spirit of life in Romans 8 is principally organic as well. It is constituted of the processed Triune God who spontaneously operates in our being as life through the Spirit who has been consummated through the process of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. The very elements of this process have also been compounded into the Spirit, thereby freeing us from the outward demands of the Law by inwardly fulfilling the righteous requirement of the law as we walk according to the Spirit in our spirit.

The organic gospel in Galatians is equivalent to the functioning of the organic operation of the law of the Spirit of life in Romans 8. This law, which takes sinners and reconstitutes them as sons and heirs who ultimately bear the image of the Firstborn, is not only the means by which Christ lives in us and is ultimately formed in us but this law actually is Christ living and being formed in us. The organic gospel is a living person, the processed Triune God, being joined to us for the sake of God's eternal expression, and the organic law in Romans 8 is also a living person, the same processed Triune God, being joined to every part of us for the sake of His eternal expression. The Law-Gospel hermeneutic principally speaks of our separation from God, certainly prior to faith in Christ, but even in the aftermath of our justification in Christ, because of the insistence of Reformed theologians on maintaining an objective distinction between God and His redeemed throughout the entire New Testament, even in the portions of the divine revelation that clearly fall within the Reformed definition of Gospel. In contrast, the organic gospel in Galatians and the organic law in Romans 8 principally speak of our union with the Triune God, thereby dissolving the distance between God and us by bringing us fully into the realm and experience of God's divine, active, and flourishing life. ■❧■

Notes

¹Francis Pieper, in his exhaustive presentation of Reformed theology, *Christian Dogmatics*, begins his discussion of Law and Gospel with a definitive declaration that such a dichotomy is an imperative in the presentation of Christian doctrine: "Because Scripture divides doctrinally into Law and Gospel, one cannot but treat constantly of Law and Gospel and their mutual relation in presenting the Christian doctrine on the basis of Scripture" (220). In effect, all of Scripture reveals either man's sinful condition and condemned status before a righteous, holy, and glorious God or God's mercy and grace. Pieper provides a definition of Law and Gospel that is succinct and revelatory of its bias toward a judicial view of God's salvation.

The Law in the proper sense (*lex proprie accepta*) is the Word of God in which God demands of men that in their nature and in their thoughts, words, and acts they conform to the standard of His commandments and pronounces the curse on those who fail to comply. The Gospel in the proper sense (*evangelium proprie acceptum*) is the Word of God in which God makes no moral demands whatever on men, hence reproves no transgressions, but on the contrary, promises His grace for the sake of Christ's vicarious satisfaction to such as have not kept the divine Law. (222)

²The divisions within the book of Romans, as utilized in this article, are taken from the Recovery Version of the New Testament.

³It is interesting to note, given the thorough emphasis on the function of Law within Reformation theology, that very little attention is given to the law of the Spirit of life. In Francis Pieper's systematic presentation of Reformation theology, *Christian Dogmatics*, for example, the index of Scripture citations indicates that there is not even one reference to Romans 8:2 in his entire four-volume set. Simply put, this organic law does not fit well within a system of thought that emphasizes only the judicial aspects of our salvation.

⁴Romans 5:10 and 8:2 are but two immediate examples; 1 Corinthians 15:45 is another.

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