

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NO CONDEMNATION

The opening verse of chapter 8 has been a favorite of Christians down through the ages. In fact, the whole chapter has often been declared to be the greatest chapter in the Bible. The noted Swiss commentator of a past generation, F. Godet, called these thirty-nine verses great because they begin with “no condemnation” and end with “no separation,” to which another writer, C. A. Fox, added that in between there is also “no defeat.”¹ The apostle indicates the connection of the present section with the preceding by the use of the conjunctions *ara nun* (KJV and ESV, “therefore, now”). It is only natural to ask, “To what do these inferential particles point the reader?” Several connections are possible. For example, J. R. W. Stott argues that the apostle at this point steps back and surveys the whole Christian landscape over which he and his readers have traveled.² This is possible, but I am not inclined to follow Stott at this point. Why? The words, “in Christ,” for example, seem to limit the apostle’s thought to that section of the epistle in which union with Christ has been developed. That would mean that the reference of the words must not go back further than 5:12ff. It has been recently suggested by Paul Barnett that the words are to be connected primarily with the statement of thanksgiving for freedom through Jesus Christ, which the apostle has just uttered in 7:25. This would seem to link the no condemnation to both sin as guilt and sin as a power.³ Still others, such as Adolph Deissmann, pointing out that the term *condemnation* was both a civil term as well as a criminal one, have argued for the force of “penal servitude.” Deissmann writes, “We, nevertheless, conjecture that it signifies a burden ensuing from a judicial pronouncement – a servitude. One may perhaps render *legal burden*.”⁴ Along similar lines the late F. F. Bruce wrote, “The word *katakrima* means *probably not condemnation*, but the punishment following sentence – in other words, *penal servitude*. There is no reason why those who are *in Christ Jesus* should go on doing penal servitude as though they had never been pardoned and never been liberated from the prison-house of sin.”⁵ The rendering would be suitable for suggesting the freedom from the judgment of original sin (the corruption of our nature), the product of Adam’s sin. In other words, believers are not only justified, they also have been freed from the bondage of *original sin*. (I will develop this line of thought as we go along.) There is no further penal servitude to the sin that inheres in our nature since the fall in Eden. The use of the root in 5:16, 18 and 8:3 argue for stress on the judicial sense of the term. The fruit of sanctification is the product of justification, and there is no problem in the reference of verse one to the latter truth. I am persuaded then to follow my late Professor of Theology, S. Lewis Johnson, in his analysis of this passage to connect 8:1 with 7:6. We have understood 7:7-25 as an *excursus* on law and sin, answering two questions that arose out of the conclusion of 7:1-6, namely, that believers are no longer under the Law of Moses as a code. In other words, 7:7-25 form something of an aside in the progress of Paul’s argument, the purpose being the clearing up of possible difficulties in the minds of his readers. Thus, as 8:1 he returns to the ongoing argument that he has been developing on the doctrine of sanctification. In 7:1-6, believers were said to have died to the Law, which is the strength of sin (cf. 1 Cor. 15:56; Law-sin-death). Therefore, he now says, there is no condemnation from that which the Law reveals – sin – either as *guilt* or *pollution*. The following verse, introduced by the explanatory “for,” follows then naturally. There is no condemnation, for the law of the Spirit of life has freed us from the Law of sin and death.⁶

I. **SOME IMPORTANT OBSERVATIONS.** Now let us notice some of the important parts of Romans 8:1. In the first place, the word “no” (*ouden*) is in a very emphatic position in the original text, and it bears a great deal of stress in the apostle’s thought. *No* condemnation is the thrilling judgment the apostle affirms concerning the position of the believer before the Lord God. We might paraphrase by saying, “There is no condemnation *of any kind.*” Leon Morris comments, “*Condemnation* is a forensic term which here includes both the sentence and the execution of the sentence. But for believers there is no condemnation at all . . . *ouden* is given special emphasis by its position at the head of the sentence and its separation from its noun. It signifies *not a single one of any kind* (Lenski). But this is not a blanket exemption, applying to all people. Paul is speaking of those who are *in Christ Jesus.*”⁷ Likewise, as Peterson points out, “This is a particularly significant claim in view of the ongoing struggle with sin and acknowledgment of personal failure in 7:14-25. So important is the assurance of freedom from condemnation that Paul expands on it in v. 34.”⁸

A. **THE WORD CONDEMNATION IS NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE WORD JUDGMENT.**

It is the stronger word and refers to final judgment, that of eternal judgment. There is no condemnation for believers, although they still face the necessity of appearing before the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10). They are freed from condemnation, the condemnation of the Law of God, because their penalty has been paid by a substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ. They are also freed from bondage to sin by the Holy Spirit, a product of the payment of the penalty by Christ. Thomas Jacomb (1622-1687), one of the great Puritan commentators, declared, “Sin is sin in the children of God, and it merits condemnation in them as well as in others; whence is it then that there is no condemnation to them? Merely from the grace of God, who doth not impute this sin to them. As Solomon told Abiathar he was worthy of death, yet he would not, for some considerations, put him to death, 1 Kings 2:26; so here the highest in grace have that in them which renders them worthy of condemnation, but yet, they being in Christ, and thereupon sin not being imputed, they shall not actually be condemned.”⁹

B. **NO CONDEMNATION IS DIRECTLY CONNECTED WITH THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT.**

The old Scottish divine, George Smeaton, observed long ago, that the two expressions *ouden katakrima* (Rom. 8:1) and *katekrine ten hamatian* (Rom. 8:3) must be seen together, as such, “The apostle had stated at the commencement of the chapter, that, notwithstanding the indwelling sin which still adheres to us, and which he described in the previous chapter (7:15-25), there is no condemnation to the Christian; and then he subjoins the text under our notice as the ground of the non-condemnation, and of the deliverance from the law of sin and death. The passage amounts to this, that there is *no condemnation*, because *sin has been condemned in Christ’s flesh*, and the approved fulfillment of the law is laid to our account.”¹⁰ Note carefully that Paul’s language clearly links our sins to deserving judgment and that the only hope of deliverance is through a Redeemer who stands in our place to absorb the judgment. This was, down through the centuries the way Christians understood the nature of Christ’s atoning work. But the concept of penal substitution, and its correlative doctrine of our sins being imputed to Christ, has been under fierce attack for centuries. However, these attacks have usually come from those outside the Evangelical tradition. Today the most vocal opposition is from those claiming to be Evangelicals. Now a number of voices from within Evangelicals are regurgitating the old standard arguments made years ago by theological Liberals.¹¹ Chief among them is that it has been regarded as inherently unjust that an innocent party should suffer and the guilty go free. In the normal processes of civil justice, such a situation would cry out for amendment.¹² Two points, however, should be noted. On the one hand, the guilty do not go free; their guilt is fully recognized and they are punished with the full sanctions of God’s law. The key issue is that they receive this penalty in Christ. The fact that He takes the burden of our sins upon Himself and undergoes the sanctions God’s justice requires should not blind us to the fact that in all He does,

it is both as our substitute and our representative. It is in the context of a real and vital union between Him and us, which is at least as real and vital as that between Adam and us. Hence, we His people do indeed receive our just desserts for our misdemeanors inasmuch as Christ, having united Himself to us in His incarnation, fully discharges the debt we owe. Our freedom, which results from the atoning death of Christ, is thus a just freedom, since the rightful claims God had against us have been fully settled on our account. The other point is equally significant. Due to the sin of Adam, we were plunged into ruin, estranged from God, “without hope and without God” (Eph. 2:12). As Adam was expelled from the garden and from God’s presence, so we shared in his condition. “Had it not been for the coming of Christ and God’s gracious covenant, we should have had no option but to face the just wrath of God. What kind of prospect is that? Jesus Himself testified that there is no way to God apart from Him (Jn. 14:6). Apart from the provisions of God’s grace in the substitutionary atonement of Christ there is no salvation.”¹³

CONCLUSION: *No condemnation* – what a glorious sound that has! Through the work of Christ, Christians have been acquitted. Thomas Crawford, another old Scottish divine, contended, “Here we are assured that *to them who are in Christ Jesus* – that is to say, who are united to Him by faith – *there is now no condemnation*. And if it be asked how this should be the case – the answer suggested is, that *our sin has been condemned in Christ*. The law was *weak through the flesh* – in other words, it was impotent to deliver us either from the guilt or from the power of sin, by reason of the corruption of our nature, which rendered us incapable of satisfying its requirements. But having regard to this impotency of the law, *God sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh*, although Himself sinless, and *for sin* – that is, for the expiation of sin. Thus did He *condemn sin in the flesh* – namely, in the flesh of His own incarnate Son. And sin was thus condemned in Him in order *that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us*; or that its righteous demands might be satisfied in our behalf, who show the reality of our union with the Saviour, and our consequent interest in His mediatorial work, by *walking not after the flesh, but after the Spirit*. Accordingly, *there is to us no condemnation*, inasmuch as Christ has paid the penalty which our sins had incurred.”¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ As cited by J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expositional Commentary II* (Baker, 1992), p. 782,

² J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (IVP, 1994), p. 217.

³ Paul Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God’s Righteousness* (Christian Focus, 2003) – he writes, “Most likely, Paul’s *then (ara)* picks up his question (*Who will rescue me from the body of death?*) and his answer (*I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord – 7:24-25*). Christ *will* rescue Paul and other believers from their sin-controlled flesh, their bodies of death, that is, in the Last Day.” (p. 171).

⁴ Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies* (T & T Clark, 1901), p. 264.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to The Romans* (Eerdmans, 1963), p. 159.

⁶ I am indebted to Dr. Johnson for the substance of these exegetical remarks on this section.

⁷ L. Morris, *The Epistle to The Romans* (IVP, 1988), p. 300.

⁸ D. G. Peterson, *Romans: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Lexham Academic, 2020), p. 306.

⁹ Thomas Jacomb, *Sermon On The Eighth Chapter of The Epistle To The Romans (verses 1-4)* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1996), p. 16.

¹⁰ G. Smeaton, *The Doctrine of The Atonement According to The Apostles* (rpt. Alpha Publications, 1979), p. 168.

¹¹ Some of the recent examples are C. H. Pinnock and R. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century* (IVP, 1994); J. B. Green and M. D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (IVP, 2000), and J. D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Eerdmans, 2001). Green and Baker in their diatribe against the penal satisfaction understanding of the atonement are forced by the Biblical evidence to admit that the Scripture does in fact support it, but they then make this remarkable statement, “models championed in the New Testament for expounding the meaning of Jesus’ suffering may not (all) be suited to our day,” p. 111. A number of people representing the Emergent Church (Brian McLaren and Steve Chalke) have also cast aspersions on the doctrine, calling it a form of “Cosmic Child Abuse.” For a response, see John Thackway’s review of Chalke’s *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2003), in *The Banner of Truth* (April 8, 2005).

¹² Robert L. Dabney, one of the great Reformed theologians of the 19th cent. Devoted a chapter to the standard objections to this doctrine in his class work on the subject, *Christ Our Penal Substitute* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1978).

¹³ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (IVP, 1993), p. 136. (Zondervan, 1985), p. 476.

¹⁴ T. J. Crawford, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture Respecting The Atonement* (Wm. Blackwood & Sons, 1871), p. 52.