

I DO NOT DO WHAT I WANT TO DO

What does Paul mean when he says, “*I have sinful human nature, and am sold under sin*”? (Rom. 7:14). Some feel that such a strong statement could not be made of a Christian. Therefore they assume Paul is still speaking of his pre-conversion days, the time when Paul first learned the full meaning of God’s law.

It seems more likely, however, that the key to Paul’s thought here lies in understanding the dual nature of the Christian - what Luther speaks of when he describes the Christian as being “saint and sinner at the same time.” What that means is that at all times the new self of faith is beset by the old sinful nature, the old Adam. Both old and new self remain active in the Christian throughout this earthly life.

Seeing both an old self and a new self active in the Christian’s life accords well with what Paul described to the Galatians. He wrote to them about the “conflict” going on within every child of God. He told them, “*So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want,*” (5:16-17).

The view that the Christian is a combination of both the old and new self is the interpretation assumed here in Romans. Hence it is Paul the Christian who in verses 17 to 24 of our Second Reading for today laments the fact that he still keeps on sinning every day. We should note, however, that while the old and new self are found side by side in the Christian, they do not hold an equal place. His real identity lies with the new self. Not the old sinful nature but the new self is the true “I” Paul refers to when using the first person singular pronoun in this section (v. 14-17).

Because there is an “unspiritual” component in him by virtue of the sinful nature clinging to him (as it is with every Christian), Paul has to admit that he continues to sin daily. In fact, so tenacious is the old Adam’s hold that Paul can describe himself as being “*sold under sin*.” This does not mean that Paul is under the control of sin. Remember that sin’s domination has been broken by Christ’s death, a death the believer shares through Baptism. Sin is not the master of Paul’s life, but, time and again, his old sinful nature spoils even Paul’s best intentions. He has to concede, “*I do not understand what I am doing. For I do not do what I want to do, but I do what I hate.*”

The translation “*I do not understand what I am doing*” is perhaps a bit misleading. Paul understood full well what he was doing - or rather not doing. The problem in translating this verse lies in the fact that we’re again dealing with a verb that allows a number of meanings, depending on its context. Literally, the apostle wrote, “I do not know what I do.” The verb for “know,” however, is not restricted simply to having knowledge about something. Very often the word contains the idea of knowing by personal experience, of knowing intimately, of knowing with affection and approval. Hence we might translate here, “I do not approve of what I’m doing, because what I want to do, I don’t do, but what I don’t want, that I keep right on doing.”

Recall that Paul is in the midst of making a defence for God’s law, which he earlier described as “holy, righteous and good” (verse 12). Paul is addressing that point when he now continues, “*If I do what I do not want to do, I also agree that the Law is good.*” We might catch the force of Paul’s logic a little more easily if we invert the English word order and say, “If I really don’t want to do what I’m doing, then I agree that the Law is good.”

That line of logic can be illustrated from the life of a person who unfortunately has become addicted to drugs. His life is a mess: he's become unemployable; he's on the verge of losing his house; his children are suffering and his wife is threatening to leave him. Remorsefully, he looks at the situation and says, "I don't want to go on like this. The law of the land is right when it forbids the misuse of the drugs I've gotten into." Paul is in the same frame of mind. When he doesn't want to do the bad things God forbids, he's actually agreeing with God that God's laws and commands are good and right.

But how, then, can Paul's continuing in sin be explained when he knows God forbids it and has to agree that God is right in forbidding it? Paul answers, "*However, now it is no longer I who am doing it, but it is the sin that is living in me.*"

This is not a cop-out on Paul's part but an accurate assessment of his situation. We have noted that the Christian retains an old sinful nature throughout this earthly life. That nature lives alongside his new and real self, which was created by the Holy Spirit when the Spirit brought that person to faith in Christ. This new self is totally in sync with God's will. It wants to do the things God wants done. So it is also in Paul's case. His new self, his "inner being" (7:22), delights in God's Law. Hence the problem does not lie with the Christian's new self or with God's Law. The villain is sin, which operates through the old sinful nature, which still clings to every Christian.