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The Assurance and the Reality of Salvation as Motivation for Righteous Living in the Epistle to the Romans

Dr. David T. Ejenobo (Ph.D.), Senior Lecturer
Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy
Delta State University, Abraka
Delta State, Nigeria¹

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Abstract

In an age of religious relativism and pluralism, the question that begs for answer is: “Should righteous living on the part of those who profess Christ be compromised?” This paper examines this question from the perspective of Paul’s argument for Christian living in his Epistle to the Romans. It argues that Paul’s perception in Romans is that anyone who professes Christ must show it by his actions. The assurance of salvation in Christ, which flows out of the justifying work of Christ on the cross, transforms a man who professes faith in Christ to the extent that his lifestyle must of necessity change. He

¹ See www.DelSU.edu.ng.

cannot continue living in sin so that grace will abound. Paul enunciated this most explicitly in what we call the εν πνευματι principle found in the writings of Paul. The paper suggests ways by which the Christian can live a life of righteousness based on his assurance of salvation found in his mystical unification with Christ.

Introduction

Wright (2002: 395) is of the opinion that Paul's epistle to the Romans is "neither a systematic theology nor a summary of Paul's lifework," but it is regarded by most scholars as "his masterpiece." He observes further:

It dwarfs most of his other writings, an Alpine peak towering over hills and villages. Not all onlookers have viewed it in the same light or from the same angle, and their snapshots and paintings of it are sometimes remarkably unlike. Not all climbers have taken the same route up its sheer sides, and there is frequent disagreement on the best approach. What nobody doubts is that we are here dealing with a work of massive substance, presenting a formidable intellectual challenge while offering a breathtaking theological and spiritual vision.

Commenting further on the importance of Paul's epistle to the Romans, Myers writes:

The Epistles to the Romans has also contributed significantly to the history of Christian doctrine. Almost every influential Christian thinker has dealt with Romans. Origen, Thomas Aquinas, and Philip Melancthon, to mention only a few, wrote noteworthy commentaries on Romans. And numerous theological notions have been derived solely or in part from Romans. Augustine acquired his idea of original sin from Romans 5, Luther gained his understanding of justification by faith alone from Romans 3-4, John Calvin obtained his doctrine of double predestination from Romans 9-11, John Wesley got his distinctive teaching on sanctification from Romans 6 and 8, and Karl Barth learned of the importance of the righteousness of God from Romans 1 and 2. In short, this epistle has exerted a powerful influence on all branches of the Christian Church, and its impact on the lives and thought of prominent Christian thinkers through the years has been second, perhaps, only to the canonical gospels.²

From the above observations, it is clear that most New Testament scholars are united in their assessment of the importance of Romans to understanding not just the message of Paul, but even the message of Christ. No wonder it has been observed in some quarters that Paul

² www.EarlyChristianWritings.com/romans.html.

can actually be regarded as the interpreter of Christ. The various items which Paul covered in Romans bear testimony to the fact that he understood in pristine details the core of the message of the cross of Christ.

No New Testament scholar doubts the authorship of Romans by Paul. Most accept the fact that it was written from the city of Corinth between 55-57 AD (Knox, 1954). Paul was about to leave Corinth for Jerusalem with the contributions for the saints there. He was of the mind that he should sail for Spain after delivering the relief materials he had collected for those stricken by the famine in Palestine. In view of the smear campaign of the Judaizers against his person and ministry, Paul wrote Romans to prepare the minds of the Christians in Rome as to the veracity of his gospel. Little wonder some scholars have referred to Romans as “The Gospel According to Paul.”

I. Paul’s Confidence in the Cross

Romans Chapters 1-5 constitute the kernel of Paul’s argument on the reality and importance of the work of Christ on the cross. He made it abundantly clear that without the cross mankind had been condemned to death by virtue of the sentence passed on the first man in the Garden of Eden. Even though his fellow Jews practice a religious pietism that sets them apart from other nations in terms of their belief in one God, it was the argument of Paul that religious pietism on its own cannot make one to be justified in the site of God.

The argument of the Jews which Paul tried to debunk in Romans 1-3 on religious pietism has continued to surface in one form or the other in Christendom down the ages. It is unfortunate that religious legalism has continued to rear its ugly head among some Christian denominations who believe that it is by their righteousness that they can gain entrance into the kingdom of God. Paul made it abundantly clear that it is only dependence on the righteousness of Christ that can guarantee one access to the throne of God. He concludes that all the righteousness of men are thrash in the site of God. It should be recalled that this was the main reason Paul fell out with Peter as described for us in Galatians 2. Paul felt appalled that Peter could expect the Gentile Christians to fulfill the details of the Mosaic Law which he Peter could not do. It is unfortunate that even within the

church today, a lot of Christian leaders are no different from Peter when it comes to the observance of religious laws.

It is this conclusion that led Paul to argue for justification by faith. Chapter 4 of Romans begins with the argument that Abraham was never justified by works but by faith. Chapter 5 begins with the argument that it is our faith in Christ that justifies us in the site of God. Therefore between Romans 4 and 5 Paul makes it clear that when talking about salvation, Paul never relied on the old religion of works. He relied absolutely on the work of Christ on the cross. “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly (Rom.5:6). He writes further “But commendeth his love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

However, it is Romans 3:25 that goes to the heart of the matter of what the death of Christ on the cross meant to Paul: “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.” Whiteley (1964:130) writes: “St. Paul understood salvation in Christ against the background of what we may term the ‘presupposition of the first fruits.’” By this he interprets the death of Christ as participatory rather than substitutionary: Christ died in order that by our dying alongside with Him, we might obtain salvation. Christ’s death was not therefore a death-on-behalf-of, but a death-along-side-with. Moe disagrees. He is of the opinion that “in practically all his letters, the Apostle extols the death of Christ as a death for us” (Moe, 1954:239). According to Barry (1978:88), the symbol implied in the word *hilasterion* is drawn from the sacrificial system, and for both Jews and pagans who ponder on the significance of the death of Christ, the symbolism of sacrifice is inevitable; so that the Jewish Christians came to regard Christ as the Paschal Lamb.

On the significance of the death of Christ for Paul, he believes that the sin-death principle operative in humanity must be overcome and destroyed by the obedience-life principle operative in Christ (Ejenobo, 1987:68). In other words, Christ’s death was God’s means of relating himself in a saving way to sinful men. Thus Paul writes in Galatians 2:20a: “I have been crucified with Christ.” The man who considers himself as crucified with Christ on the cross is the man that has the assurance of salvation. The death of Christ was for him. By uniting himself with that death by faith, he too dies to the law of sin

and death. We are therefore justified by faith in the crucified Christ, not in the works of the flesh. Paul picks up this theme in Romans 8 after his temporary diversion in Romans 6 and 7. What the law of sin and death could not do in the flesh, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ has accomplished.

Romans 8:1 must be read in the closest connection with Romans 7. There we have seen the unavailing struggles of an awakened Jew, who sought pardon and holiness from that law which he was conscious he had broken; and in which he could find no provision for pardon, and no power to sanctify (Cragg, 1954:300). This conviction having brought him to the very brink of despair, and, being on the point of giving up all hope, he hears of redemption by Jesus Christ, thanks God for the prospect he has of salvation, applies for and receives it; and now magnifies God for the unspeakable gift of which he has been made a partaker by exclaiming: “Thank God I no longer stand condemned because I am in Christ” (Cragg, 1954:302). That is the joy of salvation! That is the assurance of salvation!!

II. Living the Life of Christ

The question with which Romans 6:1 opens is a reflection of what the Apostle had said in Romans 5:20: “Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.” A surface reading of this verse could suggest that Paul was trying to say that the more the sin of a man, the more the grace of God to cover such sins (Ejenobo, 2008: 310). It was to debunk such an assumption that he asked: “Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?” It is very likely that Paul was reacting to the numerous things which had been said about his conception of the Mosaic Law (Romans 3:8).

Cragg (1954: 369) observed that the idea of walking in sin must be seen as Paul’s way of diagnosing the human situation: man, created in the image of God with God’s law written across his heart, has fallen under the control of sin thereby rejecting God’s actual plans for creating him. Sin, for Paul is more than an act or attitude of rebellion against God or of transgression of his law, although it surely involves this meaning. However, in the more characteristic sense, sin can be described as an outside demonic power alien to man’s character. This demonic power overrides man’s original, true and

created nature, and has gained entrance to man's life thereby reducing him to bondage and thereby making him a transgressor.

Sin is thus a direct contradiction of the state of things which Christian baptism assumes. The point where sin made its attack, gained its entrance into human life, and took up its seat was the flesh (Cranfield, 1958:298). For us modern men, it is difficult if not impossible to think of sin as a real, concrete entity. Sin for us is likely to mean the mere act of sinning. This is not the thinking of Paul. In the thinking of the Apostle, sin takes on a being of itself, such that when it enters and controls a man, his nature tilts more to the ways of the devil, than to the ways of God. When this happens, walking in sin then takes on the meaning of living in sin.

Walking in sin might appear to be a mere natural phenomenon. To Paul, walking in sin calls attention to the totality of the being of a man (Ejenobo, 2008:311). The basic attitude of walking in sin connotes a man who is infested by and lives his life under the dictates of the things of the devil. Thus for Paul, for a man to say that he is in Christ, it means that the attitude of walking in sin must be replaced with God's actual plan for man and this can only be achieved when man becomes dead to sin and begins to walk in the Spirit. The word 'walk' is used here not to mean the literal walk which means moving physically from one place to another. Rather it implies living continuously a certain life style or being totally subjected and obedient to a pattern of life, and being under the control of an influence. So the phrase "walking in sin" means living continuously and consistently in a way of life which opposes God's actual plan for mankind (Ejenobo, 2008:311). This concept is brought out more forcefully in Weymouth's translation of Romans 6:2: "No, indeed; how shall we who have died to sin, live in it any longer?"

John R. Stott observed that one is a slave to whomever one decides to obey. Man, having been given a choice between the life of Christ and the sinful life is a free entity to make a choice. Whosoever decides to walk in sin becomes a slave to sin. For Paul therefore walking in sin simply means allowing sin to reign supreme in a person's life (Dodd, 1974:120). It is for this reason that Paul admonishes that sin should not be allowed to reign supreme in the life of a Christian. Rather, he should walk in the Spirit. He emphasized that there is a glaring difference between a person who consistently

walks in sin and one who by mistake falls into an act of sin. To Paul, it is important that this distinction be made. A sinner is a person who commits sin constantly, as a way of life. That is what walking in sin means. This should not be so for a Christian, because he can only fall into sin but not walk in sin. For if he falls, he will surely get up and continue his life with Christ. This was why he asked the question: “Shall we continue walking in sin that grace may abound.” (Romans 6:1).

In Romans 6:11 Paul drives home his point more forcefully: “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” To be dead to a thing is a strong expression denoting that such a thing has no influence over the person any more (Ejenobo, 2008:319). According to Wenham (1995:275) when it is said that a Christian is dead to sin, the sense is, that it has lost its influence over him; he is not subject to it; he is in regard to that, as one in the grave is to the busy scenes and cares of this life.

Let us at this stage turn our attention to understanding what Paul was trying to say in Romans 8:9: In this passage, Paul asserts that he who does not have the Spirit of Christ is none of His. When it is realized that the phrase ‘Spirit of Christ’ actually carries with it the undertone of the Risen Lord who is actually the same person as the Holy Spirit, then what Paul is saying here becomes more meaningful (Ejenobo, 2009:71). Paul is saying that anybody who is not living under the influence of the Spirit of God cannot claim to belong to Christ. That is why in Romans 8:14-16 Paul went to some length to show that it is only through the living testimony of the Holy Spirit that one not only knows he is a child of God, but through Him that he enjoys his inheritance as a heir of the kingdom of God in the here and now. The flow of thought in Romans 8:14-16 reveals Paul’s mystical understanding of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit not only gives a sense of belonging to the kingdom of God, He makes Christians appreciate the fact that they are in fact God’s children.

This God-consciousness which Paul is talking about must be put in proper perspective. It is the contention of Paul, from the beginning of Romans 1 that sin had completely destroyed the being of man. Thus all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom.3:23). However, Christ came with the task of bringing about a radical

change in the being of man. This is the same being that had lived a sin-dominated and a sin-controlled life till now. When such a person comes to God through the ministration of the Holy Spirit, it is only the Holy Spirit that has the power to impinge on the consciousness of man the fact that he now belongs to God. Without the ministration of the Holy Spirit in the spirit of man, the sin-consciousness can never give way to a Christ-consciousness.

From our analysis of Romans 8:9, it will appear therefore that the nexus of Paul's theology of the Holy Spirit can be found in his emphasis on a mystical relationship with the Holy Spirit embodied in the phrase εν πνευματι. It is this εν πνευματι principle in the thinking of Paul which led him to use the word περιπατω to describe a system of life for the Christian whereby he lives in constant fellowship with the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:25): "If we live by the Spirit, by the Spirit also let us be guided." Galatians 5:25 seems to suggest that a man who claims to be living in the Spirit must show by his life style that he is being guided by the Spirit of God. The key phrase here is εν πνευματι (Ejenobo, 2009:72). It is from the standpoint of a life lived in the Spirit that Paul interprets the whole of salvation history. This is why Christology only has meaning in Paul when viewed from the point of view of his Pneumatology. (Dunn, Jesus, 1973:54)

One is not positing that it is possible to understand all that Paul says on all doctrines from the point of view of his εν πνευματι principle. Rather, it seems as if one gets a clearer insight into the thinking of Paul on a lot of subjects when one has this principle at the back of his mind in seeking to interpret him. Paul was the theologian of the Spirit. He looked at life from the standpoint of the Spirit. For Paul, the Christian life is a life εν πνευματι, a life of mystical union between the spirit of man and the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

The central message of Paul in Romans Chapters 1-8 was on the plan of salvation. Man in Adam had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Man in Christ has faith and is justified in the sight to God. However, the man that is justified must live the life of Christ. For Paul no one can live the life of Christ unless he is under the constant control of the Spirit of Christ. This is what we refer to as the

εν πνεύματι principle in the theology of the Paul. In bringing this brief study to a close, it is pertinent at this point to make some very salient observations in connection with the mystical elements in Paul's theology of the Holy Spirit in a bid to drive home the fact that righteous living for Paul was not matter to understood lightly.

1. When Paul met the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus, something happened to him which completely changed his life. He had an encounter with God which revolutionized his theological conception. From that point in time, Paul's concept of God was mystical to the core. He held tenaciously to the reality of a living union with God. God was no longer an abstract phenomenon to Paul. He could therefore say that he received his commission to preach the Gospel, not from man, nor through man, but from God (Gal. 1:10f). In this sense, Paul was a mystic comparable to any of the great Old Testament Prophets. Those Prophets met God and said, "Thus said the Lord." If Elijah were not a mystic in this sense of the word, he could not have achieved all that he did. The same applies to Amos and Jeremiah. Amos was so conscious of the hand of God upon his life to preach that when the professional Prophet Amaziah confronted him, he said:

I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet. But I was a herdsman, and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said to me "Go prophesy to My people Israel." (Amos 7:14-15)

Can it be denied that the experience of Amos here narrated is similar in essence to that which Paul described of himself in Galatians 1:15ff? It is possible for some to argue that such experiences are reserved for a few. That may be true in the sense that Isaiah, Elijah, Amos, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul (and a host of others) received special commissions from the Lord. However, the point to note here is the mystical character of Paul's encounter with God. It is time theologians lay more emphasis on this mystical element in Paul's theology of the Holy Spirit.

2. Conversion for Paul is a mystical experience, one in which a person became completely identified with Christ, the Risen Lord. When Paul said that he had been crucified with Christ, he is definitely not referring to the literal crucifixion on the Cross of Calvary. He was not even there when that event took place. Rather, the idea being conveyed is that Paul so fully identified himself with the work of

Christ on Calvary that he appropriated it to himself in a personal manner. In doing so, he now entered into a mystical union with Christ, such that he could say that he had been crucified with Christ. Christ's crucifixion becomes his, and Christ's death became his death.

On the basis of this, Paul could say in II Corinthians 5:17 that anyone who is in Christ Jesus has become a new creation. The concept here goes back to the Genesis story and the breath of God as the agent of creation. However, the breath of God is the same thing as the Spirit of God. The touch of the Holy Spirit upon a human life when such a person comes to faith in the God revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings about this new creation. This new creation results in a kind of spiritual heart-transplant such that the natural man is now regarded as a spiritual man, because having now surrendered to the Holy Spirit, he lives in union with Him. According to Moe (1954:255) "although Paul considers Christ's death as a vicarious suffering of punishment, it is not his idea that its purely passive aspect or the suffering of death as such gives its atoning force." Rather, it is only as the sinner applies the death of Christ to his personal life that the meaning and significance of the death of Christ will become apparent in his life. In the words of Conner, (1954:94) "Paul sets out the death and resurrection of Christ as the pattern and dynamic of a new life for men."

Since much emphasis has not been laid on the mystical side of the conversion experience, a lot of people believe today that it is one thing to be a Christian and another thing to be a Spirit-filled Christian. This accounts for the dichotomy between conversion and sanctification by members of the Pentecostal movement worldwide, on the one hand, and the numerous people who confuse attending church on Sundays with living the Christian life on the other. Perhaps it was this type of dichotomy, which led John Wesley to teach the concept of a second blessing subsequent to conversion. Wesley perceived that even though people went to church and professed faith in Christ, their lifestyle did not show the power and dynamism that is expected of a man who had the power of the Holy Spirit living in him.

There is no doubt that before the Holiness Movements gained ground both in Europe and the United States of America, there existed a gross dichotomy between practical Christian living and profession of faith in Christ. More often than not, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is

not presented in such a way as to make it clear to men that when they come to faith in Christ, it is the Holy Spirit who brings them into the new life found in Christ, and that the relationship that should exist between them and the Holy Spirit should be mystical, that of a spiritual fusion between the spirit of man and that of the Spirit of God. It would appear that the negative connotation of the word mysticism has made some theologians to run away from using it in describing what happens with the Spirit of Christ is united with the spirit of a man. Conversion needs to be interpreted purely as a mystical event, else it will lose its spiritual implications.

Nothing short of such a definition of conversion would satisfy the yearnings of men and women who are thirsty for a personal God today. The Euro-American Church called those who yearned for this dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit the Holiness People. Today they are called Pentecostals or Charismatics. By whatever name they are called, these people are calling attention to the fact that conversion in the time of Paul involved a radical transformation of a man's personality in a way that can only be described as a mystical encounter with the Holy Spirit. It is the emphasis on the radical transformation of character that is absent in our teaching on the new life that makes people to believe that they can come to church on Sundays and pretend to be Christians and then go out the remaining six days of the week and live as they wish. This is not the teaching of Paul. And that is not true Christianity.

3. For a Christian who lives in the assurance of salvation as described by Paul in the early part of Romans, living a righteous life in the Spirit becomes second nature. Since he does not and cannot walk in sin, he has to walk in righteousness. It is the confidence that he has been set free from the law of sin and death that motivates the Christian to live the righteous life. Through the power of the indwelling Spirit as described by Paul in the *εν πνευματι* principle, the Christian lives a life of righteousness which becomes a mirror to the world. It is within this context that the statement of Jesus in Matthew 5:14 can be properly understood. Jesus told His disciples: "You are the light of the world." It is only as Christians live the righteous life that is enabled by living in the Spirit that the world will see the true light of moral living that will change the world. That is

what the world needs today: men and women who by living in Christ change the moral lifestyle of the society in which they live.

For Paul, since the Holy Spirit is a dynamic Person, everyone He indwells must live a dynamic life. There is nothing like passive Christianity in the theology of Paul as found in his Epistle to the Romans. At conversion, God in His eternal being as Spirit reveals Himself anew to the spirit of an individual. From that point in time that person enters into a new mystical relationship with the Spirit of God. This is the implication of the $\epsilon\nu\ \pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\tau\iota$ principle in Pauline theology. No man indwelt by the Holy Spirit can live a life of sin. He is empowered to live the life of Christ. He is empowered to fulfill the law of God; to live a new way of life which unconverted men fail to live. He is empowered to be the light of the world. God expects nothing less from those who claim to have been justified by faith and saved by grace.

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