

WRESTLING WITH THE “LAW OF SIN”

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In reviewing K. C. Moser’s book, *The Way of Salvation*, I am primarily interested in what I believe to be erroneous concepts of fundamental doctrines. The book is not Calvinistic in the classic sense of the word, certainly not consistently so—but is tinted with errors associated with Calvinism. Because of current interest in these themes, and because this book is receiving renewed attention, its review serves as a vehicle for a restudy of many vital matters.

We have already discussed the “*nature*” of man, but more needs to be said about this “law of sin” which Moser views as a counterpart to the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit (pp. 21, 71, 134). He sees it as something IN man, which “refuses to permit man to obey God as he should” (p. 133), and “overcame every determination to do right” (p. 134). The issue here is *man’s capability* to come to God, and to serve Him—perhaps the most basic issue in Calvinism. With complete honesty, Moser would likely deny any charge of teaching “total depravity”. But his statements reveal a concept of some force preventing man from serving God, which *God* must replace with a force, enabling man to serve. A classic Calvinist would surely ask Moser how the unregenerated man could “repent and believe” under such pressure. More important, the young disciples of Moser’s concept might be pushed back to accept direct operation of the Holy Spirit in conversion. After all, Moser says, “Man is even now unfit for Christianity until he is ‘born from above’, until the crucifixion of the ‘law of sin’” (p. 21).

Moser rightly teaches that man is justified by faith, not by law. But he shows a typically Calvinistic hang-up on the subject of “law”. He seems to make *any* “doing” an effort to “save ourselves”. He is unwilling to strike out the necessity for obedience, or a faithful life; but he manages to view this in a way that gives God the initiative, and leaves man a pawn in the power of either the “law of sin” or the personally indwelling Holy Spirit. Distinctions here may seem rather subtle, but we are riding the fulcrum between free will and election.

On page 148 Moser says,

“Grace does not simply bind on man a new set of obligations and expect him of his own strength to meet them. This would but seal his condemnation. Instead, justification through Jesus Christ provides a basis of righteousness.”

If I were writing that statement I would have in mind the forgiveness of man’s failure, through Jesus Christ. But Moser has a different line of thought. His “basis of righteousness” is, “First lust is crucified, and then the Holy Spirit is given to help in his (man’s—RT) fight against sin.” He has told us (pp. 18-19) that the “old man” or the “law of sin” was crucified; and further (p. 71) that “The Holy Spirit is given the child of God for the purpose of crucifying lust and thus enabling man to live righteously.” Now

he says, "Lust is killed to the extent that many by the assistance of the indwelling Spirit can live a holy life." Thus faithfulness, hence preservation, is made to depend upon an immediate operation of God's Spirit within the individual. He says (p. 74),

"Christianity is a law in the sense of imposing upon man obligations. These obligations, however can be met; and hence man is not left in bondage as he was under the law of Moses. Simple law, such as that of Moses, enslaved because the "law of sin" in man is left unconquered. But grace crucifies this "old man" and hence makes it possible for its obligations to be met, thus leaving man free."

I fully agree that God saves, and that the power unto salvation is in the gospel, the glad tidings concerning Jesus Christ. But I believe this gospel is universally available, and its appropriation is left to man's choice. Open your Bible and let us study the "*old man*" and "*law of sin*" from Romans 6 and 7.

Paul asked Christians, "*Shall we continue in sin?*" This clearly infers that they *could* do so. When he answers, "*God forbid,*" and says we are "*dead to sin,*" he means we have indicated our *intent*, we have promised or covenanted with God to quit sin certainly not that we have no further ability to sin. How did we show this intent, or seal this covenant? By our symbolic *death*, being baptized "*into death*" when we were baptized into Jesus Christ. As Jesus was crucified, buried, and arose again to "*live unto God;...likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (v. 11). Note, "*reckon yourselves*" ("consider yourselves" RSV) "*dead to sin.*" He is calling upon them to honor their part of the covenant. Now, *what* is dead? Paul says (v. 6), "*our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.*" The "*old man*" is simply the way they once lived "*ye were servants of sin*" (v. 17), "*ye (once) yielded your members servants to uncleanness*" (v. 19). This past has been forgiven, and they are to "*consider*" it dead; the thought being not so much the past deeds, as the past life that produced them. Paul nowhere argues the "*death*" of the "*old man*" as indicating they *could not* again be dominated by sin. On the contrary, he pleads with them that they not let this happen. Paul knows the "*death*" was symbolic, and urges them to honor the meaning of the symbol (See also Rom. 7:4).

But Rom. 6:14 reads, "*For sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the law, but under grace.*" Here Paul refers to the basic difference in "*law*" and "*grace,*" as means of justification. Moser sees grace as "crucifying the old man" and "enabling" him to keep the new law; while I see it as providing the means of forgiveness, thereby removing man from the dominion of sin. There are *two* ways in which sin had "*dominion*". First, it is the characteristic of sin, whether practiced by alien or one baptized, to enslave. Obvious examples are found in alcohol, drugs, and sexual deviations; or the multiplying tendency of deceit, theft, etc., all exacting their wages (Rom. 1:24, 27). Paul is not referring to that kind of dominion in 6:14, for he has just warned them about letting sin "*reign*" in their mortal bodies. *That* power of sin remained.

However, there was another “*dominion*” that sin worked *by means of “law”*. Under a *system of law* (to be discussed in future article), “*sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me*” (Rom. 7:11). Under a system of law—law alone—one could be justified (free of guilt) only through perfect obedience. (“*Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them*”—Gal. 3:10). Grace delivered us from dominion which sin, by means of a system of law, exercised. (Christ became a curse for us, dying on the cross—Gal. 3:13). In Rom. 6:14 Paul reminds brethren that the dominion which sin exercised under a system of law, is now broken. All the more reason for them to “*yield your members servants to righteousness.*”

To sum up Moser’s scattered and confused theology we note: he says, “man can exchange the ‘law of sin’ (the ‘principle of sin in man’, p. 73) for the ‘law of the Spirit’” (p. 19). He says the “law of the Spirit” is the “Spirit in man” and is the *source* of this new tendency toward righteousness (p. 73). But he says the “Spirit in man” is the personally indwelling Holy Spirit (pp. 135, 137), and specifically denies that reference is to the word of God (p. 131). Then after many pages of saying the Holy Spirit IN us does this and that, he says (p. 139), “The person being influenced by the Spirit brings forth these graces.” If the word is not under consideration, then the influence must be immediate, and the Calvinistic questions are upon us. Does this not make God’s direct or immediate influence the means of preservation? When God so acts, does He ever fail?

Although I feel certain brother Moser had no intention of doing so, his efforts to uphold his belief in the personally indwelling Holy Spirit have led him to seriously question the free will and agency of man. I don’t know how he would explain the presence of “*good*” soil for the seed of the kingdom (Lk. 8:15), and it is difficult to see how he could explain apostasy of falling from grace, *and remain consistent with the many loose statements made in “Way of Salvation”*.

Somehow we have failed to teach and stress the power exercised by the Holy Spirit through the instrument divinely assigned, i.e., God’s word. That which brought the heavens and earth into existence, and now maintains them against the day of Judgment (2 Pet. 3:5-7); which signaled all mankind with “*Let us make...*” (Gen. 1:26); which is “*quick and powerful...a discerner of the thoughts and intents*” of man’s heart (Heb. 4:12);--surely, that word can do the work God has assigned it to do with respect to reaching sinful man, and pointing him to light.

The “*law of sin*” with which man wrestles is the sinful inclinations of a life pattern, established through what one might call social heredity. We are, without choice, born into a sin-cursed world. (I believe that is what David referred to in Psalms 51:5) We are “*by nature*” (i.e., the influence of social patterns) children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). But *individual responsibility* for sin remains (Jno. 9:39-41; 15:22). The prodigal son exercised his will as he “*wasted his substance with riotous living*” and when he determined to return

to his Father (Lk. 15:13, 17-19). This does not mean he “saved himself”. He stood condemned by law and justice. But the love and mercy of the Father was his to enjoy only *when he had returned*, humbled and penitent. The “great commission” to a lost world (Matt. 28:19f; Mk. 16:15-16; Lk. 24:46-48) tells us of God’s love and sacrifice on our behalf, but calls upon man to *turn* (wrestle with and break away from sinful conduct) and *come* to Christ.

One thing man *can* do, and that is to *trust in Christ*. Moser states this quite well, and his book should be appreciated for many passages on this subject. It is most regrettable that he could not separate man’s coming, trusting, and living a faithful life, from his erroneous excursions into the realm of direct and immediate influence of the Holy Spirit. And man *can* wrestle with his sinful inclinations. His will, his intent can be to serve God. The hopeless, helplessness of such a struggle (as in Paul’s illustration, Rom. 7:14-24), was not in his inability to *will* to do rightly, nor to *do* rightly some of the time; but in the lack of a means of forgiveness when he did fail. The law “*was weak through the flesh*” (8:2), but grace provided forgiveness by the sacrifice of Christ. This in no way negates man’s responsibility to do what he can to serve the Savior who died for him. Rather, it encourages us to wrestle with greater determination—not with pride in self-achievement, but in gratitude for Jesus Christ, our only hope.

(*Vanguard*, Vol. 2, No. 8, Oct. 28, 1976)