

DEFINING THE IDENTITY OF THE CHRISTIAN “I”
 BETWEEN THE ALREADY AND THE NOT YET: IN
 REVIEW OF WILL N. TIMMINS’S *ROMANS 7 AND CHRISTIAN
 IDENTITY*

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IN HIS RECENT MONOGRAPH, Will Timmins has plunged into the perennially debated question of whose voice is represented by the “I” who speaks in Romans 7:7–25.¹ The monograph constitutes a revised version of a Cambridge dissertation completed under the supervision of Dr. Peter Head. Readers of this journal may be most familiar with debates over whether the first-person statements in this section of Romans represent Paul expressing his Christian experience or earlier experience before his conversion. But, while those interpretative options are given some consideration in Timmins’s volume at various points, the programmatic concern of the book is really to interact with and undermine a more recent viewpoint championed by Stanley Stowers, and followed by many since, that the “I” does not speak in Paul’s own voice at all but instead represents the voice of an imaginary (or “fictive”) interlocutor that Paul dialogues with at various points in Romans (e.g., Rom. 2:1–5).² In Stowers’s view, this interlocutor is a Gentile who lacks self-mastery and believes the solution for this is to adopt customs from the Jewish law, such as circumcision, to help him form greater character and moral continence—a viewpoint with which Paul’s law-free mission to the Gentiles strongly disagrees. Throughout Timmins’s monograph, Stowers’s influential thesis is of central concern, while other, more traditional debates remain of decidedly secondary importance. In response to Stowers and others, Timmins argues that the “I” of Romans 7 represents Paul’s own voice describing his own experience as a Christian. Yet, that experience

1. Will N. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity: A Study of the ‘I’ in its Literary Context*, SNTSMS 170 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

2. See especially Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) and idem, “Romans 7:7-25 as a Speech-in-Character (προσωποποιία),” in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 180–202. For a broader treatment by Stowers regarding Paul’s use of diatribe in Romans, of which speech-in-character is a constitutive part, see also his earlier work, *The Diatribe and Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

is also typical of Christian experience in general, and he lays out various reasons in support of that view across the seven chapters. In general, the main lines of his approach to the whole topic are quite welcome and are a large part of what drew me to want to read and review the volume. Of particular note, regarding this approach, are the ways in which Timmins: (1) emphasizes the importance of defining the “I” by careful analysis of the “literary-argumentative” flow of thought within Romans itself, rather than primarily by debating various possible religio-historical backgrounds testified to within the broader Jewish or Greco-Roman marketplace of ideas outside of Romans; (2) pays considerable attention to the issue of the “already” and the “not yet” in the Christian life for Paul, meaning the extent to which God’s redemptive and sanctifying purposes are “already” realized in the life of a believer or “not yet” fully realized, the combination of which produces a mixed condition in the believer’s life (being partly sanctified and yet still sinful), to which the tension experienced by the “I” in Romans 7 can then be compared and contrasted; and also (3) pays considerable attention to the anthropological distinction between what is “internal” (the inner man, the mind, etc.) and what is “external” (the flesh, the body, etc.), especially in chapters 6 and 7, as it helps define how and in what ways the “already” and the “not yet” should in fact be understood. These aspects of Timmins’s approach to chapter 7 heightened my own expectations as a reader. Yet, while I found certain aspects of the resulting treatment of chapter 7 quite helpful, making me significantly more sympathetic toward his preferred position, several aspects of his treatment that remained unsatisfying, which readers who already *agree* with Timmins’s overall conclusions about the “I” of chapter 7 that one would especially do well to consider as they grapple with the apostle Paul’s own theology and approach to pastoral care.

The monograph begins with a short chapter of introduction, which briefly lays out some features of past scholarship and Timmins’s own approach. Nothing approaching a history or even a representative survey of past scholarship appears here. Rather, Timmins focuses on select developments in past scholarship that led to Stowers’s “fictive interlocutor” thesis and then highlights some big-picture interpretative options related to that. Of particular importance before Stowers is the interpretive observation made by W. Kümmel regarding how aspects of chapter 7 are difficult to relate to Paul’s own biography,³ such as when Paul was ever “without the Law” (Rom. 7:9) in his own life (see Phil. 3:5), and how to relate the very pessimistic-sounding voice of Romans 7:14–25 with Paul’s own personal experience as a believer, or even with his relatively positive descriptions elsewhere of his experience of the law when still an unbeliever (e.g., Phil. 3:6). Responding to past scholarship, Timmins identifies three interpretive options concerning the identity of the “I” in Romans 7: it is a personal “I” (meaning that Paul describes his own experience), a typical “I” (meaning that Paul describes an experience that is typical of Christians, however much it does or does not directly correspond in detail to his

3. See Werner Kümmel’s very influential, “Römer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus,” in *Römer 7 und das Bild des Menschen im Neuen Testament: Zwei Studien* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1974), 1–160.

own), or a fictive “I” (meaning that Paul adopts a fictive interlocutor’s voice to describe an experience that is specifically not his own). This set of choices comes to be of programmatic importance for the book as a whole, informing what options it regularly considers and how Timmins constructs his argument. However, Timmins also asserts from the beginning that the personal and typical interpretations are not mutually exclusive—and he will go on to contend for a combination of those two—wherein Paul describes his personal experience as it is meant to illustrate something typical or paradigmatic of the Christian experience in general. This aspect of Timmins’s discussion, where he tries to show how Paul’s descriptions of himself are not just information about him but purposefully function paradigmatically for Christians more broadly, is quite helpful at times as a way of highlighting Paul’s rhetorical effort in Romans, not just to describe himself in a general way but to shape how the Romans also view themselves.

At the same time, though, while the limited number of options that Timmins focuses on—three options, with two of them then combined—help concentrate his argument around undermining the fictive “I” interpretation, it also betrays a significant weakness of the book, since the book’s narrow focus leads to some valid interpretive questions and possibilities being too greatly overshadowed or not given much consideration at all. Perhaps most important among the overshadowed possibilities is the question of whether the “I,” even if it is both personal and paradigmatic, represents the experience of a person before or after union with Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Even if Paul is describing his own experience as something that is also paradigmatic for others, as Timmins argues with considerable persuasive power, is it Paul’s experience pre- or post-conversion? Unfortunately, this question often goes underexplored along the way, possibly because Timmins asserts early on that Mark Seifrid has decisively dismantled the pre-conversion reading of Romans 7.⁴ Even more broadly, though, other interpretive choices also go unmentioned or get very little consideration. For example, the book gives very little direct treatment of whether the “I” of 7:7–13 is the same as the one in 7:14–25. Related to this is the fact that the history of scholarship bears testimony to quite a few views (far more than just three) about the identity of the “I” in each part of the passage in chapter 7. For example, in his landmark commentary, Charles Cranfield lists six different views of the “I” in 7:7–13 and seven in 7:14–25.⁵ More recently, Arland Hultgren has listed eight views of the “I” in the passage as a whole, at least three of which were not mentioned by Cranfield (partly because some of them are more recent).⁶ Yet Timmins’s treatment simply does not engage such a breadth of views, and at times even fails to give significant attention to some of the most

4. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 5. Here he appeals to Mark A. Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom. 7:14–25,” *NovT* 34.4 (1992): 313–333, as well as Seifrid’s *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992).

5. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1981), I:342–344.

6. Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 684.

common of these past interpretations. As a result, his exegetical assertions at various points in his argument also prove to be quite one-sided. They are geared especially toward undermining Stowers but in a way that also ends up predisposing the direction of the argument toward Timmins's own preferred outcome without sufficiently considering additional, viable interpretative possibilities. Unfortunately, this often makes his otherwise thought-provoking discussion less thorough and therefore less persuasive, since legitimate interpretive questions are still lingering by the end of the book. When grappling with a passage as complex as 7:7–25, where small distinctions or shifts in interpretive perspective sometimes have a big impact on final results, the narrow scope of much of Timmins's argumentation is therefore particularly regrettable.

True to the book's focus on disproving Stowers's views, though, chapter 2 offers an extended critical assessment of the fictive "I" hypothesis. This begins with a close look at citations that Stowers appeals to from ancient rhetoricians like Quintilian and Longinus. Timmins claims they do not contain rhetoric sufficiently like Paul's in Romans 7 to support saying that Paul adopts speech-in-character beginning in 7:7. On the contrary, Timmins argues that 7:7 does not signal a change in voice from Paul's to someone else's. In particular, at this point, Timmins emphasizes how the opening question, "What shall we say?" in 7:7 and the answer that follows shortly thereafter, "By no means," both echo the same question and answer in 6:1–2, which clearly represented Paul's own voice. This, Timmins suggests, supports taking 7:7 as Paul's own voice as well. Timmins also heavily critiques Stowers's suggestion that the "I" in 7:7 needs no introduction at that point in Romans because the same Gentile interlocutor had already appeared earlier in the letter in 2:1–16. Against this, Timmins maintains that the interlocutor in 2:1–16 is actually Jewish rather than Gentile (thus diminishing the resemblance to the interlocutor Stowers purports to see in 7:7ff.), points out that Stowers himself sees the voice of a different interlocutor (namely, the clearly Jewish one in 2:17–29) imposing itself between 2:1–16 and 7:7 (making the need for clear re-introduction of a Gentile voice in 7:7 greater), suggests that the "I" in chapter 7 actually has more in common with the second voice that appears in chapter 2 than with the first one, and then asserts that, more than either of the interlocutors in chapter 2, the "I" in chapter 7 actually has the most in common with how Paul describes Christians themselves in chapters 5–6. While not everyone will agree with various of Timmins's views of chapter 2 itself, the exegetical points he raises do broach significant challenges to Stowers's position.

In chapter 3, Timmins next turns, somewhat surprisingly, to an exegetical treatment of 3:7 and the first-person singular pronouns that appear there, which he believes are examples of Paul using a representative/typical "I" that therefore provides a precedent for the "I" later in 7:7–25 being understood in the same way. Toward that end, Timmins first provides helpful argumentation showing that 3:1–8 does not consist of a dialogue between Paul and an interlocutor, as Stowers and others have maintained, but all consists of Paul speaking in his own voice instead. The reasons Timmins provides for this include that the singular "you" addressing the interlocutor(s) in chapter 2 disappears entirely after 2:27, that there are no clear

markers to indicate change back and forth between speakers in 3:1–8, and that, as a result, attempted reconstructions of dialogue in 3:1–8 have produced entirely conflicting results regarding when Paul or a supposed interlocutor is thought to be speaking.⁷ After that, Timmins instead tries to show that the “I” of 3:7 represents Paul speaking as a representative of all humanity, not just himself or just Jews, which Timmins supports especially on appeal to the notion that Paul had broadened out the scope of his concern to a truly universal one regarding all people (not just Jews) by his mention of “every person” in 3:4 (“Let God be true and every person a liar”). For Timmins, this phrase shows that the issue at hand by the point 3:7 arrives is the guilt of every person, not just the ethnocentrism of some Jews, as some New Perspective and other recent interpreters have maintained.

However, as much as one may generally sympathize with Timmins’s resistance to those who focus overly much on the problem of Jewish ethnocentrism in Romans 3 rather than on the broader and deeper problem of human guilt, Timmins’s interpretation of 3:7 and context is still quite weak since it overlooks or greatly diminishes some crucial aspects of the larger passage. Of particular note is how he distances the “I” of 3:7 from the opening question of the passage regarding the advantage of the Jew and circumcision (3:1), Paul’s answer regarding Jewish privilege (3:2), the follow-up question about the obvious sin of some Jews (3:3), the fact that Paul specifically appeals to the description in Psalm 51 of the transgression of one notable Jew, David (whose distinctively Jewish line of descent was already highlighted in Rom. 1:3), and the obvious first-person references to Paul and his own experiences in the ministry in 3:8. The last of these is especially problematic for Timmins’s argument. In a monograph that gives such frequent attention to pronouns, ignoring the first-person plural that clearly refers to Paul himself in 3:8 and shows Paul’s immediate concern to defend his own ministry in that context is a major oversight since the language in 3:8 makes the first-person references in 3:7 read much more naturally as a specific reference to Paul’s own individual experiences. Moreover, given Timmins’s overarching desire to offer an “integrative, construction interpretation of the ‘I’ [that] bears the marks of literary-argumentative coherence,”⁸ the fact that so many features of 3:1–8 get little or no attention in his treatment stands out as especially concerning. In addition to all of that, the significant rhetorical distance between the “I” in 3:7 and the one in 7:7 also makes the relevance of the former for determining the meaning of the latter seem fairly doubtful anyway, much like with Stowers’s arguments for reading 7:7 in direct connection with 2:1–16, a feature of Stowers’s argument that Timmins had previously critiqued.

Next in chapter 4, Timmins turns to Romans 5–6 to begin showing that Paul’s description there of the present, ongoing condition of believers after their conversion

7. For a table that gives a fuller, visual representation of scholarly disagreements over who is speaking when in a supposed dialogue in Romans 3:1–8, as well as for broader analysis regarding why Romans 3:1–8 are not written as a dialogue (or diatribe) at all, see Marcus A. Mininger, *Uncovering the Theme of Revelation in Romans 1:16–3:26: Discovering a New Approach to Paul’s Argument*, WUNT 2:445 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 278–280.

8. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 200.

is not, in fact, incompatible with how Paul later describes the tensions that exist in the life of the “I” in chapter 7. Here Timmins details how, even though believers are described as already rescued out from under the dominion of sin in chapters 5 and 6 (e.g., 6:2, 6, 11, 14, 18, 22), nevertheless Paul still describes ways in which the new work of God has not yet come to fruition in their lives, particularly since their mortal bodies or flesh continue to be weak and the location of sin’s desires (e.g., 6:12, 19). As noted before, such attention to both the “already” and “not yet” of salvation is quite welcome, as is Timmins’s attention to how Paul especially associates the “not yet” with the present condition of the Christian’s body.

At the same time, though, while Timmins is to be commended for addressing the already/not yet tension directly in this way, his specific conclusions about this topic also lack clarity at important points. They overlook key parts of Paul’s own descriptions of the Christian condition in ways that are very important for interpreters of chapter 7 to keep in mind.

For example, he concludes from the elements of “not yet” described in Romans 5 and 6 that believers presently experience a “double participation in both Adam and Christ,”⁹ which could seem to suggest, quite problematically, that believers have two federal heads simultaneously. Yet Paul never describes believers’ relation to Adam and Christ as having equal bearing upon their standing and condition now, as if believers could equally be said to exist “in Adam” (something Paul never says) and “in Christ” (something which he constantly emphasizes), rather than their having been transferred out from under the federal headship of the one into that of the other.

More than that, Timmins repeatedly describes the “not yet” of believers’ existence by insisting that the redemptive work of God always remains entirely “extrinsic” to them,¹⁰ something that defines their relationship to God at present but does not entail a change in their anthropological condition.¹¹ Elsewhere, in the important last line of his book, he even appropriates Martin Luther’s language to expound upon this point, saying that everything good for the Christian presently remains “outside of us, and that good is Christ.”¹² However, such language about grace, Christ, and the result of God’s work remaining “extrinsic” to or “outside of” the Christian hardly does full justice to Paul’s language in Romans and elsewhere, where he clearly describes God’s present work “within” believers and the genuine results of that work already being realized in an inward condition that is decisively changed in crucial ways now. Just in Romans, for example, Paul describes the love of God having been poured out within believers’ hearts (5:5), Christ being in them (8:10), and their minds being progressively renewed as a result of the gospel (12:2). In addition, this reality of Christ being “in” believers is due to the Spirit “dwelling” within them (8:9), the Spirit who does an internal work that both calls forth and enables the cry “Abba, Father” to issue forth from within believers themselves (8:15).

9. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 68.

10. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 74, 82.

11. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 90.

12. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 210.

So then, instead of simply saying that God’s work remains extrinsic to or outside of the believer, Paul repeatedly affirms that the work of God is most definitely “within” the believer, that is, something both happening inside and having its decisive effect upon the believer’s “inner man” (mind/soul/spirit/heart). Moreover, this inward work and changed inward condition for believers is contrasted with the continuing condition of the “outer man” or body, which does remain untransformed and is still beset with desires until the future work of bodily resurrection and transformation on the last day. As 8:10 puts it, “If Christ is *in* you, the body is dead on account of sin, but the Spirit [note: the Spirit who now dwells within (8:9)] is life on account of righteousness.” Or, as he puts it even more categorically in 2 Corinthians 4:16, “Though our outer man is wasting away, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.”¹³ Importantly, such passages clearly describe not just something about a believer’s status or relationship to God but also something about the believer’s changed anthropological condition at the present time, thereby showing that the work of God, while by no means complete, has nevertheless produced and continues to produce a decisive internal change in the believer “already.”

On reflection, while Timmins aptly notes how Paul locates the continued effects of sin in believers’ bodies, he fails to note how that ongoing bodily condition of “not yet” stands in contrast with what God has “already” done and continues to do within each believer now. As a result, while it would be appropriate to say that the new, inward work of God remains something not native or natural to the believer in himself (i.e., it always remains an “alien” work done by a divine power that is foreign to the believer’s own constitution or abilities), still that same supernatural work, originating from outside the believer and done by a power not his own, nevertheless terminates upon and produces true effects *within* the believer, changing his anthropological condition in important, if still limited ways. So then, rather than taking Luther’s verbiage about Christ being “outside of” the believer as an overarching description of a believer’s present condition, it is far more faithful to Paul’s own discourse to recognize with John Calvin that, “as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us,” which is why it is of paramount importance that Christ and his work do not remain simply outside of the believer. Rather, the believer is united to Christ by the presence and powerful working of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in an ongoing way in each child of God, bringing the believer to life inwardly and enabling him to engage the fight against the sin that nevertheless still dwells in his own members.¹⁴

13. For helpful reflection, prompted especially by 2 Cor. 4:17, on how the “already” and “not yet” of salvation must be understood in relation to the distinction between the “internal” and “external” in believers, see especially Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 53–75.

14. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967), I:537.

Yet, of course, this way of putting things, in dependence upon Paul's own language, also highlights one of the main exegetical difficulties with interpreting Romans 7:7–25 as a description of the Christian condition. After all, it is precisely this inward work of God's Spirit, which creates and defines a believer's life in Christ, that is directly mentioned in 7:5–6 when clearly describing Christian experience but remains conspicuously absent from the lengthy description of the experience of the "I" in 7:7–25—only then to appear again in chapter 8. More than that, what Paul does describe in 7:7–25 sets forth a different sort of inward/outward tension than the one set forth elsewhere in Romans regarding believers. In place of the tension between the Spirit and the flesh in 7:5–6, by which Paul clearly contrasts the way he and the Romans *used to* live when they were "in the flesh" (i.e., before they were Christians) with how they should now live as Christians "in the newness of the Spirit," Romans 7:7–25 instead provides an extensive description of an "I" whose experience of the power of sin in his flesh (7:18, 23, 25) is contrasted, not with the inward presence of the Spirit, but only with the inward presence of the law (7:22, 23, 25)—something that hardly defines the essence of a distinctively *Christian* struggle with sin. Of course, in itself, this does not make it impossible that the "I" being described in 7:7–25 is a Christian, if the distinctively Christian aspects of a believer's condition and experience are for some reason being set to the side and left unmentioned for a stretch of time in Paul's argument. It is certainly possible, for example, that Paul is temporarily describing the experience of a Christian without reference to the Spirit in order to show the futility involved when even a *Christian* confronts sin merely through the inward resources and power provided by the Letter alone, as Timmins will go on to suggest later.¹⁵ However, this possibility must also be weighed against other considerations in and around the passage. Among those other considerations are not just the absence of the Spirit in 7:7–25 but the ways Paul repeatedly sets up temporal contrasts in the immediate context. Of particular note are how he contrasts Christian experience with a past life "when we were in the flesh" (7:5), overtly looks back to what "once" was for the "I" in times past (7:9; also note the past tense verbs throughout vv. 7–11 and 13), and then creates a strong contrast with what "now" is (8:1) regarding the work of the Spirit in the Christian (8:2ff.). All of this might seem to place a struggle against sin *without the Spirit*, like the "I" in 7:7–25 experiences, decisively into a new covenant believer's pre-conversion *past* rather than his ongoing present.

Of course, there is no doubt that many questions remain, which cannot be fully addressed here, about how to compare and contrast the tensions described in 7:7–25 with what Paul clearly says about Christians elsewhere. Indeed, there seem to be no interpretations of this complex passage that simply and effortlessly explain all the available evidence within and around it. As a result, the passage is and remains a genuinely challenging one.

Nevertheless, engaging fruitfully with the challenges in the passage certainly at least requires a more nuanced consideration of the Christian's present condition than simply saying the work of God remains entirely outside the believer and that 7:7–25

15. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 205.

shows how the ongoing condition of a believer is essentially unchanged from his pre-conversion state, as Timmins does. Indeed, to get more clarity, a noticeably more thorough and nuanced consideration of the “now” and the “not yet” would be needed. In the absence of that, though, Timmins’s treatment of chapters 5–6, together with his lack of any significant treatment of chapter 8 in the book, create an inadequate background for conducting a clear comparison and contrast between 7:7–25 and the material that immediately surrounds it in Paul’s letter. As a result of such weaknesses, Timmins’s argumentation often remains exegetically and theologically less persuasive than one would hope. One important lesson to draw from this is that avoiding optimistic overstatement about the “already” of the present Christian condition should not be accomplished by adopting an opposite overstatement about the “not yet” of present Christian existence.

Moving on to chapter 5 of the book, Timmins turns to a treatment of Romans 7:7–13. Of course, by jumping directly from Romans 6 to 7:7, Timmins elects not to provide any dedicated treatment of 7:1–6 at this juncture, even though those verses obviously provide a crucial part of the “literary-argumentative” context for 7:7ff. (something Timmins elsewhere emphasizes is quite important to his method and the value of his results). What is more, the verses being skipped also include the statements by Paul that contain some of the biggest counterevidences to Timmins’s preferred view of chapter 7. In addition, even when treating 7:7–13 themselves, Timmins curiously elects to proceed thematically, rather than in verse-by-verse order, and so looks in turn at the “discourse of the ‘I,’” the “experience of the ‘I,’” and then the “history of the ‘I.’” His stated rationale for proceeding thematically is that it reduces “the chance of giving undue weight to one aspect of Paul’s presentation.”¹⁶ However, in practice, this topical approach also allows him to front considerations that tend to support his desired conclusion, a fact which at times comes to be quite significant exegetically.

Such procedural concerns notwithstanding, Timmins does raise some valuable and instructive considerations about 7:7–13. In particular, his discussion of the “I” discourse highlights how the first-person pronoun’s appearance in 7:7 should not be studied in isolation. In fact, Paul had just used the first-person singular as recently as 7:4, where he addresses the Romans as “brothers of me” (i.e., my brothers), a phrase in which the first-person clearly refers to Paul himself in a way that also highlights his close relational connection to the Romans. In addition, Paul also used the first-person *plural* in the surrounding context, including in 7:4 (“in order that *we* may bear fruit”) and 7:6 (“*we* are released from the law”), all of which clearly refer to both Paul and the Romans. As a result, when 7:7 asks, “what then shall we say?” and follows that up with the singular “I would not have known,” these pronouns do not appear *de novo*. Still, they are most naturally understood in context as also referring to the Romans and Paul, respectively. Along with this, Timmins also points out how the “we” in 8:2 suggests that both Paul and the Romans are included among those who have been released from the tyranny of sin and death that 7:7–25 had just described. All of these contextual observations help underscore the implausibility of

16. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 92.

a fictive “I” interpretation and support seeing Paul speaking in his own voice instead. Beyond that, Timmins suggests, less helpfully, that Romans 5–8 evidence a pattern regarding what pronoun Paul predominately uses in successive sections (an argument that had too many crucial weaknesses to be persuasive). He also offers an extended comparison between 7:7–13 and Genesis 2–3 to show that the death of the “I” in the Romans 7 is individual and not that of corporate Israel, and then he contrasts 7:7–13 with chapter 5 to show that the “I” is not Adam but Paul portraying his own death after the likeness of Adam’s. Along the way, Timmins also speaks in favor of the view that the time when “I” was alive “without the Law” (7:9) likely refers to Paul’s childhood experience before his coming of age at his bar-mitzvah.¹⁷

But, while Timmins’s arguments against Stowers’s fictive “I” interpretation continue to be helpful, his arguments in favor of his own position often continue to be less satisfying. This includes the procedural concerns noted above regarding how he dips only selectively into aspects of 7:1–6 that might support his reading at this stage in his book while leaving other aspects of that earlier passage sidelined until much later. Also, Timmins makes frequent summary judgments about aspects of 7:7–13 that tend to slant his eventual interpretative outcome in favor of reading the “I” as a Christian. For example, he asserts that sin producing desire and sin producing death are concurrent, not consecutive experiences of the “I,”¹⁸ that desire and death are two results of sin instead of desire being something that causes death,¹⁹ and that the imperfect tense verb “I was not knowing” (7:7) describes an action that continues into the present for Paul.²⁰ Each of these interpretative judgments stated without significant argumentation, help make the experience of the “I” appear more similar to that of a Christian or remove obstacles toward seeing it that way, which predisposes the course of the argument to a certain conclusion and again shows how Timmins often gives less than full consideration to the possibility that the “I” might in fact principally describe Paul’s pre-conversion experience.

Finally, in chapter 6, Timmins turns directly to Romans 7:14–25, which he again pursues thematically, this time by looking at the “condition of ‘I,’” the “time of ‘I,’” and the “character of ‘I.’” The last of these provides comparative material in which Timmins shows similarities between the experience of the “I” of Romans 7 and that of Abraham, the voice of the psalmist in the Old Testament, and exilic Zion as described in Isa 50-51. However, these comparisons are largely illustrative of and depend upon the conclusions drawn in the previous two sections of the chapter, which we will focus on below.

When handling the “condition of ‘I,’” Timmins seeks to complete his argument that the “I” describes the ongoing condition of both Paul and all Christians with him. To do so, he first places considerable emphasis upon the suggestion that the term σάρκτινος in Romans 7:14 means “composed of flesh,” and refers to the material composition of Paul’s body, not to living according to or under the dominion of the flesh as the similar term σαρκικός often does. If true, this would help support saying

17. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 133.

18. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 107.

19. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 110.

20. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 113.

that the condition ascribed to the “I” in 7:14 is not equivalent to the state of being “in the flesh” attributed to the non-Christian in 7:5, thereby helping preserve the possibility that the “I” is indeed Christian. However, while such a distinction between the Greek in 7:5 and 14 is certainly possible in theory, σάρκιος can also just be used interchangeably with σαρκικός, as is evident in 1 Corinthians 3:1,3. Given this fact, a good argument could also be made for saying that the terminology in Romans 7:5 and 14 are actually just synonymous, and so 7:14 also describes the state of a non-believer. Next, Timmins addresses the language in 7:14 about the “I” “having been sold under sin,” seeking to distance it from Paul’s language in Romans 6 about how the Christian is no longer under the dominion of sin (e.g., 6:11, 14, 18, 22). Toward that end, Timmins says that Romans 6 and 7 use different metaphors, the former regarding government or statecraft and the latter regarding warfare, and that, while chapter 6 refers to sin as a power external to the human being, chapter 7 instead describes sin as a power at work internally.

Numerous exegetical problems arise here, though. First, why should language about government and warfare be separated, since governments usually wage wars? This distinction seems unlikely to bear the significance Timmins attaches to it. Second, Paul’s language about being “under sin” in 7:14 strongly resembles the language he used when describing “dominions” in chapter 6 (e.g., 6:14), and lordship language itself also continues into the early verses of chapter 7 itself in verses 1–3, which help set up the flesh-Spirit contrast in verses 4–6 that then leads to the discussion in verses 7–25. Again, then, the separation Timmins attempts to create between 7:14 and what precedes seems unjustified. Third, Timmins’s attempts to downplay the importance of the phrase “under sin” in 7:14 by attributing its presence merely to Paul’s use of some underlying Old Testament source and because it only occurs once in the passage²¹ are quite weak. In all, then, the particular arguments Timmins uses to distance chapter 6, which states that believers are not under sin’s lordship, from 7:14, which describes the “I” as “sold under sin,” remain unconvincing.

Additionally, Timmins’s effort to negotiate the meaning of the perfect tense of the participle “having been sold under sin” (πεπραμένος, 7:14) also produces problems. Appealing to the way a perfect tense verb can bring into view both a past action and an ongoing state of being that results from that action, Timmins suggests that πεπραμένος refers to “the [past] *event* of being sold that gave rise to the [ongoing] *condition* of fleshliness. Ἐγώ does not thereby say that he is a slave to sin, but he explains his fleshliness as a condition of being in captivity to sin.”²² One significant problem at this juncture is that this interpretation stands in direct tension with Timmins’s prior assertion that “fleshliness” in 7:14 means “composed of flesh,” an interpretation which he used previously to distance 7:14 from Paul’s description of pre-conversion life “in the flesh” in 7:5, but which he now apparently departs from to define “fleshliness” as “captivity to sin.” Beyond the mere issue of apparent interpretative inconsistency, though, a more fundamental problem emerges here that

21. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 146.

22. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 145.

is at the heart of what makes 7:14 difficult to interpret. In particular, how does being in ongoing “captivity to sin,” which Timmins here predicates of the Christian “I,” really differ substantively from being under sin’s lordship, which chapter 6 says is no longer the case for Christians? What, in the end, is the real difference between being under sin’s dominion or power, on the one hand, and being an ongoing captive to it, on the other?

In fairness to Timmins, his use of the phrase “captivity to sin” when interpreting 7:14 does at least do more justice to Paul’s word choice than some of the more generic language that interpreters sometimes revert to when interpreting the same verse. For example, Cranfield says that 7:14 describes how a Christian should not be deceived about “the fact of his continuing sinfulness.”²³ That way of putting things significantly waters down Paul’s own wording, which speaks not simply of a general “sinfulness” but of a “having been sold under sin.” Most people are clear that Christians are not yet perfect but still experience “continuing sinfulness,” as Cranfield’s somewhat vague language puts it. But Paul’s language is stronger than that. Yet in light of that stronger language, we must ask, is it correct to apply—or in what sense is it or is it not correct to apply—the category of ongoing “captivity to sin” to the Christian, as Timmins does? Unfortunately, while Timmins is to be commended for not watering down Paul’s word choice in 7:14, he still fails to make clear how such a state of ongoing captivity can be true of a Christian at the same time as the Christian’s not being “under sin” or its lordship, as Paul very clearly asserts regarding Christians earlier in the same letter.

Pointedly, then, Timmins’s lack of conceptual clarity on this topic creates significant problems for his attempted interpretation and again highlights the innate challenges involved in taking 7:14 as a description of post-conversion Christian existence, especially when read within the flow of Paul’s larger argument in Romans, as Timmins repeatedly emphasizes that he seeks to do. This is not to say that interpreting 7:14 as a description of a Christian is impossible or certainly wrong. It may still be correct, and some further reflections on how such a view might best be articulated will be offered later below, based in part on a closer look at the grammar of 7:14 itself. But in the meantime, the problems Timmins experiences in explaining how 7:14 could properly describe a Christian are significant to note, especially for those inclined toward such a reading themselves.

To reflect more deeply on this issue, we need to be clear how part of the interpretative challenge in 7:14 relates specifically to Paul’s choice of the word *ἐγώ* in this verse. Timmins’s whole monograph is stately designed to focus on this issue but actually receives insufficient consideration at this particular juncture of his argument. After all, it would be one thing to say, in keeping with chapter 6, that I as a Christian have been crucified with Christ through baptism (6:6) and yet still experience the presence and pernicious effects of sinful desires in my body (6:12). In a situation described that way, the ongoing presence and influence of sin in part of my person (namely, in my body) is made quite clear, which helps identify a definite element of “not yet” concerning the application of God’s redemptive work to me

23. Cranfield, *Romans*, I:358.

during this life. Indeed, I am not yet free from sin’s remaining influence since that influence is clearly present not just outside of me but in the members of my own body, which are part of me. Yet in a condition described in that way, “I” myself, in the core of my being, am also still clearly described as being redeemed from sin’s dominion at the same time. In other words, my “I,” and therefore the inner core of my personal identity is associated not with the remaining sin present in my flesh but with Christ himself, his death for me, and my death with him! What is therefore true of my body—that its desires are so often still sinful—is still not predicated on my “self” at the deepest and most defining levels of who I am. Instead, I experience a divided situation because, despite the definite presence of sin at work in my members, nevertheless my “old man” has been crucified (6:6), and the “I” of the Christian is no longer under sin or law (Gal. 2:19–20; cf. Rom. 6:11, 14 regarding “you”). In other words, the divided state as Paul describes it is one in which, despite what is true of the body, the “I” itself and therefore a Christian’s own identity still falls on the “not under sin’s lordship” side of the division rather than being thought of as in ongoing “captivity to sin.” Similarly, too in Romans 7:5–6, it is the Christian “we,” comprising Paul and other believers with him, who “once” existed “in the flesh” but “now” have been released from the law so that they might serve God in the newness of the Spirit.

Importantly then, in each of these Pauline descriptions, the pronoun identifying the Christian person is *not* what is “in the flesh” or “under sin,” even though certain *aspects* of the Christian person (particularly the body or outer man) still clearly experience and are even beset by the continuing presence and influence of sin. Put differently, Paul does not say that sin occupies or controls the Christian “I” (i.e., my person, the defining seat of who I am); instead, Christ dwells in “me” (Rom. 8:9–11; cf. Gal. 2:19–20). By comparison, sin’s desires are still present and at work in my person, but their location is in the body, which, though it is a part of who I am, is still not the essential component—the inner core—that defines my very nature and identity. This constitutes a significant difference from Timmins’s explanations of Paul.

Of course, for some, it is partly the strong language Paul uses in Romans 7:14 regarding sold-ness to sin that prompts them to see the “I” there as describing a non-Christian—one who is in fact still captive, unlike what chapter 6 says is the case for the Christian. But if one disagrees with that interpretation for various reasons and believes the “I” of 7:14 to be a Christian, then it becomes crucial, if one is to rectify 7:14 with what Paul clearly says of Christians elsewhere, to explain how what 7:14 says does not, in fact, apply to the Christian “I” itself, but only to something *about* the “I.” In other words, it is an essential feature of Paul’s descriptions elsewhere, where he does clearly and indisputably describe the Christian condition and identity, that the dominion of Christ and the dominion of sin are not equally ultimate, having equal purchase upon who the Christian “I” *is*. Consequently, those reading 7:14 as a description of a Christian must offer a clearer explanation of how the language about the “I” in 7:14 does not actually apply to the Christian *person* or inner man. Otherwise, the crucial Pauline distinction between what is true of my inner man or

me and what is true only of my body or outer members is overridden or thrown into confusion.

In short, the Christian “I” is not both redeemed from sin and under sin at the same time and in the same way. Neither does Paul’s language elsewhere ever suggest that he is. Nor should Christians ever be encouraged to think that way about themselves! Rather, it is vital to see that, even with the extent of a Christian’s ongoing sinfulness fully acknowledged, the work of Christ in him is still deeper and more fundamental—more defining of an identity—than the continuing presence of sin is, which is why that work reaches to and claims the Christian’s *personhood*, transferring “us” *ourselves* from the dominion of darkness to the dominion of his beloved Son (Col. 1:13), despite how many things *about* us remain imperfect, sinful, and awaiting greater transformation in the future.

It is consistently the case elsewhere, then, that Paul describes the Christian himself, the inner man, as united to Christ and only the outer person (which is still a real part of the Christian’s constitution but not the “inner core” that fundamentally defines him) as something still characterized by sin’s powerful working, something which the Christian “I” should therefore also resist and exercise mastery over by the Spirit’s enabling power (e.g., Rom. 6:12). And this asymmetry in Paul’s descriptions, within which redemptive grace already reaches to the Christian “I” or “inner man” to the degree that it does not yet reach to or transform his body or “outer man,” must therefore be adequately accounted for in any interpretation of 7:14. In Paul’s descriptions, both sin and grace are still present in a believer’s life, but they are not equally ultimate or equally defining, however sanctified or unsanctified any individual Christian may be as yet in this life. For this reason, Paul describes the Spirit of Christ as already making a partial but nevertheless authentic beginning to its transforming work, which has already brought about a real change of condition for that person, regenerating him at the core of who he is. By thus bringing about the firstfruits of his renewing work (8:23), the Spirit thereby also lays claim to the entire Christian person, establishing a beachhead in the war against sin—a real, though partial beginning of the broader work of renovation that continues during this life and will eventually be completed and extend even to the renovation of the body or outer man only at the final day of resurrection.

So then, in keeping with this broader Pauline way of viewing things, a Christian interpreter might legitimately believe that 7:14 describes something *about* himself and his own experience within the present “not yet” of God’s redemptive work, but he should not think that the soldness under sin mentioned in 7:14 describes his “self,” his “I,” in the same basic and defining way that the salvific work of being united to Christ by the Spirit does. For Paul, the Christian “self” belongs to and exists “in Christ,” even if the Christian’s body or flesh remains characterized by sin’s powerful presence and influence.

It is also important to realize how this Pauline distinction between the “I” and the outer man is absolutely crucial, not only for proper interpretation and theologizing but also for engaging the vital work of shepherding God’s people and the difficult, complex work of pastoral counseling that is a part of it. However deep and disturbing the effects of sin in a Christian’s life may no doubt still be (and they

are certainly that!), the Christian is still not to *identify* his “self,” or to have it identified by others, as ongoingly captive to sin in general or to any individual sin in particular, rather than as fundamentally redeemed from sin at the abiding, God-renewed core of who he is. At base, then, the Christian’s “I” is not an addict, a homosexual, a philanderer, a thief, or any other thing that is defined by sin and its power. In fact, to say otherwise is really (even if unwittingly) to give in to the notion that my identity and “who I am” at my core is not defined most basically by Jesus Christ’s grace and lordship now—a claim that, among other things, plays directly into the hands of much of the identity politics of our own day.

Instead, the gospel indicative of Paul’s letters is much more robust and makes a deeper claim than statements that would identify my “self” in such ways would suggest. Paul makes a more comprehensive claim about what has happened to and now defines the Christian “I” and, therefore, who the Christian “I” most fundamentally *is*. After all, even though Paul recognizes the severity of the sins that characterized and defined the lives of the Christians in Corinth before their conversions, such as sexual immorality, idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, stealing, greed, addiction, hatred, and many other things (1 Cor. 6:10), he nevertheless identifies those sins as part of what the Corinthian Christians once “were” (1 Cor. 6:11), because he insists that “you” were washed, sanctified, and justified in Christ by the coming of his indwelling Spirit. In other words, Paul’s use of pronouns there and elsewhere shows that a decisive break—a setting apart—has taken place, which now defines the Christian “you” in contrast to everything sinful that once characterized him and all the sinful ways that used to define him deeply. As a result, this also affects how Paul commands Christians to *think about* or view themselves now, not as those whose identity is defined by sin but whose identity is defined by Christ: “So then you also reckon yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). By implication, to be careful to obey this command from the apostle Paul, we must also be careful that our interpretation of 7:14—whichever one we take—fits with what Paul clearly says in chapter 6 and elsewhere about the nature of the Christian condition and identity. Is my outer man, my body still filled with all sorts of sinful desires? Yes, indeed. But am “I” defined by or should “I” identify my existence or essence with those desires that are still present in my body? The reality of my union with Christ and his indwelling power says, “definitely not.” However poignantly and in however many complex ways I can and do feel the continued effects of sin at work in my own person, nonetheless “I” am crucified with Christ and no longer live the former life that was formerly characteristic of me but instead live a new life of faith based on the new reality that Christ, by his Spirit, now lives in me (Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:12; 3:9, 12) and so, more than anything else, I am most fundamentally *his* (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

With these things in mind, it will be useful to turn now to the discussion Timmins offers in chapter 6 about the “time of ‘I’” as well. Surprisingly, given all the debate that has surrounded who the “I” of Romans 7 represents, Timmins quickly asserts in this section of his book that it is “clear” that the time of the events recorded in 7:14–25 is the present time for Paul and his readers, rather than it possibly

referring to something in Paul's past.²⁴ Therefore, when the "I" says "I am fleshly" in 7:14, this also refers to the condition of the "I" at the time of Paul's writing. Though such an assertion has seemed far from "clear" to many of Paul's interpreters, Timmins sees it that way, especially for two reasons. The first is the meaning of the present tense verb in the first clause of 7:14: "For *we know* that the law is spiritual. . . ." In Timmins's view, the verb "we know" clearly refers to what Paul and his readers know at the time Paul writes. As a result, the following verb, "I am," must refer to that same point in time as well. Second, Timmins places significant emphasis on the issue of how 7:25a, "Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ," fits into the flow of the larger passage. Clearly, that phrase expresses hope for deliverance through Christ, in answer to the lamenting question, "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death?" in verse 24. For Timmins, this expression of Christian hope in verse 25a shows that the "I" must be speaking as a Christian throughout the entire passage. Of course, Timmins knows that many have taken the expression in verse 25a as a parenthetical expression of Paul's own gratitude, briefly inserted as an anticipatory moment of "relief" into an otherwise more negatively tinged passage that expresses the condition of someone outside of Christ. But he dismisses this interpretive option as untenable in the context, suggesting that such momentary "relief" is unnecessary in 7:25a since Paul will get to a further, positive description of Christian hope just one verse later in 8:1 anyway.

Having secured these two interpretive decisions as he would see them, Timmins only then turns at long last to the temporal contrasts Paul had built previously in 7:5–6 between "once" when Christians were previously "in the flesh" and "now" when they serve Christ by the Spirit. While acknowledging that those verses help construct "the most plausible *literary* argument for reading 7:14–25 as a retrospective reflection on life in the flesh,"²⁵ Timmins nevertheless dismisses this possibility based on the time-value of the verbs in 7:14 and the exegetical disruption that putting 7:25a in parentheses would create, in his mind. On the contrary, he concludes that the divided state of the "I" in 7:14–25 must be that of a Christian since the difficulty the "I" experiences is "coterminous" with the Christian experience of deliverance as well.²⁶

Reflecting on this key stretch of Timmins's argument, there are several things to appreciate. In particular, the attention he brings to the present tense verb "we know" in 7:14 is quite important to grapple with and continues to give me pause as I wrestle again and again with the details of Paul's text. Indeed, for someone who does not find a fictive "I" reading like Stowers's persuasive, Paul's statement, "we know," does seem to bring the present time of Paul's writing close to the surface of the text as at least *one* of the times that is included in the span of time in which Paul and the Romans know that the law is spiritual. This, combined with the fact that Paul never returns to past tense main verbs again after 7:13 but continues using present tense ones through the rest of the passage (with the exception of the future tense, "who

24. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 156.

25. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 167-168.

26. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 160, 168.

will deliver me” in 7:24), probably provides the biggest obstacle to seeing the “I” of 7:14–25 express the thoughts of the pre-conversion Paul.

Nevertheless, while Timmins’s argument provides serious food for thought in this regard, the passage’s details must still be considered at greater length than he often does, which also renders his conclusions less certain. More importantly, interacting with some of the gaps in his treatment also forces us to wrestle directly with Paul’s own language again, which is always so important to do.

Regarding the idea of taking 7:25a as a parenthetical statement, Timmins’s dismissal is far too quick. After all, Paul is not immune to making side comments that interrupt the flow of his own argument, not least when such “interruptions” express doxological reminders of God’s own character and faithfulness, as is clearly the case in 7:25a. For example, something very similar to 7:25a happens in 1:25, where, immersed in a lengthy description of people’s unfaithfulness to the Lord, including their exchanging the truth of God for a lie and worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, Paul evidently cannot hold himself back from including a brief doxological “aside” that expresses his own loyalty to the Lord by pointing out that the Creator, who is not being worshipped by those Paul is describing, is nevertheless the one “who is blessed forever, amen!” This clause obviously is not to be attributed to the rebellious people whose condition Paul is otherwise describing in 1:18–32 as a whole—quite the contrary! Nevertheless, Paul interrupts himself, as it were, out of the overflow of his own reverence for God, not willing for unfaithfulness and degradation to be described at such length in his letter without giving direct expression to his own devotion to the Lord, whom others sadly reject. The expression in 7:25a is quite similar since it interrupts a section otherwise filled with lament about the wretched human condition with an anticipatory expression of thanksgiving. For this reason, it seems much more plausible than Timmins allows for 7:25a to be taken as a parenthetical anticipation of something otherwise absent from 7:7–25 as a whole. In fact, taking 7:25a parenthetically also fits nicely with the future tense of the question that precedes it in 7:24—“Who will deliver me from the body of this death?” This question plainly asks about a deliverance that is still future to the “I,” not one that is “coterminous” with the present trouble the “I” experiences, as Timmins suggested. In the context of that question about a still-future deliverance, then, Paul inserts an anticipatory response that brings into view something that the rest of 7:7–25 does not mention, namely the work of God in Jesus Christ. Then after that, 7:25b also begins with a resumptive pair of conjunctions, “So then” (Ἀρα οὖν), to summarize what 7:14–24 have shown, which again fits with seeing 7:25a itself as a brief aside before 7:25b gives a summary *not* of a situation of sin and deliverance through Christ but of a person serving both the law and sin, which is precisely what 7:7–25 as a whole unpack. On any reading, then, 7:25a really does interject positive considerations that are otherwise absent from the rest of a negatively tinged, lament-filled passage describing a tension produced by the operation of both sin and law in the same person. In that context and given Paul’s practice elsewhere, taking 7:25a parenthetically really does not seem at all problematic in itself.

More important than this, though, is the matter of adequately assessing the time-value of the statements Paul makes in 7:14. Here the shortcomings of Timmins's argument are of much greater significance, especially (but not only) if one *does* see the "I" as voicing the thoughts of a Christian, as Timmins and many others do. Given what was pointed out above regarding the problems involved in describing the Christian "I," who has been transferred out from sin's dominion, as still also being in an ongoing state of captivity to sin, several additional features of 7:14 need to be considered more carefully than Timmins does.

First, despite Timmins's brief assertion about how "clear" the present tense reference of 7:14 is, it is important to note that other, legitimate interpretive options are certainly possible within the normal range of meaning for Greek present tense verbs. One strong possibility would be for the present tense verbs to be "gnomic" or "timeless" in their meaning, describing a general state of affairs that is always or timelessly true.²⁷ Statements like "A good tree bears good fruit" use the present tense in this way. A statement like that does not assert, "The good tree is bearing good fruit right now." To the contrary, such a statement may readily be made even in winter, when trees are not presently bearing fruit at all. It instead makes a broader assertion about the way things are in general: "good trees are of such a sort that, whenever they do bear fruit (past, present, or future), they bear fruit that is good." In fact, this seems to be exactly the use of the present tense that Paul employed in a similar context two verses earlier in 7:12. At that juncture, Paul had also been using a string of past tense verbs (aorist and imperfect), just as he does before the verbs in 7:14, and then he shifts to a present tense verb to draw a generalized inference about the nature of the law based on what he had just said: "So then the law is holy, and the commandment holy and righteous and good." As is true with gnomic present tense verbs, these statements are time-*unspecific*, commenting on the law's abiding character. They do not assert something particular to Paul's present time *per se*:

27. For descriptions of the gnomic present, see Ernest de Witt Burton, *Syntax of Moods and Tenses in N. T. Greek*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1898), 8; Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 110; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 523. Notably, Wallace goes on to say (p. 532 n. 52) regarding the present tenses in Romans 7:14–25 in particular that, though he has wrestled with how best to understand them, he has come to see the gnomic interpretation as best suited to the context. Taken that way, they describe not Paul's present and ongoing condition as a Christian, narrowly speaking, but instead "something that is universally true" for "anyone who attempts to please God by submitting the flesh to the law." By application, this experience is something that could be experienced by either a believer (inasmuch as he acts inconsistently with who he is as a believer) or an unbeliever.

In addition to the gnomic present, another possible option in 7:14ff. may be the "historical" present, which is common as part of narrative-like depictions of past events, where an author begins describing something past using typical past tense verbs (e.g., aorist and imperfect; cp. Rom. 7:9–11 and 13) and then continues describing past events using the present tense instead. For further discussion and examples of a device that is also commonly used in English, see Burton, *Moods and Tenses*, 9 or Young, *Intermediate*, 110.

“The law is holy *right now*.” They instead make a generalized observation about something that has always been, is still, and always will be the case: “The law is and always has been holy in its character.” That is just part of the law’s ongoing nature, which the descriptions in the prior verses had helped illustrate. By comparison, a similar, gnomic meaning may also occur with the present tense verbs in 7:14, where Paul makes another overarching observation about the law’s inherent nature based on the past-tense statements that had preceded (in v. 13). If so, Paul’s point would not so much be to say something about his own present (“We are knowing right now that the law is spiritual”) as much as to make another overarching generalization (“We all know or can see in general that the law is spiritual,” i.e., “This is always clear”). On further reflection, then, the statements in 7:14 may not actually be specific to Paul’s own present or that of his readers but may instead be much broader than that and so equally pertinent to all times.

But second, whether or not the present tense verbs in 7:14 should be taken as referring specifically to Paul’s own present (which may still be the case even if other exegetical options also deserve to be considered rather than just overlooked or dismissed), a much more significant exegetical consideration also arises in 7:14, not about the time-value of the present tense verbs but about the precise force of the perfect tense participle, *πεπραμμένος*, that follows them.

Here an important distinction must be observed about the nature of the perfect tense, which Timmins overlooks. While the perfect tense often does bring into view both a past action and an ongoing state of affairs that results from that action,²⁸ that ongoing state of affairs may be something that continues long after the original action that produced it no longer pertains or has instead even been reversed. In other words, to describe someone as “having been sold under sin” means that that person was sold at some point in the past and that past occurrence brought about some continuing result thereafter. But it does not necessarily mean that the person is *still* sold, that the sold-ness itself *continues* even now. One prominent example of how the perfect tense can describe the results of a past event that continue even after the original event has been reversed can be seen in how Jesus is described with a perfect tense participle elsewhere as a lamb “having been slain” (e.g., *τό ἐσφαγμένον* in Rev. 5:12). This participle points out how Jesus is presently in a state of *having been* slain in the past—i.e., the fact that he was slain continues to be of great, continuing significance—even though he is clearly not *still* slain. Instead, at the time when that perfect tense participle was written, Jesus had already been raised from the dead and was standing in heaven (e.g., 5:6). He is, therefore, one who *has* been and yet is no longer *still* slain. This is part of the genius of the perfect tense in Greek: it highlights the existence of an ongoing state of affairs, even if the past event that produced that

28. Regarding the force of the perfect tense participle, Burton notes, “Like the Perfect Indicative it may have reference to the past action and the resulting state or only to the resulting state. The time of the resulting state is usually that of the principal verb” (*Moods and Tenses*, 71). Regarding the perfect tense in general, Wallace states similarly, “The force of the perfect tense is simply that it describes an event that, completed in the past . . . has results existing in the present time (i.e., in relation to the time of the speaker)” (*Greek Grammar*, 573).

state of affairs has since been undone. Indeed, the fact that Jesus *was* slain before is still of great significance for understanding the ongoing state of affairs in heaven now in Revelation 5, even though (or we could say, precisely because) Jesus is not still slain but living. So then, while it is vitally important in Revelation that Jesus is not *still* slain, it is also vitally important that he *was* slain at one time (among other things, his perfect death brought about salvation for others and is the reason why he was raised into heaven and continues to deserve praise and adulation in an ongoing way forever), and therefore he is described very carefully as the one *having been* (but not still being) slain.

On reflection, this feature of a perfect tense participle, by which it can describe the ongoing significance of a past event even after the event itself has since been undone, may provide a valuable point of comparison for understanding the perfect tense “having been sold under sin” in Romans 7:14 as well. It is very plausible that the immediately prior statement in 7:14, “I am fleshly,” points out how the “I” is composed of flesh, as Timmins suggests, which thereby points out the constitutional weakness of the “I” as someone whose body is composed of a material (“flesh”) that is closely associated in Scripture with weakness. Then, as further explanation of that weakness, the “I” also mentions how he is someone “having been sold under sin” at some point in the past. In that statement, the perfect participle points out how the “I” is and always will be someone who was once sold in this way, implying that this fact is of significance for understanding the ongoing character of the “I” even if he has subsequently been redeemed and is not still sin’s slave now. Pointedly, then, to describe someone as “having been sold under sin” is not necessarily to say that he remains sold. It is only to say that, even if he has since been redeemed from that state (as would have to be true of the “I” in 7:14 if it is a Christian “I,” given what Paul repeatedly says of Christians in 6:2, 6, 11, 14, 18, 22), he nevertheless recognizes about himself that he is still and always will be a person who had once *been* sold under sin and that past event, even though it has since been reversed, still has ongoing significance for understanding what sort of person he is in himself—a weak one, who is not only composed of flesh but is also so weak in his own nature as to having once been sin’s slave. Indeed, such facts would show something important about the very nature of the “I” that decisively limits what such a weak “I” can and cannot ever accomplish in his life through the help of the law alone. As Paul says a bit later in Romans, it is the law’s ineffectiveness at work in a situation of fleshly human weakness that necessitated God’s response of sending his Son to redeem otherwise hopeless sinners (8:3). Moreover, it is quite likely that the ongoing significance in a person’s life of having once been sold as a slave, even if his situation has since changed, would be very familiar to Paul’s Roman audience, since being a free man (having never been a slave at any point) was thought of very differently in the ancient world from being a freedman (having once been enslaved earlier before then gaining freedom).²⁹

29. For a helpful overview of Roman law and custom regarding freedman and the continuing limitations present in their lives compared to a freeman, see Alan Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 35–45. To be clear, though, while the difference in the ancient Roman empire between being a freeman and a

Importantly for understanding Romans 7:14, then, noting carefully what the perfect participle does and does not say makes possible an understanding of what the “I” says about his own condition that affirms and underscores the inherent weakness of the “I” without having to assert that he is *still* a captive of sin. As a result, this opens up a clearer way to explain how what the “I” says in 7:14 could potentially describe a Christian (if other exegetical factors warrant that) because it does not inherently conflict with what Paul clearly says elsewhere in Romans about Christians now being freed from sin. Moreover, taking the perfect participle in this way would also avoid having to say, with Timmins, that if 7:14 does describe a Christian, then the Christian “I” should be seen as one for whom God has only done an external work but whose ongoing personal condition is itself really no different from when sin was his master in his pre-conversion state.

In addition, this distinct exegetical possibility regarding the perfect tense, which Timmins does not consider, could also dovetail quite nicely with one of the most valuable exegetical suggestions that Timmins did make in his book concerning the rhetorical purpose of 7:7–25 as a whole. Reflecting on the content of 7:5–6, which lead to and help set up the need for 7:7–25 within Paul’s argument, Timmins notes the specific nature of Paul’s focus upon the issue of how *Christians* who have been freed from the law should serve God after having been freed, not in the oldness of the letter but in the newness of the Spirit. Given the nature of that particular focus in 7:5–6, Timmins suggests that 7:7–25 as a whole are designed to show in turn exactly why any ongoing attempt *by Christians* to serve God in the oldness of the letter should, in fact, be abandoned. Given the inherent, ongoing weakness of their person, especially in the face of sin’s great power, the law simply cannot provide the solution they need, a fact which 7:7–25 clearly helps illustrate.³⁰ On top of that, though Timmins does not directly pursue the topic further in this way, additional reflection on the broader situation of the Roman audience would also suggest that dissuading the Romans from continuing to serve God in the oldness of the letter was indeed quite necessary for Paul to try to do since it would also help persuade them that their service to God as Christians no longer required adherence to outward distinctions between various foods and days, which the law had once instituted to help separate Jews from Gentiles but which many of the Romans wrongly thought was still important to Christian sanctification in their own times (see Rom. 14).

freedman helps illustrate how “having been enslaved” had continuing effects on someone’s life even after emancipation, it is also important to remember that, for Paul, the situation of a Christian is not adequately described as having once been enslaved and now being *free*. Instead, it is a situation of having once been a slave to sin and now having been graciously freed from that bondage to become a slave to God instead (e.g., Rom. 6:13, 18, 22). Yet even so, as a slave to God, the Christian does not seek to fight against sin through the law’s power but through the power of God’s Spirit, as Romans 6 and 8 so helpfully show and as Romans 7 itself is meant to help reinforce in its own way (on which see further below).

30. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 170–171.

Therefore, on balance, the considerations above suggest two possible views³¹ of the “I” in Romans 7:7–25 that are both somewhat different from the one Timmins himself supports. One possibility is that Paul demonstrates the futility, even for Christians, of seeking to serve God in the oldness of the letter by recalling his pre-conversion experience and then making general observations about the futility of his state while unregenerate, when sin’s desires raged in his flesh, but only the written law (not the Spirit) was at work in his inner man. This experience would, of course, be different in several important ways from the tension between flesh and the *Spirit* that Romans 6 and 8 (as well as Gal. 5) describe *Christians* experiencing. But it would still illustrate the inherent problem with seeking to accomplish any good through the power of the law and would therefore look prospectively to Romans 8, where Paul describes in more detail the solution to sin and death that God has in fact provided for and continues to apply to Christians (both now and in the future) through Christ and the Spirit. The other possible interpretation is that Paul demonstrates the futility of Christians seeking to serve God in the oldness of the letter by surveying some of his pre-conversion experience (esp. 7:9–11 and 13) and then offering some overarching observations about his continued weakness as a Christian and the continued hopelessness, as someone once having been enslaved to sin, of attempting to resist sin even now through the resources provided by the law alone. Importantly, the tension that 7:7–25 describe on this second reading would *still* be quite different than the experience Christians are meant to have as they battle sin through the *Spirit* (cf. Rom. 8 and Gal. 5). Instead, it would only describe a Christian wrongly and futilely struggling against sin in the power of the law. But this reading would at least not conflict with what Paul says about Christians in the surrounding chapters of his letter and elsewhere, like some readings of Romans 7 unfortunately do.

In the final analysis, a more thorough consideration of both the interpretations just mentioned would show that they each have some exegetical considerations in their favor and others that create difficulties for them. As a result, while they are both theologically viable, no doubt many readers, like me, often still feel torn between them—more persuaded by one at one time and the other at another—and may therefore cry out, “Wretched interpreters that we are! Who will deliver us from the veil of this flesh?” Yet thanks be to God, who has delivered us out from under sin’s dominion already, will one day relieve us of all its continued effects in our members, and at that time will even replace our presently dim apprehension of truth with a far greater and more glorious understanding as well! And in the meantime, we can all continue praying that our efforts to wrestle faithfully with the apostle Paul’s writings and to read other’s diligent attempts to do the same, like those provided by Timmins, would continually sharpen our grasp of Christian identity in this time of both “now” and the “not yet,” until God’s redeeming work finally comes to its completion at the great and glorious day of the Lord. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

31. There may be other possibilities too, but these two are the ones that emerge within the narrow scope of this article’s specific area of focus.