Exegetical Study on Romans 6:1-4

JOHN H. PIET

There are four guidelines we shall follow. First, we shall ask what Romans 6:1-4 says. Here we shall pay strict attention to Paul’s use of language, especially the tense of his verbs. Second, we shall ask what these verses say in context. We shall interpret them in the light of the verses which precede them, the assumption being that Paul makes himself clear as he goes along. Third, we shall place Romans in an imaginary historical and sociological setting and try to determine what these verses said to a certain individual who first heard them. Fourth, we shall ask what we can learn from these verses, interpreted through the chapters which precede them. In doing this, we shall apply the principle of extension or implication, since this is the only viable way in which to arrive at a position regarding baptism today.

Imagine yourself as a married person, recently baptized, living in Rome between 54 to 59 A.D. You have changed your allegiance from the pagen gods to Jesus Christ. All you have to guide you as a Christian is an oral tradition regarding Jesus, and your own experience. You understand Paul wrote letters to the Christians in Galatia, Thessalonica, and Corinth, but you have never heard these. Now you sit in your house-church eager to listen to an authoritative word from Paul.

The members of your house-church, like yourself, are converts from paganism. As a group, you worship separately from Christian Jews primarily because you live in a different section of Rome. This separation causes some tension. Whereas the Christian Jews feel the members of your house-church live too freely, your group, on the other hand, resents the “holier-than-thou” attitude of the Christian Jews. Granted, you and your fellow worshippers ought to live a stricter life. The Christian Jews, on the other hand, appear too rigidly fixed by the Law of Moses.

There are, however, two things about Christian Jews you admire. One is their deeper understanding of the Christian faith which they derive from an intimate and inherent appreciation of the Old Testament. Here they have an advantage. When they become Christians, they keep their original scriptures. You and others like you must jettison yours. You wish you could have a more intelligent rapport with the Old Testament.

Second, Christian Jews, following their former customs, circumcize their sons. By means of this initiation rite, they seem to establish a communal bond which your house-church lacks. You wish your group had a similar sign of solidarity.

Both these advantages, especially the latter, come into sharp focus for you as you contemplate the birth of your first child. Whereas Christian Jews regard their children as an integral part of their community, you are not sure how you should regard yours.

As you wait for the service to begin, you wonder what Paul has to say. You hope he answers your question about how you as a Christian Gentile should consider your child.
The elder begins, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ ... to all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints ..." (1:1-6). You follow the elder closely and respond with joy when you hear Paul say,

... the gospel ... is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith ... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, he who through faith is righteous shall live (1:16-17).


The first part of chapter five is meaningful, but your mind wanders when Paul contrasts Adam and Christ. It wanders until he says,

Law came in, to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (5:20-21).

At this point, you enter into a mental dialogue with Paul. Does he mean you can go on sinning? If where sin increases, grace correspondingly increases in a kind of geometric progression, may you continue in your former pagan ways and continue doing wrong in order to experience more grace?

Paul stops your train of thought by asking the same question, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound" (6:1)? His answer comes quickly, "Heaven forbid!"

His explanation comes in the form of a question, "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (6:2) "We who died" is an aorist tense which refers to a precise, dateable moment in the past. What Paul means is, how can you who in your essential nature are a Christian go on living in sin?

Paul continues to appeal to your experience. He asks, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" "Have been baptized" and "were baptized" like "who died" are aorists also. This time, however, Paul puts them in the passive voice. This means baptism is not something you did to yourself. It is something which your house-church did to you. When you presented yourself to the church, the church took over and baptized you. Even though you were an adult, you were a passive recipient of baptism.

Paul says the church did two things when it baptized you. Ideally, these are one, but for good reasons he distinguishes between them. First, the church baptized you into the body of Christ. Second, the church baptized you into the person of Christ himself. Both of these meanings are inherent in "into Christ."

Paul's use of the preposition "into" is significant. He uses the same word in 1:24 where he speaks about your former way of life. Paul says even as God gave you up in the lusts of your heart into impurity, so the church baptized you into the body of Christ and into himself. After all, Jesus is both an individual and the embodiment of the
corporate personality, namely, the church. He, the person, is the Head and the
inclusive Representative of the new redeemed, risen, and glorified humanity.\(^1\)

Furthermore, the church baptized you into Christ’s death. Even as Christ lost all
contact with sin on the cross, you lost all contact with the deadly power or the stran-
gling grip of sin when you were baptized.

Here you recall your days in school near the Roman Forum. Your teacher told
your class about a ship carrying illicit cargo which sank in the bay. Your teacher used
the word \textit{baptize} as he described how the ship plunged beneath the water. In a similar
way, you and your illicit cargo were plunged beneath the water of baptism.

Paul goes on. He says, “We were buried therefore by baptism into death.” “Were
buried,” like “were baptized,” is an aorist passive. In other words, your baptism, like
a burial, is something which is done for you or to you. One is as passive a recipient of
baptism as he is a passive recipient of burial. You wonder if this is why some Christian
Greeks in Rome are talking about building their baptistries in the shape of a tomb?

Why were you buried by baptism into death? Paul says, “... so that as Christ was
raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”
Paul seems glued to the aorist passive. He uses it twice in connection with baptism,
one in connection with burial, and here in connection with resurrection. On second
thought, what other tense could he use? One can no more raise himself than he can
bury himself. Burial and resurrection happen to people. They happened to Christ. And
they happened to you who are in Christ.

Why did resurrection happen to Christ? Paul says, “... so that as Christ was
raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too might walk in newness of life.”
“By the glory of the Father” must be a synonym for “by the power of the Father.”
Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection were all of God and through the power of God;
and it is through these acts of power God reveals his glory. As a consequence, you too
—and the “you” or “we” here is plural — should walk in newness of life.

Paul contrasts your present life with your former one in his letter. In chapter one,
he describes how you as a pagan changed the glory of the immortal God for images
resembling mortal man, birds, animals, and reptiles (1:23). Now as a Christian, you
must reflect the power and glory of the Father through the newness of your life. At one
time, you subjected the power of God to your corrupt mind. Now you must subject
yourself, mind and body, to the power of God.

Whereas once you sinned and fell short of the glory of God, you are
justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ
Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, and which you
received by faith (3:23-25).

You once fell short of the glory of God when you served idols. You must now
approximate the power and glory of God by the way you live. You must walk in
newness of life, life which has the quality of everlastingness and the ring of eternity.

Up to this point, Paul has spoken to you as an adult, born in paganism, reborn in
the church. He has yet to answer your question regarding your child. Should you
regard this child as a pagan, or may you incorporate your child into the membership of
Christ's church? Paul has not spoken to this point directly. Nor will he. He expects you to find an answer, basing it on what he has already said. In other words, Paul expects you to arrive at a viable position by way of extension or implication.

What, then, has Paul said which can lead you to an acceptable position regarding your child? First, you must retrace the apostle's use of the aorist passive tense. He says, "You were baptized." While the house-church was active, you were passive. The passivity of the individual being baptized can apply to your child. As a matter of fact, he can be a more perfect example than yourself of the passive role a candidate must play in baptism.

Second, you notice Paul's use of the aorist passive when he speaks of your being buried with Christ by baptism into death. You were not in Jerusalem when Christ died. You were not yet born. Nonetheless, Paul says you were buried with Christ by baptism into death. You were incorporated by baptism into a death which took place many years ago. Since this is true of yourself, it can be true of your child as well.

Third, you review what Paul says when he introduces baptism by contrasting Adam and Christ (5:12-21). Paul says Christ is the head of the new humanity in the same way Adam is the head of the old humanity. You were not present when Adam came on the scene. Nevertheless, sin entered the world through Adam, and through sin death passed to all men. Adam here is a historical individual who is also the head and inclusive representative of the human race.2 Neither were you present when Christ came on the scene. Nonetheless, God's act of grace in Christ bestows righteousness and life on all men. Accordingly, your child will live either in Adam or in Christ.

Paul's use of the passive in the case of both Adam and Christ claims your attention. The apostle says, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." "Were made" and "will be made" do not mean "to account" or "to reckon." They specify a declarative act which establishes a relationship. Accordingly, even as you were placed in a relationship of sin through Adam, your house-church placed you in a relationship of righteousness through Christ. In Adam, you were born into a race which has separated itself from God; whereas in Christ, you were placed in a relationship to God.3 While Adam created a humanity of sinners, Christ creates a humanity of people who desire to do the right.4 You can apply this to your child.

Fourth, you notice there are two parts to your life in Christ. The first is God's creative act. The second is your desire to do the right. Paul speaks of God's creative act in 5:1 where he says, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith — we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." On second thought, perhaps the elder read, "Since then we have been justified by faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The difference is simply a matter of a short or a long "o" in have. No matter. The difference between "we have" and "let us have" illustrates how Christians live. We are commanded to have peace with God through Christ precisely because we have it already. This is the faith according to which your house-church lives. "Being therefore justified" is an aorist passive participle which means God is the actor, while man is the passive recipient. The church as the body of
Christ is the body of believers authorized by Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit to incorporate this faith.

The privilege and responsibility, the joy and assurance which come from living according to the faith of the church come next. Having been declared righteous, the duty to be righteous follows.

But where does faith come into the picture? Faith, certainly, is the genius of Christian living. How and where does faith begin? Paul says it begins with Abraham who like yourself was born a pagan. Scripture says of him, ‘Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ ‘It was reckoned’ is passive. Even though Abraham believed, he did nothing regarding which he could boast before God. God simply counted Abraham's faith as righteousness.

After this, God gave Abraham a sign or seal to testify to the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (4:10). The sign Abraham and his children bore witnessed to the world that he and his children were children of God. The sign, however, was likewise a seal which indicated to the one who bore it that he was expected to live as God’s child according to the esprit de corps of the community.

In each instance, the purpose of the sign was to evoke faith. In the first instance, the purpose was to make Abraham the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them (4:11). In other words, in the case of pagans like Abraham, faith comes first; then, the sign. In the second instance, the purpose was to make Abraham the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (4:12). Paul in this letter addresses Christians, Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles. Accordingly, what he says applies to them even though he illustrates his point by means of Jews. Paul’s thought, then, is that Christians can no more rely on their heritage and claim justification through it than can the Jews who hold that justification is by works.

The converse of this is likewise true. Even as the circumcised were given the privilege of coming to faith by walking in the steps of faithful Abraham, so those whom the church baptizes are granted the privilege of coming to faith by following the Christian way of life. This walk with God applies to adult as well as child, and vice versa. All members of the household of God are encouraged to come to faith and to keep on coming. This, after all, is the theme of Paul’s letter, “For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.” Here you and your child are on equal ground; because he, like you, and you, like he, must grow in grace and righteousness through faith for faith.

What, then, prevents you from having the church baptize your child? He who through faith is righteous shall live.

FOOTNOTES

2 Ibid., p. 86.