

INDWELLING SIN: ROMANS 7

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When Paul speaks of sin resident within him (or indwelling sin), perhaps he means it phenomenologically; that is, the experience of sin feels like something inside him. His point is that sin is not just something outside us (environment, influence) trying to tempt us into misaction; it is something inside us as well. There is a subjective as well as objective component in the sin phenomenon. The implication is personal responsibility for subjective response to objective influence and stimulus.

Within the subjective we can include the innate and the experiential. The potentials based on the realities that are genetically transmitted combine with the residue of our own past action to create a bondage to sin that is more than the sheer action of sinning itself. There is an inclination to sin before the occasion to sin arrives; there is a lack of idealness in human “nature,” whether “nature” comes from inheritance or habit.

We are using “habit” here to cover all the residual effects of past sin on present resolve. Habit contrasts with “inheritance,” which covers everything that is genetically transferred. Habit addresses the sense of “bondage” to sin, the experience Paul laments in Romans 7.

The innate and the experiential components include the following (a) the morally neutral desires and capacities that are genetically transferable and (b) the habits formed by past behavior. Habit includes psychological and emotional patterns as well as evil ways of fulfilling bodily desires that are themselves morally neutral. Even chemically based irregularities, people are responsible for overriding with the will as guided by values adopted with the mind—at least to the extent that they can do so.

Paul distinguishes between himself, the true “me,” from this indwelling sin; but does not relieve himself of responsibility for it. That implies that “sin-in-my-members” can be changed by the true self in contrast to supernatural change by external agency through miracle. “Habit” describes what we do not control well and yet something we can change, albeit not immediately, easily, or entirely (“Nobody’s perfect”). Improvement over habits takes deliberate action to resist and overcome. Paul’s “true me” may be the aspiring self in contrast to the experiencing self.

As to the unchangeable factor in the subjective side, God takes a benevolent attitude: “*he understands our frame.*” Jesus understood somewhat the sleepiness of the apostles in the Garden. But as to the changeable aspects, God demands human responsibility.

Today we have an increased appreciation for the genetic component of human behavior in areas that vary between persons. The chemical make-up of some individuals may dispose them more easily to anger, impatience, hyperactivity, laziness, lack of self-control. An element of relativity comes in by the differences between people. Today we also have a correspondingly higher responsibility because research has isolated the genetic components of certain behavior tendencies or extremes and has developed antidotes for some of them. Now we have the responsibility based on knowledge to take our “medicine.”