

Are Christians ever condemned?

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Rm 8:1

The LORD redeems the soul of His servants, and none of those who trust in Him shall be condemned. Ps 34:22

He who believes in Him is not condemned. Jn 3:18

These verses are tremendous promises that have encouraged countless generations of believers. Justification, or standing legally righteous before God without condemnation, is a precious part of God's covenant with his people and the basis of fellowship since we must be holy as he is holy. Without justification by faith, whereby we are declared legally righteous, we could never enter heaven. This promise ensures that all the elect will be saved since there is nothing legally accounted against them in heaven's court; they are not condemned but justified.

However, legal righteousness, or our standing before God in heaven, is not the same as actual righteousness, or our actual condition on Earth – this concerns our progressive sanctification. Being justified by faith must be followed by growing holiness or progressive sanctification; if there is true justification there will always be genuine progress in sanctification. Paul expresses this when he states that the thought of justification providing an excuse to sin is abhorrent (Rm 6:1-2).

Yet it is my experience that Romans 8:1 is frequently misused by church leaders and Christians generally to excuse sin. This is a grave error. This misuse of this verse has often led to antinomianism, whereby people have abandoned God's law, and lost any sense of obedience to God's command to be righteous. Thus we need to examine just what 'no condemnation' means for the believer.

What it means

Words used

The promise that the believer will not be condemned refers to the condemnatory judgment to hell on the Last Day. The word in Rm 8:1 is *katakrima*, meaning damnation or a sentence of condemnation, of doom, a verdict of guilt and punishment. True believers in Christ will escape God's wrath by virtue of the atonement of Christ and the putting away of sin.

However, the word 'condemnation' and its relative words are still applied to Christians. For example:

But refuse *the* younger widows; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry, having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith. 1 Tim 5:11-12

Here the word is *krima*, meaning a decision, a judgment, a judicial decision whether severe or mild, or condemnation of a wrong. It means essentially the determination of right and wrong. It is not referring to eternal damnation or Paul would be implying that Christians

can lose their salvation, something he expressly does not teach. It would also be monstrous to say that widows are eternally damned for wanting to remarry.

[An elder must not be] a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the *same* condemnation as the devil. 1 Tim 3:6

Again the word is *krima*. Young men cannot be elders since they could easily become proud and sin. Such sin would be condemned but would not be a sentence to hell. If every proud moment led to eternal damnation we would all be lost.

So there are two meanings to condemnation. The first refers to eternal damnation; Christians are spared this. This second simply means a judgment of wrong, a recognition that someone has erred in some way. We all suffer this judgment from time to time since we all sin.

What it does not mean

It does not mean that every professing convert is justified.

This is a grave mistake to make, but one that happens every day. People attend superficial 'Gospel' meetings where they are emotionally moved or pressurised; perhaps they are led to stand up or raise a hand as some sort of confession; worse they are made to repeat someone else's dictated prayer. As a result they are told that they are saved and Romans 8:1 is read to assure them of eternal life and safety from judgment. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I have seen very many people come through systems like this, and even perhaps lead good lives for a short while, only for them to utterly apostatise later and deny the faith, sometimes with vilification and blasphemy. There was never any true life and Jesus warned us about this in the parable of the sower. There are many types of temporary positive reaction to the Gospel message, only for these to be abandoned later due to pressure from the world, from cares or from lack of nurture.

There is much to learn from this.

The first thing is to ensure that we preach a Biblical Gospel message in a Biblical fashion. Much modern Gospel preaching is no such thing, being variants of Arminianism, Amyraldism or Free Offer notions that have no validity. If the message is not Scriptural it is 'another Gospel' to be cursed and which will do no good (Gal 1:6-9).

The second thing is to ensure that people hear correctly and are nurtured properly. Believers must never make conversion so easy that it has not cost the convert something (Lk 14:26-33). A truly convicted sinner will deal with God in his own way and in his own time and be brought to an utter end of himself before he is ready to learn how to apply faith in Christ. Our job is to witness to Christ and preach his word, not to water down his commandments so that a sinner can make a superficial assent. Without true conviction of sin there is no salvation. Without a true yielding to Christ as Lord there is no conversion. Without a true apprehension of Christ as Saviour there is no faith.

Even when it appears that a person has been truly converted there is still a great need to teach the basic principles of the Gospel for some time so that he is fully aware of what has gone on. There are those who appear to be genuine converts and yet later demonstrate that they were no such thing; sometimes after many years. We must be slow to accept that a person is a believer unless there is good reason otherwise to trust in their confession of

faith. Readiness to obey Christ and be baptised is one good sign; another is being swift to confess Christ to others.

This leads us to another important point.

The vital need of catechising, evaluating and pastoring

Those who are true Christians will demonstrate this by their changed lives and ongoing bearing of spiritual fruit. If there is no manifestation of Christ-like fruit and changed character then, despite their apparent good profession of faith, they cannot be truly saved. It is the job of pastors to nurture young Christians with a programme of teaching and counselling for some considerable time after their profession of faith. Elders are responsible to God for the spiritual education of immature folk and this is a very serious and crucial part of eldership ministry. Yet it is seldom seen these days in any way.

The chief way this is done is through house to house visitation and tailoring the teaching (catechising) to the individuals. It is rarely possible to do this properly in larger groups where everyone's needs are so different. For this reason this ministry has been abandoned today since it costs too much time of the pastor, but it is one of his most important tasks. Only by spending a great deal of time with a person one-to-one will a pastor be able to see whether there is true spiritual life present. Only when a person has demonstrated genuine faith, understanding and fruit, and has been baptised, can a pastor affirm that he is not under any condemnation.

It does not mean that genuine Christians are never guilty of sin

Time and again in church history there have been those who used Rm 8:1 as an excuse to sin without fear of punishment. These have been called 'antinomians' since they are against any kind of law (*nomos*) or judgment against them. Some have perverted the doctrine of identification in Romans 6 so that all their sins are placed in the old man and thus absolve their responsibility for them; they can enjoy sin in the old man and still claim to be righteous in the new man. Thus they lead a double life. Others pervert the doctrine of freedom from external law as found in Romans 7, and thus justify their ability to live lawless lives of iniquity without fear of punishment. Whatever the doctrinal foundation, all these forms of antinomianism are false and lead to condemnation.

True Christians will obey God's moral law, which is subsumed in Christ and the New Covenant as the 'Law of Christ'. While we are free from Mosaic Law, we are never free to ignore God's commands about ethical behaviour, which have been the same since creation. God's people must live righteous lives and this means following the principles of moral law found in Christ and enabled by his Spirit.

Christians who sin

If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves; we all sin and all need constant forgiveness. Even grumbling leads to condemnation (Jm 5:9). Thankfully, God provides cleansing through the blood of Christ and continually cleanses us as we fellowship with him and live lives of repentance, trusting in his salvation (see 1 Jn 1-2). Sadly, it is our normal lot to sin since our old nature is not eradicated at this time and we do not always put it off. However, as we confess our sin God is pleased to cleanse us and forgive us – thus we must be constantly thankful.

However, there are times when even true believers do something serious and do not repent, or at least not straight away. Are these condemned in this time?

'Condemnation' in Romans 8:1 has the import of damnation, of a judgmental sentence. It is referring to the fact that genuine Christians will not appear before God for

condemnatory judgment to hell-fire on the Last Day. Elect Christians who have erred deeply will be finally sanctified and spared the wrath of God – the doctrine of perseverance assures us of this. However, this does not mean that they never stand condemned by God for sin today.

It is clear that God condemns his people for sin, though he spares them final judgment to hell. The illustration of Israel's remnant alone demonstrates this effectively. It is also evident in Biblical characters. Was David saved when he was king of Israel? Certainly he was, as is demonstrated by the psalms he wrote and being declared 'a man after God's heart'. Yet David was condemned by God more than once. He was condemned when Nathan the prophet told him that he was the man who had sinned in the matter of Uriah's death and the adultery with Bathsheba. He was also condemned by God for numbering the people of Israel at the end of his life. Judgment followed both. Note that the voice of our conscience allies with God in condemning us for our sins:

And David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O LORD, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly'. 2 Sam 24:10

God disciplines his children as any father would. Hebrews 12 explains this clearly. When believers sin and do not deal with the matter effectively, God brings chastisement to teach them how to behave. Sometimes this discipline is severe. The Corinthians were said by Paul to be saints and sanctified (1 Cor 1:2) and yet some were guilty of great sins. This had resulted in God's chastisement so that some sinful believers who continued to break bread, but without repentance, were afflicted with physical suffering and some died (1 Cor 11:29-30; 'sleep' refers to death). Paul also refers to those Christians who are careless sin this life but are yet genuine believers. They build rubbish on their lives and yet still manage to get into heaven as a naked man escapes a fire in a house, with nothing (1 Cor 3:10ff.). They have bare faith but only superficial works that attract no reward.

Do all these types of people stand condemned? Surely they do. They are not condemned in a legal, judgmental, wrathful way to hell, but they stand condemned by their Father as having disobeyed his commands and require discipline as wayward children. The prodigal son lived a life of miserable condemnation until he returned to his father. Notice the words used by God to wayward children in Hebrews 12 such as, chastens, scourges, rebukes. Though still loved as children, they are yet scourged (whipped).

In explaining about sinning brothers and forgiveness, Jesus taught the disciples a parable about servants of a king. At the end of this note the punishment of the wicked servant, 'And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him'. [Torturer means 'one who elicits the truth by means of the rack'.] Jesus then directly applies this to all disciples to make sure the message is heard, 'So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses' (Matt 18:34-35). If we do not forgive each other (the sin of the Corinthians in schism), then there will be whatever torturing is meant to imply; i.e. fatherly chastisement to teach us righteous behaviour.

So, can Christians be condemned? No, in terms of final judgment to wrath; but yes, in terms of fatherly discipline by God for sin. Romans 8:1 does not encourage complacency.

The acid test

Justification by faith will always ensure that the believer becomes more and more sensitive to sin. As he gains more knowledge of God he understands just how repugnant sin is to a holy God. As he learns more about himself he constantly is made aware that he is never more than a sinner saved by grace. Thus history is full of godly saints who led righteous lives but who died fully aware that they were great sinners and whose only hope was the cleansing blood of Christ; even Paul called himself the chief of sinners towards the end of his life. All truly justified people are aware that they constantly sin and they glory in the forgiveness of God and their union with Christ in the new man.

However, those who make presumptions about being never being under condemnation, who glory in their holiness, who shout about their freedom, who presume that they are fully sanctified, are antinomians. The antinomian refuses to see that he sins but glories in the presumption that he is fully saved from it now, that he is dead to law as a principle, that he is freed from the dominion of sin. What such folk fail to realise is that freedom from sin's dominion is only in Christ, in the new man, and we fail to walk in the new man all the time. We so often walk in the old man and thus sin in thought, word and deed. Those who walk in the Spirit, who put off the old nature, who abide in Christ are free from the dominion of sin and obey the law, but who can claim to do this constantly? No one in this life. Thus we are aware of our failings and cling to Christ as our Saviour and hope.

The more a man walks in the Spirit and puts off the flesh, the more that man will walk righteously; and yet that man will also grow in his sensitivity to sin and his thankfulness for the cross.

Beware those who have no sense of their great sinfulness.

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