CHRISTOPHER T. BOUNDS

Augustine’s Interpretation of Romans 7:14-25, His Ordo Salutis and His Consistent Belief in a Christian’s Victory over Sin

The Apostle Paul declares in Romans 7:14-15, “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do.”

The history and development of Augustine of Hippo’s exegesis of this passage has received significant scholarly attention. In his initial forays into Pauline study in 394/395, Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, Augustine interpreted Romans 7:14-25 as a human being “under the law, prior to grace.” The “I” pictured here is the quintessential unregenerate person, who has knowledge of the law of God, senses true guilt for sinfulness, longs for deliverance, but is without the grace of Christ to overcome sin. In contrast, the Christian “under grace,” infused with the love of God, is victorious over sin and “ceases to sin.” In 396, Augustine reiterates his understanding in Eighty Three Different Questions and in his work of 398, To Simplician on Various Questions.

There is no hint of change in Augustine’s basic interpretive approach to Romans 7 until 411 in his treatise On the Merits and Remission of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants. In his examination of Job’s righteousness, Augustine compares Job to the person in Romans 7:19-24 who “delights in the law of God after the inner man, while he sees another law in his members warring against the law of his mind.” Job is the type of individual who says, “The good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me.” At this point, there is no inconsistency with Augustine’s earlier teaching. However, later in the treatise he will argue that Christians who live a life of righteousness like Job are worthy of praise, but are not without sin and therefore must pray regularly the Lord’s Prayer “forgive us our trespasses.” Augustine implicitly connects Christians “under grace” with the person of Romans 7.
What is implied in *On the Merits* becomes explicit by 415 in Augustine’s *On Man’s Perfection in Righteousness*, which sets forth the key seminal ideas of his new interpretation of Romans 7. The person described by Paul in this passage is one “under grace.” The “divided self” pictured so poignantly by the Apostle is the Christian believer. Later, in a series of sermons preached in 417, Augustine clarifies that the “I” in this passage is Paul speaking about himself. Paul is testifying to his present Christian experience and providing a description of every Christian life before the resurrection of the body. By 421 in *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* and in *Against Julian* Augustine acknowledges and repudiates completely his earliest interpretations of Romans 7. In 327, three years before his death, Augustine, writing his *Retractions*, renounces again his earliest position on Romans 7 as a description of an unconverted person “under law” and reiterates his belief that this is Paul’s Christian testimony and the experience of every person “under grace.”

Intimately tied to Augustine’s exegesis of Roman’s 7 is his *ordo salutis* or order of salvation. In his earliest written work on Paul, *Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans*, Augustine uses his comments to articulate a theological understanding of personal salvation in four stages. Indeed, this is the focus of *Propositions*. Interestingly, while Augustine changes his understanding of Romans 7 as he grows older, and for that matter, his reading of Romans 9-11 and the doctrine of election, his *ordo salutis* remains essentially the same throughout his life. He articulates it clearly in his early theological work, uses it as a reference point throughout his ministry as priest and bishop, and gives it significant treatment in his later treatises.

In his *ordo* Augustine consistently maintains that a Christian is empowered to walk in obedience to Christ through the infusion of love by the Holy Spirit. He describes a normative Christian life as one free from outward or willful sin. Even as his interpretation of Romans 7 changes, this basic understanding of a Christian’s life “under grace” does not, although it is nuanced differently in his later thought.

The question arises: how can Augustine do this with his complete reversal on Romans 7? If the Apostle Paul is describing his Christian life, and with him all Christians, in verses 14-25, how can Augustine maintain a theology of salvation in which a Christian is free from willful sin? The purpose of our paper is to answer this question. To do so, we will first summarize Augustine’s *ordo salutis* and highlight some nuances brought to his understanding in later reflection. Next, we will examine how Augustine reconciles his later interpretation of Romans 7:14-25 with his persistent teaching on a Christian’s outward compliance to the law. Then, we will look more specifically at the role of will or consent in the Christian “under grace.” Finally, we will conclude with a few summary remarks.
I. Augustine’s *Ordo Salutis*

Augustine in 394 identifies four basic stages in a person’s experience of salvation, subsequently carried throughout his ministry as priest and bishop: a life “prior to the law,” “under the law,” “under grace,” and “in peace.” However, he acknowledges that some Christians may not pass through all stages, such as the case of infant baptism in which a child moves from a life “prior to the law” to one “in grace,” bypassing the stage “under the law.”

He also sees his *ordo salutis* as an outline of the history of the church. First, the church existed “prior to the law,” from the moment of the fall in the Garden to God’s appointment with the nation of Israel on Mt. Sinai. Second, the church lived “under the law” from the revelation of God’s law through Moses to Christ’s coming. Now, the church lives “under grace” through the incarnate ministry of Jesus Christ. However, Augustine maintains that life “under grace” is never absent in history, but is veiled and hidden. Before Christ’s incarnation, Old Testament saints had some knowledge of and saving faith in Christ or they would not have been able to make prophecies about him. Finally, the church will be “in peace” when it enters the resurrected state in the eschatological age to come.

Specifically, because of original sin, Augustine believes every human being is born into life “prior to the law.” They live in ignorance of sin and follow their carnal desires without the restraint of conscience or established prohibitions. He interprets the Apostle Paul’s statement, “And I was alive once without the law,” as indicative of Paul’s early childhood before he could reason, before he reached an age of accountability.

The second stage is a life “under the law.” Here, through an awakened conscience and the revelation of God’s law, people recognize their sinfulness. Knowledge of the law produces anxiety over their guilt and prepares them for the grace of salvation. They learn how sinful they really are. They are aware of the condemnation of God upon their lives and want to some extent to live in accordance with the law, but are unable to do so. They are slaves to sin and the fear of God. They want to change, but the power of carnal desire is too strong and they find greater pleasure in committing sin. Sin deceives them continually “with its false sweetness.”

Augustine believes a person is defeated at this stage “because he does not yet love righteousness for the sake of God and for the sake of righteousness itself. And so when he sees righteousness on the one hand and temporal comfort on the other, he is drawn to the weight of temporal longing and thus abandons righteousness, which he was trying to hold on to only in order to have the comfort he now sees he will lose if he holds on to righteousness.” People “under law” may conform to the law, but only as long as it is beneficial to them. The desires of the flesh may lead to obedience, but only for selfish reasons. When keeping the law is no longer beneficial, a
person discards it.

The only way humanity’s sinful desires can be defeated is through a true love of God and love of the commanded good. In the absence of real love, carnal desire always triumphs. In the third stage of salvation “under grace,” Augustine teaches that God gives the love of God to the human heart through the infusion of the Holy Spirit, empowering the Christian to “delight” in the law of God and walk in accordance to love. While Christians still have desires of the flesh, and the flesh is in conflict with the Spirit, the love of God triumphs over these desires so that believers do not obey them.22

At this point, it may be helpful to catalogue chronologically some of Augustine’s key statements on life “under grace” to demonstrate his consistent belief in a Christian’s victory over willful sin. Augustine in his description of the third stage clearly states in 395, “When this happens, even though certain fleshly desires fight against our spirit while we are in this life, to lead us into sin, nonetheless our spirit resists them because it is fixed in the grace and love of God, and ceases to sin. For we sin not by having this perverse desire but by consenting to it.”23 In 398 in response to questions raised by his friend Simplicius, he answers, “When grace forgives sin and infuses a spirit of charity, righteousness ceases to be hard and becomes even pleasant.”24 Speaking about the perfection of righteousness possible in the present life and experienced “under grace,” he teaches in 415, “But whenever he suffers not sin to reign in his mortal body to obey it in the lusts thereof, and yields not his members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin it does not reign, because its desires are not obeyed.”25 In the heights of the Pelagian debates of 422, Augustine affirms that the Apostles did not consent to the lusts of the flesh and lived “under grace.” He declares, “I do say that although they were free from consent to depraved lusts, they nevertheless groaned concerning the concupiscence of the flesh, which they bridled by restraint with such humility and piety, that they desired rather not to have it than to subdue it.”26 Then, in the most systematic account of his mature theology in 422, The Enchiridion, Augustine describes the Christian in the third stage of salvation: “But if God has regard to him, and inspires him with faith in God’s help, and the Spirit of God begins to work in him, then the mightier power of love strives against the power of the flesh, and although there is still in man’s own nature a power that fights against him (for his disease is not completely cured), yet he lives the life of the just by faith, and lives in righteousness so far as he does not yield to evil lust, but conquers it by the love of holiness.”27

While Augustine remains consistent in his teaching on a Christian “under grace,” as a life empowered to walk in love and not consent to sinful desires, he does nuance some of the finer points of his teaching, particularly his conception of sin and his understanding of the intensity of sinful desires.
First, Augustine develops his definition of sin. In 395 Augustine acknowledges that a Christian still experiences the lusts of the flesh, but does not sin. At this point in his theology, he defines sin as the consent of the will to obey, or to act according to sinful desire. Simply having sinful desires is not personal sin. He states, “For we sin not by having this perverse desire but by consenting to it.” Elsewhere, he writes that God’s condemnation does not rest upon the one, “engaged in battle, but on the one defeated in battle.”

However, by the opening decades of the fifth century, Augustine’s hamartiology expands. He begins to see sinful desire itself as personal sin and in need of the absolution brought about through the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors;” as well as through almsgiving. While he only sees it as venial sin and not mortal, it is still sin that a Christian must bear until the resurrection of the body.

Augustine comes to see sinful desire as sin because it falls short of the perfect love of God and neighbor, which is the ultimate end of the law. A Christian operates out of the love of God; the love of God enables a person’s obedience, but because of the desires of the flesh, love is not perfect. Augustine states, “It is not the mere “doing” of a good thing that is not present to him, but the “perfecting” of it. For in this, that he yields no consent (to the desires of the flesh), he does good; he does good again, in this, that he hates his own lust. But how to perfect the good is not present to him; it will be, however, in that final state, when the concupiscence which dwells in his members shall exist no more.”

Second, Augustine sees more clearly the intensity of sinful desire in Christian life. Early in his theological thought, Augustine recognizes or acknowledges concupiscence in the third stage, but does not give significance to it. However, while writing The Confessions he begins to address the psychological dynamics and intensity of fleshly desires in detail. They command Augustine’s attention in ways not seen in his earlier work. Nevertheless, while Augustine paints concupiscence in the third stage with greater intensity, he persistently maintains a Christian’s victory over it.

In the fourth and final stage of salvation, a life is “in peace.” This will take place when the bodies of Christians are resurrected in the age to come. Then, there will be nothing in humanity that resists the love of God, but every part will work harmoniously together. There will be the perfection of love in which people will love God with all heart, soul, and mind. All human action will embody the perfect love of God and neighbor. Sin and sinful desires will be impossible to humanity, since they will be like God, having true freedom – to do only what is in accordance with love.

II. Augustine’s Later Interpretation of Romans 7:14-25
How does Augustine reconcile his consistent understanding of the
Christian “under grace” with his later exegesis of Romans 7:14-25? As we stated earlier, by 417 Augustine sees Romans 7 as the Apostle Paul’s personal testimony of Christian experience, as well as every individual in the third stage of salvation. To answer this question, we must examine Augustine’s interpretation of this passage. His clearest and most thorough treatments are Sermons 151-156, preached in 417 and two treatises written in 422, On Marriage and Concupiscence and Against Two Letters of the Pelagians.35

First, Augustine begins by reviewing Paul’s teaching from Romans 3:20, 3:27, 4:13, 5:20, 6:14, and 7:4, establishing the fact that the law brings knowledge of sin, and incites sin, but does not take it away. Because knowledge of the law makes a person more sinful and is not able to deliver a person from sin, Augustine is careful to defend the goodness of the law. The law drives a person to seek God’s grace. Only divine grace infusing love in the human heart can set an individual free from sin.36

Second, Augustine interprets Romans 7:7-13 as the Apostle’s personal witness about his life “prior to the law” and “under the law.” Paul’s statement, “For I was alive without the law once,” refers to Paul’s early childhood, before his ability to reason, before an age of accountability. “But when the commandments came, sin revived, but I died,” addresses the time in the Apostle’s life when he became aware of the law, but was not able to keep it, thereby becoming a transgressor.37 More specifically, the phrase “sin revived” refers to original sin in the Garden, passed down to all humanity, which remains hidden and undetected, until the human heart recognizes it when it encounters and balks at the law of God. Paul’s statements, “For without law sin is dead,” and “I had not known sin but by the law, for I had not known lust unless the law had said, ‘Thou shalt not covet,” conveys the profound disruption knowledge of sin brings to life. Once sin revives, it becomes “excessive” through the angst created in confrontation with the law. Continuing to speak on the command not to covet, Paul testifies, “But the occasion being taken, sin wrought in me by the commandment all manner of lust.”38 Concupiscence becomes stronger in it assertion of independence from the law.

Third, Augustine argues that Romans 7:14-23 is Paul’s present Christian testimony and all Christians “under grace.” Verse 14 states, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold as a slave to sin.” Here, Augustine notes the use of the present tense, “I am,” and not the past, “I was.” Paul is speaking for himself and his Christian experience. More specifically, the declaration “I am carnal” refers to Paul’s physical body, which has not yet experienced the resurrection. It is the same as saying, “I am mortal.” “Sold under sin” further conveys the idea of a physical body not yet redeemed from its corrupted state, a body that creates a “drag” upon the soul. Augustine makes clear though, this is also the description of every Christian. However, with Paul, Christians do not consent or obey the desires arising from the
body's corrupted state.\textsuperscript{39}

Paul writes in verses 15, “For what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.” Augustine does not understand this statement to involve any external act by the Apostle, rather an internal motion in the heart. In essence, this is Paul’s admission to concupiscence. He covets or has sinful desires arising from his corrupted body. However, he does not consent or obey these desires. These are desires that wage inside of him. He despises them, longs to be free from them, but finds them nevertheless in his life. Augustine elaborates, “We shouldn’t take what he said, ‘It is not what I want to that I do, but what I hate, that is what I do’ as meaning that he wanted to be chaste, and was in fact an adulterer; that he wanted to be kind, and was in fact cruel. That’s not the sense in which we should understand (this passage). . .but in what sense? 'I want not to covet, and yet I do covet.'”\textsuperscript{40}

In verse 16 Paul continues, “If then I do that which I would not, I consent to the law that it is good.” Here, Augustine develops further his previous thought. What does Paul do that he “would not”? He has sinful desires. The Apostle then recognizes that the law wills that there be no coveting, no concupiscence and he agrees with the law. He wants what the law wants. Augustine explains, “And yet what I don’t want (desire, coveting, concupiscence) occurs in me. What the law doesn’t want, I join the law in not wanting; what it doesn’t want, I don’t want either; so I give my consent to the law.”\textsuperscript{41}

Because there is concupiscence in his physical body, but Paul does not consent or give into these desires, the Apostle states in verse 17, “Now, then, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me.”\textsuperscript{42} His body suffers from concupiscence, but not his actions. He does not obey his sinful desires. Therefore, he does not covet, but his body does. Augustine states, “For ‘it is not I that do it,’” cannot be better understood than he does not consent to set forth his members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin. For if he lusts and consents and acts, how can he be said not to do the thing himself?”\textsuperscript{43}

For Augustine, verse 18 is the crux to understanding Paul’s testimony. This is the “clear” passage, through which the more difficult passages of this section are to be read. Paul declares in verse 18, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwells no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perfect that which is good I find not.” Augustine argues that Paul is empowered to do the good. He is able to walk in obedience to God and follow the law of God, but because concupiscence exists in his body, his actions are not perfect. This accounts for the Apostle’s precision in words. Paul does not say “to do good” is beyond his will to do, but “how to perfect it” is in the present life.\textsuperscript{44}

For Augustine verse 18 holds up the ideal action as a basis for judgment of any act. The ideal is an action performed in perfect love of God without
any constraints of sinful desire. Augustine states, “for the good is performed imperfectly when one covets, even if consent to the evil of coveting is withheld.” Complete action, “perfect” action is by contrast action uniformly supported by a person’s desire to act in the love of God.45 Not only does Augustine contend that this is the correct reading of the verse in which the infinitive “to perfect” appears, but he assumes the other ways of expressing action in Romans 7:14-25, carry implicitly the sense of acting in conformity to the ideal. So, for example, when Paul states in 7:15 that he does what he hates, Augustine interprets this to mean that Paul performs what the law demands, but not without the presence of fleshly desire. Sinful desire does not interfere with his actions, but with the purity of his intentions.46

Augustine believes Paul’s declaration in verse 18 is amplified in verses 19-21. The Apostle states “For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now, if I do that which I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then the law, when I would act, to be good to me; for evil is present with me.” Again, Paul finds the law good when he consents to do what the law would have him to do; inasmuch as his consent falls short of its perfect keeping, as a result of concupiscence, evil is present even in his consent.47

In the first part of verse 22, Paul testifies, “For I delight in the law of God after the inward man.” Augustine confesses that this testimony is key to his transition of seeing Romans 7:14-25 as a Christian “under grace.” Only a person “under grace” delights in God’s law. A person “prior to the law” is ignorant of it; a person “under the law” fears the consequences of breaking the law and is in servitude to it. However, the Christian “under grace” delights in it. This delight comes from realizing the end of the law – love, made possible by the grace of God through the Holy Spirit. In it is love that cheers and gratifies the believer.48

The second part of verse 22 and verse 23 continues, “but I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” Augustine again interprets this other “law” to be concupiscence in his fallen body. “Bringing me into captivity” addresses the flesh, the body that has a “morbid carnal affection.” Augustine states, “In so far then, as there is now this waiting for the redemption of our body, there is also in some degree still existing something in us which is captive to the law of sin.”49 This captivity is in the flesh and not in the mind, in the emotions, but not in consent.50

In verse 24, Paul declares, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death? The grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Augustine comments, “What are we to understand by such language, but that our body, which is undergoing corruption, weighs heavily on our souls? In the resurrection there will be full liberation.”51 Although the actual
law of sin partly holds the flesh in captivity, still it does not reign in the Christian life because a Christian does not obey its desires.

Finally, in verse 25, Paul concludes, “So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.” Augustine again drives home his point that Paul, and by inference, every Christian, serves the law of God by refusing to obey the law of sin. However, the Apostle serves the law of sin by having the desires of the flesh, from which he is not free entirely, although he does not give in to them. Augustine states, “To wit, with the flesh, the law of sin, by lusting; but with the mind, the law of God, by not consenting to that lust.” Augustine states elsewhere, “Both the law of God in the mind, and the law of sin in the flesh. I both take delight in this one (mind), and at the same time I feel lust there (flesh). But I am not overpowered; it tickles my fancy, it lays siege to me, it hammers at the door, it tries to take me away, but not it does not (overpower).”

III. The Role of Will or Consent in People “Under Grace”

As we have now seen, while Augustine’s exegesis of Romans 7 shifts from a person “under law” who cannot walk in true righteousness to a Christian “under grace” who can walk in obedience to the law, but cannot perfect it, nevertheless, his later interpretation conforms to his basic ordo salutis held throughout his ministry.

Now, the question must be asked: what enables people “under grace” to walk in obedience to God, to serve the law of God in their mind and not consent to the desires of the flesh? Augustine’s answer: the love of God shed abroad in the human heart by the Holy Spirit. The love of God enables obedience, empowering true consent to the law of God.

Augustine identifies three factors in the exercise of human will: suggestion, delight, and consent. First, a suggestion is any idea that comes to a person’s mind through personal reflection, random thinking, or bodily senses. Therefore, when a person is told she needs to go back to school if she wants to work at a particular company, or an individual has a chance idea to start a new business while talking to his wife about a haircut, or a teenager considers eating an ice cream cone after seeing a Baskin-Robbins advertisement, they have experienced suggestion. More specifically, Augustine sees the law of God as suggestion as it comes to human beings in the law given to Adam in the Garden and to Moses on Mt. Sinai, in the law summarized by Jesus Christ, and in the law of reason and conscience.

Next, Augustine teaches that each suggestion encounters internal desires already existing in the human mind. In response to a suggestion presented to the mind, strong feelings of attraction or aversion may arise, motivating a person to move in one direction or another; or it may meet with indifference, creating little inclination to action; or it may encounter conflicting desires,
causing internal division within the mind about what to do. For example, when a person encounters a suggestion to eat an ice cream cone from a Baskin-Robbins commercial, strong feelings of sensual pleasure may arise, or stimulate a deep fear of gaining weight, or cause internal turmoil if pleasure and fear are both persuasive to the mind.

From whence do these desires come? Augustine identifies two places: love and the force of habit. First and most basic, Augustine believes human desires have their origin in love—either the love of God or the love of self. By creating humanity in the divine image, God made people to love God, which then enables them to turn toward their neighbor in self-giving love, and truly love themselves for God’s sake. However, because of original sin, love has been corrupted, becoming self-centered, seeking its private interest above all else. In fallen humanity, desire or delight, are all manifestations of a person’s egoist love. Augustine calls these “desires of the flesh” and “concupiscence.” All human desires or delights have self-love as their basis, rather than the perfect love of God.

Second, Augustine believes some desires are built and fortified by habit. A habit begins when a suggestion arouses pleasure that leads to consent. Then, the experience of gratification fuels the pleasure desire, so that when the same suggestion comes again, even greater desire arises, leading to action. As a person continues to consent to the pleasure inclination, the pleasure desire increases in strength, forcing other competing desires (fear, caution) to recede to the background, forming a habit almost impossible to break.

Finally, Augustine believes a suggestion that arouses the strongest delight leads to consent of the will, which results in action. He believes human beings consent to what they ultimately want. Humanity does whatever is their strongest desire. Human consent follows the desire most aroused by a suggestion. For example, in the suggestion of eating an ice cream cone, Augustine believes a person will consent to whatever the strongest desire is. If the pleasure desire is stronger, she will eat the ice cream; if the fear of gaining weight is stronger, she will abstain; and if both are powerful, she will have some inner turmoil, but will eventually do whatever the strongest desire is.

As such, the key for Augustine in the sequence of suggestion - delight - consent is delight or desire. Accordingly, humanity in the stage “prior to the law” cannot begin to fulfill the law of God. They cannot “delight” in the true love of God and neighbor. Instead, their “delight” is completely self-focused. Because all human desire in this stage is self-focused, defined by “concupiscence,” the act arising from willful consent will always be selfish. As such, they do not keep the law of God.

In the stage “under the law,” humanity by God’s grace begins to recognize a need to keep the law of God. They see the need to love God and neighbor. They may begin to desire to walk in true love. As such, a new desire enters
into the mix. However, when the suggestion of God’s law comes by instruction or reason, concupiscence rises to the fore, dominating any desire to walk in divine love, so that they are not able to keep the law. Their consent follows their fleshly desires. Even when they act in outward conformity to the law, concupiscence is at the root. In wanting to avoid punishment, earn praise, or gain some personal reward, they act out of egoist love in the outward performance of the law. Only when a person wants God’s will out of the love of God alone is the law kept. Thus, in The Confessions Augustine testifies of his life before conversion as one “under law” in which he wants to follow God, but is not able to relinquish his fleshly desires that bind him to the world. His fleshly desires are stronger than his desire for God.

In the third stage “under grace,” Augustine teaches that God infuses divine love or “delight for the law” by the Holy Spirit into human life. This comes as a gift of God to a person. Therefore, when the suggestion of the law comes, it encounters the internal desire to love God, which subordinates any other contrary desire or inclination, leading to a person’s consent. God empowers a person with love, so that this delight, this pleasure, this inclination, “draws” or “leads” human consent. Divine love becomes the strongest desire or delight in a Christian and the human will consents to this love. What the law commands, love seeks and obtains by divine grace.

However, as already been intimated, because concupiscence resists love and consent to the good, the good accomplished by consent is marred. It is not perfect love. Nevertheless, the inclinations against which a person “under the law” struggles are now overcome because a higher inclination, love of God, has subordinated them.

More specifically, in Romans 7:14-25 Augustine sees two conflicting delights. The first, which is the consequence of original sin is concupiscence. Human beings find pleasure or delight in the wrong things. This is the law of sin. The second, which is a result of God’s grace infusing the heart with love by the Holy Spirit is delight in the law of God. Augustine makes clear in his interpretation of this passage that a person “under grace” can consent to the good and yet not be free of conflict. Because concupiscence resists love and consent to the good, the good accomplished by consent is marred. It is not perfect love.

Augustine states, “And, without the gift of God—that is, without the Holy Spirit, through whom love is shed abroad in our hearts—the law may bid but it cannot aid. Moreover, it can make of man a transgressor, who cannot then excuse himself by pleading ignorance. For appetite reigns where the love of God does not (but) if a man begins to be led by the Spirit of God, then the mightier power of love struggles against the power of the flesh. And although there is still in man a power that fights against him—his infirmity being not yet fully healed—yet the righteous man lives by faith and
lives righteously in so far as he does not yield to evil desires, conquering them by his love of righteousness.” 69

Conclusion
In conclusion, while Augustine’s interpretation of Romans 7:14-25 undergoes revision in his work as priest and bishop, his basic understanding of a person “under law” and Christian “under grace” does not. Augustine consistently maintains that a person “under law” is unable to keep the law, because of “delight” for self-love. The Christian “under grace” is able to consent to the law and be victorious over the desires of the flesh, because of “delight” in God’s love.

Augustine’s teaching stands in a long historical line of witness to the expectation of a Christian’s victory over willful sin and a life defined by the love of God and neighbor. Augustine in his doctrinal treatises believes Christians are able to overcome their sinful desires, because of the love of God shed abroad in their hearts. Because Christians “under grace” have true love, love subdues all other desires, enabling them to walk in love. While it is not perfected love, it nevertheless is love made manifest in heart and life.

Christopher T. Bounds is associate professor of theology at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana.

End Notes
1 Romans 1:14-15 (New International Version)
3 Augustine, Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, trans. Paula Fredriksen Landes (Society of Biblical Literature, 1982), 44.2.
5 Augustine, Eighty-Three Different Questions, trans. David L. Mosher, The


7 Ibid., II.21.


13 Unfortunately, in many recent treatments of Augustine’s evolving views of Roman 7, his affirmation and expectation of a Christian’s victory over willful sin is ignored or misrepresented. For example, in his chapter, “Interpretations of Paul in the Early Church,” in Reading Paul Together: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives on Justification, ed. David E. Aune (Baker Academic, 2006), 146-168, David M. Rylaarsdam ignores this part of Paul’s teaching. Mark Reasoner in Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 70-73 clearly misrepresents Augustine’s teaching on sin by failing to make distinctions in sin. Reasoner portrays all sin as the same and fails to incorporate Augustine’s
finely nuanced understandings of sin into his treatment. This obscuration of Augustine's teaching on a Christian's victory over sin is greatest in the widely lauded Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (William B. Eerdmans, 1999), in which not one article on “sanctification” or “holiness” in Augustine is included.

14 Augustine, Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, 13-18.2-4.
15 Augustine, The Enchiridion, 119.
16 Ibid., 118.
17 Augustine, Propositions for the Epistle to the Romans, 13-18.2-4; The Enchiridion, 118.
18 Augustine, Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, I.14,16.
19 Augustine, Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, 13-18.2-4; The Enchiridion, 118; To Simplician on Various Questions, I.2.
20 Augustine, To Simplician on Various Questions, I.5.
21 Augustine, Commentary on Galatians, 46.
22 Augustine, The Enchiridion, 118.
23 Augustine, Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, 13-18.7-10.
24 Augustine, To Simplician on Various Questions, I.7.
25 Augustine, On Man’s Perfection in Righteousness, XI.28.
26 Augustine, Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, I.24.
27 Augustine, The Enchiridion, 118. In 427, three years before his death, Augustine in The Retractions 89 states about The Enchiridion, “In this, in my opinion, I have adequately covered how God is to be worshipped, a worship, which Divine Scripture defines as man’s true religion.”
28 Augustine, Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, 13-18.7-10.
29 Augustine, Commentary on Galatians, 46.
30 See James Wetzel, “Sin,” in Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia, 800-802 for a more extensive discussion on Augustine’s developing view of sin.
31 Augustine, On Man’s Perfection in Righteousness, VIII.19; The Enchiridion, 121.
32 Augustine, On Man’s Perfection in Righteousness, XI.28.
33 Compare Augustine’s treatment of concupiscence or fleshly desires in his earlier theological work in Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, 13-18 and Commentary on Galatians, 46 with his mature theological treatments in Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, I.13-27, and Against Julian, II.2.5, VI.23.70–73. Also see Augustine’s introspective examination of concupiscence in The Confessions.
34 Augustine, Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, 13-18.2-4; Commentary on Galatians, 46; Eighty-Three Different Questions, 66.3; Concerning Man’s Perfection in Righteousness, III.8, VIII.19; Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, I. 24; The Enchiridion, 118.

Augustine, Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, I.13.

Ibid., I.13. Augustine also addresses what might be a problematic statement to his interpretation of Paul as one unable to keep the law. Paul testifies in Philippians 3:6 that as a Pharisee he was blameless in keeping the law. Augustine reconciles his interpretation in Romans 7 with Paul’s statement in Philippians by saying that Paul kept the law with outward conformity, but it was motivated by sinful desire and not love. As such, Paul was a man “under law” as a Pharisee. See Against Two Letters of the Pelagians I.15.

Ibid., I.13.

Augustine, Sermon 154, 154.2-3.

Augustine, Sermon 154, 154.10.

Augustine also notes the word “now” as indicative of Romans 7:14-25 being Paul’s present Christian testimony.


Augustine, Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, I.29.32; Sermon 152, 152.2.


For this analysis of verse 18, I am indebted to James Wetzel, Augustine and the Limits of Virtue (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 165-175.

On Marriage and Concupiscence: I.30.34; In Sermon 155:1 Augustine states, “Now it is no longer I that perform it, but the sin that lives in me;” it was because he wasn’t performing it by consenting with the mind, but by lusting with the flesh. He gives the name of sin, you see, to that from which all sins spring, namely to the lust of the flesh.”

Ibid., I. 30.34-31.35; Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, I.20; Sermon 151, 151.6.

Ibid., I. 30.34-31.35.

Against Two Letters of the Pelagians: I.20; Sermon 151: 151.6.

On Marriage and Concupiscence, I.31.35.

Ibid., I.31.36

Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, I.21; Sermon 151, 151.8.


Augustine states here, “We have discovered that there are two kinds of things, eternal and temporal. Two kinds of men, as well, have been clearly and sufficiently distinguished: those who pursue and love eternal things, and those who pursue and love temporal things.”

For Augustine this is true for aversion as well. Aversion can play a role in the development of habit.

Speaking of the Apostle Paul, Augustine states, “He was struggling, he was not subdued. But because he did not even want to have this thing to struggle with, that is why he said, “It is not what I want to, that I do.” I don’t want to covet, but yet I do. So I do something I don’t want to; but all the same, I don’t consent to this lust.”