

FIRST CORINTHIANS 10:13: A REJOINDER TO STEVEN COWAN

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I am grateful for the opportunity to interact with Steven Cowan on the issue of the will in 1 Corinthians 10:13. In my original article, I argued that 1 Cor 10:13 seems to necessitate a libertarian form of free will in order to make sense and that consequently every time a believer sins, he or she could have done otherwise. Cowan has responded, “God makes a way of escape for the Christian by encouraging and helping him in the progressive development of a virtuous character.”¹ Cowan develops the following lines of argument: (1) the broader context of 1 Corinthians 9–10 argues for a compatibilistic sense in 1 Cor 10:13; (2) key texts from elsewhere in Scripture (Rom 7:14–25, Phil 2:12–13, and 1 Tim 4:7) support a compatibilistic interpretation of 1 Cor 10:13; and (3) my view of 1 Cor 10:13 would have a seriously negative effect on the doctrine of sanctification. I will respond to each of these points.

I. RESPONSE

First, however, I must acknowledge that my original article may have been overly anthropocentric. The focus of 1 Cor 10:13 is, first and foremost, on God as the gracious provider for the escape route. Indeed, the structure of the verse itself points to this: God is the faithful one (πιστός) who stands juxtaposed with all the frailty of mankind. If I have neglected the theocentric nature of this passage, I hope to rectify that by stressing it in this paragraph. The central character of 1 Cor 10:13 is God himself, and anyone who preaches this passage should focus on the graciousness of God more than the ability of humans.²

Nevertheless, I believe my overall thesis, that a Christian can always resist the temptation to sin (at any particular point in time), still stands. In response to Cowan, I would like to begin by pointing the reader to a significant difference in how he and I view the relationship of self-discipline to resisting temptation. For Cowan, “godliness (and no doubt godly choices) are the outcome of a gradual process of training.”³ Thus, God’s escape from temptation functions by “enabling us to progressively develop the necessary virtues—habits of character—that will, when ac-

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¹ Steven B. Cowan, “Does 1 Corinthians 10:13 Imply Libertarian Freedom? A Reply to Paul A. Himes,” *JETS* 55 (2012) 799. In his response, Cowan correctly notes that my basic thesis has been argued before, specifically citing an article by William Lane Craig (p. 795, n. 2). I had been unaware of Craig’s work until now, and I appreciate Cowan pointing this out.

² I am grateful to my pastor for stressing this point.

³ Cowan, “Does 1 Corinthians 10:13 Imply Libertarian Freedom?” 800.

quired, motivate us internally to make the right choices.”⁴ In this way Cowan seems to view resisting temptation as the outcome of, and mostly distinct from, the process of discipline. My response would be to argue that resisting temptation is *part* of self-discipline and the acquisition of virtues. One does not develop godly character first and then start resisting temptation later. Indeed, many of the virtues Christians are supposed to acquire through discipline are, in fact, the act of resisting certain temptations. The verb ἐγκρατεύομαι (v. 25), for example, is used only one other time in the NT (1 Cor 7:9), and there it refers to whether or not one is successfully resisting illicit desires.⁵ It would also be logical to assume that, within the context of Paul’s athletic metaphor, the expression would refer to an athlete keeping himself or herself from vices. Consequently, I believe 1 Cor 9:24–27 assumes resistance to sin as part of the process of godly discipline.⁶

This, then, forms the basis of my response to Cowan on both 1 Cor 9:24–27 and 1 Tim 4:7. Regarding the former, I would find it odd indeed if actively resisting temptation were not, in fact, part of the apostle Paul’s practice of self-control. How, for example, could the apostle discipline himself to avoid disqualification if he were actively sinning all along? Would such a person be truly disciplined? Would it not be better to say that the apostle Paul, in the process of training his body to cheerfully accept any circumstances for the sake of the gospel, also actively trained himself to resist temptation so that he would not be disqualified from the ministry? Disqualification, after all, is not merely falling into sin but rather something much more drastic.⁷ If, then, resisting sin is part of self-discipline, I do not believe either

⁴ *Ibid.*, 798.

⁵ All lexical searches were conducted using *Accordance* 8.4 (OakTree Software, 2009). Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner aptly sum up the overall point of 1 Cor 7:9 when they state, “If sexual desire is a chronic distraction and temptation, disrupting a life lived out for the gospel, Paul advocates marriage” (*The First Letter to the Corinthians* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010] 288). In other words, self-control here refers to how well one is dealing with sexual temptation. Note that the Greek of 1 Cor 7:9 does not read “if you are *unable* to exercise self-control,” which would have most likely required a form of either δύναι + the infinitive or ισχύω + the infinitive (e.g. Acts 6:10). Rather, ἐγκρατεύονται is a present indicative, and consequently the protasis of this sentence could be understood to mean “But if they are not currently exercising self-control . . .” (this writer is fully aware, however, that any attempt at exegesis based on the tense of the verb is fraught with controversy).

The noun cognate ἐγκράτεια likewise seems to refer to resisting vices or temptation. The word only occurs three times in the New Testament (Acts 24:25; Gal 5:23; and 2 Pet 1:6), but the reader should also note its use in such places as 4 Macc 5:34 (where the act of self-control is equated with resisting the temptation to turn one’s back on the Law [v. 33]) and Josephus, *Ant.* 8.235 (Jadon resists the hospitality of the king, for to accept it would have meant disobeying the Lord’s command; Josephus is retelling the story of 1 Kings 13:8–9).

⁶ For a discussion of “restraint” (including the concept of “self-control”) in the Christian life, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Excellence: The Character of God and the Pursuit of Scholarly Virtue* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011) 128–30. Köstenberger discusses how self-control is linked both to “the control of one’s temper (Prov. 14:17, 29; 15:18)” and “sexual purity (1 Cor. 7:5, 9).”

⁷ Although I do not hold that the term means “total apostasy” as some Arminians would, I cannot deny that ἀδόκιμος in the NT often portends drastic consequences. See esp. Rom 1:28 and 2 Tim 3:8. I would prefer the sense of “disqualification from ministry” in 1 Cor 9:27, but my point is that Paul is not disciplining himself so that he would never sin, but rather so that he would not become disqualified. Part of the process of keeping oneself from being disqualified is to resist sin.

1 Cor 9:24–27 or 1 Tim 4:7 argue against my position. Regarding Cowan’s discussion of the latter, I would simply add that godliness is the result of *both* godly choices and self-discipline. One cannot claim to be godly if they have not been (mostly) resisting temptation all along.

Furthermore, 1 Cor 10:13 was not directed at the apostle Paul, with all his maturity and discipline.⁸ It was directed at a diverse group of Christians, many who were spiritually immature and struggling with all sorts of sins (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5 and the tolerance of a sexual sin that appalled even the Gentiles). These believers were clearly in the same danger of sinning as the Exodus generation (1 Cor 10:6–12, esp. v. 12). If, at the moment the epistle was read, at least some of these Corinthians lacked the self-discipline to resist the sin that would assail them in the coming hours, then both the admonition in 1 Cor 10:13 and the command immediately following (v. 14) fall flat. Indeed, could not the Corinthians have responded to the epistle by arguing that they currently lacked the self-discipline or godly character to escape, and that it would be awhile before they could actually obey Paul’s commands in 1 Cor 10:7–10, 14?

Regarding Cowan’s discussion of Phil 2:12–13 and 1 Tim 4:7, I am somewhat uncomfortable with Cowan’s suggestion that under my view the apostle Paul would “expect the believer to avoid sin by acting independently of his desires and values as Himes would have it” and that a Christian has “the ability to either sin or not to sin in that situation independently of his desires and values” (the key word in each case being “independently”).⁹ Instead, I argued in my original article that

a Christian chooses *between* his or her desires and thus controls the *strengths* of those desires. Furthermore, simply because choice may be influenced by other factors (including spiritual disposition) does not necessarily mean that choice is determined by those factors.¹⁰

Thus the believer does not act independently of his or her desires and values, and the believer’s actions will never be based off of a non-existent desire or value; all of his or her actions stem from something that is already there.¹¹ What I am arguing, however, is that a believer has *competing* desires and is forced to choose between them. The presence of the Holy Spirit guarantees that a believer will have the “right” values and desires while the possession of a corrupted human nature results in the “wrong” values and desires.

Since Cowan’s argument from Rom 7:14–25 rests on one particular interpretation, I will keep my comments brief. I am uncomfortable with a theology that

⁸ This, however, raises the question: could the apostle Paul have sinned?

⁹ Cowan, “Does 1 Corinthians 10:13 Imply Libertarian Freedom?” 800 and 797, respectively.

¹⁰ Paul A. Himes, “When a Christian Sins: 1 Corinthians 10:13 and the Power of Contrary Choice in Relation to the Compatibilist-Libertarian Debate,” *JETS* 54 (2011) 341.

¹¹ To be fair, I did say that Christians may act “regardless of their current value scale” (Himes, “When a Christian Sins” 341; Cowan quotes me on p. 796 of “Does 1 Corinthians 10:13 Imply Libertarian Freedom?”). Nevertheless, I would argue that this is different from saying that a Christian acts *independently* of his or her desires altogether. The Christian, through the enabling of the Holy Spirit, when faced with competing values, may change his or her value scale by resisting temptation. The “value scale,” in my opinion, is descriptive rather than determinative.

would say the apostle Paul was truly a slave to sin even after he was converted. This seems to contradict the very point he makes in Romans 6 and 8. As Hae-Kyung Chang notes,

In Rom. 6 and 8, respectively, Paul makes it clear that “being free under sin” and “being free from the law of sin and death” are conditions that are true for every Christian. If one is a Christian, then these things are true; if one is not, they are not true. This means that the situation of “I” depicted in Rom. 7:14–25 cannot be that of the “normal” Christians, nor of an immature Christian. Nor can it describe the condition of any Christian living by the law because the Christian who is mistakenly living according to the law is yet a Christian and is therefore not “under sin” or a “prisoner of the law of sin.”¹²

With Chang, then, I would prefer to see 7:14–25 as “a typical experience of the man who is confronted with the law” or perhaps, as Joseph Fitzmeyer argues, the view of “unregenerate humanity faced with the Mosaic law—but as seen by a Christian.”¹³ To suggest that a believer could ever be a “slave” or “prisoner” to sin in a theological sense seems to run counter to Rom 8:2 which indicates that the believer is free from sin. Yet even if, for the sake of argument, the apostle is speaking of his own experience as a believer, I am not sure that it would support a compatibilistic view, for Rom 7:15–16 would then have the believer acting *contrary* to his or her desires rather than in accordance with them (οὐ γὰρ ὁ γὰρ θέλω τοῦτο πράσσω).

Finally, Cowan has suggested that my argument “implies an implausible view of sanctification.”¹⁴ He argues,

So, on Himes’s view, it is conceivable that a particular Christian always, without exception, chooses to do right—and this regardless of his level of sanctification or maturity. Even more oddly, a Christian, regardless of his level of Christian character development, *could consistently choose to always do the wrong thing.*¹⁵

In response, I would argue once again that a Christian’s level of sanctification is dependent upon his choices, not vice versa. Nevertheless, I would acknowledge that *in theory*, it is possible for a Christian to make the right choices consistently (though I fail to see how this is a problem). Statistically, however, this is unlikely and virtually impossible. If I may be permitted an athletic analogy, a major league baseball slugger has the physical ability to hit every single pitch that comes across the strike zone into the bleachers. Yet the sheer amount of pitches he will face makes it statistically unlikely that this will happen every single time (physical training helps, but is not determinative). In the same way, a Christian faces an innumer-

¹² Hae-Kyung Chang, “The Christian Life in a Dialectical Tension? Romans 7:7–25 Reconsidered,” *NovT* 49 (2007) 268.

¹³ *Ibid.* 270; Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 465 (Fitzmeyer is drawing on the work of Otto Cuss). For a similar view with a unique twist, see Jair de Almeida, Jr., “Uma Hipótese Plausível da Identidade do ‘Eu’ de Romanos 7,” *Fides Reformata* 14 (2009) 101–15 (Almeida links the “I” in Romans 7 to Jesus’ dialogue with the rich man in Mark 10).

¹⁴ Cowan, “Does 1 Corinthians 10:13 Imply Libertarian Freedom?” 800–1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 801. Emphasis is Cowan’s.

able amount of temptations over his or her life and statistically is unlikely to successfully resist every single one.¹⁶

The other side of Cowan's argument (that a Christian could conceivably always sin) is not necessarily true in my theological scheme, and I have already dealt with Cowan's objection in my original article. In footnote 61 I argue,

Yet simply because a Christian may always possess the ability *not to* sin, that does not mean that he or she always possesses the ability *to* sin. The converse is not always logically true (and is irrelevant to 1 Cor 10:13). It is quite possible that the Lord, in order to carry out his plan, determines that in a certain circumstance a particular Christian will not even have the ability to sin.¹⁷

The fact that Christians always have the power to resist the devil does not necessarily mean they always have the power to resist the Holy Spirit. In addition, I believe both Cowan and I would agree that, for the Christian who is consistently sinning, the Lord would step in with corrective chastening after a certain point (cf. Heb 12:5–11). In addition, I would like to ask (just as I did in the original article) how it is that mature Christians, those Christians with godly character, still sin at all within a compatibilist theology?

II. CONCLUSION

I believe, then, that a compatibilist interpretation of 1 Cor 10:13, as articulated in Cowan's article, is not as attractive as a libertarian interpretation. Resisting temptation is part of godly discipline and should not be viewed as the determinative result of such discipline. Godliness proceeds from both positive action (practicing virtues) and negative action (resisting sin). The Christian is godly because he or she resists temptation rather than resisting temptation because he or she is godly.¹⁸

I suspect there is much more that could be said on the doctrine sanctification by both Cowan and myself. For future discussion, I believe it would be profitable for both libertarians and compatibilists to address the issue of how one's view of the will factors into personal counseling (and it is not without a sense of irony that I acknowledge that some of the best books on counseling have been written from a strong Reformed perspective).¹⁹

¹⁶ This means that any form of "sinless perfection" is impossible, for even if one reaches the point that they have not sinned in an entire year (an unlikely prospect), there is no guarantee that he or she will not sin the next year (many mature, godly men and women have fallen into sin). Until the redeemed state, we will never achieve perfection, as the Apostle Paul himself seems to indicate in Phil 3:12. I suspect Cowan and I would agree on this, though I wonder if under the compatibilist view it might be at least theoretically possible to reach a state of spiritual maturity where it would be impossible both to sin and to grow lax in self-discipline.

¹⁷ Himes, "When a Christian Sins" 340 n. 61.

¹⁸ I will acknowledge, as a friend pointed out, that godly character (defined as both the development of virtues and the consistent resisting of temptation) may make it easier to resist sin in the future. Yet even godly Christians sin, so godly character alone does not account for whether or not one resists sin.

¹⁹ For the compatibilist, I would ask how helpful it would be to admit to an immature Christian counselee that, in regards to the sin they committed last night, they were incapable of having resisted it.

In the end, however, I would like to reiterate that not every choice one makes is necessarily a libertarian choice. To the contrary, there may be some areas where a compatibilist view makes sense theologically or practically, possibly including the believer's sinlessness in heaven (as Cowan has argued in a recent article).²⁰ It is not necessarily a matter of "either-or."²¹ Furthermore, there are at least two key points that I believe Cowan and I would agree on regarding sanctification: (1) nothing good is possible in the Christian life without the gracious work of God through the Holy Spirit; and (2) true sanctification nonetheless requires genuine effort and work on the part of the Christian. The believer who truly takes those two points to heart will consistently "work out" his or her salvation, regardless of whether or not it is a compatibilist or libertarian will doing the working.²²

Conversely, as a partial libertarian, I am struggling with how to deal with such issues as addiction; simply saying "Choose to do the right thing and put away your drugs" is unlikely to be sufficient help for the struggling Christian.

²⁰ See Steven B. Cowan, "Compatibilism and the Sinlessness of the Redeemed in Heaven," *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (2011) 416–31.

²¹ If I may expand on an illustration I used in the original article, I would ask readers to consider a trip to the local ice cream shop. In my case, I most definitely have competing desires that I can choose between. One day I may choose one flavor, the next day another (i.e. libertarian will), and I would be hard-pressed to be convinced by a compatibilist that my value scale changed so radically within the 24 hours separating my decisions (decisions that I often cannot even predict until the moment I am making them). On the other hand, some flavors do not even exist as a legitimate possibility because I have no desire for them nor can I create the desire for them (hence, compatibilism). In this way, the will makes both libertarian and compatibilist choices.

²² I am grateful to Dr. Cowan for his dialogue with my work and to Dr. Andreas Köstenberger and *JETS* for permitting a rejoinder. I am especially grateful to three friends who read an earlier draft of my rejoinder and offered insights and critique: Pastor Joe Henson, Michael Stover, and my father, John Himes. As always, any errors, misinterpretations, or heresies are the sole responsibility of this writer.