

The Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus  
*An Introduction to Pauline Spirituality*

Richard L. Peterson  
RP-D-614

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
The Doctor of Ministry  
Dr. David Bailey, Professor/Mentor  
Columbia Evangelical Seminary  
June 2021

This is an introductory essay in Pauline spirituality. This work is driven by three pastoral concerns: first, the glory of the triune God as Savior and Redeemer; second, my deep concern for those who believe they are saved by grace through faith in Christ, yet nonetheless live experientially as under the yoke of law; and third, the domestication and marginalization of the Person and work of the Spirit within both the academy and the local church.<sup>1</sup> It is my purpose therefore to show that in the mind of the apostle Paul, Christ has fully redeemed a people for whom he consecrated a radically new covenant, not of the letter, but of the life-giving Spirit (II Corinthians 3:6), *and* that the Spirit alone is therefore sufficient for moral transformation *apart from observance of Torah*,<sup>2</sup> at any point in the Christian life.

I will work to show how Paul exposed the folly of practicing Christian nomism<sup>3</sup> in light of the eschatological reality that the believer belongs to the new covenant age of the indwelling Spirit, as well as the fact that far from producing genuine righteousness, law observance actually increases the struggle with remaining sin while providing no remedy for that struggle. I will show that Paul preached the radical work of the Spirit in creating and empowering a new covenant people for the glory of God who actually *fulfill* the law in their daily walk. This means also that this essay will be somewhat polemic, as it exposes those today who call for the law as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), p.899.

<sup>2</sup> Defining our terms: Throughout this essay, I will be using the Hebrew term "Torah" to refer to the Mosaic Law, particularly the first five books of the Law, also called the Pentateuch.

<sup>3</sup> Defining our terms: By "nomism" I mean basing one's ethical and religious conduct on the observance of external "moral law," itself a term often used in conservative theology to refer to the Ten Commandments.

“rule of life”<sup>4</sup> for the believer, teachers who act as the spiritual heirs of the Judaizers who opposed Paul’s new covenant ministry.

This essay begins with an examination of the gospel of Jesus Christ *within the Bible’s own covenantal and eschatological framework*; a framework articulated by Paul within his letters. We will discover how essential this framework is in properly understanding how the glorious revelation of Christ’s work is realized by the Spirit in the believer. We will also consider how cultural and political interests have redefined this essential framework. The pastoral concerns here are grave, for apart from this framework one simply cannot understand the full implications of the redemption for which Christ died, with the result that many are spending their Christian life needlessly struggling, or for some, determining the Christian life simply to be impossible and leaving the faith altogether.<sup>5</sup>

Having set forth the essential framework, we will then examine Paul’s letter to the Galatians in order to further discover the implications and application of this framework. We will also consider how Satan, the enemy of souls, seeks to pervert and distort the gospel and how the believer can be more discerning so as to avoid falling prey to his schemes. For two thousand years, the church has contended with those who would pervert and distort the gospel by muddling the distinction between the old and the new covenants and thus redefining the work of Christ, and the Spirit, and the gospel itself.

Finally, I will conclude with some practical approaches for life in the Spirit, such as how Christians may better read and study the Bible and how the eschatological people of God are to

---

<sup>4</sup> See Article VI, Chapter XIX of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the standard document of faith and practice for many within Reformed and conservative circles.

<sup>5</sup> See Daniel B. Wallace, “Christ at the Center,” a chapel lecture given at Dallas Theological Seminary in 2020, available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0JQe\\_AP-oM&t=30s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0JQe_AP-oM&t=30s) [retrieved June 2, 2021].

function with each other and within the world while also steering clear of the folly of triumphalism<sup>6</sup> and “Victorious Life” theology. All Christians may take heart in the fact that there are a growing number of New Testament scholars doing very important work to restore the covenantal and eschatological framework of the gospel; that’s the good news. The bad news is that too seldom does the work done in the academy find its way into the pulpits of churches, let alone the pews and daily lives of Christian people. It is my hope that this will soon change and that this essay may in some small way contribute to that end.

### **The Essential Framework for the Gospel**

It is God’s eternal purpose to create for his own glory a people worthy of his presence (Ezekiel 36:22-38; Ephesians 2:11-14; Titus 2:11-14; Revelation 21:1-8)<sup>7</sup>. From Genesis through Revelation, we are to understand Scripture therefore as the redemptive history of how this purpose is *progressively* revealed through a series of promises and covenants, all of which find fulfilment in Christ and the new covenant he consecrated with his own blood (Acts 7:2-50; 13:16-41; Hebrews 8:1-10:18). In short, the *biblical* covenants are the backbone of the story of redemption and the lens through which we read and understand Scripture.

Regarding the eschatological framework, Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum say it well: “Scripture itself comes to us a redemptive revelation, rooted in history, unfolding God’s eternal plan worked out in time, and as such the very ‘form’ and ‘shape’ of Scripture is

---

<sup>6</sup> Defining our terms: “Triumphalism” within a religious context refers to an excessive exultation of one’s standing or superiority of accomplishments that is unwarranted, as in the case of over-realized eschatology, or denial of suffering and pain.

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*<sup>®</sup>, NIV © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.<sup>®</sup>

‘eschatological.’<sup>8</sup> In other words, “Scripture is more than a storehouse of facts and propositions since Scripture unfolds for us a plot, a story line, a divine interpretation of the drama of redemption, which is eschatological at heart, Christological in focus, and as such, our interpretation of Scripture and our drawing of theological conclusions must reflect this.”<sup>9</sup>

What is important to understand here is that the Bible contains its own covenantal and eschatological structure. But one would *not* think so given the proliferation of man-made theological systems and the strange and even hysterical speculations of many teachers these days on the subject of the end times. As in first-century Judaism, American evangelicalism has become steeped in the traditions of men to the point of making God’s word of no effect (Mark 7:1-13).<sup>10</sup> So, let us take some time now and clarify what the Bible means when we use the phrase “covenantal and eschatological framework.”

### The Biblical Covenants

When I say “biblical covenants,” I mean those covenants that are found within Scripture itself and not those fabricated and imposed upon Scripture by man-made theological

---

<sup>8</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> American Christianity is defined primarily by a discredited theological system referred to as dispensationalism; this system, created by John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century, came into being at the same time as did Seventh-Day Adventism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Mormonism, none of which found acceptance within orthodox Christianity as dispensationalism did, even though the teachings of this system are in many cases equally heretical. See A. W. Tozer, *I Call It Heresy* (Camp Hill, PA: Wing Spread Publishers, 1991, 2010); John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000); and John G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998). To a lesser degree, Covenant Theology (also known as “Reformed” theology) has increased in influence in recent decades, even though this system also imposes its own fabricated covenants upon Scripture. There is a desperate need therefore for Christians to learn to read and study the Scripture for themselves and for churches to reject these and any system that redefines the Bible’s own covenantal and eschatological structure.

systems designed to reinforce a man-centered agenda.<sup>11</sup> The first mention within Scripture of a covenant is that which God made with creation following the flood through Noah (Genesis 9:8-17). However, redemptive history began with Abraham, to whom God promised that it was through his “seed” that humanity would be redeemed (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21), and with whom God then made covenant, with male circumcision being the sign of that covenant (Genesis 17:1-14). Centuries later, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob delivered the children of Israel out of Pharaoh’s hands, and made a Law covenant with them at Mount Sinai through Moses, the Sabbath being the sign of that covenant, and which included over 613 commandments (Exodus chapters 19-31)—none of which Israel ever kept.

After the nation was settled in the land, the people demanded a king. And having removed the first king, Saul, God anointed David in Saul’s stead, and later made covenant with him promising that one of his own offspring would reign, and his kingdom would be without end (II Samuel 7:12-17). The Davidic covenant was a continuation of the previous covenants and promised that it was through a king that God would secure the land and bring blessing and an eternal kingdom. After the decline of the monarchy into idolatry and moral decadence, God removed his presence from the temple (Ezekiel 10:18), which precipitated the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, and many within Judah were taken into exile in 587 B.C., but God also promised

---

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Covenant-Reformed theology teaches three covenants not found anywhere in sacred text, but nonetheless taught as though they were: (1) The covenant of redemption between the Father and Son decreed within eternity; (2) the covenant of works between God and Adam; and (3) the covenant of grace, which serves in this system as an overall umbrella and lens by which the actual biblical covenants are to be interpreted, and which relegates the new covenant to the status of simply an administration of this covenant of grace. See Samuel E. Waldon and Richard C. Barcellos, *A Reformed Manifesto: The New Covenant Constitution of the Church* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2004), p. 69. The so-called “covenant of grace” originated with Ulrich Zwingli during the early decades of the Reformation in order to provide a theological framework within which to justify a new way of viewing infant baptism that stopped short of the baptismal regeneration that the church had practiced for centuries prior to the Reformation. Zwingli’s innovation provided theological cover by considering infant baptism as the New Testament application of old covenant circumcision. Pauline theology, however, presents circumcision under the new covenant as the work of the Spirit at conversion (see Romans 2:28-29; Philippians 3:3; Galatians 6:15).

a return from the nations, and a *new* covenant, unlike the former covenant, by which he himself would save and cleanse his people by the work of his Spirit within them (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-37:23; Joel 2:28-3:21). It would be by God's restored presence, through the Spirit, that the covenantal language, "You will be my people, and I will be your God" would be forever established, and *not* by the broken Mosaic Law covenant. Let us now consider the eschatological framework.

### The Eschatological Framework

Following the return to Jerusalem of some of the exiles 70 years later, the walls of the city were eventually rebuilt by Nehemiah and the temple was rebuilt by Zerubbabel. There was great expectation that God would at that time restore his presence and return Israel to her former glory under David and Solomon. As decades turned to centuries, and the occupation of foreign nations continued, the expectation of God's intervention within history faded so that by the time of Malachi a great apathy had taken hold of the people. This apathy manifested as chronic violation of the Mosaic covenant by the people in the form of offering blemished sacrifices, divorcing, injustice, withholding tithes, and generally speaking arrogantly against God (Malachi 1:6-14; 2:11-3:15).

After the time of Malachi, Israel entered into what is called a time of "the quenched Spirit," a period when no new prophetic word from God was heard for 400 years.<sup>12</sup> And despite the earlier promises within the former prophets of God's intervention within history followed by an end-time consummation, the Jewish expectation of divine intervention within history was

---

<sup>12</sup> Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p. 914.

slowly abandoned and an eschatology was adopted that was outside the biblical framework. A spirit of apathy led to a spirit of apostasy in the religious thinking within Judaism.

It was during this time that a group called “The Apocalyptists,”<sup>13</sup> using pseudonyms, began writing of a history-ending, cataclysmic event in which God would destroy all of Israel’s enemies and return Israel to world prominence within an eternal, messianic age *and the return of the presence of God* to the temple. Though *uninspired*, these writings nonetheless resulted in a period of great apocalyptic fervor among the people. Yet it was during this period that John came preaching a baptism of repentance and warning of the coming wrath of God, as well as the coming of One who would “baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:15-18).

So, to summarize the eschatological background: The prophets spoke of the promise of divine intervention within history followed by a final consummation, but by the first century this biblical framework was abandoned in favor of an *alternative* eschatological framework that was *entirely future-oriented*. In the Jewish mind, all hope for divine intervention and the dawning of the messianic age *within history*, including the restoration of God’s presence, became tied to a singular, cataclysmic event at which time Israel’s enemies would be destroyed and the kingdom restored, and human history brought to an end. This abandonment of the covenantal and eschatological framework of Moses and the prophets meant that the Jewish leaders and the people were not prepared for what was to come next.<sup>14</sup>

And what came next was Jesus of Nazareth stepping out of obscurity, and the inauguration of God’s saving rule as evidenced by the beginning of the messianic age of the Spirit *within history*. When Jesus left Nazareth, he passed by the *apostate* religious structure of

---

<sup>13</sup> H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of the Apocalyptic* (New York, NY: Association Press, 1964), p. 189.

<sup>14</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 55.



Jerusalem, and instead submitted to the Spirit-empowered ministry of John. This was significant, because in his submission to the waters of repentance, Jesus represented all of Israel. He came as the fulfillment of the long-awaited Son of Abraham and Son of David. In short: Jesus came as *true* Israel.<sup>15</sup> What occurred at his baptism, however, was not the expected history-ending, cataclysmic event that would usher in the messianic age. Instead, what occurred was the descending of the Spirit, and the affirming voice of the Father, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased” (Mark 1:11). The promise of the restored presence of God was fulfilled beginning in Jesus (Ezekiel 34:7-31; John 2:18-24); “Immanuel: God with us” (Isaiah 7:14; 8:8,10; Matthew 1:23). This meant that the expected end-time event of the return of God’s saving rule was in fact being mobilized—not in a singular, cataclysmic history-ending event, but concurrent with *the present* age within the Person and Spirit-anointed ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. This was something the teachers of Israel could not fit into their erroneous eschatological framework of interpretation (John 3:10; 5:36-47).

Nonetheless, after overcoming the Satanic temptation to redefine his messianic mission, the stage was set for the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus to begin. The time had come to inaugurate the kingdom age; that is to say, to inaugurate the future age of God’s saving rule *into the present*. This is what is meant by the term *inaugurated eschatology*, a phrase for which every believer ought to possess a working knowledge.<sup>16</sup> *The fact that in the coming of Christ, the future invaded the present* is at the core of Pauline spirituality.

---

<sup>15</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), p. 546.

<sup>16</sup> Defining our terms: “Eschatology,” from the Greek word “eschaton” (end), means the study of that which is expected to occur at the end of human history: judgment, renewal, re-creation, deliverance, the eternal state. “Inaugurated eschatology,” therefore, means that the end-time events have begun in the present day. In other words, the future has invaded the present and is accessible to those who are made alive by the Spirit in order to walk in the realm of the Spirit, drawing their identity, purpose, hope, and values from that coming kingdom in the now, though it is yet to be fully realized as it will be when Christ returns.

After John was arrested, Jesus left the waters of Jordan and the wilderness experience and began his Galilean ministry, proclaiming, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14-15). “The time has come.” What time? The time of God’s saving rule through the Son of David and the restoration of God’s presence among the people. This was not preaching as we understand preaching today; rather, this was Jesus making a royal proclamation, a heralding that despite the Jewish expectation, the arrival of the long-awaited time of God’s saving rule *within history* had now come. The coming of the Spirit upon Jesus was evidence that the messianic age had come—the Son of David had arrived—and the kingdom of God was *now* present and active. This means that when Christ returns it will not be to do something new, but to consummate that which he began with his first coming.

Jesus declared this fulfillment to the synagogue at Nazareth, declaring, “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me*, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Luke then adds: “He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is *fulfilled* in your hearing’” (Luke 4:14-21; Isaiah 61:1-2, emphasis mine). The saving rule of God and the messianic age of deliverance had begun, as evidenced by the anointing of the Spirit upon Jesus.

However, the absence of a singular, cataclysmic event confused even John, who then sent messengers asking, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” To which Jesus replied by detailing the power of God’s saving rule at work in his ministry—which meant that the overthrow of Satan’s dominion had begun (Luke 7:18-23). That which Jesus declared fulfilled at the synagogue in Nazareth was by this time actively occurring. The “end”

had begun—although the decisive event of the cross and resurrection were to come, followed by the confirming of the new covenant era at Pentecost with the outpouring of the Spirit.

Earlier, John had spoken of the Messiah’s coming as the One who would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). This was “John’s way of speaking of the Messiah’s most essential quality, namely that he would usher in the messianic age as the age of the Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> This is the age in which all believers *now* live and participate. If it does not seem so, it is because, just as it was in first-century Judaism, the essential framework of the gospel has once again been largely abandoned in favor of the traditions and systems of men. The Pharisees and scribes had developed their own framework into which Jesus simply did *not* fit.

And so it is today also that many have developed their own framework of interpretation into which, once again, Jesus does not fit. What we get from their alternative framework is that which Paul warned: a different “Jesus,” a different “spirit,” and an altogether different “gospel”—all of which most modern Christians “put up with easily enough” (II Corinthians 11:1-5). The time is come that these schemes be discerned, exposed, and rejected in favor of the gospel of Christ, *within its own biblical framework*.

The work of the Spirit in the life and ministry of Jesus represents the crucial factor in Paul’s theology and *Spirit*-uality, and therefore, our understanding as well of the Spirit’s work within the covenantal and eschatological framework of the gospel. And no one explains this factor better than Gordon Fee:

Thus the Spirit in the New Testament is an eschatological reality. The Spirit belongs to the Future, to the coming of the New Age. *This is the key to everything in the New Testament*. What is essential to understanding the ministry of Jesus is that He announced that with his own coming the Kingdom of God, the New Age of righteousness and justice, had *already* begun. In the synagogue at Nazareth, the messianic prophecy of

---

<sup>17</sup> Gordon D. Fee, “The Baptism in the Holy Spirit: The Issue of Separability and Subsequence” in *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 7:2 (Fall, 1985), pp. 97-99.

Isaiah 61:1, that the Spirit would rest upon the Messiah to bring justice and the time of God's favor, is announced to be fulfilled "in your hearing" (Luke 4:6-12). When accused of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul, he announces, "If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God (the rule) of God has come present upon you."

The Spirit is crucial to all of this. For Jesus himself, divine though he is, the key to *his truly human life* was the presence and fulness of the Spirit (Luke 4:14, 16; 5:17; Acts 2:22; 10:38). With him, the Messiah—the one uniquely anointed with the Spirit and power—had come. But it was only the dawning of the New Age, the beginning of the End, the inauguration of the Rule. Therefore, the power is there, but it is held in tension, as veiled power—there for others, while he himself experienced weakness, servanthood, deprivation, and finally crucifixion. This is followed by resurrection. Surely now comes the End: "Will you now restore the kingdom of Israel?" That's the wrong question, Jesus implies. It is *for you to receive power, when the Spirit comes*, so that you may be witnesses to me. It is in this context that we are to understand the outpouring on the day of Pentecost. Above all else, the coming of the Spirit meant that God's people also *had been ushered into the New Age*. "This is that," shouts Peter. "The Spirit is here; the New Age has begun."<sup>18</sup> (Emphasis mine)

God's eternal purpose for humanity is fulfilled in the Person and finished work of Jesus of Nazareth, who has now set the standard for the people of God. To be truly human is to live as Jesus lived; that is, in fellowship with and in utter reliance upon the presence of God by the eschatological indwelling Spirit. It is in Christ alone that humanity is found worthy of God's presence, by the Spirit. And it is now the presence, fulness, and experience of the Spirit that marks out the people of God from the fallen humanity around them.

### The Implications of the Gospel Framework

Having set forth the essential covenantal and eschatological framework of the gospel, let us now consider the implications of this framework for the Christian life. We begin by embracing the life and ministry of Jesus as the pattern for life in the Spirit and the *biblical* rule of life for all believers. Jesus is not a means to an end for Israel; rather, he is the end. He is the end and

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

fulfillment of the Mosaic Law covenant, and he is himself the new covenant (Isaiah 42:6). What is more, this means that the one in Christ exists within an *already/not yet* framework. The coming age has invaded the present age as evidenced by the resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

For members of the early church, these two events of Christ's resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost radically changed how they viewed *the time* in which they existed.<sup>19</sup> And this is critical for us "on whom the culmination of the ages has come" (I Corinthians 10:11). As did the early church, we are to also understand that Jesus' resurrection meant that the final resurrection had *already* begun, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost meant that the future *new covenant age* had also been inaugurated. All this means that the one in Christ no longer belongs to the old covenant age of law, sin, and death, but to the coming new covenant age, which is being experienced in the present. It is from within this *already/not yet* framework that Paul declares: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (II Corinthians 5:17).

Within the early church, particularly in the thinking of Paul, this realization produced a radical shift in the understanding of the ministry of Jesus, as well as the early church members' own self-understanding as the now eschatological people of God living in the present reality of the new age of the Spirit. So radical was this shift that Paul had to spend fourteen years wrapping his mind around this great covenantal and eschatological event that had occurred in the coming of Christ (Galatians 2:1). This means that, like Paul, every Christian must consider what it means for one's daily life to be saved and yet know that one will also be saved at a later time; that one

---

<sup>19</sup> Gordon D. Fee, "The Holy Spirit in Pauline Literature," Lecture series given at Regent College, Lecture one. Available on DVD at [www.regentbookstore.com](http://www.regentbookstore.com)

is adopted as a child of God, and yet awaiting the final adoption; one is redeemed, and yet awaiting the full realization of one's redemption at the second coming of Christ, and given a new physical body (Philippians 3:20).

For Paul and the early church, and all believers since, a truly *new* and living way was now theirs in Christ as over and against the yoke of the law, a yoke no one had ever been able to bear (Acts 15:10). To use Pauline terminology, God has “rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13). The one in Christ lives therefore within a new realm, the realm of the Spirit, *and no longer* in the realm of the flesh (Romans 8:1-17), nor does the one in Christ belong to this present age.

And the implications of all this for daily life are immense: It affects one's personal sense of identity, purpose in life, and hope for the future. For the Christian now possesses a certain hope: Christ has risen, which guarantees that those in him will also rise to new life, for the “power” of this new resurrected life is already at work within them through the gift of the indwelling Spirit (Ephesians 1:17-23). That the realm of the Spirit and the realm of the flesh are opposed to each other and represent two distinct, mutually exclusive eschatological realities is foundational to Pauline thought and spirituality. There are only two possibilities now for how one lives, either according to the Spirit or according to the flesh (Romans 8:5-11). This status of *already/not yet* therefore defines what is *essential* in the covenantal and eschatological framework whereby we are to understand the gospel of our salvation. Apart from this framework, one will be prone to either an under-realized eschatology bearing fruit in despair, or an over-realized eschatology bearing fruit in an unwarranted triumphalism.

The Christian life therefore is not to be spent in endless debate about differing views regarding millennialism, tribulation theories, rapture, the antichrist and so on. Instead, the

pressing issue before each Christian has to do with practical living *in this time* of the already/not yet messianic age of the Spirit as one awaits the second coming of our only Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. “The righteous,” we are told, “will *live* by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Hebrews 10:38), not merely be *converted* by faith. The great question is, how does one live the Christian life? For the Christian, all of life in the present is conditioned by the coming new age that has *already* arrived, though it is *not yet* fully realized. To better uncover the mind of Paul on this vital topic of life in the Spirit, we will now examine his letter to the Galatians. I chose this letter because it may be the most misread and badly interpreted within the Pauline literature due primarily to the widespread failure to understand the covenantal and eschatological framework laid out above.<sup>20</sup>

### **Galatians: The Spirit, from Start to Finish**

This letter to the Galatians contains some of Paul’s most important teaching on the Christian existence as life in the Spirit, as opposed to life under Torah. This letter also contains his most severe language in dealing with those who preach an alternative framework. For Paul, it is life in the Spirit that defines the eschatological people of God, with the fruit of the Spirit

---

<sup>20</sup> It is astonishing how certain theological systems interpret Paul’s concern to be how one is converted in order to support the teachings of that system regarding the role of the law as the “rule of life” for the believer. The many creeds and confessions developed since the Reformation are primarily responsible for this theological folly, most especially the nearly universally accepted Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF). That document alone has done more than any other to muddle the distinction between the covenant of the letter that kills, as Paul referred to the Mosaic Law covenant, and the glory of the new covenant of the life-giving Spirit. It is not too much to say that the WCF serves as a Christian Midrash calling Christians away from faith in Christ alone, to a supposed faith in Christ supplemented by law-keeping, which in the end is to supplant the work of the Spirit in the believer’s life. One has to wonder if Covenant theologians have ever read either Galatians or Romans apart from the lens of their system, and what would change for them if they were to do so. See John G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998).

defining what is the normative rule of life within this new creation community—the “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

Paul begins this letter with a brief presentation of the gospel he preaches, saying, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (Galatians 1:3-5). This is an excellent summary of Paul’s gospel as over and against the “gospel” of those who had come to Galatia from Jerusalem with a different framework for the gospel. For Paul, his gospel is that of a divine rescue mission *from this present evil age*; a rescue which required that the Lord Jesus Christ give himself to accomplish what they could not. Both Paul and those he refers to as “agitators” proclaim their message as good news, just as many do today. But Paul is clear, there is but one gospel, and it is the one revealed to him by Jesus Christ and not the traditions of the leaders from Jerusalem.

Throughout the Pauline literature there exists this controversy with certain men, usually from Jerusalem, who presented an alternative framework for the gospel from that of Paul. The alternative gospel is the natural consequence of adopting a framework that muddles the distinction between the old and new covenants. This is important for one to realize because this muddling of the covenants remains active today in most evangelical teaching, and the consequences are no less destructive today than when Paul wrote this letter.

Therefore, Paul expresses his astonishment that those in the region of Galatia are “so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:6-7). Clearly, the content of the “different gospel” was tantamount to deserting the God who had called them, through Paul, to



*live* in and by the same grace of Christ by which they had been converted. Let me say it again: God had not called them merely “to be converted by grace” (which they were), but to also “*live* in the grace of Christ.” The great issue in Galatians is upon what basis one relates to God and the community of faith; is it in accord with law and Jewish identity markers, or in accord with the new life in the Spirit?

### Getting In and Staying In

The issue here in Galatia therefore is *not* on what basis they were converted, for Paul makes it clear later that his readers have already experienced authentic conversion (Galatians 3:1-3); rather, the conflict revolves around on what basis, once a person is in Christ, are they *now* to live in relationship to God and each other as the people of God: by law or by the Spirit? This is the ground upon which the spiritual battle is being waged. In Paul’s mind, the sharp distinction between “saved and sanctified” does not exist as it does within Protestantism. For Paul, observing law as a basis of relationship to God and each other *at any point* in the Christian life represents a denial of the sufficiency of the work of Christ *as realized* by the experience of the Spirit (Galatians 2:15-22; 3:1-4; 5:2-6; 6:15). This alone should cause every evangelical to pause. For the great lie of our day is that relating to God and each other on the basis of law is somehow pleasing to him.

This issue was serious business for the apostle, as is evidenced by his double apostolic curse upon those who sought to reimpose Torah upon those in Christ. Tragically, it is not serious business for many evangelicals today; rather, to reimpose Torah is an accepted teaching among many evangelicals (tithing, sabbath keeping, even dietary rules). Thomas Schreiner comments, “In Galatians Paul argues repeatedly that the readers cannot return to Torah now that Christ has

been crucified. To do so would be to return to the ‘present evil age.’”<sup>21</sup> The great lie that law remains a legitimate means of relating to God is grounded in the failure to recognize that the Christian belongs to a new age, and the law to the old age. Nearly all false teaching finds its ground in the failure to understand the Bible’s own covenantal and eschatological framework.

This brings me to another important point: The Galatian controversy for Paul was not merely a failure of him to “agree to disagree” on nonessentials, but a sharp conflict between the truth of the gospel and falsehood. It was an irreconcilable breach between Paul’s gospel, which had its origin in divine revelation, and that man-made “gospel” of the Judaizers, which was worthy only of double apostolic curse (Galatians 1:8-9; 2:11-12). Every believer must take seriously the fact that Satan appears as an “angel of light,” advancing a different gospel through his own human emissaries who promote themselves as “servants of righteousness” (II Corinthians 11:1-5, 12-15). Paul had no commission to find common ground with the Judaizers, and neither should we with the Judaized Christianity now prevalent within Western churches.

The great challenge to the church today therefore is not socialism, or a list of growing societal ills, but a Judaized form of Christianity that in the final analysis is energized by the demonic (James 3:13-17; Revelation 2:12-29). And I am not referring here to the overt teachings of the cults of Mormonism et al., but to that which is commonly accepted within orthodox Christianity, and a “gospel” of which Paul would be astonished and even compelled to curse, but which modern evangelicals “put up with easily enough” (II Corinthians 11:4). It is my conviction that demonic influence is present in any teaching that seduces the Christian mind away from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ and life in the Spirit, and returns the Christian to reliance upon law and/or man-made rules as a basis for relating to God and other believers.

---

<sup>21</sup> Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, p. 553.

Torah is “holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12), and it was given as a temporary restraint to instruct and to expose sin, but it proved powerless to bring righteousness. Israel had the law, but did not keep it (Acts 7:53); instead, their behavior mocked the law, and as is done today, they used it for their own purposes. Jeremiah cried out, “How can you say, ‘We are wise! We have the law of the LORD?’ The truth is, those who have it have used their writings to make it say what it does not really mean” (Jeremiah 8:8, NET).<sup>22</sup> The greater truth is that the God of grace calls sinners to relate to him on the basis of the *revelation* of his Son, and his finished work on their behalf *alone*, as *realized* by the gift of the Spirit. What I want is for believers to share in the passion of Paul for the sufficiency of the Spirit in all things for life in this eschatological time of *already and not yet*. It is by the Spirit, and not Torah observance, that the work of Christ is realized in the believer. In the final analysis, Pauline *Spirit-uality* is defined by living in accord with the indwelling Spirit of Christ and not the Mosaic Law, or any other man-made add-ons.

### People-Pleasing Hypocrisy in Antioch

In chapter two of Galatians, there is more evidence that the issue is not about initial conversion, but upon what basis the one in Christ is to relate to God and the community of faith. After Peter and others in Jerusalem had received Paul and his gospel, Peter came to Antioch and was eating and living in the freedom of the gospel, along with the Gentile believers. The righteousness, peace, and joy produced by the covenantal and eschatological framework of the gospel was firmly in place. The one new eschatological people of God was functioning within Antioch. But when men came from Jerusalem, Peter was intimidated into separating from the Gentile Christians, being “afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group” (Galatians

---

<sup>22</sup> The New English Translation.

2:12). These came from James with the mission to “stop this increasing disregard for the law once for all.”<sup>23</sup>

The other Christian Jews “joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray” (Galatians 2:13). What was their hypocrisy? They were living in the freedom of the gospel, but then returned to law as a basis for relating to Gentile Christians. These men from James came with what they believed to be the *complete* gospel wherein once Gentiles are accepted into the people of God they should *prove* or complete their faith by being circumcised, as was Abraham, and as Torah prescribed. Their “gospel” was a “Christ-plus” formula versus Christ alone (Acts 15:5-35).

Does this sound familiar? It should. For it is very common today for Christian leaders to tell those in Christ that tithing is mandatory and to base their reasoning on *the blessing or curse* of the Mosaic Law covenant described in Malachi 3:6-12. This despite the fact that Paul clearly teaches that “all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law’” (Galatians 3:10). But of supreme importance is the fact that Paul also teaches that Christ died to redeem his own from the curse of the law “in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might *receive the promise of the Spirit*” (Galatians 3:13-14). The real issue today for those who command the mandatory tithe based upon Malachi is that such teaching represents a *back-door denial of the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice to redeem us from the curse of the law*. So, whether it is circumcision, sabbath-keeping, feast days, kosher food, or covenantal tithing, the issue today is as serious as it was when Paul wrote this letter. No one has the right to reimpose a curse upon those for whom Christ died to remove

---

<sup>23</sup> H. Weinel, *St. Paul* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018), p. 228.

that curse. It is as simple as that. The irony is that this issue is not about giving. New covenant Christians, when instructed properly, are generous givers. This is about perverting the covenantal structure of the Bible in order to secure and maximize revenue, and it is a heinous practice.

Now, there is little doubt that the men from Jerusalem were well-intended, moral men; “Bible believers” we would call them today, and no doubt these men made what appeared to be a good “biblical” argument. The Judaizers likely appealed to the Abrahamic covenant as described in Genesis: “Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:9-14). And it wasn’t as though Peter and the other Jewish Christians were ignorant of how that text was fulfilled under the new covenant circumcision of the heart, it was simply that they feared the authority of these men from James and therefore failed to hold to the covenantal and eschatological framework of the gospel. Peter and the others simply wanted to avoid conflict. This is a lesson for us all. People-pleasing has long been a cause for retreat from the truth of the gospel, often masked as a plea for unity. Biblical unity is grounded in the shared experience of the Spirit, and not tolerance for gross error and/or heresy (Ephesians 4:3-5; Romans 8:9).

But Paul did not waver, not “for a moment” (Galatians 2:5). For Paul knew that to submit to the argument of the Judaizers was as good as saying that Christ died in vain (Galatians 2:21). Let me say it clearly: To demand that a Christian relate to God on the basis of old covenant law of blessing or curse is to deny the sufficiency of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice; it matters little whether this is done by imposing a covenantal tithe, sabbath-keeping, or a set of man-made rules (Colossians 2:16-23). Paul knew nothing of the post-Reformation thinking of being saved by grace through faith, but then seeking sanctification by looking to the law, what is commonly referred to now as “the third use of the law.”

Such a distinction between conversion and sanctification was foreign to him. For Paul, if believers chose to relate to God and each other on the basis of law *at any point* in the Christian life, it was the same as seeking to be justified by works of the law. Period. This is why this letter (and all of Scripture) must, frankly, be read as if the Reformation never happened in order to avoid reading it through the eyes of Luther rather than Paul.<sup>24</sup> And for Paul, the Christian life was about working out God's gracious gift of eschatological justification and sanctified status before God in fear and trembling, knowing it was God at work causing one "to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13).

In Paul's theology, God has acted in Christ to remove the question of justification from the future and placed that verdict upon Christ and his finished work. The resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit is evidence that eschatological salvation is available *in the present* and is in *no way* tied to works of the law. To be in Christ is to belong to a new age, and not the present evil age in which Torah is given until the time of Christ. In other words, it is the image of God "displayed in the face of Christ" that contains the everlasting glory to which the Christian is being conformed, and not the fading glory of the Mosaic covenant (II Corinthians 3:6-4:6).

Therefore, it would serve the church well if Paul's rhetorical question in chapter three would ring throughout the halls of the Christian academy and pulpits of our land: "*I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you*

---

<sup>24</sup> See Gordon D. Fee, "A Strategy for Reading Galatians," Online video lecture available on YouTube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNb\\_DSxC7o8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNb_DSxC7o8) [retrieved June 4, 2021]. See also Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 162-171, for an excellent discussion of the absence of a proper prolegomenon in the first-generation reformers, which then led to the scholastics of the second and third generations afterward leaning upon philosophy and thus an Aristotelian *framework* after the earlier work of Aquinas, out of which came the tri-part division of the law.

*now trying to finish by means of the flesh? Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain?”* (Galatians 3:2-4). Here is a foundational principle within Pauline spirituality: As one begins the Christian life by the initiating and appropriating work of the Spirit, so one must also continue and finish the Christian life by the same work of the Spirit. Anything other than complete reliance upon the Spirit throughout the Christian life is not a gospel Paul would recognize, let alone tolerate for a moment.<sup>25</sup> A retreat to law is a refusal to trust the voice of the Spirit, a refusal grounded in unbelief that has plagued the people of God throughout redemptive history (Acts 7:51 Hebrews 3:7-19).

### The Spirit Against the Flesh

One text in Galatians most commonly used to support the notion of the Christian life as a never-ending, often losing battle with the flesh and law is Galatians 5:17. Many things serve as obstacles here, such as the authentic experiential struggles of the believer to live a godly life, the habit of reading text devotionally apart from its context, and the theological agendas that find their way into our English translations.<sup>26</sup> It is easy therefore for any believer to find solace here by thinking they have Scriptural affirmation for their ongoing struggles, when in fact they have simply misread the text and missed Paul’s greater contextual concerns in this letter.

---

<sup>25</sup> One obstacle here is the intellectualizing nature of Western Christianity, within which the existential and experiential aspect of the Spirit is looked upon with suspicion. It is the “fear of loss of control” says James Sawyer, that produces a retreat into the evangelical trinity of “Father, Son, and Holy Bible” (see Daniel Wallace, James Sawyer, *Who’s Afraid of the Holy Spirit* (Dallas, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2005). It is important to ask ourselves, “How much of our resistance to adopt a *Sola Spiritus* in addition to the other five Solas is tied to the fear of loss of control?”

<sup>26</sup> Gordon D. Fee, “The Spirit Against the Flesh,” Lecture given to Regent College, available on CD at [www.Regentaudio.com](http://www.Regentaudio.com).

A further examination of the text is warranted here: “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Galatians 5:17, ESV). It is the last line, “to keep you from doing the things you want to do,” that presents the supposed affirmation to troubled believers. For by reading this passage apart from Paul’s greater context, they assume they now have Scriptural proof that the Christian life is quite impossible and so merely resign themselves to the struggle, perhaps adopting psychological or philosophical helps and strategies by which to cope—or in some cases, simply giving up and leaving the faith altogether. After all, what kind of gospel breeds moral despair? The answer is: The modern evangelical gospel based in law for “sanctification.” Saved by grace through faith, and kept by law, is no gospel at all. Now, let us return to Galatians 5:17.

I chose to cite this text first in the ESV<sup>27</sup> because it lends itself most to the popular conservative and Reformed notion of the Christian life as an ongoing internal struggle. So, we need now to consider the context, but first let us read the verse from a different translation: “For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, *so that you are not to do whatever you want*” (NIV, emphasis mine). In the ESV, the conclusion is easily drawn that the flesh keeps believers from doing the godly things they want to do. It is enough then for many conservative Christians to resign themselves to the struggle as a fact of Christian life in the knowledge that at least they *want* to do these things, and somehow even derive assurance that they are truly saved, although the flesh is often simply too strong to overcome. The supposed struggle becomes ground for assurance.

---

<sup>27</sup> English Standard Version.



However, the NIV here provides a better contextual reading far more in keeping with Paul's overall concerns in the letter. Simply stated, Paul's point here is that the Christian is morally *constrained* by the Spirit so that life in the Spirit is not about lawlessness. On the contrary, the Spirit of Christ is also called the Spirit of holiness (Romans 1:4), and this means to live and walk by the Spirit is to walk in accord with the holiness of the Spirit, and so the indwelling Spirit does not allow one *to do whatever they may want*, but leads them instead into the will of God. It is the power of the Spirit, and not the law, that empowers one to overcome "in a world that is described as an eschatological warzone."<sup>28</sup>

Let's look back to Paul's context, for here we discover that verse 17 comes first within this immediate context: "So I say walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. *For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.* But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Galatians 5:16-18). The major imperative in this letter is found in verse 16: "So I say walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

On the moral constraint of the indwelling Spirit, D. A. Carson states, "This does not mean there is no struggle; it means it is a struggle you can win . . . it does not mean you get to do whatever you want; it means wanting good things . . . in other words, whatever Christian liberty means, it does not mean freedom from constraint, but a transfer from the constraint of the law to the constraint of the Spirit."<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Galatians," cited by Thomas R. Schreiner, "Galatians" in the *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Clinton E. Arnold, Gen. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p. 345.

<sup>29</sup> D. A. Carson, "The Spirit's Work in Gospel Transformation," Lecture delivered at Southern Seminary, 2014. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8XfriikKKI&t=13s> [retrieved April 2, 2021].

We can state with confidence that life in the Spirit is the sum of the Pauline ethic. In other words, in the mind of Paul, the indwelling Spirit is sufficient for life and godliness in this present age. The indwelling Spirit is both “the replacement for Torah, and the true *antidote to the flesh*.”<sup>30</sup> But let us not stop here. Let us examine briefly the greater context of Galatians 5:13-26:

<sup>13</sup> You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. <sup>14</sup> For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>15</sup> If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

<sup>16</sup> So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

<sup>19</sup> The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; <sup>20</sup> idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions <sup>21</sup> and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other (Galatians 5:13-26).

Far from being perpetual victims of the moral struggle with law and the flesh, Paul assures his readers that they have been called to freedom. The freedom is from the curse of living under law, the very freedom for which Christ died (Galatians 3:13-14; 2:20). Those who seek to live on the basis of law will find only an increase in the demands of the flesh, for law exposes and incites the flesh into action (Romans 7:14-25). There is therefore no healthy individual or community that

---

<sup>30</sup> Fee, “The Spirit Against the Flesh.”

is grounded in law, but at best one will find a people for whom the acts of the flesh are covered by a thin veneer of external religious appearance (II Timothy 3:1-5; Colossians 2:23).

To relate to God on the basis of law, *at any point along the Christian life*, is to walk in the external piety and “righteousness” of the Pharisees, a form of righteousness that Paul himself once perfected but that failed him, and that which Jesus warned would not afford anyone entrance into the kingdom of heaven (Philippians 3:4-11; Matthew 5:20). Seeking righteousness through law is the quantitative, external piety that Jesus repeatedly exposed and condemned, saying, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous *but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness*” (Matthew 23:27-28, emphasis mine).

But is this not the typical plight of the modern evangelical as they attempt to experientially live under man-made rules of mandatory tithing, sabbath-keeping, ritual Bible-reading, and so on? Many New Testament scholars are beginning to speak out against such practices. One scholar in particular is Dan Wallace, a professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary. In a 2020 chapel message, Wallace declared, “Evangelicals are the spiritual heirs of the Pharisees, we each have our shibboleths [religious rules] whereby we judge each other.”<sup>31</sup> If only Dr. Wallace were speaking hyperbolically, but tragically, he is not. What is essential then is to teach believers who they are in Christ, and exhort them to live in accord with that new eschatological realm of the indwelling Spirit, and not the traditions and

---

<sup>31</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, “Christ at the Center.”

commandments of men. This was the conflict that dogged Paul's ministry, and we ought not be surprised that this conflict continues today.

### Two Realms: Two Patterns of Life

Most Christians are familiar with Paul's contrast between the acts of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:19-26). What most Christians do not understand, however, is that the entirety of the Pauline literature points to this contrast as existing within a religious context. In other words, the acts of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit are representative of two people (communities) who profess Christ, one relying upon law, and the other upon the Spirit. Paul's concern here therefore is not to detail the secular against the religious, the unbeliever versus the believer, *per se*, but two ways of life for those professing to believe in Christ.<sup>32</sup> The acts of the flesh are in fact *indicative*<sup>33</sup> of the way of life of those who seek to relate to God on the basis of law, for the law is simply unable to produce true godliness (Colossians 2:20-23). The tragic irony is that the acts of the flesh are fueled by law and man-made religion, not overcome. Looking good but acting in accord with the flesh is directly tied to the lack of an experiential walk in the Spirit. But there is more to Paul's point.

---

<sup>32</sup> Those whose lifestyle is characterized by the acts of the flesh prove themselves to be as unbelievers regardless of profession, and are even now under eschatological condemnation, just as are rank pagans, even though they profess to believe in Christ (Galatians 4:28-31; 5:13-15; 6:12-13; Matthew 7:21-27; I Corinthians 6:7-10; Ephesians 5:3-7; Titus 1:16; Revelation 21:8). It is sobering to ponder that in these last days, what calls itself Christianity will be in truth a law-based, Judaized religion that serves as a cover for the acts of the flesh, but "repudiates" the power of the Spirit to transform (see II Timothy 3:1-5, NET). See also Craig S. Keener, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), p. 508.

<sup>33</sup> Defining our terms: The "indicative" here refers to what/who the Christian already is as a result of God's saving action in Christ, and the appropriating and empowering work of the Spirit; the "imperatives" are simply those things commanded in order to bring one's conduct into line with the indicative. The indicative, therefore, *always* precedes the imperative. To place the imperative (command) before the indicative (status) is, therefore, heresy of the first order, and a back-door denial of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. This heresy is most often practiced today anytime one must do something in order to gain God's blessing (tithing, sabbath-keeping, charitable works of righteousness).

By listing the acts of the flesh as opposed to the fruit of the Spirit, Paul is setting forth two very distinct and mutually exclusive eschatological realities. In other words, Paul is not recommending the Christian walk in the fruit of the Spirit over acting out in the flesh; rather, he is saying that these are the two distinct states of life in this eschatological time of already/not yet. The acts of the flesh are *indicative* of those who belong to this present evil age, and however religious they may appear, they *must* obey the *imperatives* of the flesh (see Romans 6:17). This is why religiosity and hypocrisy are traveling companions.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is *indicative* of those who belong to the new age of the Spirit, and they must obey the *imperatives* of righteousness, for while they were once slaves to sin, they are now “slaves to righteousness” (see Romans 6:18). As Schreiner writes, “The indicative guarantees that the imperative will be kept without canceling out the authenticity of the imperative.”<sup>34</sup> One note of caution: Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit is not intended to be another set of rules; they are *not* intended to be a new law to regulate Christian conduct. Rather, “these fruit are pointers; here is what one who is being conformed into the image of Christ will look like.”<sup>35</sup>

It cannot be said too often: The Christian belongs to the eschatological realm of the Spirit, and is therefore not a person who is in the flesh one day, and in the Spirit the next day, depending upon how life may be treating them. Make note: Spirit versus flesh are absolutes (Galatians 5:17). I often hear a Christian excuse sin by saying, “I was in the flesh that day.” That is simply not how it works. That is akin to the comedic phrase, “The devil made me do it.” Instead, believers “should become what they [already] are; they should be what they are becoming. They

---

<sup>34</sup> Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, p. 567.

<sup>35</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul the Spirit and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 115.

do not attain purity by removing sin from their midst, for they are *already* pure and holy in Christ. And yet they are to realize *experientially* and *existentially* what they are *eschatologically*.”<sup>36</sup> The power of the Spirit for transformation is discovered in the Christian believing what the Bible says about them in Christ. Moralistic Christianity, however, simply cannot grasp this essential truth of the gospel, and therefore muddles the old covenant with the new and compels its adherents to live in a manner for which the Judaizers of the Galatians would be proud. It is much tidier to impose laws and rules than it is to trust the Holy Spirit to reproduce the life of Christ within the community, but it leads to destruction.

By contrast, life in the Spirit is defined by bringing one’s conduct into accord with the Spirit, for it is the indwelling Spirit that evidences that they already belong to the coming age and are now under a new covenant. Again, I cannot stress this too much. The Christian life involves the progressive transformation into Christ’s image “with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (II Corinthians 3:18). The Christian life, therefore, is *not* about working the law in order to become something one presently is not in the hope of attaining final justification, but about a life controlled by the Spirit, putting to death anything that is not in accord with who they already are in Christ (Romans 8:13). In short, life in the Spirit is about living as Jesus lived (I John 2:6), and nothing more or less. What a glorious privilege!

The fruit of the Spirit defines the character that is *indicative* of the one in Christ living out the coming age in the present; walking in the new regenerate self “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24), and the *imperatives* of life in the Spirit, the fulfillment of which is love (Galatians 5:14). Douglas Moo says it this way,

Those who are joined to Christ by faith live in the new age where grace, not the law of Moses, reigns. This being the case, believers’ conduct is not directly regulated by the law.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 565 (emphasis mine).

Under Jewish premises, such a “law-less” situation would be assumed to foster sin. Christians would be not better than “Gentile sinners” (cf. Galatians 2:15). But Paul sees in grace not only a liberating power but a constraining one as well: the constraint of a willing obedience that comes from a renewed heart and mind and, ultimately, (cf. Galatians 5:17-24; Romans 8:4-9), the impulse and leading of God’s Spirit.<sup>37</sup>

The appropriating and empowering gift of the Spirit is God’s means of fulfilling his eternal purpose of creating a new covenant people worthy of his abiding presence, and who display his character within a fallen world (Ezekiel 36:24-27). The church is an eschatological people living out the age to come *in the present*, and for whom life is conditioned by the ethic of that future age.

### Summary of Galatians and Life in the Spirit

The central controversy in Paul’s letter to the Galatians is the introduction by some Jewish Christian leaders of a “different gospel” than that preached by Paul under which his readers were converted. The difference between the Pauline gospel and that of the Judaizers is not whether or not Jesus is the Messiah, for these men believed in that truth; nor did they deny that grace and faith are necessary elements for entrance into the people of God. Rather, what made their gospel different than Paul’s was how when once converted, as evidenced by the gift of the Spirit, one *maintains* standing in the household of God. In short, the “gospel” of the Judaizers was *saved* by faith, and *kept* by works of the law. Those who accept this “gospel,” Paul says, are “bewitched”— they are under a spell sourced in the demonic. This means most of modern evangelicalism is, therefore, bewitched; for the notion that those who are in Christ must relate to God on the basis of law in some fashion is the predominant teaching within conservative circles today.

---

<sup>37</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 398.

So, we conclude that the plague within modern evangelicalism is thinking that the Christian life, though begun by means of the Spirit, is somehow made complete by works of the law, which equates to finishing in the flesh (Galatians 3:1-3). And this is not merely an academic issue.

Each year, large numbers of new converts joyfully enter the waters of baptism having been told they are saved by grace through faith, only to be told afterward that they must then submit to mandatory tithing under threat of the curse described in Malachi 3:6-12; many are also told that Sunday is now a mandatory sabbath under the so-called “moral law” of the Ten Commandments; that even daily Bible reading and prayer become ritualized so that they become a test of authentic faith (along with dress, wine in communion, avoiding the theatre or sporting events, and even how one votes).

But for Paul, not to finish by the Spirit was no different than deserting the God of grace altogether; there was no such thing in Paul’s mind as getting the gospel half-correct—half a gospel is no gospel at all. In other words, to seek to relate to God on the basis of law *at any point in the Christian life* equates to seeking to be justified by law, period, which means one is “alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:4).

Yet the freedom for which Christ died is not a freedom to moral laxity, but a new basis for living in which the believer actually *fulfills the law* within community (Romans 3:31; 8:4) as they live out life in the fruit of the Spirit within community (Galatians 5:22-6:6). This means there are presently only two realms of existence: the realm of the flesh, which belongs to this present evil age, *and* the realm of the Spirit. These are two mutually exclusive, and thus distinct, eschatological realms. A person belongs to either one or the other, but not to both, and the one in Christ belongs to the realm of the Spirit and is living out *the fruit of the Spirit* within the eschatological community, the church (Galatians 5:24-6:10).



How does one know to which realm one belongs? It is not by mere profession, nor by membership within a religious body, but by what characterizes one's lifestyle—meaning the acts of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit. But this is not a call to perfectionism, for “we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2); rather, it is a call to continue in the Christian life on the same basis upon which one enters—that is, by the appropriating and empowering presence of the Spirit. Therefore, “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation” (Galatians 6:15; see II Corinthians 3:4-18; 5:17). It is by the Spirit that one begins life in Christ *and* by the Spirit one lives thereafter, for the Spirit is the replacement of Torah and the antidote to the flesh. All who live according to this rule know peace and mercy, and *permanent* identity as the “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

### **How to Live by the Spirit**

It would be remiss of me to set forth the above without offering some pastoral direction as to how to in fact live by the Spirit. So here we will review the Spirit's work in conversion, and then how the Spirit continues in working out salvation into the daily life of the believer. We have learned that the Christian life begins by a sovereign work of the Spirit in regeneration, and is applied by the gift of faith through hearing the gospel and the sealing and empowering work of the Spirit as one continues an eschatological existence awaiting the return of Jesus Christ (John 3:1-8; Galatians 5:25; Romans 8:14-17). It is by the Spirit that one learns to “live as Jesus lived” (I John 2:6). This is a gracious work of God grounded in no manner upon the merit or personal effort of the one so birthed.

The first step to walking by the Spirit therefore is to consider any other means of existence in the Christian life as utterly untenable and a deserting of the triune God of grace, a

falling away from grace; it is making Christ useless to you. This not therefore a matter of tolerance for one Christian walking by the Spirit, while another walks according to law. We have already established that to walk according to law is to remain in the realm of the flesh, and actively belonging to this present evil age. All those in Christ have been made alive by the Spirit, and live in the realm of the Spirit, whether one is fully conscious of it or not.

Now I cannot stress this too much: To walk by the Spirit is the normative Christian life, and *not* the exclusive right of the spiritually elite. All Christians are “spiritual” by virtue of regeneration, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:14). This means that there is no such thing as a “carnal Christian” as over and against a “spiritual Christian.” That is an erroneous teaching grounded in a discredited dispensational system. Sadly, one in Christ may behave like a carnal or unbelieving person, as was the case in Corinth (see I Corinthians 3:1-4), but to do so is to act against one’s Spirit-imparted new nature and usually involves a lack of maturity in understanding who they truly are in Christ. What follows now are some pastoral suggestions for learning to walk in the Spirit.

- Life in the Spirit is primarily about the Spirit reproducing the life and character of Christ. Therefore, Christian obedience involves bringing one’s daily conduct within community into line with *who one already is in Christ*. Paul’s point in setting forth the fruit of the Spirit is not to declare a new set of laws, but so that we may know what is *normative* for life within the eschatological community of the body of Christ. What would your life become if this were true within your fellowship of believers?
- Life in the Spirit is not about subjective mysticism: rather, learn to listen for the voice of the Spirit within the text. This is best done by reading the Bible within its historic, literary, and grammatical context, and within *its own* covenantal and historical

framework. Note also that the Bible is a communal book; it was not designed to be read as we most often do, silently and alone. If you are alone, at least read it out loud. The New Testament especially was written to be *heard*. “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Matthew 11:15; Revelation 2:7, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

- Slow down when you pray. Pause to be in God’s presence. Learn to rest in his presence, and listen. Give thanks, and pray as though you are talking to another person, for in fact, you are. Ask for ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to you, and to the church. And spend time each day simply praising the risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As you do, you will find the Holy Spirit empowering and affirming your praise.
- Do not be afraid to bring your weaknesses to prayer; the Spirit is not offended by them, and will instead intercede for you in accord with the will of God (Romans 8:26-30).
- Set your loyalty firmly upon the truth found in the text of holy Scripture as over and above your own presuppositions—and yes, if necessary, even your Christian heritage and tradition. This may take courage, but people-pleasing is a major impediment to spiritual health.
- Recognize your fear of loss of control. To the degree that you demand control over your existence, you are not trusting the Holy Spirit. He is trustworthy.
- Commit to loving others as God has loved you in Christ, especially your brothers and sisters in Christ. Live and worship within community, however imperfect. We need

each other. The road to life is narrow, and your community may be small, but find a group and commit, remembering Christ's example (Philippians 2:5-8).

- Finally, read and become familiar with church history, especially the record of the church before and apart from the Constantinian change. The so-called “radicals” and independent groups like the Waldensians, the Lollards, and the early Anabaptists, have much to teach us about life in the Spirit, especially their resistance to the formalized, powerless religion masking as Christianity of their own day.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this essay, I have endeavored to present an introduction to Pauline spirituality. We began from the point of God's eternal purpose to create a people for his own glory worthy of his presence. I have argued that central to Paul's gospel is that this purpose is *fulfilled* in the *revelation* of God's Son as the Seed of Abraham and true Son of David. It is by Christ's finished work on behalf of his own that the eschatological community has been created and *realized* by the appropriating and empowering work of the Spirit. The newly created people of God therefore are those “in Christ;” that is to say, those united to Christ by the Spirit. Christ is the pattern for the Christian life, and the Spirit is the power by which that life is realized.

I have reminded the reader that the work of Christ occurred within the Bible's own covenantal and eschatological framework by which we must understand the revelation of Christ's saving work. The New Testament in particular cannot truly be understood apart from the *already/not yet* tension created by this framework. This is important to the reader, for it is within this metanarrative that the believer draws personal identity, purpose, and hope; and because an alternative framework cannot but produce an alternative gospel that leads only to

quiet misery and desperation. The misery of the unhappy Christian is often tied to their Christian experience, which itself is tied to a faulty view of the gospel as *grace plus law*, though they are loath to admit it for fear of sounding unfaithful to Christ. These are most often people who are truly converted and who love God, but simply cannot make the law-based teaching they receive work for them.

By stark contrast, the righteousness, peace, and joy that is the kingdom of God means that the Christian life of obedience toward God, and an ethical treatment of others, is drawn not from the law, nor from the values of this present evil age, but from the righteousness of the coming age being experienced in the present and by and through the indwelling eschatological Spirit. It is this sufficiency of the Spirit of Christ for all things in the Christian life in this present age that is Paul's passion, and ought to be the passion for those in Christ as well. One simply cannot separate life in the Spirit from life in Christ, any more than one can legitimately separate the cross and resurrection from the gospel itself. Life in the Spirit is that essential.

And yet many throughout church history have worked to do just that by insisting upon a return to a Judaized form of Christianity in which the work of the Spirit is quenched and replaced in favor of identity markers tied to the Mosaic Law, and/or man-made rules and traditions. It is a spiritual plague the symptoms of which every believer has suffered at one time or another, and the suffering continues today.

I have used the commonplace example of the evangelical leader insisting on a mandatory tithe of one's gross income, quoting Malachi 3:6-12, with the promise of covenantal blessing for obedience, or the pain of a curse for disobedience. I have stated emphatically that what you are actually hearing is a Judaized Christian leader reimposing the blessing or curse of the law; and this in spite of the fact that Paul is clear that Christ's death redeemed believers from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:10-13). While common practice, this issue of mandatory tithe accompanied

by covenantal blessing or curse is a serious and pressing issue. For instance, Dave Ramsey and his “Financial Peace University” and untold numbers of evangelical churches hold to Ramsey’s teaching of the Malachi text as a basis for giving. The biblical response must be given: Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law “in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (Galatians 3:14). What then is the teaching of a mandatory tithe but a back-door denial of the sufficiency of Christ’s cross? It is compromising the gospel in order to maximize revenue. And the same is true for a mandatory sabbath-keeping (Saturday or Sunday), and so on.

Today we are reliving the great theological controversy that has repeatedly occurred for over two thousand years of church history, and it always comes down to this singular question: *On what basis* does the Christian relate to God, and how is that lived out within the community of the church? Tragically, the human compulsion to self-justification, and thus the design of theological systems that ultimately place a person in relation to God on the basis of law, have never left us. “Saved by grace, and kept by law” is the modern “gospel.” Though they would never use that language, it is the same in its effect. The end result is a religion that provides a form of godliness while repudiating its power (II Timothy 3:1-5, NET).

It is fair to say that Paul would be as astonished today by the covert use of law within most evangelical churches as he was for the Galatians. And he would no doubt feel compelled, as he did in Rome, to preach the gospel of Christ to modern evangelicals; a gospel of which most today are covertly ashamed. For Paul, the gospel means devotion to Christ from start to finish, on the basis of faith as realized by the indwelling Spirit, and *never* on the basis of law. I am convinced that the central reason law is so attractive to many is because it requires no faith (Galatians 3:10-12). It takes no faith at all to prescribe a mandatory tithe and/or sabbath-

keeping; on the other hand, it does require faith to know that the Holy Spirit will create a congregation of cheerful givers. It does take faith to trust that the Spirit is reproducing the life of Christ within the church community and in our homes.

It is just easier to teach law, even though to do so means that one inevitably ends up preaching another Jesus, and another spirit, and another gospel other than Paul preached (II Corinthians 11:1-5). With Covenant theology and dispensationalism as the two dominant theologies in the evangelical West, this issue of a Judaized Christianity is the great theological and spiritual issue of our time. It is not merely an academic debate between scholars, for—*I will say it again*—real people suffer real misery from adhering to bad theology.

This is one reason why I have worked to make the essential covenantal and eschatological framework understandable. For while this framework may be unfamiliar to most Christians, it is not incomprehensible, especially since all those in Christ have the illuminating work of the Spirit of truth as their guide. It is my hope that this essay will contribute to the release of those now experientially suffering under the yoke of bondage to law in one form or another, even though they were told at baptism that salvation was by grace through faith in Christ. It is also my hope that this essay will reawaken in this reader a thirst for the living waters of the Spirit in their daily lives. The Holy Spirit is a divine Person, not just a power to be possessed, or an influence to be wielded, or a line in the historic creed. With the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is to be honored, worshipped, glorified, and given thanks. May we come to take seriously the words, *Semper Reformanda* (Always Reforming).

## Bibliography

- Carson, D. A. "The Spirit's Work in Gospel Transformation." Lecture delivered to Southern Seminary. Available at [www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com)
- Fee, Gordon D. "The Baptism in the Holy Spirit: The Issue of Separability and Subsequence" in *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 7:2 (Fall, 1985).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *God's Empowering Presence*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Holy Spirit in Pauline Literature." Lecture series delivered to Regent College. Available at [www.regentbookstore.com](http://www.regentbookstore.com)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Spirit and the Flesh." Lecture delivered to Regent College. Available at [www.regentbookstore.com](http://www.regentbookstore.com)
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Strategy for Reading Galatians." Online video lecture. Available on YouTube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNb\\_DSxC7o8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNb_DSxC7o8) [retrieved June 4, 2021].
- Gentry, Peter J., and Wellum, Stephen J., *Kingdom through Covenant*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
- Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Rowley, H. H. *The Relevance of the Apocalyptic*. New York, NY: Association Press, 1964.
- Schreiner, Thomas R., "Galatians" in the *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* series, Clinton E. Arnold, gen. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The King in His Beauty*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013.
- Wallace, Daniel B. "Christ at the Center." Chapel lecture delivered to Dallas Theological Seminary, 2020.
- Weinel, H. *St. Paul*. London, U. K.: Forgotten Books, 2018.