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FROM WRETCHEDNESS TO GLORY

BY BOB DEWAAY

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? (Romans 7:24)

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (Romans 8:29,30)

How could the apostle Paul, after describing the glorious truths of justification by faith and our position in Christ (dead to sin and alive to God Romans 3-6), then characterize himself as being “wretched”? This seems so shocking that some have assumed that Romans 7 is somehow out of sequence in Paul’s thought and is describing his life before his conversion. They reason that a man of faith (such as Paul) could not lament his own sinfulness in such vivid terms. However, the Scriptures are filled with stories of people who have faith in God sorrowing over their own guilt and failure. David’s lament in Psalm 51 comes to mind.

In this article I shall examine the tension between the Biblical call for complete holiness in the lives of those who are in Christ and the practical experience of falling short of it. I shall do this by following Paul’s progression of thought in Romans chapters 7 and 8. We shall see that the wretchedness of Romans 7 and the glory of Romans 8 are the universal Christian experience. We shall also discuss common approaches in modern Evangelicalism that fail to appreciate neither the depth of human sinfulness and helplessness

nor the power and glory of God’s grace.

WRETCHEDNESS AS A CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Paul said, “Wretched man that I am” (Romans 7:24). Did he say this as a Christian or as an unregenerate? Those who assert the latter fail to consider other New Testament passages. The evidence we have from Paul and from the Book of Acts does not suggest that Paul was suffering from feelings of utter sinfulness before he met Christ. Acts 9 shows Paul filled with self-confidence, thinking he was doing God a favor by persecuting Christians. Even more telling is his description in Philippians 3 of his former life: “. . . although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Philippians 3:4-6). As a Pharisee, Paul saw himself as blameless; as a Christian, wretched. There is no way one can read into this section of

Philippians the notion that Paul thought of himself as failing to live up to God’s law while he was a Pharisee. Given the natural progress of thought in Romans and Paul’s own testimony about his pre-Christian attitude, therefore we must conclude that in Romans 7, Paul is describing something he experienced as a Christian.

How can it be that Paul, a justified Christian (Romans 5:1), would be lamenting his sinfulness so vociferously? According to Romans 7, two things were painfully true to Paul: the Law was holy and true (verse 12) and Paul was not fully living up to it (verses 14 & 15). The key to understanding how a self-confident Pharisee who thought himself righteous became aghast at his own sinfulness is found in the 10th commandment. “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Romans 7:7). There are plenty of lost sinners who have never committed adultery or made an idol and who are found treating their parents with honor. But who can say he has never coveted? This commandment strikes at the innermost motivations of the heart. These are motivations that Paul, as a Pharisee, had overlooked when he then considered himself “blameless” in regard to righteousness that is in the law.

As lost sinners, we tend to compare ourselves with others who are worse, think of sins we have not committed, and consider ourselves basically good people. When we are saved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, a conflict begins that was not there before. The Spirit of holiness shines His all-knowing light into the hidden recesses of our thoughts

and motivations. This causes a sense of sinfulness and need that we could never have comprehended in our previous fleshly existence. Now, as Christians, the goal has changed radically. Rather than merely hoping to be a “good” person as the human scheme of things goes, we are now called by God to be conformed to the image of Christ. The more we understand this high calling and the more we see the glory of God in Christ, the more we realize the depth of our need. This was Paul’s Romans 7 experience. The 10th commandment is the “Achilles heel” of self-righteousness. If our very thoughts and motivations are to be called into question, we are found sinners of the worse sort.

THE INABILITY OF THE FLESH

Paul summarizes the problem clearly: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not” (Romans 7:18). As Christians, we cannot escape the fact that the Holy Spirit who indwells us causes a desire for holiness. The reason for this is that God the Holy Spirit is at work in us changing us, convicting us, and leading us toward God’s purposes. In Romans 8:14 Paul writes, “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” Verses 17 & 18 of that chapter tell us where the Holy Spirit is leading us: to glory. So the Holy Spirit does not leave us content with the corruption of sin. He is leading us to glorification.

This Holy Spirit-imparted desire conflicts with the flesh. The term “flesh” in this context denotes “all that we are in ourselves, apart from Christ.” The old sin nature still has its sinful desires. The flesh is legally dead and crucified with Christ (Romans 6:5-11) but practically is very much alive. That the flesh and the Spirit coexist for the Christian is shown in Galatians 5:17 and several other passages. Paul describes the conflict in Romans 7:21-25. It is clear that fleshly effort can never deliver us from our sinful condition. Human effort, however well informed it may be, is inadequate to deliver us from our sin and conform us to the image

of Christ.

The conflict can be described as follows. As Christians, we now have many true beliefs about God, His truth, and what is right (1John 2:20,21). We are also indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He convicts us and works to bring us into the image of Christ. We desire God and His holiness, but our actual behavior — both mental and physical — shows that we are so very short of the goal. Besides this, we can no longer feel good about this gap between what we know is right and what actually is. There is a very real conflict. It is just as Paul described it: “for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15b). When I hurt the ones I love, I hate it, but I surely have done so. As a Christian who believes the truth, I “hate” thoughtlessness or callousness toward others. Yet it happens.

LEGALISM, LICENCE OR LIBERTY?

This conflict leads to many man-centered approaches. One of these is legalism. Paul considered legalism as going back to a non-Christian approach. Legalism is, at its heart, merely narrowing the scope of the Law to something doable now. In essence, it is as if keeping the first nine commandments would be adequate for holiness. For example, the rich young ruler had no qualms about claiming that he had kept certain commandments: “You know the commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’ And he said, ‘All these things I have kept from my youth’” (Luke 18:20,21). When Jesus asked something of him that cut to his deepest motivations, he went away sad.

With legalism there is a list of what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, and we take great pains to stick to it. Those who do are deemed sanctified; those who don’t are not. Paul likened this approach to beginning in the Spirit and seeking to be completed by the flesh (Galatians 3:3). Legalism fails because it cannot deal with the very root of fleshly sin: the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Another man-centered approach is licentiousness. This is the “anything goes” approach which is technically called antinomianism (against law). In essence, this is changing the standards so that we are no longer falling short. It is lowering the bar, so to speak, so that most anyone can jump over it. This error was also present in the first century. The book of 1John warns against it in many places. One example is, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1John 1:8). Some Gnostics claimed that the material realm was so inconsequential that whatever is done in the body matters not. They boiled over into gross wickedness and thought it of no effect on their souls. God has not called us to license, however, but to true liberty. Liberty in the Bible means victory over sin and true love for God and neighbor (Galatians 5:13 and see 1Peter 2:16 & 2Peter 2:19). It is freedom from the dominating power of sin and the power to do God’s will by His grace.

THE WALK OF THE SPIRIT

Paul taught neither legalism nor licentiousness, but liberty. This brings us to Romans 8: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:2-4). This liberty comes through Christ’s payment for our sin through His death on the cross, and the power of God’s Spirit at work in us conforming us to the image of Christ.

We are legally and positionally free now, practically being set free by God’s grace, and assured of final and perfect freedom from sin. This is the essence of Romans 8. By positionally free, I mean that Christ has made full payment for our sins. We have already died to our old life of sin (Romans 6:2-7). The practical freedom is a life-long process.

When we speak of “progressive sanctification,” which I believe is Biblical, we do not mean that there are no setbacks or that every day we are more Christlike than the day before. It’s like someone once told me about golf when I was lamenting a very bad outing: “This is not a game of continual improvement.” Yes, sometimes we do find ourselves apparently worse off than we were before. Nevertheless, progressive sanctification means that God, by His grace, is doing whatever it takes to bring us to glory. He will not leave true believers permanently in a state of utter failure.

Romans 8 emphasizes walking according to the Spirit. When Paul speaks of “walking” in the Spirit, he is speaking of an entirely new mode of life. It is all-encompassing since it not only concerns changed life-styles, but changed motivations. It is a principle of living, empowered by the Holy Spirit, resting solidly on the grace of God, and characterized by Spirit-filled people depending on God. Since those in the flesh “cannot please God” (Romans 8:8), those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit mind the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5,6). This means that their hope for final and total victory is based firmly in the finished work of Christ and His providential oversight that will bring them to glorification.

FAILED APPROACHES

The walk of the Spirit involves trusting God, who knows better than we ever could what we need, what causes us to be the way we are, and what is necessary to change us. Romans 8 tells us that our walk includes suffering (verse 18), anxious longings for what is not yet (verse 19), present futility in our whole environment (verses 20 - 22), and groaning (verse 23). Truly, there is a constant sense that something is wrong. This passage of Scripture acknowledges our sense of need as a fact of walking by the Spirit in this life, seeking God’s ultimate purposes. We suffer because we know, even more than those who do not know Christ, just how fallen and wicked this present world is.

This situation causes many in our

day to run after plans and programs that supposedly will eliminate our problems. Mainly, this means searching for causes. We debate “nurture or nature.” Why is one person a drunkard, another a thief, another an abuser, another a workaholic, another lazy, and yet another relatively happy and well adjusted? The idea is to determine the causes and devise a therapy to fix the problems. We have many theories and therapies, both in the Christian and non-Christian world. We have discussed some of these in previous issues of Critical Issues Commentary.¹

Some of the latest studies indicate that genetics are much more influential than previously thought. Both secular and Christian people hate to hear that, however, since we assume that genetic causes either provide excuses or make therapy impossible. Essentially, no one has been able to conclusively prove what ultimately causes the differences.

In my experience, the Biblical approach is liberating. We don’t have to figure out what causes the difference between the drunkard and the Pharisee. They are both lost in fleshly sin until they turn to Christ. But we need to understand this: our hope of sanctification and glorification is not based on altering the gene pool nor on manipulating the environment. It is based on the supernatural grace of God. Sin is still sin no matter what “caused” it. For example, the world is scurrying about trying to prove that genetics determines “sexual orientation.” Whether they can prove it or not remains to be seen. As Christians, we know homosexual behavior is sin and it will always be sin, no matter what the cause. God’s grace to change lives will never be thwarted by genetics. The whole person is fallen and sinful, by “nature and nurture.” Our hope is in the promises of God in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, not cleverly learning the details of the cause and effect process so that we can manipulate it for our own good.

This goes for “spiritual” approaches as well. Many Christians get caught up in movements that are looking for spiritual curses, demons, subconscious memories, etc. in order to cure present

problems. They experience the “wretchedness” about which Paul spoke and assume they need a Christian exorcist. They scoff at the simplicity of the Biblical plan. I lived through years of trying these approaches myself, early in my Christian walk. None of them deliver what they promise. We still suffer, groan, and feel that something is amiss. Guess what? So did the apostle Paul. The answers are in Romans 8 and elsewhere in the New Testament, not in modern therapies. How liberating it is to trust the same grace of God and power of the Holy Spirit to perfect us that we trusted to save us.

We must do so because the problems are much worse than we imagined. Our hearts are desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). Even as Christians, we often don’t even know how to pray: “And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). Only God knows everything about us, our deepest hurts, our sorrows, and ultimately everything that causes us to be who we are. Only He can deliver us and change us.

AIMING TOO LOW

A huge problem with trusting these various man-centered approaches is that they set the goal too low! People are aiming for being “normal” compared with other fallen sinners. God is not satisfied with anything less than perfection. He wants us completely conformed to the image of Christ. The danger is that even if one of the man-centered approaches “worked,” one could become satisfied and complacent. We might be happy enough being considered a normal person compared with others, a “good old Joe” who copes with life quite well now, having no feelings of wretchedness, but high self-esteem.

Consider Paul’s testimony about his own goal:

More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have

suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:8-12).

His goal was to attain to the resurrection from the dead, which he associates with ultimate glorification and perfection (Romans 8:23). That means that the goal is to be conformed to the image of Christ.

Notice also that he laid the things of the old life aside as rubbish as he pursued by faith Christ's righteousness. Today, Christian people spend years sorting through the old rubbish of their previous lives trying to find causes for present failings. Not so with Paul. Even when feeling totally wretched, he didn't look back to his old life for causes or answers, but forward to the promise of God. When we realize the goal is total conformity to the image of Christ, we will depend on God and the work of His Spirit in our lives. There is no human resource to get us to this goal.

THE PROMISE OF HOLINESS

God will do whatever it takes to make us holy, and nothing in this world can stop Him from doing so. This is the topic that dominates the last half of Romans 8. The so-called "golden chain" of Romans 8:29,30 says, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justi-

fied; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." In popular terminology, "it's a done deal." The logic here is undeniable. If one person God justified is ultimately not glorified, these verses have lied. And God cannot lie. We were not just chosen for salvation; we were chosen for holiness: "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him" (Ephesians 1:4).

The famous passage that precedes the "golden chain" is Romans 8:28. It tells us that all things work together for the good of those He has called. The context defines "good" for us. It means conformity to the image of Christ, which includes sanctification and, ultimately, glorification. All the resources of heaven and earth are at God's disposal. He is putting them to work to ensure that all of His elect shall be glorified.

Do we have a part in this? Yes, we do. We must press on to the high goal of our calling in Christ Jesus. We do so, according to Romans 8, by walking in the Spirit. This is by grace through faith just as salvation is, yet there are practical things God has given us to do. Ryan Habbena's article shall describe these.

Clearly, we struggle with conflicting motives and groan as we live in a situation of great conflict. We know the holiness of God and His righteous callings. We fall short and feel wretchedness. We long for heaven and the consummation of the desire of our hearts, knowing God fully and truly, in complete holiness. We live in a fallen world, however, that seems incompatible with holiness. The Scriptures have told us about this so that we do not despair. We despair when we get our eyes off the promises of the Scripture and onto the schemes of man. "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). Our hope is glorification.

1. Many back issues can be found on at: www.twincityfellowship.com/cic Write us for a complete list of back issues.

End Note

WALKING BY THE SPIRIT

BY RYAN HABBENA

Ever since the fall, humanity has been engaged in an age-old struggle against the power of sin. Sin, being defined as “both fallen humanity’s state of separation from God and as a person’s purposeful disobedience to God’s will as evidenced in concrete thought or act,”¹ is the ultimate problem of the human race. While remaining corporate, it is also a very real individual problem. We find this truth presented from virtually the beginning of the Biblical accounts. When Cain was enraged with his brother regarding the insufficiency of his own sacrifice, God informed him “sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Genesis 4:7b [emphasis added]).²

Throughout the history of the church, we discover many feeble attempts to “master” sin. The Ascetics believed sin could be mastered by withdrawing from the world. Those who practiced asceticism would attempt to remove all “outside” temptations, living a life of rigid self-denial. Those who vowed to live an ascetic lifestyle found themselves just as tormented and drawn by sin as those living “in the world.”

Most know of Martin Luther’s “insanity” before he came to a realization of the grace of God. In his understanding of the intensity of sin, he would physically discipline himself in an attempt to overcome it. In fact, “he punished his body so severely that he later commented it was in the monk’s cell that he did permanent damage to his digestive system.”³ Perhaps the most amusing case of attempting to master sin through rigorous external means is that of the ascetic Simeon Stylites. He was so troubled by the people who came near the cave he dwelt that “he put up a pillar and made his home on the top of it for over thirty years.”⁴ Regarding this man, I once heard a teacher state “The real saints were the ones who picked up after him

for thirty odd years!”

Throughout the extremes noted above, a common thread is evident. All of these believed (and practiced) that sin could be mastered through rigorous external means. This is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to the past. Similar legalistic teachings are just as prevalent today. Given the extremes we encounter through all of these, a pertinent question arises: a question that is of utmost importance for all who are truly regenerate believers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How does one “master” sin in this present age?

The task of this work revolves around this very question. In our struggle against sin, the Scriptures never command us to physically beat ourselves.⁵ Nor do they command us to retreat from the world.⁶ It is clear from the examples noted above that no one can successfully hide from the sinful desires of our fallen humanity. However, the Scriptures do proclaim that believers have been freed from slavery to sin and are now under the law of the Spirit of life (Romans 6:17, 8:2). Perhaps the most significant passage regarding the “how” of mastering sin is found in Galatians chapter 5: “But I say to you, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.” (Galatians 5:16-17)

Therefore, the two-fold task of this work is as follows. First, we must clearly understand what this text is proclaiming, especially when Paul most significantly asserts, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh.” Second, given the generality of this command, we must explore the whole counsel of God in discovering exactly how one indeed “walks by the Spirit.” When these two tasks are carefully examined, accepted, and brought into everyday life, one is well equipped to “master sin” by “walking by the Spirit.”

What IS “WALKING BY THE SPIRIT”?

Paul’s epistle to the Galatians carries with it a severely admonishing tone. Many in the church at Galatia had succumbed to the dangerous teaching of the “Judaizers” – a sect that proclaimed one must rigorously follow the Old Testament law in addition to Christ in order to remain in God’s favor. As a sign of this, circumcision needed to be added to the grace of Christ. For the apostle Paul, this was a departure from the only true Gospel.

In this epistle Paul attempts to correct the Galatians’ perilous departure. After Paul affirms the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ and the necessity to abide in it, he turns to matters regarding Christian living. It is fairly safe to assume these Judaizers were after a stringent keeping of the Old Testament law. In Paul’s discourse regarding Christian living, he declares that “life in the Spirit” is not antinomianism, a doctrine many accused the apostles of teaching.⁷ Rather, a “life in the Spirit” is one that seeks to obey and serve God in a profound, intensified manner.

For Paul, faith in the Gospel is a necessary prerequisite for “walking by the Spirit.” Thus, one must “begin” in the Spirit before “continuing” in it. Paul’s overriding concern is clearly seen in the following:

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:1-3)

Paul’s rhetoric is unmistakable. The Galatians, having begun in the Spirit by believing, were now seeking to mature by obeying a system that was only a shadow of things to come. Such a practice was utter “foolishness” to Paul. Therefore, in chapter 5, Paul gives the definitive answer to how one matures and obeys the true and living God: “Walk by the Spirit and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh.” This phrase is begun with a command

(Walk by the Spirit) and finished with a promise (you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh). There are three elements in this passage we must understand in order to grasp Paul's intention. We must understand the terms "walk," "Spirit," and "flesh."

Walk- The Greek word *peripateite* is one of four verbs used in Galatians 5 to designate "life in the Spirit." All seek to convey a similar meaning – a lifestyle consumed by the power of the Holy Spirit. "Although this is the only place in Galatians where the word "walk" is used in this sense, it is a common Pauline designation for one's daily conduct or lifestyle."⁸ Therefore, Paul is using the word "walk" in the sense of a continual lifestyle.

Spirit- To ascertain Paul's intention of the Greek word *pneuma* one needs to examine the context. This Greek word has a variety of possible translations: the human spirit, wind, unity, the Holy Spirit, etc. Given the context of the entire epistle and the immediate passage, Paul is clearly referring to the Holy Spirit, which empowers the regenerate believer to live a dynamic, obedient life in relationship to God.

Flesh- There has been considerable debate over the translation of the Greek word *sarx*, mainly stemming from the NIV translation committee's decision to translate this word "sinful nature" in many instances. While I have some reservations in accepting that word translation, overall I believe *sarx*, in this particular context, indeed carries the meaning of the fallen nature of humanity. Timothy George notes, "Throughout Galatians 5-6 flesh is used as an ethical term with a decidedly negative connotation. Flesh refers to fallen human nature, the center of human pride and self-willing."⁹ Therefore, "fulfilling the desires of the *sarx*" is simply equivalent to "sinning."

In light of the above observations, the meaning of Paul's command can be succinctly stated as the following: Live your life by the power of the Holy Spirit and your sinful desires will remain unfulfilled. Again, George is helpful here: "In Paul's vocabulary, to

walk in the Spirit or be led by the Spirit means to go where the Spirit is going, to listen to his voice, to discern his will, to follow his guidance."¹⁰

Therefore, this text confirms it is not through external means, such as a legalistic regiment, as the Judaizers were affirming, or self-inflicting punishment, or a manipulation of one's own environment, that sin may be overcome. On the contrary, it is through the inner working of the Holy Spirit, changing the heart and purifying it in service to God, that one "does not fulfill the desires of the flesh." This does not entail, however, that we take absolutely no part in our sanctification and the mortifying of the "flesh." To be sure, it is the Holy Spirit, not our human wills, that ultimately purifies us from all unrighteousness, yet, He accomplishes this through certain and various means, in which we are called to participate.

Therefore, since we know what "walking by the Spirit" is, we must answer the question: How specifically do we "walk by the Spirit" so we do not "fulfill the desires of the flesh?" A careful reading of the Scriptures reveals three prime "devotional disciplines" that the Spirit works through in continually purifying the children of God. It is primarily through these that we engage in our "walk."

How DOES ONE

"WALK BY THE SPIRIT"?

In the day of Pentecost, after the promised Holy Spirit was poured out, the apostle Peter proclaimed: "This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'And it shall be in the last days,' God says, 'that I shall pour out my Spirit on all mankind'" (Acts 2:17). The new discipleship community was being established. Those who believed had indeed "begun by the Spirit." With this having occurred, how were the individuals rooted in this community living in this radical new way of life?

Those who believed and were included in this new discipleship community did not remain passive. On the contrary, after Peter gave his Pentecost address, it is written that "those who had received his word were baptized

. . . they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:41,42 [emphasis added]). Having "begun with the Spirit" these were indeed "continuing in Spirit." In the above, three devotional disciplines are clearly presented: Feeding upon the Word of God, Practicing Prayer, and Devotion to Christian Fellowship.¹¹ It is through devotion to these, I will argue, that one fulfills the heart of the command: Walk by the Spirit.

FEEDING UPON THE WORD OF GOD
"Man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). The word of God is proclaimed as spiritual nourishment for all those who believe. The Scriptures testify that the Holy Spirit is active in fueling the believer with power and growth through the word He inspired. "Like newborn babes," exhorts Peter, "long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Peter 2:2 [emphasis added]).

The Scriptures must be read with an awareness and dependence upon the Holy Spirit. There is indeed an objective nature to the reading of the Scriptures. However, we must be careful, lest we divorce the necessity of illumination when the Scriptures are read by an open heart and mind. The great 19th century preacher, Charles Spurgeon has noted:

It is one of the peculiar offices of the Holy Spirit to enlighten His people. He has done so by giving us His inspired Word, but the Book is never spiritually understood by anyone apart from the personal teaching of its great Author. You may read it as much as you will and never discover the inner and vital meaning unless your soul is led into it by the Holy Ghost Himself. You may have done well to learn the letter of truth, but you still need the Spirit of God to make it the light and power of God to your

soul.¹²

This illumination is presented in John 16:13: "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth." These were the words spoken by Jesus to His disciples, yet they also have significant meaning for all that believe. R. Kent Hughes notes regarding this verse: "The Holy Spirit guides us into 'all truth.' We will grow as he further illuminates the Scriptures to us. That does not mean we will have all knowledge regarding the sciences, but we will be taken deeper and deeper into the essential truth about God and Christ and eternal life and our souls."¹³

The Scriptures should never be divorced from the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit. He has inspired and brought illumination to the significance and power of the Scriptures. When one devotes oneself to the Scriptures, with a keen awareness and dependence upon the Holy Spirit, the believer will be equipped and upheld by His powerful working through the inspired word.

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

Prayer is clearly and directly commanded in Scripture: "Devote yourselves to prayer" (Colossians 4:2). Prayer is simply communication with God, and is practiced through a variety of means: petition, thanksgiving, praise, worship, intercession, etc. The Holy Spirit is especially active in this endeavor. Not only are we commanded to pray, we are commanded to pray "in the Spirit" (Jude 20, Ephesians 6:18). Praying in the Spirit "seems to indicate a deep, free, and intensive time of prayer, when the Spirit takes over and controls and leads the prayers."¹⁴

Scripture affirms the special presence and activity in the believer's endeavor of prayer, for "we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). Therefore, prayer is a devotion in which we are commanded to participate, as the Holy Spirit comes beside us, both inspiring us towards communication with God¹⁵ and interceding "for the saints according to the will of God" (8:27b). As we, by the Spirit's inspira-

tion, devote ourselves to communication with God, the Holy Spirit actively works by interceding, comforting, sanctifying, and protecting in ways our finite minds are not able to grasp.

THE BLESSINGS OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

Christ has established the church as a community. The benefits of being in Christ not only entail participating in the eternal relationship of the Trinity, but also fellowship with other believers. Contemporary Evangelical culture often centers on the individual nature of faith and practice. While individual, daily worship and service are indeed a characteristic of a healthy spiritual life, it is incomplete without belonging to a local fellowship of believers. There needs to be devotion to Christian fellowship.

The Holy Spirit is active in a special way "wherever two or three are gathered" in the name of Christ. In Old Testament Israel, the Temple was where God's special presence resided: within the "Holy of Holies." However, it is now in the collective hearts of His children where His special presence resides through the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul proclaims, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" Here Paul is not referring to a believer's physical body as God's temple, but rather the community of believers. The Greek word for "you" in this verse is in the plural. It is in this fellowship where God's Spirit dwells in a special and powerful way.

The benefits of Christian fellowship are numerous. It is in this community setting where we worship, hear the word of God, corporately pray, serve God and others through our spiritual gifts, and remember Christ's death through the Lord's Supper. In all these things the Holy Spirit is working powerfully: conforming believers, both individually and corporately, into the image of Christ and the triune God.

By devoting oneself to Christian fellowship, a believer is engulfed in activities where the Spirit is actively working. In fact, in the New Testament,

when members of the church are placed out of fellowship for disciplinary reasons, they are said to be "delivered unto Satan."¹⁶ They had been removed from God's sphere of safety present within the church. Being plugged into a body of true believers offers protection from our spiritual enemy and the temptations of this fallen world. Clearly, therefore a devotion to pure fellowship protects and edifies the believer through the power of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

A pure devotion to these disciplines was prevalent in the new discipleship community after the Spirit was poured out on Pentecost. It is clear the Holy Spirit is especially active throughout all of these devotions, conforming the individual and the community into the image of Christ and the triune God. Thus, devoting oneself to these will result in an "ever-increasing walk" intoxicated with the Spirit of God. As a result there will indeed be an "ever-decreasing fulfillment" of the desires of the flesh.¹⁷

In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald S. Whitney has noted:

Discipline without direction is drudgery. But the Spiritual Disciplines are never drudgery as long as we practice them with the goal of Godliness. If your picture of a disciplined Christian is one of a grim tight-lipped, joyless half-robot, then you've missed the point. Jesus was the most disciplined Man who ever lived and yet the most joyful and passionately alive. He is our Example of discipline.¹⁸

As we seek to walk by the Spirit, we must not lose sight of the ultimate goal. The goal is not to focus on the devotional disciplines themselves, but rather through them be brought into a deeper relationship with our Savior. The ultimate goal is to be conformed into His image, for His glory. While we walk by the Spirit, "let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2 NIV).

END NOTES

¹ Stanley J. Greutz, David Guretzki, Cherith Fee Nordling, Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 107.

² To “master” sin in this context means to “bring it under submission.”

³ R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1998) 84.

⁴ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, (Nashville: Word, 1995) 119.

⁵ In 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul is most probably using hyperbole when he states, “I beat my body” (NIV). He does this to demonstrate the seriousness of bringing the desires of the flesh under control.

⁶ Paul implicitly teaches against such a practice in 1 Corinthians 5:9, where he admonishes: “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world...for then you would have to go out of the world.”

⁷ See Romans 3:8.

⁸ Timothy George, *NAC Galatians*, (Nashville, Broadman & Holman, 1994) 386.

⁹ *Ibid* 377.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 386.

¹¹ Here the “apostles’ teaching” is surely equivalent to the “word of God” as they are fulfilling the Great Commission: “teaching people to observe all Jesus commanded them” (Matthew 28:20). Also, the “breaking of bread” is most probably a subheading of fellowship. However, it also could refer to observing the Lord’s Supper. Either way, these can be seen as a part of devotion to Christian fellowship.

¹² Charles Spurgeon, *What the Holy Spirit Does in a Believers Life*, (Lynwood:Emerald, 1993) 35.

¹³ R. Kent Hughes, John, (Wheaton:Crossway, 1999) 381-382.

¹⁴ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 115.

¹⁵ In the passage at hand, it is proclaimed that the Spirit Himself has given us a spirit that cries out “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:14-16)

¹⁶ Paul uses this terminology in 1 Corinthians 5:5 and 1 Timothy 1:20.

¹⁷ In my estimation, it is clear that the Scriptures affirm progressive sanctification, where absolute perfection is not obtained until glorification. This is germane to note as it relates to this issue and particular passage. However, a defense of this position is beyond the scope of this work.

¹⁸ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, (Colorado Springs:NavPress, 1991) 24.

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