

CHAPTER 6

WALK: FOCUSING ON WHAT?

Driving. You're out the door, in the car and away you go. As you head out, are you concentrating on the rules of the road or focused on reaching your destination? You studied the manual. You know the rules. They are tucked away in the recesses of your mind and are automatically retrieved as you travel along. Sometimes they are so second nature we implement them without even realizing it. Retrieving them is instinctive. In actuality, while your focus is on driving, knowing the rules and putting them into practice become one and the same.

Focusing on Rules

The Christian life is somewhat like driving. Living from moment to moment, you need to know the rules, not the Mosaic Law, rather the law of liberty (Jam 1:25) or the law of Christ (Gal 6:2), which was given to us by Jesus and the New Testament writers. While some stipulations may be a restatement of those in the Mosaic Law, the law of Christ is valid and directed toward all believers. So, as a Christian, do you focus on rules? Hopefully not! Nevertheless, you should know and understand the life implications that the New Testament has on

ESCAPE

you, just as the driver's handbook does regarding the rules of the road. Knowing precedes and partners with doing.

Having God's guidelines, your life should be lived in obedience. "Wait!" "You just implied that it is not necessary to focus on rules; yet, you say we need to live in accordance with the law of Christ." "Yes" and "Yes." You operate your car obeying the law. Your focus is on driving, which is based on knowing and understanding what makes for the responsible operation of your vehicle. It is the same for the Christian life. You focus on living, not rules. Yet, knowing the rules is reflected in all you do.

The crux of the Christian life is how you live. You many have heard someone use the cliché, "You're not to focus on rules, but focus on Christ."¹ Nevertheless, obeying rules and living the Christian life go hand in hand. Being compatible, they are inseparable and occur together in perfect harmony. So, what does focusing on Christ mean? Should it be contrasted to focusing on rules?

Focusing on Christ

In the previous chapter, we noted that Romans 8 addressed the Christian's association and alignment with the Spirit through a familiarity with God's Word. Over time understanding God's Word plus applying it in your life, leads to growing maturity in Christ. The result is a walk with Christ that becomes second nature. You instinctively know what you should do and you do it.

Example of the Twelve

How do you begin? How do you know what to do in the way God wants to you to do it? The answer is simple and the old adage, "It is easier said than done," applies here. In fact, Jesus gave us the key in His call to those who wanted to be His committed disciples. He said, "Follow Me."²

Jesus' call to discipleship was centered in the closing months of His earthly ministry.³ On each occasion, He spoke of the demands on those who took seriously the message to follow Him. When Jesus

WALK: FOCUSING ON WHAT?

said, “Follow Me,” He *never* referred to salvation; rather His appeal was to discipleship to those who were already saved.⁴ For example, Andrew and Peter, believed in Christ at the first miracle (John 2:1-11). Months after the miracle in John 2, Jesus called Andrew and Peter to “Follow Him” in discipleship (Matt 4:18-29). Intimacy, allegiance, and dedication to Christ were the emphasis, not salvation.

The Twelve are illustrative of what Jesus meant when He said, “Follow Me.” Jesus’ words in Luke 6:40 bring clarity. “A pupil [disciple] is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.” Jesus chose the Twelve “so that they would be with Him and that He *could* send them out” (Mark 3:14). These men were exposed to His words and actions, which they replicated in the days ahead. They were to be reproductions of the original.

Not only did Jesus instruct them, but more importantly He taught by modeling truth. For instance, the disciples learned from Christ’s example when He washed their feet.⁵

13 You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for *so* I am. 14 If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. 16 Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor *is* one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them (John 13:13-17).

Notice Jesus expected them *to know truth* and *to live out truth*, putting it into practice. Like many of us, the Twelve were often slow learners. Change seldom occurs overnight. Hearing and observing what He taught began to be assimilated and applied in their own lives. They eventually became imitators of Christ.

Pattern of the Church

If we want to “follow Him,” we must *focus on Christ*. Get to know Him intimately.

Getting to know Jesus starts with the Gospels. There “we view the life of Christ,”⁶ His actions, reactions and teaching. During His

ESCAPE

time on earth, Jesus' instruction included many dos and don'ts. He modeled them perfectly. If discipleship requires that we live according to Christ's example, we can only conclude that we must heed what He said if we are to become like Him. This is what He expects. "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me" (John 14:21a). To walk in loving fellowship with Christ means knowing and obeying His Word.⁷

When Paul made the appeal, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1), he used a mirror analogy to clarify. He wrote,

17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. **18** But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17-18).⁸

Beholding Christ "signifies a steady kind of action—looking at him, looking at him, looking at him....The more you and I look at him, the more we become like him."⁹ Continually focusing on Christ, His words and works transforms the believer so that he is more and more conformed to His likeness.

Using the same illustration James went on to explain that God's Word should be embraced not only by internalizing it but also applying it. Exhorting us to become word-doers, he wrote,

22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves...**25** But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it [in it], not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does (Jam 1:22, 25).

When the law of liberty is intently and continually observed, a believer cannot escape from falling in love with his Savior and expressing that affection through keeping His commands (John 14:21). Abiding in the Word translates into doing. Exposure changes our behavior so that we become more like the One we follow.

WALK: FOCUSING ON WHAT?

Trying or Trusting Illusion

We are typically told there are two diametrically opposed ways to experience the Christian life (see chart 6-1). These popular views are that the Christian life is lived either by *trusting in the Spirit's power* or by *trying in one's own strength*, distinguishing Spirit-reliance from self-reliance, Spirit-effort from human-effort.¹⁰ If the Christian chooses to allow the Spirit to empower him to live the Christian life, the Spirit produces godly behavior through the believer. On the other hand, if



the believer chooses to ignore the Spirit and on his own tries to live the Christian life, human effort only yields sinful behavior. Notice that anything and everything (e.g., brushing your teeth, grocery shopping, etc.) the Christian does without being empowered by the Spirit is considered to be sin! Let's examine this from Scripture to see if these assumptions are supported or if they are in error.

Trying in One's Own Strength

Can the Christian life to be lived by *trying in one's own strength*? To say it another way: "Can the Christian keep God's rules by his own

ESCAPE

human effort?” The following three considerations will give us some insight:

Definition of Flesh

The issue in Scripture is choosing the way you walk—in darkness or in light, with respect to the flesh or with respect to the Spirit, etc. In Scripture the believer’s walk is associated with living the Christian life, always requiring human effort. Nevertheless, “trying to walk in one’s own *human effort*,” is typically associated with “walking by the *flesh*,” contending that the “flesh,” and thus “human effort” produce sinful behavior.¹¹ Is that association legitimate?

In a study of both Romans and Galatians where “walking by the flesh” comes center stage, the term *flesh* is used in numerous ways. It can mean “human being” (Rom 1:3; 9:5; Gal 1:16), “physical kinship” (Rom 9:3; 11:14), “physical body” (Rom 2:28; 4:1; Gal 4:14, 23, 29), “unregenerate” (Rom 7:5; 8:8, 9; 9:8), or “propensity to sin” (Rom 8:4, 12, 13; Gal 5:13, 16, 17, 19; 6:8). [**Note:** in *Romans 8 and Galatians 5*, “*flesh*” refers to the “propensity to sin,” not human effort] In the four remaining occurrences (Rom 6:19, 8:3; Gal 3:3, 4:13), many conclude that “flesh” refers to “human effort.” These texts are provided below (italics added).

I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your *flesh* (Rom 6:19).

For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the *flesh* (Rom 8:3).

Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the *flesh*? (Gal 3:3).

You know that it was because of a bodily illness [weakness of the *flesh*] (Gal 4:13).

Both Romans 6:19 and Galatians 4:13 address the “flesh’s weakness,” referring to the limitations of human beings to understand spiritual truth (Rom 6:19)¹² or to physically function due to illness (Gal 4:13).¹³ In Romans 8:3 it was, in fact, the law that was weak,

WALK: FOCUSING ON WHAT?

being incapable of providing freedom from sin and death, because of the Christian's own "propensity to sin."¹⁴ The remaining text (Gal 3:3) is the one typically used to support the idea that "walking by the *flesh*" being synonymous with "walking in one's own strength" or "walking by human effort." A careful study shows that that assumption is based on a flawed view of Galatians 3:2-3.¹⁵ The following gives a clearer perspective.

2 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 hearing with *faith*? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by [with] the *Spirit*, are you now being perfected by [with] the *flesh*?¹⁶ (Gal 3:2-3, italics added)

These verses contain two sets of contrasts using a series of rhetorical questions. Verse 2 concerned the prior reception of the Spirit by the Gentile Christians in Galatia prior to the coming of disruptive teaching by Judaizers. Remember they taught the necessity for Gentile Christians to keep the Mosaic Law. "The Judaizers in Galatia, it seems, claimed not to be opposing Paul but to be supplementing his message, and so to be bringing his converts to perfection [maturity]."¹⁷ Yet in both Galatians and Romans Paul taught that any form of Mosaic Law-keeping was mere legalistic observance.¹⁸ That is the very reason Paul questioned their spiritual discernment relating to the *basis of their conversion*, whether their justification was by "works of the Law" or by "believing that which they had heard."¹⁹ "Thus the contrast Paul was drawing was between doing works and believing in Christ," pointing out the "alternative ways of approaching God."²⁰

In verse 3, Paul moved on to their present situation. Here he questioned their spiritual discernment concerning the *basis for Christian living*, whether sanctification was "by/with the flesh" or "by/with the Spirit." The implied answer was "by/with the Spirit." Beginning their Christian life with the Spirit, Christian living is being perfected [moving to maturity] with the Spirit. "The Christian life is one that starts, is maintained, and comes to culmination only through dependence on the activity of God's Spirit."²¹ One would conclude that for Gentile Christians legalistic observance improperly addresses both justification,

ESCAPE

by the *works of the Law* (v 2), and sanctification, by/with the *flesh* (v 3).²² Consequently, *works of the Law* and *flesh* are used interchangeable in this text and both are equivalent to *legalistic observance*.

While the antithesis between the flesh and the Spirit is prominent in both Galatians and Romans, Galatians 3:2-3 has been used to infer that a believer's "human-effort" is synonymous with the "flesh," trying to gain merit before God by Law-keeping.²³ The conclusion has been supported by the way "flesh" has been understood in verse 3. In fact, it is unfortunately translated *human effort* or *own efforts* (e.g., NLT, AMP, NET, EXB), implying that one's self-effort associated with sin's power is insufficient and that naturally the power of the Spirit is required for Christian living. Nevertheless that approach misses the point in verse 3. *Legalistic observance, not human effort, is the topic*. Remember in chapter 5, we discussed that *walking in the Christian life does involve human effort*. There we found that the primary issue is which choice we make either in disobedience, "with respect to the flesh," or in obedience, "with respect to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4-5; Gal 5:16-17). Whichever decision allows either your propensity to sin or the Spirit to influence our life. Here in Galatians 3:2-3, Paul refuted the Judaizers' teachings regarding legalistic observance. Paul appealed to believers to wakeup (Gal 5:1-6). If they chose to walk "with respect to the Spirit" rather than "with respect to the flesh," then they were being "led by the Spirit, [and were experientially] *not under the Law*" (v 18, italics added).

Notice in these four texts (Rom 6:19; 8:3; Gal 3:3; 4:13) that in *no* instance is "human effort" associated with "flesh." Whether life is lived obediently or disobediently, the human element is always involved. Remember, "walking with respect to the *flesh*" refers to "walking with respect to your *inclination to sin*" not "walking in one's own *human effort*." It's illegitimate to associate "flesh" with "human effort."

Not Because of, but by Means of Human Effort

With the proper understanding of "flesh," it becomes clear that human effort is *never the cause of* sinful behavior but *certainly the means by which* sinful behavior becomes a reality. Remember, "the

WALK: FOCUSING ON WHAT?

members of your body” can be “the instruments of unrighteousness” (Rom 6:13). Human effort, manifested through the physical body, is the means by which sinful behavior is accomplished and made evident. However, the source of sinful behavior is the Christian’s inclination to sin. The predisposition to sin is the very thing you are “not to let reign...in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts” (v 12).

Focusing on Rules

The expression “trying to walk in one’s own strength or human effort” is often couched in the terminology of “trying to keep rules” to avoid sin. Picture a process where the believer is striving to avoid sin and to gain merit before God, while focusing on rules and laboring to keep those rules by sheer human effort. Understandably from that perspective, this pursuit would be considered legalism. However, that approach to Christian living is flawed in two ways: “human effort” is again used illegitimately and God’s laws are to be obeyed.

Legalism should *not* be defined simply by keeping rules because Christians are to obey God’s rules found in the law of Christ (Gal 6:2) or the law of liberty (Jam 1:25). Biblically legalism *is* “attempting to gain favor with God by means of Torah [Mosaic Law] observance.”²⁴ That applies not only for salvation, but also for Christian living. Even though commonly believed, it is inaccurate to label keeping the law of Christ as legalism. The law of Christ is, in fact, the governing guideline for living the Christian life in order that the fruit of the Spirit and spiritual growth might be evidenced (see chapter 12). Invalidating the law of Christ for Christian living is blatant antinomianism (i.e., to be free from the obligation of any law to govern a believer’s behavior; lawlessness).²⁵

Many misunderstand and inaccurately describe legalism as any type of adherence to any law for Christian living. In a derogatory manner, legalism is equated with “focusing on rule-keeping,” which is then associated with “trying to obey God in your own strength.”²⁶ This approach to “legalism” is an overreaction to unbiblical and destructive, man-made criteria for determining the validity of one’s walk with Christ. It is unfortunate, but when the pendulum swings

ESCAPE

it usually overcompensates and goes to the other extreme—moving from erroneously defined legalism to unfettered antinomianism (see chapter 14).

Regrettably, Christian validation typically comes in two forms: individual introspection and corporate policing. In both arenas there is an inordinate preoccupation with rule-keeping, never mind if they are from the Mosaic law, the law of Christ, or another set of standards set by a religious group (e.g., no drinking, no smoking, no dancing, etc.). Invariably, the emphasis is on the don'ts. While it is true that the believer in Christ should examine his behavior (1 Cor 11:28-30), continual preoccupation with keeping the rules ushers in a personal seek-and-destroy mission—seek it out, dig it out, cut it out, and stomp it out. Whether individually or corporately, every word and deed is critiqued against a “Christian” checklist. Corporate policing is particularly good at pointing out when someone has missed the mark. No wonder some in the Church have reacted and pushed the pendulum toward antinomianism.

Preoccupation with rules springs from one primary source: lacking assurance of salvation. If a person is *not* absolutely sure he possess eternal life, conformity to rules is perceived as the way of obtaining, proving, and keeping it.²⁷ Introspection only provides a temporal connection with God. In fact, only as a person is secure in his position with Christ can the law of Christ be freely and fearlessly embraced and obeyed.

Focusing on keeping rules in order to “conquer,” “avoid,” or “suppress” sin is a false premise for Christian living.²⁸ Nevertheless, the central part of Christian living is obeying God's commands. As discussed earlier, maturing in Christ is a process of embracing and understanding God's Word and then applying it to everyday life. Fellowship with Christ over time produces a growing sensitivity to appropriate behavior. In time your life will reflect who you already are positionally in Christ. Actions and reactions will become second nature. Remember, your focus is on living.

Trusting in the Spirit's Power

If trying in one's own strength is an invalid approach to the Christian

WALK: FOCUSING ON WHAT?

life, should we then embrace *trusting in the Spirit's power* as the correct one (see chart 6-1)? If we can't walk in our own strength, shouldn't the logical conclusion be that we must rely on the power of the Spirit? The Christian then must choose to allow the Spirit to empower him to live the Christian life, as the source of godly living. Rather than focusing on keeping rules in order to "suppress" sin by one's own human effort, the Christian life involves focusing on Christ and by faith appropriating the Spirit's power. "Walking in the power of the Spirit" is then to "walk focusing on Jesus and trusting in the Spirit's power." Obviously, everything the Christian does without being empowered by the Spirit must be considered sin. This is the popular pronouncement in evangelical circles. Let's look to Scripture to find support or if it too is incorrect.

Inserting Power

As explained in the last chapter, walking "according to the Spirit" is often taken to mean that the believer in Christ is to "walk according to *the power of the Spirit*." Inserting power indicates that an assumed power of the Spirit is necessary for Christian living to counter a so-called power of sin. To sustain that position two factors must be overcome. First, it must be biblically supported that the inclination to sin is actually a power to be defeated. From Romans 4, we determined that sin does not possess the ability to produce disobedience (see chapter 4). Second, the term *power* is not used in the how-to-live section of Romans (ch 5–8) or Galatians (4:21–6:18) where "walking by the Spirit" is taught (see chapter 5). Importing the idea of power lacks biblical support. Rather than involving two different sources of power, the "walking" texts (e.g., darkness or light, flesh or Spirit, etc.) address choices that are available to the Christian.

Focusing on Christ

"Focusing on Christ" is not meditating on Christ's work on the cross, as important as that is; It's not wondering WWJD (i.e., What Jesus Do?) in a particular situation; and it's not a five-minute devotional at the start of each day. As explained above, focusing on

ESCAPE

Christ is a lifelong process of getting to know God as revealed in the Scriptures. Jesus is God incarnate and His life and work are captured in the Gospels. Notice also that “the Old Testament prophets led up to the Gospels and the apostles explained the Gospels in their epistles.”²⁹ Only as we diligently study the entire Word of God can we know God and what He desires for each of us. The intended purpose in the pursuit of following Christ is transformation, becoming like Him in all respects. We are to become imitators of Him. This is a process that requires time and relates to the following topic.

Appropriating Power

Salvation is a free gift and it is not gained by any effort on man’s part. Notice that at salvation God does all the work. On the other hand, the Christian life is when the believer’s work begins. Nevertheless, the *trusting view* sees the power of the Spirit producing good works through the believer. Hence, God’s Spirit does the work, having nothing to do with the Christian’s own effort.

From this perspective, the believer’s choice is either to allow the Spirit to live through him or not. If not, human effort produces sin—the *trying view*. Consequently, it would be extremely important of know exactly how to allow the Spirit to empower one’s walk. It is typically understood as *appropriating the Spirit’s power*.³⁰ Based on the “truth” that God promised power (e.g., Acts 1:8, see chapter 9) and by faith in that promise, you trust that God will provide what He promised to live the Christian life. Unfortunately, many in the Church understand this experience to be instantaneous: trust, pray, believe, and then the Spirit works through you immediately. The work of the Spirit then is “a mystical work of the Spirit in and through the believer.”

You can see why “focusing on Christ’s” promise can readily be combined with “walking in the power of the Spirit.” The expected work of the Spirit through the believer reminds me of Popeye’s experience.

You remember Popeye the Sailor Man, the cartoon character, and his nemesis Bluto. Compared to the muscular Bluto, Popeye appeared as a weakling. Walking along the beach Bluto kicks sand on Popeye right in front of his girlfriend, Olive Oyl, trying to impress her. To the distress of Popeye, he is unable to defend himself in the eyes of his

WALK: FOCUSING ON WHAT?

beloved Olive. A fight ensues with the brute getting the best of Popeye. Seemingly down and out, a can of spinach falls out of Popeye's shirt. You know what happens next. Gulping down the spinach while in the clutches of Bluto, Popeye instantaneously becomes superhuman. From that point the winner of the skirmish is never in question.

Unfortunately many in the church see the same relationship between Popeye and spinach with the believer and the Spirit. Just as spinach produced superhuman strength in a cartoon character, the Spirit allegedly produces supernatural power in and through the believer to live the victorious Christian life. We are again reminded of the trying view: *we can do nothing in and of ourselves*. The Christian life is *not* done in one's own strength; rather, it is emphasized again and again that the Christian walk is accomplished only by the Spirit's power.

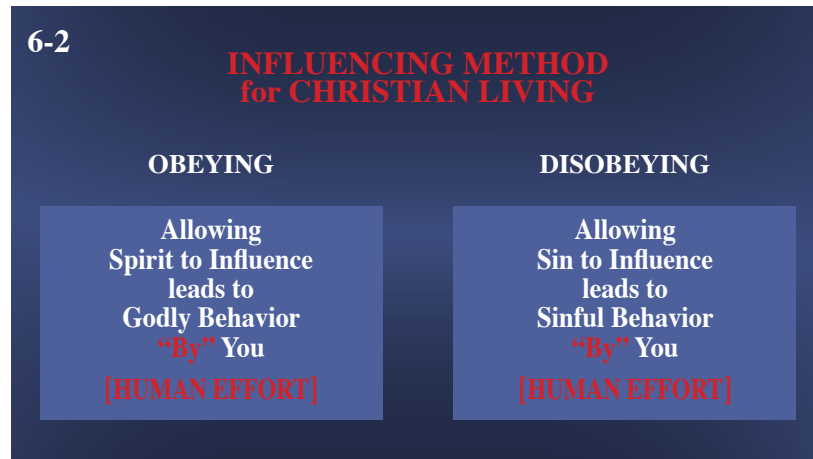
In chapter 5 we have already discussed that the ministry of the Spirit for Christian living is *not* empowerment. The secret of the Christian life is not "getting plugged into the Spirit's power" so that He produces obedience. The answer is to make oneself available to the Spirit's influencing ministry through the Word of God, choosing to do the right thing (Rom 6:13).

Obeying or Disobeying Reality

There is a better way to distinguish Spirit-reliance from self-reliance in the Christian life. Following after Christ as influenced by the Spirit or going one's own way as influenced by the flesh is the choice in the Christian life. The concern in Scripture relates to choices regarding the way you live—in darkness or in light, with respect to the flesh or with respect to the Spirit. Remember, whether in obedience or disobedience, the Christian walk is *never* associated with the ability to walk, since it is assumed that walking *always* requires one's own human effort (see chart 6-2). Behavior, whether godly or sinful, is always lived out by human effort, based on human choices.

Walking is a process and human effort is assumed in each biblical passage addressing "walking" in the Christian life. A Christian "walks in the darkness" not because he is "trying to live in his own strength," but because he actually does "not practice [do] the truth" (1 John 1:6).

ESCAPE



On the other hand, the same text implies “to walk in the light” is “to practice [do] the truth” (v 7). A believer in Christ can actually “do the truth” or “not do the truth.”³¹ The choice facing the believer in Christ is obedience or disobedience, which are manifest through human effort or activity.

Look again at Romans 6:13.

[D]o not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God.

By human effort through the “members of your [physical] body,” you manifest either godly behavior, as you allow the Spirit to influence you, or sinful behavior, as you allow sin to influence you. Did you catch that? You do the “choosing!” And, you do the “doing!” If you are a Christian, “you do” the Christian life, with bad choices leading to the “deeds of the flesh” (Gal 5:19-21) or wise choices resulting to the “fruit of the Spirit” (vv 22-23).

As the believer continues to focus on and mature in Christ, those choices become more inline with God’s word and will. He increasingly becomes a “Word-doer” (Jam 1:22, 25).

WALK: FOCUSING ON WHAT?

Maintaining a Proper Focus

Focusing on living (which includes focusing on Christ) the Christian life should be the priority of each believer. Nevertheless, that focus can be blurred by two false assumptions:

First False Assumption

The first false assumption is assuming that focusing on Christ eliminates the requirement of following rules.

Focusing on Christ requires a growing intimate knowledge of Jesus, His words and actions, leading to a lifestyle that increasingly mimics His. It is true that fixating on keeping rules leads to harmful introspection, particularly if assurance of salvation is in question. Nevertheless obeying God's dos and don'ts is integral for conforming to Christ.

Second False Assumption

The second false assumption is assuming the *only* alternative to trusting in the Spirit's power is trying in your own strength.

This assumption contains two flaws. First, trusting in the Spirit's power to produce the Christian life is erroneous. That is not the ministry of the Spirit. Rather the Spirit's ministry for Christian living is to influence the believer's choices and behavior, as he is open to God's direction (Rom 6:11-13). Second, an attempt to eliminate human effort in Christian living is also inaccurate. The choices that Christians entertain are acted out through their own effort, whether influenced by the Spirit or by one's propensity to sin. Don't lose sight of the biblical principle that choices are the issue in walking with Christ.

Gaining a biblical perspective regarding these false assumptions eliminates their hindrance for growth toward Christian maturity.



