

MYTH 7

Spirit's Power Causes
Christian Walk



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But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire 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 you please.

Galatians 5:16-17

I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes.

Ezekiel 36:27

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

Acts 1:8

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TRUTH
WALKING OBEDIENTLY IS A CHOICE

Most people believe that God grades on the curve. If you are good enough or if you have not done many bad things, He will let you into heaven when you die—a Santa-Claus theology. Like Santa, God not only knows when you are awake, He also knows if you have been naughty or nice. If very naughty, well, you will get what you deserve. “So be good for goodness’ sake!” Unfortunately believers in the Christian community are just as susceptible to misunderstanding God, making Him conform to the way they imagine Him to be. Picturing the Spirit as a supernatural genie, believers assume they cannot live the Christian life unless they tap into heaven’s power source. Rubbing the magical vase, saying the right prayer, using the proper spiritual formula, the Spirit comes to their defense and releases God’s power in their lives. While many believers reject a Santa-Claus theology for salvation, most readily embrace a genie theology for sanctification.

Conflicting Forces

You have probably heard the statement, “One can either walk

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in his own strength or in the power of the Spirit.” This statement is frequently associated with the interpretation of Galatians 5:16-17, in which two ways of walking are contrasted: (1) walking by means of the flesh or (2) walking by means of the Spirit.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire 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 you please.

Typically “walking by means of the flesh” is associated with “walking in one’s own strength.”¹ In turn, “walking by means of the Spirit” is equated with “walking in the power of the Spirit.”

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The deeds of the flesh—immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, and so forth (vv. 19-21)—are the demonstration of the flesh’s rule. And the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and so forth (vv. 22-23)—is the result of the Spirit’s empowerment. While some understand “flesh” in Galatians 5 to describe life before Christ,² most interpreters understand “flesh” to refer to the sin capacity the believer continues to struggle with following salvation.³ The believer finds himself in conflict as to which force, flesh or Spirit, he will allow to be in charge and to control him. In ourselves, “in our own strength,” the flesh (the sin capacity) produces the fruit of the flesh.⁴ On the other hand the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit.

The Believer’s Journey

Walking is both progress and a process. “By its very nature,

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walking is a succession of dependent acts.”⁵ As you walk, your next step is dependent on the previous one. Progress in the Christian life is the pilgrimage of walking in dependence on the Spirit.⁶ On the other hand failure or setbacks in the Christian life spring from dependence on the flesh. The antithesis between flesh and Spirit results in two opposing forces, each desiring to control and direct the course of the believer’s walk.

Paul commanded believers to walk by means of the Spirit (v. 16). His appeal is for each one to live in a manner that is pleasing to God. Implicit in the command is the choice that the believer must make: to obey or disobey. At each step in his pilgrimage “the Christian must choose to use his or her freedom in Christ either as an opportunity for the flesh or in response to the Spirit.”⁷ Those are the choices. Those are the only choices. Renounce one and embrace the other.

Since the flesh and the Spirit are diametrically opposed to each other, Paul spoke of the obvious dilemma each believer faces. Will he follow his own self-direction, blurred by pleasures and desires, or will he follow the guidance of the Spirit, revealed in God’s Word. In his appeal to “walk by the Spirit,” Paul said in essence “Choose wisely, you cannot have it both ways.”

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The Spirit’s Empowering Ministry?

The headlines read, “Man Lifts Car to Save Teen.” Fearing for the teen’s life, a man lifted a car that had pinned the teenager. As a result the teen escaped further harm. This was one of those rare feats you hear about from time to time, in which exceptional strength is

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revealed. Surely, this was not in the man's own strength. Was this some supernatural phenomena? Was this actually a miracle?

Salvation, in which a person begins a relationship with God, is obviously a miracle. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). The concern we are addressing here is not saving faith, but whether the believer's walk of faith is accomplished by his own strength or by the power of the Spirit. Is the Christian walk something like lifting cars? That is, is it accomplished by the Spirit's power?

Power to Walk

Numerous teachers in the church answer the above questions with a resounding and emphatic, "Yes!" We are told that we can do nothing in and of ourselves; the Christian life is not done in one's own strength. Rather, we are told, the Christian walk is accomplished by the Spirit's power through the believer. Consider the following examples:

The new life...is to be lived by the *enabling power* of the indwelling Spirit.⁸

Lewis Sperry Chafer

The Holy Spirit's role is crucial...in *empowering* us to live our lives in Christ.⁹

John MacArthur

One of the Spirit's chief roles is to *empower* believers to live supernatural lives.¹⁰

Tony Evans

Therefore the effort we make to obey God is not an effort done in our own strength, but...by relying on the *strength* which God supplies.¹¹

John Piper

We are to walk by means of the Spirit's *power* and direction.

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The Spirit enables our spiritual walk because He makes us alive with the victorious life of Christ.¹²

Neil Anderson and Robert Saucy

Invariably these examples state that believers in Jesus Christ are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live the “victorious” Christian life. Such teaching tells us that the Spirit produces good works. Good works are said to be the fruit of His power.

Promise of Power

The origin of the requirement for the Spirit’s power to produce victorious living primarily comes from two texts, one from the Old Testament and the other from the New Testament:

I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes (Ezek. 36:27).

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8).

While Ezekiel 36 concerns the New Covenant promise of the coming Spirit, which was instituted in Acts 2, one’s theological perspective determines whether the “cause you to walk in My statutes” applies to the current church age or to the future earthly millennial reign of Christ.¹³ Correctly understanding this promise’s fulfillment is crucial to determining whether the Spirit’s “special empowerment” is needed in the Christian life. The author of this book addressed this issue in the book, *Rethinking Empowerment*.¹⁴ There is not enough room in this work to address all the implications. However, if, as we defended in the prior work, that particular New Covenant promise will be fulfilled only after Christ’s return, then it has no application to the present-day walk of the believer.

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Also Acts 1:8 is addressed in *Rethinking Empowerment*.¹⁵ There we defend the position that the promise of power was directed exclusively to the apostles to carry out their mission as witnesses of Jesus Christ in the establishment of the church throughout the world. Understood in this way the typical proof text for empowerment in

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the Christian life has no application today for the walk of the believer.

A distinction must be made between God's gifting for service (which is certainly taught in the New Testament) and God's "special empowerment" to live the Christian life. This author does not believe the latter idea is taught in Scripture. Nevertheless the quotations above illustrate that many embrace the view that the victorious Christian life can be lived only by means of God's "special empowerment."

Plugging into the Power

Those who understand that the Christian life is "lived by God's power" are constantly searching for the means of getting "plugged into that power source." Typically there are two approaches. The *first* is a "surrendered life." Passive submission to God excludes reliance on one's own resources.¹⁶ The familiar expression, "Let go and let God," expresses the means of accessing the power of God and living the victorious Christian life. This view involves total reliance on God's provision. The *second* position is dualistic in nature. Not only is a commitment or surrender to God necessary, but also the believer must cooperate with the Spirit, as the Spirit produces His

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work through the believer.¹⁷ Whether taking the first or the second approach, the believer's participation and responsibility are the issues.

In either viewpoint believers are the channels through which the Spirit produces good works. If God causes obedience, obviously the believer participates. However, the following illustration provides insight.

Pipes are used as conduits for the flow of water and are responsible for the irrigation of fields. The pump activates and energizes the flow through the pipes to produce the watering. Do the pipes participate? "Sort of." Are the pipes responsible? "Sort of." And do the pipes cooperate with the pump? While the God-causes-obedience camp states that "because the pump works the pipes work," how responsible are the pipes for irrigation? How involved are the pipes in irrigation? More importantly, how responsible and how much participation is necessary by believers in present, progressive sanctification?¹⁸

So how involved are believers in present, progressive sanctification? Is God the One who is actually responsible? Does God simply require availability on the part of the conduit in order for the believer to experience the Christian life? However you answer these questions, fruit is the activity of and work of the Spirit, with little or no participation by the believer. Either fruit is the *gift* of the Spirit or it is the *spontaneous quality* in the life of an empowered believer.¹⁹

The Spirit's Influencing Ministry

There is another way to understand what it means to "walk by means of the Spirit."²⁰ In the view discussed previously, walking by the Spirit means getting "plugged into" the Spirit's power. Now

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we will consider the Christian life from a different perspective. Realizing we already possess the Spirit's resources in full supply, we can readily access them to live in obedience to God's Word.

Resources Ready and Available

Rather than seeking something you do not possess, the believer possesses all the resources of the Spirit. Remember too the believer also has the flesh as a resource, a poor one but nevertheless

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one still available to him. Choosing which one you will allow to influence your life is the issue of Galatians 5. This is the struggle each believer continues to face. The conflict is in the choosing.

The first reaction to this suggestion may be, "Man is doing it all!"

It is all the work of men to live the Christian life!" But nothing could be more further from the truth. The obedient walk of the believer is based on his new standing with God (2 Cor. 5:17). Believers are to respond to God out of gratitude for the work of God in their lives. This was true for Old Testament saints as well. The *putting-off* and *putting-on* theme of Colossians 3:1-15; Ephesians 4:22-25; and Romans 13:8-14 requires obedience to God's commands. However, He has already provided everything required for obedience on our part (regenerating, indwelling, baptizing, etc.). We participate by cooperating with Him. He has made us new people and He has given us the Spirit to fill, lead, and teach. This is the Spirit's *influencing* ministry, which is entirely different from an *empowering* ministry, as previously discussed in *Myth 4: Grace Causes Good Works*.

Resources Always Available

Not only are believers to walk in obedience *without* the "special

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empowerment” of Acts 1:8 and without the “causation” of Ezekiel 36:27, but the *logical extension* back into the Old Testament demonstrates that the Law *could have been obeyed* without the Spirit’s indwelling.²¹ One only needs to review the many occasions when Old Testament saints walked in God’s ways *without* any “special empowerment” of the Spirit. They were not helpless to observe His ways, and their obedience obviously was not in the letter only, but from the heart—out of gratitude, as God intended. Hebrews 11 is replete with illustrations of this truth.

Though Old Testament saints did not possess the Spirit’s resources, yet were responsible to obey God and to grow in maturity (e.g., Abraham, James 2:21-24). Believers today through the New Covenant possess unprecedented privileges and increased expectations to walk obediently. However, New Testament believers are never given *additional empowerment* by the Spirit to walk obediently;²² rather, they have already been given the resources (filling, leading, and teaching) of the Spirit so that they may walk obediently.

So why do many believers not walk in obedience? They possess the resources whereby they can walk obediently, but *they choose not to do so!* Those choices are the reason many of Paul’s prayers (Phil. 1: 9-11; Col. 1:9-14; and Eph. 3:14-19) concern the progressive growth of the believer toward maturity in Christ, as well as the basis for the hundreds of Paul’s commands to believers. Since the Spirit does not impose Himself on the believer, the choice to access and experience the resource of the Spirit results in obedience, which is needed for one to grow in maturity in Christ.

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Accessing Available Resources

The *empowering view*, based on Ezekiel 36:27 and Acts 1:8, requires the overlaying of an empowerment template on all New Testament texts. On the other hand the *influencing model* does not require a “special empowering” of the Spirit; instead it properly

The influencing model properly understands the cooperation of the believer and the Spirit.

understands the cooperation of the believer and the Spirit. Obedient action by the believer, rather than passivity, is the essence of the Christian life. The believer makes choices and takes action under the influencing (filling, leading, and teaching) ministry of the Spirit.

The question again must be asked, “How involved is the Spirit?” The answer lies not in some mystical empowerment in which the believer is merely a conduit. Rather, the answer

involves knowing more of Christ in the Word and conforming to His image through obedience. It requires the active involvement of both the Spirit and the believer. It involves a struggle, a conflict within the believer who must continually choose between the influence of the Spirit over against the influence of the flesh. The believer’s resources are the Word and the Spirit.

Bearing Fruit of Choices

The believer’s walk is a reflection of that to which the believer aligns himself. You have heard the popular expression, “You are known by the friends you keep.” If influenced by your own pleasures and desires, the deeds of the flesh will be evident. On the other hand the fruit of the Spirit is a reflection of a believer’s lifestyle that is aligned with the Word of God. Christlikeness, which results

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from growing in maturity in Christ, is the fruit of the Spirit and is observable as the believer continually chooses to allow the Spirit to influence his life.

Mystical Intervention or My Choice

The biblical concept of the Spirit's work in the believer's walk is not of one who mystically intervenes but of one who is a Helper; not one who manipulates but one who is a gentle Teacher, leading and instructing. Aligning oneself with the Spirit's influencing ministry results in conformity to the will of God, which evidences itself in maturity and Christlikeness.

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Myth 7, NOTES

1. John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 157; John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Silent Shepherd* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1996), 113; Jack Hayford, ed, *Spirit Filled Life Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 1779; John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991), 252; and J. Robertson McQuilkin, “Keswick Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Melvin E. Dieter (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 174.
2. Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 431-32.

Fee understands “flesh” to refer to the unredeemed, old man of Romans 6:6. As a result no internal tension within the believer is required for Fee’s view. However, the imperative to “walk by the Spirit” indicates that God’s desire is for the believer to make a deliberate choice to walk obediently. The choice to live otherwise would be to decide to live disobediently, which comes from the capacity to sin that resides in each believer.

3. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 239-41; John F. MacArthur, *Galatians* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 154; Timothy George, *Galatians* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 377; Anthony A. Hoekema, “Reformed Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, 84.
- Hoekema writes, “Though the word flesh as used in the New Testament may have various meanings, here [Gal. 5:16-17] it means the tendency within human beings to disobey God in every area of life.”
4. R. C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1990), 165.
 5. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 100.
 6. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit*, 161; and Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, 100-101.
 7. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 241.
 8. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1964), 28, 74 (italics added).
 9. MacArthur, *The Silent Shepherd*, 6 (italics his).

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10. Tony Evans, *The Promise* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 156 (italics added).
11. Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, p. 252 (italics added).
12. Neil T. Anderson and Robert L. Saucy, *God's Power at Work in You* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 225 (italics added).
13. Ken Neff, *Rethinking Empowerment* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2011), 113-24.

Chapter 9, *Prophecy and Power*, explains the New Covenant's already/not yet fulfillment from both the amillennial perspective, which does not envision an earthly reign of Christ, and the premillennial perspective, which envisions a millennial age following Christ's return.

14. *Ibid.*, 125-39.

Chapter 10, *Power in Ezekiel 36:27*, explains interpretations of "I will... cause you to walk" from both the amillennial perspective (believers are caused to walk in obedience); the traditional premillennial perspective (believers are enabled to walk in obedience); and the alternative premillennial perspective (believers can walk in obedience without a "special empowerment" of the Spirit). This author argues that the third approach is supported from Scripture.

15. *Ibid.*, 75-86.

Chapter 6, *Exploring God's Promise of Empowerment*, explains that to properly observe the Acts 1:4-8 text reveals that the promise of power (v. 8) is restricted to the Eleven, rather than to all believers, and related to service, rather than the believer's walk.

16. MacArthur, *Galatians*, 153.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Neff, *Rethinking Empowerment*, 174-175.
19. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 259.
20. Philip R. Williams, *Grammar Notes* (Greek class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1971), 12.

A noun in the dative form that denotes the agency by which something is accomplished is a dative of agency and is translated typically "by" or "by means of." On the other hand a noun in the dative form that denotes the cause by which something is accomplished is a dative of cause and is translated "by" or "because of."

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While the dative of cause conforms to the “empowerment” perspective of Galatians 5, the dative of agency conforms to an “influence” perspective of the same text. The dative of agency is the preferred translation in explaining the dynamics within Galatians 5.

21. Obviously the Law *could not* have been obeyed completely, and certainly obedience to the Law *could not* provide for salvation.
22. This is not to limit God in His activities with men. Obviously it must be understood that God can intervene in history to directly and miraculously change people and their actions (e.g., to overcome an addiction or heal an affliction). The issue here is the normal manner in which God deals with His people and provides resources so that they may walk obediently in the Christian life.