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Walking Under the Influences



RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

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 that you please.

Galatians 5:16-17

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 John 1:6-7

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If everyone did the right thing, there would be no need for rules. Right? Well, maybe we should rethink that since people have different ideas, as to what is “right” and what is “wrong.” We must remember that most people do what is right in their own eyes (Judg. 21:25). This became crystal clear to me where I currently live amidst a cluster of condo units. Some owners purchased their condos for an investment opportunity and are currently renting their units. As you might expect, renters do not embrace the same perspective of community, as do the owners. As a result, the homeowners association established a *Rules and Regulations* document setting forth expected behavior for everyone in the community. Requirements, ranging from trash, to pets, to parking, are now spelled out in detail. This is in fact the purpose of all laws—to set forth the appropriate “dos” and “don’ts” by which people are to live in community together. In the case of God’s laws, they encompass, in addition to community, the way to experience communion with the Creator.

Walking the Walk

In Galatians 5:16, believers are commanded to “walk by the Spirit.” That command conjures up various ideas and questions. *First*, a command means you need to make a decision—to obey or not. *Second*, what does it mean to walk by the Spirit? How does a believer know he is walking by the Spirit? Then, *third*, what are the results?

Some writers minimize the believer’s choices when discussing walking by the Spirit; instead, they emphasize the sufficiency and superiority of the Spirit over the flesh.¹ As a result, there is essentially no conflict between the Spirit

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and the flesh. There is no doubt of the Spirit’s superiority—“greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). The same writers also emphasize the verb form (present tense) of “walk.” They insist that this is a habitual, continual walk and they translate the verse, “Keep on walking by the Spirit.” If the Spirit’s superiority is emphasized, then the believer’s walk becomes the Spirit’s walk, not

the believer walking under the influence of the Spirit. This may seem like a question of semantics, yet understanding the difference makes all the difference.

The issue in Galatians 5 is the *believer’s decision* to walk either by the Spirit or by the flesh. When my daughter was growing up, I told her, “Make your bed.” That command was given not because she was to “keep on making her bed,” but because she had not made her bed.² She had a choice each day: make the bed or not make the bed. That is the same intent of this verse: walk by the Spirit or walk

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by the flesh. This leads to the question, How is the believer to walk by the Spirit?

If, in fact, actual choices and conduct in life are in view, then behavior—step-by-step, event-by-event—is determined by those choices. In Galatians 5:16, “walk by the Spirit” is similar in concept to “walk by faith” (2 Cor. 5:7),³ “walk in love” (Eph. 5:2), “conduct yourselves with [walk in] wisdom” (Col. 4:5); “walking in the truth” (3 John 4); and “walk in the light” (1 John 1:5-7). We can choose to walk by faith, trusting God, or we can choose to be self-reliant. We can choose to walk in love, serving others, or we can choose to seek personal gain. We can choose to walk in wisdom or in foolishness. We can choose to walk in truth or in falsehood. We can choose to walk in the light or in the darkness. The last parallel in particular stresses the contrasting spheres of existence for the believer—walking in the light or walking in the darkness (1 John 1:6-7). These are the same realms Paul addressed: walking by the Spirit or walking by the flesh (Gal. 5:16-17). To walk in the flesh is to walk in darkness, and to walk in the light is to walk in the Spirit.

A Command Is an Opportunity

A biblical command is an opportunity. It is an opportunity to align one’s life with God’s Word and to experience fellowship with Him. When my daughter made her bed, she aligned herself with my desires, and we experienced fellowship with one another. There is the potential in each biblical command to experience fellowship with God by choosing to conform your behavior to His Word. On the other hand choosing poorly does not separate you from your positional standing with God, but it does impact your fellowship with Him.

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As discussed in the last chapter, the essence of God's desire is to "love God and love your neighbor." Doing the right thing God's way is His desire for us. The means of expression has changed over time, but there are numerous New Testament commands given by Jesus and His apostles that specify particulars about the essence of our responsibility toward God. However, if you do not find a command spelled out, just apply the "do-the-right-thing factor," and you will be just fine. Remember that you need not create extrabiblical laws, as is often done, to evaluate behavior. There are enough *truth and light* requirements in the Scriptures so that we are not left guessing. Paul explained in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

A Command Is Not a Guarantee

A biblical command is not a guarantee. There is no assurance of success. Unfortunately many infer that since the sufficiency and superiority of the Spirit overpowers the flesh, the believer somehow automatically and spontaneously walks by the Spirit.⁴ How can he do otherwise? Is not the flesh helpless to the Spirit? They assume the Spirit's power is initiating, activating, and accomplishing obedience in the life of the believer. As a result, the typical appeal, which guarantees that the believer victoriously walks in the Spirit, is founded on one of the following approaches.

First, the *command-promise approach*. This approach is based on the command "walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16), and the promise "If we ask anything according to His will...we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (1 John 5:14-15). This supposed victorious Christian walk is predicated on bad logic, and bad logic leads to bad theology. If the command is A and the promise is B, then A + B = C, and C is the victorious Christian life, walking in the Spirit.⁵ At least, that is the contention. However, in

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this case, $A + B \neq C$ biblically. It is true that A and B are biblical concepts, but you do not pray for something you are commanded to do. My daughter did not need to pray to see if she should make her bed, and we do not need to pray to determine if we should walk in the Spirit. This command-promise approach is lacking in logic and uses the Scriptures incorrectly.

Second, the *submission-presentation approach*. This approach is based on Romans 6:13 and 12:1. In light of all that God has done for us, we should yield and present our bodies as instruments of righteousness to God. The conclusion is that if this is done the believer will be walking in the Spirit. There are two alternatives presented in this approach. The “surrendered-life” option assumes the total passivity of the believer in regard to the control and power of God. The result is that God does with the believer as He wills. Their battle cry is “Let go and let God.” The second option varies only in that the surrender is not entirely passive and the believer is responsible, to some extent, to walk by the Spirit. However, both options involve submission or yielding to the Spirit’s truth and power.⁶ And you might ask, “What does that mean?” Their answer is that “Holy living does not come from *our* performance for God but from *His* performance through us by His own Spirit.”⁷ That sounds somewhat plausible, but what does that look like? Peeling off the layers, it becomes evident that it is the Spirit who is actually accomplishing the works through the believer. The believer may or not be completely passive in yielding, but he certainly is passive in the doing. In this view the Spirit causes and produces the behavior.⁸ This approach would surprise those Old Testament heroes mentioned in Hebrews 11, who chose to walk with God *without the Spirit*.⁹ Notice also that the appeal for believers to present their bodies in Romans 12:1 is followed with instructions on how to progress in the Christian life. Verse 2 is comprised of

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two commands: (1) “do not be conformed to this world” and (2) “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The picture painted by the apostle is to embrace God commands (James 1:21-25) in order to transform your life from the ways of the world to the ways of God (Rom. 12:2). Behavior is a choice, it is a change, and it is the actual everyday working out of God’s Word by the believer. As a result, the submission-presentation approach likewise is lacking scriptural support.

The extreme emphasis of the sufficiency and superiority of the Spirit that overpowers the flesh is the genesis of both approaches. But both approaches miss the analogies found in Galatians 5:16-17; 1 John 1:6-7; and Romans 12:2.

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If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:6-7).

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2).

These passages say nothing of the Spirit’s empowerment to insure spiritual success. Rather, there are two possible spheres of existence. There are two realities in which to walk—according to the flesh or according to the Spirit, in darkness or in the light, and

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in the ways of world or in the ways of God. In each instance the believer's behavior (step-by-step, event-by-event) is a volitional choice to conform to God's Word. He is assisted (not caused) by the Spirit to accomplish each task. Believers are to walk according to the Word with the assistance of the Spirit. This is not accomplished by some "special empowerment" that a person "plugs into" that energizes, activates, or compels the believer into the realm of the "victorious" Christian life.¹⁰ Any "getting-plugged-into" concept is foreign to the Scriptures. The Energizer Bunny is not the biblical, spiritual model.

The Walk of Faith

Some obviously object to believers choosing to work out their walk of faith in obedience to God. They claim obedience cannot be accomplished in the believer's own power or strength, but only in the power of the Spirit.¹¹ The basis of the statement is that the believer can only accomplish God's work in and through him by God's power.¹² This position can be explained only by a mystical experience in which "special empowerment" of the Spirit causes obedience. Even though they may speak of some level of cooperation between the Spirit and the believer, the issue is the extent of that cooperation. Their position essentially and consistently diminishes or eliminates the believer's participation and responsibility.

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Rather than an unbiblical distinction between whether man or the Spirit is the source of power, the issue is a biblical understanding of man's ability to choose. The point is not *who* is responsible for the believer's walk. Believers themselves are to walk in obedience.

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Rather, the point is *what* are the choices. What is the right thing to do? The choice determines which realm of existence the believer will experience. Choices lead to behavior resulting in a certain lifestyle. This behavior is, in fact, accomplished in cooperation with the Spirit. However, rather than a “special empowering” for living the Christian life, the Spirit’s role is assisting the believer in obeying God’s Word. This assistance is through the Spirit’s filling (Eph. 5:18), leading (Gal. 5:18), and teaching (1 John 2:27) ministry, using the Word of God.¹³ This then is the manner by which the believer “walks by the Spirit”—one choice at a time.

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Chapter 4, NOTES

1. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 429, 435.

Addressing Galatians 5:16-17, Fee writes, "There is not a hint in any of this that 'warfare' is going on in the human breast, which in effect leaves the believer in a state of helplessness (one *cannot* do what one wishes)." Rather, Fee indicates, "At issue, therefore, is not some internal tension in the present life of the individual believer, but the sufficiency of the Spirit for life without Torah—a sufficiency that enables them to live so as not to revert to their *former* life as pagans" (italics his).

2. A gnomic (customary) present tense is in view rather than a durative (progressive) present tense. The context concerns a timeless action (over-and-over repetition), rather than an actual action in progress.
3. In a discussion of whether Galatians 5:16 should be translated "walk by the Spirit" (instrumental dative) or "walk in the Spirit" (dative of sphere). Gordon Fee provides the following insight: "Although in the final analysis, and especially in light of the usage in v. 18, the formula is probably instrumental, I would argue for more of an overlap in Pauline usage than for rigid grammatical categories. That is, even though one is to walk by means of the Spirit, one does so because one is also to walk in the sphere of the Spirit, that is, in the arena of the Spirit's present life and activity" (*God's Empowering Presence*, 430).
4. See Note 1.
5. Teaching the command-promise approach, Campus Crusade for Christ reveals an incorrect use of the Scriptures, resulting in erroneous teaching [*How You Can Walk in the Spirit*, Transferable Concepts (www.transferableconcepts.com), 1-6]
6. John F. MacArthur, *Galatians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 153.
7. *Ibid.*, 152 (italics his).
8. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Backer, 1981), 254.

Addressing the believer's responsibility to live according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh in Romans 8:12-13, Hendriksen writes, "They have an obligation to perform; nevertheless, they cannot do this in their own power." If individuals cannot live the Christian life without the Spirit's power, then the Spirit's power is, in fact, the cause of obedience, producing obedience in and through the believer.

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9. Obviously New Testament believers enjoy advantages of the indwelling Spirit that never were available in the Old Testament. However, we must not overstate the Spirit's ministry to the exclusion of the believer's responsibility. The Spirit assists in obedience, but does not cause or produce obedience.
10. The following authors illustrate this "getting-plugged-into" concept in the Christian life:

Tony Evans, *The Promise* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 10-11.

Evans explains, "Only as we are empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit will we produce what our lives are supposed to produce." Further, he writes, "If we don't *get plugged in* to Him we will continue to experience defeat after defeat" (italics added).

J. Robertson McQuilkin (Keswick View), *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 167.

McQuilkin writes, "Faith *throws the switch*, releasing the current of divine power. Without faith there is no light, no power" (italics added).

Charles Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit Filled Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 66.

Stanley says, "Our part is simply *plug into* the new life that indwells us. We are to draw upon His life in us. How? By faith" (italics added).

11. The following pastor and authors illustrate this "power of the Spirit" concept in the Christian life:

Jim Kallam Jr., Senior Pastor, Church at Charlotte, illustrated this teaching during his July 30, 2006 sermon saying, "The Christian life is not in your own strength but in the *power* of the Spirit" (italics added).

Lewis Sperry Chafer, rev. by John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 193.

Chafer writes, "It [what a Christian does] is not undertaken in the energy of the flesh, but it is the outliving and manifestation of the *power* of the indwelling Spirit" (italics added).

Anthony A. Hoekema (Reformed View), *Five Views on Sanctification*, 70.

Hoekema explains, "This is most important for us to realize that sanctification is not something that we do by ourselves, with our own efforts and in our own strength. Sanctification is *not a human activity but a divine gift*" (italics added).

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12. See Note 8.
13. The assisting ministries of the Spirit are presented in detail in a companion book, *Free To Choose* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2011), 135-73.

