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Imposing Empowerment Expectations



RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Ezekiel 36:27

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.

Romans 12:2

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 Corinthians 3:18

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When identical results are required in woodworking, templates are made to reduce mistakes and ensure each piece conforms to every other piece. The template is the pattern, a predetermined and precut guide by which identical items are replicated. When laid on a board, the template allows the craftsman to quickly mark and cut every piece with precise conformity. Draftsmen likewise use templates for drawings. These are plastic or thin-metal sheets with different angles, circles, or holes punched out. When laid on paper, the draftsman selects the shape and size needed and marks the page with his pencil. In both uses, the template overlays an object and is used to ensure the uniformity from one item to the next.

Templates are a reliable means to accomplish particular projects. That is, if every item is to be identical. In the interpretation of Scripture, it has become a common approach or practice to infuse one idea or concept found in one text on all others. In fact the practice is to overlay a presupposed template on passages so that every text conforms to an original position or assumption. In this case, unwarranted uniformity leads to error.

Expectations from Ezekiel 36:37

How you interpret I will “cause you to walk in My statutes” in Ezekiel 36:27 can create a rippling effect when that interpretation is imposed on passages in the New Testament. Each of the major views addressed in the last chapter, *Power in Ezekiel 36:27*, will again be reviewed to understand the impact of this verse on particular passages in the New Testament.

Traditional Amillennial View

In support of the traditional amillennial position, proponents have intertwined three passages: Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; and Titus 3:5.¹ In doing so, the logic is as follows: (1) since the

Perspective #1
*The Spirit causes
 and accomplishes
 the renewing and
 the transforming
 of the believer.*

Spirit is in the business of *renewing* (“He saved us...by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5), and (2) since the Spirit is in the business of *transforming* (“But we all...are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18), and (3) since it is assumed that “a renewed mind is equal to having the Spirit,” then, when Paul taught “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2), the conclusion is that the work of the Spirit is then the primary emphasis in the Christian life. The Spirit causes and accomplishes the renewing and the transforming of the believer.

True, the Book of Romans addresses the Spirit’s ministry to the believer. Chapters 6–8 of Romans concern the Spirit in present sanctification and Romans 12:3-8 addresses the giftedness of the

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believer by the Spirit. However, much more than the work of the Spirit is involved in 12:1-2. Consider the key terms *renewing* and *transforming*, in light of their limited use in the New Testament.

Renewing is used only five times in the New Testament. Twice one verb form is used in reference to the continual renewal of the new man (2 Cor. 4:16; Col. 3:10). Twice the noun form is used regarding renewing the mind (Rom. 12:2) and the renewing by the Spirit at salvation (Titus 3:5). In Ephesians 4:23 another verb form (“to renew”) is used to refer to the renewing of the believer’s spirit (small ‘s’).

Titus 3:5 obviously addresses the solitary work of the Holy Spirit in salvation, where a person renewed in Christ as in 2 Corinthians 5:17 is in view. The remaining four passages, however, refer to the believer and his Christian walk. In fact, two are contained within the *putting-off* and *putting-on* theme found in Colossians 3:1-15 and Ephesians

4:22-25.² In the Colossians text, since believers have been made new in Christ and since the new inner man is continually being renewed, Paul commanded believers to put off (anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive speech, and lying) and to put on (compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing one another, forgiving one another, and love). The parallel Ephesians text echoes the Colossians text. Believers are commanded to refrain from doing certain things—making wrong choices that result in wrong behavior. At the same time, they are commanded to do other things—making right choices that result in right behavior. These texts do not say the Spirit is not involved in the walk of the believer. However, these verses indicate that every believer is to participate actively with the Spirit and to cooperate completely with Him.

These texts do indicate an active participation and total cooperation by the believer with the Spirit.

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Transforming also has limited use in the New Testament as well, being used only four times and each time in the verb form (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2; Rom. 12:2; and 2 Cor. 3:18). The two gospel occurrences refer to the transfiguration of Christ. The remaining two refer to the believer. Romans 12:2 teaches that the renewed mind is the agent of change and 2 Corinthians 3:18 (a very difficult passage to interpret) seems to imply that the Spirit is the agent of change. By the rules of interpretation, the clearer passage (Rom. 12:2) should be used to interpret the less clear passage (2 Cor. 3:18). Invariably, traditional amillennial proponents apply just the reverse, using 2 Corinthians 3:18 to interpret Romans 12:2. However, in reference to 2 Corinthians 3:18, George Ladd does not envision the Spirit as the transforming power.

However, it is not clear that Paul conceives of the indwelling of the Spirit as an inner spontaneous power that issues in gradual progress and growth in Christian virtues...in this passage the Spirit is *not the indwelling power* of the new life but is identified with the ascended, glorified Lord. The Christian's preoccupation with his exalted Lord will mean that he will be more and more conformed to the image of Christ.³

A passage outside the Pauline writings agrees with Ladd's assessment, not only providing insight to 2 Corinthians 3:18 but also clarity for a proper interpretation of Romans 12:2. James uses the identical mirror analogy as Paul used in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord." In a section concerning the Word and works (James 1:22-25), James stated that to intently look into the mirror of God's Word and to abide (making one's home in) results in being a doer of the Word. Likewise 2 Corinthians 3:18 pictures a believer who is exposed to Christ in a mirror and is progressively over time transformed into the likeness of the Lord. Even though the Spirit is mentioned only in the

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latter text (2 Cor. 3:18), we must conclude that James assumed the Spirit's assistance to the believer in *knowing the Word* and *keeping the Word*. In turn, it is wrong to conclude that choices and actions of believers are not in view in Romans 12:2. In fact the *first command* of Romans 12:2 is an instruction to not be conformed to the course of this world system, while the *second command* is an instruction to be transformed so that the will of God is proven through the believer's walk, not merely pursued intellectually. This rings a familiar tone to the *putting-off* and *putting-on* theme in Romans 13:12-14 and Colossians 3:1-15.

For the traditional amillennial position, only the inward transformation of the believer is all that is required in Romans 12:2, and that transformation is accomplished by the ministry of the Spirit, with the believer only *discerning* the will of God. Choices and actions are not the issue since it is God who causes and produces the perseverance of the believer in obedience to the end. This interpretation of Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 is consistent with the amillennial view, which is demanded from their "cause you to walk" interpretation of Ezekiel 36:27.⁴

Traditional Premillennial View

In support of their traditional premillennial position, proponents likewise turn to 2 Corinthians 3:18 to illustrate the effect of "*I will cause you to walk in My statutes*" (Ezek. 36:27).⁵ Again the Spirit is the One who transforms the believer as He enables and empowers the Christian walk.

As a result, their use of 2 Corinthians 3 to explain the Spirit's

Perspective #2
The Spirit transforms the believer as the Spirit enables and empowers the Christian walk.

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effect in transforming lives makes one ask the obvious question, “How is the traditional premillennial view any different from the traditional amillennial position?” Frankly, it is difficult to tell them apart. They use the same “*I will cause you to walk*” (Ezek. 36:27) passage linked to the same supposed New Testament life-transforming power passage (2 Cor. 3:18). Together, these passages supposedly provide the proof for the “special empowerment” to live the Christian life espoused by both positions.

Alternative Premillennial View

Both the traditional amillennial and the traditional premillennial views require the overlaying of the empowerment template (Acts 1:8) on other New Testament texts. This results from their interpretation of “*I will cause you to walk in My statutes*” (Ezek.

Perspective #3 36:27), requiring the Spirit’s “cause-you-to-walk” ministry to be *the* agent of change in both Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. On the other hand the alternative premillennial view does not require a “special empowering” of the Spirit to live the Christian life. In fact correctly understanding the use of “renewing” and “transforming” in 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Romans 12:2, as previously discussed, negates the

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“special empowerment” requirement. Rather, the alternative view properly envisions a cooperation of both the believer and the Spirit. Activity by the believer, rather than passivity, is the essence of the Christian life. The believer makes choices and takes actions under the influencing (voluntary filling, leading, and teaching) ministries of the Spirit.

Now the question must be asked, “How is the transformation

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of the believer in Romans 12:2 accomplished?” “How involved is the Spirit?” The answer lies not in some mystical empowerment with (1) the believer merely understanding the will of God and (2) behavioral modification being accomplished by the Spirit. Rather the answer involves knowing more of Christ through the Word and conforming to His image through obedience—a process of transformation from the ways of the world to the authority of God. It requires the active involvement of both the Spirit and the believer. This make-over process involves a struggle, a conflict within the believer who is pressed to continually choose between the influence of the Spirit over against the influence of the world or the flesh. The agents are the Word and the Spirit—voluntary submission to the Spirit’s filling, leading, teaching ministry by means of the Word of God. The biblical concept of the Spirit’s work in the believer’s life is not of one who mystically intervenes. Instead He is a Helper; not one who manipulates but a gentle Teacher, leading and instructing. The result is conformity to the will of God, evidencing itself in maturity and Christlikeness.

Both traditional views require the overlaying of the empowerment template (Acts 1:8) on other New Testament texts.

Conclusion

In woodworking every board in an entire project should not be cut to the same pattern. If so, you will never be able to finish the project. This fact applies equally to the Scriptures. Every context is not the same. Overlaying a predetermined template on every passage leads to error. When you hear the usual refrain “the Christian life cannot be lived in your own power, but only in the power of

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the Spirit,” you know a mold is being used to cut every passage to conform to the same pattern. However, the Spirit does not cause behavior in the Christian life; rather the believer by his own choice allows or restricts the Spirit’s influencing ministry.

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Chapter 11, NOTES

1. Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 602.

Fee is representative of the traditional amillennial position. He writes, "Scholars have regularly (and rightly) noted that the key phrase, 'be transformed by the renewing of the mind' denotes for Paul the particular work of the Spirit. First we noted on 1 Cor 2:16 and 7:40 that 'having the mind of Christ' and 'having the Spirit of God' are nearly interchangeable ideas, suggesting that to have a renewed mind is equal to having the Spirit. Moreover, the verb ἀνακαινῶω (lit. = 'make new again') is specifically attributed to the Spirit in Tit 3:5, an understanding that is surely presuppositional here, especially in a letter where life in Christ vis-à-vis Torah observance is described as 'in the newness of the Spirit' (7:6). Not only so, but the verb Paul uses regarding the renewed mind ('transformed') is found once elsewhere in the corpus (2 Cor 3:18) where the Spirit causes us to be 'transformed' into God's own likeness."

Continuing he says, "'Behavioral modification' is the aim of all this, to be sure, but it comes as the direct result of a radically renewed mind... brought about by the Holy Spirit.... As people of the Spirit whose minds have been renewed by the Spirit, they are now equipped to *discern* what God's will is" (italics added).

2. Chapter 2 addressed the responsibility of the believer in the *putting-off* and *putting-on* theme found in Colossians 3:1-15 and Ephesians 4:22-25.
3. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 518 (italics added).
4. Examples of authors who connect "cause you to walk" in Ezekiel 36:27 with obedience in the Christian life are the following:

Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism, Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 89.

Mathison writes, "The same Holy Spirit who writes the law on our hearts also indwells and gives us the power to obey it (Ezek. 36:27). We fulfill the law to the extent that we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4)." The author's contention is that the believer is incapable of obeying the Law without the Spirit, and the Christian is unable to obey without some "special empowering" of the Spirit.

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John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991), 147.

Piper says, “God does not merely command obedience, *he gives it*” (italics added). Then, for support, he cites, “I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes’ (Ezekiel 36:27; 11:20; see also Hebrews 13:20; Philippians 2:13).” Obviously the author’s contention is to correlate “God working in you” (Phil 2:13) and “cause you to walk” (Ezek. 36:27) with “he gives it [obedience].”

Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, pp. 453-454.

Fee explains, “The need of Torah...has come to end with the advent of the Spirit, God’s way of fulfilling his promised new covenant. This is Torah being etched on the heart, so that God’s people will obey him (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:27). Here also is the clear evidence that for Paul the elimination of Torah does not mean the end of righteousness. On the contrary, the Spirit *produces* the real thing, the righteousness of God himself, as his children reflect his likeness in their lives together and in the world. The author’s contention is that the Spirit is the energizer and producer of the believer’s obedience” (italics added).

John F. MacArthur, *Galatians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 152.

MacArthur writes, “Holy living does not come from *our* performance for God but from *His* performance through us by His own Spirit” (italics his). Obviously his contention is that the Spirit produces obedience in the believer’s life.

Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 915.

Fee says, “Their [Paul and the early churches] experience of the outpoured Spirit caused them to turn...to the books God had inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16). There Paul discovered that he and the newly constituted people of God had been written about beforehand; there was the promise of the eschatological Spirit, who would reveal, reinstate prophecy, bring in a new covenant, and *cause* God’s people to walk in his ways...The lavish outpouring of the Spirit on him and his churches was evidence for Paul that the End had begun” (italics added). Again this author indicates that not only is the Spirit the producer of the believer’s walk, but also the Spirit is the actual cause of that walk.

These authors connect “God causes obedience” in the Christian life with Ezekiel 36:27. This connection is the only conclusion to be reached from their teachings—*God causes obedience in and through the believer.*

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5. The following is a representative of the traditional premillennial position, which relates “cause you to walk” in Ezekiel 36:27 with obedience in the Christian life.

Bruce A. Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 88-89.

Ware explains, “The superior glory of the new covenant is seen in its transforming *power to enable* its covenant participants to live increasingly righteous lives through the Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 it is the Spirit who accomplishes our transformation into the likeness of Christ, from one degree of glory to another. It seems that Paul has combined in his thinking the new-covenant promise of Jeremiah 31 (see 2 Cor. 3:6, where the “new covenant” is used) with the promise of the coming Spirit from Ezekiel 36, for it is clearly the ministry of the Spirit that enlivens and *empowers* the new covenant’s effectiveness” (italics added).

In connecting Ezekiel 36:27 with 2 Corinthians 3:18, this view does not envision the Spirit “causing” obedience in the believer. Rather, an “enabling” is typically considered the appropriate wording. In reality, the ultimate concept is the action associated with the Spirit’s ministry. Whether is it called “causing” or “enabling,” the Spirit’s ministry is the same.

