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Power in Ezekiel 36:27



*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

Power in Ezekiel 36:27

Urban legends are unsubstantiated information passed on as fact. They are allegedly from a “trustworthy” source, usually a friend of a friend. Repeated over and over, the information is assumed to be true. You have probably heard of the *alligators in the sewers* of New York. Purchased as pets on Florida vacations, they are released into the sewers. Supposedly they are numerous and enormous. Over time, this became increasingly well known and accepted as fact. However, “well known” and “true” do not necessarily correlate. This is the stuff that creates and establishes myths, folklore, and urban legends—well known and assumed true, but unsubstantiated.

As discussed in chapter 9, *Prophecy and Power*, there are many good-intentioned people who hold different views regarding future things (eschatology). These people are “trustworthy” sources, usually a pastor, seminary professor, or radio/television Bible teacher. Each one supports his view from the selfsame source—the Bible. That is the difference between an urban legend and biblical teaching. The latter is based supposedly on truth. Since a Bible passage can have only one correct interpretation, all opposing views cannot be true but

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are nevertheless passed on as such. Repeated over and over again, a particular teaching is increasingly assumed to be absolutely reliable. However, once again, “well known” and “true” do not necessarily correlate.

One area in which there are differing opinions is in the interpretation of biblical passages regarding the fulfillment of the Ezekiel 36:27 prophecy. In particular, the point of this chapter concerns the Spirit and expectations for empowerment in the life of the believer of Jesus Christ.

The Traditional Amillennial View

If one is consistent with the traditional amillennial view’s historical progression (see chapter 9), the *logical conclusion* for New Testament believers is predictable. Consider the following

Perspective #1
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progression of thought: (1) since the Spirit empowers believers for an obedient walk (Acts 1:8), and (2) since the Spirit “causes” believers to obey (Ezek. 36:27), and (3) since believers are to obey, the *inevitable conclusion* is that believers are *caused to walk in obedience* through the Spirit’s empowerment.¹ Since the Spirit came as promised and indwells each believer, the traditional amillennial view understands

that the indwelling Spirit *causes* the believer to walk obediently according to God’s Word.² The Spirit is, then, the energizing agent of God in and through the believer. This is the one and only *logical conclusion*.

Universally this view implies and teaches that New Testament believers cannot obey God without the Spirit’s empowerment. In fact the Spirit’s intervention is required. Invariably the appeal is

to the phrase “cause you to walk in My statutes” (Ezek. 36:27) to validate a “special empowering” of the Spirit. Aligning himself with this point of view, one proponent writes, “God does not merely command obedience, *he gives it.*”³ Then, for support, that author quotes, “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).”⁴ The contention is to correlate “God who is at work in you” (Phil 2:13) and “cause you to walk” (Ezek. 36:27) with “He gives it.” This view says that God is the source, the cause, the One who actually accomplishes the believer’s walk. God is the One who gives and produces obedience. This is the only logical result of overlaying and superimposing the empowerment template of Acts 1:8 on each and every passage addressing the Christian life. Also consistently imposing a predetermined interpretation of Ezekiel 36:27 and Acts 1:8 on other passages is also the basis for teaching the perseverance of the saints.

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If the Spirit’s “special empowerment” currently *causes* those in the church to live lives of obedience, what is the *logical extension* back into the Old Testament? One spokesman provides perspective when he says, “The old covenant failed because it was not accompanied by a giving of the Spirit to the people who received the Law.”⁵ Isn’t his point that Old Testament saints were impotent to keep the Law? This logical conclusion is based on an interpretive assumption that the empowering Spirit now, and only now, permits or causes obedience in the ways of God.⁶ However, Old Testament saints could obey the old covenant Law. This fact significantly diminishes the validity of the Spirit’s “special empowerment” being required to live

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the Christian life. This is particularly evident in the fact that some Old Testament saints seemed to walk as obediently, if not more so, as believers walk today. In fact, the list of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11 yields a “great crowd of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1), who walked by faith without the Spirit.

As previously noted, the Law was given to reveal what God demanded from His people to actually live in fellowship with Him. The Law was never to establish a relationship or union with God,

Choices, not the Spirit, were the means of walking in fellowship with God in the Old Testament.

but to sustain fellowship or communion. Only Christ, the ultimate sacrifice, resolved the sin problem; the Law revealed God’s requirements to those who previously looked forward to God’s provision. They were to walk in obedience even without the Holy Spirit. They could experience fellowship with God since they already possessed a relationship with Him. Choices, not the Spirit, were the means of walking in fellowship with God in

the Old Testament. Indeed, choices remain the means of walking in fellowship with God in the New Testament, albeit the *influencing ministry* of the Spirit is obviously beneficial to the believer’s faithful walk in obedience. However, this influencing ministry is distinguished from the traditional amillennial view, which requires the Spirit’s intervention to ensure obedience to God’s Word.

The Traditional Premillennial View

To be consistent with following the traditional premillennial view (see chapter 9) to its *logical conclusion* for New Testament believers also becomes predictable. Consider the progression of

thought: (1) since the Spirit empowers believers for an obedient walk from Acts 1:8, and (2) since the Spirit “enables” believers to obey from Ezekiel 36:27, and (3) since believers are to obey, the *inevitable result* is that believers are *enabled to walk in obedience* by the Spirit’s empowerment.

Proponents of the traditional premillennial view understand that the New Covenant is the development of the blessing portion of the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant will be completely fulfilled when the regathered Jewish remnant is blessed with a new heart, restored in Israel, the land God promised to Abraham, with Christ the King reigning on the earth. The New Covenant, promised in the Old Testament (Jer. 31; Ezek. 36; Joel 2), instituted at Christ’s death (Matt. 26; 1 Cor. 11), and initiated at Pentecost by the Spirit (Acts 2), will be completely fulfilled at the return of Christ. Summarizing, the premillennial position envisions God’s future work with the nation of Israel during a 1,000-year earthly reign of Christ, when God will cause national Israel to walk obediently, based on Ezekiel 36:27. Currently, the church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, is the recipient of the blessing portion of the Abrahamic Covenant. As such, with the initiation of the New Covenant in Acts 2, traditional premillenniumists say that “I will put My Spirit within you and [*I will enable*] you to walk in My statutes” (Ezek. 36:27) refers to the present *enablement* by God to walk obediently.

Perspective #2
Believers are enabled to walk in obedience by the Spirit’s empowerment.

This view understands that every believer presently participates in the blessing portion of the Abrahamic Covenant. However, complete fulfillment of God’s promises with national Israel remains in the future. One supporter of this position states that “*all* those in

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the community of faith participate in that covenant's eschatological power and blessings, and Acts 2 makes it clear that this feature has now begun to be realized."⁷ Continuing he writes,

The fulfillment of God's new covenant thus should not be viewed as an all-or-nothing affair. Rather, it is best seen as partially realized now (spiritual aspects of forgiveness and the indwelling Spirit for all covenant participants) and later to be realized in its completeness (when all Israel is saved and restored to its land).⁸

Since the Spirit has come as promised and is within each believer, advocates of this view believe that the indwelling Spirit *enables* and/ or *empowers* the believer to walk in obedience to God's desires. A spokesman writes,

At the present...the struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil goes on, but it does so with the resources of new-covenant provision *to enable* holiness and obedience not possible prior to the coming of Christ and the sending of the Spirit.⁹

The believer is transformed by the Spirit and empowered for obedience.¹⁰ As a result, the Spirit gives power to the believer, making it possible to obediently conform to God's Word—the *logical conclusion*.

As with the traditional amillennial view, traditional premillennialists universally imply and teach that New Testament believers cannot obey God without the Spirit's intervention and empowerment. This conclusion again is based on a faulty interpretive assumption that the empowering Spirit now, and only now, permits and enables obedience to the Word of God.¹¹ Since Old Testament saints, in fact, could obey the old covenant Law, the *logical extension* back into the Old Testament again significantly diminishes the validity of the

Spirit's "special empowerment" in order to live the Christian life today. Again, the argument of Hebrews 11 is that Old Testament saints were expected to walk by faith without the Spirit.

Advocates of the traditional premillennial view say that believers can presently obey the Word of God since they have been transformed by the indwelling Spirit and are empowered to obey. This is the partial fulfillment of Ezekiel 36:27; the complete fulfillment awaits Christ's return to establish the millennial kingdom. Nevertheless, as with the previous view, this outlook fails to explain just how the Spirit works today to bring about obedience in the life of a believer. *What exactly does that dynamic look like? The Spirit does this mystical work, but how?* The only logical conclusion is that, even though the traditional premillennial view envi-

In reality both traditional views merge requiring an overlaying of the empowerment template of Acts 1:8.

sions an *enablement to obey* as contrasted with the *caused to obey* of the traditional amillennial view, *in reality both concepts merge* requiring an overlaying of the empowerment template (Acts 1:8) on Scriptures that pertain to the Christian life.

An Alternative Premillennial View

The alternative premillennial view's historical progression is identical to that of the preceding view (see chapter 9). However, the ministry of the Spirit is understood entirely differently. Consider the following line of thought: (1) since the Spirit does *not* empower believers for an obedient walk (Acts 1:8), and (2) since the Spirit does *not* "cause" or "enable" believers to obey (Ezek. 36:27), and

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(3) since believers are to obey, the *inevitable conclusion* is that believers can walk in obedience *without* a “special empowerment” of the Spirit.

Differing from both traditional views, the alternative premillennial view does not require a “special empowerment” for the believer to live according to God’s Word. Also this view does not envision the fulfillment of “I will cause you to walk in My statutes”

Perspective #3
Believers can
walk in obedience
without a “special
empowerment” of
the Spirit.

(Ezek. 36:27) to occur in any form before the establishment of the earthly millennial reign of Christ after His return.

The first reaction to this suggestion may be, “Man is doing it all! It is all the work of man to live the Christian life!” Nothing could be further from the truth! The obedient walk of the believer is based upon a new standing with God (2 Cor. 5:17). Believers are to respond to

God out of gratitude for His gracious work 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.¹² However, He already has provided everything required for obedience on our part (regenerating, indwelling, baptizing, sealing). We participate in cooperation with Him. He has made us new people and He has provided the Spirit to voluntarily fill, lead, and teach. *Influencing* is entirely different from *empowering*.

Believers are to walk in obedience without (1) “special empowerment” of Acts 1:8 and (2) “causation” or “enablement” from Ezekiel 36:27, but the *logical extension* of the alternative premillennial view to the Old Testament shows that the Law *could have been obeyed* (obviously not completely and certainly not for initial

salvation) without the indwelling Spirit. One only needs to review the many occasions when Old Testament saints walked in God's ways apart from any "special endowment" of the Spirit. They were not helpless to observe His ways and their obedience obviously was not in letter only, but from the heart, out of gratitude, as intended by God and the Torah.

Conclusion

The variation between each of these three eschatological views is the extent of the Spirit's New Covenant ministry—currently and in the future. For the *traditional amillennial view*, the future is now, with all the prophecies for Israel being fulfilled today by the church. With an energizing empowerment, the *Spirit causes obedience*.¹³ The two premillennial views look forward to a future restoration of national Israel during the 1,000-year reign of Christ. The *traditional premillennial view*, however, also sees an energizing empowerment that *enables* the believer's obedience in partial fulfillment of the Spirit's promised ministry from the Old Testament. Differing from both former approaches, the *alternative premillennial view* does not envision a "special" empowerment that requires the Spirit's intervention to ensure obedience to God's Word. Rather, the New Covenant ministry regarding the walk of the believer is one in which *the Helper* is available to *influence obedient choices* in which the Spirit is allowed to voluntarily fill, lead, and teach the believer.

Since Old Testament saints could obey without the Spirit, the extent of the Spirit's ministry, not the availability of it, is the issue relating to the New Testament Christian. The Spirit's empowerment for ministry and giftedness should not be confused with this issue.

Heart of the Issue
*Is it an energizing
or an influencing
ministry?*

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Here lies the heart of the issue in regard to the Spirit's ministry. Is it an *energizing* or an *influencing ministry*? This author believes the latter is the correct interpretation. The *question is not whether the believer's work is in his own power or in the power of the Spirit*. That distinction is a "religious myth." The issue is the believer's walk, based on right choices, as the Spirit is allowed to influence and affect those decisions.

Chapter 10, NOTES

1. In his extensive work, *God's Empowering Presence*, Gordon Fee remains consistent with his traditional amillennial view and argues that the church is spiritual Israel, requiring no further fulfillment of any promises of God with the nation of Israel in the future. From that perspective, he declares that the "Spirit...will enable his people to follow his decrees (Ezek 36:27)" (Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994], 843) and "because the promised Spirit of the new covenant has come...God's people will be moved to obey him (Ezek. 36:27)" (Ibid., 306). Further, Fee indicates the promised Spirit is "the key factor to make 'the obedience of the heart' a possibility" (Ibid., 492).
2. 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: 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)." Obviously, the author's contention is an incapability of obeying the Law without the Spirit and, therefore, the inability of obedience in the Christian life without some "special empowering" of the Spirit.

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

Piper says, "God does not merely command obedience, *he gives it*" (italic added). Then, for support, he writes, "'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*, 453-54.

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. Obviously, the author's contention is that the Spirit is the energizer and producer of the believer's obedience" (italics added).

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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, the author’s 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 church’s] experience of the out-poured 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 now indicates that not only is the Spirit the producer of the believer’s walk, but the Spirit is the actual cause of that walk.

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

3. Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 147 (italics added).
4. Ibid.
5. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 510.
6. The following individuals from this perspective say the following about the old and new covenants:

Greg L. Bahnsen, *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 102-3.

Bahnsen writes, “The old covenant law...could not grant the internal ability to comply with those demands. By contrast, the new covenant...communicates life and righteousness, giving the *power to obey* God’s commandments” (italics his).

Mathison, *Dispensationalism, Rightly Dividing the People of God?* 89-90.

Mathison explains, “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 difference is that under the old covenant administra-

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tion, the law was external and man was *unable to keep* it. Under the new covenant administration, the law is written on believers' hearts and the indwelling Holy Spirit *empowers* them toward a more mature obedience than their old covenant forebears" (italics added).

Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 305-6.

Fee says, "The essential contrast between letter and Spirit...is between the Law as demand for obedience but unaccompanied by the *empowering* of the Spirit and the coming of the Spirit who makes Law in the former sense obsolete, since what the Law requires is now written on the heart" (italics added).

7. 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), 87 (italics his).
8. *Ibid.*, 95.
9. *Ibid.*, (italics added).
10. *Ibid.*, 89.
11. The following individuals from this perspective say the following about the old and new covenants:

Ware, "The New Covenant and the People(s) of God," 89.

In his discussion of Romans 8:2-4, Ware says, "Paul is affirming the simple fact that the law, though it is holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12), cannot enable anyone to keep it. *Empowerment* for keeping the law comes by the Spirit" (italics added).

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1964), 74-75.

Chafer writes, "The new life...is to be lived by the *enabling power* of the indwelling Spirit...no help was ever provided under the law... under grace it is provided...This fact that the *enablement* for daily life is provided in one case and is not provided in the other is the...most important distinction between law and grace" (italics added).

12. Chapters 2-5 addressed the responsibility of the believer in the Christian life to choose obedience, being assisted by the Spirit's influencing ministries.
13. Examples of authors who connect "cause you to walk" in Ezekiel 36:27 with obedience in the Christian life are found in Note 2 above.

