

Spirit and Flesh: An Allegory, No. 1

In various ways throughout Bible history God has manifested himself to his people. In the beginning of new covenant records, he became a man born of Mary. He was to be called Emmanuel which means ‘*God with us*’ (Matt: 1:23). “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*” (John 1:14). When Philip asked to be shown the Father, Jesus explained, “*He who has seen me has seen the Father ... Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me*” (John 14:8-10). Man cannot see God who is Spirit, so he took visible form in the flesh to manifest himself. Because of this mutual identity, John could say, “*We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father*” (John 1:14). “*He was manifested in the flesh ... taken up in glory*” (1 Tim. 3:10).

When the time approached for him to be taken up in glory, Jesus prepared his disciples who were so slow to understand for his leaving. They were not to be left alone. God manifested in flesh was about to leave them. But God would manifest himself through both observable demonstrations and less evident gifts of his Holy Spirit. Whereas God had exercised himself with Israel particularly, Joel foretold a time when their present system would be replaced by a new one (Joel 2). In apocalyptic imagery Joel spoke of the “last days” when God would manifest himself to “all flesh,” not meaning every human being but to Israel and the Gentiles as well. This would be by the outpouring of his Spirit in empowering and overseeing this covenantal change. We have erred in interpreting the “last days” to mean the “last dispensation” which would include us presently. It was the last days of Judaism when the earthly kingdom would give way to the spiritual kingdom.

We err also if we think the works of the Holy Spirit were confined to new covenant history. God’s presence has always been with those who serve him. In former times, however, God was dealing more particularly with a race of people and an earthly kingdom. Jesus, the son of David, would inaugurate and rule over a spiritual kingdom. So the manifestation of the Spirit of God was vital in authenticating the replacement of the physical with the spiritual. In the former, a person’s relationship with God was more racial but in the latter individuals would have spiritual relationship with deity.

In accomplishing this great change, the apostles were given special empowering, demonstrative gifts. While having Jesus’ teachings brought to their remembrance, by inspiration and revelation they were guided into all truth, being given the “Spirit of truth.” Miraculous demonstrations would bear witness, giving authentication. Through the message of the Spirit, people would be convinced / convicted. These purposes and functions were accomplished. No one has such gifts today, nor do we need them.

What of us today? Whether we receive “the gift of the Holy Spirit” or “the baptism of the Holy Spirit,” or both, is a continued debate which is mostly a matter of semantics. If any have the empowering demonstrative gifts like the apostles received, they would be demonstrated clearly like they were by the apostles. We must not appropriate the promise given the apostles to ourselves. Paul (in Romans 8) gives insights into the spiritual relationships that apply to all disciples. Though much more is revealed in the epistles, this chapter gives general coverage.

The overlay of this chapter is allegoric reminiscent of his allegory in Galatians 4:21-31. In it Paul lets “flesh” represent both the former relationship through law and flesh, and more literally, the problem of earthly man whose path leads only to death. He lets “spirit” represent the new relationship which frees us from sin and death. Hear him: “*For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death*” (v. 2). The law was a code with no saving power; the law of the spirit is not a code but a rule / principle of grace through faith which gives life.

Paul explained, “*But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you*” (8: 9-11) Paul was saying they were no longer of the fleshly kingdom but the spiritual, even as Jesus taught Nicodemus.

The indwelling gift of the Spirit is a clear promise even though Paul does not state when it is received or how we will know we have received it. Peter offered two promises simultaneously at the time of baptism in water on Pentecost, that is, the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). If that is not the time of its reception, at what point could you define it?

Notice that Paul uses “the Spirit of God” and “the Spirit of Christ” interchangeably in this chapter but does not use the term “the Holy Spirit.” Jesus was God manifested in the flesh, was raised up in Spirit, and ascended into heaven (1 Tim. 3:16). God also manifested himself in Spirit – his “holy Spirit,” the “Holy Spirit.” Paul is saying that the essence of the One God is in us.

Looking at the whole picture, God, Christ, and the Spirit live in us and we live in them. In reality, deity is omnipresent. If so, the pagan and atheist are as close and permeated with God as the believer is. But we are not speaking in terms of locative prepositions. Is the indwelling in our brain, our blood-pumping heart, or our entire body? Or is it not our constant consciousness of God? Spirit is not in places but in essence and relationship. The essence and character of divinity are the character of the disciple. We are in the image of God sharing his nature.

This is not felt physically or emotionally. It does not surge and subside according to our emotions. It is a way of life. We hear and sing prayers for a new anointing, a rekindling of the fire within us, and a restoring of the power within us. Do we mean that the Spirit leaves us, dissipates, or grows inattentive? Or does it not indicate that the supplicant has become low emotionally, has weakened in faith, or has grown less attentive and conscious of God in his or her life? It is we, rather than God, who are unstable and capricious. This would argue against the total sovereignty of God ruling our lives.

Again, Paul assured, “*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God*” (8:14). The Spirit does not make us sons of God but was given as a result of our becoming sons of God as Paul states, “*And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’*” (Gal. 4:6).

We do not want a teacher to introduce confusing questions, but I see that as calling upon the reader to involve new factors for consideration in future studies. So I ask whether the term “son” of God always refers to one born again spiritually. And does “pneuma” mean “spirit” or “Spirit”? And where the article A or THE is not in the original, should we translate it “a spirit” or “The Spirit”? In this chapter Paul gives us a good text for applying such a study, *“For all who are led by THE SPIRIT of God are SONS OF GOD. You did not receive THE SPIRIT OF SLAVERY to fall back into fear, but you have received THE SPIRIT of SONSHIP. When we cry ‘Abba! Father’ it is THE SPIRIT himself bearing witness with OUR SPIRIT that we are CHILDREN OF GOD”* (v. 14-16). Both the words “spirit” and “children / sons” are used with different meanings. In other references we read of the spirit of error, the spirit of adoption, the spirit of fear, the spirit of meekness, the spirit of jealousy, and the spirit of glory. Various persons were called children of Abraham, children of the free woman, children of light, sons of the evil one, sons of the kingdom, sons of darkness, sons of disobedience, sons of the world, and sons of those who murdered the prophets.

The identification of persons as sons or children was metaphorical. Persons were said to be sons of or children of a person or thing when they displayed the nature or character of that person or thing. It is for us to interpret these figures of speech according to context. This chapter offers such a setting. I have never read a study of this nature. Maybe that means that I should leave it alone. After all, who am I to claim discovery of truths the learned have overlooked?

Is it out of harmony to suggest that Paul’s contrast is between a fleshly covenant with a race administered by law through Moses and a spiritual covenant with individuals ministered through the Holy Spirit dispensing grace? One is represented by the flesh; the other by the spirit. The NIV blurs this by interpreting “flesh” as “sinful nature.”

In Verses 18-25, Paul envisions the whole theocratic kingdom with all its appurtenances groaning and straining to be set free from its futile bondage. *“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together UNTIL NOW.”* Travail until the “birth” of what? The birth of the new creation -- those who would receive redemption at the imminent return of the Lord along with the firstfruits. The “hope of Israel” was for resurrection. At Jesus’ return, their mortal bodies (flesh) was changed to the immortal. It would be when the new heaven and new earth, the new Jerusalem, would be seen coming down from God out of heaven at the “parousia,” the coming of the Lord. God would then make his dwelling with men. It was for this that the Holy Spirit was preparing them. The Spirit had taken on the groaning of the old system and was interceding to bring into reality what they did not even understand how to pray for intelligibly. With the destruction of Jerusalem and all it represented, “the fleshly” would be superseded by “the spiritual.” The allegoric double meanings would then be fulfilled.

We will hope to continue from this point next time. []

(Cecil Hook; March 2004)

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