

Peninsula City Church

The Letter to the Galatians

The Holy Spirit

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The Letter to the Galatians: The Holy Spirit

An Introduction

Q. How are we to understand living in the freedom of the Holy Spirit?

Paul wrote the Letter to the church in Galatia to challenge the local churches regarding some wrong teachings they had heard. Some false teachers had snuck in amongst them and said that they needed Jesus Christ for new spiritual life plus circumcision, amongst other things (Gal 2:3-5). So, they had taught that it was not merely a life in the Spirit but also one of keeping the Law. Paul was not pleased with this and wrote to them.

The Big Idea: Paul aimed to communicate to the Galatians that spiritual living is not based on keeping the Law but rather on the influence of the Holy Spirit.

As Jacob pointed out last week, they were not to receive this new life and then try to live under the Law and in the freedom of the Spirit. We need to remember that Paul wanted the Galatians to recall that due to their new life in the Holy Spirit, they were already free and children of the Father through Jesus Christ. That is, their reality was they already had the status of being free in Jesus Christ. That is why he declared that,

¹ “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery... ¹³ For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal 5:1,13 NASB).

Paul aimed to communicate to the Galatians that spiritual birth and then living was not based on keeping the Law but rather on the influence of the Holy Spirit.¹ They were to remain firm, stand in the freedom they had already received, and not try to keep the Law. He pointed out that the only law still relevant is the ‘law of love,’ in which the Law of Moses has been fulfilled.

“For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Gal 5:14 NASB).

James, in his Letter, called it the “royal law” Jas 2:8, and the “law of freedom,” or “the law that sets you free” Jas 2:12. So, trying to keep the Law of Moses in human strength only cultivates the lust of the flesh with all of its fruit or doing your own thing (the sin of antinomianism)² (Gal 5:13–21). Instead, they were to live in the power of the Spirit, bearing spiritual and God-glorifying fruit (Gal 5:22–26).³ So, next, we will review what Paul had to say regarding the Spirit. So, here in this paper, we will look at three things:

1. What does Paul say about the miracle of the new spiritual birth?
2. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit works in every Christ follower?
3. How can there be victory over sin and self?

¹ Easley, Kendell H. *Holman Quick Source: Guide to Understanding the Bible*. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2002), 292.

² “The word antinomianism comes from two Greek words, anti, meaning ‘against,’ and nomos, meaning ‘law.’ Antinomianism means “against the law.” Theologically, antinomianism is the belief that there are no moral laws God expects Christians to obey. Antinomianism takes a biblical teaching to an unbiblical conclusion. The biblical teaching is that Christians are not required to observe the Old Testament Law as a means of salvation. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He fulfilled the Old Testament Law (Rom 10:4; Gal 3:23-25; Eph 2:15). The unbiblical conclusion is that there is no moral law God expects Christians to obey.” “Antinomianism.” <http://www.gotquestions.org/antinomianism.html> (26th February 2024).

³ Tenney, Merrill C. *Galatians: The Charter of Christian Liberty*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 165-185. Cf. also the contrast in the letter of the Spirit and the flesh (Gal 4:29; 5:16, 19-22; 6:8).

1. What does Paul say about the miracle of the new spiritual birth?

Q. Why did Paul feel the need to deal with this matter with the Galatians?

In the Letter to the Galatians, he felt the need to set things right due to the wrong teaching on receiving a new birth. He pointed out that the Holy Spirit is the one who gives new spiritual life, not attempting to keep the Law of Moses. Paul mentioned this divine person of the Holy Spirit sixteen times between chapters three and six. (**See Appendix**). The Holy Spirit is a real and divine Person within the Godhead for Paul. It is important to emphasise this, as some have thought of Him merely as a great power or influence over the last two thousand years. Possibly, it was due to verses such as Acts 1:8 (amongst others) being taken out of context, which speak of His power.

“But you shall 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 NASB).

However, rest assured that He is a real divine Person. In the Bible, He is spoken of repeatedly as ‘He,’ ‘Him,’ ‘His,’ and in our English Bibles. In addition, His title of Spirit is always given a capital ‘S’. He is also described as doing things only a person could do.⁴

So, when did Paul teach that the Holy Spirit enters a person? It was when they believed they received a new spiritual life and became a child of God. The theme of the Letter to the Galatians is that a person gets a new spiritual life through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. A miracle took place the moment they believed in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit connected with their spirit, and they received a new life at that very moment. Paul taught the Galatians about the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. The following is some of the truth that he taught them. We learn this from Gal 4:29 that,

“But as at that time, they who were born according to the flesh persecuted them who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also” (Gal 4:29 NASB).

Notice the contrasting phrases, “born according to the flesh ...” and “born according to the Spirit.” Paul was not the only one to teach about this truth; also see John’s Gospel—for example, Jn 3:3-7, and particularly vv5-6.

³ “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, they cannot see the Kingdom of God...’ ⁵ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn 3:3,5 NASB).

Paul pointed out here that the miracle of the new spiritual birth is the sovereign work that can only be done by the Holy Spirit. A person can never earn or make themselves spiritually alive. They cannot place themselves within the family of God and make themselves Christ-followers. It is solely the work of the Holy Spirit when one believes in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is when they receive Him as their Saviour (or deliverer) that they are born of God, born again, and we become members of God’s family, consult Jn 1:12-13,

² “But as many as received (*once and for all*) Him, to them He gave the right (*exousia, power of choice, liberty of doing as one pleases*) to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of any person, but of God” (Jn 1:12-13 NASB).

⁴ Read the references to the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John, chapters 14, 15 and 16, and notice the indications of personality, which are shown in the things that He does. The Holy Spirit is not only a real Person; He is a divine Person, He is God, the third Person in the Godhead. This does not mean that He is of lesser importance than God the Father and God the Son, but He is third in order, or in succession. A reference to Matt 3:16-17; 28:19; Acts 5:3-4; 2 Cor 3:17 and 13:14; and a comparison between Ex 17:2-7 and Heb 3:7-9, make it clear that the Holy Spirit is God.

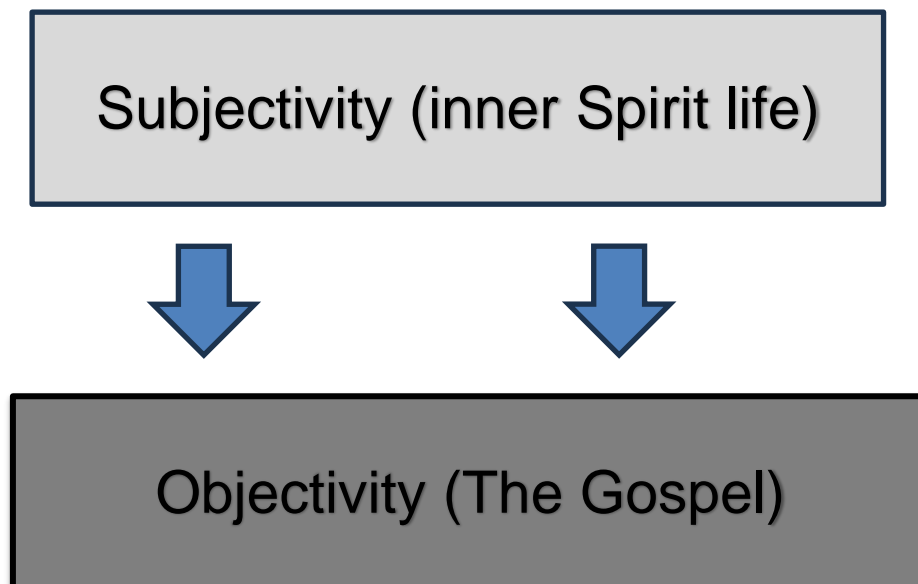
2. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit works in every Christ follower?

Q. What did Paul have to say about their new identity?

However, for the Galatians (as for many believers), the battle after they receive their new life can be understanding their new identity. Namely, to see themselves as spiritual children of God empowered as rulers of the Kingdom of heaven here on earth. They need to grasp the truth that Jesus had crucified their old life (Gal 2:20). However, for many, it was hard to abandon any old self-perceptions. As with the Galatians, Christ-followers today can also struggle to live in light of their new identity in the power of the Spirit. It is a new way to see themselves, but a problem can arise when they try to deal with living this new life on their terms. There can be a shift to try to live under the flesh again and reject grace. Paul was attempting to help them see that they were children of God since they had already been justified in Christ Jesus. The primary attack by Satan is in the mind to keep Christ-followers striving to keep the law, to try to have success, etc. But they all needed to open their eyes to who God is, what He has already done through Jesus Christ and who they already were in Jesus Christ. They needed to stand on the truth of the Gospel that it has all been one through Jesus Christ. Positive or negative feelings are always subjective and need a firm foundation. It could be said then that,

“Objectively (the freely given Gospel) and subjectively (the inner life of feelings and experience), then, Galatians is the charter of freedom from externalism in worship and from frustration in personal spiritual life. As the Lord Jesus Himself said: ‘If you abide in My Word (faith in the revelation), then are you truly My disciples; and you shall know (experience) the truth (objective theology), and the truth shall make you free (subjective experience).’”⁵

See the following illustration to explain how the experiences of life are always to be built on the Gospel (Word of God),



Paul asked a rhetorical question in Galatians 3:2, which implied that all the Christ-followers within the church at Galatia had received the Holy Spirit. How had they received Him, and when? It was through hearing the Gospel and responding in faith. That is, it was at the moment they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit came to live within them forever.

⁵ Tenney, *Galatians*, 19

“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?” (Gal 3:2 NASB).

The Holy Spirit lives within every Christ-follower as His temple. The fact of this truth has been spoken about elsewhere. To see this, look up the following Scriptures that make this very clear: (1) Jn 7:37-39; (2) Jn 14:16-17; (3) Rom 5:5; (4) Rom 8:9; (5) 1 Cor 6:19; (6) 1 Cor 12:13 and (7) 1 Thess 4:8.

If that is the case, Paul wanted to know why they are trying to live by their strength apart from the Holy Spirit. That is,

“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal 3:3 NASB).

Paul pointed out that he worked among them when he lived to get an essential truth across. His entire effort was in the power and energy of the Holy Spirit. It is always by faith that we are to believe that service is only through the power of the Holy Spirit

⁴ “Did you suffer so many things in vain-- if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?” (Gal 3:4-5 NASB).

They could not serve God effectively with their energy or strength. But they could serve Him effectively in the power and might of the Holy Spirit; look up Zech 4:6 and compare Acts 1:8. The sooner we realise this truth, the better it is for us. We need to rest in this truth.

3. How can there be victory over sin and self?

Q. What could be the result if one believed this truth?

In the letter to the Galatians in Gal 5:16-17, Paul clearly stated that there was a way to live and have victory over sin and self. It was a completely different way that they had been living. That is,

¹⁶ “But I say, walk (to be conducting oneself) by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ 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” (Gal 5:16-17 NASB).

When one received a new spiritual life (or was born again), the warfare between the Spirit, sin and self immediately began. The apostle Paul also knew this through experience cf. Rom 7:18-25. What is the way of deliverance from sinful nature? How could they, as Christ-followers, be victorious over sin and self? Only the Holy Spirit enabled them to walk by faith in victory. In all of this, Paul said it was when they did four things,

- a. When they realised, they needed to walk by faith in relationship with the Spirit (Gal 5:16,25), they were to trust Him, going along in harmony with Him entirely.
- b. They were to be wholly submitted to His leading (Gal 5:18) and recognise His Lordship as God. Thereby yielding themselves to His control, they experienced His victory.
- c. When they, by faith, exercised God-empowered discipline in their lives (Gal 6:7-8). They could either sow to the sinful nature or sow to the Spirit, cf. Rom 13:14.
- d. Realise that they were crucified once and for all with Christ and are dead to self (Gal 5:24; 2:20).

So, Paul encouraged the Galatian church to live as followers of Jesus Christ. It was to be a life of walking (in their faith community) led by the Spirit bearing spiritual fruit (Gal 5:16). How were they to bear this fruit? Since it would appear (from Paul, what had been mentioned in Gal 5:16-21) that they were still living a lustful and sinful lifestyle. They were kings on the throne of their self-styled

kingdom, living like they once did before they received the new spiritual life. Instead, now that they were Christ-followers, they were to submit their life to the Holy Spirit of God. They needed to allow Him to be on the throne of their life as Lord. Paul taught the Galatians that life in the Spirit (Gal 3:2,3,14) is a life of faith. For that reason, they needed to,

- Wait patiently for hope of the completion of the work of the Spirit: Gal 5:5
- Walk (*progress through life*) in or by the Spirit: Gal 5:16
- Be continually led by the Spirit: Gal 5:18
- Yield the fruit (result, outcome) that is from the Spirit: Gal 5:22
- Live and walk (*in a straight righteous line*) in the Spirit (like soldiers marching in rank): Gal 5:25
- Sow and reap the fruit in the Spirit: Gal 6:8

All of this took faith for the Galatian church to believe. However, if they trusted the Holy Spirit, victory and Spirit fruit would be in their lives.

Some concluding thoughts

So, coming back to the opening question,

Q. How are we to understand living in the freedom of the Holy Spirit?

Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians out of concern for their well-being. He was concerned with their spiritual well-being. Remember Paul's Big Idea,

The Big Idea: Paul aimed to communicate to the Galatians that spiritual living is not based on keeping the Law but rather on the influence of the Holy Spirit.

It was in light of the wrong teaching given to them. As a result, Paul was quite strong and forthright in what he had to say. It was why, amongst other things, he dealt with the following,

1. What does Paul say about the miracle of the new birth?
2. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit works in every Christ follower?
3. How can we have victory over sin and self?

How do we fair in our understanding of these matters, I wonder?

Remember that Paul wanted to draw their attention back to the central truth that they were free in Christ. That is,

¹ "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery... ¹³ For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:1,13 NASB).

As Christ-followers, we need to remember that it is a life that we can only live by faith in Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit. If we do not follow Jesus Christ, we can start today. We will need to realise that all our self-effort to get right with God to this point in life has failed. We need a change of perspective to see things differently beyond what we already know, turn towards Jesus Christ, and follow Him. We can call out to him at any time, even now, and to live a life of freedom from the cruelty of sin and self. We can receive the miracle of the new birth today. We can have the Holy Spirit fully living within us as we become a Christ-follower. Also, we can have victory over sin and self. Do you want these right now? Let us talk to God right now about our lives.

“Heavenly Father, I have tried to live and do things my way. It has not always worked out for the best. I ask for your forgiveness for my sin (all the wrong that I have done). I want to receive the miracle of the new birth today. Could I please have the Holy Spirit live within me as I want to become a Christ-follower? Also, I need your Spirit to have victory over sin and self. I ask this in the name of Jesus Christ.

So, today, we need to look to God, the Holy Spirit, Who works amid the chaos of life to create order in our lives. We need to ‘Stop and reflect.’ We have seen what the Bible has said on the matter. But what has the Holy Spirit been telling us about who He is today? That is, what is the one thing that stands out to us? We need to apply this; otherwise, it is merely all academic. Then, we need to respond to what the Holy Spirit has been saying to us.

In response, we need to ask through this process:

- What personal application can be found in the passages?
- What is God teaching me today?
- That is, “What is God saying to me?”

How should I respond to what is being said, or so what?

- What are you going to do about it?
- What do you need to do to respond?
- Pray and respond

Appendix: The Use of the Holy Spirit in the Letter to the Galatians

“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?” (Gal 3:2 NASB).

“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal 3:3 NASB).

“Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith?” (Gal 3:5 NASB).

“In order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Non-Jews so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:14 NASB).

“And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:6 NASB).

“But as at that time, they who were born according to the flesh persecuted them who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also” (Gal 4:29 NASB).

“For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness” (Gal 5:5 NASB).

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal 5:16 NASB).

“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” (Gal 5:17 NASB).

“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law” (Gal 5:18 NASB).

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness” (Gal 5:22 NASB).

“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25 NASB).

“For the one who sows to their own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal 6:8 NASB).