

The Believer and the Spirit

IV. - The Effects of the Holy Spirit

“So then we from now on know no man after the flesh; if also we knew Christ according to the flesh, but now we know Him no longer. So that if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things have passed away, behold they have become new” (II Corinthians 5:16,17).

Believers go through a constant struggle over the question of the degree to which their lives should change when they have accepted Christ. What should be the effect of the Holy Spirit upon them? The text quoted above might suggest a large degree of renewal. Indeed, in the King James rendering of the text—*“behold all things are become new”*—the renewal might seem to be quite sweeping. Actually, in the original text, the word “all” is not there. It simply says, *“old things have passed away, behold they have become new.”* We must see this text in its context. And it is most important for us to distinguish between aspects of our person that will change with the coming of Christ and those things that may or may not change—what is essential and what is secondary. This issue is the crux of much of the struggles experienced by believers in their walk with Christ.

Human dogmas about what constitutes “really, really Christians” provide convenient leverage for motivating the believers to function in terms of sectarian demands. Memberships in various groups are often based upon humanly devised rules. These rules often go beyond the Biblical requirements of salvation. Of course, church organizations can have any membership rules they like, as long as they do not make membership in their church equivalent to membership in the body of Christ.

But what then is the effect of the Holy Spirit individually?

In the first place, our essential being is changed from mortal to immortal. “We become partakers of the divine nature.” And with the coming of the Holy Spirit, we have entered into a position of instant communion with Christ. *“So also the Spirit helps us together in our weaknesses; for we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with unuttered sighs [zephyrs] but He who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit because He makes intercession [encounters God] on behalf of the saints”* (Romans 8:26,27). Our prayers are both inspired by the Spirit and carried by the Spirit. This intercommunion sustains us even in periods where our human emotions are in a negative state. This is why we continually maintain our relationship to Christ and return to Him again and again after moments of disappointment or disillusionment (not uncommon among believers, given the state of the flesh).

But to what degree does the Spirit make all things new?

How much change can we expect in our personalities? In our attitudes and actions? In his statement to the Corinthians, Paul is saying that he views things from a totally different perspective. *“I once knew Christ after the flesh.”* What did he mean by this? He meant simply that he viewed Him as a false messiah. So strong was his belief that he set about to attack His followers, and believed that he “did God a service.” When the Holy Spirit touched him, his whole attitude changed. It is, of course, the work of the Spirit that causes everyone who comes to Christ to change one’s attitude towards Him.

But what changes may we expect in personality? In behavior and actions?

Among the “new age” advocates, it is commonly assumed that one can change one’s attitudes and actions by “getting in touch with one’s inner consciousness” or it is assumed that humans have the inner resources to correct any flaws that may be there. Any discrediting of this capacity on the part of humans is viewed as extremely pessimistic, although it is in conflict with the Scriptures. Jesus likened Himself to the vine and His followers, the branches. He said, in this respect, “*Without me, you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). Apart from a Biblical position, the world has not given much evidence from its beginning of any progress in the area of human behavior. The Bible indicates that things will get worse, not better.

Among the “new age” thinkers there is much talk of “love.” However, there is little definition as to just what love we are talking about. Ultimately, it seems to boil down to human emotions, expressed in many different varieties and degrees of intensity. The Bible, on the other hand, is very explicit about love and regards it as a fruit of the Spirit—a natural characteristic of those who possess the Spirit. The important distinction is that the kind of love that the Bible talks about here is a “caring consciousness.” It is resident within the Spirit and expresses itself in caring about others, but does not require any emotional interaction. Thus, loving one’s enemies, as Jesus advocated in the Sermon on the Mount is part of the *agape* love of the Spirit. It does not require affection or approval but is expressed in reaching out a helping hand when it is needed.

So what other changes can the believer expect?

Here we must distinguish between intrinsic personality traits and acquired characteristics. Many personality traits are genetic and will probably not change. For example, the introvertive or shy type will probably always be shy despite salvation. Some assume, erroneously, that being filled with the Spirit will automatically make one outgoing and bold. Those who are genetically extrovertive—bold and outgoing—are not more spiritual than those who are shy. Many characteristics are marginal and may or may not change. One who has a propensity toward loss of temper may be able to get a handle on it as they respond to the Holy Spirit, but many retain this characteristic all of their lives. It is unfortunate to assume that such ones are less spiritual. They struggle with something that the milder person does not struggle with. There are many non-believers that control themselves very well. Many similar characteristics that are unsound might be changed and should be changed, but are not a test of spirituality. If one does not control one’s temper, for example, one may lose one’s job or one’s family, or one’s well-being, but one does not lose one’s place with Christ.

Believers are like children. They ought to behave themselves better, but do not always do so. Nevertheless, as parents love their children and ideally stand with them, so Christ loves his children and does not forsake them. Apparently, Paul had a continual struggle with the flesh and declared that “*In me, that is in my flesh, dwells no good thing*” (Romans 7:18). If it be supposed (as some think) that this was his state prior to salvation, remember that he made a similar statement to the Philippians—“*We are they who have no confidence in the flesh*” (Philippians 3:3). Many believers struggle all their life with habits and personality problems over which they do not have control. It is unfortunate but does not alienate them from Christ. As with children, sometimes the weaker ones get the most attention.

The human psyche is very complex. Our actions and attitudes in the flesh are governed by the intricate maze of neurons in the brain and nervous system that are the product

of genetics and the input of a vast amount of data. Remember again that the instrument that collects the data affects the data it collects. So all of our human thoughts and attitudes and actions are part of a flawed system that is difficult to control. We ought to be in better control, but are not always. That should not discourage us from maintaining our close ties with Christ but should help us realize our utter dependence on Him. It should also help us to avoid judging others, inasmuch as we have no knowledge of what they struggle with. We do not have to accept the behavior or attitudes of others, but we are not their judge.

Those who assume that the coming of the Holy Spirit will bring perfection have misunderstood some basic points of Scripture. Our word for “perfect” is not used in the Greek text. There are two Greek words that we translate by “perfect”—*katartidzo* and *teleo*. *Katartidzo* means “to mend” or “restore,” and is used, for example, in regard to the disciples who were “mending their nets.” *Teleo* has to do with fulfillment or consummation. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “*Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48). The word there is *teleo*. What Jesus is saying is, “Be fulfilled as your Father in heaven is fulfilled.” An automobile, for example, fulfills its purpose when it transports passengers, in spite of the fact that it may have many flaws. We humans fulfill our purpose when we become vessels of the Holy Spirit, in spite of the fact that we may have many flaws in the flesh.

The evidence that we have the Holy Spirit within us is the very struggle that we go through with our flesh. If Christ were not in us, we would not be concerned about pleasing Him. Most struggles that the believers go through have to do, not with violating the Ten Commandments, but rather with having the favor and approval of Christ. Possessing the Spirit of Christ we are not flawless, but faultless. “*He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust*” (Psalm 103:14). The promise of Scripture is—“*Unto Him that is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy*” (Jude 24).

The words of Jesus to His much-flawed disciples, on the way to the cross, were “*These things have I spoken unto you, that in Me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation [pressure], but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33).

So be at peace, beloved ones, and accept the embrace of Christ, who has said, “*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*” That is your real heritage and portion from the Holy Spirit within you.

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