

HOW DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT LEAD?

One is not a child of God, a Christian, unless he is led by the Spirit: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14). How does God lead His children by means of the Holy Spirit? Most denominationalists, in their doctrinal confusion and emotionalism, are under the delusion that there is some sort of direct guidance of the Spirit in their lives. Some feel that this is done by giving free reign to their impulses or yielding to their “hunches” or to His “nudges.” Some believe the Spirit must “illuminate” the written Word for them if they are to understand it. Further, some claim that they receive some “special blessing” of spiritual strength (enabling them to resist temptation/behave righteously) from work which the Spirit does for them **directly** and **internally** beyond and apart from the written Word and apart from God’s external (to us) activity in the realm of providence. Others believe they hear a voice speaking directly to them from the Spirit. Still others believe the Spirit leads them by showing them special signs which indicate specific decisions they need to make at a given time. (Some wait on the Spirit to “lead” them to get up in the morning, which socks to wear, and even which one to put on first.)

It is not surprising—but expected—that unbelievers advocate the above-listed errors. Nor are we surprised that “change agents” and “new hermeneutic” advocates are urging at least some of these activities of the Spirit of God in their do-or-die agenda to wreck the church of the Lord. The matter that causes both surprise and dismay is that some and/or once sound brethren are now saying that the Spirit operates in a direct manner apart from and in addition to His Word in the realm of sanctification. My concern is that they apparently do not have in mind merely the way God operates and what He does through His “behind-the-scenes” providence or in answer to our prayers, indirectly and external to our hearts and minds (which Biblical doctrines are practically universally believed and taught among the Lord’s people [e.g., Gen. 50:20; Est. 4:14; Rom. 8:28; et al.]). These brethren are insisting that the Spirit does some things directly and internally to and in the Christian’s heart that He does not do through His Word alone. If this is not what these brethren mean by their words, they should say so and say it plainly (and I would hope soon). It is imperative that one’s words on this subject be carefully-chosen, precise, and well-defined so as not to raise questions unnecessarily. (I say this realizing that we all fall short of this lofty aim occasionally.) If one’s concept of the way the Holy Spirit does His work for the Christian cannot be stated in unambiguous, clearly-comprehensible terms, it may be a strong signal that he has an incorrect concept that he needs to abandon or at least hold only to himself if he must hold it.

Two major differing views concerning the way the Spirit dwells in the Christian (i.e., representatively or personally) have been held by those who have genuinely pleaded for the restoration of the ancient order over the past two centuries. The “how” of the Spirit’s indwelling, in and of itself, has not been considered a “fellowship” issue by respected men among us in past generations and is not thus considered now.

However, so far as I know, only an infinitesimal number who were/are counted faithful through all these years have advocated (until very recently) the idea that the Spirit leads, guides, instructs, strengthens, and/or produces spiritual fruit in the Christian in any direct or immediate way, apart from or in addition to His spiritual “sword,” His Word (Eph. 6:17). (I realize that “how many” or “which” brethren believe a certain doctrine does not guarantee is not the yardstick of Truth. However, it hardly seems wise to disdain or hastily abandon doctrinal convictions arrived at by many able men over a long period of time.) To contend that the Spirit thus operates on the heart of the Christian in some direct, immediate way has generally been (and continues to be) correctly perceived both as (1) a surrender of the all-sufficiency of the Word of God and (2) an opening of the door to unrestrainable subjectivism.

It is not always kept clear (but it should be) that the way the Holy Spirit **dwells** in the Christian and the way the Holy Spirit **works** in the life of the Christian are separate issues. Some (both among representative-indwelling advocates and personal-indwelling advocates) apparently believe that the personal indwelling view somehow implies or at least tends toward the direct-work view of the Holy Spirit. However, I deny even the tendency, much less the implication.

The personal indwelling view no more implies or tends toward the direct work of the Holy Spirit than the doctrine of the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins implies or tends toward “salvation by meritorious works” (as denominationalists have long averred). I do not know of any brother who faithfully teaches the role of baptism in God’s salvation pattern who would ever think of considering it some sort of work of merit on man’s part. Likewise, until lately faithful brethren have been all but non-existent who hold that the Spirit dwells in one personally and who therefore believe that this conviction implies some work in or for us by the Spirit separate from, in addition to, His written Word. Again, let us keep clear the distinction between the **indwelling** and the **operation** of the Spirit.

Now back to the original question: “How does the Holy Spirit direct, lead, and do His work in the Christian?” Does He provide direct leadership and influence in our lives? Does He directly (apart from, in addition to His written Word and His external providence) tell us where to

go, what to do, when to do what, and such like? Does He directly (apart from, in addition to the Bible and providence) give us spiritual strength and cause us to produce His fruit (Gal. 5:22–23)? Please bear in mind that however the Spirit leads, He leads not a few, many, or most, but all who are children of God, according to Romans 8:14.

In the first century, the Holy Spirit gave the apostles miraculous power, enabling them to impart it to others for the purpose of revealing and confirming the Gospel (Acts 6:6–8; 8:18; Heb. 2:3–4). However, so far as I can discern, the New Testament neither explicitly nor implicitly teaches that every Christian possessed miraculous gifts. On some occasions, the Spirit directly told someone to go to a certain place and to do or not do a certain thing (e. g., Acts 8:29; 10:19–20; 16:6–7; et al.). However, it is readily observable that such direct messages and instances of guidance, even in the days of miracles (long since ended [1 Cor. 13:8–10, et al.]), **were not the ordinary, but the extraordinary occurrence**. Since even these miraculous incidents of the Spirit's leadership were exceptional and were confined to only some or perhaps even a few individuals, manifestly, such miraculous leadership was not in Paul's (or the Spirit's) mind in Romans 8:14. The kind of leadership of which Paul wrote is that which the Spirit gives to **every Christian**, implying that it is not occasional and extraordinary, but general and ordinary.

How then are sons of God led by the Spirit? I repeat, that until very recently, faithful brethren, whether they held a personal or a representative-only view of the Spirit's indwelling, answered almost unanimously as follows: "We are led by the Spirit when and as we obey the Word of the Spirit." Paul commanded: "Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). Surely, none would deny that to "walk by the Spirit" is to be "led by the Spirit." Immediately after His statement just quoted, the Spirit (through Paul's inspired pen) leads us to understand what the "works of the flesh" are and what the "fruit of the Spirit" is (Gal. 5:19–26), with the implied obligation to shun the former and produce the latter. There is not the slightest hint that Paul had in mind any idea that the Spirit apart from or in addition to the written Word would somehow **directly** preserve us from fleshly works or produce in us this beautiful and everywhere-lawful fruit.

I am convinced that there is only one way in which any one (whether alien sinner or God's child) is "led by the Spirit": it is by obeying the Word of the Spirit. Any other claimed leading of the Spirit degrades and even nullifies His written Word by which He leads us. After all, if the Holy Spirit **directly** strengthens us against evil and produces the fruit of the Spirit in us, what need have we for the instructions and urgings of the written Word? Yet, it is that very written Word ("Scripture") which is profitable for our every spiritual need and craving and which,

if followed, will bring us (without any extra direct assistance of the Spirit) to full spiritual maturity (2 Tim. 3:16–17). That same Word is able to edify us so as to bring us to our heavenly inheritance if we follow it (Acts 20:32). Only as we read, understand, and obey the Word does the Spirit lead, direct, teach, and work in us. Any other view of the Spirit's work in us is an aberrant view in light of both the Bible and the almost-unanimous convictions of generations of earnest brethren in modern times.

So long as brethren are united on this bedrock foundation of Biblical principle—the Spirit leads only through His Word—why should the manner of the Spirit's indwelling the Christian ever be considered a divisive issue? I therefore appeal to all brethren (whichever view of the Spirit's indwelling they hold) to join hands and hearts earnestly concerning the work of the Spirit on the hearts of men **through His Word alone**. As one man let us go forth to face the change-mad liberal heretics within and the many and mighty Satanic foes without who are attacking Zion from every direction.

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[Note: I wrote the foregoing article in 1997, after a brother by the name of Mac Deaver had declared what he meant by “the supra-literary work of the Holy Spirit.” This article is an expansion of a brief article I wrote under the same title in 1979 for the *Granbury Gospel* (weekly church bulletin of the Granbury, TX, Church of Christ, of which I was editor. It represents what I have believed and taught for many years and what I continue to believe and teach.)