

In the Flesh or the Spirit

Some difficult statements found in the Bible will permit misuse or outright error if they are not subjected to Holy Spirit illumination and sound exegetical principles. One of these is the range of statements about being in the flesh or in the Spirit.

*“For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. (Romans 7:5-6)*

*So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (Romans 8:8-10)*

Sometimes such passages as these are used to support the occult illusion of astral projection . . . leaving the flesh and transporting the spirit. Sometimes they are used to speak of a relative “spiritual state” in the believer. If he loses his temper, he is in the flesh. If he has a time of special communion with God, he is in the Spirit. If he falls into selfish ambition or covetousness, he has gotten into the flesh. If he is specially anointed to witness of Christ, he has gotten into the Spirit.

The passages cannot mean that we were in times past before our conversion without spirit. Nor can they mean that after conversion that we any less tabernacle in a body of flesh and blood.

The term “flesh” has different usages in the Bible. In some places it means all mankind: *“All flesh is grass” (Isaiah 40:6)*. Sometimes it means the body only, as in Galatians 2:20, *“the life I now live in the flesh”*. Sometimes it means the sensuous part of man that has no affinity toward God. Galatians 5:17: *“For the flesh strives against the Spirit”*.

The latter is the sense in which it is used in the passages in Romans seven. See also Romans 8:4: *“That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit”*. Flesh is a term that is used to contrast with spiritual life. It is synonymous with the natural, unregenerate man, the man who is under law and therefore under condemnation.

To be in Christ, therefore, is to be in the Spirit, to not be in the flesh. Being in the Spirit, in the sense considered, therefore, is not a superior state of the regenerate man: It is his normal state, his natural habitat.

According to Philippians 3:3, we who are in Christ are in the Spirit and have no confidence in the flesh. We do not hope in law-keeping. All who are in the flesh hope in law-keeping of some kind. It is the only hope they have. It is a futile hope, but the only one anyone outside of Christ can have. That is why they fight for it so viciously. To deny them that hope is to leave them in bare condemnation.

There are only two possible positions for all men. The first of these is in the flesh. All who are in the flesh are unregenerate, have no spiritual life, are sinners at enmity with God. Sinners are under the law, for the very strength of sin is the law (1 Corinthians 15:56). The second possible position for mankind is in the Spirit. If we are in the Spirit, then we have been regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit on the basis of the blood of Christ and are at peace with God. We are, therefore, under grace; and sin cannot have dominion over us, because we, as saints, are *not under law (Romans 6:14)*.

The unregenerate man has a spirit that is devoid of God, the Holy Spirit. The human spirit thus deprived of its dynamic is impotent to control and influence the soul and body of man. Thus, this unregenerate man is dominated by his flesh. That is where he lives . . . in the flesh. So living in the flesh, his mind, affections and volition are all wrong and his actions are contrary to God and God’s law. He is under law which he constantly transgresses, and cannot escape its condemnation. His mind is filled with unbelief and lies; his affections lust for perversion, malice and selfishness; his volition drives him to rebellion and lawlessness.

For the man who is under grace, the grace of God has regenerated his fallen human spirit by the infusion of Spiritual life. God now is the dynamic of his spirit and is able to control the mind, affections and will. He now lives in the Spirit. That is the controlling factor in his life. He still tabernacles in the body of flesh, but that is not where his real life exists. As the Holy Spirit exerts His influence and power on the mind, emotions and will, this man lives and behaves in harmony with God’s law. He is not under law, but under grace. His mind is now full of faith and truth; his affections are filled with love of God and man; his volition fervently seeks obedience to every command of God.

Let it be clearly understood here that we are not saying that the man is *justified* by the indwelling Holy Spirit or by his spiritual behaviour. That is secured by objective faith in Christ. We are speaking of the liberty from sin and from the condemnation of the law that is the heritage of those who have been justified.

We are, then, either in the flesh or in the Spirit. That is where our *real* life exists. They who are in the spirit do at times behave fleshy and sin, but that is not where their real life exists. It is an unnatural behaviour for them, and they cannot live there. On the other hand, those who are in the flesh can do nothing but sin. They are incapable of spiritual deeds. They are “held” in condemnation under the law.

In Romans 7:5, the “motions of sins” is better translated “passions of sins” or “sinful passions”. Appetites, desires, passions that are a legitimate part of the psychological makeup of man are not in themselves sinful. But man, through the fall, has an evil bias through these desires of the natural body. They dominate his life. He is flesh centered or flesh controlled, rather than Spirit controlled. Again, we say he is “in” the flesh. As long as he is controlled by his flesh, he is in rebellion against God and God’s law.

This rebellion is aggravated or stirred up by the law. A fleshy desire is inflamed so much the more when an external law forbids its indulgence. And though outwardly the person who is in the flesh may abstain from disobedience of the law, his inner man is hostile to it. Though he obeys in the letter, he is in constant violation of the Spirit of the law by his inward desires. He is always “under” law. He can never get free of it.

Romans 7:5 speaks of “when we *were*”. Romans 7:6 says, “but now we *are* delivered from that law, being dead to that wherein we were held”. A transition has been made. We were something that we are no longer. We are something that we previously were not. We are delivered, set free, from all that we were under when we were in the flesh.

We are free from condemnation. I no longer must strive in the flesh to justify myself. There is no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus. It is God Who justifies.

We are free from our fleshy struggle to sanctify ourselves. The flesh is no more able to sanctify than it is to justify. The foolish Galatians thought they could finish the job in the flesh that was begun by the Spirit. But He Who has justified us is the same Who presents us to Himself without spot or blemish.

We are free from our bondage to sin. We are no longer constrained to sin, either in the body or in spirit. It is not that we cannot sin (indeed we can), but we no longer must sin. We have an alternative. We can live holily, something of which we were utterly incapable in the flesh.

We have been made free to serve God in the newness of the Spirit, not in the oldness of the letter. This is not just a new dynamic to help us to keep the letter. Many think it is, and continue to strive for the letter, completely missing the Spirit. Christ has made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the Spirit: for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life (2 Corinthians 3:6). We are the true circumcision who worship God in the Spirit (Philippians 3:3).

Life in the Spirit is sometimes better understood as it is contrasted with life in the flesh. Following are some of the more evident differences:

1. In the Spirit, the writing of the law is in the heart, not in stones or books (2 Corinthians 3:3, Hebrews 8:16, 10:16). Such writing is not a rote verbalization in the heart, as something in the letter memorized. God Himself is in the inner man, and where God is, all that He is in His moral perfection is there sensibly. The man who is in the flesh has an outward rule only, and this outward rule is opposed to his inward disposition. He is not free, because he is constrained to do what he hates and restrained from doing what he craves. The man in the Spirit has, by virtue of the presence of the Holy Spirit in his heart, a propensity that is identical with the Spirit of the written law. The two are in complete harmony. There is no tension between what he does and what he wants to do.
2. The person who is in the Spirit has an understanding of the Holy Scriptures which he could not have in the flesh (2 Corinthians 3:13-16). Even when the external letter of the law is read, a veil is upon the unregenerate man’s heart so that he can only see the bondage and the meticulous legalism of the letter. Its gory and spirituality are utterly hidden from him. But the person who is in the Spirit has not only the outer light, but inward illumination. “*Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and in you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth.*” This is not revelation apart from the scriptures, but a revelation of the spiritual nature of the scriptures themselves.
3. The person who lives in the Spirit seeks for the Spirit of the law, not just the letter. The person who is in the flesh glories in the letter. This was Paul’s disposition before his conversion (Philippians 3:4-8). He was blameless so far as the letter of the law was concerned. In this he gloried in his flesh. But he counted it all but a heap of dung when he saw the glory of the Spirit in Christ.

This was the error of the Pharisees which Jesus addressed in His sermon on the mount. He came to fulfill the law, to give a full revelation of it, to bring out its full spiritual impact. The law was not aimed at stopping murder only, but its roots: malice, hatred, anger. The act of adultery was prohibited, but the seventh commandment was aimed at

illicit desire, evil concupiscence. Men are taught not only to abstain from theft and dishonesty: They must be delivered from the love of materialism, covetousness, greed, selfishness, unholy ambitions. Such is the work of the Spirit in the heart of believers.

4. Those who walk in the Spirit have a different motive for good and right living. They who live in the flesh do right because they fear God's judgment, condemnation, reprisals for disobedience. They are under law, and as such, have the "spirit of bondage to fear" (Romans 8:15). It is an obedience that rises solely out of desire for self preservation. Others who live in the flesh obey God's law because they derive a sanctimonious self-satisfaction from it. They feel it gives them a superior standing with God, and an admired position among men. They imagine that they are better, more spiritual, more holy than other men who are not so scrupulous or successful in keeping the letter of the law. Not so with those who live and walk in the Spirit. Obedience to God's law is a natural function of spiritual life. They give no more thought to consequences of disobedience than they would to consequences of failing to breathe, to eat and to rest. Disobedience is not a thing seriously contemplated, so the fear of God's wrath is never a factor. They are in full agreement with the rightness, the wisdom, the goodness of God's precepts, and delight in living in them simply because they mark out the best way to live. They are constrained by love to serve Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14-16), feel that they rightly belong to Him, and are content to live their lives unto Him.
5. We who have been set free to live in the Spirit, live in a new spirit of life itself. Our life is not one that is characterized by fear, stress, despair, frustration, strife and anxiety. It is one of peace, quietness, victory and restful confidence in the sufficiency and faithfulness of our God. We are not constrained and pressured to get anything done. Christ has done it all. This is not to say that we are inactive. But it is to say that we are possessed of an assurance that our activity is His working in us, and that it is He, not us, Who gets the work done.
6. They who have come to live in the Spirit have found that they have a new power and ability to perform, to overcome the power of sin in their lives which they could never attain in the flesh. "*For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh*" (Romans 8:3). That is the objective truth in which we believe. "*For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live*" (Romans 8:13). That is our responsibility, and our Spirit endowed ability. To mortify the fleshy deeds to which Christ in His death and resurrection has made us dead.

W who live in the spirit have passed from death to life, and have abandoned a life of constant failure and found a life of assured victory in the triumphant Christ.

- C. M.