

The Work of the Spirit as the Spirit of Holiness

By [James Buchanan](#)

The general work of the Spirit of God consists of two parts — the regeneration of sinners, and the edification of his people. Under the latter, several special operations of his grace are included, which are distinctly mentioned in sacred Scripture, and which may be considered separately, as examples of the connection which subsists betwixt his grace and all our duties, and as evidences of the love and wisdom with which his blessed agency is adapted to all the wants and weaknesses of our nature. It is an animating and consoling thought, that the promised grace of the Spirit has respect to every duty which we can be called to discharge, and to every change that can possibly occur in the condition, the temptations, and the trials of his people: for whether we be called to fight against our corruptions, the Spirit is our sanctifier; or to endure affliction, the Spirit is our comforter; or to choose the path of duty in times of perplexity, the Spirit is our guide; or to engage in prayer, the Spirit is the Spirit of grace and supplication; or to cultivate any one of the graces of the Christian character, they are all “the fruits of the Spirit.” So that whatever may be our duty, and however formidable the difficulties by which we are surrounded, we can look up to God on the warrant of his own Word, for the aid of that “good Spirit” who has promised “to help our infirmities,” and who says to each of his people, “I will never leave thee nor forsake thee,” “My grace is sufficient for thee, I will perfect my strength in weakness,” “As thy day is, so shall thy strength be,” “Wait on the Lord, and be of good courage, and he will strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, upon the Lord.”

Sanctification is the work of the Spirit; and the commencement of it in the soul is to be dated from the time of a sinner’s conversion. Until he is converted, he is “dead in trespasses and sins;” for, says the apostle to the Ephesian converts, “You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit which now worketh in the children of disobedience. Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath even as others” (Ephesians 2:1-3) And again, to Titus, “For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour.” (Titus 3:3-6) At the time of a sinner’s conversion, spiritual life is imparted to his soul; he who

was dead is quickened; he rises with Christ to newness of life; he is born again; he is "God's workmanship, created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works."

This great change is often preceded, as we have seen Part 1 dealt with the Spirit's work in the Conversion of Sinners; and Part 2 dealt with Illustrative Cases of conversion in the New Testament., by a preparatory work of conviction and instruction, and is always followed, as we shall now see, by a progressive course of sanctification; but it properly consists in his closing with Christ in the Gospel, by the deliberate assent of his understanding in an act of faith, and the decisive consent of his will in an act of choice. At the instant when a sinner, duly instructed in the truth, and impressed with a sense of his guilt and danger, flees to Christ for refuge, and embraces him as his own Saviour in all the fulness of his offices; at that instant he passes from "death unto life," and becomes a partaker of all the privileges of the children of God. That we might understand the nature, the reality, and the magnitude of this blessed change, God has been pleased to record many examples of it in Scripture, which serve the double purpose of teaching us, both what is essentially involved in all cases of genuine conversion, and also the varieties of individual experience which may exist notwithstanding. In reviewing the cases of the Philippian Gaoler, and the dying Malefactor; of Lydia, Cornelius, and Paul; of Timothy, the Ethiopian Treasurer, and the three thousand who were converted on the day of Pentecost, we are enabled to see that, while there were great diversities of individual experience among them, both in respect to their previous character, and the manner and circumstances of their conversion itself, yet there was a *radical change* that was common to all, and which properly consisted in their being brought under the power of "the truth as it is in Jesus," while it was followed in every instance by a life of new, and cheerful, and devoted obedience.

When the apostle says, "If we *live* in the Spirit, let us also *walk* in the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25), his words are addressed to those who have undergone this great change; and they refer, not to the work of the Spirit in the conversion of a sinner, which has been already illustrated, but *to the continued work of the Spirit in the progressive and growing sanctification of the believer after he has been born again*. And in directing your thoughts to this interesting subject, it may be useful, first of all, to illustrate some important truths which are implied in this exhortation, and then to explain and apply the exhortation itself.

I. New Birth is Followed by New Life

It implies that a *new birth* will invariably be followed by a *new life*, and, conversely, that a *new life* necessarily presupposes a *new birth*, so that regeneration and sanctification are inseparably conjoined. In other words, a renewed heart will be followed by practical reformation, and a holy life can only spring from an inward change of heart. Regeneration is the spring, sanctification is the stream; if we live in the Spirit, we shall also walk in the Spirit; but we

cannot walk spiritually unless we be spiritually alive.

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This important truth is clearly taught by our Lord, as will appear at once from a comparison of two passages, in which he presents it in each of these aspects. In the first (Matthew 7:16-20), he says, “Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their *fruits* ye shall know them.” Here we are taught that the nature of the tree may be judged of by the quality of its fruit; and that wherever spiritual life exists in the heart, it will manifest its presence there by bringing forth the peaceable fruits of righteousness in the life: so that utter barrenness is a proof of spiritual death, according to His own words, “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away;” “Behold these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?”

But, seeing that there may often be many outward semblances of holiness where there is no inward change of heart, our Lord teaches us in another passage (Matthew 12:33), that the quality of the fruit depends on the nature of the tree; in other words, that there cannot be a spiritual life without a living principle within. “Either,” says he, “make the tree good, and his fruit good: or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.” And, in the 6th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, he gives three distinct instances of the way in which actions, apparently good and moral, may be vitiated by the depraved state of the heart: he mentions *almsgiving*, *prayer*, and *fasting*, and declares that if they proceed from an unhallowed principle or improper motive, they are not acceptable in the sight of God.

It is equally clear, then, that every sinner who has been quickened by the Spirit will also walk in the Spirit; and also, that a holy life, such as the Christian leads, must be preceded by a new spiritual birth. If he be alive, he will walk; but if he would walk, he must be made alive. And the *inseparable* connection which subsists between a new birth and a new life, or betwixt regeneration by the Spirit and a progressive course of sanctification, is well worthy of our serious consideration, because it serves to guard us against *two widely different errors* which, it is to be feared, are too prevalent at the present day.

The first is of an Antinomian complexion; and consists, not, perhaps, in the

positive disbelief or denial of the duty which is incumbent on Christians, but in the practical forgetfulness or habitual neglect of those considerations which should lead them to maintain a close and conscientious walk with God, and often results in their “turning the grace of God into licentiousness,” as if they were at liberty to “continue in sin because grace abounds.” Perhaps the most common and fatal form which this dangerous error assumes in modern times is the presumptuous confidence with which some professing Christians will venture to do what their consciences condemn, or, at least, what they can with great difficulty reconcile even to *their* ideas of duty, with the latent feeling, that if they sin, they have only to repent at some future time to ensure their forgiveness; a feeling which, wherever it exists, evinces an utter ignorance of the nature and source of genuine repentance, and an awful want of fear and reverence for God. But to every man who is conscious of any tendency to continue in the indulgence of known sin, or to relax his diligence in the work of a growing sanctification, may it not be said, If you *walk* not in the Spirit, what evidence have you that you *live* in the Spirit? Is it not alike the command and the promise of Christ’s Gospel: “Let not sin, therefore, reign in your mortal body,” for “sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.” “How shall we that are dead to sin live any longer therein?”

But if a new life will invariably follow the new birth, it is equally certain that there can be *no real holiness of life without a thorough change of heart*. And this truth also, which is implied in the apostle’s words, stands directly opposed to another error of a different kind; I mean the error of those who are mere formalists, and who suppose that if their life be regular and decent, and above all, if they abound in the outward acts of apparent morality, they need give themselves little concern about any spiritual change. Augustine was wont to say that the very virtues of such men were only “splendid sins;” and our Lord sanctions the same sentiment, when, referring to the *alms*, and *prayer*, and *fasting*, which were done from an impure and unhallowed motive, he declares that, however applauded by men, they were utterly unacceptable to God. Nay, I will venture to say, that every man’s conscience will decide in the same way: it estimates the morality of an action by the motive from which it springs. Suppose you see an individual relieving the wants of a poor brother; you immediately approve of an act by which the sufferer’s wants are relieved. But suppose you could look in on that man’s heart, and found no *love* there, and no touch of human sympathy; but in its stead, a lust of praise, or a desire of vain-glorious applause: I ask whether, on the instant, the vicious motive would not, even in your estimation, demoralise and desecrate the whole character of his conduct? And so is it with ourselves in our relation to God. He looks in upon the heart; and the heart must be renewed before the life can be reformed according to his will. If it be true that “without holiness no man shall see the Lord,” it is equally true that we can only become holy by being “renewed in the spirit of our mind.”

II. All Spiritual Life Flows from the Holy Spirit

It is further implied in the apostle's words, that not only the *commencement*, but the *continuance also of spiritual life in the soul, depends on the gracious operation of the Spirit of God*. As the great initial change by which we pass from death unto life is wrought by him, so is the succeeding course of our progressive sanctification; and as he brings us into the way, he must conduct us, from first to last, by the constant communication of his wisdom to direct, of his grace to animate, and of his strength to sustain us. We are made alive by the Spirit, and we are enabled to walk by the same Spirit. At the time of conversion, he may implant a gracious principle in the heart; but that principle is not self-sustained, nor does it derive its nourishment from the soil in which it is planted, but is fed from his secret springs. The liveliest Christian would soon decay were the Spirit's grace withdrawn: he has no stability and no strength of his own; and there would be neither growth nor fruitfulness, but for those constant supplies which he receives of all needful grace from the fulness that is in Christ.

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Accordingly, various expressions are used in Scripture to intimate the constant operation, and the abiding presence, and the intimate fellowship of the Spirit with his people. Sometimes they are represented as *being in him*: "If we live *in* the Spirit, let us walk *in* the Spirit;" an expression which, whatever else may be implied in it, plainly intimates a constant dependence on their part, and a continued care on his. And at other times he is represented as *being in them*, as when our Lord said, "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him; but ye know him; for he *dwelleth with you*, and shall be *in you*:" and the apostle, "What! know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God?" And both expressions occur in the same verse (Romans 8:9), "Ye are not in the flesh, but *in the Spirit*, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell *in you*." The consideration of the continued presence and constant operation of the Spirit of God in the soul of every true believer is fitted at once to encourage and animate him in the path of holy obedience, and to impress him with an awful sense of reverence and godly fear. It is a strong consolation, and a cheering ground of confidence and hope, that amidst all the corruptions with which he is called to contend, and the innumerable temptations by which he is assailed, he is not left to depend on his own wisdom and strength, but may ask, in believing prayer, the supplies of the Spirit of all grace, and rest on the promise, "My grace is sufficient for thee; I will perfect my strength in weakness." And when the believer is most sensible of his infirmity and corruptions, he is only the better able to appreciate the value of this promise, and to say with the apostle, "When I am

weak, then am I strong.” But if it be fitted to cheer and animate the believer in his warfare, by giving him the hope of final victory, it is also unspeakably solemn. It may well fill him with holy awe to think that the Spirit of God is at all times present with his soul, watching over its progress or declension, its growth or decay; that by cherishing unholy thoughts or desires, he may “grieve the Spirit,” and even provoke him, for a time, to withdraw: and when he reads the solemn appeal, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? if any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy,” how forcibly should he feel the motive which is urged in the apostle’s exhortation, “Work out your own salvation with *fear and trembling*; for *it is God that worketh in you* to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

III. Our Practical Duty To Walk in the Spirit

When the apostle says, “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit,” his words, while they contain a doctrinal truth, prescribe also a *practical duty*; and that duty is inculcated by a motive derived from the consideration of our having been quickened into life by the Spirit of God. It is as if he had said: If we have been born again, let the new birth be followed by a new life; let our walk correspond with our past experience and our present profession. There is much even in this general view of the apostle’s meaning that may well humble us in the very dust for our past negligence, and at the same time incite us to greater diligence in future: for every one who professes to be a Christian must be considered as one who has been “born again,” and in whom the “Spirit of God dwells;” and if this be implied in our profession, oh! how deeply should we be affected by the thought of our many miscarriages, our frequent declensions and decays, and the strength of our remaining corruptions; and how ardently should we desire that, in time to come, we may walk more worthy of the vocation wherewith we have been called, and become altogether such as God’s Spirit would have us to be!

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The Habitual Exercise of Faith

But more particularly, this walking in the Spirit consists in *the habitual exercise of faith in Christ*, that faith by which we are united to him, so as to receive out of his fulness even grace for grace. Christ is made of God unto us sanctification, as well as redemption; and it is by faith in him that our sanctification is advanced; for, says the apostle, “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” And this corresponds with His own language to the disciples, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch

cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without (or, out of) me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” Now, “we abide in Christ” when “his word abideth in us.” It is by faith that we are first united to Christ, and it is by the continued exercise of the same faith that our union with him is maintained, and that we derive from him, as a branch draws sap from the vine, the nourishment which makes us fruitful. It was “the truth as it is in Jesus” that was the means of our conversion, and it is the same truth that is the instrument of our progressive sanctification; for Christ’s prayer for his disciples, even when he spoke of the promise of the Spirit, was, “Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth.” And the truth here spoken of is not solely, nor even chiefly, the *truth contained in the law*, although that is useful, as affording a perfect rule and authoritative directory for the conduct of life, but it is especially the *truth contained in the Gospel*; for that affords the most constraining motives to a life of new obedience; and what “the law cannot do, seeing that it is weak through the flesh,” the Gospel can accomplish, because it is, in the hand of the Spirit, an effectual means of sanctification. We are not only justified, we are sanctified also by the truth as it is in Jesus; and they who are jealous of the doctrine of free grace, because of its supposed tendency to relax the obligations of holiness, betray a lamentable ignorance at once of the scheme of revealed truth, and the actual experience of all believers. Man’s method of sanctification is by the law, God’s method of sanctification is by the Gospel; the former is by works, the latter is by faith, unto works.

Conflict With Indwelling Sin

The walking in the Spirit which is here enjoined consists further in *maintaining a constant conflict with indwelling sin*, and seeking to crucify the flesh, with its corruptions and lusts. I need not say — for your own experience must convince you — that regeneration does not destroy sin in the soul. It dethrones sin; it breaks its power; but it does not extirpate or expel it from the heart. It is still there; not as a tyrant, but as a traitor, ever ready to deceive and seduce, and then most likely to succeed when we are least sensible of its presence, and least watchful against its wiles. Even in the bosom of the child of God there is many a “root of bitterness,” which, springing up, may trouble and defile him; there is a “sin which doth so easily beset him;” there is “a law in his members warring against the law of his mind, and bringing him into captivity to the law of sin and of death.” The whole course of his sanctification is a ceaseless warfare, which will never terminate until the body is dissolved in death. Now the steady maintenance of this arduous and protracted conflict is included in “his walking in the Spirit,” and can only be successful in this way; for, says the apostle, “Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led by the Spirit, ye are

not under the law.”

By the *flesh* in this context, we are to understand all our sinful propensities and passions, whether such as belong properly to the body, or such as have their seat in the soul; for, in enumerating the works of the flesh, he mentions “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like;” and, in reference to these, he says, “They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.” The use of the word *flesh*, however, seems to intimate that our evil passions derive much of their virulence and strength from our connection with these “vile bodies,” whose appetites we are so prone to indulge, and for whose comfort we are so anxious to provide: and if so, we may do well to remember the example of the apostle, who said, “I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest having preached the Gospel to others, I should myself be a castaway.” And the use, again, of such terms as “*mortify* and *crucify* the flesh,” implies that we are called to a very painful task, and to the exercise of much self-denial; but this is involved in our profession and inseparable from it; for our Lord thus forewarned his disciples, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

A Spiritual Frame of Mind

Again, this walking in the Spirit consists in maintaining a *spiritual frame of mind*, by having our thoughts much engaged with spiritual truth, and our affections set on spiritual objects, and all our faculties employed in spiritual services. That this spiritual frame of mind is included in the duty appears from the statement of the apostle in another place, “For they that are after the flesh *do mind* the things of the flesh: but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” To walk in the Spirit clearly implies that we should be *spiritually minded*, (See John Owen on *Spiritual Mindedness*.) and this gracious habit mainly consists in our thoughts being much occupied with divine truth, and our affections and desires being set, not on the things which are seen and temporal, but on those things which are unseen and eternal. The real state of our hearts may be determined by the prevailing bent of our thoughts, affections, and desires: for if these be mainly occupied with the world, and naturally and instinctively point to some earthly good, then we have reason to fear that we are still walking after the flesh, and not after the Spirit; but if they are chiefly set on things spiritual and divine — if not only in the hour of prayer, but at other times, they recur to God, and Christ, and heaven, and dwell on these subjects with complacency and satisfaction, or at least with earnestness — then we have reason to hope that we may be of the number of those who have been quickened into spiritual life, of which the first and surest symptom is the appetite and desire for spiritual nourishment and food.

And he who is thus spiritually minded is said to “walk in the Spirit,” not only

because it is the Spirit which quickened him at the first, but also because it is the Spirit which continues to sustain his spiritual life, keeping alive his appetite for spiritual food, directing his thoughts to spiritual things, and exciting his affections for spiritual objects. This he does by means of the *truth*; and hence the same truth which is declared to be the germ of the new birth — by which we are “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, even by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” — that same truth is also the aliment by which the Spirit nourishes his people; for, “as new born babes, they desire the sincere milk of the Word, that they may grow thereby.” And so the same Word which cleanses the sinner at first — for we read of “the washing of water by the Word” — is also the means of his growing sanctification; for “now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.”

Cultivate the Graces of the Christian Life

Walking in the Spirit consists further in our habitually seeking to cultivate and exercise all the graces of the Christian life, by bringing forth abundantly the *peaceable fruits of righteousness*. These are expressly said to be, in every believer, “the fruit of the Spirit;” for, says the apostle, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance;” and again, “The fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, and righteousness, and truth.”

Without attempting to illustrate each of those elements of the Christian character, I may observe in general, that when combined, as they always are, although in different degrees and proportions, in the experience of believers, they are to be regarded as the first lineaments of that divine image which was lost at the fall, and which it is the great design of the Spirit to restore, while they are at the same time a source of the purest and most permanent happiness. Love to God as our Father, to Christ as our best benefactor, and to his people as brethren; joy and peace, springing from the Gospel; the joy which the world can neither give nor take away; the very peace of God which passeth all understanding; long-suffering and gentleness, springing from that love which “beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things;” goodness, which rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; faith, which believes God, and trusts in his faithful promise; meekness, which is not overcome of evil, but overcomes evil with good; and temperance, which restrains indulgence within the limits of duty: these are the elements of the Christian character; and they are as conducive to our true happiness as they are opposed to our natural dispositions.

But especially, let us realise the thought, that these graces are, one and all, the *fruits of the Spirit*; they are not the spontaneous products of our corrupted nature, nor even the forced nurslings of our own culture and industry; they are the “beauties of holiness,” with which the Spirit of God adorns “the new creature,” and by which he prepares him for the society and services of heaven. If, then, we feel ourselves deficient in any one or more of these graces, we should not

depend on our own strength; but, while we are diligent in the use of every appointed means, we should pray for the SPIRIT.

It is a very serious truth, that each of us must be walking either after the flesh or after the Spirit; and that according as we pursue the one course or the other, we are proceeding, with the swiftness of time itself, towards heaven or hell. Our personal interest in all the privileges and promises of the Gospel depends on our choice betwixt these two; for, speaking of those who are interested in the Gospel, the apostle describes them in these words: "There is now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus; who *walk* not after the flesh, but after the Spirit;" for "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." But he adds, "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." "So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God." "If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die." The apostle urges this solemn truth even on the attention of those to whom he wrote, although they were professing Christians; partly because there are, in every visible church, some mere nominal professors, who need to be awakened to a sense of their real condition; and partly also, because it is salutary for believers themselves to be reminded of the wide difference which subsists betwixt the Church and the world, and of the holy jealousy with which they should watch over their own souls. "Wherefore work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

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