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Make the Most of God's Spirit

You cannot be a Christian without having the holy Spirit. It's precious. So how does it help us?

by James McBride

'Without the Spirit of Christ' writes the apostle Paul, 'you are none of his'. That's what sets apart the Christian from the rest of mankind. The holy Spirit - the very mind of God - at baptism, through the laying on of hands, unites with our human spirit. That's conversion, though the process continues for the remainder of the Christian's life. That's the bottom line if we are to have eternal life.

If we have the divine Spirit in us at the point of our death we will be 'in the Kingdom'. But to 'gain entrance' just 'how much' of the Spirit must you have? Is there advantage in having 'more'? Can you have 'more'?

Principles of Change

God's Spirit - the 'substance' of which His being is formed (John 4:24) - is described as flowing like water (John 7:37); or in another analogy, it is like electricity. The Spirit flows into us from its divine power source, acting through the power outlet that He implants in our human spirit when we convert. It can be 'quenched' - turned off. Or we can be 'filled' with the Spirit. Through the Spirit's action we can be transformed in character to become Christ-like, to more perfectly do God's will (Romans 12:1f).

Humans, of course, can modify character without God's Spirit. We can apply psychological principles to life's situations, and indeed many have done just that. Solomon's proverbs are divine life-changing principles that can be applied without the indwelling Spirit. They were penned to include 'the man in the street' devoid of God's Spirit. Countless books have been written in modern times, too, which give guidance on successfully changing our behavior.

The Spirit helps us

Christians, in common with all mankind, are continually faced with choices. Our moral failures are rooted in our fallen nature. They flow from inside us. Said Jesus Christ: "...out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man..." (Matthew 15:19).

Most civilized folk have a general awareness that such practices are plain wrong—though that doesn't often stop us doing them when we think we can get away with it, or through moral weakness. The 'good angel on our shoulder' whispers that it's wrong. Not everyone, though, has such a conscience, and much depends on our early childhood training and on our national and local culture, though conscience is, too often, fueled by error. Most major religions will instill morality, though perhaps none so clearly as in the Judaeo-Christian faith. The latter is rooted in the 'Holy Bible'. The rise and fall of moral sensitivity in the Anglo-Saxon nations, for example, mirrors the level of Bible teaching in the previous and current generations.

Paternal Guidance

With the indwelling Spirit of God, there's added guidance. The Scriptures express the mind of God, His Spirit. The indwelling Spirit helps us by recalling to mind the Word of God that we have absorbed. 'Conscience' is sharpened and aligned with the mindset of our Creator, and the more we are in tune with Him and His Word the clearer will be the message. *But the Spirit will never force us to act on the prompt. We are led by the Spirit, not driven.*

Make the Most of God's Spirit

Any naughty child in a well-adjusted family has experienced mother's warning, 'Just you wait till your father comes home'. He could be miles away—but the thought of his presence quells any thoughts of disobedience. His 'spirit' reaches out to influence us.

When we have His Spirit, our heavenly Father similarly influences us through His Spirit. Even to the point of chastening us (Hebrews 12)!

In a dysfunctional family, of course, father—if there's one around—holds no such influence. The 'word of advice' has never been imparted.

Spirit Fruitfulness

Our lives as Christians is to be modeled on the life of Jesus. He lived the framework of the true Christian faith as well as the substance, setting us an example. That is, Jesus followed the external pattern of the divinely revealed faith. His custom was to observe the seventh-day *Sabbath*, and the *Passover* and seven *Days of Unleavened Bread*, and all the worship days. [They are outlined in Leviticus 23.] Beyond those externals he lived the life of the Spirit. As he informed the Samaritan woman: "*those who worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth*" (John 4:24)

The nine-fold 'fruits of the Spirit' are fundamental character traits of the Father and Christ. Look at Christians in general and it is obvious that the fruits are not dished out automatically on conversion. Simply saying 'I'm a Christian' or 'I'm born again' does not, like an automaton, bear spiritual fruit.

The fruits have to be 'worked at', and result from our conscious effort to conform to God's character. They are not simply funneled into our character without our active co-operation. The Father, through His Spirit, acts on us through circumstances to change our outlook and behavior, allowing life's tribulations to shape us. That work may be painful—a long hard road! The degree we change depends on how actively we respond.

Put off—and on

This is a matter the apostle Paul made clear. He tells us to '*put off*' certain behaviors and to '*put on*' others. A personal choice. And perhaps demanding intense and concentrated effort. He wrote to the Colossian Christians: "*Put to death therefore, what is earthly in you.... put them all away: anger wrath, malice, slander, foul talk. Lie not one to another [this to Christians!]....*" (ch 3:5-11). To the Ephesians he adds "*...let the thief no longer steal*", adding: "*Put on, then, as God's chosen ones...kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another, and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you*" (vv.12-17).

If we '*hide God's word in our heart*'—memorize it—we have the godly guidepost. God's Spirit in the believer motivates and leads us to Christ-like behavior. The Spirit doesn't coerce. Let's co-operate.

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