**THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE SPIRIT**

***You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. 2I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? 3Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? 4Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? 5Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? 6******So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”***

**Galatians 3:1-6 (NIV)**

‘*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified’* (3:1*).* In 2:15-21 Paul wove his own story into the theology of our standing in Christ. He now appeals directly to the Galatians and their experience of Christ and the Spirit. The Galatians’ turning away from the gospel was not just a kind of spiritual treason but an act so foolish that Paul likens it to the result of a sorcerer ‘bewitching’ them. His question is partly rhetorical because he knows only too well about the activities of the false teachers. ‘*Who’* in ‘*Who has bewitched you?’*is singular perhaps because behind these false teachers he detects the activity of the devil himself, the deceiving spirit, whom the Lord Jesus called ‘*a liar and the father of lies’* (John 8:44)

Paul here describes his ministry among them as the public exhibition of the reality of the crucifixion, in which and through which Christ ‘*loved* (us) *and gave himself for* (us).’ If righteousness came by means of the Law, ‘*Christ died for nothing’* (2:21). The essence of Paul’s thinking is that their new position is a contradiction of the gospel. Paul’s astonishment is because before their very eyes ‘*Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified’* (3:1). It wasn’t just that Christ was publicly portrayed before their eyes, but that He was portrayed before them ‘*as crucified’* (an emphatic participle at the end of Paul’s sentence). It was as if this bewitching had completely removed from their memory the central fact of Christ’s crucifixion.

The gospel is not general instruction about the Jesus of history, but a specific proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2). The force of the perfect tense of the participle (‘*crucified’*) is that Christ’s work was completed on the cross, and that the benefits of His crucifixion are forever valid and available. Sinners can be justified by God and before God, not because of any works of their own, but because of the atoning work of Christ; not because of anything that they have done or could do, but because of what Christ did once, when He died. The gospel is not an invitation for us to do something but a declaration of what God has already done. It is not a demand but an offer.

If the Galatians had grasped the gospel of Christ crucified, that on the cross Christ did everything necessary for our salvation, they would have realised that the only thing required of them was to receive the gospel by faith. To add good works of any kind to the work of Christ was an offence to His finished work (c.f. 2:21).

Paul now exposes the senselessness of the Galatians’ position. They knew perfectly well that the gospel was received by faith alone since their own experience (3:2-5) and the plain teaching of scripture told them so.

‘*I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?’* (3:2). In view of their present ‘bewitchment’ and readiness to give in to ‘works of law’ (at least circumcision and observance of days), Paul wants to learn from them ‘*just one thing*,’ a phrase which stands in emphatic first position in his sentence. He can narrow everything down to this ‘*one thing’* because he himself had been present when in their response to his teaching of Christ crucified, they had received the Spirit.

Paul’s concern is that their relationship with God was to be based entirely on their trust in Christ and not on their submission to ‘works of law.’ The emphasis is not on human effort to *obtain salvation* but on the believer’s salvation *coming to completion* by their observing certain aspects of the Law.

Paul’s contrast is now between ‘doing the law’ (Paul’s actual wording) and ‘the hearing of faith’ (NIV: ‘*by believing what you heard’*), which puts the emphasis on their putting their trust in Christ when they *heard* the gospel proclaimed to them. It was not their ‘doing the law’ that led to their receiving the Spirit, but their believing (and so putting their trust in) the one about whom they heard when the gospel was proclaimed.

The appeal to ‘receiving the Spirit’ as the evidence of entry into the Christian life demonstrates the crucial role the Spirit plays, not only in Christian conversion itself but also as the singular ‘identity mark’ of those who belong to Christ. The issue throughout the letter is the proper evidence of identity. What uniquely distinguishes God’s people, marks them off as inheritors of the promises made to Abraham? The agitators say: circumcision, probably on the basis of Gentile inclusion in the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:3 and 17:4-7,12. Paul obviously argues for the Spirit. He saw the Spirit alone functioning as the seal of divine ownership, the clear and certain evidence that one has entered into the life of the age to come. Even though Paul’s present contrast is between ‘hearing of faith’ and ‘works of law,’ the ultimate contrast in this argument is between life under Law (slavery) and life in the Spirit (adoption as children) as 4:1-7 makes plain and 5:13 – 6:10 will amplify. The Spirit alone distinguishes God’s people in the new covenant.

Paul’s argument seems to assume that the reception of the Spirit by the Galatians was ‘dynamically experienced.’ Even though Paul seldom mentions any of the visible evidences of the Spirit in contexts like these, his argument rests on there having been clear evidence of the presence of the Spirit of God. This would best account for the way Paul picks up the arguments for life in the Spirit in 5:13 – 6:10.

‘*Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?’* (3:3). The entire argument of the letter is devoted to Paul’s response. The question is not: how does one gain right-standing with God? (how are people saved?) but, once given right-standing with God, how is this relationship maintained? Does Torah observance have any role in the Christian life? Paul believed it had none and will argue in 5:13-15 that the whole of Torah is fulfilled in the single command to ‘*love your neighbor as* *yourself*.’

The ultimate contrast Paul deals with in this letter is not between ‘faith’ and ‘works of law’ (dealing with our entrance into the Christian life) but between the ongoing life in the Spirit – always lived out by faith – and Torah observance. 5:13 – 6:10 is a crucial part of the argument of Galatians, and not just a collection of ethical instructions added at the end. The ethical result of life in the Spirit is part of the essential logic of the letter because it encapsulates ‘how do believers live?’ The alternative is to live by ‘works of law’ ‘attained’ by means of the ‘flesh’ (Paul’s actual wording: ‘*by human effort’* as in the NIV).

The word ‘flesh’ points firstly to the literal cutting of the flesh in circumcision (cf. 6:12,13). Elsewhere though Paul uses ‘flesh’ as the primary description of life before and outside of Christ. To live ‘in the flesh’ is to live according to the values and desires of life in the present age that stand in absolute contradiction to God and His ways. The final contrasts in Paul are eschatological life ‘according to the flesh,’ lived according to the present age that has been condemned through the cross and is passing away, or life ‘according to the Spirit,’ lived in keeping with the values of the coming age inaugurated by Christ through His death and resurrection and empowered by the Spirit. Since life before and outside of Christ is described as ‘flesh,’ and since compliance with identity markers of the people of God under the old covenant is to revert to life before Christ, to submit to ‘works of law’ is to revert to life in the ‘flesh.’ To submit to circumcision is to put one’s confidence before God in that which is merely an expression of ‘flesh,’ which is self-confidence, rather than trust in Christ and Him alone, for a proper relationship with God.

Paul was adamant. To yield to Jewish identity markers was neither an innocent reaching out to Jewish believers nor necessary for Gentile inclusion into the full privileges of the Abrahamic covenant. This was not the way to become members of the people of God in the present age, inaugurated by Christ and the Spirit. Instead, it was ‘rebuilding’ what Christ Himself had dismantled (2:18), trying to be completed by means of the flesh.

‘*Have you suffered so much for nothing—**if it really was for nothing?*’ (3:4). To capitulate to ‘works of law’ is to revert to life in the flesh, and to do that is to have experienced life in the Spirit ‘*for nothing*,’ to be ‘*alienated from* *Christ*,’ to have ‘*fallen away from Christ’* (5:14). Paul’s wording expresses disbelief that people who had had such remarkable experiences should even consider coming under Torah. In context the issue is not a question of ‘losing their salvation.’ The same word translated by the NIV ‘*for nothing’* is used by Paul of the possibility that he laboured *‘in vain’* (2:2), that he ‘*wasted his efforts’* (5:11). In the present case he is not willing to allow that such a situation has already happened – ‘*if it really was for nothing?*’

The NIV follows some other Bible versions in translating the word for ‘experienced’ as ‘*suffered’* (‘*Have you suffered so much for nothing …’*) This is probably not justified. The Greek word itself (*pascho*) has neither negative nor positive connotations. The context colours its meaning and here the Galatian’s experiences were very positive, particularly when described in the next verse (3:5). Moreover, suffering is nowhere else referred to in the letter.

‘*Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?’* (3:5). Paul now appeals to their on-going life in the Spirit as a community of worshipping believers. The sentence begins with an untranslated ‘therefore,’ linking this verse to what has just been said. Paul’s thinking is: ‘if you began life in the Spirit (3:2) and in light of how much of the Spirit’s presence you have experienced (3:4) – all by faith and completely separate to Torah – then so too with your present experience of the Spirit. The rich supply of the Spirit in your midst, including the working of miracles, is not in any way related to Torah. On the contrary, all of this is based on faith in Christ.’

Paul turns the appeal and their attention to God Himself as the One who continually and liberally ‘supplies’ them with the Spirit - ‘*Does God give you his Spirit …’*  As with similar passages in 1 Thessalonians 4:8 and Philippians 1:19, the implication is that even though they had already received the Spirit, there is another sense in which the Spirit is ‘given’ again and again. In contrast to the other two passages though, here the emphasis is on what happens in the community. Every ‘manifestation’ of the Spirit among them for their ‘common good’ (1 Corinthians 12:7) is to be understood as God’s supply of the Spirit in their community life.

There is a close grammatical connection between the giving of the Spirit and the working of miracles. ‘God is present among them by His Spirit’ is closely connected to the fresh supply of the Spirit finding expression in miraculous deeds of various kinds. Paul is continuing to appeal to the visible and supernatural nature of the Spirit’s presence in their midst as ongoing evidence that life in the Spirit, founded on faith in Christ, has no place for traditional ‘works of law.’

The reference to God ‘giving’ His Spirit and ‘working miracles’ serves as further evidence of the genuinely ‘charismatic’ nature of the Pauline churches. The evidence from 1 and 2 Thessalonians indicates that prophecy was a regular and expected phenomenon in these churches. The evidence from 1 Corinthians indicates that speaking in tongues was also a part of the broad experience of Holy Spirit phenomena. What Paul elsewhere calls ‘signs and wonders’ was a regular and expected expression of their life in the Spirit. No further clarification of what Paul includes by ‘*miracles’* is given in the letter.

*‘So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”’* (3:6). Even though this verse serves as a transition to the argument that begins in verse 7, it grammatically belongs to verse 5. Paul is saying: does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your observing the Law, or by believing what you heard, just as ‘Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.’

Paul wants to conclude his sentence this way citing Abraham for a number of reasons. First, the quote relates to Abraham, the recognised ‘father’ of the Jewish nation. The agitators would almost certainly have appealed to Abraham from the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17. Second, the citation has in it the key word ‘*believed’* and ‘*it was credited to him as righteousness*,’ words spoken to Abraham before he was circumcised. By ending his final rhetorical question with this citation, Paul was intending a kind of coup over his opponents’ use of the Genesis account of Abraham and his circumcision. So, with this final citing from scripture regarding Abraham, Paul raises the question: who are Abraham’s ‘legitimate’ children?

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

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