

The Leading of the Spirit (Rom 8.14)

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Our topic for today is the familiar subject of the leading of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14). Although this is a familiar subject, that fact does not mean that it is a correctly understood subject. Actually, there is a great deal of misunderstanding about the Spirit's leading. If you think, for example, that a Christian can decide whether to allow the Spirit to lead him, then, as I intend to show, you totally misunderstand this important slice of biblical teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's leading is a fact for a Christian, not an option. To make my point stick, I will cover the context of the Spirit's leading, some misconceptions, and finally, the paradox of the Spirit's leading.

1A. The Context of the Spirit's leading

In the book of Romans, as a whole, we are in the section on the provision of the gospel (4-11), which responds to the need of the gospel (1-3). All eleven chapters inform us of our need and God's provision. They tell of the state of man in the fall, of both Jew and Gentile, Christ's work as the second Adam, and the fact of a righteousness, not our own, but God's own righteousness given to those who believe in their hearts and confess with their mouths that Jesus Christ is the risen Lord of glory. Thus, there are few exhortations in chapters 1-11 (only two, one is direct, Rom. 6:11-14; and one is indirect, Rom. 8:12-14; a way to read the book is to test this claim). The call to duty picks up in 12-16 beginning with the call to be living sacrifices (12.1-2).

The leading of the Spirit (8:14) is presented in context of an indirect exhortation to do the duty of putting sin to death. Again the indirectness of Romans 8.14 is striking: 1) we have a duty but Paul does not say what it is. Paul speaks of "an obligation" rather than of a duty to do this or that. 2) He tells us what it is not. In general, it is not to the flesh, our fallen nature, which is what we are in the fall without the Spirit. 3) When the duty is particularized, it is buried in an "if...then" statement in the antecedent, "if by the Spirit you *put to death the misdeeds of the body.*" Ultimately, we are exhorted to put sin to death or literally, to "put the acts of the body to death." We are to "kill the actions of the body."

We should clarify the reference to the body here. The body is part for the whole: the sin that manifests itself in your physical body is to be put to death. The body is not evil, physical flesh is not evil, but we sin in the wholeness of our being as flesh and blood human beings. Sin, in the depth of our beings, is called "the flesh," the corrupt fallen nature we have inherited. Thus, the flesh manifests itself through our fleshly, bodily, existence, given our basic make up as material-immaterial selves. The term "body" can be used as a synonym for the flesh because it is where sin manifests itself. That is probably what we have here because Paul simply speaks of acts (like the books of Acts), and calls them acts of the body that are to be killed because they are sinful as acts *of the body* (of the flesh, of the fallen sinful nature). Hence the translation: "misdeeds" for "acts."

Sin is thus not to be looked at lightly. It is serious business—a battle to the death: "One of us is going to die; it is you, sin, or me the sinner. By the grace of the Holy Spirit and by much effort on my part, it is going to be you!" This is a mindset, a mind set on the Spirit (v. 5).

The basis for this indirect but powerful exhortation is found before and after verses 12-13; before the "therefore" (v. 12) and after the "because" (v. 14). So the obligation is based on three things: 1) you have the Spirit who is life and peace, the gift of the work of Christ securing righteousness, 2) the Spirit will give life to your mortal body, though it is subject to dying and death, and 3) you are being led by the Spirit, and thus, are children of God.

All three bases impact the obligation. 1) Since you have the Holy Spirit and righteousness secured by Christ for you (v. 10), then you have an obligation to the Spirit and not to the flesh. 2) Since you have the promise of completed righteousness in the resurrection glory of heaven (v. 11), then you have an obligation, and it is not to the flesh, but to righteousness by the Spirit. So put sin to death in your members in light of the fact that you are righteous in Christ and you are bound for eternal righteousness and peace. For example, put Sabbath sins to death because you have the Holy Spirit and you are bound for everlasting Sabbath rest. 3) Since you are led by the Spirit and are thus children of God (v. 14), then follow in His steps, live as His children, earnestly, studiously, and obediently. In a word, fight sin to the death.

All three of these considerations drive home the fact of this fundamental Christian conflict with sin.

2A. Some misconceptions about the Spirit's leading

It is common for people to have many misconceptions about what it means to be led by the Spirit. This is a case where we definitely need to put misconceptions out of our minds (cf. Warfield, "The Leading of the Spirit," *Biblical and Theological Studies*, pp. 543-559). 1) The leading of the Spirit is not a reference to God's providential leading, like when someone says that God has led him or her to leave one church in order to serve in another. Neither is it a reference to how the Lord leads someone from one place of employment to another. We may call these "providential leadings" of the Lord (and true blessings), but our text speaks to something more fundamental and pervasive. How do we know that? We know it by studying the context. The leading of the Spirit, spoken of in Romans 8.14, relates to the pathway of righteousness in contrast to the misdeeds of the body. Therefore, Paul is talking about the leading of the Spirit *on the pathway of holiness*. 2) It is not a reference to a special voice from the Spirit giving a direct word like "the Spirit told me to go to South America as my pathway of holy service." We walk in the steps of the Spirit by following His words, which we have in Scripture (cf. the larger apostolic foundation of the church and *sola scriptura*). 3) The goal of this leading is not to insure that we escape the difficulties and trials of life. It is to insure that we conquer sin. However, this does not mean that we have no fight to enter or no wounds to endure. It calls us to strenuous effort:

The exhortation to put sin to death by the leading of the Spirit is not given to preserve us from the necessity of strenuous preparation for the tasks before us or from the trouble of rendering decision in the difficult crises of life. It is given specifically to save us from sinning; to lead us in the paths of holiness and truth (Warfield, 547).

3A. The Paradox of the Spirit's leading

The leading of the Spirit causes us to reflect carefully on the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in renewal by the Holy Spirit. Some comments from Warfield are particularly helpful in this connection.

First, Warfield states the paradox with great care for balance (he is also a literary artist). The leading of the Spirit is the power of God unto salvation and therefore "it must needs abide with the sinner, work constantly upon him, enter into all his acts, condition all his doings, and lead him thus steadily onward toward the one great goal" (547; note how fundamental and pervasive this is). That goal is the new life of holiness that is determined by the power extraneous to ourselves for "One is not led when he goes his own way. It is only when an influence distinct from ourselves determines our movements that we can properly be said to be led" (548). It is a "controlling power" that "the strength of the led one is insufficient to withstand" (550) and thus "they go, not where they would, but where He would; they do not what they might wish, but what He determines. This is what it is to be led by the Spirit of God" (552). Nonetheless, this does not mean that the work of the Spirit is "a substitute for their activities" (552). Indeed, "strenuous endeavor" is required of us (558). Paul's language does not promise God's children . . . relief from the weariness of the journey, alleviation of the roughness of the road, freedom from difficulty or danger in its course, or emancipation from the labor of travel. That they have been placed in the right path, that they will be kept continuously in it, that they will attain the goal-of this he assures them; for this it is to be led of the Spirit of God, a power not ourselves controlling our actions, prevalently directing our movement to an end of His choice. But he does not encourage us to relax our own endeavors; for he who is led, even though it be by the Spirit of God, advances by virtue of his own powers and his own efforts (556).

Second, Warfield grounds this balance in the word selected by Paul to describe the action of the Spirit . . . known as His *leading*. The connotation of this word is distinct from guidance which points the way into truth (Jn. 16:13). It is distinct from being carried as was the case for the prophets (2 Pet. 1:21). Nor is it to be confused with being drawn or dragged to Christ initially in the monergistic act of God (Jn. 6:44, cf. Calvin, Inst, II, III, 6, "not a whit remains to man to glory in"). An effectual drawing to Christ is required to bring sinners out of dark bondage and into the light and freedom of the gospel. As Warfield says, "they cannot come to Christ by virtue of any powers native to themselves, but require the action upon them of a power from without, coming to them, drawing their inert, passive weight to Christ, if they are to be brought to Him at all" (554; cf. Warfield's "Psychological Aspects of Faith").

The word Paul uses is contrary to all these ideas, being the same word used for the leading of animals (Matt. 21:2; Acts 8:32), leading the sick and blind (Lk. 10:34; 18:40), and leading prisoners (Jn. 18:28; Acts 6:12; 9:2):

It is to be observed, however, on the other hand, that although Paul uses a term here which emphasizes the controlling influence of the Spirit of God over the activities of God's children, he does not represent the action of the Spirit as a substitute for their activities. If one is not led, in the sense of our text, when he is merely guided, it is equally true that one is not led when he is carried. The animal that is led by the attendant, the blind man that is led to Christ, the prisoner that is led to jail-each is indeed under the control of his leader, who alone determines the goal

and the pathway; but each also proceeds on that pathway and to that goal by virtue of his own powers of locomotion (552).

Remarkably, "the Spirit determines both the end and the way toward it, His will controlling their action, yet it is by their effort that they advance to the determined end" (553). Leading does not induce passivity because the believers "own efforts enter into the progress made under the controlling direction of the Spirit; he supplies, in fact, the force exerted in attaining the progress, while yet the controlling Spirit supplies the entire directing impulse" (553).

Third, Warfield makes practical application of the apparently contradictory nature of the Spirit's leading. He points out that Paul's purpose in speaking of the leading of the Spirit is not intended as a warning to frighten us on the steep and dangerous paths of our journey; instead, they are given "to console and to enhearten" (557) because:

One is not led who is unconscious of the road over which he advances; such a one is rather carried. He who is led treads the road himself, is aware of its roughness and its steepness, pants with the effort which he expends, is appalled by the prospect of the difficulties that open out before him, rejoices in the progress made, and is filled with exultant hope as each danger and obstacle is safely surmounted. (555).

Thus we who know that sin has a dreadful grip upon us have the Holy Spirit in our hearts as "a power not ourselves making for righteousness" and grounding "a cry of victory" (557-8):

And as we repeat it, let us go onward, in hope and triumph in our holy efforts. Let our slack knees be strengthened and new vigor enter our every nerve. The victory is assured. The Holy Spirit within us cannot fail us. The way may be rough; the path may climb the dizzy ascent with a rapidity too great for our faltering feet; dangers, pitfalls are on every side. But the Holy Spirit is leading us. Surely, in that assurance, despite dangers and weakness, and panting chest and swimming head, we can find strength to go ever forward (558).

Concluding remarks

- 1) We do have paradox here, not only in this context, but conveyed in the very word "leading." The Holy Spirit sees to it that we arrive, not where we would, but where He would. Still, we arrive there by our efforts and decisions.
- 2) Neither thread of truth should be removed from the fabric or it will unravel and we will not be fully covered with the warmth of the biblical garments. Consequences are real for setting the truth aside. It is like going out into the cold with holes in our clothes or picking, choosing, omitting from the balanced diet provided by the Holy Spirit. Bad eating habits lead to ill health physically and spiritually.
- 3) But our failures and their consequences do not indicate that the other thread is actually missing or negated. The Holy Spirit is leading with an unbreakable determination. So it is not man-centered. Progress is not something we let God give us. In all the ups and downs, it is a path

of holiness on which the Holy Spirit lets us skin our knees, not for our ruin, but for our betterment; not to excuse sin, but to show us how deeply responsible we are; not to make us lax or slothful, but to stir up our concentration and effort.

Compare this with learning to ride a bike as something you want to do. But you cannot. So you try with training wheels provided by your father. You fall and skin your knees (I remember falling into a neighbor's newly seeded front lawn; that was not too painful physically, but I recall some commotion in the backdrop – perhaps it was a battle of words between my mom and my neighbor). Eventually the training wheels come off (our son Jonathan learned to ride without training wheels but could not stop; he would jump off the oversized bike for his age and let it roll and crash to a halt!). There are both times of skinned knees and times of exhilarating joy as the Holy Spirit takes off the training wheels and lets us ride down the sidewalk, wind in our faces, and heart pounding.

We are on a roll and may not even stop to think that we now know how to go but do not know how to stop. So we end that little stage in our journey with some fear as we jump from one experience to another. We do this perhaps thinking we are all alone, but then He reminds us that He has set us behind and before; He knows the way of the righteous. This knowledge that is too wonderful for me is not just factual insight into details past, present and future (foreknowledge). It is a caring, protecting, observing kind of knowing. Our steps are *ordered* of the Lord. He is there when the bike tumbles, when we tumble to the ground and feel the dirt and grass seed in our faces. He is in control in such a way that we are kept on the pathway of holiness for His names sake. Eventually we will be finally freed from sin and shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

4) If we learn of our Father who sovereignly blesses His children by Christ through the Spirit, then what else can we do but bend the knee in worship, raise the voice in praise, and move the feet in the way of obedience, righteousness, truth and holiness. To the triune God be the praise forever, amen.