

# *Words Have Power*

## *How The Spirit/Scripture Balance Can Be Threatened*

In several of my works I have raised the issue of the balance between the Spirit and the Scriptures. I have tried to make the case that it is not either/or; it is both. I have taken the trouble to argue this because I am convinced that it is a vital question; a contemporary, vital question at that. Alas, as so often in the history of the church, the balance between the Spirit and the Scriptures is under threat today.

On the one hand, there are those who so emphasise the Scriptures (usually whittled down to the so-called moral law) at the expense of the Spirit that they are in danger – to put it no stronger – of becoming legalists.

On the other hand, with the recovery of the theology of the new covenant – something which I applaud wholeheartedly – there is a risk that an old danger might rear its head, an old mistake might be repeated. Some have so stressed the inward glories of the new covenant that they have given the impression that the inward Spirit trumps the outward Scripture. This – once again, to put it no stronger – can give the impression of licence being mistaken for liberty.

In this article, I am concerned with the latter danger. It is not that the former is not important, but I confine my present remarks to the latter danger. For a long time, I was Reformed and carried the first risk. Now, as a new-covenant theologian, I am faced with some who teach in a way that might well lead to the second.

Let me be set out what I am talking about by asking a few questions. Is the law of Christ external, internal or both? Indeed, is there such a thing as ‘the law of Christ’? Again, is there such a thing as progressive sanctification? If there is, is it, to use the technical terms, monergistic or synergistic? Monergistic sanctification states that the believer’s progressive sanctification is the work of God through the Holy Spirit alone, as opposed to synergistic sanctification, which argues that the human will

cooperates with the Spirit. In other words, is the believer passive or active in progressive sanctification, assuming it exists?

Scripture teaches that the believer is positionally sanctified in Christ, immediately perfect at the point of faith by virtue of his union with Christ, but that he must live this out in a life of progressive sanctification, growing in grace and Christ-likeness. This not an option; it is essential. However, he can do this only because he has died to the law and been united to Christ, being now under new ownership, with a new Lord, and married to a new husband – Christ. The believer’s progressive sanctification comes through the power of the Spirit within, the one who gives him a new heart to love and obey, with determination, the law of Christ written throughout the Scriptures. I will not stop to argue all this, having done so at length in several works.<sup>1</sup>

As I say, some new-covenant theologians are challenging these claims.

OK! But why am I getting all steamed up about it now?

My first concern, of course, is for the maintenance of the authority of Scripture. But not in an arid way. My concern in engaging in this debate is pastoral. That is to say, I am thinking of those who are watching, and yet fail to see the point of all the hair-splitting (as it seems to them) that appears to be going on. The fact is, of course, nothing of the kind is happening, however it may look. As far as I am concerned, this is no ‘angels on the head of a pin’ argument! Vital issues are at stake. And I am not thinking of the next two weeks. I have 20 to 50 years in mind.

As I said when tackling infant baptism,<sup>2</sup> that which might appear to be good today will, if you take it up, come back to bite you, and bite you hard. Infant baptism is unscriptural. Adopting it, therefore, carries a heavy price tag, the cost of which, as in times past, will be borne in succeeding generations. I gave historical evidence to support my assertion.

And herein lies my sense of foreboding in this present issue. I am thinking of those who have come to see – or who are coming to

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<sup>1</sup> See, in particular, my *Believers Under the Law of Christ; Liberty Not Licence; Fivefold Sanctification; Positional Sanctification; Christ Is All*.

<sup>2</sup> See my *Infant Baptism Tested*.

see – the glories of the liberty which believers have in Christ in the new covenant. Might they be attracted by teaching which so stresses that liberty, so stresses the inward work of the Spirit, that there is a risk of diminishing the role of Scripture? Are they being captivated by the notion that there is no such thing as progressive sanctification, that the believer’s sanctification is entirely at once complete and perfect,<sup>3</sup> that Christ is so formed in him that he is free from all law? Well... look before you leap is my advice. Before you go down that route, make sure of its biblical ground. Get the theology sorted out now; now, before you buy into it. And you know the way to verify such things. Isaiah 8:20 and Acts 17:11 still stand!

As I say, I am not arguing my corner here. All I want to do in this article is give an example of the sort of thing that is being said, in order to show what it might lead to. I have taken what follows from a recent (September 2017) thread on a Facebook group,<sup>4</sup> some of whose members resolutely promote the view I contest.

The question was raised:

Could the Holy Spirit still accomplish his mission without the written word of God as we now have it?

Note the question: ‘Could... still...?’ ‘Could the Holy Spirit still accomplish his mission without the written word of God as we now have it?’

This was posted by a member in response:

Yes, because he will convict the world of its sin, and of God’s righteousness, and of... judgment.

When this was challenged, the correspondent replied thus:

There are places and times where Scripture was not available. The Holy Spirit was their only hope of hearing the gospel, so yes – the Holy Spirit could still accomplish his mission without the written word.

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<sup>3</sup> Positionally speaking the believer is in Christ perfect and free of all condemnation. But progressive sanctification – which is never perfect in this life – is equally scriptural.

<sup>4</sup> A Facebook thread has an opening post under which members can make comments.

This illustrates what I want to say.

I admit at once that God can do whatever he wills. No question about it! If he had decreed that a man would recite the entire AV in 1500 (even though the KJV was only produced 1604-1611), then that man would have done that very thing. But if we were to make this the basis for our theology and practice, we should need our head examined! What God can do, what God might do, is of no concern to us; indeed, we have no business prying into it. Deuteronomy 29:29 deals with that! Let's nail that point once and for all! This should signal the end of the thread, a thread which should never have been started in the first place. The question should never have been posed!

Coming closer to home, it is true that in the days immediately following Pentecost, the gospel advanced in the world without the apostolic Scriptures. Of course. But the apostles were still alive and active, giving their authoritative guidance, receiving revelation of truth which they were writing down, and so turning it into Scripture, all in accordance with Christ's promise that they would be led into all truth by the Spirit (John 16:12-15). In addition, the early church had new-covenant prophets who, with the apostles, were foundational, Christ being the real foundation (1 Cor. 3:9-10; Eph. 2:20). And, of course, people could verify what they were hearing by the Old Testament Scriptures, as did the Bereans (Acts 17:11). Even so, I admit that in those early days, the Spirit did work without the written apostolic scriptures.

Nevertheless, as before, noting the uniqueness of the transitional circumstances of the time, is it right to speculate about whether or not the Spirit might work in the same special manner today, now that we have the complete Scriptures? And even granting that he might, what we need to concentrate on is not what *God might do*, but *what he has revealed*. Indeed, why are people asking about what God might do? What purpose will such a question serve? Especially when it raises the possibility of a gap between the Spirit and the Scriptures?

The real question is not: Can the Spirit give us God's mind independently of Scripture?, but: Is this the way we should be thinking in the first place? What is more, since the sum total of saving truth is now revealed in written Scripture, it can only be that

the Spirit will reveal the same truth in a direct way, even if he does speak independent of the written word today. Unless, of course, some people want to claim that God gives new truth independent of, and additional to, Scripture. Which I certainly do not!

But my main concern lies not in this speculation – for that is what it is. It is the danger inherent in such speculation. Having such a public debate as this – what can it lead to? What good purpose is it intended to serve? Putting it another way: What evil consequences might come from it? What will happen if people listen to this kind of talk, if this seed now sown actually germinates? Large oaks come from small acorns. In this kind of talk, I see a gap (oh, so slight a gap) being prised (oh, so gently prised) between the Spirit and Scripture, and, for what it's worth, I want to register my protest. If enough people keep tapping the wedge that is being nestled ever-so innocently into the gap, that gap will widen. As sure as eggs are eggs, that gap will widen.

The correspondent cited John 16:8-11. I think we should look at the entire section, up to and including verse 15:

And when [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:8-15).

As Christ said, the Spirit convinces sinners of sin, righteousness and judgment, and all in connection with Christ himself. Granted that for a little while, in unique circumstances, the Spirit did this without the apostolic Scriptures, nevertheless, he was doing it even as he was producing those very Scriptures through the apostles. Moreover, as Christ immediately went on to explain, the gospel age (after those initial extraordinary days) is to be marked by the presence and power of the Spirit, the Spirit and the Scriptures in tandem. After all, the Spirit's work of conviction is in connection

with Christ. But which Christ? The Christ of men's imagination? The Christ of Christendom? The Christ of Christmas? The Christ of Scripture! And only the Christ of Scripture. There are many Christs in the world (Matt. 24:24), but only one saving Christ – the Christ of Scripture. As Joseph Hart put it:

*The Scriptures and the Lord  
Bear one tremendous name;  
The written and the incarnate Word  
In all things are the same.*

So the Spirit, convincing sinners in connection with Christ, will be using Scripture to do it.<sup>5</sup>

Just now I used the word 'innocently'. I did so advisedly. I accept that the correspondent may well deplore the suggestion of any such dangerous construction as I have set out being placed on what he/she wrote. Very well. But this is precisely what I am trying to tease out. Immense care is needed in such things. It is what people take away from what we say, not merely what we say, that matters. And it is not only what we say. What we do *not* say has an impact, too. In other words, we have a responsibility to do all we can to prevent people drawing the wrong conclusion from what we say.

And so that no-one can misunderstand my position, I assert categorically that the believer is under the law of Christ, that that law is written in all Scripture, and that the believer is responsible to obey it, moved and enabled by the power of the Spirit. I say there is not the slightest hint of a gap between the Spirit and the Scriptures. It is both. Not either/or. Both.

I close as I often do, and appeal to all to search the Scriptures on these things (Acts 17:11).

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, his usual method is by using believers to preach the Scriptures, supremely the gospel, taking 'preaching' in its widest new-covenant sense. See Rom. 1:14-17; 1 Cor. 1:17 – 2:16; 9:16; 2 Cor. 4:5-6.