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“What It Means to ‘Keep in Step with the Spirit’—

A Careful Interpretation of Galatians 5:25 and Its Implications for Practical Christian Living”¹

“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

(Galatians 5:25)

The Apostle Paul taught that the Christian life is grounded in God the Father’s love and grace, in what Christ did for us on the cross, and in the ongoing, active work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Yet, what is the Christian’s responsibility in the spiritual life? I’m not suggesting that Christians have a role in earning or procuring their salvation. I’m speaking of the day-to-day life of those who are in a relationship with God, saved by grace through faith, and true followers of Christ. These Christians trust in God for their salvation, but also want to filled with and led by the Holy Spirit in concrete ways, which enable them to experience the abundant life in Christ (John 10:10) and to fulfill God’s will for their lives.

From a New Testament perspective, any discussion of this important, subject related to practical Christian experience and living, must include the Holy Spirit. This, in turn, calls for a carefully

¹ This article is excerpted, with some modifications, from my forthcoming coming book, *Saying Yes to God: How to Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017).

developed pneumatology (doctrine of the Holy Spirit). In this short article, we must confine ourselves to just one biblical author, Paul; to just one of his letters, Galatians; and even to one single, but critically important verse: Galatians 5:25.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, after a lengthy discourse on the opposition of the sinful nature to the will of the Spirit in which Paul details the marks of the "flesh," which stand in contrast to the "fruit of the Spirit," Paul sums up the real intention of his teaching. He states succinctly, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5:25). His broad intention seems clear enough. He wants the Galatian Christians to stop using their freedom to indulge their sinful desires, and instead to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Yet, his phraseology raises important questions about the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians, as well as human responsibility vis-à-vis the activity of the Spirit. In other words, when it comes to practical Christian living, what part does God play, and what part are humans responsible for?

To focus specifically on Paul's phraseology in this verse, why does he mention both living by the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit. What does it mean to "live by" the Spirit? What does it mean to "keep in step with" the Spirit? Do the two phrases mean the same thing? If they differ, how so? To try to answer these questions will be the initial focus of this article, followed by a discussion of what keeping in step with the Spirit entails in practical Christian living.

Living by the Spirit

According to Scripture, there are many different ways in which we can or do live by the Spirit.

If we group some of the most important biblical references by categories or types of actions, we can identify at least ten different ways the Spirit of God gives life to human beings, which would be particularly applicable to Christians. Though all these references do not come from Paul's writings, together they represent a consistent New Testament perspective on how God works in human lives through the Spirit, and thus make up the theological thought-world Paul was immersed in and contributed to. In bullet point fashion, we learn from Scripture that the Spirit . . .

1. Gives life to every human being. (Gen 2:7; Ps 104:29–30; Acts 17:24–28)
2. Convicts of sin. (John 16:7–11) The Spirit shows us our sin and convinces us it is wrong. To some extent, this may be the same as the human conscience, though psychologists teach us that many things may affect our sense of guilt and shame. Thus, we should not think that every guilty feeling we have comes from the Holy Spirit.
3. Guides us to truth and specifically enables us to have faith in Jesus. (John 14:6; 16:13–15; Eph 2:8–9; 1 John 4:1–3)
4. Makes us spiritually alive in a renewed relationship with God. (John 3:1–8, 16; 7:37–39; 20:19–23) That is, we are “born again.”
5. Inspires a living hope and real joy, coupled with a deep love for Jesus. (1 Pet 1:3–9)
6. Gives power to resist sin and to live at peace. (Rom 8:1–6, 9; Gal 5:16)
7. Enables us to experience and exhibit “fruit” in our lives, which enable us to relate to others in more loving and godly ways. (Gal 5:22–23; 2 Pet 1:2–3)
8. Helps us to pray in ways we could not do on our own. (Rom 8:26–27; 1 Cor 14:2, 18; Eph 4:18)

9. Gifts and empowers us for Christian service to build up the body of Christ. (1 Cor 12; Rom 12:3–8; 15:18–19; Eph 4:11–16)
10. Empowers us to fight and overcome evil. (Eph 6:10–20, see especially vv. 17–18) While Jesus taught that we should ask God to “deliver us from evil,” Paul taught that Christians may call upon the Lord to take a stand against evil forces that may come against us.

In narrative form, these many biblical references reveal the progressive nature of the Holy Spirit’s activity and work in the human beings, starting from simply the divine breath within us and going all the way to a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led, and Spirit-empowered follower of Christ. Life in the Spirit begins with simply possessing God’s life-giving breath, and thus applies to all human beings whether we recognize God’s presence within us or not. However, the quality of how we experience the Spirit expands considerably when we enter a life-changing, personal relationship with Christ. In fact, the kind of experience with the Spirit that Luke, John, and Paul refer to is so qualitatively different from ordinary human life without Christ that we must consider this a kind of new life in the Spirit.

For the Christian, God’s Spirit leads us to Jesus, gives us faith, and enables us to surrender our wills to God’s will. Something happens inside of us that is like coming alive. We experience the forgiveness of sins. God takes away our guilt and shame. We become convinced that we truly belong to God and are members of the family of God. We come to love Jesus and want to follow him. We want to stop sinning, and we feel more strength and power to live for God, even if we still battle with stubborn sin throughout our spiritual journeys. All these experiences fit with

what Jesus meant by being born again, or, being born of the Spirit (John 3:1–8). John explained that it is the Spirit of God that leads us to the truth about Jesus Christ, and that a true encounter with the love of God will transform us and enable us to become loving people in ways not possible beforehand (1 John 4).

As we mature in our relationship with Christ, we will experience more and more ways the Spirit breathes new life into our minds, relationships, and ways of being in the world. We will see God working through us to bless others and to enable us to contribute meaningfully in the church and in society. We will be better able to love God, ourselves, and others in life-giving ways. For all these reasons, we can say we are living by the Spirit, because God’s presence in us and the Spirit’s working in and through us gives us a life that was and is not possible otherwise.

Thus, when Paul said, “we live by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25), he no doubt had in mind most if not all the ten ways outlined and discussed above. However, he particularly was referencing the new life made possible since the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers in Christ.² Yet, what is possible through the Spirit because we “live by the Spirit,” isn’t automatically the same as what we will experience in daily life. Though we truly live by the Spirit as believers in Christ in whom the Spirit is at work in life-giving ways, we must also learn

² According to Scripture, the Spirit was active in human beings in similar—albeit more limited—ways in Old Testament times. The Spirit would, on occasion, empower individuals in extraordinary ways and was a source of wisdom to all who would listen. Yet, the former ways of the Spirit are not foremost in Paul’s mind in Galatians or in any of his writings. For Paul, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection along with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit are so significant that they have become the central pieces of his theology. Practically, since Pentecost, trusting in Christ and being led by the Spirit are now the key to a right relationship with God and to one’s ability to please God and fulfill God’s purposes for one’s life. (See, e.g., Gal 3:1–5; Rom 8:1–8.) The ways God’s Spirit has worked and works in the world among those who do not know or follow Jesus Christ is an important and relevant topic in pneumatology (the study of the Spirit), but outside the scope of this article. Here our focus is on the critical role of Holy Spirit for followers of Christ.

how to get in step with the Spirit and then keep in step with the Spirit in order to keep growing and to live fruitful lives in Christ's service. Here is where human responsibility comes in.³

Keeping in step with the Spirit

So many of us Christians know the “right answers” when it comes to following Christ and serving God, but we falter in our own efforts to practice what we preach at significant points. We may have experienced new life in the Spirit, and genuinely appreciate many ways we have experienced God touching, blessing, or working in our lives for God. Yet, at the same time, real gaps still exist at times between our ideology/theology/philosophy and how we conduct our lives, handle temptations, and interact with our brothers and sisters in Christ, not to mention those from other races, tribes, or religions.

As sincere Christians, we are all trying to do what is right, and most of us have seen fruit from God's grace and our efforts in many different aspects of our lives. Yet, at the same time, if we're honest, we will admit that we are also failing at key points, too. Either we just don't know what to do differently, or we lack the motivation, ability, or strength to do what Christ calls us to do.

³ In the original Greek text, Paul uses the indicative of the verb *zao* (to live) to state what is true of Christian experience along with the imperatival form of *stoicheo* (to keep in step) to indicate what Christians need to do. In Louw and Nida's lexicon, they suggest that this verse be translated, “Since the Spirit has given us life, we should also let him control our lives” (41.12). A similar idea exists in Galatians 5:16, where Paul also refers to the notion of keeping in step with the Spirit, only in different words. There he instructs the Galatians to “walk (*peripateo* in Greek) by the Spirit.” Unfortunately, the New International Version and the New Revised Version translate this imperatival phrase using the words, “live by the Spirit.” While this Greek verb (*peripateo*) can be translated as such, doing so here may obscure the differentiation Paul makes in 5:25 between “living by the Spirit,” and “keeping in step with the Spirit.” Louw and Nida rightly indicate that *peripateo* and *stoicheo* can function as synonyms (41.47).

Worse, sometimes we still resist the Spirit or live in rebellion to God in this or that area of our lives.

This has been the story for Christians since the beginning. This is the story for every would-be follower of Jesus Christ. This human story explains why every writer in the New Testament not only announces God's wonderful love and grace extended to us through Christ, but also devotes significant space to overcoming ignorance, sinful desires, persistent resistance to God, and unhealthy, ingrained habits in everyday life. For practical Christian living, something more is needed than just faith or following the traditions we inherited. Something more is needed than having Christ in our hearts and possessing the Holy Spirit. Here is where keeping in step with the Spirit is so important.

When Paul said, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit," he was shifting from what God does for us to what we must do in response to the presence of Christ and the Spirit in our lives. The Spirit renews our hearts and minds, reveals truth to us, provides reliable guidance on our spiritual journey, empowers us to overcome our resistance to God, and corrects us when we wander off the path, but usually doesn't force us to obey. That's something we must do. Though God is surely speaking to each one of us regularly, we must listen for the Spirit's voice, and cooperate with his leading. Though the Spirit is the greatest power available to us, it is a resource we must draw on to benefit from it. Though the Spirit may even chase us and compel us at times, we still must say "yes" to God in order to keep in step with the Spirit.

On a practical level, most, if not all, of the ways that we “keep in step with the Spirit” will flow from how we “live” by the Spirit. In other words, if we want to know how the Spirit might be leading us at any given moment, we can reflect on the ten ways that Christians live by the Spirit (above). It is likely that the Spirit is prompting us in some way that fits one of his chief roles in their lives. Since we know what it is to experience new life through the Spirit, we should actively draw upon the power of the Spirit to consistently live in freedom (from sin) and to do whatever good the Spirit might prompt us to do.

The Spirit’s prompting, stirring, enlivening, and empowering us provides the internal resources we need to live a Christ-centered, fruitful life, but we must draw on or respond to the Spirit’s leading to make the called-for changes. We must take what we receive and then actively (re-) direct our attitudes, actions, and priorities in concrete ways that stem from the Spirit’s life-giving presence in our lives. This may involve just remaining open to however the Spirit may choose to get our attention or speak to us, or it may require actively drawing on the Spirit’s power and presence for whatever help we need. In other words, keeping in step with the Spirit requires cultivating a lifestyle of listening regularly for the voice of the Spirit, and then staying ready to cooperate by following, obeying, and submitting our will to God’s will in a hundred little ways every day. This is the meaning of Paul’s imperative, and it is the only way any of us can stay close to God, grow spiritually, and fulfill God’s good purposes for our lives.

A simple path: Listening and cooperating

Consequently, in its most basic form, to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25) comes down to listening for the small voice of God within us and cooperating with the Spirit’s promptings, as a

way of life. This is what Spirit-led living is all about, and it applies to every possible aspect of our lives, every day. It's not magical and rarely astounding. It's usually straightforward, often subtle, and extremely practical. Still, keeping in step with the Spirit must be learned—not because it's complicated or reserved for the highly educated or gifted few, but because it is so natural and simple that some of us can miss the Spirit's leading while looking for something more dramatic. We lack confidence in the little promptings of God so we flounder looking for something else that may never come.

Others of us can miss the Spirit's leading because down deep we actually don't want it. Listening to what threatens us can be very painful or frightening. Either we don't want to face some unflattering deficiency in our lives, or we can't bear the thought of having to make changes we don't want to make. As a result, our minds may work over time to discount or question what we're feeling and sensing. Something or someone is telling us to open our eyes, to listen to our heart, or to change our behavior; but frankly, we don't want to. In discerning God's leading, careful deliberations about important matters are usually wise and needed, but for some of us, we develop a complicated mental process that is little more than a mask for our resistance, stubbornness, or outright rebellion.

In the end, such resistance is exhausting and counterproductive. So much energy is chewed up trying to justify ourselves or to prove why our way of thinking or doing something is actually right or better than whatever the voice emerging from within us is proposing. Our fear of what God might ask us to do blocks our ability and willingness to listen. No matter what the source of the voice, if the idea is a good one, and we resist, we're usually sorry. We wind up restless,

frustrated, disappointed, and generally unhappy—and others are often unhappy with us as well. If instead we listen to the voice with an open mind and heart, the result is entirely different. We will usually be led to whatever truth we need to hear in the process of listening carefully, and we often experience peace and quiet resolve to follow the path marked out for us by Jesus and the Spirit.

Listening is at the heart of a living relationship with God

Whether we are adept at hearing God’s voice or not, the teaching of the Bible makes clear that we are all called to learn to listen for the voice of God and to be ready to respond appropriately. Over and over again in literally hundreds of verses in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, believers are told either explicitly or implicitly to “hear” or “listen” to the words of God. Usually the call signals that the prophet or teacher is going to reveal the will of God or give instructions to believers that must be followed.

As one important example, the Hebrew verb, *shema* (translated, “to hear”), appears in one of the most significant Old Testament texts, traditionally known as the Shema⁴: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut 6:4–5). These verses are foundational in the Judeo-Christian tradition, because they affirm Israel’s belief in one God and introduce the commandment to love God with all one’s being, a directive Jesus later called the greatest commandment of all.⁵ The points of significance here are, first, that the content of the teaching

⁴ Deut 6:4; the verb is also found in Deuteronomy at 4:1; 5:1; 6:3 and 9:1.

⁵ In its biblical context, the Shema sets the stage for the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy. In Hebrew tradition ever since, the Shema has also formed an important part of the Jewish evening and morning prayer, as part of a confession of faith. Jesus’s teaching on the primacy of love can be found in all the Gospels: Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30;

includes the call to “hear” the Word of God and is not simply an introduction to what follows. To listen to the voice of God is constitutive of a right relationship with God. Then, as a second and equally important point, when one listens to God the most important message one will ever hear will have to do with love. As Spirit-led followers of Christ, we, too, can expect that repeatedly the Spirit will lead us to express love for God or love for others. Our primary job is to listen and to follow the love-promptings.

Listening to God means listening to Jesus and the Holy Spirit

Starting with the New Testament, Jesus becomes the one we are to listen to. Jesus stands at the center of God’s revelation of himself and of all that is good, right and true. At Jesus’s baptism, God the Father says, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him” (Luke 9:35, italics added).

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke of himself as both the good shepherd and the gate, whose sheep “listen to his voice” (10:3). Jesus adds that there are sheep that are not from the same pen who also “listen to my voice” (10:16). When confronted by Pontius Pilate, Jesus declared, “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (18:37).

After Jesus’s death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit takes his place as the day to day guide for believers. Before his death, Jesus spoke of the coming Spirit of truth, who would “teach [them] all things and remind [them] of everything I [Jesus] have said to [them]” (14:17, 26). The

Luke 10:27. Cf., other NT teaching on the importance of love as the primary marker of those who know God and follow Christ, e.g., John 13:34; 1 John 4:21.

implication was that it would be very important for Jesus's disciples to be listening for the voice of the Spirit, who would be sent by God to tell them what they needed to hear.

At the end of his long upper room discourse, Jesus returns to the subject of the Spirit and its important role in the lives of his disciples:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.* He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (John 16:12–15, italics added)

Jesus was not saying that the Spirit's role was to guide all followers of all times into new truth, but rather was to help Jesus's disciples to understand what they could not accept at the time of his earthly ministry, namely who he was and the suffering he had to endure on behalf of the human race. Thus, on one hand, we should not think that the Spirit will be the source of revealing all truth on all subjects on an ongoing basis. Jesus's promise of the Spirit, as found in John 16, was primarily for his disciples, who would need help to make sense of Jesus's crucifixion and glorification.⁶ At the same time, the fact that the Spirit was God's tool for opening their minds, refreshing their memories, and zeroing in on truth for the disciples indicates that these are the kinds of things the Spirit does—not just for the apostles but in anyone with whom the Spirit has contact. Simply, when the Spirit speaks, we should expect to hear important truths pertaining to our relationship with God, to the person and work of Christ, and to what it means to follow Christ.

⁶ John Levison, *Inspired: The Holy Spirit and the Mind of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013) 150.

We can wait until truth comes crashing down on us, such as when life falls apart in some way or when others we love and care about suffer serious consequences of our living in denial of some truth that we're not facing. Or, as a much more helpful and less painful alternative, we can proactively seek to know and live by the truth in every aspect of our lives. We can humble and open ourselves to whatever God wants to reveal to us. We can ask God to help us to see whatever truth we need to see, and to find the strength we need to keep in step with however the Spirit is leading.

Keeping in step with the Spirit when it is hard to do so

When we fall out of step with the Spirit due to our reactions to some disturbing situation in our life, we must take action to get back into step as quickly as possible. Our inner felt-need for control, for example, surges forward and takes over, and we stop listening to the Spirit and drawing on God's help to handle the situation well. What we need to do instead, in order to keep in step (or get back in step) with the Spirit, is to reach out to make a conscious connection with God and ask for help. We need to find a healthy and faith-full perspective that is built on trusting God and approaching the situation with wisdom, inner strength, and confidence.

Practically, this often begins by relinquishing our anxiety to God in prayer, and asking God to work in us, through us, and in the situation for good. It is not the prayer itself that produces the inner peace and confident perspective that we need, as if it were a magic incantation. No, our relief and help comes from the Holy Spirit, who is already present within us, but whom we are accessing in a conscious way by praying. This process of keeping in step with the Spirit when we are most vulnerable to falling back on our own instincts or to being overwhelmed by our fears is

exactly what Paul advised the Philippians to use. When they were anxious over the threat of persecution from nonbelievers in Philippi and were in turmoil due to internal conflicts within the church, he wrote:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:6-7)

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he doesn't speak specifically about being filled with or keeping in step with the Spirit as he does extensively in Romans and Galatians, but he still holds out depending on God's working in our lives and prayer as essential aspects of the Christian life.⁷ In Philippians, repeatedly he speaks of the importance of focusing our minds on God, Christ, Christ-like values in the body of Christ, our calling and so forth, ultimately with the goal of having the "same mind [in us] that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5, NRSV).⁸ Ultimately, how we focus our minds makes all the difference in the world to our ability to keep in step with the Spirit, which means, practically, being able to draw on the mind of Christ and the power of God in order to live with wisdom, strength, peace, confidence, and love in the midst of challenging circumstances. Likewise, toward the end of the letter, Paul reiterates the connection between how we focus our minds and our experience of God within us when he writes:

Finally, brothers [and sisters], whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:8-9)

All of us need help sometimes

⁷ E.g., Phil 1:6; 19; 2:12-13; 3:8-9; 4:19.

⁸ Other references in Philippians to the importance of what and how we think, and to seeking God's help to shape our thinking so that it will be in better sync with Christ and God's will for the church include Phil 1:9-11; 2:2-9; 3:3-15.

One final point of interpretation on Galatians 5:25. When we recognize that Paul's call to "keep in step with the Spirit" implies human responsibility for at least a portion of our spiritual lives, we ought not interpret that to mean that we have to do this on our own. In fact, Paul makes clear elsewhere, such as in his letter to the Philippians, that we are always dependent on God "to work in us to will and to do what pleases [God]." (See Philippians 2:12-13.) Even though we are responsible to make every effort to listen to and cooperate with the Spirit, we will always need God's help to do so. We also need help from others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, as Paul goes to great lengths to explain in several passages.⁹ Consequently, part of taking responsibility (in part) for our spiritual vitality and growth includes asking for help from God and from others.

Practically, asking for help should begin with God. Whether we are seeking help to know what to do, how to do it, or for a greater ability to do it, the place to start is in prayer. Listening for the voice of God continues to be the fundamental component for one's spiritual life. As we seek God's guidance, we should fully expect that the Spirit will send us out into the world to receive help from others and to learn more from the Spirit in the process of acting in faith and serving. But the place to begin is on our knees. There, in humility and openness, we ask God to show us what we most need and to guide us in a process of seeing and doing all that is necessary to think straight, to stay in the sacred love flow, and to fulfill God's purposes for our lives.

All of us at times need the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to something that we've not been able to see, but need to, in order to cope with some situation at hand and move forward. We also need

⁹ For example, see Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 12:1-27.

the Holy Spirit to work in us or in whomever else may be involved in our lives in order to shift something so that God's love and power will be able to flow more freely. By all means, if we already know what we need to do, then we should just do it. But, in my experience, often I feel like I just can't make the needed changes on my own; and I certainly can't produce any desired changes in someone else. Prayer is asking God both to help us see what we can and need to do, and it's asking for God to do in us, in others, and in the situation in general what we cannot do.

Finally, when it comes to asking others for help for our spiritual lives, the kind of help we seek and how the help is offered are also very important. Seeking help from others should complement, rather than replace, our own efforts. The help we need is not to short-circuit our own struggle to grow personally and spiritually. As followers of Christ we need to keep growing in our ability to listen to and to cooperate with the Spirit for ourselves so that we can make proper use of the counsel and support of others who are listening, praying, and seeking guidance from God with us. Keeping in step with the Spirit requires striking a balance between taking personal responsibility for one's life and relationship with God and seeking the right kind of input and help from one's community, whether it is submitting to elders and authority figures or getting counsel from trusted friends, pastors, and advisors so that we can make better decisions for ourselves.

Conclusion

We live by the Spirit by the grace of God at work in our lives through Christ and the Spirit's work within and through us. Our responsibility is to not only be recipients of God's grace as beneficiaries of God's life-giving Spirit, but to actively listen for the voice of the Spirit, and then

cooperate in every way we know how. The Spirit, who gives us life, is also the one who reveals truth to us and leads us in the ways God wants us to go. In as much as we direct our thoughts and attention to God and say “Yes” to God—not just to accept God’s gift of salvation but every day and in every way the Spirit calls to us—we will be fulfilling our responsibility. Such attentiveness, responsiveness and cooperation is what it means to keep in step with the Spirit. When Paul urged the Galatians to “keep in step with the Spirit,” this is what he wanted them to do.

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