

Poison at the Root

We need, first of all, to get to the root.

Getting to the root

What, in Scripture, is the great antithesis to ‘Spirit’? It is ‘flesh’. Sometimes this dependence on ‘flesh’ is spoken of in terms of ‘law’ or ‘works’.¹ Of course, in the early days of the new covenant this dependence was often shown by a reversion to Judaism, but the principle applies much wider than that. Moreover, the repudiation of the Spirit need not always be overt.

We know that Scripture starkly contrasts the Spirit and the flesh, the Spirit and law. As we have seen:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him (Rom. 8:1-9).

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed

¹ See my ‘Paul’s Answer: The Spirit’ in my *False*.

Poison at the Root

in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified...

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?... Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith...? (Gal. 2:16; 3:1-5).

Just as at that time [that is, in the days of Ishmael and Isaac] he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now (Gal. 4:29).

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness...

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident... I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is... against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another (Gal. 5:4-5,16-26).

The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life... Those who want to make a good showing in the flesh... would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it

Poison at the Root

from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (Gal. 6:8,12-15).

In light of such passages, look again at this:

No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God (Rom. 2:28-29).

By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight... But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe... One is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Rom. 3:20-22,28).

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh (Rom.13:14).

Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:50).

You show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:3-6).

We all... beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

We regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has

Poison at the Root

come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself (2 Cor. 5:16-18).

We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3).

Consequently, to ‘repudiate the power’, to repudiate the Spirit, is to encourage the flesh, to promote the law – **and vice-versa**. Men are guilty of ‘having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power’ when they give the least encouragement to the notion that ‘godliness’ (in all its aspects) can be obtained in any other way than by the power of the Spirit.

We need to be clear. I spoke of ‘godliness in all its aspects’. While it is true that we are speaking about justification, we must not confine Paul’s warning to Timothy – and all the apostolic warnings about reversion to the law – to justification; sanctification – both positional and progressive² – is also in view.³

As I say, in the apostolic days, the issue concerning law showed itself in a widespread effort to return to Judaism – hence, for instance, the letter to the Hebrews.⁴ Today, while we should not be thinking only in terms of a return to Judaism – although, strident calls for ‘a return to Jewish roots’ is far from unknown (indeed, I fear it is on the rise) – whenever eyes are taken away from Christ and centred on flesh, works or law, we are coming face to face with the ‘repudiation of the Spirit’. And that is far from uncommon!⁵

* * *

Now for the poison.

² See my *Fivefold; Positional*.

³ See my *Christ; False*.

⁴ But see also Romans; 2 Corinthians; Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians, Colossians; 1 Peter. See my *False*.

⁵ See my *False*.

Poison at the Root

We have not exhausted Paul's warning to Timothy about those:

...having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power
(2 Tim. 3:5).

One of the marks of this age is that there will those who profess Christ – they have 'the appearance of godliness' – but they lack the reality, they do not have its power.

But Paul did not actually say that; he probed much deeper – and in two respects.

First, the apostle was speaking of those who, while they have a show of spirituality, not only lack the Spirit, but they *deny* the power, they *deny* the Spirit. The word means 'deny, repudiate, oppose, abrogate, forsake, or renounce'. Not only do such people not have the power of the Spirit, but they actually hate all talk of it, they resist it, they repudiate it; they decidedly prefer the veneer, the varnish, to the reality, and they are prepared to fight for it.

Secondly, Paul tells Timothy: 'Avoid such people' (2 Tim. 3:5); that is, shun them, have nothing to do with them. Timothy must not tolerate and accommodate such, he must not cosy up to them, but shun them; indeed, keep on shunning them: 'be you shunning'.

In short, Paul says that this age will be marked by those who resist the Spirit. Moreover, he says, the duty, the obligation, laid on true believers, the *ekklēsia*, does not stop at guarding against such: believers must shun them. Certainly they must not accept, tolerate or accommodate them.

This, of course, is not the only scriptural warning about resisting the Spirit, and how to deal with it. Stephen was blunt:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears,
you always resist the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51).

Poison at the Root

Stephen had observed the practice. But he did not stop there. He confronted it – at huge personal risk. Indeed, he paid the ultimate price.

Paul knew that believers always stand in risk of resisting the Spirit – that is why he commanded believers:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God (Eph. 4:30).

Do not quench the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19).

D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones pulled no punches over the issue. Here are two extracts from the MLJ Trust – introductory remarks outlining two sermons:

In this sermon on Ephesians 6:10-13 titled ‘Quenching the Spirit (1)’, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes the bold claim that the church’s quenching of the Holy Spirit hinders it more than anything else. What is quenching the Spirit? In a desire to avoid making Christianity reliant on subjective religious experiences, many Christians leave no room for the work and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This is quenching the Holy Spirit.

I break in to say that this is not the only way in which to quench the Spirit! It is not unknown for law-teachers, for instance, while they pay lip service to the Spirit, to make the Spirit little more than a doctrinal principle or theological chess-piece than a felt reality, than a vital part of the believer’s daily experience.

The blurb continued:

The Bible tells [us] that the Holy Spirit is a person who indwells all who believe. The church of today ought to look at the early church found in Acts to see what it looks like to rely on the Holy Spirit for power and guidance. What are the practical applications of this discourse⁶ on Ephesians 6:10–13? Christians should seek to look to the Holy Spirit to empower their ministries and lives as they follow Jesus Christ. The church as a whole should look to the guidance

⁶ Original ‘message’. I prefer to keep this for the import of actual Scripture, not a man’s discourse on a scripture.

Poison at the Root

of the Holy Spirit as he enables⁷ Christians to understand the gospel and God's word. Christians must not overreact against those who abuse the Bible's teaching on the Holy Spirit by suppressing what the Bible does teach about the Holy Spirit and his ministry in the church.

And:

In his sermon on Ephesians 6:10-13 titled 'Quenching the Spirit (2)', Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones offers a challenging and convicting discourse⁸ to the church today: beware of quenching the Spirit. Quenching the Holy Spirit is one of the ways the devil works in believers' lives in order to make their Christian life ineffectual and lacking power. Dr Lloyd-Jones diagnoses the problem by looking at the Scriptures and noting that the person filled with the Spirit knows their doctrine, has a love and warmth about them, and has the power of the Holy Spirit. Dr Lloyd-Jones then proceeds to offer application for how one can be guilty of quenching the Spirit. He attacks such practices as formalism in the church...⁹ as well as a general resistance of the Spirit's prompting.¹⁰

Quenching the Spirit is the poison at the root.

⁷ Original 'allows'. Far too weak.

⁸ See previous note but one.

⁹ I have omitted 'conflating regeneration and the baptism of the Spirit'. I disagree with Lloyd-Jones' view of spiritual baptism.

¹⁰ MLJ Trust website.