

Paul on the Spirit in His Letter to the Galatians

1. Introduction

In Galatians, there are 18 occurrences of πνεῦμα, the Greek word for “Spirit.” With the exception of the two appearances in Gal 6:1 and 6:18 indicating the inner being of human (spirit, s is a lower letter), all the other 16 occurrences denote the Holy Spirit (Spirit is capitalized, Gal 3:2, 3, 5, 14; 4:6, 29; 5:5, 16, 17 [twice], 18, 22, 25 [twice], 6:8 [twice]). The top five most frequently occurring words (mainly nouns or verbs) in Galatians are Χριστός (“Christ,” 38 times), νόμος (“law,” 32 times), πίστις/πιστεύω (“faith/believe,” 22/4 times), πνεῦμα, and σὰρξ (“flesh,” 18 times), and Ἰησοῦς (“Jesus,” 17 times) respectively. There are two phenomena regarding their distribution in Galatians worth noting. One is that all the appearances of “the Spirit” are found in chs. 3-6 (i.e., distributed as 4-2-8-2 times, in each of the chs. 3-6). The other is that the remaining words distribute mostly also in chs. 3-6. Then it stands to reason that “the Spirit” is the crucial concept in chs. 3-6, combining with “Jesus Christ” and “faith,” employed by Paul to deal with the other two main opposite concepts: the law and the flesh.

2. A brief description of the crisis in the Galatian churches: the deviation from the gospel (salvation = faith + the Mosaic Law) and their misbehavior (submission to the power of the flesh)

Paul’s letter to the Galatians begins with an unusual tone. In his greetings, besides a concise salutation (Gal 1:2-3, 5), Paul expresses two very defensive statements in Gal 1:1 and 4 which “anticipate central themes of the letter.”¹ The former verse emphasizes that his apostolic authority is not dependent on any human instance, but originates from God’s direct commission; and the latter demonstrates the core significance of the sacrificial death of Christ which represents the only way to salvation.

Paul’s defense in the beginning of the letter reveals that a crisis has developed in the Galatian churches that threatens to undermine his apostolate and message. Due to the arrival of some opponents of Paul’s apostleship and mission in the Galatian churches, Paul fervently accuses these troublemakers of slandering both his Gentile ministry and gospel message. The troublemakers in Galatians are most likely Christians with strong Jewish background, who insist that the observance of the Mosaic Law is indispensable for salvation.

According to Paul’s defense, it is reasonable to assume that they deliberately make

¹ G. W. Hansen, “Galatians, Letter to the,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 323-34, here 330.

allegations against Paul of lacking authoritative support from the main apostles of the Jerusalem church, on the one hand; further, they claim that faith is not enough in obtaining justification, observing the Mosaic Law, especially the circumcision is necessary, on the other hand. In their mind, the Gentiles must become the descendants of Abraham through circumcision before they are able to inherit the promises God granted Abraham. In other words, the Gentiles are supposed to become proselytes before being able to experience Christ's salvation. Moreover, without the authorization and backup of the leading apostles in the Jerusalem church, Paul's message of justification by faith alone is maligned by the troublemakers as a second-hand, low-cost message which could be used to easily attract Gentiles to convert to his belief. It is very likely that the moral struggle in which the Gentile Christians have been caught up gives the troublemakers an opportunity to demand returning to the regulations of the Mosaic Law, which are regarded by them as a better guidance than Paul's message of "the law of Christ" for the Gentile Christians.

3. The way Paul deals with the crisis: the Spirit as the dominant force in effecting Christ's salvation

My leading assumption regarding the role of the Spirit in the letter to the Galatians is that Paul brings in the Spirit, refers to it and mobilizes it as the decisive force to confront and overcome the crisis in the Galatian churches. In order to demonstrate this, we must take time to elaborate Paul's argument on law contra faith throughout the letter and then pinpoint the appearing occurrences of the $\pi\nu\epsilon\delta\mu\alpha$ within the argumentative flow.

Many signs in the Galatian churches show that the spiritual situation of the believers is in a severe crisis. That is why Paul displays his urgent attitude and rebukes immediately after greetings the Galatian believers for their deviation from the true gospel without careful discrimination (Gal 1:6-10). Generally speaking, from Gal 1:11 onwards, Paul strongly defends his apostolic authority and the truth of the gospel through three dimensions. First, in the remaining passage of Gal 1-2, Paul appeals to his autobiography for clarifying the authenticity of his apostolate and his revealed message (Gal 1:11-2:21). Its main parts include his conversion experience (Gal 1:13-17) and his two visits to Jerusalem during which it was documented and demonstrated that the same truth of the gospel applies to Jews and Gentiles alike (Gal 1:18-2:5), and his Gentile mission was recognized by the pillar apostles (Gal 2:6-10). Further, Paul tells about his conflict with Peter in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14), in which Peter's inconsistent deed induces Paul's concise statement of the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:15-21). Secondly, Paul further elucidates the gospel of justification by faith (Gal

3-4). Finally, he corrects the Galatian believers' misunderstanding of Christ's gospel and their consequent misbehavior (Gal 5-6). What deserves attention is that "the Spirit" is employed intensively in Gal 3-6 by Paul to prove his argument. It is to this meticulous argumentation and defense of the gospel we now turn.

3.1 The role of the Spirit (Gal 3:1-5)

Actually, in Gal 2:15-21 Paul has paved the way for a more detailed demonstration of the gospel when he emphasizes that "a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal 2:16 NASB). Furthermore, the cross of Christ becomes the central basis of the Christ event which makes the identification with Christ result in a meaningful and righteous life for Paul.

Paul uses a series of questions to underline the silliness of the Galatian believers in accepting the troublemakers' message (Gal 3:1-5). The failure to comprehend the significance of the message of Christ crucified is the first charge Paul brings against them. In this very context we encounter the first appearance of the Spirit in Galatians, in 3:2, where Paul reminds the Galatian believers of their initial conversion experience of receiving **the Spirit** due to hearing with faith rather than doing the works of the law. Paul's reminder is immediately followed by another accusation of their foolishness that having begun by **the Spirit**, the Galatian believers are now ending with the flesh (Gal 3:3). The Spirit appears again in the last question: who provides you with **the Spirit** and works miracles among you? Does this happen by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith? (cf. Gal 3:5) Through this query Paul urges his recipients to think of the demonstration of the Spirit and power on them when they heard the gospel and believed. Obviously, the Spirit becomes the central instance Paul utilizes in reminding the Galatian believers of their actual experience of salvation and sufferings in Christ (cf. Gal 3:4). In his mind, Paul expects a positive response from the Galatian believers: "We are saved, receiving the Spirit not by the works of the law, but only by faith in Christ who was crucified and gave himself for us."

3.2 Explanation through the Abraham narrative (Gal 3:6-18)

Paul's elucidation of his viewpoint expands hereafter. On the basis of the life and example of Abraham, in which the Spirit is the central blessing, Paul intends to establish a fourfold antithesis between Spirit-faith-promise-freedom, on the one hand, versus flesh-work-law-slavery, on the other hand, to prove his position.

The fourth occurrence of "the Spirit" in Galatians is in Gal 3:14: "in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might

receive the promise of **the Spirit** through faith” (NRSV). The Spirit is regarded by Paul as the promise which is also the blessing of Abraham (Gal 3:9), that is, his believing God was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gal 3:6, cf. Gen 15:6).

In other words, Paul relies heavily on the Abraham narrative to consolidate his statement of justification by faith alone. Paul emphasizes that the scope of application of this statement has been expanded to all those who believe in God since Abraham’s time, Israelites and Gentiles included. He finds this testified in Genesis and brings a conflated quotation of Gen 12:3 and 18:18 as his proof: “All the nations [τὰ ἔθνη] shall be blessed in you [ἐν σοί]” (Gal 3:8). Paul hereby makes a short conclusion: “So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer” (Gal 3:9). However, Paul does not present explicitly the link between these verses, Gal 3:8 and 9, that is, the reason why the principle of Abraham’s justification could apply to all who do as Abraham does. After all, most people do not receive the promise of countless offspring as Abraham.

3.2.1 The link between Gal 3:8 and 3:9

The following passage Gal 3:10-18 makes known the unclear link, which contains two elements: one is the principle of faith; the other is the object or the content of faith. The former one has been mentioned in Gal 3:7, “those of faith” (οἱ ἐκ πίστεως) are those who believe in God (Jewish and Gentile believers alike) in the same way as Abraham does. In Gal 3:10-12 Paul strengthens the faith principle through two dimensions. First, he ardently denies the availability of the law in justification by highlighting the resulting curse for those relying on the law. Moses has put all who do not observe all the regulations written in the book of the law under a curse (Gal 3:10, cf. Deut 27:26). Moreover, although the law assures life to those who act in obedience to it (Gal 3:12, cf. Lev 18:5), apparently, no one is justified by the law before God (Gal 3:11a). Paul cites Habakkuk 2:4 “The righteous man shall live by faith” (in Gal 3:11b) to confirm that “righteousness by faith is the way to life.”² What Paul implies is that if the Jewish observant followers of the law are under a curse due to their powerlessness to keep the law, the possibility of bringing curse on the Gentile believers is even greater because they are less able to obey the law when they seek identification with the Jews.

With regard to the object or content of faith, Paul expresses that the key person is Christ. On the one hand, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13 NRSV, cf. Deut 21:23), implying the eternal effect of His death on the cross. On the other hand, Christ is the seed who is designated by God as the

² Ibid., 332.

blessing channel in Paul's interpretation (Gal 3:16). Paul might expand God's promise to Abraham from his quotation in Gal 3:8b ("All the nations shall be blessed in you") to Gen 22:18a LXX: "And in your seed [ἐν τῷ σπέρματί σου] all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gal 3:16). Furthermore, Paul proposes that since God's promise to Abraham is much earlier than the promulgation of the Mosaic Law, the validity of the earlier one cannot be nullified by the later one (Gal 3:15, 17). What Paul claims is that if God's promise to Abraham cannot be invalidated by the Mosaic Law, all the more so the promise to the Gentiles, foreseen in advance in the promise to Abraham (Gal 3:8), cannot be invalidated.

Therefore, Paul's train of thought between Gal 3:8 and 3:9 can be understood as follows: Abraham believes in God, who promised to give him numerous offspring, so it is reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. Correspondingly, those who believe in God, who sent His son Christ in order to die on the cross and redeem them from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for them, to them it is reckoned as righteousness. This is what the conclusion of Gal 3:9 means "those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed" (NRSV). Related to Abraham's faith is his correct understanding of God. More precisely, the object Abraham believes in is God rather than the promise. Therefore, Abraham's righteous status comes not from any work of the law or his deed, but from his right response to God's act or promise, no matter what it is (cf. Rom 4:3, 9b, 22).

Not only in Gal 3:14 does Paul identify Christ as the key person who makes Abraham's blessing available for the Gentiles, but he also uses the Spirit to represent the promise God granted Abraham. Paul even further broadens this connotation of God's promise in the concluding verse 18 of Gal 3:6-18 to the concept of inheritance (κληρονομία, 3:18), of which the cognate noun heir (κληρονόμος, Gal 3:29; 4:1, 7) and the verb inherit (κληρονομέω, Gal 4:30; 5:21) as well as another noun adoption (υιοθεσία, Gal 4:5) will become the most important thought Paul employs to awaken the Galatian believers to their identity and status in the remaining passage of Gal 3-4.

3.3 Full awareness of a new identity and status (Gal 3:19-4:11)

Paul's rejection of the law as the basis of inheriting God's promise does not indicate his denial of its legality, but Paul emphasizes the completion of the law's periodic task during the salvation history. Responding to two potential doubts regarding the function and purpose of the law as well as the relation between the law and God's promise which are also like two sides of the same coin, in Gal 3:19-25 Paul further expounds the bypassing destiny of the law when Christ comes. At first, Paul makes a comprehensive evaluation of the law in Gal 3:19-20: its negativity in increasing trespasses

(Gal 3:19a, cf. Rom 5:20), its transitoriness in awaiting the arrival of the promised descendant (Gal 3:19b), and its intermediacy through angels and a mediator in the process of promulgation (Gal 3:19c-20). Secondly, as regards the purpose of the law, Paul points out its powerlessness in giving life and its confinement in imprisoning all men under the power of sin for the possibility that the promise in Christ might come to the believers (Gal 3:21-22). Finally, regarding the function of the law, Paul calls attention to its custodianship up to the coming of Christ (Gal 3:23-25). Put differently, Paul maintains that the law does not own the capability to lead any human to Christ; therefore, it will be in vain if the Galatian believers return to the law.

Nevertheless, in asserting the significance of God's promise to the believers: a new identity (i.e., God's children); a new relationship (i.e., all being one in Christ); and a new status (i.e., Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise) (Gal 3:26-29), Paul sets the stage for a further discussion of the life in the Spirit.

Not only are the believers called descendants of Abraham by Paul, but they also are regarded as sons of God in Gal 3:26. Following 3:26, Paul repeatedly uses terms belonging to this theme or to its related, semantic field, mainly in Gal 4:1-11. For example, "adoption" or "sonship" (υιοθεσία) occurs in Gal 4:5, the related terms "sons" (υιοί) of God in Gal 4: 6, 7 (twice); "heir" (κληρονόμος) in Gal 3:29 (pl.); 4:1, 7; "children" (τέκνα) of God in Gal 4:28. Obviously, these familial designations are used by Paul to contrast sharply with slavery, an identity and status without freedom (cf. slave [δούλος], Gal 3:28, 4:1, 7; slavery [δουλεία], Gal 4:24; 5:1; enslave [δουλεύω], Gal 4:8, 9, 25).

Among all these terms, we will predominantly concentrate on υιοθεσία, which refers to a popular legal system in the Greco-Roman society, used by Paul as an imagery to express the believers' status as God's adopted children, signifying not only a change of status from non-children to children, but also an elevation of social class from slavery to royal children. Again, Paul indicates that the law has its transitional task, once Christ comes, the law's task is over (Gal 4:1-2). To put it in another way, the heir has grown to the time set by his father, the guardians and managers of the heir should be dismissed. In the past, the Galatian believers were like slaves under the regulatory law or the gods of the world (Gal 4:3, 8); now they have been redeemed by God's Son, and granted the unique identity of being adopted children of God (Gal 4:4-5). The triune relationship of Father, Son and Spirit is very closely associated in accomplishing the redemption. Since they have received such precious grace, Paul strenuously urges them not to repeat the same mistakes as before (Gal 4:9-11).

Most importantly, Paul draws attention to a fact: God has sent **His Son's Spirit** to the heart of the believers (Gal 4:6a). Paul also illustrates the way the Spirit arouses the believers' awareness of their adopted identity by the Spirit's crying out (κράζον):

“Abba! Father!” (αββα ὁ πατήρ, Gal 4:6b) on behalf of the believers. A combination of a word (αββα) in vocative form transliterated from an Aramaic word (אבא) and a Greek equivalent (ὁ πατήρ) in nominative case is peculiar for Paul. It appears only three times in the New Testament; here, in Rom 8:15, and, actually in the Gospel of Mark 14:36, where the evangelist has preserved the tradition in his narrative of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:39, πάτερ μου, “my Father [vocative];” Luke 22:42, πάτερ, “Father [vocative]”). Many scholars believe that the Aramaic אבבא, a term of expression of affection used in prayer and in family relations, conveying intimacy and respect, is taken over by Greek-speaking Christians as a liturgical formula. Their ceremonial practice is considered closely related with the Lord’s Prayer. Paul applies it in the prayer of the Spirit with believers.

On the one hand, the Spirit’s fervent calling reflects that His prayer entails a quite affectionate and trustful attitude of the adopted children towards God the Father, which is totally different from the feelings of slaves to their master (Gal 4:7a). On the other hand, the Spirit demonstrates that the interactive relationship between Jesus as the Son of God and His Father is the best analogy to the one between believers and God. At this crucial occasion, Paul shows the Galatian believers that only the divine power behind the status of God’s children founded on the Spirit’s presence can help them counter the temptation succumbing to the former master (i.e., the Mosaic Law) who tries to regain control over them (cf. Gal 4:9). The reason behind this is that the Spirit is **the Spirit of His Son** (τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ). As the Spirit is involved in Christ’s resurrection, so shall it be in ours (cf. Rom 8:11). The believers’ exclamation betrays their confidence due to a new identity and status, which regarding their sonship awareness is comparable to that of Jesus. Furthermore, Paul also highlights another related identity: they are heirs through God (Gal 4:7b). The believers’ inheritance is supposed to be comprehended from the spiritual dimension: The believers are beloved children of the Father in heaven, and because they indeed are, they own the assurance and promise of life in the Spirit both now and to the day of eternity (cf. Gal 3:27-28).

3.4 Children of the free woman (Gal 4:12-31)

In addition to convincing the recipients with argumentative reasons, Paul’s concern and perplexity about the Galatian believers prompt him to move them with familial feelings (cf. Gal 4:11, 20). In this letter the Galatian believers are called “brothers” nine times by Paul (Gal 1:11, 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18). Not only does their close connection reflect a reality that they are a living community united by the Spirit with the adoptive sonship, but they also deserve Paul’s more urgent and strin-

gent exhortation. By repeating the friendship they showed in their first meeting, Paul expresses his worry and expectation at this moment (Gal 4:12-20). In order to help the Galatian believers recognize their real identity, Paul reveals the spiritual significance regarding two systems of the promise and the law hidden behind the narrative of Abraham's two wives, Sarah and Hagar, with their own children. Through an allegorical exposition, Paul identifies who is the real descendant of Abraham. The key verses are Gal 4:28-29: "And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him *who was born* according to **the Spirit**, so it is now also" (NASB).

Mainly drawn from the Sarah-Hagar narrative in Gen 21, Paul's allegorization of the two women is mirrored in the current Galatian churches. In Paul's interpretation, Hagar, the slave woman who bears children to be slaves, typifies the Sinai covenant leading to law and slavery. By contrast, Sarah who gives birth to Isaac typifies the Abrahamic covenant leading to promise and freedom. Accordingly, those trouble-makers who are a mirror of the Hagar system are supposed to be expelled. Repeatedly, Paul guides the Galatian believers through the transformation of their identity and status which is established and effected by the Spirit. What is more, the Spirit-flesh and freedom-slavery antithesis displayed in the allegorical argument is paving the way for more practical instructions in the ethical dimension.

3.5 Freedom in the Spirit (Gal 5:1-6:10)

The essentially theological appeal for the awareness of the identity of true descendants of Abraham in Gal 3-4 forms a substantial doctrinal base for Paul's further exhortation to the renewed moral performance of the Galatian believers who are supposed to live a life worthy of the new identity granted in Christ. His purpose in the remaining passage is to expound how to obey the leadership of the Spirit so as to live out the real freedom in Christ (Gal 5:1-6:10). In Gal 5:1 Paul uses a typical pattern of indicative-imperative as his beginning proclamation:

Indicative: "It was for freedom that Christ set us free" (Gal 5:1a).

Imperative: "Therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1b).

A total of 21 occurrences of the imperative form are found in Galatians, of which Gal 5-6 account for 12 times.³ Behind the indicative-imperative pattern there stands Paul's consistent conviction of motivating correct behavior through full awareness of

³ Gal 5:1 (twice), 13, 15, 16; 6:1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 11, 17.

identity, in which the Spirit is always actively involved in inspiring the believers in identity cognition and in empowering them to behave positively.

First focusing on the core practical problem of circumcision which has caused serious confusion within the Galatian churches, Paul warns his recipients about the severity of returning back to the life under the law (Gal 5:2-15). It is insignificant whether to be circumcised or not (cf. Gal 5:6a, 6:15a), but anyone who is trying to be justified by the condition of circumcision has been alienated from Christ, and has fallen under the slavery and condemnation of the law (cf. Gal 5:4). Hence, those intruders who instigate others to do so obviously have sinned against God (cf. Gal 5:10b). What is important is that we through **the Spirit**, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness (Gal 5:5). The Spirit's presence and confirmation of our future justification becomes our basis of freedom which prevents us from using it as the excuse to indulge the flesh (cf. Gal 5:13). Moreover, the Spirit can empower us with faith which effects our love to serve one another (cf. Gal 5:6b, 13b-14).

Next, Paul shows the influence of the Spirit standing in total contrast to the impact of the flesh (Gal 5:16-26). The flesh, which represents a self-oriented values system against God, is personified here as an oppressor with evil power bringing hostility toward God and death to those who set their minds on the flesh (Gal 5:17-18). Quite to the contrary, the Spirit brings the kingdom of God and the fruit of every kind of spiritual virtue to the believers (cf. Gal 5:21b, 22-23). **The Spirit** plays the most vital role in the process of Christians' experiencing the reality of justification by faith and the freedom in Christ (cf. Gal 5:16). If there is a verse which could fully show the practical advice to Christian life in Galatians, it must be Gal 5:25: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." Not only does Paul propose an ethical direction in a concise way (5:25b), but he also demonstrates its solid theological basis (5:25a), responding to the model of Gal 5:1. This statement is proposed by Paul to exhort the Galatian believers to recognize that the real helper is the Spirit who can really effect the freedom in Christ in their moral struggle.

Finally, in the passage of Gal 6:1-10, Paul speaks more specifically about how to walk in the Spirit in the daily life of the believers. There are five imperatives in this passage. Except the one in Gal 6:7 μή πλανᾶσθε ("do not be deceived,"), most exhortations are made positive-oriented: καταρτίζετε ("restore," Gal 6:1), βαστάζετε ("bear," Gal 6:2), δοκιμαζέτω ("examine," Gal 6:4), κοινωνείτω ("share," Gal 6:6), conveying a message that only through the work of **the Spirit** the believers can fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2, cf. 5:14, 25). Equally noteworthy is that the stark contrast between the Spirit and the flesh appears again in Gal 6:8, in which the completely opposite consequences of walking according to them are underlined (i.e., eternal life versus corruption) to remind the Galatian believers of the ultimate judgement they are going to

face.

4. Conclusion: the message of the cross

In the end of Galatians, particularly deserving attention is Paul's reiteration of the significance of the cross of Christ in Gal 6:14, responding to his declaration in Gal 2:20. Paul's experience of participating in the death of Christ and living to God by the indwelling life of Christ rather than relying on the law and the flesh makes him brave to manifest the importance of Christ crucified. In summary, in order to help the Galatian believers in countering the false teachings about the gospel, Paul commits them to **the Spirit** and the word of His grace which can strengthen them in sound doctrine and ethical norms. Paul is well aware that the dynamic to walk worthily of Christ's redemption depends on the inspiring and empowering work of **the Spirit**, who effects the believers' knowledge of receiving a new identity as God's children due to Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection. Paul also understands that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are under the law and the flesh, but to those who are being saved and indwelled by **the Spirit** it is the power of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:18; 2:14).