Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God

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Overture – Invitation to Read Paul Anew

One reads Paul poorly who does not recognize that for him the presence of the Spirit, as an experienced and living reality, was the crucial matter for Christian life, from beginning to end.

Contemporary Christians have a right to be concerned. In an increasingly secular, individualistic, and relativistic world-dubbed “post-Christian” in the 1960s and now called “postmodern” – the church is regularly viewed as irrelevant at best and Neanderthal at worst. Frankly, much of the fault lies with the church, especially those of us in the church who pride ourselves in being orthodox with regard to the historic faith. For all too often our orthodoxy has been either diluted by an unholy alliance with a given political agenda, or diminished by legalistic or relativistic ethics quite unrelated to the character of God, or rendered ineffective by a pervasive rationalism in an increasingly nonrationalistic world.

But there is reason for hope as well since contemporary post-modernism looks much like the culture of the Greco-Roman world into which the gospel first appeared some two thousand years ago. The secret to the success of the early believers in their culture lay first with their “good news”
centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Immanuel had come, bringing both revelation of the character of God (“Have you been with me for so long and don’t know who I am? The one who has seen me has seen the Father”, John 14:9) and redemption from our tragic fallenness (“You shall call his name Yeshua, for he will save his people from their sins”, Matt 1:21). But their success also lay with their experienced life of the Spirit who made the work of Christ an effective reality in their lives, thus making them a radical alternative within their culture.

It often seems otherwise with us. If we have (rightly) kept our central focus on Christ Jesus, we are less sure about the Holy Spirit. Despite the affirmations in our creeds and hymns and the lip service paid to the Spirit in our occasional conversations, the Spirit has been largely marginalized both in the halls of learning and in the life of the church as a community of faith.

I do not mean that the Holy Spirit is not present; he is indeed, or we are not of Christ at all. But the primary emphasis regarding the Spirit’s activity has been on his quiescence, based largely on imagery drawn from Elijah’s encounter with God on Sinai, where the Lord was not in the wind, earthquake, and fire, but came to Elijah “in a still small voice” (1 Kgs 19:11-13 KJV). Support for this view is then found in the New Testament by emphasizing Paul’s “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22-23), while suggesting that the “gifts of the Spirit” in 1 Corinthians 12-14 were for the apostolic period only. Quiescence, however, has sometimes fostered anemia, not only in the church corporately but also at the individual level, evidenced in part by the myriad of ways individual believers have longed for a greater sense of God’s
presence in their lives.

This common “missing out” on the Spirit as an experienced, empowering reality has frequently been “corrected” historically through a variety of Spirit movements – most recently in this century in the form of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Emphasis here has been on the “wind, earthquake, and fire”, and the primary texts are from Acts and 1 Corinthians 12-14. These Spirit movements have also tended to emphasize individualistic spirituality, so that the reality of the Spirit is sometimes merely experienced in the experience. Such piety has frequently lacked sound exegetical basis or betrayed inadequate theological reflection.

The net result has tended toward a truncated view of the Spirit on both sides, accompanied by an inadequate view of the role of the Spirit in Paul’s understanding of things Christian. For him life in the Spirit meant embracing both fruit and gifts simultaneously and vigorously – what I have come to call life in the radical middle. The Spirit as an experienced and empowering reality was for Paul and his churches the key player in all of Christian life, from beginning to end. The Spirit covered the whole waterfront: power for life, growth, fruit, gifts, prayer, witness, and everything else.

But if the empowering, experienced dimension of life in the Spirit is often missed on the one side, too often missing on both sides are two further matters that, for Paul, lie at the very heart of faith. First, the Spirit as person, the promised return of God’s own personal presence with his people; second, the Spirit as eschatological fulfillment (see Chapter 5 below), who both reconstitutes God’s people anew and empowers us to live the life of the future in our between-

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1 Chapter 5: The Beginning of the End – The Spirit as Evidence of the “Presence of the Future”.
the-times existence – between the time of Christ’s first and second coming.

If the church is going to be effective in our postmodern world, we need to stop paying mere lip service to the Spirit and to recapture Paul’s perspective: the Spirit as the experienced, empowering return of God’s own personal presence in and among us, who enables us to live as a radically eschatological people in the present world while we await the consummation. All the rest, including fruit and gifts (that is, ethical life and charismatic utterances in worship), serve to that end.

Hence I offer this “invitation” to read Paul afresh, to recognize the crucial role of the Spirit in his life and thought, and in that of his churches. Such a reading, I insist, must be thoroughly exegetical – hence the frequent references to the exegesis presented in *God’s Empowering Presence* and fully theological, to see how the Spirit fits into the bigger picture of things Pauline. This fresh reading of Paul will make clear that for him the presence of the Spirit, as an experienced and living reality, was the crucial matter for Christian life, from beginning to end. Since that is a theological assertion, some preliminary theological issues must first be addressed in chapter 1. 2 I encourage readers not to get bogged down here. The chapter is necessary in order to establish a reference point for the rest of the book.

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11. The Ongoing Warfare –
The Spirit Against the Flesh

The Spirit-flesh conflict in Paul has to do not with an internal conflict in one’s soul, but with the people of God living the life of the future in a world where the flesh is still very active.

11.1. Introduction

A good friend wrote recently, “Christians seem to me to divide into two groups these days: the first lot don’t think that sin matters very much anyway, and the second know perfectly well that it does, but still can’t kick the habit”. 3 This chapter picks up the concern of the second lot. Indeed, we now come to the real world! Painfully, for many of God’s people the subject of this chapter tells the story of their Christian life, a story of ongoing inner conflict of soul. They take some comfort in believing that Paul was their companion in this struggle. If Paul, the great apostle of the faith, could write, “what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom 7:15), then what hope is there for us? So they simply resign themselves to the struggle. Peo-

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ple come by this comfort by reading Galatians 5:17, the single Pauline text that speaks about a conflict between the Spirit and the flesh, in light of Romans 7:14-25 – although the Spirit is not so much as mentioned in the Romans passage, where Paul describes the conflict that goes on in the soul of a person living under law and without the Spirit’s help. People accept this unfortunate reading of Paul at face value, because the text in Romans vividly describes something they know only too well. Sadly, for the vast majority of those who adopt such a view, the flesh usually wins. Thus Paul’s passion, namely, the sufficiency of the Spirit for all of life in the present age, is brushed aside as unrealistic in favor of one’s own personal reality.

To be sure, such war does rage in the hearts of many. Often the warfare – and the sense of helplessness to live above it – is the direct result of the intense individualism of Western culture. Both secular psychology and much Christian teaching focus on the inner self: How am I doing according to some set of criteria for wholeness? Focused on the inner struggle, we can scarcely see Christ or walk confidently in the way of the Spirit. Instead of living out the fruit of the Spirit, in constant thankfulness for what the Spirit is doing in our lives and in the lives of others, our individualistic faith turns sourly narcissistic – aware of our personal failures before God, frustrated at our imperfections, feigning the love, joy, peace, and gentleness we wish were real. Our turmoil crowds out openness to the Spirit himself. In such spiritual malaise God almost always gets the blame.

But as real as this is for some, Paul is not addressing this

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4 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.
issue when in Galatians 5:17 he speaks of the Spirit and “flesh” as in utter opposition to each other. Indeed, he would not even understand it. His world is that of Psalm 19, not that of “the introspective conscience of the West” 5 In consecutive verses (12-13), the psalmist acknowledges first his “errors” and “hidden faults” and then the possibility of “willful sins”. The former is an acknowledgment of the depth of our fallenness; for these “hidden faults” he asks forgiveness. His concern – and it does not take the form of a struggle – is with the “willful sins”. About these he prays that they will “not rule over me”. 6 Paul’s view is similar. In Galatians 5:17 he is not addressing a struggle over “hidden faults” but open disobedience to God in the form of “willful sins”.

At issue for us in this chapter, therefore, is Paul’s own view of the conflict between the Spirit and the flesh, between living kata sarka (“according to the flesh”) and kata pneuma (“according to the Spirit”). Every occurrence of these terms in Paul has to do with our present eschatological existence – what it means for believers to live together as a people, defined by the already/not yet fulfillment of God’s promises, in contrast to a former life defined and determined by the world. My point: **Nowhere does Paul describe Christian life, life in the Spirit, as one of constant struggle with the flesh.** 7 He simply does not speak to that question. His point rather is the sufficiency of the Spirit for God’s new end-time people.

Basic to Paul’s view is that, as with struggle with the flesh.

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6See also Ps 51, where David speaks of his “sin as ever before me” (v. 3) and of his having “done what is evil” (v. 4). But he also knows the source of such sin, the evil heart, which he refers to in vv. 5-6.

7See the discussion in GEP of Gal 5:13-15, 16-17, 19-23, 24-26; 6:7-10; Rom 7:4-6; 8:4, 5-8; 13:11-14; Phil 3:3.
Torah observance, the time of the flesh is over for followers of Christ. According to Romans 7:4-6, Christ and the Spirit have, with the new covenant, brought an end to the time of the law and the flesh, which belong to our existence before and outside Christ. Continuing to live this way is incompatible with life “according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:5-8). But Paul’s view does not represent triumphalism, as though people who lived by the Spirit were never tempted by the old life in the flesh or that they never succumbed to such. They have, and they do; and there is forgiveness for such, and gracious restoration.

A careful analysis of the key texts Galatians 5:17 and Romans 7:14-25 demonstrates that this is Paul’s perspective. But we will be helped in that analysis by looking first at Paul’s use of the term “flesh”. 8

11.2. The Meaning of “flesh” in Paul

The place to begin such a study is with the Old Testament, since Paul’s usage originates there. The Hebrew word bəśār refers primarily to the flesh of bodies, and by derivation sometimes to the bodies themselves. On a few occasions the term is extended to describe human frailty and creatureliness, usually in contrast to God as creator. Thus a common expression for all living beings, especially humans, is “all flesh”, meaning “every creature”. When the psalmist asks in light of his trust in God, “What can flesh do to me?” (Ps 56:4), he means that with God as his protector what can a mere human do to him (cf. Jer 17:5). In his anguish Job

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8 For further reference to recent scholarship on this question, especially the position of J. D. G. Dunn, to which some of the following is a response, see Fee, God’s Empowering Presence, 816-22.
asks God, “Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as humans see?” While “flesh” is not a neutral term when used in this way, neither does it express a negative moral judgment; rather, it expresses the frailty of human creatureliness. It would be unthinkable to the Hebrew that sin lay in the flesh, since sin’s origins lie in the human heart.

Although Paul rarely uses the Greek term *sarx* in its basic sense, as referring to the physical body, he regularly uses it in the extended sense as referring to our humanity in some way or another. Thus he can speak of “Israel according to the flesh” (1Cor 10:18), or Abraham as our forefather “according to the flesh” (Rom 4:1), or of Jesus as descended from David “according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3), meaning in each case “according to ordinary human descent”. In the same mode Paul recognizes present human life as still “in the flesh” (e.g., Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 10:3), that is, lived out in the present human body, characterized by frailty as it is.

Paul also uses *sarx*, however, in a more unusual sense, derived in part from intertestamental Judaism, but marked by his own basically eschatological view of life in the world. “Flesh” for him denotes humanity not simply in its creatureliness vis-à-vis God, but in its fallen creatureliness as utterly hostile to God in every imaginable way. It is in this sense that he contrasts life “according to the flesh” over against life “according to the Spirit”. The one describes the present evil age in terms of human fallenness, where by nature each has turned to his or her own way; the other describes the eschatological age that has dawned with the coming of Christ and the Spirit, as described in chapter 5 above. 9

This does not make *sarx* an easy term to translate. The

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NIV often uses *sinful nature*. That translation works well in Romans 7, where Paul is describing the failure of his former life under the law. The “flesh” represents “another law in his members” that rises up to defeat the law of God and thus to render the law helpless. That “other law” is his own “sinful nature”. But this rendering does not work well in other places, where he is describing what characterizes the whole world in its present fallenness.

The clearest instance in which Paul plays on the two basic senses of this word (“human frailty” and “human fallenness”) is in 2 Corinthians 10:2-4. Accused by them of acting “according to the flesh” in the morally negative sense, Paul allows, for the sake of his argument, that he does indeed live “in the flesh”, by which he means “in the weaknesses and limitations of present mortality”. But, he goes on, I do not engage in warfare “according to the flesh”, in keeping with the fallenness which characterizes the present age that, because of the cross and resurrection, is on its way out. This argument does not work at all if “flesh” is morally negative in both instances.

Our interest lies strictly with this latter sense, human fallenness, which has completely lost its relationship to the physical and has become strictly eschatological – and morally negative – describing existence from the perspective of those who do not know Christ, who thus live as God’s enemies. It describes believers only before they came to be in Christ and live by the Spirit. Any conflict in this matter has to do with believers in Christ, people of the Spirit, continuing to behave

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But does so inconsistently. It uses “sinful nature” when “flesh” implies a negative moral judgment (e.g., see 1 Cor 5:5; Gal 5:13, 16, 17 [twice], 19:24; 6:8; Rom 7:5-8:13; Col 2:11, 13; Eph 2:3), but “worldly point of view” in 2 Cor 5:16 (d. 1:12, 17; 10:2) and “flesh” in Phil 3:3-4!
according to their pre-Christ perspective and values. Paul’s point always is, “Stop it”. “Put off your old self”, he says, and “put on the new self” (Eph 4:22, 24). My point, then, is that whenever “flesh” occurs in contrast to the Spirit, it always bears this eschatological sense.

11.3. The Spirit-flesh contrast in Paul

That Paul viewed the flesh as belonging to the past for believers, in the same way as he viewed Torah observance, is specifically stated in Romans 7:4-6: “When we were living in the flesh, the passions of sin, aroused by the law, were [also] at work in us; ...but now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been set free ...to walk in the new way of the Spirit”. How Paul understands this is set forth vividly in 2 Corinthians 5:14-17:

For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

The death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit have changed everything. The former order of things

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This contrast does not occur nearly as often as we are sometimes led to believe, being found basically in Gal 5:13-6:10 (d. the analogy in 4:29); Rom 8:3-17; and Phil 3:3—although see also 1 Cor 3:1.
is described in refills of flesh, that basically self-centered, creature-oriented point of view, which has caused the Corinthians to regard Paul as he had formerly regarded Christ, as weak and therefore not of God. The flesh perceives things from the old age point of view, where value and significance lie in power, influence, wealth, and wisdom (cf. 1 Cor 1:26-31).

To be sure, such a worldview is still about. But for those in Christ, all of that has passed away; behold, the new has come, the lime of the Spirit, in which there has been a total change in the definition of what has value or significance. The new model is the cross: the power lies not in externals but in the Spirit, who indwells believers and by grace is renewing the “inner person” (2 Cor 4:16), transforming us into God’s own likeness (ultimately portrayed in Christ through the cross).

This eschatological view of the Spirit/flesh contrast is found in other passages as well:

1. “I could not speak to you as Spiritual, but as fleshly”, Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:1). The irony of this sentence lies in the fact that the Corinthians, who think of themselves as Spirit people, are thinking just as they did before they met Christ, just like those leaders of this passing age, who crucified Christ (2:6-8). Their attitude toward Paul’s suffering and his message of the cross in effect makes them bedfellows with those who killed Christ, viewing things from the perspective of the flesh.

This is obviously eschatological terminology. Moreover, it does not reflect some internal struggle in the believer between these two kinds of existence. On the contrary, it de-
scribes the essential characteristics of the two ages, which exist side by side in unrelieved opposition in our present already but not yet existence. The one, flesh, has been condemned and is on its way out; they are to be done with that. Paul is cajoling them to live the real life of the Spirit.

2. Similarly, in Philippians 3:3 Paul warns against those who would insist on circumcision. He describes believers as those serve “by the Spirit of God” and who put no confidence in flesh”. Here “flesh” refers to self-confidence based on a presumed advantaged relationship with God evidenced by circumcision as noted in chapter 9 above, the Spirit also stands opposed to, fulfillment, any form of Torah observance. Thus these too basically eschatological realities. To revert to circumcision, that to put “confidence in the flesh”, is to go back to the way that has come to an end with the death and resurrection of Christ and gift of the Spirit.

3. The strong contrasts in Romans 8:5-8 likewise do not deal with internal conflict. Paul is again describing the two kinds of existence, and indicating their utter incompatibility. Those who walk according to the flesh-and it is clear in context that this does not mean believers, but those still outside Christ – “have their minds set on what the flesh desires” (v. 5). Such a mind-set is hostile to God, does not – indeed, cannot – submit to God’s law, cannot please God (how in the world could it?), and ends up in death. That simply does not describe Christian life, not in Paul and not anywhere else.

The people of God, who walk according to the Spirit, live in bold contrast to flesh-walkers. Their minds are set on the things of the Spirit (their minds have been renewed by the Spirit, after all); in place of hostility to God, they live in

12Chapter 9: Conversion: Staying In (Part 1) – The Spirit and Pauline Ethics.
peace; and instead of death, they know life. That this is the conflict Paul describes is made certain in Romans 8:9, where he addresses his Christian readers: “but you”, he says, ”are not in the flesh [in the sense that the flesh-walkers in vv. 7-8 are], but in the Spirit [a whole new way of existence], since indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you”.

But Paul also recognizes that life in the Spirit is not just a stroll in the park. So in Romans 8:12-13 he applies all of vv. 1-11 to their lives, by reminding them that by the Spirit they must continue to kill that to which they have already died (the already/not yet again). They were formerly controlled by, and thus under obligation to the flesh, Their new obligation is to the Spirit, to walk his ways, led by him (v. 14).

Life in the Spirit is not passive; nor is obedience automatic. We continue to live in the real world; we are, after all, both already and not yet. Therefore, the imperative for the already is walk in/by the Spirit. That assumes that we live in a world very much controlled by the flesh; but it also assumes that we now live in that world as different people, led by the Spirit and empowered by the Spirit to produce the fruit of righteousness, rather than to continue in the works of the flesh.

That leads us finally to Galatians 5:17 and Romans 7:13-25. We begin with the latter, since it does not have to do with this contrast at all; and conclude by another look at the Galatians passage (see Chapter 10 above).  

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13Chapter 10: Conversion: Staying In (Part 2) – The Fruit of the Spirit.
11.4. The Struggle in Romans 7:13–25

What about the intense, deeply emotional narration of Paul’s own internal conflict in Romans 7:13-25? Doesn’t this passage suggest that Paul himself, even though a man of the Spirit, continually struggled in his inner person with the pull of the flesh? At first glance, and taking the passage out of context, one might think so, But three things reveal otherwise: the surrounding context, what Paul actually says, and what he does not say.

The context throughout has to do with the place of Torah in the Christian life. In vv. 1-6 Paul has made it clear, by repeating himself yet one more time, that the believer has no relationship to it at all. In the death of Christ we have died with respect to the law (v. 4). Not only so, he adds, but we have also died with respect to the flesh (vv. 5-6; note the past tense, “when we were in the flesh”). But Paul is also aware that he has been extremely hard on the law in his argument to this point, which will hardly sit well with his readers who are Jewish Christians. Besides, he does not really consider the law a bad thing – quite the contrary. His problem with the law was with its inadequacy, its helplessness to empower what it required.

So in vv. 7-25, he sets out to exonerate the law from any suggestion that, because it was implicated in our death, the law itself was a bad thing. To make this point, he argues in two ways, First, he says in vv. 7-12, what killed “me” (and “me” in this paragraph stands for all other Jews as well as for himself) was not the law but the innate sinfulness that the law aroused. The law is implicated in his “death”, to be sure, but as an abettor, not as a direct cause.
This, too, could put the law in a bad light, so he starts all over again (v. 13), this time insisting that the law is not really to blame at all. Its fault lay in its helplessness to do anything about the sin it has aroused in us by making us vividly aware of sin’s utter “sinfulness”. This is said with great intensity, and in a way in which all who try to please God on the basis of law can empathize. In the final analysis it is a totally useless struggle. For the person under law, who has not experienced the gift of the Spirit, sin and the flesh are simply the stronger powers.

Enter Christ and the Spirit (Rom 8), as God’s response to the anguished cry of 7:24. Not only is there no condemnation in Christ (that is, the judgment We all so richly deserve has been put into our past through the death of Christ), but We now live by a new “law”, that of the Spirit of life (8:2). What the law Was unable to do, Christ has now done for us (positionally) and the Spirit “fulfills” in us (experientially) as we “walk in the Spirit” (vv. 3-4).

Three simple points, then, in conclusion:

1. What Paul describes throughout is what it was like to live under the law; and whatever else is true of the Christian Paul, he did not consider himself to be under the law. What he describes, from his now Christian perspective, is what it was like to live under law before Christ and the Spirit. The use of “I” and the present tense of the verbs only heighten the intensity of his feelings toward the utter helplessness of the law to do anything about the real problem of sin.

2. The person here described never wins. Being under the helpless law, in the face of the more powerful flesh and sin, means to be sold as a slave under sin, and thus incapable of doing the good thing the law demands. Such a description
is absolutely incompatible with Paul’s view of life in Christ, empowered by the Spirit.

3. There is not a single mention of the Spirit in the entire passage (vv. 7-25). The Spirit was last mentioned in v.6 as the key to our new life in Christ, who has brought our relationship with the law and the flesh to an end. Christ and the Spirit are then picked up again in 8:1-2 as the divine response to the anguished cry of the person struggling with sin, but with the helpless law standing by, pointing out the sinfulness of our sin, unable to do anything about it.

Thus the only questions Paul himself raises in this entire passage have to do with Torah, whether it is good or evil, and once this is affirmed as good, how this good thing is still implicated in our death. Life under Torah alone is under scrutiny.

11.5. Galatians 5:17 in context

But what of Galatians 5:17, where Paul says (literally) “for the flesh has desires over against the Spirit, and the Spirit over against the flesh; for these two [realities]; so that whatever things you may do things you may not do”? Does this not indicate that there is an internal struggle of the Spirit against the flesh? In context, not so. In fact, this text is precisely in keeping the text previously looked at, where this contrast appears.

Verse 17 comes at the heart of urgent question: Since Torah observance is now a thing of the past because of the coming of Christ and the Spirit, what is to ensure righteousness? That is, Paul is arguing against (perhaps anticipating)
Jewish Christian opposition that would see his bypassing Torah observance as a sure invitation to license and ungodliness. Indeed, as Romans 3:7-8 makes clear and Romans 6:1 implies, Paul has been charged with this very thing.

Paul takes up this question, typically, not in terms of the individual believer in a one-on-one relationship with God, but at the very point where the Galatians are living as they used to, when the flesh held sway. Paul therefore warns the Galatians not to let their new freedom in Christ serve as a base of operations for the flesh (5:13), meaning in this case to continue to engage in strife within the community of faith (v. 15). Rather, in love they are to “perform the duties of a slave to one another” (v. 13). For love like this “fulfills the law” (v. 14).

Paul’s response to vv.13 and 15 is vv.16-26. He begins in v.16 with the basic imperative – and promise. “Walk in the Spirit”, he urges them, “and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh”. Since this responds to v.15, he is not talking about the inner life of the believers, but of giving in to ungodly behavior within the community. After all, the works of the flesh that follow, all have to do with behavior, and eight of the fifteen items mentioned are sins of discord within the believing community.

Verse 17 functions to elaborate v. 16, and does so by way of what has been said in vv.13-15. The elaboration simply says what we have seen him say elsewhere: walking in the Spirit is incompatible with life according to the flesh, because these two are in utter opposition to one another. And because they are utterly incompatible, those who live in the Spirit may not do whatever they please, that is, their new freedom in Christ does not permit them to continue living as
they used to, by eating and devouring one another.

Thus the flesh-Spirit contrast has to do with those who have entered the new way of life brought about by Christ and the Spirit; Paul is urging them to live this way by the power of the Spirit. His point is that the Spirit stands in opposition to the other way of living, and is fully capable of empowering one to live so. It is not that Paul does not care about the inner life; he does indeed. But here he cares especially that the way God’s people live provide a radical alternative to the world around them. Those who so walk by the Spirit will not keep on destroying the Christian community through strife and conflict.

In all the passages where Paul sets the Spirit against the flesh he insists that through the death of Christ and the gift of the Spirit, the flesh has been mortally wounded – killed, in his language. It is not possible, therefore, that from Paul’s perspective a Spirit person would be living in such a way that she or he is sold as a slave to sin, who is unable to do the good she or he wants to do because of being held prisoner to the law of sin.

Believers live between the times. The already mortally wounded flesh will be finally brought to its end at the coming of Christ. The Spirit, already a present possession, will be fully realized at the same coming. To the degree that the old age has not yet passed away, we still must learn to walk by the Spirit, to behave in keeping with the Spirit, and to sow to the Spirit. We can do so precisely because the Spirit is sufficient. In Paul’s view, we live in the flesh, only in the sense of living in the present body of humiliation, subject to the realities of the present age; but we do not walk according to the flesh. Such a way of life belongs to the past, and those
who live that way are outside Christ and “shall not inherit the [final eschatological] kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21).

Paul is always a realist. The “new righteousness” that fulfills Torah, effected by the Spirit, is itself both already and not yet. To return to the preceding chapter, the coming of the Spirit means that “divine infection”, not divine perfection, has set in. Our lives are now led by the one responsible for inspiring the law in the first place. But that does not mean that God’s people cannot still be “overtaken in a fault” (Gal 6:1). The resolution of such between-the-times trespassing of God’s righteous requirement is for the rest of God’s Spirit people to restore such a one through the Spirit’s gentleness. It means regularly to experience God’s forgiveness and grace. It does not mean to accept constantly living in willful sin as inevitable, like a slow leak deflating our lives, as though the Spirit were not sufficient for life in the present.

### 11.6. Conclusion

If this explanation does not satisfy those of you who live in a constant struggle with some besetting sin, my word to you is to take heart from the gospel. I do not minimize the struggle. But you are loved by God, and that love has been “shed abroad in your bean by the Spirit”. The key to life in the Spirit for some is to spend much more quiet time in thanksgiving and praise for what God has done – and is doing, and promises to do – and less time on introspection, focused on your failure to match up to the law.

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Whenever you do feel like getting even for what someone has done to you rather than forgiving them as Christ has forgiven you, you are made to realize once more that you do still live between the times, between the time the infection set in and the perfection will be realized. But by the Spirit’s leading, neither do you do whatever you wish – tear into somebody for what they have done to you – as you used to do without thinking. The Spirit, God’s own presence – his empowering presence – is within, and will lead you into appropriate responses. Finally, to bring this discussion full circle, here is where your being a member of the body comes in. Since the ultimate goal of salvation is for us individually to belong as a growing, contributing, edifying member of the people of God, others in the body exist for the same purpose, and thus should serve you in the same way. Don’t try to be a lone ranger Christian, slugging it out on your own. Seek out those in the community to whom you can be accountable and let them join you in your desire to grow into Christ’s likeness.
15. Where to from Here? – The Spirit for Today and Tomorrow

_If we are going to count for much in the post-modern world in which we now live, the Spirit must remain the key to the church’s existence._

15.1. Introduction

In light of the preceding pages, we must candidly admit that the experience and life of the Spirit were more radically central for Paul and his churches than seems to be true for most of us. The Spirit was more genuinely experienced as well. That awareness has led to the title of this final chapter. Proper humility will also “acknowledge that the most appropriate answer to the question is “I don’t know”. Rather than try to give answers, therefore, I propose to end

1. by identifying the central features of Paul’s approach to the Spirit,

2. by pointing out the frequent distance between Paul and ourselves on these matters, and
3. by offering some brief suggestions about bridging that distance.

What is said here assumes the truth of the Reformation principle: the church must be both “reformed and always being reformed”. Historically, the most important ingredient of true reformation and renewal is for the church to become more intentionally biblical in its thought and actions.

15.2. Paul’s understanding of the Spirit – A summary

The following are what I see to be at the heart of Paul’s approach to the Spirit, given now in slightly different order from the way they appear in the preceding chapters.

15.2.1. The key to Christian experience

The most obvious point has been repeated in a number of ways throughout, namely, the crucial role the Spirit plays in Paul’s Christian experience and therefore in every aspect of his understanding of the gospel. In the final analysis, in every aspect of his theology – at least what is basic to his theology – the Spirit plays a leading role. To be sure, the Spirit is not the center for Paul – Christ is, ever and always – but the Spirit stands close to the center, making Christ known and empowering all genuinely Christian life and experience. For this reason, the Spirit must play a much more vital role in our thinking about Paul’s theology than tends now to be the case.
15.2.2. God breaking into our lives

Equally crucial to Paul’s perspective is the dynamic, experiential way the Spirit comes into the life of the individual and into the ongoing life of the believing community. This reality lies behind everything Paul says; it is a point Paul presupposes and thus argues from, not for. The Spirit as an experienced reality lies behind both the Corinthian abuse and Paul’s correction of Spirit life in that community (1 Cor 12-14); it is basic to his reminding the Thessalonians about the reality of their conversion (1 Thess 1:4-6); it serves as primary evidence that life in Christ is based on faith and apart from Torah (Gal 3:1-5; 4:6-7); it is the assumption lying behind the commands in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 (cf. 2 Thess 2:2); it serves as evidence confirming Paul’s own ministry as an apostle (1 Cor 2:4-5; 2 Cor 12:12; Rom 15:18-19); it is the basic truth on which Paul can argue for the sufficiency of life in the Spirit (Gal 5:13-6:10); and it is essential to his reminder to Timothy to fan Spirit life into flame in order to receive the necessary power and courage for ministry in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:18; 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6-7). Both Paul’s direct and passing references to the work of the Spirit everywhere presuppose the Spirit as an empowering, experienced reality in the life of the church and the believer.

15.2.3. End-time evidence and guarantee of glory

Pivotal to the Spirit’s central role is the thoroughly eschatological framework within which Paul both experienced and understood the Spirit. The Spirit had played a leading role in his – and others’ – expectations about the end times. Along with the resurrection of Christ, therefore, the outpoured Spirit
radically altered Paul’s eschatological perspective. On the one hand, the coming of the Spirit fulfilled the Old Testament promises, and was the sure evidence that the future had already been set in motion; on the other hand, since the final consummation of God’s kingdom had not yet taken place, the Spirit also served as the sure guarantee of the final glory. It is impossible to understand Paul’s emphasis on the experienced life of the Spirit apart from this eschatological perspective that dominates his thinking.

15.2.4. God dwelling in and among us

Related to the critical eschatological framework are several converging facts which demonstrate that for Paul the experience of the promised Spirit meant the return of God’s personal presence to dwell in and among his people. The Spirit marks off God’s people individually and corporately as God’s temple, the place of his personal dwelling on earth. Brought together here in terms of fulfillment are:

1. the theme of the presence of God, expressed in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple;
2. the presence further understood in terms of the Spirit of the Lord (Isa 63:9-14; Ps 106:33); and
3. the promised new covenant of the Spirit from Jeremiah and Ezekiel, wherein the Spirit would indwell God’s people and cause them to live and to follow his ways.

Paul not only sees these themes as fulfilled by the gift of the Spirit, but also understands the Spirit as God’s personal presence. This understanding best accounts for Paul’s general reluctance to refer to the Spirit with impersonal images;
on the contrary, he regularly refers to the Spirit’s activity with verbs of personal action, used elsewhere of God and Christ. The Spirit is thus “the Holy Spirit of God” and “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” – the way God is currently present with and among his people.

15.2.5. “God very God”

In this vein it is also important to note how absolutely fundamental to Paul’s theology are his presupposition about the Trinity—although that is neither his language nor his major focus. What makes the Trinity foundational for him, without his ever discussing it as such, are the four ever-present realities

1. that God is one and personal,

2. that the Spirit is the Spirit of God and therefore personal,

3. that the Spirit and Christ are fully divine, and

4. that the Spirit is as distinct from Christ and the Father as they are from each other.

This modification of Paul’s understanding of the one God is in part what makes his treatment of salvation dynamic and effective.

15.2.6. Salvation made effective

Paul’s understanding of God as Trinity, including the role of the Spirit, is thus foundational to the primary passion of his life – salvation in Christ. Salvation is God’s, activity, from
beginning to end: God the Father initiated it, in that it belongs to God’s eternal purposes (1 Cor 2:6-9), it has its origins in God and has God as its ultimate goal (1 Cor 8:6), and it was set in motion by God’s having sent both the Son and the Spirit (Gal 4:4-7). Christ the Son accomplished salvation for the people of God through his death and resurrection, the central feature of all of Paul’s theology. The effective application in believers’ lives of the love of God as offered by the Son is uniquely the work of the Spirit. So much is this so that when Paul reminds believers of their conversion experience or of their present status in Christ, he almost always does so in terms of the Spirit’s activity or presence. There is no salvation in Christ that is not fully trinitarian in this sense, and therefore there is no salvation in Christ that is not made effective in the life of the believer by the experienced coming of the Spirit, whom God “poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:6 NIV).

15.2.7. A people called forth

The goal of God’s eschatological salvation is to create a people for his name. This people are the true succession of the old covenant people of God, and as a people are the object of God’s saving activity in Christ. But they are now newly constituted through the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the eschatological Spirit, though the they enter the community individually through faith in Christ and the gift of the Spirit.

   Formed by the Spirit, they are an eschatological people, who live the life of the future in the present as they await the consummation. They are God’s family, evidenced by the
The Spirit’s crying *Abba* from within their hearts; they are God’s temple, the place of his habitation on earth by his Spirit; and they form Christ’s body, made so by their common lavish experience of the one Spirit.

**15.2.8. Righteousness made possible**

The Spirit’s major role in Paul’s view lies with his being the essential element of the whole of Christian life, from beginning to end. The Spirit thus empowers ethical life in all its dimensions-individually, within the community, and to the world. Believers in Christ, who are Spirit people first and foremost, are variously described as living by the Spirit, walking in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, and sowing to the Spirit. Ethics for Paul is likewise founded in the Trinity: the Spirit of God conforms the believer into the likeness of Christ to the glory of God. The Spirit is thus the empowering presence of God for living the life of God in the present.

There is therefore no Christian life that is not at the same time a holy life, made so by the Holy Spirit whom God gives to his people (1 Thess 4:8). At the same time, life in the Spirit also includes every other imaginable dimension of the believer’s present end. time existence, including being empowered by the Spirit to abound in hope, to live in joy, to pray without ceasing, to exercise self control, to experience a robust conscience, to have insight into God’s will and purposes, and to endure in every kind of present hardship and suffering. To be a believer means nothing less than being filled with and thus to live in and by the Spirit.
15.2.9. The key to Christian worship

Finally, the Spirit is the key to all truly Christian Spirituality. At the individual level the life of the Spirit includes “praying in the Spirit” as well as with the mind. In so doing, the Spirit not only helps believers by interceding for them in their weaknesses, but also gives them great confidence in such times of prayer since God knows the mind of the Spirit, and since the Spirit prays through the believer in keeping with God’s own purposes.

At the same time, the Spirit’s presence, including his charismata, helps to build up the believing community as its members gather together to worship God. In Paul’s churches, therefore, worship is ”charismatic” simply because the Spirit is the key player in all that transpires. The Spirit, who forms the body and creates the temple, is present with unity and diversity, so that all may participate and all may be built up.

15.3. The Spirit in the later church: A contrast

With no intent to be judgmental, I observe that in much of its subsequent history the church has lived somewhat below the picture of the life of the Spirit just outlined. Indeed, the general marginalizing of the Spirit by scholarship and the frequent domestication of the Spirit by the church were noted in the overture as part of the reason for this book. For example, the passage of time and the (necessary, but not always helpful) institutionalizing of the church, plus the influence of Greek thought forms on its theologizing, led the church away from its fundamentally eschatological outlook (§15.2.3 above). This meant the experience of the Spirit
played a less and less crucial role in the church’s understanding of itself as living between the times – that is, between the beginning of the end and its consummation at the return of Christ (§15.2.7). As a result, the local community of believers was less apt to maintain the balance of being in the world but not of the world, always calling it into question, not conditioned by its values and lifestyle.

At the same time, the dynamic and experienced nature of life in the Spirit was generally lost (§15.2.2). At least part of the reason for this was the result of a matter the New Testament never addresses: How do children of believers become believers themselves? At some point in time the majority of Christians became so as the result of being born into Christian homes rather than through adult conversion. Indeed, much of the tension later believers feel between their own experience of church and that about which they read in the New Testament can be attributed to this significant factor.

An important point is that all of Paul’s letters were written to first-generation believers, all of whom – at least those addressed in Paul’s letters – were adult converts, whose conversions had included an experience of the Holy Spirit coming into their lives. That, at least, is the picture that emerges in the letters. But what happens to this experienced conversion, attended by the Spirit, for children born and raised in the homes of such converts? As much as anything, this probably accounts for the subsequent loss of the experiential nature of life in the Spirit and for the general marginalizing of the Spirit in the later church.

Again, this is not intended to be a judgmental picture, nor do I suggest that it is true at all times and in all places. But it
is of some interest that the subsequent study of church history by the church itself has far more often been a history of the institution than of the life of the Spirit in the community of faith as it lived out the life of Christ in the world.

What was not lost in all this, of course, was the doctrine of Spirit, with its properly biblical understanding of the Spirit in personal terms (§15.2.4), which led to the more formal expressions, in the creeds, of the Spirit’s place in the Godhead (§15.2.5) and therefore of his essential role in one’s becoming a child of God (§15.2.6). Related to this development are two other matters associating the reception of the Spirit with water baptism, and the (probably) eventual practice of baptizing infant children born into Christian homes. The Spirit was inevitably now no longer perceived as dynamically experienced (§15.2.2), although he was still a central factor in the theology of salvation.

The general loss of the dynamic and experiential life of the Spirit on entrance to Christian life (conversion) also accounts for the spiritual disease and feebleness in the individual believer throughout much of the church’s later history (§15.2.8). This is not true of everyone, of course. But it does in part account for the rise both of the monastic movement and of various Spirit movements throughout Paul’s perspective of church history. “Holy” and its plural noun, “the saints”, which in Paul’s Spirituality describe everyday Christian life and Christians, respectively, came to describe the special rather experienced reality than the normal. So too with Spirituality (§15.2.9). Spontaneity by the many gave way to performance by a few; prayer in the Spirit became fixed in the (often excellent) liturgy of the church; tongues did indeed generally cease and the prophetic word was rele-
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To be sure, the church has also had its history of Spirit movements of various and sundry kinds. Some of these were absorbed into the church; others were pushed outside the church and usually became heretical and divisive; and still others became reform movements within the church. The common denominator of most of these movements has been their attempt to recapture the life of the Spirit in some form. To the degree that they succeeded they have been a source of renewal and blessing. But Spirit movements tend to make institutions nervous – for good reason, one might add, both positively and negatively. The net result has been that Paul’s perspective of life in the Spirit, as a dynamically experienced reality creating an end-time people who live for God’s glory, has not generally fared well in the overall life of the church.

15.4. A way forward

If what has preceded paints too bleak a picture or sounds like a belittling of the subsequent work of the Spirit in the church, let me say again that this is not my intent; nor do I think that if we could turn the clock back, all would be better. To the contrary, I not only recognize that the clock cannot be turned back, but also find cause for much rejoicing in the church’s history. The creeds, the liturgies, the theologizing, the institutional life are not only with us, but for many, myself included, are seen to be the work of the Spirit in the subsequent life of the church. The plea of this study, therefore, is not that of a restorationist, as if we really could restore “the primitive church”, whatever that means.
and whatever that would look like. Rather, it is a plea for recapturing Paul’s perspective of Christian life as essentially the life of the Spirit, dynamically experienced and eschatologically oriented – but fully integrated into the life of the church.

From my limited perspective, such a recapturing has three dimensions. First, we need the Spirit to bring life into our present institutions, theologies, and liturgies – in contrast to tearing down these barns and building different ones, which all too often has been the history of Spirit movements, especially of the restorationist type. The Spirit not only inspires a new body of songs in every renewal within the church, but makes the best of former hymns come to life with new vigor. “Can these dry bones live?” the Lord asked the prophet. “You know”, he replied, and then watched as the Spirit brought life to what was already there. Too much water has passed under the bridge for us to believe that somehow we will be miraculously unified in terms of visible structures, liturgies, and theologies. But time and again, when the human factor is not getting in the way, the Spirit has given God’s people a greater sense that they are one across confessional lines. The church is with us – indeed, we are it – in its present shape(s) and structures. May the Spirit of the living God be poured out upon us afresh for our life in the present world until Christ comes again.

Second, a genuine recapturing of Paul’s perspective will not isolate the Spirit in such a way that Spiritual gifts and Spirit phenomena take pride of place in the church, resulting in churches that are either charismatic or otherwise. Rather, a genuine recapturing of Paul’s perspective will cause the church to be more vitally trinitarian, not only in its theology
but in its life and Spirituality as well. This will mean not the
exaltation of the Spirit but the exaltation of God; and it will
mean focus not on the Spirit as such but on the Son, crucified
and risen, Savior and Lord of all. Ethical life will be neither
narrowly, individualistically imagined nor legalistically ex-
pressed, but will be joyously communal and decidedly over
against the world’s present trinity of relativism, secularism,
and individualism, with their thoroughly dehumanizing re-
sults. And the proper trinitarian aim of such ethics will
be Paul’s own aim— to the glory of God, through being con-
formed to the image of the Son, by the empowering of the
Spirit.

Recapturing the dynamic life of the Spirit will also en-
tail the renewal of the charismata, not for the sake of being
charismatic, but for the building up of the people of God for
their life together and in the world. What must not happen
in such a renewal is what has so often happened in the past:
holding the extraordinary charismata is such awe that they
are allowed to exist untested, undiscerned, and ungrounded
in the local body of believers. Every form of extremism,
which is often the expressed or hidden fear, over a renewed
life of the Spirit in the church, is ultimately the result of fail-
ure to heed Paul’s key injunction (1 Thess 5:19-22): “Do
not quench the Spirit by despising prophesying. But test all
things; and in so doing, hold fast to what is good and be
done with every evil form”. The failure to test the spirits
has led to lack of responsibility and accountability, which in
turn has often led to failure on the pan of some who were in
prominence, as well as to pain and hurt by those who were
the recipients of prophetic words that were either false or
impossible.
Third, a genuine recapturing of the dynamic life of the Spirit will result in more effective evangelism in a lost, isolated, individualistic world. As evidenced already in some good ways through current charismatic traditions and traditional Pentecostals, the visibly dynamic work of the Spirit – where God is less an item in the creed and more obviously at work in the world – has frequently manifested itself in drawing people to Christ and into his church. Our task is not to share our “good views” about God, but to offer his great and glorious “good news”, which includes his presence as reality in people’s lives and in the life of the church.

In summary, I think Paul’s perspective has the better of it; and I also believe that that perspective can become our own-dare I say, must become our own, if we are going to make any difference at all in the so-called post-Christian, postmodern era. But this means that our theologizing must stop paying mere lip service to the Spirit and recognize his crucial role in Paul’s gospel; and it means that the church must risk freeing the Spirit from being boxed into the creed and getting him back into the experiential life of the believer and the believing community.

15.5. Conclusion

So we have come to the end of this look at the Spirit in Paul’s letters. What is obviously missing is the how to question, which is probably the more urgent question for most people in a culture like ours. “How do I foster such a life of the Spirit within my church?” and “What do I do personally about all of this?” are the most frequently asked questions in
Where to from Here?

On the corporate level my response is basically to the leadership, for without the leadership taking ownership of the need, little will happen. To leaders, then, I suggest three things: First, over a long period teach this material in an ongoing way. Teach the people biblically. Work hard on the texts themselves. Lead the people through Paul’s letters again and again, pointing out the crucial role the Spirit plays in his view of things.

Second, I refer back to the first paragraphs of chapter 5. I would make it my top priority to lead the people of God into a more biblical understanding of what it means for us to be God’s eschatological people in a world gone mad. Over and over again, through text after text, New Testament book after New Testament book, I would try to help them to make a major paradigm shift as to what it means to be the people of God in the world. Since this is the aim of God’s saving work in Christ that the Spirit has come to bring to realization, I would make this the focus of ministry for years to come.

Third, in terms of the gathered community at worship (chapters 13 and 14 above), leaders would do well to provide a setting and atmosphere in which people can practice. This means readiness to take risks by creating opportunities in a corporate setting to let the charismata build up the people of God – for growth in ministry within and in reaching out to the world, Take risks as leaders and then be willing to get out of the way to let the people of God function as a whole priesthood, each one bringing their gifts to God and

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15 Chapter 5: The Beginning of the End – The Spirit as Evidence of the “Presence of the Future”.
16 Chapter 13: To the Praise of His Glory – The Spirit and Worship; Chapter 14: Those Controversial Gifts? The Spirit and the Charismata.
to each other. Allow for newness, changes, and greater spontaneity within the structures God has traditionally blessed. After all, “seek earnestly the better gifts” for the edification of the body is an imperative, not a polite invitation.

At the individual level, my stock answer is admittedly not always helpful: hunger and thirst with openness. For some this puts too much emphasis on the human rather than on the divine side; and I too fear that. But my own experience in the church is that there is a dear correlation between our own hunger after God, on the one hand, and our experience of God, on the other. This does not remove the experience of the Spirit from God’s own Sovereignty, nor does it imply that the one hungering and thirsting does not already have the Spirit in full measure. I simply know of no other practical solution.

Moreover, our Lord himself pronounced his congratulatory blessing on those who “hunger and thirst after righteousness”, promising that they “shall be filled”. Part of the point of this book is that hungering and thirsting after the life of the Spirit is what that beatitude is all about. And that beatitude presupposes the first one, that those who recognize themselves before God as “impoverished in spirit” are the inheritors of the kingdom.

The concern for openness is where I would emphasize the divine sovereignty. It is a way of suggesting that we need less often to tell God what we want, as though we knew what is best for us, and more often to have a stance of openness, so that we might continually be surprised by joy. Openness means seeking earnestly after the Spirit, with readiness for whatever the Spirit may want to do, not for the sake of our individual walk alone, but for what it will mean for sake of
the body. My experience over many years, including the reading of Scripture, has taught me that the one God, who lives in holy joy and love in triune relationship, delights to delight his people, and those delights are as diverse as the creation itself.

Perhaps the proper way to conclude this study, therefore, is with prayer, in this case with the aid of earlier Spirit-inspired prayers. The first is from Psalms, expressing the longing of those who already know God to know him more – and better; it assumes the attitude of the first and third beatitudes, but is expressed in the passionate language of the soul that knows it has a God-shaped space within, which desperately needs God to fill it with himself:

O God, you are my God, 
earnestly I seek you; 
my soul thirsts for you, 
my body longs for you, 
in a dry and weary land 
where there is no water. (Isa 63:1 NIV)

The second is the prayer of Moses, noted earlier as lying close to the surface of Paul’s understanding of the Spirit as God’s empowering presence. Here is that cry of desperation which should mark church and believer alike, who live as God’s redeemed and redemptive people in the postmodern era that marks the turning of the centuries – and millennia:

If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with ... your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish ... your people from all
the other people on the face of the earth? (Exod 33:15-16 NIV)

Finally, from Andrew Reed’s hymn, which expresses at the individual level what should perhaps most characterize the nature of our prayer for life in the Spirit:

Holy Spirit, all divine,
    Dwell within this bean of mine;
Cast down every idol throne,
    Reign supreme, and reign alone.

Amen and amen.