



The Justice Of God

Rightly Dividing The Word: Shelf 5 — Volume 46

OBJECTIVE: One of the central teachings of the Bible in reference to the nature of God is His justice. Regardless of any interpretation we may have in reference to Bible teaching, we must never develop any teaching that endangers, or brings into question, the justice of God. If we do, then we are bringing into question the very existence of the God in whom we believe.

Justice means that God deals fairly with all men and does not show respect of persons. God is *“a just God and a Savior”* (Is 45:21). *“Righteousness and justice are the foundation”* of His throne (Ps 89:14). This is also said of the Son who said, *“My judgment is just”* (Jn 5:30 - KJV). Jesus is the Just One (See At 3:14; 7:52; 22:14). Whenever we consider the influence of the Holy Spirit on the heart of an individual, **the justice of God must always be considered.** This is necessary because of the reality of hell that is to come for the wicked.

God is a just God. To be just means to be fair. It means to judge by law with an unprejudicial nature. **Judgment with justice means that the individual who is judged must have had an opportunity to obey the law by which he is judged.** He must also have had a choice to respond to law. The one judging must not be swayed by preconceived ideas or respect of persons. **The one who is judged must not have been given a nature that would incline him to either obey or disobey the law.** The justice of God, therefore, means that God has bound Himself to fair judgment by His law that He has given to man to obey. It means that He will not interfere with the free-moral decisions of those who will be judged.

One's theology of the Holy Spirit must always include the final judgment and the punishment of the wicked beyond the judgment.

If just one person is eternally lost to hell, no accusation must be charged against God in judgment for being an unfair judge. This is true concerning the judgment of any Christian who loses his or her soul through apostasy.

As we develop from our Bible study an understanding of the work of the Spirit in reference to the moral behavior of man, we must never bring into question the justice of God in final judgment. If one is eternally lost, then God cannot be blamed. **One must accept complete responsibility for his or her salvation in response to the gospel.** Only in this way can the justice of God stand in view of the final judgment and condemnation of the wicked or apostate Christian.

A. God Is No Respector Of Persons

In order for the justice of God to stand unchallenged in final judgment, **God must not show respect of persons.** Peter said, *"In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality"* (At 10:34). He also stated, *"The Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work"* (1 Pt 1:17). Therefore, *"there is no partiality with God"* (Rm 2:11; see Ep 6:9; Cl 3:25). The Bible clearly teaches that God does not show respect of persons in reference to judgment. If He did, then He would not be a just judge.

Since God does not relate to humanity with respect of persons, then we must also conclude that He does not work on the heart of any individual in any way that shows partiality. He does not influence us against our will (subjectively) to either obey or disobey His word. In other words, **in order for God to maintain His justice He cannot make us do what we do not want to do.** He will not forcefully prevent us from doing what we should not do. If He did, then He would be partial. He would be showing

favoritism. And if one was eternally lost to whom God had shown partiality in any way, then the justice of God would be brought into question. If one whom God was supposed to have helped was condemned, **then the condemned could complain that God did not help enough.** If one is eternally lost, no fault can be placed on God for one's condemnation.

It is very important to understand the principle that God is not a respecter of persons. **There would be no such thing as the justice of God if God showed respect of persons.** When drawing conclusions concerning the work and influence of the Holy Spirit, therefore, it is very important to understand that God the Holy Spirit works without showing respect of persons. He does not consider one saint above another.

The Holy Spirit does not influence the individual saint in a manner by which He would eventually be accused of being accountable if an apostate saint would loose his soul.

There is a good example of the fairness of God in reference to some misbehavior on the part of the apostle Peter. *“Before certain men came from James [in Jerusalem to Antioch], he ate with the Gentiles. But when they came, he withdrew and separated himself [from the Gentiles]”* (Gl 2:12). By doing this, Paul said that *“he stood condemned”* (Gl 2:11). He stood condemned because he did not behave in a manner that was *“straightforward about the gospel”* (Gl 2:14).

Though Peter had previously had all the privileges or opportunities of being personally called by Jesus into apostleship, and walking with Him during His earthly ministry, **he stood condemned in Antioch because of his bad behavior.** Though he had the privilege of being given the keys of the kingdom, he stood condemned. Though he could miraculously heal others, he stood condemned. **God is no respecter of persons.**

B. God Is Bound To His Law

When speaking of the justice of God, two things are necessary for justice to stand unapproachable. (1) One is the existence of the law of God. (2) The other is that a free-moral individual must be truly free in order to respond to law.

1. Law is necessary.

If God created us—and He did—then it is reasonable to conclude that He would communicate to us instructions for moral behavior. If God created us to have a free-moral choice in matters of His law—and He did—then it is absolutely necessary that we be given law in order to direct our relationships with one another.

God did not make us gods. He did not create us with the ability to determine our own moral codes of behavior. It is not in us to establish our own moral codes by which to relate to one another (See Jr 10:23). Our efforts to direct our own life often ends in our maltreatment of our fellow man. Nazi Germany, and similar societies of world history, have proved the fact that it is not in humanity to morally direct their own steps.

Since we are here as a result of God's creation, then it is necessary that we be governed by divine law, not by our own humanly devised schemes of law.

2. Law revealed before judgment.

In order for God to be fair, and thus not showing partiality in judgment, He must reveal law to us **before** we are held accountable for obedience to law. **We must be warned and given the opportunity to bring our lives into harmony with that which will be the standard of our judgment before the judgment.** Jesus stated, *“The word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day”* (Jn 12:48). This is the warning. Jesus, therefore, has given His standard by which we will be judged. We have been forewarned that we will be judged by the standard of

the word of Christ in order that we reap the eternal benefits of the gospel.

If one stands condemned before God in the last day, then he or she of necessity had to have been given law before the judgment. **God would certainly not be a just God if He condemned to hell anyone who had not been given an opportunity to hear the word of God before he or she stands in judgment.** Because God has given law, His judgment will be just.

3. Law is a necessary standard.

When we speak of the law of God in reference to Christians, we must keep in mind that law is the condition for a covenant relationship that the Christian has with God. In order to establish a covenant relationship with God, **one must submit to the God-given conditions of the covenant.** In order to maintain the covenant, the obedient must continue his or her submission to the conditions of the covenant.

This does not mean that the conditions can be kept perfectly. The fact is that no one can keep the conditions of the covenant perfectly. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God (See Rm 3:9,10,23). Therefore, **it is by grace that we are saved** (See Rm 5:1,2). When considering the giving of law for people to obey, we must keep in mind that God expects us to respond to grace by obedience to the conditions of our covenant relationship with Him. It is for this reason that obedience to the gospel is a condition for eternal life (See 2 Th 1:6-9)

Law is given as the condition for staying in a covenant relationship with God. Therefore, law is necessary. It is necessary in order to determine if one has sought to keep the conditions of a covenant with God, though no one can keep the conditions perfectly (See Rm 3:9,10). Though law establishes the conditions, the gospel of grace covers our violations of law. *If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and*

the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 Jn 1:7), then we remain in a covenant relationship with God.

This thought is brought out in several statements in Paul's letter to the Romans. He refers to this first in Romans 2. In Romans 2:2 Paul said, **"But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things."** In this context Paul is arguing that God will judge the Jews who lived before the cross by the Sinai law. In the final judgment He **"will render to each one according to his deeds"** (Rm 2:6; see 2 Co 5:10). In this judgment **"there is no partiality with God"** (Rm 2:11). Such impartial judgment is emphasized in Romans 2:12: **"For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law."**

For Christians, therefore, Paul concludes that God will **"judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel"** (vs 16). The Christian's standard of judgment by which his deeds will be measured will be his response to the gospel. Therefore, Jesus forewarned, **"The word [of the gospel] that I have spoken will judge"** you in the final day of judgment (Jn 12:48). Christians will be judged in reference to grace, not law. It is for this reason that one must obey the gospel in order to have access to this grace (See 2 Th 1:6-9).

Since Christians live under the "law of grace," this means that in the final judgment they will not be judged according to their performance of law, but by their faithfulness in walking in response to the gospel of grace.

In Romans 3 Paul continued to emphasize the just judgment of God because He has given to us the opportunity to obey the gospel. Paul asked, **"Is God unjust who inflicts wrath?"** (Rm 3:5). In other words, is God an unjust God who would condemn those He might randomly choose not to save? Paul's answer is, **"Certainly not!"** (Rm 3:6). Paul assumes that

the Roman Christians, and us, would be wondering concerning God's final judgment. He continued, *"For how will God judge the world?"* (Rm 3:6). The answer is simple: *"The law brings about wrath"* (Rm 4:15). The law notifies man that he is a sinner. **It manifests that no person can keep law perfectly in order to justify himself or herself before God.** Therefore, if one would seek to stand before God on the merit of his or her own meritorious performance in law-keeping, then he or she will most assuredly be condemned (See Rm 6:23).

Through law we realize that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Rm 3:23). Therefore, the law is good because it identifies sin. And when sin is identified, **one is driven to the grace of God.** It is man, not law, who has the problem. Our problem is sin—lawbreaking. Paul asks, *"Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law"* (Rm 7:7). Paul's extended answer is, *"Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good"* (Rm 7:12). The law was good because it identified sin, for *"when the commandment came, sin revived and I died"* (Rm 7:9). Therefore, if we are condemned in final judgment, we must not blame the law, or God's giving of law. The point is that we must accept our personal responsibility for our own inability to keep law perfectly in order to save ourselves.

If one is lost, then he or she must take ownership of the fact that he or she did not receive or accept God's solution for lawbreakers, that is, the gospel of His Son. Law, therefore, should drive us to accept the responsibility of responding to the gospel of God's grace.

In no way can God be blamed for our failure to respond to the gospel. His justice must and will go unchallenged throughout eternity because He has forewarned humanity by the giving of law and the offering of the gospel to those who have realized that they cannot be saved by perfect obedience to law. One's eternal destiny depends on his or her

response to the gospel for no one can keep perfectly the conditions (law) of the covenant.

Judgment will be conducted according to God's revealed law. **God cannot change the conditions of the covenant at the time of final judgment and still be just.** He cannot judge individuals by a different standard than that which has been given. God is bound to judge by the standard that He has given in order that we might escape condemnation.

4. The Holy Spirit allows free-moral choice.

The Holy Spirit must of necessity allow individuals the opportunity to free-morally act or react in relation to the gospel. Our understanding of the operation of the Holy Spirit in relation to revealed law and the heart of man is very critical here.

God cannot stand just in final judgment if the Holy Spirit operates directly upon the heart of a person in a manner wherein He would directly influence the actions or reactions of that person in reference to the gospel.

The apostate Christian could not be justly condemned if it were the work of the Spirit to directly influence his moral behavior in relation to the law of God. This is true because the apostate could **justly** say in his or her condemnation, "Why did the Holy Spirit not influence me more?"

If the Holy Spirit works directly on the heart of Christians in a manner by which He directly controls and changes our hearts and behavior, then apostate Christians could blame the Holy Spirit for their condemnation. Peter could not blame the Holy Spirit when he stood condemned in Antioch for behavior that was contrary to the truth of the gospel. His later repentance proved that he took ownership for his actions that brought him into condemnation.

Any teaching, therefore, that shifts the responsibility for condemnation from the apostate Christian to the work of the Holy Spirit must be brought into

question. In order for God to stand just in final judgment, **no blame can be placed on Him in any way for the condemnation of the disobedient.** The condemned must suffer the consequences of their own disobedience. The only way they can bear the total responsibility for their condemnation is if they are totally responsible for their behavior.

The teaching of the direct operation of the Holy Spirit on the free-moral heart of an individual inherently makes God a respecter of persons.

If God operates directly in conversion in order to move one to respond to the gospel, then this action makes God respect one sinner over another. Why would He not move all people to respond who hear the gospel? Since God is not willing that any should perish (See 2 Pt 3:9), then we would assume that the Holy Spirit would move everyone who hears the gospel to respond to the gospel, that is if the Spirit directly influences one to respond to the gospel.

The fact that most people do not respond to the preached gospel is evidence that the Holy Spirit is not operating directly on the hearts of people in order to move them to respond to the gospel.

If God works directly on the heart of the believer, the same dilemma is a problem. We would ask why He operated powerfully in one case, and yet, in the case of the fallen Christian we would wonder why He did not work hard enough in order to guard the believer from falling. Why would He have allowed Peter to behave in a way in which he once stood condemned? Harper was right when he said,

If God's child could obey God but would not, and God sends in the Holy Spirit to do his work, or to obey for him, or to **enable** his child to do it himself, you then place God under obligation to do the same for all his children or make God a respecter of persons. This would mean "once in grace always in grace"; "once saved, always saved" **unless** the Holy Spirit is **unable** to perform that for which God sent

him (E. R. Harper, *Harper on the Holy Spirit Issues in the Twentieth Century*, 1976)

God has revealed the gospel through the offering of His Son. We are subject to respond to the gospel. We will in the last day be judged if we have not obeyed the gospel (See Jn 12:48; 2 Th 2:6-9). It is not the work of the Holy Spirit to endanger the justice of God by directly influencing our relationship with Him through our free-moral obedience to the gospel. It is not the work of the Holy Spirit to enable us to respond to the gospel and the law of God. It is our free-moral responsibility to obey. After we obey the gospel, it is our responsibility to maintain the conditions of God's covenant that He established with us at the time of our obedience to the gospel (Cl 3:1-17).

As a Christian in a covenant relationship with God, it is not the work of the Holy Spirit to enable us to maintain the conditions of the covenant. It is our responsibility. And since it is our responsibility to maintain the conditions of the covenant, then we must take ownership of the consequences of disobedience if we do not continue faithful to the conditions of our covenant relationship with God.

It will thus be our own fault if we lose our soul by falling away from the covenant we have with God. Every picture of the final judgment in the New Testament focuses on the individual responsibility of each person in reference to his or her obedience.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that every one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad (2 Co 5:10).

In our final judgment, we cannot blame any other person if we are condemned. Peter had to take ownership of his once state of condemnation. He did not blame the Holy Spirit to keep him away from bad behavior in surrendering himself to the bad behavior

of others. This also means that we cannot blame the Holy Spirit if we involve ourselves in behavior that will lead to our condemnation.

C. Our Free-Moral Choice

The justice of God is necessitated by the fact that there will be a final judgment wherein most of the world will be condemned to the destruction of hell. The fact that there will be accountability for sin in judgment assumes that there must be a just God who will bring all of us before judgment. Therefore, in order for there to be a just and fair judgment, those who are judged must be fairly judged by a just God. **Just judgment before a just God can happen only if we are held completely accountable for our own behavior.** And for us to be held completely accountable for our own behavior in final judgment, we must be truly free to make our own decisions in this life.

God has instilled in the thinking of every person the ability to make choices. In order for just judgment to be conducted in reference to every individual, every individual must be a truly free-moral individual who lives in an environment wherein choices of either good or evil can freely be made.

In order for God to be just in judgment, therefore, everyone must be a true **free-moral individual with the ability to make choices.** By **free** we mean that we must have the right or freedom to make choices of either good or evil. By **moral** we mean that we must have the freedom to make moral choices in reference to our behavior, and subsequently, our eternal destiny. By **individual** we mean that we must be an independent personality wherein our heart can be influenced.

We cannot be truly free individuals if our minds cannot make either right or wrong choices that are outside the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. A truly free-moral individual has the freedom to make choices of either good or evil in an environment

wherein choices of either good or evil can be made.

A. Requirements For Free Choice

In order for one to be a true free-moral individual there are three things that must exist: **(1)** We must have the ability to make choices. **(2)** We must live in an environment in which the choices can be made. **(3)** We must have the freedom to make the choices.

If one had the ability to make choices, but did not live in an environment wherein he or she could make choices, then certainly he or she would not be a true free-moral individual. If one could make the choices, and lived in an environment in which he or she could make choices, but was prevented from doing so, then he or she would still not be a truly free-moral individual.

1. Ability to choose:

If we are to make choices in relation to revealed law in order to maintain a covenant relationship with God, then we must have the **mental ability** to make choices. God first placed man in the garden of Eden. He also placed in the garden the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In relation to the tree, there was law. "Don't eat of it" (Gn 2:17). It would have been senseless to state the law concerning the eating of the fruit of the tree if Adam did not have the ability to make a rational choice concerning the law.

Adam was given the law not to eat of the tree because God had already given him the ability to make a choice. Because Adam had the ability to make a choice in reference to law, he was truly free, and thus, would be held accountable for his sin if he violated the law. Therefore, in order for everyone to stand in judgment and be held accountable for their choices, **all of us must have been created with the ability to make choices concerning good and evil.**

Condemnation of anyone would be unjust if any individual did not have the ability to make choices by which he or she could be saved. **The justice of God**

will stand in judgment because we have been given the ability to make choices. And because we have this ability, we will be held accountable for the choices we make.

2. Environment for choice:

A person with the ability to choose, who is not placed in an environment wherein he or she can make choices, is not truly free. Therefore, God had to place choices before Adam and Eve in order to produce an environment wherein they could function as true free-moral individuals. For this reason, all of us were placed in a world where Satan is allowed to deceive. The reality of deception by Satan is evidence that we must make choices in relation to truth. As free-moral individuals we are capable of making decisions in the environment in which we live.

In order for God to stand as a just God in judgment, those who are judged must have had an opportunity to make choices of good or evil.

If the condemned did not have the choice of making bad choices, then God could not be just to condemn them to hell. Therefore, the fact that we will be held accountable for making evil choices, assumes that we now live in an environment in which those choices can be made.

3. Freedom to choose:

It would have been useless for God to create us with the ability to make choices, and then place us in an environment wherein choices could be made, **but without giving us the freedom to make choices.** God's creation of man with the ability to make choices assumes that we have the freedom to do so.

Placing us in an environment wherein we can make choices also assumes that we can make the choices. Therefore, in order for us to be a true free-moral agents, we must have the privilege of making choices of either good or evil in an environment

wherein such choices can be made.

If God had pre-programmed us to behave in a certain manner, we would be robots. But it is difficult to love a robot. Therefore, in order for God to relate to a being upon that He could truly pour out His love, we of necessity had to be created truly free to make moral decisions. And when God did pour out His love through His Son, then the recipients of the love could free-morally respond to the Father with the words, “We love You, too!”

To be truly free, however, God could not create us with a programmed nature that would incline us to either good or evil. We were created pure. Babies are born pure of sin. We were brought forth into this world with an unbiased nature. Therefore, we are not programmed (predestined) to good and heaven. We are not programmed (predestined) to evil and hell (See Shelf 5, Volume 47).

If we were programmed to do good, then we would not deserve heaven. If we were programmed to be disobedient, then we could not justly be condemned to hell. Therefore, of necessity we had to be created pure and free, and then allowed the opportunity to live in an environment wherein freedom of choice was possible.

Without freedom of choice, **we could not be justly given heaven as a “reward.”** A reward can be given only to one who freely chooses to do that which was necessary to receive the reward. Neither could we be justly condemned to hell if we were not true free-moral individuals with the freedom to rebel against obedience to the gospel.

What type of a fiendish god would condemn to hell one who never had the freedom to make a choice concerning his or her eternal destiny in heaven? This is the insidious nature of the teaching of some that we are predestine to either heaven or hell. This teaching is an attack against the justice of God, as well as the free-moral choice of each individual person who has and will live on the face of the earth. It is an attack against our opportunity to

respond to the gospel, and our walk of gratitude to God for sending us His love offering.

B. The Freedom Of The Free-Moral

The Bible assumes that every person is a free-moral individual. There is no definition in the Bible for the free-moral choice of people. It is just assumed that we would logically conclude that such is true. Free-moral choice is thus an axiomatic truth. **It is a truth that does not need direct revelation to teach or necessarily be proved.** It is simply a fact of life that all people have the freedom to make choices. Therefore, we do not need to quote a scripture that states, “People are free-moral individuals.” That we are such, needs no proof from the Bible.

Free-moral choice is true because we all exercise daily choices in an environment that allows choices to be made. Even without the Bible, we assume that people are free-moral individuals. Nevertheless, the manner by which God deals with us teaches us that He created us true free-moral individuals.

Joshua exhorted Israel, **“Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve”** (Ja 24:15). Isaiah also exhorted Israel to **“choose the good”** (Is 7:15). God pled with Israel to come and reason together (See Is 1:18). He did not make the people righteous. He did not force them to return to His law. He allowed them the opportunity to choose their own destiny. Such exhortations in the Bible assume that Israel had the ability to make a choice that would affect their future and eternal destiny.

The fact that God made pleas to Israel to repent is evidence that He allowed them to make their own choices concerning their own destiny. And the fact that God allowed them to make choices assumes that they had the freedom to do so.

In the New Testament free-moral choice is assumed even in the personal behavior of inspired individuals as Paul and Peter. These men were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and yet, they were allowed to make

choices concerning their eternal destiny. The Spirit did not directly control their moral behavior.

1. Paul exercised free-moral choice:

The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Paul can be quite interesting. Did Paul always obey the counsel of the Holy Spirit? Did he always give heed to the forewarning of the Spirit? In answer to these questions, it is necessary to understand an important point concerning God's use of visions to direct His chosen people.

Throughout the Bible visions are mentioned in situations where God directly appeared in some way to those He wanted to give counsel or direction in ministry. We do not know exactly what transpired in a vision. It was an experience that was so real and clear that the beholder perceived that it was actually happening. It was a surreal appearance that the one who beheld the vision received a moving picture from God concerning the future.

However, understanding what a vision was is not the point. The point is that a vision was given in view of the free-moral choice of the one to whom it was given. The beholder saw the vision, **but he was allowed the opportunity to make a choice as to whether to obey the vision.**

Visions were not subjective experiences. They did not take control of the individual. In other words, the fact that God gave the vision is evidence that He allowed the beholder to make a choice concerning obedience to the instructions of the vision. Examples of this fact are seen in the life of Paul.

a. Paul's vision concerning outreach to Asia: In Acts 16:6 Paul and his mission team evidently determined to personally go into Asia to preach the gospel. However, *"they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia."* They thus changed plans and decided to go into Bithynia, a province of Asia. However, *"the Spirit did not permit them"* (At 16:7).

The reason the Spirit did not want them to go to these areas is discovered in Acts 19:8-10. The Spirit foreknew that Paul would later have the opportunity to **indirectly** preach the gospel to all Asia through the medium of teaching in the school of Tyrannus.

In **Acts 16:9** Paul was given a vision that detoured him to Macedonia. However, he had a choice even concerning this vision. He could have disobeyed. The Spirit allowed him to exercise his free-moral choice by giving instructions in the vision to go into Macedonia. But this did not mean that Paul had to obey the vision. The fact that the vision to go to Macedonia was given in a vision assumes that he was only given the opportunity to go. He had to make the decision to go for himself.

The fact that the Spirit “forbade” and “did not permit” in the above context concerning Asia and Bithynia indicates that something other than inner nudges and inclinations were used to detour Paul’s plans. The fact that a vision was given to direct him to the correct location is also evidence that the Spirit guarded Paul’s free-moral choices by giving him knowledge through vision by which he could make a decision. The Spirit simply did not force him to do anything.

b. Paul’s vision concerning obedience to his call:

Later in his life, Paul stood before King Agrippa and stated concerning a vision that led to his conversion as recorded in Acts 9: **“I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision”** (At 26:19). In order for Paul not to be disobedient to the vision, **he must have had the freedom to make a choice concerning obedience or disobedience to the vision.**

In reference to any vision, the beholder could make a choice. Free-moral choice was not violated in the case of Paul in either Acts 9 or 16. In both situations Paul had a choice as to whether he would obey or disobey the visions.

c. Paul's vision to travel to Jerusalem:

At the end of his missionary journeys, Paul returned to Jerusalem for a final visit. He eventually came to the coastal city of Tyre. The disciples in Tyre *“told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem”* (At 21:4). Regardless of what the Spirit revealed to the brethren in Tyre to tell Paul, Paul continued on to Jerusalem.

Paul then came to Caesarea. The prophet Agabus came down from Judea, and said, *“Thus says the Holy Spirit ...”* (At 21:11). Agabus then gave Paul a symbolic prophecy that he would be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, and against the Spirit's warnings and counsel, Paul free-morally chose to carry on to Jerusalem.

It was in Jerusalem that he was eventually arrested. In this case, Paul was allowed by the Holy Spirit to exercise his free-moral agency. He was given the knowledge concerning his future, but he was left with a choice as to what he would do in reference to the knowledge that came from the Holy Spirit.

From what happen on Paul's way out of Caesarea, we learn that he was not even moved emotionally within himself to change his mind. Though the pleading of the brethren in Caesarea for him not to go to Jerusalem certainly touched him, he still went to Jerusalem (At 21:13,14).

It is clear, therefore, that Paul **was not controlled directly by the Holy Spirit**. In fact, he went on to Jerusalem and was subsequently arrested. However, the Lord stood by him with the following comforting words: *“Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome”* (At 23:11).

The conclusion to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Paul would be that though Paul was often led by the Spirit on different occasions, he was not directly controlled in his behavior by the Holy Spirit. When a vision was given to him, he still maintained the freedom to make a decision concerning what to do.

In his decisions, Paul always followed the direction of the Spirit to accomplish his ministry to preach the gospel (See At 9:15). At other times when it involved his personal safety, he chose to go on his own accord, though he was forewarned by the Spirit. In reference to his moral behavior, he was left to be a true free-moral individual.

Paul would conclude this point for us with the following words: *“But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified”* (1 Co 9:27). Though Paul preached the inspired message of the gospel, he was still free-morally responsible to live by that which he preached.

In the same context of obedience he exhorted Timothy, *“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you”* (1 Tm 4:16). Though this thought seems to scare some, the fact is that these free-moral men were left on their own to do what Paul had told the Philippians, *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”* (Ph 2:12). When it comes to moral behavior in reference to our salvation, every Christian is responsible for himself or herself. And because we are responsible for ourselves, God will remain just in judgment if we are “disqualified.”

2. Peter exercised free-moral agency.

Peter was also an apostle and a Spirit-inspired individual in reference to preaching and writing instructions to the early church. However, in Antioch of Syria he ran into some problems because of his lack of courage. In Antioch he at first freely associated with Gentile Christians. However, when some Jewish brethren came up from Jerusalem, Peter exercised his free-moral choice, **and subsequently made a bad decision.** He *“withdrew and separated himself [from the Gentile brethren], fearing those who were of the circumcision”* (Gl 2:12).

Paul confronted Peter about his fear of the

legalistic Jewish Christians from Jerusalem. Paul later recorded concerning this incident, *“I withstood him to his face because he stood condemned”* (Gl 2:11). During the withdraw, *“even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy”* (Gl 2:13). So both Peter and Barnabas made bad choices on this occasion.

The problem was that both Peter and Barnabas were greatly intimidated by the Jewish brethren from Jerusalem. Their lack of confidence to continue to walk according to the gospel in the presence of these legalistic Jewish brethren led them to behave in a hypocritical manner. They were thus not being straightforward about the gospel. For a moment, they turned back from living the gospel that gave them freedom from the legal interpretation of the gospel of the Jewish Christians.

We can understand Paul’s harsh judgment of Peter on this matter for Paul had faced similar false brethren in Jerusalem who sought to sinfully bind Jewish laws on Gentile Christians. Paul said that he and others *“did not yield submission even for an hour”* (Gl 2:5). But during this encounter in Antioch, Peter yielded.

The above illustrates that though Peter was personally chosen to be an apostle of Jesus, the Holy Spirit **did not directly control or change the moral behavior of Peter**. As previously stated, Peter was intimidated to be a hypocrite even though he had been given the witness of a special vision and experience of God’s acceptance of the Gentiles (See At 10 & 11). He had even experienced the working of many signs and wonders. Nevertheless, he stood condemned on this occasion in Antioch when he allowed his personal lack of boldness to be revealed because of the intimidation of the Jewish brethren from Jerusalem.

The point is, though God used Peter to do great things, **the Holy Spirit did not make him bold enough to withstand the intimidation of the Jewish leadership**. He was struggling to overcome

this lack of confidence even these many years after becoming a disciple. Peter's lack of confidence remained with him even after he had walked with Jesus for over three years.

If the Holy Spirit is to work directly upon the heart of the Christian in order to change one's character, we would wonder why He failed in the case of changing Peter's lack of confidence so that he could stand up publicly for the truth of the gospel.

The situation with Peter in Antioch must also be viewed in the context of Paul's request for prayers for boldness while he was in prison in Rome. He wrote to the Ephesian brethren to be ...

... praying always with all prayer and supplication ... that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak" (Ep 6:18-20).

Consider also the request for boldness by the disciples after the miraculous release of Peter from Herod's prison. The disciples prayed, "*Grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word*" (At 4:29). For these prayers to be made, it seems that in some way **boldness can be granted by God**. However, it cannot be granted in a way that would free us from our personal responsibility to stay strong. It may have been that Peter did not pray for boldness in Antioch when he feared the Jewish brethren from Jerusalem. It was certainly the case when Paul needed from the Ephesian church special prayers for boldness when he was in prison in Rome. In both cases, we would not conclude that the answers to the prayers sets aside the responsibility of one to free-morally choose to stand for that in which he or she believes.

The Holy Spirit does not directly work on our moral behavior in any way to influence directly, or set aside, our free-moral choice. At least, in the case of Peter in Antioch the Spirit did not do this. Also consider as

an example the lives of Balaam and David. Though inspired by God to give testimony concerning the Israelites, Balaam did not change his moral behavior or evil counsel (See Nm 22:38; 24:13; 2 Pt 2:15,16; Jd 11). Though David was inspired to write many psalms, but the Holy Spirit did not directly control his moral behavior by deterring him from committing adultery with Bathsheba (See 2 Sm 11:2-5). And though some of the Corinthian disciples possessed the miraculous gifts of the Spirit in abundance, Paul said they were behaving carnally (See 1 Co 3:1-3). Some were selfish and covetous.

When speaking or writing by direction of the Holy Spirit, Peter and the other Bible writers spoke and wrote truth by inspiration. Their behavior, however, was subject to their own personal decisions. Though their revelation of the truth was under the **direct** guidance of the Holy Spirit, their moral behavior was under the **indirect** guidance of the truth that they revealed by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And by such, they exhorted themselves and others to exercise free-moral choices in relation to their behavior.

Peter exhorted Christians to give **“all diligence”** to grow in the graces of gospel living (2 Pt 1:5). In recognizing our responsibility to take ownership of our spiritual growth, he exhorted Christians to **“be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure”** (2 Pt 1:10). Concerning his guide for gospel living, he said, **“If you do these things you will never stumble”** (2 Pt 1:10). What is illustrated here in these statements is that Peter by inspiration reveals things **to be done**. He expresses **individual responsibility** that these things be done in our lives. Emphasis is not placed on the Holy Spirit activating one’s heart to respond to the instructions to be carried out in our lives. It is the responsibility of the individual Christian to **“be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless”** (2 Pt 3:14). It is the responsibility of Christians to **“keep yourselves in the love of God”** (Jd 21). Only in view

of the fact that we are true free-moral individuals do these injunctions make any sense.

3. God expects to choose.

God holds us responsible for our behavior. The plea of the early evangelists, therefore, was, ***“Repent!”*** (At 2:38; see 2 Pt 3:9). Such was a call for people to exercise their free-moral choice to bring their lives into harmony with God’s will. ***“Cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit”*** (2 Co 7:1). ***“Do not touch what is unclean”*** (2 Co 6:17).

Pleas on the part of the Holy Spirit to stand firm in the faith would be senseless if we could not make free-moral choices. They would not make any sense if the individual could not make a choice to respond on his or her own accord.

In the context of these exhortations, we wonder why there is the absence of pleas to submit to the supposed inner workings of the Holy Spirit if indeed He is to do such in the life of the alien sinner or the saint. The point is that God will hold each individual responsible for his or her own behavior, regardless of one’s beliefs concerning the influence of the Holy Spirit. Paul warned, ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”*** (2 Co 5:10).

The fact that we will be held accountable for behavior in judgment means that the Holy Spirit will carry no burden for spiritual growth that would end in the Spirit’s accountability for our behavior. The Spirit will not come into judgment for our bad behavior at the final judgment. Each Christian will be held accountable for his or her own moral behavior.

In order to influence the moral behavior of every disciple, the Holy Spirit works through the medium of the instructions of the word of God. In this way the free-moral choice of each individual is guarded.

Therefore, we are without excuse if we refuse the Spirit's pleas through the word of God to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (See 2 Pt 3:18).

Our understanding concerning the work and influence of the Holy Spirit must respect the free-moral choice of each individual. This is necessary because if the free-moral choice of the Christian falls in any way, the justice of God in final judgment also falls. Therefore, God has shielded our hearts by making each of us free-moral individuals. Franklin Camp concluded, *“Any work of the Spirit that does not conform to God’s way of teaching His Word, or that would destroy or set aside man’s free moral agency, is a misconception of how the Spirit works”* (*The Work of the Holy Spirit in Redemption*, 1974).

Through our free-moral knowledge of revealed truth, we are allowed to either respond negatively or positively to God’s law. However, the influence of the Holy Spirit must not be viewed as directly influencing our moral behavior apart from our responsibility to make choices for ourselves.

If it is the work of the Spirit to directly control or influence our moral behavior, then our free-moral choice is violated. If our free-moral choice is violated, then the justice of God cannot stand in final judgment if one is lost. So H. Leo Boles concluded,

God has never forced man to serve him. In the long history from the first of Genesis to the close of the New Testament, not one instance do we find where God has refused to let man do as he pleased God never compels man to serve him; he has never coerced or forced man to do his will. He has always left man free and has never used any coercion, nor has he used any coercive methods to force man to obey him While we speak of the restraint and constraint of the Holy Spirit, yet we recognize that the Holy Spirit leaves man free to choose his own course in the work that he does. Man can turn a deaf ear to the words of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit will not force him to hear (*The Holy Spirit, His Personality, Nature, Works*, 1967).

Can God stand just in final judgment if the Holy Spirit is allowed to directly influence the moral behavior of the Christian? Can any Christian be justly condemned to hell if it is the work of the Holy Spirit to influence directly the moral conduct of a Christian in order to keep him or her saved?

If it is the work of the Spirit to directly activate one's response to the gospel, then He must do so in a way that does not leave Him responsible if a Christian is eternally lost. We wonder what effect the Spirit would have on the Christian's moral behavior to the extent of guarding him or her from apostasy.

Whatever understanding one derives from the Scriptures concerning the work of the Spirit, or influence of the Holy Spirit upon our moral behavior, his or her interpretation must not make the Spirit infringe upon the free-moral choice of the individual.

If our free-moral choice is set aside by a supposed direct action of the Holy Spirit, then God's justice would be brought into question if only one Christian was eternally lost.



ABREVIATIONS

OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pi**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**

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