

XII

Led by the Spirit

Because those who are led by the Spirit of God are Sons of God.

(ROMANS 8:14)

There is a question that comes up time and again in the life of a Christian. How can I know God's will for the decisions that I have to make every day from day to day? The passage above this chapter speaks of being *led* by the Holy Spirit, but how does the Spirit do this leading? How can we be sure it is the Spirit's guidance we are following and not our own insights?

Claims of being directly guided by the Spirit of God are highly suspect. This is especially true when someone claims to be led by the Spirit to do something which also involves *others*. Some easily say: the Spirit guided me to do this, or I felt guided by the Spirit, the Lord prepared and called me for this, God opened doors, God spoke to me, he laid this burden upon me etc., and therefore you have to do as I say.

I touched on this matter earlier but mention it now in this important context. What do you say in response to such claims? If the Holy Spirit led someone to a certain task, position, or insight, we had all better sit up and listen, right? Whoever dares to say that God has led him to become, for example, a leader in the church, affects everyone, for woe to the person who does not see or recognize God's leadership and guidance behind such a lofty claim.

Such charismatic persons are either special instruments of God, or they are supremely arrogant. Such persons are most often schismatic rather than charismatic. I read somewhere that we should never make our own decisions or feelings absolute, as if they have the force of divine revelation.¹⁰ All too easily people present their personal insights as God's guidance.

Difference between providence and revelation

What is this being led by the Spirit? Do we experience this in our lives? How do we detect God's guidance? Is this visible only, as is sometimes suggested, when we look back? Then we can say: in retrospect I see God's guidance. Is this guidance ever to be discerned in the present? Do we receive clear directions for the future?

In this passage Paul clearly infers that this being led (present tense) is an *ongoing* work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is leading us, today as he did yesterday. The question is how we are to discover this guidance and work with it.

It is important to note that there is a world of difference between revelation (God told me) and providence (God guided me). Revelation has ceased; providence continues daily. It is in the realm of God's providence, of his dealings with us in Christ, that we may understand this being led by the Holy Spirit.

An exclamation

In this passage the apostle presents the leading by the Holy Spirit as a great gift of God to his children. The text is actually in the form of an exclamation: those led by the Spirit are the sons of God! So we should not neglect Christ's work of spiritual leadership and divine guidance in our lives, but we should delight in it.

The Lord Jesus Christ leads us by the Holy Spirit to live as children of the Father. We must come to recognize the evidence and the assurance of this leading by the Holy Spirit. Then the leading by the Holy Spirit will in our lives not be a question mark but an exclamation mark. He does lead us!

Principle themes

In the letter to the Romans the apostle has explored and expounded the great principle themes of the Christian faith. He wrote about justification (chapters 3-5), sanctification (chapters 5-7), and glorification (chapter 8). Then many practical exhortations and warnings follow in the chapters 9-16. The passage about being led by the Spirit is found in the section on *glorification*. One might even say, to be more exact, that it is

¹⁰ Donald Macloed, *The Spirit of Promise*, Christian Focus Publications, 1986, page 67.

found in the section that gives us the transition from sanctification to glorification.

These three main themes are presented by Paul in a marvelous, balanced manner. We are justified by faith, acquitted of guilt, but still there is death with which we have to deal. We are sanctified and being sanctified, the Spirit dwells in us, but there still is the effect of sin. We have conquered in Christ, share in his glory, and will as heirs receive full glory, but there is still the reality of suffering. See the strong lines: justification, and yet death; sanctification and yet sin; glorification, and yet suffering.

But we have triumphed and shall triumph in Christ. This triumph is seen and experienced in various ways. In chapter 8 the main theme is that those who are *in Christ Jesus* (and we want to consider that expression more closely later) are, see verse 9, "...controlled not by the sinful nature, but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you."

Being in Christ

Notice the conditional phrase: if the Spirit of God lives in you. Paul continues in that verse: and if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. And again: but if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive...Verse 11: and if the Spirit...is living in you. We have at least four "ifs," which merit our attention.

The all-important fact is that the Spirit of God must live in us. As we head towards glory and long for it, and must persevere in suffering, the Holy Spirit must certainly dwell in us. He must lead and guide us or we cannot persevere.

In chapter 8:1 Paul writes about those who are "in Christ." To be in Christ means that we are a part of him and of his body, the church. It means that we embrace him by faith as our only and perfect Savior. It means also that we have seen our sins, confessed them, and broken with them. We are now fighting against them.

You cannot be in Christ if you *live* in sin. You cannot be controlled by the Spirit, if the devil governs your thoughts and actions. We are not to fool ourselves but to take stock of the real situation in our lives. Self-examination is constantly needed. Therefore Paul dares to write: *if* the Spirit of God is living in you.

Not meant to cast doubt

Reformed explainers agree that these four qualifications are not meant to cast doubt on whether the Christians in Rome have the Spirit or not. Rather they chart out the riches of having the Spirit and highlight the sad consequences of not having the Spirit. The point is not that the believers shall question whether they have the Spirit, but they must see the great and wonderful effect of having the Spirit in their lives. To that end they must repent wherever needed.

Notice how Paul also balances this aspect very carefully. The congregation is indeed to take stock: how terrible would it be not to have the Holy Spirit. His presence must be evidenced, but how wonderful it is that the Spirit has been given to the church: (verse 9) you, however, are not controlled by the sinful nature, but by the Spirit... Verse 15 also, following the text: for you did not receive a spirit of slavery... but the spirit of sonship. Paul is convinced that the Roman Christians have received the Spirit of sonship.

Paul bases his writing on the notion that the believers in Rome indeed have received the Holy Spirit. So he can write in verse 12, “Therefore (because the Spirit lives in you) you have an *obligation*...! His point is that having the Holy Spirit leads to a great obligation.

Spiritual obligation

We know the word obligation to be a covenantal word. At baptism we say in the Form adopted for that occasion¹¹: a covenant has two parts, a promise and an *obligation*. In Romans 4 Paul has written extensively about the *promise* given to Abraham and all his offspring – which also includes us, as Paul emphatically states. The promise comes by faith and is given only out of grace. God has fulfilled his covenant promises to Abraham and to all whom he has called, and now there rests upon us an *obligation*.

We are obligated to put to death the misdeeds of the body (verse 13) and so we will live. This is possible *because* (verse 14) those who are led by the Spirit are sons of God. The Holy Spirit enables us by his indwelling and leadership to put to death the sinful nature and the misdeeds of the body.

Notice the word “because” here. The obligation that rests upon us is not something that we have to fulfill by ourselves or in our own strength. We

¹¹ *Book of Praise*, page 594.

can put to death the misdeeds of the body and we will live *because* those led by the Spirit are sons of God. God enables us by his Spirit as his children to put to death the misdeeds of the body. We are under a covenantal obligation, but we can meet it by God's Spirit as his children. This is the line of thinking followed by Paul.

What is meant by leading?

We are led by the Spirit. How are we to understand this leading? The word has various connotations which might all be important, but I want to focus on the translation "led." It does not mean that the Spirit goes ahead of us and that we then decide if we will follow. That's often how leadership is understood or experienced. We choose someone as a leader and then we follow the leader, or not.

The word used here is, however, somewhat stronger. Some translate with *driven*. We are driven by the Spirit. What I like about this translation is that it does give due recognition to the Spirit's power in his leading. But it should be clear that the Spirit does not force us to do things against our will. Instead he renews our will so that we want what God wants. Where he leads, we faithfully and heartily go.

This leading is a steady going ahead of us, always being there, giving constant guidance, so that we follow and even find joy in this following of the Spirit. It means from our side a growing in submission and discipleship.

How does the Spirit do this leading? Where is the real *evidence*? We can say or think that we are being led by the Spirit, but how do we know for sure? Do we hear a voice? Is it a feeling that grows into a conviction? Are special messages imparted to us by certain signs, by dreams, or by natural occurrences? How does it work?

The Spirit uses means

The question is whether this leading by the Spirit is *immediate*, that is, without any certifiable means. Does the Spirit come directly to give us guidance and leadership, or does he come to us by various means which he has preordained? The latter is indeed the case. Direct revelation has ceased. Those who claim to have it, have founded sects, not built churches, and have misguided believers, not put them on a better path.

The Spirit leads us by various means. This is first of all the means of *God's Word*. If a self-professed leader tells us that God's Word is unclear or insufficient, and that we are therefore to be guided by feelings, sensations,

signs, convictions, and dreams (as happened of old), and must follow especially his own ideas, you can be sure that an imposter is at work. It is remarkable how our Lord Jesus himself built only on the given Word. He said time and again, “It is written....”

If anyone comes with a teaching that is contrary to God’s Word – or something that goes above and beyond God’s Word – we can be sure that this is not a result of the Spirit’s leadership. The evidence of true spiritual guidance lies in the Scriptural nature and content of what is taught.

It is impossible that the Spirit would lead us against God’s own Word. Instead he gives us “illumination,” the light to understand God’s Word even better.

The Spirit also leads through lawfully given office-bearers who are faithful to Scripture and can properly apply God’s Word. When Paul writes in the letter to the Ephesians that the ascended and glorified Christ gave gifts to men, these gifts are specified as being apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. They will build up the church in the true knowledge of the Son of God.

Leadership in communion

This brings us to another important point. The Spirit gives leadership not just by one person who stands alone and above the crowd. That is typically sectarian. The Spirit leads through the fellowship and the communion of the holy catholic church.

The apostle Peter refers to this when he writes (1 Pet 2:4) that we are like living stones being built into a spiritual house. The church is the house, the temple of the Spirit, and we have to be part of that house as a living stone if we wish to be led by the Spirit. Spiritual stones are not rolling stones. This same church, this spiritual house, is called by the apostle Paul the “pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). We are led not just by ourselves, loose from the flock, but we are led together as communion of saints with the church of all ages, to be faithful to the teaching once for all delivered to the saints (Jude:3).

If someone, then, decides to close the confessions and ignore the historical foundation of the church, how can there be any leading by the Spirit? There is in the leading by the Spirit the use of the lawful ministry of reconciliation, the fellowship of the saints, and so growth together in the truths of the Word. We let ourselves be corrected by the evidence of Scripture. We humbly submit to the faithful discipline of the church, as we have promised.

I find it very telling that many of those who claimed to be particularly led by the Spirit deeply rejected the spiritual discipline of the church and lacked the humility which characterizes faithful children of the Lord. They always knew better, and they alone knew the truth. Leadership that acknowledges the wisdom of others and does not lord it over others is leading in accordance with Biblical rules.¹²

Thinking Spiritually

The Holy Spirit guides us clearly in the Scriptures. In the day to day decisions that must be made we apply the norms and rules of Scripture as best as we can. It is sad to observe how we sometimes in our daily life knowingly make decisions that clearly and directly go in against God's Word, but we refuse to be led by the Spirit. Paul speaks about the "misdeeds of the body," giving in to sinful desires, despite the consequences that come, neglecting to do what we should do, and going consciously in against the leading of the Spirit.

I must add that the Spirit's leadership does not mean that we should not apply with Scripture the principles of nature and the rule of common sense. We have to use our minds and learn to think spiritually and responsibly. God did not create us without a mind, but he by his Spirit *renews* our mind.¹³ Think biblically, speak with others, listen to their insights, and come to a sensible conclusion.

What strikes me when it comes to self-evaluation is that some people overestimate their gifts. They think highly of themselves, even though this is hidden under a thin veneer of pseudo-humility. But there are also people who tend to underestimate their gifts, do not see their talents, and therefore do not multiply them. The Spirit leads us properly to esteem the gifts, abilities, and talents that we have been given, and then we are to exercise sober judgment (Rom 12:3) and appreciate the input of fellow members of the church.

¹² In Proverbs 11:14 we read, "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisors make victory sure" (NIV) or "...in the multitude of counselors there is safety." (KJV). Leadership may lie ultimately in the hands of one person, but he needs many advisors to rule wisely.

¹³ Ro 12:12, "...be transformed by the renewing of your mind...."

Is what we do edifying?

Being led by the Spirit means that God involves us to examine our heart, motives, gifts, feelings, and even to open our lives to the views of those who are faithful to the sound doctrine. This leading by the Spirit always guides us to do what is *edifying*. Paul has written in I Corinthians 6:12, “...everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial” (edifying). The Spirit leads us not to offend others, not to cast stumbling blocks, not to cause division, but to seek what is up-building for all without compromising the Word of God. The purpose is not to demonstrate that we are right, but to consider how something we do benefits the church of Christ.

Being led by the Spirit means that we grow in the wisdom of Scripture. We must prayerfully meditate on God’s Word every day. We must be renewed in our thinking, that is, approach all questions with a mind ruled by the Spirit, use our given talents as well as our natural abilities and common sense – which have been reshaped by the Scriptures – and listen to the brotherhood in whose midst we live and function.

The leadership of such persons will be accepted by the holy Catholic Church.

Never forget prayer

In this process, we may never forget *prayer*, the ABBA, Father! as the Lord Jesus taught us to pray. Being led by the Spirit is evidenced through a close walking with the Lord, in humble but persevering prayer, asking him to bless and to give wisdom and insight. I will elaborate on the relation between the Holy Spirit and prayer in another chapter, but let it be said now in connection with being led by the Spirit: whoever does not pray in accordance with the Word, can not be led by the Spirit. But by prayerfully mobilizing all the gifts that God has given us, we can progress in knowing and doing God’s will.

Will we then never make mistakes? Will we sometimes not fall into sin or error? Does this leading by the Spirit make us virtually invincible and un-touchable? It does not. The Spirit does not *replace* our nature with another one, let’s say a flawless one, but he *renews* our nature. That is not a single event, but an ongoing process. And it is on this way also that we receive assurance of being a child of God. Paul writes: you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit are sons of God.

Not become sons but are sons

Notice that Paul doesn't write: those who are led by the Spirit *become* sons of God. He writes that they *are*. This being led does not bring us to hope or speculate or assume that we are God's sons, but it gives us the assurance that we are God's sons.

Some would have it this way: if we really try hard and climb up to a certain level of obedience, then we might become sons of God. It takes a lot, and it can also be lost, if we are not very careful. There is very little lasting assurance here, for we can tumble out of every state of grace. Those who are led by the Spirit, it should read then, are for that time also sons of God, but not when they tumble and fall. This is the Arminian position which denies the perseverance of the saints.¹⁴

But we may say: if we by the Spirit put to death the misdeeds of the body and if we are in the process of true sanctification, we are also on our way to *glory*, because those who are led by the Spirit are the sons of God. Justification leads to sanctification, and that is part of our glorification. It will culminate in the full manifestation of our being sons of God.

The Spirit leads to Christ

Even though we are led by the Holy Spirit, we can still fall into grievous sins. Remember that sin is with us until glorification is realized. Sometimes we might even come to doubt our sonship. The devil can accuse us, as well as our sins and our own conscience, and we can despair, "Am I really a child of God, when I am still capable of terrible sins?"

Our sins should shock us. I read somewhere that it's like being in a dark tunnel, where we never should have gotten into, and then seeing there is light, not at the end of the tunnel, but all through the tunnel. This happens when our sins alarm us, and teach us to watch and pray, to flee to Christ alone for forgiveness and renewal. This is what the apostle Paul calls "godly sorrow" (2 Cor 7:10).

For the Spirit in his guiding always leads us *to Christ*, to Golgotha. The Holy Spirit is one-directional. He is not one dimensional, so to speak, but one-directional. He always leads us back to the Lord Jesus, from the cross to the throne. He assures us of our inheritance in the Lord Jesus. We receive the inheritance not on our merit or because we were so faithful

¹⁴ This is also the classic position of John Wesley, which has permeated much of British and American theology.

and fruitful in God's service. But we receive it through the Son of God alone.

Son ship means inheritance

Notice how Paul writes, "...because those who are led by the Spirit are *sons of God*" I hope that women who read this book are not offended by this apostolic way of speaking. Paul uses the word *sons* at this point because he wants to emphasize the *inheritance*. The sons received the first right to the inheritance. But this includes all who are led by the Spirit. In verse 10, after having established who the lawful heirs are, he uses the expression "God's children." Being a child of God is not a matter of gender but of faith.

When it comes to the inheritance, there is only one point that matters: are you an heir of the kingdom of heaven? Do you belong to the covenant of God? Are you his child, and was this evidenced by the Spirit? Are you assured in Christ of the inheritance itself?

For the Spirit drives us to Christ, to the Son. The same Spirit assures us by Christ's cross that indeed we are children of God. We may grow in that assurance, also when we come to repent of grievous sins, and we may know: I am (still) an heir to the promises of God, I shall again take upon myself the obligation in the covenant, for I have a renewed desire to put to death the misdeeds of the body.

Then life becomes new again. There is no experience of greater joy than to have broken with a certain difficult sin by God's grace and power, and to live again in the assurance of salvation: I *am* a child of God. How wonderful it is to experience the riches of the comfort of Christ and to see again how the way of justification is the way of sanctification and also the way of glorification.

Where does he lead? In the Lord's house I shall dwell forever (Psalm 23).