



TRANSFORMED:
by the SPIRIT’S POWER or by the BELIEVER’S CHOICES?
PART 2

My 2013 GES Workshop entitled *Transformed: by the Spirit’s Power or by the Believer’s Choices?* raised a number of questions by those in attendance. This *Article (Part 2)* revisits particular issues incorporated within questions following my Workshop’s presentation. Since these issues are based on the content of that presentation, you should review the actual presentation in order to understand the foundation for this *Article (Part 2)*. **Note:** The presentation addressed “special empowerment” for Christian living, which was distinguished from empowerment for service and ministry.

Introduction

Are there not a number of verses that talk about the believer being empowered to live the Christian life? Yes. However, the issue isn’t the verses that speak about the believer being empowered to live the Christian life, but how we should understand those verses. Is the Spirit the *cause* of the Christian life? Or, does the Spirit *influence* the believer in his or her choices to obey Christ?

**How Are We
to Understand
Power Passages?**

The chart, *Use of Power with Believers*, presents the 23 instances when “believers” and “power” coincide in the New Testament. Nevertheless some do not directly relate to living the Christian life. Rather the emphasis is spiritual giftedness (Matt. 25:15; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28, 29;

USE OF POWER WITH BELIEVERS			
Book	Ch.	Vs.	Context
Matt.	25	15	Believers—Talents according to "ability" were given
Rom.	15	13	Believers—Abound in hope by power of Holy Spirit
1 Cor.	5	4	Church—Assembled with power of Jesus to judge evil doing
	12	10	Believers—Gift—Effecting of miracles
		28	Believers—Gift—Then miracles
		29	Believers—Gift—All are not <i>workers</i> of miracles, are they?
	14	11	Church—Know the meaning (power) of language
2 Cor.	4	7	Believers—Gospel from power of God, not of men
	6	7	Believers—Servants in power of God
	8	3	Believers—Gave money according to ability and beyond own ability
	13	4	Believers—Raised and lives because of the power of God
Gal.	3	5	Believers—Christ supplies Spirit and works miracles among you
Eph.	3	16	Believers—Strengthen with power through His Spirit in inner man
		20	Believers—Able to do, according to the power that works within us
Phil.	3	10	Believers—To know the power of His resurrection
Col.	1	11	Believers—Strengthened with all power, according to His might
2 Thes.	1	11	Believers—That may fulfill work of faith with power
Heb.	6	5	Believers—Tasted good word of God & powers of age to come
1 Pet.	1	5	Believers—Protected by the power of God for a salvation
2 Pet.	1	3	Believers—Divine power has been granted to us everything for life
		16	Believers—Peter make known the power & coming of Christ
Rev.	3	8	Believers—Have little power and have kept My word

2 Cor. 8:3 twice), miracles (Gal. 3:5), the Church (1 Cor. 5:4; 14:11; Rev. 3:8), salvation (2 Cor. 4:7; 1 Pet. 1:5), the second coming (2 Pet. 1:16), and the kingdom (Heb. 6:5). The remaining 9 instances are the texts that are used to teach a “special empowerment” for Christian living. One text in particular is typically relied on to support that position—*Ephesians 3:14-19*. The grammatical layout is provided below.

In these verses Paul described the content of his prayer to God on behalf of believers. As in Philippians 1:9-11 and Colossians 1:9-14, here Paul also prayed for believers to grow in maturity in Christ. Since Paul was praying expectantly for growth, how is the “power” (“He would grant you...to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man”) in Ephesians 3:16 to be explained? But before addressing the “power” issue, one must understand the structure and progression of Paul’s entire request.

Grammatical
Layout

EPHESIANS 3:14-19		
Verse	Text	Comments
14	For this reason I bow my knees to the Father, of our Lord	Who/What
15	Jesus Christ, of whom every family is named, in heaven and on earth,	
16	that according to the His riches of glory, He would grant you to be strengthened in the inner man with power through His Spirit;	Purpose
17	so that Christ dwell in love through faith, in your hearts having been rooted and having been founded	Result #1
18	so that with all the saints, you may be able to grasp what is the breath and length and depth and height	Result #2a
19	and you may be able to know Christ's love surpassing knowledge so that you may be filled to all God's fullness.	Result #2b Result #3

In Paul's writings he commonly use a long sentence to explain a truth. The construction of the extended material must be understood to grasp properly the flow of his thought. This author believes Paul presented his only request in verse 16, that the Father would provide for the believers in Ephesus "to be strengthened with power through the Spirit in the inner man." Thereafter, verses 17-19 contain a progressive series of expected results derived from their being "strengthened with power through the Spirit." These three results are (1) "that Christ may dwell in [their] hearts through faith" (v. 17), (2) "that [they] may be able to comprehend...the love of Christ" (vv. 18-19a), and (3) "that [they] may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (v. 19b). What then does it mean "to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man" (v. 16)? (*Rethinking Empowerment*, p. 160).

Most commentators explain "power" in this context by overlaying the Acts 1:8 template indicating that believers are strengthened with Spirit-infused power. They typically turn to Philippians 2:13 for support pointing out "it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure." Empowerment envisioned concerns an energizing by the Spirit that causes the believer to walk obediently. Nevertheless those who embrace this typical understanding do not indicate the means by which the Spirit strengthens the believer with power. Rather, the assumption is that the believer receives this strengthening as a mystical experience by which he is infused or zapped with special energy, causing him to do God's desires.

However, could it be instead that the inner man is "being renewed" (Col. 3:10; 2 Cor. 4:16) through the Word (Rom. 12:2)? (see *Presentation*, slides 23 and 25). And is this not what Paul expressed in his earlier writings in Galatians 5:13-25? (see *Presentation*, slides 13-15). Walking by the Spirit is a choice that produces intimacy with Christ, revealed in love for others and behavior that reflects growing maturity in Christ. Ephesians 3:16-19 is an *echo* of Galatians 5, but it is also a *preview* of Ephesians 5:1-21 (see *Presentation*, slides 16-18), where Paul explained that the filling of the Spirit (5:18) is rooted in the believer's walk ("walk in love," 5:2; "walk as children of light," 5:8; "walk...as wise," 5:15) and is expressed in gratitude to God and fellow believers (5:19-21). An interpreter of this passage then could just as well understand the "strengthening by the Spirit's power" to refer to allowing the indwelling Spirit to strengthen the inner man through His voluntary filling (Eph. 5:1-21), leading (Gal. 5:16-26), and teaching (1 John 2:27) influence via the Word of God (*Rethinking Empowerment*, pp. 161-162).

Those are the two explanations for "empowerment for living the Christian life" from Ephesians 3. It is either based on the *empowering template* or an *influencing template*.

So, which is the better explanation? Since no text explains exactly how this "strengthening by the Spirit's power" occurs, only that it can occur, does the empowering through the Spirit in Ephesians 3:16 refer to:

1. Receiving the Spirit's energizing ministry in the believer subsequent to but (a) identical to or (b) different from receiving of the Spirit's initial empowerment
- Or
2. Experiencing the indwelling Spirit's influencing (voluntary filling, leading, and teaching) ministry already present within the believer.

Either aspect of the first option concerns getting "plugged into" the Spirit's energy. On the other hand the second option concerns both (a) realizing the believer already possesses the Spirit's resources and (b) accessing these resources as we walk in obedience to His Word. The former-energizing option involves injecting what is

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not yet possessed; the latter-influencing option involves accessing and experiencing what is *already* possessed. God is expected to initiate the former, since believers require additional energizing. Believers are expected to initiate the latter one, since God has already provided His resources. As already noted, Ephesians 3:16 does not state *how* the “strengthening with power through the Spirit” is accomplished; it simply states that it *may occur* (not must occur) in the believer’s life. One’s theological bent determines his preference as to how he understands that strengthening to occur (*Rethinking Empowerment*, pp. 162-163).

If the typical concept for empowerment *does not explain how it actually works out* in the Christian life, one wonders if that position is actually explainable other than declaring it to be a mysterious zapping by the Spirit.

I believe the issue of power in Acts 1:8 *does not concern power to live the Christian life but only concerns power for service or ministry* (see *Presentation*, slides 10-12). The promise of power was given to the Eleven as “eye witnesses” (Luke 24:48) of Christ (obviously Paul claims to also be an “eye witness” of Christ) to accomplish their mission of taking the message of Christ to the world and establishing the infant church. This power was reflected in “signs,” “wonders,” and “miracles,” which authenticated the apostles and their message (2 Cor. 12:12). Luke consistently uses “witnesses” throughout Acts to indicate that the apostles were Christ’s “eye witnesses.”

The New Testament states that all believers are gifted, some with miracles, prophecy, etc. Nevertheless giftedness for ministry is different from Christian living. It is interesting that the teaching concerning both the leading by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-18) and the filling of the Spirit (Eph. 5:15-18) fall within the application sections of both books, the “how-to” sections. I believe the Spirit’s ministry in the believer’s walk relates to His filling, leading, and teaching. Believers already possess the resources for living the Christian life, but they must choose to walk obediently! Those choices are the very reason for Paul’s prayer (Eph. 3:14-19, Phil. 1:9-11; and Col. 1:9-14), as well as the basis for the scores of Paul’s commands for believers to grow in maturity. Since “strengthening through the Spirit” is not automatically imposed on believers, the choice to access and experience the resources of the Spirit results in obedience and increasing maturity in Christ. That is what the Spirit’s ministry looks like in the believer’s life, not to some “special empowerment.”

Philippians 2:12-13 tells us that believers should “work out your salvation” (v. 12) by obedience, with Jesus providing the ultimate example of obedience through His life (vv. 5-11). Verse 13 indicates the basis for the believer’s living out the Christian life—“for it is God working in you.” I believe “God working in you” is best understood occurring through the influencing ministries of the Spirit. Immediately following Paul’s prayer for believers’ growth in maturity (Eph. 3:14-19), he writes, “Now to Him who is able to do exceeding, abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (v. 20). Isn’t that what we see in Philippians 2:13? Rather than the zapping of power that causes obedience, God works in believers through the Spirit’s ministries of leading, filling, and teaching. I believe that provides the best understanding of the use of “power” in the verses relating to the Christian life that results in increasing conformity to Christ (see *Presentation*, slide 27).

Numerous Bible teachers say, “One can either walk in his own strength or in the power of the Spirit.” They tell us that *we can do nothing in and of ourselves*; the Christian life is not done in one’s own strength. Rather the Christian walk is accomplished by the Spirit’s power *in and through the believer*. The pump/pipe illustration is an example of this approach to the Christian life (see *Presentation*, slides 5 and 6).

This teaching is frequently associated with the interpretation of Galatians 5:16-17, in which two ways of walking are contrasted: (1) walking by means of the flesh or (2) walking by means of the Spirit.

Typically “walking by means of the flesh” is associated with “walking in one’s

Walk: in Own Strength or in Spirit's Power?

own strength.” In turn, “walking by means of the Spirit” is equated with “walking in the power of the Spirit.” The deeds of the flesh...are the demonstration of the flesh’s rule. And the fruit of the Spirit...is the result of the Spirit’s empowerment... In ourselves, “in our own strength,” the flesh (the sin capacity) produces the fruit of the flesh. On the other hand the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit (*Free to Choose*, p. 110).

Nevertheless this approach misses the point of Galatians 5 in two ways. *First*, the issue isn’t contrasting power sources but rather contrasting choices made by believers, which lead to different manners of living in either one of two spheres (see *Presentation*, slide 14). *Second*, it is obvious that “each believer can accomplish things in and of himself or herself.” That is what walking entails. The issue is what the believer allows to influence his or her choices and therefore the way in which he or she walks: according to the flesh or according to the Spirit.

Those who say that believers are “empowered by the Spirit” to live the Christian life and therefore need “to get plugged into” His power have difficulty to explain how that works out in life. Consider the following examples.

Is it the Spirit’s “power” or the believer’s “choices”:

- To not tell a lie?
- To not have an affair?
- To run an ethical business?

An unbeliever, as well as believers, can be truthful, faithful, and ethical. Mormons are an illustration of this fact. Choices and motivation are the issue.

Colossians 3 commands believers to “put off” sinful behavior (vv. 8-9a) and to “put on” godly behavior (vv. 12-14). This “put off/put on” theme is repeated in Ephesians 4:24-25 and Romans 13:8-14. Commands speak to choices: does or don’ts. In the Christian life the issue is *why you do, what you do, when you do it*. The believer’s motivation in every choice, whether good or bad, is critical. Embracing the absolute sufficiency of Christ, in providing salvation through faith in Him for eternal life, should out of gratitude motivate each believer in every instance to choose to obey the Word of God. The examples above concern choices and not a “special empowerment” to live the Christian life. Of course the Spirit’s influencing ministries would be in play in those choices.

Note: We should not limit God in His activities with men. Obviously it must be understood that God can intervene in history to directly and miraculously change people and their actions (e.g., to heal an affliction or possibly to overcome an addiction). The issue here is the *normal* manner in which God deals with His people and provides resources so that they may walk obediently in the Christian life.

The usual way “empowerment” is understood is based on Acts 1:8 and then that interpretation is imposed on all other verses. That approach leads to the view that the Spirit’s power causes the Christian walk. Obviously, my 2013 GES Presentation and my books *Rethinking Empowerment* and *Free to Choose* present a different perspective. That viewpoint is summarized in the following:

The obedient walk of the believer is based on his new standing with God (2 Cor. 5:17). Believers are to respond to God out of gratitude for the work of God in their lives. This was true for Old Testament saints as well. The *putting-off* and *putting-on* theme of Colossians 3:1-15; Ephesians 4:22-25; and Romans 13:8-14 requires obedience to God’s commands. However, He has already provided everything required for obedience on our part (regenerating, indwelling, baptizing, etc.). We participate by cooperating with Him. He has

What Motivates the Believer’s Choices?

Conclusion

made us new people and He has given us the Spirit to fill, lead, and teach. This is the Spirit's *influencing* ministry, which is entirely different from an *empowering* ministry" (*Free to Choose*, p.116).

