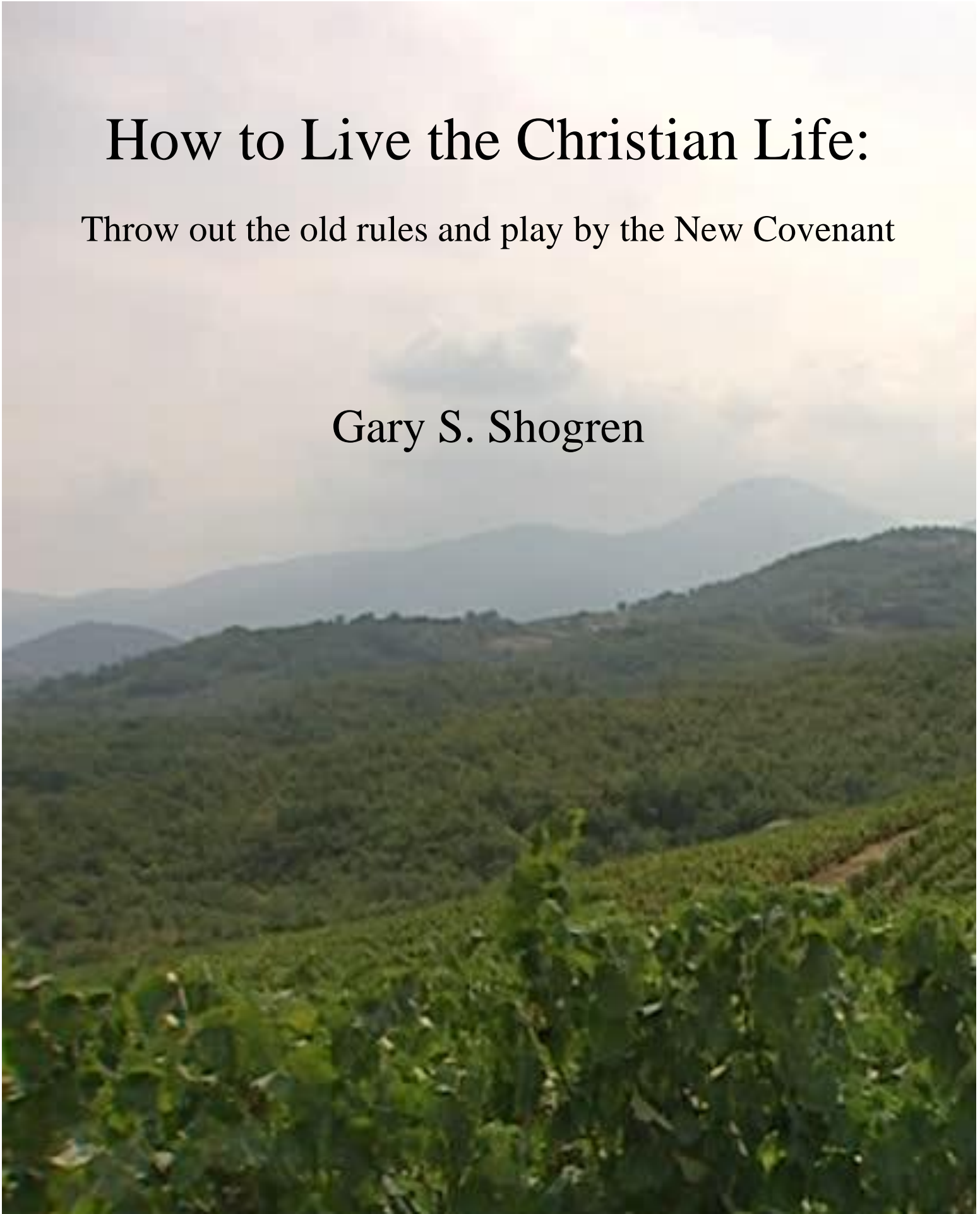


How to Live the Christian Life:

Throw out the old rules and play by the New Covenant

Gary S. Shogren



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Preface

I am deeply concerned about an outrageous lie, one that has been around since the beginning of the church; it is a teaching that may be summed up as, “Hey, really, thanks a lot for saving me, Jesus – so anyway, I can take it from here!”

This notion takes a hundred forms. Paul regularly butted heads with legalists: they said that faith in Christ was only the first step, the “portal” as it were, but people must be kept saved by obeying the Law of Moses, the Torah. One pastor I know of has as the touchstone of his teaching that we are “saved by faith, but sanctified by works.” Others affirm that salvation is by faith, but you can gain victory in life only by participating in and donating to their ministry, along the way using the Ten Principles of Victory in their new book. Whether Torah, laws, directions, principles, or rule-books, whether legalists or freewheelers, all of these plans are based on us putting our shoulder to the burden and pushing with our own strength.

The Christian life does demand much from us. *But the sad irony is that “I can just take it from here” is a cruel plot to lead us to spiritual disaster and joylessness.*

Paul taught that salvation is not just a couple of steps to get us forgiven – it is a new arrangement, a new deal, a New Covenant, that comes complete with God’s answers and divine power for any issue that might come up in life. The divine plan, like those nice hotel packages, is “all-inclusive”:

if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son,
much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Rom 5:10)

Christ’s life is manifested day by day in ours, as the Spirit works in us. This isn’t just a Pauline doctrine – the Apostle Peter spelled it out in his own terms:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3).

I hope that you will find the joy of God’s generosity through these pages.

Please pass this book along to your friends. Some of these essays are technical, others are on a general level. Some will overlap with each other, since some were written for publication, and others were spoken to a live audience.

Chapter One: “Sure! Like, why not?”

Looked at from one angle, my life may be divided into two halves.

The first half was labeled: *No thanks.*

The second half: *Yes, lets!*

Actual Examples of “No Thanks”: *Gary, you want to go sailing in the bay with us?* No thanks. *How about playing some hoops?* Don’t feel like it. *You want to go and hear this messianic group, “The Liberated Wailing Wall”?* Thank you, no. *You’ve gotta come to our clam bake!* Thanks anyway.



What made me change directions? Probably just growing up some, but two events made me rethink things.

First: a College Retreat. I almost never went to any social or sport event in high school or college. *I’m just not interested*, I thought. *I have things to do*. Then my fiancée Karen and I decided to go on our senior class retreat. And I had an excellent time. I became friendly with people whom I knew mainly as backs of heads from class. So, I asked, why hadn’t I done this before?

Second: My college roommate Sam just would not stop pestering me to go to this Christian concert with him. *You’ll love it*, he said. *He’s not Larry Norman*, he said – we were both major fans – *but he’s amazing*. Naw, I replied. *I’d better not; I have stuff to do*, I retorted. *C’mon, man!* No. It turns out that was my last opportunity to hear Keith Green perform before he died in that plane crash. I became a big fan of his – but posthumously.

I hear there’s a Jim Carrey movie called “Yes Man”. “Carl Allen is at a standstill. No future...Until the day he enrolls into a personal development program based on a very simple idea: say yes to everything!” Lessons are learned, perils are avoided, the boy gets the girl (Zooey Deschanel!), etc. I haven’t seen the film, so I can’t recommend it. But I do recommend we live positively.

I joke around with my kids that they ought to be “Yes let’s! Guys and Gal”, to go to a game or get ice cream or see a show, just because someone suggests it. I try to make my rapid response, “Absolutely, let’s do it!”

One way of viewing the Christian life is that it is a long list of things Not To Do. And certainly, there is some truth here, and we see Christians doing plenty of bad stuff. Just say no.

But at the heart of the matter is a ringing Yes: 'All of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!" And through Christ, our "Amen" (which means "Yes") ascends to God for his glory' (2 Cor 1:20 NLT). God designed our new life in Christ to be positive, open, vital, growing. The new life is meant to be lived, not locked away. Our loving Father delights for us to find new blessings, learn new truths, share our joy with others. May we live firmly in God's truth, shielded in his own armor, but unintimidated by life.

Chapter Two: Fake fruits sold here, cheap as they come!

So basically, we can offer you two plans.

Plan A.

The spiritual produce wagon arrives every day, full to overflowing for those who wish to ask the Father. *Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*, and that's not the complete list; it's only a summary. They are miracle gifts, planted, watered, grown, harvested, replanted by the Almighty. Just nod your head *Yes*, the Gardener is standing by.

Or do you imagine we're speaking about doing some housecleaning, where we clench our teeth to sort through and toss out old behaviors? No – Spirit-gifts arrive come with the power to displace antagonism, condescension, digital addictions, self-abandonment, playing half-on-half-off with Heaven, materialism, both consumerist soft- or Wall Street hardcore. You name the weed, the Spirit knows best how to pull it.

Plan B.

Of course, it's easy enough to fake that you're on good terms with the Spirit, if that's what you want. Just repeat after us as we recite the formulas! *Pat a back or two; work one sacrificial act into your weekly lifestyle; count all the way to eleven before you open up to irritation.*

Repression can be made up to look like peacefulness, hubbub can masquerade as joy. Is that generosity I see, or are you paying off a hungry man so he will let you go on your way? Only an expert can tell the difference! Is it patience, or protocol you follow? Are you self-controlled or only too fatigued to do anything really nasty? Is it unity you promote, or have you withdrawn because you have just stopped caring enough to fight?

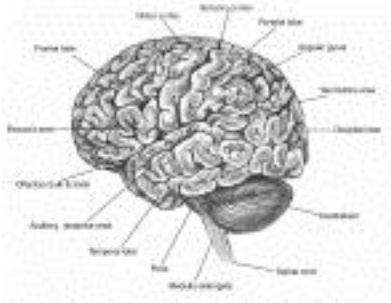
Now, when things start to fall apart, don't come to this desk to complain. We'll just tell you to relax those facial muscles and for goodness sake, when you clench your fists do it behind your back! Subtler insults, laser-guided gossip, humble brags, use minimal force to split one group into three, erase your browser history after every use. Things can be spiffed up, there are ways and there are ways.

But a warning: this plan B is basically a secular way of life, grafted onto a spiritual one. It's what Paul warned about, that there are people with the mere form of piety, but who deny its power (2 Tim 3:5). Eventually this will backfire on you, and the conversion of fake fruit to an evil harvest is not a long or complicated process. (It turns out that the Spirit won't long invest his time in the self-made Christian, and when He pulls out on your life, things tend to get real messy, real fast.)

Plan B, plastic fruit in a plastic bowl. Plan A, the reality. The choice is yours.



Chapter Three: The Holy Spirit is not limited by our brain chemistry



This morning I attended a service in Costa Rica. It's not our regular church, but one I sometimes visit. The congregation is English-speaking, Afro-Caribbean. They have a strong island accent. I was one of a few white people in the congregation.

As usual, they greeted me warmly.

Our home church in Costa Rica is Latin American and Spanish-speaking. We go to one of the lightly attended services, and we are two white faces among 100 Latinos. And they always treat us as family.

I could go on: Romanian churches, where I knew almost nothing of the language; an African American church in Philly; *campesino* rural churches in Costa Rica; churches in a communist land, where every billboard and TV news program proclaim that they should hate me because I'm from the USA. [1]

Different languages, cultures, colors. Yet they make me, a minority, feel at home.

This is miraculous, Spirit-inspired, Christian love.

Brain specialists and sociologists have now shown that people automatically gravitate toward those who look like them. *Like* feels comfortable with *like*, uncomfortable with *different*. So whether we realize it or not, our brains push us to clump together with people like ourselves.

But in the end, what does it matter? Because God is a mighty God; and the Spirit is not limited by our hard wiring. Therefore, like Samson on his better days, we people of the new birth can and must stretch to breaking the dictates of our brain chemistry.

Those who authentically walk in the Holy Spirit love don't just run to their friends – they stand on tip-toe, trying to spot people who look isolated, confused, friendless, disconnected, and make a beeline to them.

Lord, I surely hope that when I'm in a group, surrounded by friends, in the racial and cultural majority, that I make "the unlike" feel as welcomed as these brothers and sisters make me.

NOTE:

[1] By the way, I am very much aware that my positive experiences might be due to the fact that I run in circles in which white people are seen positively. Were I a black man in an all-white American church; a Chinese or Nicaraguan person in a Costa Rican church; a biker covered in tattoos; a farmer in a sophisticated upper middle-class church; then perhaps their acceptance of me would be the heartier miracle. It's a good way to test how supernaturally loving we are, not when we are tolerant of the *favored* Other, but of the *disfavored*.

Chapter Four: Rediscovering God in the Age of Therapy

This article was originally published as “Recovering God in the Age of Therapy” by Gary Steven Shogren, in *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 12, No. 1 (Fall 1993): 14-19. I wrote this as a lecture in 1992, to comment upon Christian literature of the 80s-90s. I have not attempted to update the examples, since they have retained most of their relevance after decades.



To get a quick scan of our civilization, look no further than the nearest mall bookstore. Naturally, it will carry the standards – Bibles, dictionaries, paperback classics, Cliff Notes. But since its manager has stocked it full of the ideas that consumers are buying this season, it serves as a handy display panel for the collective mind. Without doubt you will notice that merchandise is moving briskly from “Psychology/Self-Help”; a glance at the titles will reveal what’s selling:

Peace, Love & Healing – Bodymind communication and the path to self-healing: an exploration

Forgive & Forget: Healing the hurts we don’t deserve

Healing the Shame that Binds You

People of the Lie: the hope for human healing evil

May it also be said that Christian bookstores are the mirrors of our subculture? Run through the titles on whatever shelf corresponds to Self-Help and try to get a feel for what Christians want to hear:

Healing for Damaged Emotions (text and workbook)

Changes that Heal – How to Understand your past to ensure a healthier future

Restoring the Christian Soul through Healing Prayer

Faith that Hurts – Faith that Heals, and so forth; all by evangelical authors, put out by Christian publishers.

Is it a fluke, or do we really yearn for the same higher good – for want of a better term, Inner Healing – as the world at large? We dig deeper, and the likelihood of mere coincidence fades away.

Not only do the covers sound remarkably similar, but the contents read alike. At times the same title (in this case, *Forgive & Forget*) is found in both stories. And if you are surprised to find “secular” books on a religious bookseller’s Psychology shelf, then you may be even more puzzled to find books from evangelical publishers in the shopping mall.

If we can judge the book by its cover, Christians have adopted “healing” as a catch-all metaphor, an apposite umbrella term for all that we may expect from God. We may guess at how that came about: Dr. Christian, fictitious born-again therapist, has reasoned in this way:

Psychologists regard the emotional dysfunction that people experience as personal (we’re alienated from our selves) and social (we’re cut off from others). This is fine as far as it goes, but as a Christian I am aware that we are also hurting spiritually, and our relationship to God is, in fact, key. Isn’t it better to say that we are disease with regard to self, socially in our human relationships, and furthermore spiritually in our relationship with God? What we genuinely need therefore is God’s healing grace in all three connections.

What is wrong with this picture? The problem lies not in the Doctor giving a bad response, but in his attempt to answer the wrong question, one which Christians had little input in framing. He is immersed in a culture in which psychiatry, psychology, religion, and the media are champions of a “disease model” for whatever disturbs you. A Christianized version of this could depict God as the Great Therapist who gives us healing on some ultimate (spiritual) plane. As is always the case, Bible verses can be brought in for proof.

Most attempts to integrate Scripture and Inner Healing are written by professional counselors who also have some level of regard for the Bible. I am the opposite, an exegete with an outsider’s interest in counseling. As such, may I offer that it is not enough to use the Bible to strike the more egregious errors of Inner Healing and then assume that whatever is left standing is biblical? The Bible does not exist merely to filter the impurities from other systems! While keeping that in mind, let’s pose the question in this way: if a Christian began with the system found in Scriptures, would he or she soon discover this “healing” paradigm? And if not, should we embrace it as our model of first choice?

In such a study three questions will need to be answered:

- (1) how does the Bible present the language of healing?
- (2) how do counselors use the terminology of healing?
- (3) what implications does the biblical pattern have for Christian counselors?

I. THE BIBLE AND THE LANGUAGE OF HEALING

The myriad biblical references may be sorted into two general categories: first, “healing” in its primary sense is the restoration of people to bodily well-being. Second, “healing” in a metaphorical sense is the overall state of well-being found within the covenant. [1]

The bulk of the biblical verses invest “healing” with the meaning of physical restoration. When our Lord healed he eliminated the symptoms and reversed the damage already done. In his own words, “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear” (Matt. 11:5a). [2] Of course, spiritual benefits accompanied the Lord’s healings, most notably the forgiveness of sins, but “healing” words are not applied to these spiritual blessings. [3]

Twice Jesus compares himself to a physician; early in his ministry, he predicts that the Nazarenes will taunt him, “Physician, heal yourself” (Luke 4:23). In fulfillment he was jeered at the cross: “he saved others; let him save himself...” (Luke 23:35): ironically, Jesus’ power would seem to fail him when he himself was dying. In another instance, Jesus counters those who despise his association with sinners, by saying “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick (Luke 5:31).” He then added the clarification, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (5:32).” No therapist to the sick was he; Jesus was making his ministry intelligible by noting that the place of the caring is at the side of those in need.

Many references to physical healing appear in the context of God’s covenant with Israel. Even before Moses ascends Mount Sinai, the Lord promises physical well-being to those who will obey his Law:

“If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases of the Egyptians, for I am the LORD who heals you (Exod 15:26).”

These “diseases of the Egyptians” are the boils and other afflictions with which they were plagued. *Yahweh-Rapha* (“the LORD who heals”) reveals himself as the one who takes away the *physiological* ailments of Israel if they abide by the covenant.

The covenant renewal in Deuteronomy throws this relatedness of health and obedience into greater relief. Yahweh will bestow favor on the obedient, but the backslidden he will chasten

with wasting disease, fever and inflammation, boils, tumors, festering sores, the itch, madness, blindness, and confusion of mind (Deut 28:22, cf. the allusion to the diseases of the Egyptians in v. 27). Clearly, this will be no outbreak of psychosomatic symptoms generated by national guilt; rather the LORD will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses. He will bring upon you all the diseases of Egypt that you dreaded, and they will cling to you. The LORD will also bring on you every kind of sickness and disaster not recorded in this Book of the Law until you are destroyed (Deut 28:59-61). When Israel goes back to the covenant, it will return to the land from exile and find new prosperity and health (Deut 30:1-10).

As both Testaments dramatize, it is absurd to place the immediate blame for every sickness on sin (see the example of Job). But the connection between sin and the loss of physical vitality does loom large in the Law [4] and the Psalms [5]: lapse from the covenant, and God may use sickness to jolt you back to reality. Thus David's complaint is best understood as a chastising affliction:

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath. For your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon me. Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; my bones have no soundness because of my sin. (Psalm 38:1-3)

The other configuration of "healing" terminology concerns the enjoyment of a full range of blessings, not just physical health. These good things may be had by those who are right with God in the covenant. Common to both prophet and psalmist are reports that the Lord inflicts the penalties threatened in the covenant; then, when the nation repents, it is restored. Blessing replaces misfortune of every sort – agricultural, social, spiritual, physical – "when the LORD binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted (Isa 30:26b)." [6] That same metaphor resurfaces in a handful of New Testament passages. In 1 Pet 2:24 the apostle paraphrases Isaiah 53 to extend the blessings of the covenant to Gentiles: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." [7]

Why is "healing" an appropriate label for having peace with God? The reason is apparent – since physical vigor is one consequence of revival, then the removal of the curse and the renewal of sweeping blessings might with justice be termed "healing."

We may sum up the biblical data with these observations:

(a) When the words for "healing" are used of the ministries of Jesus and the apostles, they invariably refer to the restoration of physical (not emotional) health.

(b) Under the terms of the Deuteronomic covenant, bodily affliction may be caused directly by God as chastisement for backsliding.

(c) From time to time, the fruits of conversion are called “healing.” “Healing” in its broader sense returns when God removes his chastising hand from the repentant and restores them to wholeness. And, while it is difficult to prove a negative, we may also note this down:

(d) “Healing” as the easing of inner pain – when that pain is not due to God’s chastisement – is not in the vocabulary of the biblical writers.

II. COUNSELORS AND THE LANGUAGE OF HEALING

We will now turn our attention to the second question: how do our contemporary counselors use healing nomenclature? The answer is not a simple one, but a survey of two influential “disease” models may help us to find the roots of the therapeutic culture. We begin with the classic formulation of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In the 1930’s, Dr. William D. Silkworth (regarded as one of the ideological co-founders of A. A.) contributed the medical model of alcoholism to the emerging movement: certain individuals are physically/psychologically unable to handle even moderate alcohol use. The alcoholic has a disease of the mind and body – a mind obsessed with alcohol and with taking the first drink, and a body that cannot handle any alcohol without a severe reaction that triggers further compulsive drinking. Alcoholics manifest their disease on three levels: spiritually they are estranged from their Creator through self-centeredness, emotionally they are cut off from human society, and physically they suffer brain damage and ill health. In traditional A. A. teaching, the alcoholic may be out of control, but he is accountable before God and responsible to pursue recovery. While never healed of his alcoholism, he is restored to wellness, one day at a time, through surrender to a Higher Power. [8]

Who, then, is sick? A. A. preaches that a substantial minority of the population has the disease of alcoholism, and that it entails defiance against God. The disease is not universal, nor is it coterminous with what theologians call “depravity”.

But today, A. A.’s disease model has been popularized and mixed with a medical approach to mental and emotional wholeness. The result? “Sickness/disease” has been appropriated for every imaginable life problem, and the sufferers are not necessarily responsible for their actions: thus a generation arose that wailed that they were not sinful, just sick. These fashionable versions of the disease model reach their apex in the Inner Healing program:

- Many people are hurting from their upbringing and experiences; they have been rejected or abused and are “dysfunctional” (originally a medical term!) in one way or another
- They are alienated from God and others, afraid of being vulnerable, and thus unable to love or be loved
- God wishes to bring Inner Healing to all; this may mean grappling with painful memories, but it will lead to a renewed self-esteem and confidence

As far as recent Christian literature goes, one of the most revisionist gospels is from the pen of J. Keith Miller, *A Hunger for Healing* (Harper-Collins, 1991). He dubs the whole human predicament as “Sin-disease” although he admits that “the idea of referring to Sin as a ‘disease’ troubles some people (p. 4).” But he defends his language by claiming that “biblical theologians have always known” that sin is like a disease; these theologians unfortunately go unnamed.

Miller himself draws this idea to its natural conclusion: if sin is essentially a disease, then what we really need from God is healing. The “disease” model has snowballed from A. A.’s “the few are sick”, to Inner Healing’s “many are sick”, to Miller’s “really, aren’t we all sick?”

III. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN COUNSELOR

What do we find when the prophets of healing are set side by side with the biblical prophets?

Common decency presses us to point out some hazards of using a “healing” model: (1) the “healing” metaphor becomes increasingly misleading the closer it is to becoming the controlling metaphor for God’s help; (2) it brings along cultural baggage that is contrary to biblical revelation; (3) it misleads people, not about peripheral issues, but of Christian fundamentals: who is God? who am I? what is my standing with God?

We would not read in the Bible that a man is “healed” of, say, drunkenness. However, the language of healing may be used with biblical precedent to describe the *results* of repentance. Therefore we might use “healing” to speak of the spiritual, physical, economic, and relational blessings that will follow such reconciliation to God. But **when “healing” is elevated to the place of the dominant metaphor for God’s help**, we may garble the rest of the biblical message of sin, depravity, regeneration, repentance, forgiveness, and sanctification. It is in the nature of metaphors that they not be pressed beyond their limits of usefulness. If we make the healing metaphor more important than the Bible already makes it, we will in the end undo it.

Perhaps a comparison with another Bible metaphor would be illuminating: in a tiny handful of verses, God is compared to a mother. God himself says that “as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you” (Isa 66:13a). The revelation of a nurturing and gentle side of God cannot but

give blessing to the reader of Isaiah. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to load this delicate metaphor with more weight than was originally intended.

In the same way, “healing” is an important part of the whole, but that part will never stand the weight of the whole. Anyone who proclaims that our root problem is dysfunction ensures that the vital distinctions between the self-help message and the gospel will be lost. Unquestionably, one of those essentials is the imperative of the new birth: if the underlying need of both saved and unsaved is healing, and both may have it abundantly, then what good is regeneration? And who would bother getting a new life, when the old familiar one is tolerable after minor repairs? Their rejoinder that Christ is an important resource in God’s healing agenda only make matters worse. No gush of admiration for the gospel will save those who damn it with faint praise.

Really, does an evangelical author put matters in their proper place when one must skim his or her book several times and use the index just to figure out where the gospel is even mentioned? The gospel occupies a hall closet, while the house is built on the message of “healing.” One would like to be charitable and chalk it all up to benign neglect, but that would be untenable: even in evangelical literature one finds a consistent pattern of put-downs for Christians who “simply and simplistically” (and Pharisaically) urge the hurting to read the Bible, confess sin, pray (what! prayer, simple?), believe the gospel, trust God. Let’s grant that we’ve all known insensitive Christians who sling *clichés*, when they should be offering loving counsel, but their answers are at least recognizably biblical.

Secondly, there is **the question of our message becoming entangled with unbiblical cultural baggage**. Consider that a Christian today cannot quote Exod 15:26, “I am the LORD that healeth thee (KJV),” and expect that biblically illiterate Americans will recall its meaning in context. We live in the Age of Therapy; we will instinctively take it to mean that God will ease our inner hurts, our dysfunctional upbringing, our low self-esteem. How long before the gospel accounts are transmogrified into parables of Inner Healing? Lazarus may still walk out of the tomb, but he will “come forth” to a healthier sense of self-worth.

It might be objected that counselors are doing what theologians have always done, that is, using words with a meaning that does not exactly square with biblical usage. A close parallel is this: the Bible defines “redemption” rather tightly, as the work of God in delivering His people from bondage unto himself; as such it is one salvation word among many. But theologians, who have long known this, use the word to describe the whole process of salvation from beginning to end (cf. Scroggie’s, *Unfolding Drama of Redemption*). So what, then, if “healing” in the Bible means the easing of the physical and spiritual effects of rebellion through the covenant; may not counselors broaden it into the release of all human distress and pain, without worrying about a precise biblical definition?

In fact, there are major differences between the two cases. When theologians use “redemption” to describe God’s whole saving work, they may be coloring outside the lines, but they could hardly be accused of skewing the Bible’s message. It is that threat of distortion that sets the safety limits for our religious vocabulary. Although metaphors are not to be taken “literally”, they are to be taken seriously. The metaphors we choose may clarify or warp our proclamation; they must be handpicked with an eye to their exactness.

The semantics of “healing” grow murky, because those who use it are bound to commit the fallacy of failing to recognize distinctions – that is, to reason that if x and y are alike in some ways, then they are alike in all ways. [9] Inevitably it will be assumed that if sin is like a disease in some ways, it is like a disease in all ways.

How is sin like a disease? Like a disease, sin gets worse with time; particular acts of sin are symptoms of a larger problem.

But sin, according to the Bible, is unlike a disease in other respects. The underlying assumption is that each individual is born already sinful. Meanwhile the premise of most “disease” models is that we need recovery from a dysfunctional environment, with the implication that we are born good.

That is why it is thought that the deeper we can go into our selves, the nearer we will be to God. It does little good to build a Christian ministry upon the ideals, methods, and goals of Inner Healing and then to add, belatedly, that the Bible says we’re ruined from birth. The idea of depravity is not a trifle for which a slight course correction must be made – it is a foundational truth which must pervade and shape any Christian’s system of thought. Of course, we could use “healing” terms with a careful definition and suitable caveats; but a metaphor that needs a thousand qualifications has probably outlived its usefulness.

This brings us along to the third risk, that **the preoccupation with the “healing” metaphor leads to confusion not about peripheral issues, but of Christian fundamentals**, such as the nature of God himself. What happens if we envision God to be mostly like a therapist – even conceding that he is a very good one? To be consistent, we would need to imagine God as chancing upon people who have been beat up by life, and he is of course glad to offer help. In this representation, he is unsettlingly like the Good Samaritan, a man with no agenda of his own beyond being kind. God then will seem unloving if he does not give whatever help we feel we need, with our methods, to our ends, no questions asked. Although we might like to imagine otherwise, a divine Therapist cannot at the same time be the holy creator who punishes all who rebel. In a perilous quest for healing on its own terms, the ego enthrones itself as the focus of the universe, and the God-centeredness of the Bible is lost.

Finally, let's affirm Christians who proclaim that God is not just interested in the bit of us called the "spirit", but in the liberation of the whole person. This is certainly true, but the rules by which the game is played are revealed in the Bible. It is the Bible that draws us to the truth that all models of recovery must begin with theology, with the question "who am I in the sight of God...or is there in fact a God?" It is dangerous to answer that God only wants what we want, namely Inner Healing and personal growth. Let the false gods be merely "good for what ails you"; the living God, for his own reasons and to his own ends, makes radical demands on his creatures even as he brings them to restoration.

ENDNOTES:

[1] The Hebrew and Greek terms for healing are varied; in the OT the most common term is *rapha* with its cognates. Within the NT, *iaomai* (26x) and *therapeuo* (43x) are the most common verbs for healing; despite claims to the contrary within the etymological studies of the last century, the two verbs are interchangeable in meaning. The verb *sozo* (normally "to save") can have the meaning of "healing" (Mark 5:23, James 5:15), as can its cognate *diasozo* (Matt 14:36, Luke 7:3); these meanings are entirely distinct from their usage in other contexts with the meaning of "save." *katharizo* may be used of "cleansing" of leprosy.

[2] Quotations are from the NIV; note that the covenantal name Yahweh is rendered as "the LORD." Here is a complete listing of miraculous healings by Jesus and the apostles in the NT in which the verb "to heal" appears: *therapeuo* in Matt 4:23-24, 8:7, 8:16, 9:35, 12:10, 15, 22, 14:14, 15:30, 17:18, 19:2, 21:14; Mark 1:34, 3:2, 3:10, 6:5, 13; Luke 4:40, 5:15, 6:18, 7:21, 8:2, 9:6, 13:14, 14:3; John 5:10; Acts 4:14, 5:16, 8:7, 28:9. *iaomai* in Matt 8:8, 13, 15:28; Mark 5:29; Luke 5:17, 6:18, 19, 7:7, 8:47, 9:11, 9:42, 14:4, 17:15, 22:51; John 4:47, 5:13; Acts 9:34, 10:38; 28:8. *sozo* appears in Acts 14:9, its cognate *diasozo* in Luke 7:3. James 5 uses *sozo* (v. 15) and *iaomai* (v. 16) when it instructs the church how to pray for the sick; cf. G. Shogren, "Will God Heal Us? – A Re-examination of James 5:14-16a," in *The Best in Theology*, 1989 (Christianity Today, 1990); also available at <http://openoureyeslord.wordpress.com/2010/10/09/will-god-heal-us-a-re-examination-of-james-514-16a/>

[3] A possible exception may be Luke 4:18-19. Here Jesus quotes Isa 61:1-2 as a prophecy of his ministry: "...He has sent me to proclaim...recovery of sight for the blind." This refers either to the healing of literal blindness or to the removal of the spiritual blindness of sin. See the comments by J. Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, WBC: 35A (Dallas: Word, 1989), pp. 196-97. In the latter case, this metaphorical use of healing language falls under our second category, healing as the restoration to covenant blessings; in context it cannot be stretched to mean "inner healing."

[4] Besides those we have cited see, for example, Deut 32:39.

[5] For example, Psalm 6:2-3, 30:2-3, 32:3-4, 41:1-4, 107:20; cf. also Prov 3:7-8.

[6] Among these passages one may note 2 Chron 7:14 (“heal their land”), Psalm 147:2-3, Isa 1:5-6, 30:26, Jer 3:22, 14:17, 19, 30:17, 33:6-9, Hos 11:3, 14:4, Mal 4:2.

[7] Note also how the imagery of Ezekiel has impressed itself on the prophecy of the New Jerusalem: “On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2).”

[8] A. A. co-founder Bill Wilson blended Dr. Silkworth’s insight with the spiritual disciplines of the Oxford Group program, the “twice-born” model of William James, and the psychology of Carl Jung. From these ingredients he created A. A.’s 12 Steps. The A. A. model is best explained in *Alcoholics Anonymous* [popularly called “the Big Book”] (3rd. ed., New York: A. A. World Services, Inc., 1976), pp. xxiii-xxx, 17-29, 58-60.

[9] See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Baker, 1984), p. 97.

Chapter Five: Life in the New Covenant, according to Romans

[The following thoughts are taken from my new commentary on Romans in the Comentario Bíblico Contemporáneo, to be published in 2015 by Ediciones Kairós]



A “paradigm shift” is not simply coming up with new answers to the same old problems; rather, it involves reworking one’s assumptions and attempting to reframe the questions. For example, the apostle Paul grew up under one paradigm, that the people of God was constituted by the covenant God made with Abraham and the Law given to Moses. That meant that the Israelite was automatically one of God’s own, unless he or she came to reject God’s Law; and that non-Israelites could be saved if only they converted to Judaism. They believed that the Holy Spirit would come upon Israel, but only in the future kingdom, when God would establish a New Covenant with his people.

Throughout his letter to the Romans, Paul offers sweeping paradigm shifts: one of them appears in Rom 5:5 – “hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” This means that one cannot begin to understand the gospel without taking the New Covenant and the gift of the Spirit as the basis for the Christian life. He had hinted at this new element somewhat abstractly in Rom 2:14-15, that Gentiles could do what the Torah requires – that is, the life of love that is the goal of the Torah (Rom 13:10).

The new element is the gift of the Spirit in the New Covenant, predicted in the prophets and now brought to fruition in this age. Jesus said that by shedding his blood he was initiating that covenant (1 Cor 11:24-25), and Paul self-identifies as a minister of that same covenant (2 Cor 3:6). It is the basis for transformation of believers in this age (1 Thess 4:9-10).

All this to say that in place of the old paradigm, which divided the world into Israelites and non-Israelites, the gospel places everyone in “those in Christ, who by definition have the Spirit” and those who are not: “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

(Rom 8:9). We are not “saved by faith, sanctified by works”; far from it! Rather, those with the Spirit find themselves not only enabled but also *propelled* to walk in holiness, beginning with the power to love truly.

All of this shifting of paradigms might escape the attention of today’s Christian reader of Romans, who is accustomed to see references to the Spirit and his transforming power in the Bible and in life. But for people in the first century, the ancient prophecies about the New Covenant in the Spirit were end-time events, not for life in the here and now. Yes, Paul can still say that this same New Covenant will bring about the eschatological transformation of “all Israel” at the end of the age: “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” (Rom 11:27).

But at the same time, all Christians are in the now time experiencing this covenant as predicted in the prophets: “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jer 31:33, quoted in Heb 8:8). Ezekiel 36:22-28 contains a reference to the gift of God’s Spirit and also the sprinkling of purifying water; these are the two elements that underlie Jesus’ teaching that “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Jesus also taught that “the hour is coming, and is *now here* (!), when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (or better, “in the Spirit and in truth” or “truly, that is, through the Spirit”; see John 4:23-24). Thus, another important prediction (Joel 2:28-32) is now fulfilled on Pentecost, and the falls upon all believers in Jesus (Acts 2:16-21).

What is lacking from the prophetic passages above is any thought that Gentile believers would experience the New Covenant, the forgiveness of their sins, the gift of the Spirit, the Spirit of prophecy, the guidance of God in righteousness. That provided an opening for some opponents of Paul, the Judaizers, to argue that non-Jewish believers could not simply declare their trust in Jesus and be saved; rather, they had to in effect convert to Judaism, taking the rite of circumcision and pledging themselves to obey the 613 rules of the Law.

This is why it is important for Paul to demonstrate that the gift of the Spirit stands prior to anything else in the Christian walk (see Gal 3:1-6). Galatians 5 and Romans 8 show that the Christian life is a life in the Spirit, and that if anyone tries to blend the Spirit and the Torah for power to live the holy life, the whole affair will fall to pieces: a legalistic Christian, no matter what the brand of legalism, is inevitably a spiritual failure. If God himself promised that “you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you” (Ezek 36:25) – the very evils the Gentiles inevitably fall into (Rom 1:23, 24) – then it becomes ridiculous to argue that they would be better if only they would follow the hundreds of statutes of Torah in order to keep them on the narrow path.

But no – step by step it became clear to the apostles that non-Israelites could be saved through faith, manifested when they received the Spirit of holiness – “And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.” (Acts 15:8-9). This leaves us with the power of God, and also the serious yet joyful responsibility to carry out his wishes: “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” (Rom 8:12-14).

Luke 11:11-13

What father among you,

if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent;

or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children,

how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

Chapter Six: Should Christians focus on Christ and the Spirit...or only on Christ?



Spiritual believers are Christ-centered, but that doesn't prevent them from speaking about the Spirit!

Why has it become necessary to say this?

It's because John MacArthur in his *Strange Fire* opines that all Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians remove Christ from the center of the gospel and replace him with Holy Spirit mania; rather, he finds references to the Spirit's work to be, well, suspicious. [1] For example:

Charismatics want to put the spotlight on the Holy Spirit – or at least their impersonation of Him. But the Holy Spirit desires to put the spotlight on the true person and work of Jesus Christ. As the Lord told His disciples in the Upper Room, the Spirit would be sent in His name, to remind them of His teachings, and to bear testimony to His work (John 14:26; 15:26).

Rather than explore what those texts from John actually say, he turns to other books to buttress his argument, that a spiritual Christian does not speak much – or ever, if MacArthur were consistent – of the Spirit. Among them are these two quotations:

the Holy Spirit calls attention to neither Himself nor to man, but focuses all attention on the Lord Jesus Christ and what God has done in and through His Son.
[2]

The Holy Spirit seems to hide Himself and to conceal Himself. He is always, as it were, putting the focus on the Son. [3]

In other words, by definition, a Christian who is full of the Spirit will always talk about Christ and not about the Spirit. But is that biblical? The texts he cites are:

the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (John 14:26)

But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me (John 15:26)

Note that the Spirit would speak of Jesus' work; the text does not say he would speak *exclusively*! To read it that way is to break two fundamental rules of Bible interpretation: eisegesis (reading into the text what is not there) and ignoring the *regula fide* (not reading any text without considering the broader context of Scripture). For if you believe in the inspiration of Scripture, then I can prove to you that when the Spirit came he bore witness of Jesus, but the Spirit also bore plenty of witness to himself, his words through the prophets, his power, his glory.

Let's take two small portions of the Bible and apply a simple test:

Acts 1-2 – there are 31 references to Jesus in these verses: 1:1-11, 1:16, 1:21-22, 2:21, 2:22-28, 2:30-36, 38-39. At the same time, there are 11 references to the Spirit: 1:2, 1:4, 1:5, 1:8, 1:16, 2:4 (2x), 2:17, 2:18, 2:33, 2:3.

Galatians 3-6 is a passage particularly rich with gospel truths. There are 24 references to Jesus Christ – 3:1, 3:13, 3:16, 3:22, 3:24, 3:26-29, 4:4, 4:6, 4:14, 4:19, 5:1, 5:2, 5:4, 5:6, 5:10, 5:24, 6:2, 6:12, 6:14, 6:17, 6:18. Plus there are 16 references to the Spirit – 3:2-5, 3:14, 4:6, 4:29, 5:5, 5:16-18, 5:22-23, 5:25, 6:1, 6:8.

In both cases, chosen at random, Jesus Christ is referred to more than is the Spirit, but the Spirit is regularly present in the text, and is often the focus of some paragraph or another. But wait: how could the Spirit have inspired the authors of Acts or Galatians to write about himself, if that is contrary to his nature?

And come to think of it, what does it mean when Paul writes in 1 Cor 2:3 that he preaches only Christ, when in the same letter he references the Spirit, his resurrection power, his gifts, his transformation of the heart, roughly 35 times?

It turns out that the Spirit talks about himself, well, all the time. And that means that a Christ-centered believer will also be consumed with a focus on the Holy Spirit.

Christians live under the New Covenant. And while it is impossible to speak about it without going to the cross (1 Cor 11:25), it is equally impossible to have a New Covenant without the work of the Spirit (Ezek 36:26-27).

Given that John MacArthur believes in the inspiration of the New Testament, then he should abandon this *a priori* argument – that is, an argument based on “it seems to me” rather than “the text says.” The Bible speaks much of the Spirit, rendering invalid the sweeping claim that the Spirit “conceals Himself.” The Spirit speaks much about himself, and the Bible-believing Christian should too.

John MacArthur exhibits here the same weakness of logic that he’s known for on other occasions, of over-generalizing. He says that Charismatics, not being Christ-centered, are false teachers. On behalf of sound exegesis, I would invite MacArthur to put away his broad brush and say *Those Charismatics who are not Christ-centered are false teachers*. And in the same way he might say, *Those Charismatics who deny the Trinity are false teachers* and *Those Charismatics who teach the Prosperity Gospel are false teachers*.

NOTES:

[1] John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

[2] MacArthur cites J. Hampton Keathley, *ABCs for Christian Growth*, p. 204.

[3] MacArthur quotes D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 2:20.

Chapter Seven: New Year's Resolutions or New Covenant Miracles?



For many years, I made no New Year's resolutions. My reasoning:

- *Why make a big deal just because the planet has revolved around the sun to an arbitrary point in space?*
- *Why try to be a better persons on this one day when I should be doing it all the time?*
- *Are resolutions relevant to me, since I don't need to quit smoking, drinking or gambling?*

I've come to think differently, having taken another look at the Bible and paid closer attention to human behavior. For the past 5 years or so, I have made a single New Year's Resolution on December 31. The Word reveals to us that there are two methods for making resolutions.

Method A: "I will try really hard to be a better person in this area." [1] But don't we all know what happens? The resolution comes unraveled, usually within a few days or weeks. "45 percent of Americans make resolutions, but only 8 percent keep them." [2] And so, red-faced, we push our noble plan to the back of our minds, at least until next year.

We Christians have the inside knowledge that the problem lies with the one who is doing the resolving. The words "carnal" or "fleshly" refers to "humanity as flesh is contrasted with Spirit, [it] is sinful, and without the aid of the Spirit cannot please God." [3] Yes, those outside of Christ can and do make resolutions. Nevertheless they will fall short, and for several fundamental reasons: they lack God's wisdom concerning how they should alter their lives; they have not been born again and changed in the New Covenant; without the Spirit they might come to be relatively better persons, but they cannot alter their nature, please God or effect any real change (Rom 8:5-8). They launch the New Year with hopeful hearts, but their resolutions are fragile ice crystals that melt under the January sun.

The disturbing thing is that some of these people are Christians, who listen to their peers and reach for the same old bag of tricks for self-improvement. Oh, sure, they add religion to the mix: they might pray for strength; they may even have the Bible as their guiding star. Many (most?) of us Christians try to do a spiritual thing but in a "carnal" manner. For example, one famous preacher wrote about resolutions, but most of his advice is plain common sense, the sort of thing you might get from *Reader's Digest*: *Don't start out assuming you will fail; be realistic; don't be*

self-centered; take concrete steps; have an accountability partner; don't get discouraged. Toss in a Bible verse and a word or two about prayer, and *voilà* – a way of life that bears a surface resemblance to the gospel, but at heart is the world's system. It is putting new wine into old wineskins and it will lead to frustrated intentions and efforts, no matter how sincere they are (see Matt 5:17).

Let's take a step backward and think for a minute: Is this the miraculous, paradigm-breaking new life promised to us in Christ: *Be a sensible person, Be realistic, Take small steps?* What happened to the Bible's jumbo-sized promises of a life of dynamic, lasting change?

Method B – God steps in to make us like him, first when we are saved and then moment by moment. Yes, we take steps and put forth effort in faith, but God himself is the real agent of change. The Bible plan is that “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Rom 8:9). That means that any change in our lives must be spiritual (which in Paul's language means “in and through the Spirit”), not through our efforts (the flesh, human common sense, without supernatural power).

Let's unpack the Bible teaching with a “for instance”: If I resolve to be less selfish this year, and by next year, before God, I am authentically 25% less selfish, then my friends, *we have witnessed a miracle, a work that only God can do.* The yardstick of comparison would not be the success rate of the nicotine patch or Weight Watchers, but the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 or the healing of the lame man or even the creation of the stars, the sun, the moon. It will be the fruit of Almighty God's involvement within us.

There is an excellent example in 1 Thess 4:10: “concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been *taught by God* to love one another.” Paul was looking back to the prophecies of the New Covenant in Jer 31:31-34 and Ezek 36:26, showing how the pagan Thessalonians were living in the miraculous love that is the “fruit of the Spirit.” He is also directly alluding to Isa 54:13, “I will make all your sons *taught by God.*” “Taught by God” is not just taking a class about love; it is his complete package for change from the inside out. To the extent that they are walking in the Spirit, believers find that they are being motivated, are thinking, acting and reacting differently than they used to. In modern terms, the Spirit has re-written their software.

The Israelites looked forward to the New Covenant, but did not claim to have experienced its wonders. How blessed are we! From Pentecost onward, each believer is a temple of the Spirit, a “new creation.” This means that Christians have a fundamentally different nature than those we see every day in the world.

But back to the Christians who don't understand what God has done, and who attempt to do good in their own power, or even in their own power mixed with some prayer or with a couple of

relevant Bible verses on their smartphone. In fact, anyone at all could memorize Proverbs 23:20-21 –

Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags.

And that person might find good help; he need not even be a Christian; he could be a Muslim or atheist or nothing in particular. But in gospel terms, this method of change can be as “fleshly” as the one who does evil things for evil reasons. That is what was happening in Galatia, where the Judaizers were struggling hard to be the people God wanted them to be; not only did they fall short, but they plummeted below the level they had started from. Legalists, according to Gal 5:16-17, become ever more angry, judgmental, bitter, divisive, sexually out of control.

What an embarrassing failure for all who name the name of Christ but reject his plan for life. They crouch in the shadow of the Spirit’s massive power plant, but imagine it’s best to rub two sticks together. It’s fruitless, and it’s an offense to God who provided us a crucified Savior in order to give us the ability to perceive, dream of, desire, and follow the holy path that he lays out for us (Eph 2:10).

Those who focus on the New Covenant live better than those who formulate tons of rules. That doesn’t mean that we “go all limp” and make no decisions; on the contrary, it turns us into active agents, as we ask that our decisions be an expression of God working through us.

The Christian’s New Year’s Resolutions ought to begin and end with confidence in Christ, with the power of the Spirit, with the New Covenant that rewrites us spiritually and, if we want to use the terms, in the realms of the motivational, the psychological, the behavioral, the social.

So, getting back to me: for the past 5 years or so, I have made New Year’s Resolutions. One had to do with my devotional life; another with my less-than-kind-attitude toward a specific group of people. I prayed. But my prayers did not sound like “I’m trying hard, Lord, I promise to do better, give me a push toward accomplishing my goal.” Rather I prayed along these lines, on December 31 and continually from then on:

Lord, you say in your Word that I should walk like _____. Mere self-control or determination will do me no good. But I confess that you are the God of the New Covenant and that you have made me to walk in holiness in this area of _____. Thus I ask that you would continue to rewrite me and change me from the inside out, doing a miracle by your powerful Holy Spirit. I believe that this will result in me living for you in this area of my life, making decisions and taking action as you guide me.

Do New Covenant Resolutions work? *Well – if they didn't, there is no way I would be writing this post!*

NOTES:

[1] The US government actually maintains a list of the most popular resolutions (click HERE <http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/New-Years-Resolutions.shtml>).

[2] See <http://www.nwfdailynews.com/local/the-truth-behind-new-year-s-resolutions-1.71900>

[3] G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 511.

Chapter Eight: “Help! I can’t stop sinning!”



The Bible says that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). That’s why, when we come to Christ, we experience rapid changes in our conduct. People start telling us, “You’ve changed, you’re different.” Different, yes: but we haven’t become perfect, not yet. That is why the Bible tells us that we must keep on fighting against sin, every day, every minute. [1]

Whenever we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we prepare ourselves. The leader tell us to examine our hearts and confess whatever sin that’s there, so that we will not partake “in an unworthy manner” (1 Cor 11:27). So then, right now, think back to the last time you took part in the Supper, and recall what you told the Lord in the privacy of your heart. Some of us said, “Lord forgive me: I have committed some of Sin A, a little of Sin B, a lot of Sin C, none of Sin D, but some of Sin E. Please cleanse me.” Others of us said: “Lord, I’ve committed Sin A, and other things, but more than anything, this Sin A. The other month, Lord, when we celebrated your Supper, I also confessed that I’d fallen into that same sin. The month before too. And so on and so on, as far back as I can remember.” And now that you’re hearing this, you’re thinking, “Yeah, and I’ve fallen into the same sin, like always, just this week.” Your prayers start to sound alike, “Here we are, Lord, the same thing once again.” So, some of us sin “randomly” – a little of this, a little of that, and next time it will be something different. Others of us, maybe even the majority of us, fight against a certain sinful habit or habits.

Now, sin is sin, and every sin is an offense against God. Nevertheless, habitual sin is particularly offensive, since by it we are “serving two masters”: we have a life with God and another life that we’ve constructed with another “lord.” Just as James 1:8 says, some people live in two minds, and “double-minded people are unstable in all their ways.” Here is a common sin today: *internet pornography* is perhaps the greatest addiction, and it affects Christians as well as non-Christians;

to this we may add sexual relations outside of marriage, of whatever type. Nevertheless there are plenty of others: of course, *drugs and alcohol. Gambling. Theft. Anger. Pride. A fantasy life, where one does wrong, but in the mind. The lack of love. Bitterness. Obsession to get more and more money. Gossip. Bad language. Sarcastic attitude. Running with a few friends and making fun of others. Not bothering to help those in need. Chronic fear, that too is a sin. Not sharing Christ with others. Refusing to take responsibility for one's own actions. Judgmentalism.* We could make a larger list, but if there's any chronic sin in your life, you already know what it is.

What we will develop tonight is one specific gospel truth, in order to give you fresh direction and restore hope that God can transform you. That truth has to do with the New Covenant. You remember that Israel lived under the Old Covenant. God gave the Law to Moses, and he told them to obey it. Did Israel obey the Law? They did not. They knew that God had given them the Law, they knew that God would punish them if they didn't obey it, but they kept on doing what they wanted to do. What was their problem? Because we know that "the Law of the Lord is perfect" and "by the commandments is your servant warned, in keeping them there is great reward" (Psalm 19). But, from Genesis to Malachi the people of God did not obey the Lord, because they could not do so, nor did they wish to. But God did not permit the story to end there. He promised a New Covenant, one which did not depend on human effort and strength:

Jer 31:31-33 says – "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

That is, God did not simply tell them the correct way and then say, "Okay, now go and do it." Rather, he said that he would re-create people from the inside out. He would make us transformed people, whether spiritually, psychologically or emotionally. He was going to reprogram us, not to make us robots, but people with the freedom to live in a holy way. Likewise in Ezek 36:25-27 we read:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Here we have a reference to the Holy Spirit. And doesn't Paul say that "your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit"? In the Old Covenant, the glory of God dwelled in the Tabernacle or the Temple. In the New Covenant, we do not have to go to Jerusalem in order to be near the Spirit – he lives within us, and he teaches us to obey God. Do you appreciate what God is saying through Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and in other passages? It means that, as Christians, as people of the New Covenant, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within each of us. Some of us have more of his "filling" than others; nevertheless, if we are the people of God we are by definition people of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

I just looked up some information about what people today do when they have trouble with a bad habit. One method is called "aversion therapy." For example, people who lose control of their temper might go to a laboratory. The scientist says, "Okay then, think about something that makes you angry," and when they do so, the scientist lets lose a disgusting odor or may even give the person a mild electric shock. The idea is that, the angry people would associate anger with something disagreeable and so they would learn to not be so angry. But do you know what they discovered? That it didn't work! It seems that when you give a shock to an angry person, well, he just gets angrier!

I'm disappointed that even Christians lose their grasp on this truth of the Spirit and the New Covenant. So one blogger talks about how a Christian can kick an addiction: "The person who wants to quit smoking ought to throw out his cigarettes and not buy any new ones. He should avoid the company of those who smoke, and avoid places and circumstances that lead to temptation." This is good and practical counsel, but it is the exact advice that some unbelieving counselor might offer. I wonder, then, "But where is the miraculous power of the New Covenant: 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts'? Where is the fact that in Christ we are a different kind of people, that we have the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit to live holy lives? Where is the truth that the Lord has re-written and re-programmed us, even our deepest desires, inclinations and motivations?"

Another Christian writes that we ought to "resist and defeat" sin, but he does not tell us how! Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote in their day that Israel did not stop sinning, nor did it wish to! But there will come a day, they said, when God would give a New Covenant to his people, and that he would put his Spirit in them. Then, they will wish to live in holiness and then they will be able to defeat sin. And it doesn't matter if we're speaking of sin in general or habitual sin or even an addiction. We are a kind of human being that didn't exist on this earth before Christ. But since the Day of Pentecost, 2000 years ago, we and the rest of the people of God have been living under the New Covenant and its power. Jesus did not just die to give us forgiveness, but to transform us. As he said, on the night in which he was betrayed:

Luke 22:20 – And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

Paul repeats the same words, about 25 years after Jesus died for our sin:

1 Cor 11:25 – In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

So that which the prophets predicted, Jesus and later Paul said was now a fact:

2 Cor 3:6 – who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

We can unpack that verse as:

He has empowered us to be servants of a New Covenant, not of the written letter of the Old Covenant but of the Holy Spirit, the New Covenant; because the letter of the kills, but the Spirit gives life under the New Covenant.

And later on in 2 Cor 5:17 – “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” And in Galatians 5, Paul speaks of the “fruit of the Holy Spirit,” attitudes and conduct that we can experience only through a miracle of the Spirit. Not fruit of my efforts or self-discipline, but fruit of the Spirit. Some of us make New Year’s Resolutions; for example, someone will say, “This year I want to lose weight; I will be nicer to my family; be less critical toward others; be wiser with money.” And the joke, every year, is, “Well, I lasted until about Jan 15 and then I broke my resolution and said, ‘Forget it.’”

May I add a personal note? This past year I made a resolution, and I have kept it until today, in July. The January before, in 2011, I made another resolution, which I’m still following. In 2010, the same. And I can assure you, I do not have any more will-power than the average person does; so I’m not bragging about my self-discipline. So, how is it that I have followed up my resolutions, when others have not? Precisely because I do not depend on my will-power, or efforts, or rules which I’ve made to follow, or some program that I’ve joined. I do not pray, “O, God, this time things will be different!” No, I simply asked God, “Will you please teach me to obey you in area X of my life? Will you transform me?” I asked him this once, then again, then many times, again and again. And he answered my prayer – my thinking changed, and based on that, my actions changed.

The Old Covenant, the “letter,” had all the correct rules, but it did not create in people the desire to do them or the power to carry them out. “The letter kills” says Paul: if I just try to follow the rules, or be disciplined, or use more will-power, these are all examples of “the letter.” Not only does it not help, but it even causes me spiritual damage, it “kills.” But “the Holy Spirit gives life.” In the New Covenant he changes us. We can ask the Spirit, *Would you please change my*

mind? My motivations? My conduct? My attitude? Will you reprogram me? When we speak about sin, sometimes we go to Psalm 51, and that is a good option. But I believe that at times we neglect one of its important points. We concentrate on David's confession in vv. 1-3, which says:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

But we neglect what he says in Psalm 51:10 -

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

David did not just ask for forgiveness; he asked that the Lord would transform him. He did not just ask for pardon; he asked for victory over sin. *Change me, Lord.* David, since he was the beloved of God and the anointed king of Israel, received special favor from God. It was a wonderful gift that he could ask for personal transformation. But now, in this age, we Christians, every single one of us, have the same gift as a promise: in Christ, we can ask God to change our mind; that God would make us hate sin; that God would give us holy motivations. I want you to make that connection between your sinful actions and attitudes in the New Covenant. Let us pray the following as we close:

God of eternal grace, Jesus, mediator of the New Covenant, Holy Spirit of unlimited power: I do not make you promises, I do not set my own rules, I say *No* to my own plans and efforts. Instead, I ask you for a renewed heart. Rewrite my will to accord with yours. Redesign my motivations. I pray for new attitudes. I pray for miraculous transformation. I ask that you renew me, today And tomorrow and tomorrow and the tomorrow after that. That all victory might bring glory to you, Father, In the name of Christ Jesus, through your powerful Holy Spirit. Amen.

NOTE:

[1] This essay stresses the basics of the New Covenant, not its deeper implications. I originally gave this talk in Spanish, to a group in Costa Rica. One fact that guided me is that there is little teaching about the New Covenant. Another factor is the prevalent doctrine in some circles that the Christian no longer struggles with sin. One study of attrition within the Costa Rican church showed that ¼ believe that it is possible to live in perfection; and that 21.2% said that the Christian does not fall into temptation or indeed experience temptation. [Data taken from Jorge I. Gomez V., *El crecimiento y la desercion en la iglesia evangelica costarricense* (San Francisco de Dos Rios, CR: IINDEF, 1996), 103]. On top of this, many preachers tell their flocks to simply alter their behavior, as if this could be accomplished by good intentions and a human decision.

Conclusion: Raking and the Kingdom of God

Raking leaves: on the bottom of my list, way below all other yard work. Lower than fixing leaks; cleaning; trash day. I can't think of a task I enjoy less. Made even worse by the fact that I had them all picked up two weeks ago, then it got windy and I had to start again. I become nostalgic for the days you could pile them up and pour on a gallon a gas, toss the match, and feel that WHOOMPH in the chest.

But raking leaves is my *vocation* for today, God's call on my life, and one where I must pray for the Spirit's hand on me to guide the rake, with joy, care and gratitude.

I recognize no gospel which lacks the power to connect me with God's grace even through, for example, raking leaves.



Collect for Thursday in Easter Week

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*