

Keeping in Step with the Spirit (Gal 5:25): Godliness as Evidence of God's Abiding Presence

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Abstract

There is a growing interest in the person and work of the Holy Spirit in African Christianity. However, although most Christians will agree that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church is indispensable, the signs of such presence are disputed. A common assumption or fallacy among some believers is that the display of supernatural spiritual gifts is sufficient and a tangible indicator of the Spirit's presence. While Galatians 5:22–25 and other Pauline texts reveal that godliness is central in the Christian life, it is often trivialized and under-pursued. The premise of this paper is that godliness (e.g., the fruit of the Spirit), is a perceptible indicator of his abiding presence. The purpose of the paper is twofold: the first is to contribute to the ongoing discussion regarding the person and work of the Holy Spirit

in the academic community. The second is to stress the significance of cultivating a godly character worthy of our calling, and so keeping in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:25). The approach of the paper is inductive, theological, and contextual. The aim is to delineate the theological and ethical implications of the fruit of the Spirit in the context of Christian life and ministry.

Conspectus

Keywords

manifestations, godliness, fruit of the Spirit, flesh, abiding presence

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

1. Introduction

Christian thought about the Spirit has been intermittent for a long time (Packer 1988, 319), but there now is much greater interest in the Holy Spirit among scholars (Chung 2009, 5, Burke and Warrington 2014, Ngaruiya and Reed 2022, Kwiyanani 2017). The controversial question, however, lies in how the Spirit's manifestations in the church can be seen. Some believe that liturgy is the *time-tested* means of experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit (Whitaker 2022, 53).¹ Others see prophecies, speaking in tongues, healing miracles, and performing other signs and wonders as indicators that the Holy Spirit is present. This implies, of course, that without the presence of the Holy Spirit, the worship is devoid of God's presence.

Besides corporate worship or liturgy, the Holy Spirit empowers people to witness effectively (Acts 1:8), to speak in tongues (Mark 16:17, Acts 2:1–4), to heal the sick (Acts 3:1–10), to speak the word of God boldly (Acts 4:31), to perform signs and wonders (Acts 5:12–16), and to prophesy (Acts 19:6). Therefore, by emphasizing the fruit of the Spirit this study is not intended to undervalue the other legitimate indicators of his abiding presence. God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power to do good and heal those oppressed by the devil (Luke 4:18, 19; Acts 10:38). Contrary to Ruthven (2011) and Moritz (n.d.), who hold cessationist views, this study argues that the same Spirit who empowered the disciples of Christ to preach and perform signs and wonders is at work today among those who believe. However, we need to watch against one of the major pitfalls in the quest for signs and wonders is *charismania*.

1. Petitions such as "Holy Spirit, please come and be with us," or "Please come and take control" are expressions of deep desire for the active involvement of the Holy Spirit in worship.

That is, "the habit of mind that measures spiritual health, growth, and maturity by the number and impressiveness of people's gifts, and spiritual power by public charismatic manifestation" (Schreiner 2018, 12). Therefore, without undermining other acts of the Spirit, this paper argues for a fundamental and universal manifestation – his "power to effective holiness" (Nyanni 2017, 190; see also Packer 2005, ch. 3). This is an intentional stress on godliness or moral excellence amidst growing avoidance to emphasize on Christian holiness (Agang 2022).

I will not treat background matters such as the authorship, date, provenance, recipients, occasion, and purpose of Galatians. It suffices to mention that Paul is contending with Judaizers who crept into the church with a distorted teaching on justification through good works rather than faith in Christ (Gal 2:16, 3:1).² Paul reiterates that God's gift of righteousness through Christ's obedience is appropriated by faith and not by observing the law. When he adopted us as his sons and daughters, he "sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4:6 HCSB).

In this paper, I shall first give a general overview of the person of the Holy Spirit. This is intended to show the significance of the Holy Spirit in the church. Secondly, I offer a survey of the concept of flesh (σάρξ)³ in the canon and Second Temple Jewish Literature (STJL). This provides the framework for comprehending Pauline thought with regard to flesh (σάρξ) versus Spirit (πνεῦμα) in the text under study. In the third section I examine the view of godliness as mark of the Spirit's presence. This is

2. On Galatia and background matters, see Scott (2000, 389–391), Keener (1993, 517–519), and deSilva (2004, 493, 499).

3. Σάρξ is the term used in Greek, but some Hebrew words that are used in the OT and STJL are also touched on.

intended to emphasize the fruit of the Spirit for life and ministry. In the last section, I call for keeping in step with the Spirit. This is a call for intentionality—to pursue godliness to the same degree that the gifts of the Spirit are sought.

2. A General Overview of the Person of the Holy Spirit

This is an overview and not an exhaustive treatment of the person of the Holy Spirit. The aim is to underscore, in a general mode, the vital roles played by the Holy Spirit before examining the fruit he produces in the life of a believer.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, co-existing eternally and equal with God the Father and the Son. There are important references to the Holy Spirit (sometimes as the Spirit of God) in the Old Testament (Gen 1:1–2, Num 24:2, 1 Sam 11:6, 2 Chr 15:1–2, Isa 63:10–14, Ps 51:11). However, the fuller understanding of the person of the Holy Spirit is expressed in the New Testament. Considering John 15:26 and 16:13–15, Lane (2013, 145) speaks about the “anonymity of the Holy Spirit” to mean that he is “self-effacing—his function is to point to Jesus, not himself.” The work of the Holy Spirit is Christ-centered (Thiselton 2013, 70; see 1 Cor 12:3, Gal 4:6, John 16:13–14). Christ promised to build his church (Matt 16:18), and he does this through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit.

The work of the Holy Spirit is crucial in the work of redemption from regeneration, namely “the planting of the new life” (Lloyd-Jones 1997, 263), to sanctification. Several functions are ascribed to the Holy Spirit. These include regeneration or causing the new birth (John 3:3–8, Titus 3:5–7), empowering believers for witnessing (Acts 1:6–8), teaching

believers (John 14:26, 1 John 2:26–27), sealing believers (Eph 4:30) and acting as deposit of their final salvation (Eph 1:13–14), filling believers (Acts 2:1–4, 4:8; Eph 5:18), dwelling in believers (1 Cor 6:19), sanctifying believers (Rom 1:16), and encouraging believers (Acts 9:31). He also sets people apart for ministry (Acts 13:1–4), directs them to the right field of ministry (Acts 16:1–9), enables believers to guard the truths received (2 Tim 1:14), distributes spiritual gifts (Acts 19:6–7, 1 Cor 12:1–30, Rom 12:6–8, Eph 4:11–16, 1 Pet 4:10–11), leads the children of God (Rom 8:13–14, Gal 5:18), testifies that we are children of God (Rom 8:16), helps believers pray in accordance with the will of God (Rom 8:26, 27), and speaks to the conscience of the believer (Rom 9:1–2). Christians can overflow with hope in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:13).

The above shows that Christ builds his church through the Holy Spirit (Matt 16:18, John 14:15–17). Next, I will inspect the concept of flesh (σάρξ) in the canon and STJL to shed light on Paul’s idea of flesh and Spirit.

3. A Biblical Overview of Flesh (Σάρξ) in the Canon and STJL

This overview is not intended to be exhaustive, but this basic background may shed some light on Paul’s use of the σάρξ in Galatians 5. The approach here is inductive, exploring data from both the canon and STJL, interwoven with secondary sources, with the goal of comprehending the concept of the flesh with reference to our subject.

In the Old Testament, the principal terms for *flesh* are בָּשָׂר and אֶשֶׁת. In the Septuagint (LXX), these are rendered with σάρξ. The term could mean physical human skin (Ps 102:5), flesh (Gen 2:21–24; 40:19; 2 Kings 5:10, 14; 9:36; Job 10:11; Ps 27:2), or body (Ps 38:3; Eccl 12:12).

Schweizer (1971, 105–106) refers to this as “flesh in the strict sense.” But *σάρξ* “in an extended sense” (106) could represent the flesh and body of both human beings (Gen 2:23; 6:12, 13; Lev 19:28; 26:29) and animals (Lev 4:11; 6:27; 17:11; Ezek 33:25). But at other times, the term *בָּשָׂר* refers only to animals (Gen 9:4, 1 Kgs 19:21) or flesh in this sense is meat that could be consumed as food (Isa 65:4, 66:17). At other times, *בָּשָׂר* refers to every living thing or living creature, human beings inclusive (Gen 6:17, 19, 8:17, 9:11, 16; Num 18:15; Ps 136:25). But *בָּשָׂר* could also mean human foreskin that could be circumcised (Gen 17:11, 13, 14, 23–25). The term also refers to blood relationship (Gen 2:23, 29:14, 37:27; Lev 18:13, 17, 25:49; Judg 9:2; 2 Sam 5:1, 19:12, 13; 1 Chr 11:1). Flesh could mean all human beings or human race (Ezek 20:48). God is the God of all flesh (Jer 32:17). All flesh worship God (Isa 66:23) or be judged by him (Jer 25:31, 45:5; Ezek 21:4–5). Flesh could also refer to human mortality (Gen 6:3, Jer 17:5). Similar to mortality, the term connotes human frailty or impotence (Jer 17:5) and mortality (Gen 6:3; Ps 56:4) as the opposite of God who is eternal, and omnipotent (Dan 2:11, Job 10:4, 2 Chron 32:8). Schweizer (1971, 107) designates this as the “transferred sense” of the word, which could also refer to “man’s external life” and “the whole inner attitude.” The flesh is characterized by weaknesses and iniquities, rebelling against God (Ps 78:38–40). In the metaphorical use of the term, a “heart of flesh” (as opposed to a heart of stone) is “a living heart,” i.e., open to God’s will (Ezek 11:19, 36:26) (107). Eschatologically, God pours out his Spirit on all flesh in the last days (Joel 2:28). This means that the Spirit of God is made available to all humans.

From the Old Testament, I now turn to the concept of the flesh in STJL.⁴ Apart from the general usage of the term as the physical body and what constitutes humankind found also in the Old Testament, in this literature, the term is used in relation to human creatureliness, corruptibility, and mortality (Schweizer 1971, 110–123). But it also connotes humankind’s sinfulness such that the “flesh is obviously arrogant humanity” (112). This is “fallen humanity or a cosmic evil sphere” (Erickson 1993: 305). Noteworthy is the contrast between the flesh and the spirit in Qumran (1QS 3:13–4:24), designating the flesh as “the field of battle between Holy Spirit and the spirit of iniquity” (Schweizer 1971, 114). It is a conflict between light and darkness. Because the flesh is the “spirit of iniquity,” it is not difficult to see it manifesting carnal inclinations and desires rather than the pursuit of spiritual things. The flesh is inclined to evil desires. Thus, flesh versus spirit in the Dead Sea Scrolls implies humanity’s moral weakness and susceptibility to sin (Keener 1993, 534).

In light of the above, I now turn to the use of *σάρξ* in the rest of the New Testament before looking at Paul. In Matthew 16:17, Jesus speaks about flesh and blood. This is with regard to human limitations and not just the visible human flesh. Included in flesh and blood are human intellectual, religious, and mystical capabilities. This is in contrast to God who is spirit and is not subject to such limitations (Schweizer 1971, 124). In Luke 24:39, flesh “denotes the substance of earthly man” (Schweizer 1971, 124). In 1 Corinthians 6:16, Paul employs synecdoche when using *σάρξ* to mean the human body (Erickson 1993, 303). John 1:13

4. These include the Dead Sea Scrolls, Targums, Talmud and Midrash, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Philo and Josephus.

distinguishes the natural birth from that which is of God. Jesus becoming flesh refers to his humanity (1 John 4:2, 2 John 7). This includes his earthly existence in which Jesus took on flesh and blood (Heb 2:14, 5:7; see also Phil 2:5–11). John 3:16 is John’s dualism in which he contrasts that which belongs to the earthly sphere as against that which is from above (see also John 7:27, 8:15). But Jesus’s humanity does not include corruptibility as Acts 2:31 shows that Jesus’s flesh (σάρξ) did not see corruption. It is also noteworthy that σάρξ can refer to humanity’s sinful nature, in the sense of “the desires of the flesh” (1 John 2:16 NRSV) or “human way of thinking” (Col 2:18 NRSV).

The use of σάρξ in Paul is complex (Erickson 1993, 303–304). Sometimes Paul uses the term as a designation for physical matter that constitutes the living bodies of humans and animals (1 Corinthians 15:39). However, σάρξ could also mean human body (σῶμα) (1 Cor 6:16) or human person or human race (Gal 2:16, 1 Cor 1:29, Rom 3:20). This sense is in the “morally neutral sphere” as against the “morally negative” or “humanity’s value systems as they stand in apposition to God’s” (304) as in Philippians 3:3–4 and Galatians 6:12. Paul’s theology of the flesh as opposed to the Spirit is believed to have been derived from Judaism (Schweizer 1971, 126). The contrast between flesh (σάρξ) and spirit (πνεῦμα) is the result of the rebellious and sinful fallen nature working against the Spirit (Gal 3:3, Rom 7:5, 1 Cor 5:5) (Erickson 1993, 304). The believer’s flesh is opposed to what the Spirit desires. Therefore, the believer must be controlled by the Spirit rather than the flesh. The deeds of the sinful flesh are to be put to death (Rom 8:12–17, Col 3:5–9). According to Keener (2018, 251), some Greek philosophers vilified or “relativized the flesh or the body because of its mere materiality or sometimes its association with passion rather than reason.” Like Erickson above, Keener (2018, 251) says, “Paul’s specific verbal contrast between

‘flesh’ and ‘Spirit’ (Rom 8:4–6, 9, 13; Gal 3:3; 4:29; 5:16–17; 6:8; Phil 3:3) appears in Gen 6:3, contrasting mortals as ‘flesh with God’s Spirit.’” Keener (2018, 251) also assumes that this background may be the basis of Ezekiel 11:19 and 36:26 in which God puts a new Spirit and a new heart in his people because humans “cannot be what God created us to be without his Spirit.” From both biblical and non-biblical data, we may conclude that Paul’s juxtaposition of the flesh and the Spirit could be traced to both the Old Testament and Judaism.

With the above as background, I now explore the text of the study. Galatians 5:16–25 is in the context of the believer’s freedom (5:1, 13) as opposed to legalistic righteousness. Earlier in the letter, Paul appears astounded that the Galatians started their journey by the Spirit but were now trying to perfect it by the flesh (3:3, 5). Underscoring the concept of freedom in Christ, Paul said, “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love” (5:13 NIV). The antidote for indulging the flesh is walking in the Spirit “and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16 NIV). It appears here that the Galatians had probably misconstrued Paul’s concepts of freedom from the law and justification by faith. They were probably interpreting and using freedom as synonymous with libertinism. However, Paul is speaking about freedom from the requirements of the law and the control of sin in order to keep the fundamental commandment to love (Marshall 2004, 219). The right use of freedom is serving one another in love.

And what does it mean to indulge the sinful flesh? Commenting on Galatians 5:16–26, Ngewa (2010, 143) began by distinguishing between external and internal diseases. According to him, a rash on the skin “may signal nothing more than a reaction to some component in a skin cream or detergent. It could also be a signal that your whole body has been

infected by measles, chicken pox or some serious disease.” Gathercole (2018, 143) sees the power of sin and the forces of flesh and death as dominant features in Pauline epistles, indicating a human predicament. According to Paul, the basic problem of the flesh is that it desires what is contrary to the Spirit. Like a vulture or a pig, the flesh craves rotten and dirty things and places. But the new nature longs for holy and clean things. The flesh and the Spirit are, in the words of Dunn (2014, 184) “antithetical opposites.” Paul alluded to the antithesis of Spirit and flesh in Galatians 3:3. A similar contrast is found in Romans 8:5–8. In Galatians 5:19–21, Paul enumerates the acts of the flesh. They have been categorized as sexual sins (sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery), religious sins (idolatry and witchcraft), sins affecting relationships (hatred; discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy), and sins of excess (drunkenness and orgies) (Ngewa 2010, 144–148; see also Fee 1994, 441). These acts destroy individuals, families, communities, societies, and nations. This is what is meant by “the mind governed by the flesh is death” (Rom 8:6 NIV).

Concerning these fleshly vices, Paul issues a stern warning “I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21 NIV). This warning shows that being dominated by the acts of the flesh—making it a way of life—goes beyond muting the Spirit. These show that the person is not connected to God. Next follows a discussion of manifesting the fruit of the Spirit as evidence of God’s abiding presence in the church.

4. A Theological View of Godliness as Evidence of God’s Abiding Presence

As noted previously, priority is often placed on the gifts of the Spirit as the gauge for a healthy and growing church. McCown (1978, 24), who

provides a comprehensive treatment of the concept of the fruit of the Spirit in both the Old and the New Testaments, observed that much attention has been paid to the gifts of the Spirit but relatively little has been written about the fruit of the Spirit. He argues that a Spirit-filled life is a fruit-filled life. He says even some charismatic leaders believe that “The proofs of being filled with the Holy Spirit are far more convincing in the area of His fruit than of His gifts” (22). His submission is that “Spiritual fruit is indisputable evidence of the Spirit’s presence—or His absence.” Keener (2001, 69) testifies that he has “seen miraculous healings and other extraordinary signs of God’s kindness.” But, according to Keener (2001, 69), the greatest miracle he witnessed was “meeting a Christian from a very different background whose heart reveals the same character that God has put in me.” Keener (2001, 69) continues that a common denominator recognized in each of these people, with different personalities and gifts and who come from different cultures and church backgrounds, is “the same image of our Father.” This “image of our Father” is made possible by the impartation of the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22–23, Paul utilizes the metaphor fruit of the Spirit to depict the kind of life produced by the Spirit and to appeal to the Galatian Christians to pursue the same. McCown (1978, 26) says, “The use of the singular for ‘fruit’ serves to present all the graces of character in the ensuing list as a unity.” Constituted in this fruit are nine virtues. Some scholars see Paul applying a rhetorical technique that “appeals to ethos” or moral character (deSilva 2004, 508) which might be regarded as “Paul’s authoritative rhetoric” (Thompson 2020, 44). By this appeal, Paul underlines Christian social norms and values which are opposed to the ungodly deeds exhibited by the Gentile unbelieving world (see Eph 4:17). The virtues enumerated are by no means the only ones that constitute the fruit of the Spirit (Dockery 1993, 316). McCown (1978, 26) well observed that the catalog

“does not pretend to be comprehensive.” Instead, Paul intentionally “leaves it open-ended by use of the phrase, ‘such as these’ (Gal. 5:23; cf. v. 21).” The nine listed represent the select spiritual fruit of the Christian life. Harvey (2008, 181–182) correctly observes that references to the fruit of the Spirit are found in both Testaments in connection with the presence of the Spirit in a person’s life (Isa 11:1–2, 42:1–4; Eph 5:9; 2 Pet 1:5–7; John 14:17, 15:1–11; 1 John 4:13). These texts show that included in the fruit of the Spirit are wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord (Isa 11:1–12), justice (Isa 42:1–4), faith, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, brotherly affection, godliness (2 Pet 1:5–7), and truth (John 14:17). Supporting this view, Paul refers to “fruit of light [which] is found in all that is good and right and true” (Eph 5:9 NRSV). He urges Timothy to set an example “in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12 HCSB). Similarly, he admonishes Timothy to “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness” (1 Tim 6:11 ESV). The overlapping nature of these virtues is indicative that Paul hardly intended an exhaustive list in Galatians. The point is that godliness is engendered by the Spirit of God who indwells the believer. This makes the fruit of the Spirit a priority in the life of the believer. As Johnson (1999, 337) says, “The Spirit is both the power and the norm for life before God (5:25).” Other passages also utilize the fruit metaphor (Rom 1:13, 6:21–22, 7:4; Col 1:6, 10). The opposite is fruit unto death (Rom 7:5, Col 3:5–9) (Dockery 1993, 316–317).

To accept that the Spirit empowers believers with spiritual gifts and enables the life of godliness—the norm for life before God—suggests that we cannot jettison the mighty works of the Holy Spirit such as prophecies, speaking in tongues, healing, and other signs and wonders because of some unfortunate abuses. That would be to proverbially throw away the baby with the bathwater. But without a corresponding life of

godliness, the credibility of the church is at stake. The character flaws exhibited by some prominent ministers of the gospel and the prevalence of impostors who merchandise the works of the Spirit combine to eclipse the gains of charismatic gifts. The result is a growing distrust of tongues, stage healings, signs and wonders, and prophecies. A few years ago, a rather disturbing documentary by the United Nations appeared, painting the scenario of religion in Africa. The focus was on Nigeria. The picture was that of churches, mosques, and other worship centers scattered throughout. The general public is zealous, even fanatical, about religion, but corruption and other social vices are growing at an alarming rate despite the rigorous religiosity. The United Nations’s verdict is that in terms of business, religion is rivaled only by oil in Nigeria (Sarma 2014, 82–83).

Recently, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) ran a series of investigations on former members of the late Prophet T. B. Joshua, the pastor of The Synagogue Church of All Nations. T. B. Joshua became a world-famous televangelist, prophet, and healer. While alive, he dazzled his admirers with his stage-healing performances and prophecies. But he vexed his opponents who scorned and berated him for allegedly using demonic powers to work miracles and wonders. According to the BBC investigation three years after his death, Joshua allegedly raped, tortured, and abused several of his followers over a period of two decades (Wariboko 2024). According to this report, there were allegations of child abuse at his Lagos compound and that he faked his miracles. Another recent BBC report (Oladipo 2011) also reported that religion is big business in Nigeria. This indictment is corroborated by another research finding regarding the proliferation of churches and moral decadence in Nigeria (Omonijo et al. 2016).

The usual attraction to some of these churches is their fabulous names and advertisements on billboards and flyers. While the pastors are said to perform signs and wonders and prophesy, their personal lives are allegedly characterized by sexual scandals, financial misconduct, greed, and physical abuse of family and church members. Some of them divorce their spouses and remarry, claiming to do so under new revelations and visions. There are several examples.

Prophet Ritabbi founded the church God of Now Now (a.k.a. Christ as of Old Ministry of All Nations) in Jos, Nigeria. The prophet received the mandate “to empty the Kingdom of Darkness and increase the Kingdom of Light” (Christ as of Old Ministries n.d.) People are attracted to this church for healing, prophetic utterances, deliverance from generational curses, blessings of the womb, and financial breakthroughs, among other things. But there are also allegations of ungodly practices by Prophet Ritabbi, including sexual scandals.⁵

Similarly, Nkambule (2014) tells of the concern of the Reverend Elijah Maswanganyi who blasts pastors for emphasizing miracles rather than turning people to God. Such pastors misuse church funds as well as their spiritual gifts to heal people. They ask for payment for their healing, contrary to the Scriptures. Worse still, “Maswanganyi is concerned that preachers lay hands in prayer on sensitive parts of female bodies—below the belly—a part of the body that could only be touched by their husbands.” Similarly, Eyoboka (2013) reports that Samuel Olutoye blasts Pentecostal pastors for the spiritual downturn of the church. The evangelist laments the sexual scandals among the clergy and the so-called “Ministerial secrecy” in which “today’s church is witnessing

5. Prophet Ritabbi addressed an allegation by another Prophet who claims Prophet Ritabbi paid a settlement to a woman who claimed he slept with her in the church (godofnownow.tv 2023).

power without purity, arguing that several herbalists and magicians have all taken up Bibles and are now preachers and workers of miracles.” Accordingly, “Olutoye’s passion is for the enthronement of righteousness, holiness, purity, sanctification, and salvation over what he described as ministerial secrecy including immorality, transgressions, and anything that has the trappings of worldliness.” Such is the passion of all who have a genuine calling of God on their lives, both as Christians and ministers of the gospel.

Another example of ungodliness is the misappropriation of ecclesiastical or spiritual authority. According to Orogun and Pillay (2022, 2), this teaching arrogates undue authority to African Neo-Pentecostal Leaders under slogans like “spiritual covering, spiritual father, spiritual mother, and spiritual parents.” This tilts toward authoritarianism and the abuse of the rights of others. Thus, hiding behind spiritual authority, power-mongers seek to rule and dominate others for their selfish gains. To cling to spiritual authority at the expense of godliness is unbiblical.

Likewise, Omokayode (2023) reports the abuse of spiritual gifts by Pentecostal youth. Focusing on Nigeria, Omokayode (2023, 212) says, “Today it seems that spiritual gifts have been subsumed among the youth under the carpet of commercialization, intimidation, self-aggrandizement, falsehood, and extortion.” In the same manner, The Apostolic Church in Nigeria warned against the abuse of spiritual gifts and unscriptural practices whereby spiritual gifts are used as masks to cover up greed and other forms of ungodliness (Idemokon 2021).

Other ungodly practices of some pastors, widely reported by the media, include staged kidnapping of themselves and asking their church members to pay ransom (Ebiwei 2023) or raping members for money rituals (Famuyiwa 2019). One of the pastors, from an evangelical church,

who kidnapped himself twice in Jos city and asked members for ransom tried to cover his crime by burning church properties including cars. He wanted the church to believe that kidnappers who invaded the church and kidnapped him were responsible for the burning of properties. But he was apprehended and confessed his crimes (Adinoyi 2023).

These money mongers have abandoned godliness and are prepared to do anything to be rich, confirming the words of Paul in 1 Timothy 6:9–10. They forget that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim 6:6). And just as Jeremiah lamented the ungodliness of the prophets and priests of his day, ungodly pastors seem to strengthen the hands of evil-doers in the church (Jer 23:9–14). But looking at the life of Paul, one thing that can hardly be missed is the priority he placed on godliness for himself and his hearers. He told the Corinthians to follow his example as he followed the example of Christ (1 Cor 11:1). He stated how holy, righteous, and blameless he and his colleagues were among the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess 2:10). He spoke about his way of life which agreed with what he taught everywhere in every church (1 Cor 4:17). His way of life, purpose, faith, love, endurance were all known to his spiritual son Timothy (2 Tim 3:10).

The point is that what validates our confession of faith is the pattern of life that conforms to the will of God rather than signs and wonders. Turner (2008, 147), remarking on Matthew 7:22–23, states that the performance of miraculous powers “is commonly associated with divine approval, but on the last day some miracle workers will learn that Jesus does not acknowledge them as his people.” Jesus places priority on doing the will of God rather than the performance of inauthentic works in his name. This implies that true knowledge of Christ backed by godliness underpins and highlights the validity of spiritual gifts and not vice versa. Therefore, in light of the abuses by masqueraders and growing

nominalism in the church, it would be unwise to measure the presence of the Holy Spirit by signs and wonders alone. These mighty works need to be backed up by corresponding godliness, a lifestyle activated and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

For example, the Corinthian church was “enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge” (1 Cor 1:5 NIV; see also 2 Cor 8:7). But the same church was characterized by fleshly acts like dissensions, sexual immorality, and lawsuits. Paul could not address them “as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—merely infants in Christ” (1 Cor 3:1 NIV). Although they spoke in tongues, Paul described them as infants. With factions and sexual immorality, the church in Corinth was exhibiting the acts of the flesh in Galatians 5:19–21. Similarly, as noted above, Jesus’s response to some who claim a place in the kingdom of heaven based on their merits means that both verbal confession of the name of the Lord and performance of miracles could be inauthentic. But as Johnson (1999, 333) says, the Holy Spirit “replicates in individual human lives the pattern of life for others that is found in Jesus.” Similarly, the Holy Spirit applies the saving work of Christ for salvation and also causes us to grow in the likeness of Christ (Keener 2001, 74). A true servant of the Lord rejects worldliness and imitates the character of God (McCown 1978, 29, 31).

Therefore, our emphasis is “the pattern of life” found in Jesus and replicated by his followers (Johnson 1999, 333). According to Paul, no one confesses that Christ is Lord (1 Cor 12:30) or calls God “Abba Father” (Gal 4:6, Rom 8:15–16) apart from the Spirit. These two elements—confession and pattern of life—are “proof that the Spirit of God is also present” (Achteimeier, Green, and Thompson 2001, 370). The validity of confession is revealed by the fruit of the Spirit as enumerated in Galatians 5:22–23. This fruit of the Spirit contrasts with works of the flesh (5:19). The

nature of the tree determines the kind of fruit that is produced (Keener 1993, 535). Therefore, the fruit of the Spirit is a natural outcome for those who have been crucified with Christ (Gal 2:20). They “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24 NIV). The Spirit of God is the life-giving principle that “creates” (Marshall 2004, 233) the fruit of the Spirit in the life of a believer. As Harvey (2008, 182) puts it, “Central to *our remaining* in Jesus, therefore, is the Holy Spirit’s *remaining* in us, and central to our fruit-bearing process is our willingness to depend on Spirit to produce the fruit — ‘for apart from Me you can do nothing’” (emphasis original). The fruit of the Spirit is the “natural product of the Spirit, made possible by the living relationship between the Christian and God through Christ” (Boice 1994, 741). It contrasts with acts of the flesh which are ungodly human cravings. The godly character qualities “are not self-achieved; they are the consequences of trust in Christ and reliance on his Spirit” (Dunn 2014, 185). The Spirit gives moral ability to reflect the character of God which the flesh has no power to produce.

Paul concludes that there is no law against living morally blameless, meaning that the life led by the Holy Spirit transcends legalistic righteousness. This righteousness “surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law” (Matt 5:20). Similarly, because love fulfills the law (5:14), the fruit of the Spirit (5:22–23) surpasses legal requirements (Schreiner 2010, 430, Longenecker 1990, 255). Where these virtues exist, the law “ceases to have anything to control” (Oakes 2015, 232). But how, then, can the fruit of the Spirit become visible in the life of a believer? This leads us to a call for keeping in step with the Spirit.

5. A Call for Keeping in Step with the Spirit

The crux of this discussion is Paul’s strong appeal: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25, ESV). Keener (2018,

248) refers to this as “Following the Spirit’s steps.” But does not the indwelling of the Spirit suggest that the godly virtues enumerated will naturally manifest in the life of the believer? According to Galatians 5:16–18, the flesh and the Spirit compete for dominance. Therefore, passivity on the part of the believer is unwarranted and hazardous. Just as the spiritual gifts in the life of the believer require fanning into flames (2 Tim 1:6), the fruit of the Spirit needs activation so that it will not lie dormant. This requires intentionality in the pursuit of godliness. In 1 Timothy 6:11, Paul uses the word *pursue* with regard to the virtues that a man of God should possess. Deliberate effort is required to attend and sustain godliness. For example, while Jesus tells his followers that they are the light of the world, their role is to place their light in the appropriate place for visibility (Matt 5:15–16). Therefore, Paul’s desire for the Galatians to *live by* the Spirit is an appeal for cooperation with the Spirit. It is a call for maturity in Christ (Eph 4:11–16), having put on the new self, “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24 NIV).

But what exactly does Paul mean by the exhortation to keep in step with the Spirit in Galatians 5:25? Can a believer live by the Spirit and not keep in step with him? Does not living in the Spirit suggest that one is automatically keeping in step with the Spirit? The text begins with the conditional clause “If we live by the Spirit.” The conditional clause created by the conjunction “if” (εἰ) plus “we live” (ζῶμεν) in the indicative mood, here has the meaning “if so, then...” rather than a conditional clause that expresses uncertainty regarding the Spirit’s presence. The presence of the Spirit is not in doubt but is proved by keeping in step with him, as indicated by the hortatory subjunctive *στοιχῶμεν* (let us walk), which can be rendered as “let us also keep in step with the Spirit” (ESV) or “let us be guided by the Spirit” (NRSV Gal 5:25). This forms an inclusio with Paul’s earlier appeals to “walk by the Spirit” (πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε)

in 5:16. Accordingly, “one who is ‘led by the Spirit’ inevitably produces the fruit of the Spirit” (Keener 2018, 256). Moo (2013, 393) says that *στοιχέω* in Galatians 5:25 initially had the sense of to “be drawn up in line” and sometimes used in military contexts to mean “stay in line with.” Eventually, the term took on metaphorical nuance, meaning to “fall into line with.” The implication of this is constant abiding and listening to discern his promptings.

This is analogous to Jesus’s instructions to the disciples to abide in him and his word in them so that they would bear fruit (John 15:5). Therefore, Paul is urging Galatian believers to fall in line with the Spirit’s desires, namely, the life of godliness manifested by the fruit of the Spirit. In this appeal, Paul urges the believer to be intentional in walking by the Spirit. Like walking with a guide in unknown terrain, keeping in step with the Spirit is cultivated by ensuring that one does not lag behind the Spirit or race ahead of Him. This means that although the Spirit and the fruit are resident in the believer, it takes deliberate effort to put into practice what is already on the inside. This seems to be consistent with Pauline thought regarding faith and practice (e.g., Eph 4:3, Phil 2:12–15). The juxtaposition of the acts of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit portrays the reality that muting one is unmuting the other. Paul asks the believers to mute the flesh. Elsewhere, he uses the phrase “put to death” (Col 3:5 NIV) to signify the effort of the believer to mortify the sinful flesh. Like spiritual gifts, there is the tendency for negligence on the part of the recipient, hence the reminder for deliberate action (see also 1 Tim 1:6, 4:14–16).

But how can we mute the flesh to keep in step with the Spirit? On keeping in step with the Spirit so that the flesh does not gain dominance in the life of a believer, Harvey (2008, 184–185) gave an analogy of the sailboat and the Christian. According to him, sailboats are made to

harness the power of the wind for them to function. The sail must be raised for the boat to move. But when the sail is raised, the captain must ensure that their hand is steady on the rudder for the boat to move in the right direction. Harvey likens Jesus to the boat and God as the captain or steersman. Believers are the crew members while the Holy Spirit plays the role of the wind. We are in the boat as followers of Jesus, ready to travel. God who is the steersman “holds the course steady in line with the navigational plan that he has set out in Scripture” (184–185). Our work as crew is to maintain the sail so that it can do its job. But the question is how the individual Christian may raise the sail to catch the wind of the Spirit. Harvey admits there are no specific how-to lists. To raise one’s sail, Harvey (2008, 185–189) suggests seven important things to do. First, one must be wholly devoted to God at heart. Second, one must determine never to compromise one’s walk with the Lord. Third, one must be sensitive and repent of sin. Fourth, one must be faithful in little things. Fifth, one must not seek personal glory but must remember to give God the glory in everything. Sixth, one must devote oneself to prayer. Seventh, one must keep one’s eye on Jesus.

As a call to keep in step with the Spirit in line with Galatians 5:22–23, we may not analyze all the fruit of the Spirit⁶ to illustrate the significance of godliness. But it might be helpful to look at one of them to demonstrate how vital it is to put into practice their ethical principles and values for the transformation of individuals, churches, communities, and nations. The first fruit love (*ἀγάπη*) is worthy of a closer look. Exemplified by God’s offer of salvation in Christ (John 3:16; see also 1 John 4:9–12), biblical *ἀγάπη* seeks the best for the other person in attitude, actions, and

6. Indeed, it has been established that the list of virtues in Galatians 5:22–23 is not exhaustive either, but are only representative.

words. Jesus is unequivocal that the greatest commandment in the law is to love (Matt 22:38, Mark 12:29–31; see also Deut 6:5; 11:1, 13). This is a “double love commandment” (Nolland 2005, 909), namely, to love God and neighbor, even for a neighbor who is undeserving of love (Matt 5:43–48). Similarly, ἀγάπη is not only the greatest commandment but also the virtue by which the world identifies his disciples (John 13:34–35). The apostle John continues with this theme of love as a crucial virtue in the life of Jesus’s followers in his epistles (1 John 3:11–18, 4:16–21; 2 John 5–6; 3 John 6).

Obviously, Pauline thought on the priority of love is derived from Jesus’s teaching on the subject. From Romans 13:8–10, love is said to be the fulfillment of the law (Gal 5:13–14). The priority of love over spiritual gifts is seen in his words on the virtue of love in 1 Corinthians 13:1–13. Love, according to Paul, takes precedence over tongues, prophecies, knowledge, faith, and charity. Faith that can move mountains is the faith that performs great signs and wonders. But according to Paul, all of the above is insignificant in the absence of love. Echoing the words of Paul, Schreiner (2018, 71) says, “Gifts are worthless without love.”

Summing it up, the pursuit of godliness is primary in the life of a believer (1 Tim 6:11). In a world dominated by the appetites and deeds of the flesh, Paul points out that godliness is the Christian way to live. The virtues that portray godliness are attained only by keeping in step with the Spirit, namely, letting the Spirit take the lead and not muting him by a lifestyle that grieves him (Eph 4:30, 5:18; Rom 8:14; 1 Thess 5:19). This is a life of submission and obedience to the will of God manifested in character qualities that mirror the image of God in us. Godliness, therefore, is the natural outflow of keeping in step with the Spirit.

6. Conclusion

The thesis of this paper is that godliness is the most visible and universal evidence of the Spirit’s presence. To establish this premise, I examined the major roles that the Holy Spirit has in the life of believers. Apart from causing the new birth, he sanctifies them and gives them spiritual gifts, among other things. But because Paul contrasts the acts of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit, it was necessary to survey the concept of the flesh in both the canon and STJL. The study revealed that Paul leaned on both the Old Testament and Judaism for his treatment of the conception of the flesh as opposed to the Spirit. But his dependence on Judaism seems more prominent, especially in viewing the two domains (flesh and Spirit) as antagonistic to each other.

The study also revealed that in the quest for the gifts of the Spirit, godliness is often undervalued and under-pursued. But I have underscored the point that God is not only interested in outward demonstration of spiritual powers by his children. Instead, authentic manifestations of the Spirit’s gifts ought to be the outflow of the fruit of the Spirit because God designed the church to be the community of character that influences the world around her. Therefore, the dichotomy between godliness and the manifestation of spiritual gifts is unwarranted. Godliness deserves serious attention so that believers’ unique witness as salt and light of the world (Matt 5:13–16) and “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation” (Phil 2:15 NIV) may not be jeopardized. Similarly, the health and growth of the church must not be measured by signs and wonders alone but by the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit.

But because the flesh is essentially evil and is always seeking dominance, Paul’s exhortation to the Galatians to keep in step with the Spirit remains relevant at all times. Believers in Christ are to be

continually activated and sustained by the fruit of the Spirit as the antidote for the control of the flesh. Considering the undue emphasis on spiritual gifts at the expense of godliness, this paper is a call for church leaders in Africa to emphasize godliness produced by the fruit of the Spirit. Abandoning godliness is a huge threat to the testimony and growth of the church in Africa and beyond. Salvaging the image of the church and restoring her testimony in the eyes of the world is urgent and the primary responsibility of every genuine Christian. But the burden is heavier on the clergy who ought to serve as examples to the flock of Christ. The task at hand is for Christians to always be on the watch because of the constant war between the flesh and the Spirit, and to prioritize the pursuit of godliness produced by the Spirit.

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