

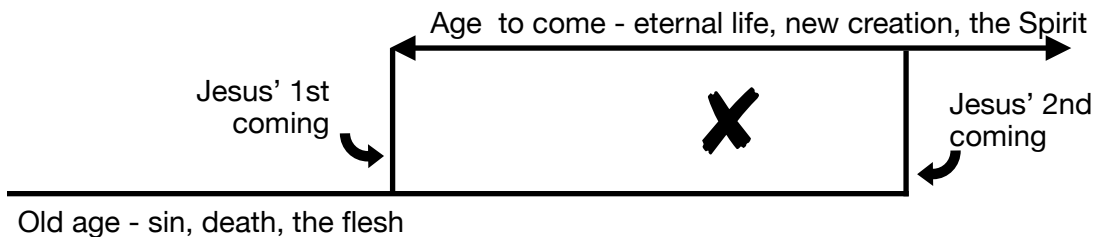
WHAT IS THE MEANING OF FLESH AND SPIRIT?

John Whittaker

To fully appreciate what Paul is teaching in Galatians 5:16-25 (as well as in places like Romans 8:1-14) we must bear in mind the end-times perspective that shapes so much of New Testament theology. This perspective is often referred to as “realized eschatology” or the “already and not yet” of God’s saving plan.

What this means is that with the death and resurrection of Jesus along with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the life of the future has already begun. God’s new creation has already been initiated . . . but it not yet completed. So, for example, we are redeemed (Eph. 1:7) but we’re waiting for the day of redemption (Eph 4:30). Or we have died to sin (Rom. 6:1-4) but we have to make sure we don’t let sin reign in our lives (Rom. 6:12-13).

This is frequently pictured as an overlap of the ages. The age to come has already broken into the here and now through the work of Jesus and the Spirit but the old age still remains until Christ returns.



Thus we live during the overlap of the ages where two modes of living co-exist side-by-side on planet earth: the flesh (the merely human mode of living, governed by human wisdom, values, and resources in all its fallen-ness and frailty) and the Spirit (the divinely empowered mode of living, governed by God’s wisdom, values, and resources in all its power). These are NOT two natures within you and me. They are two ways of living that govern people’s lives and human cultures. Those in Christ are governed by the Spirit and live according to his manner of life. Those outside of Christ (and the cultures they form) are of the flesh.

As Gordon Fee describes it in his massive work on the Holy Spirit in Paul’s writings:

“To live *sarki* [in the flesh] is to live according to the values and desires of life in the present aeon [age] that stands in absolute contradiction to God and his ways. Hence the ultimate contrasts in Paul are eschatological: life ‘according to the flesh,’ lived according to the present age that has been condemned through the cross and is passing away; or life ‘according to the

Spirit,' lived in keeping with the values and norms of the coming aeon [age] inaugurated by Christ through his death and resurrection and empowered by the eschatological Spirit" (Fee GEP, 385).

This is why Paul can say things like "when you *were* in the flesh" in Romans 7:5 or you are not "of the flesh" in Romans 8:9. We have transferred realms and now live in the kingdom of Christ by the power of the Spirit and thus the merely human way of doing life (=the flesh) no longer rules us.

Flesh	Spirit
without - god merely human tangible (this world) ego-centric	the true God supernatural eternal and Spiritual (the world to come) Theo-centric
The flesh as a life principle is living life as if God doesn't exist or doesn't matter or isn't actively involved in life here and now. Severed from God	The Spirit as a life principle is living God-focused and Holy-Spirit empowered lives, as if God were truly real and actively involved in our life and in the world here and now. Attached to God

So when we read Galatians 5:16-25 and talk about the flesh vs. Spirit, we need to make we don't talk as if we have two different natures at war within us. That's not what Paul means and that's why the NIV translation of the word "flesh" as sinful nature is so problematic. For Paul, you either of the flesh or of the Spirit - not both. The flesh is way of life completely contrary to the values, desires, and aims of Jesus' kingdom. But as Jesus' people we live according to the Spirit and He produces in us the very character of Christ - love, joy, peace, and so on.

Thus walking but the Spirit solves our deepest problem. Our basic problem is not so much sinful acts . . . sinful behavior; it's rebellion against God as a whole. Our real problem is breaking allegiance with God . . . cutting the cord . . . independence!! . . . severing ourselves from God. That's mankind's real problem; sinful acts is simply the fruit or the expression of that.

The solution then isn't so much holy acts - conformity to a behavioral code - as it is surrender, laying down our weapons and agreeing to a truce. That means submission back to God and putting an end to independence. It means re-attaching ourselves to God. This is the essence of biblical faith: casting yourself upon the mercy of God, trusting that He is who He said He is and He'll do what he said He'll do and therefore re-aligning yourself under His guidance and Lordship.

So at the heart of walking by the Spirit is attachment to God! Holy acts and Christlike character are the fruit or expression of this attachment, produced in us by God Himself through His Spirit

(Gal. 5:22). This fruit becomes a reality not because of conformity to a code but because of attachment to God and God's attachment to us ... His moment-by-moment active role in our lives which we have arranged our lives for. We cease living as if God doesn't exist or doesn't matter or isn't actively involved (living according to the flesh) and we live God-focused, Spirit-directed lives in deep attachment to God (walking by the Spirit).