

Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

May/June 2003

Issue Number 76

CARRIED BY THE COMFORTER

HOW GOD LEADS US

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“For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”
(Romans 8:14)

Romans 8 offers profound, eternal comfort to Christians. In it Paul assures us that all true Christians shall ultimately be glorified and conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29, 30) and that nothing in the entire created universe can separate them from God’s love (Romans 8:31-39). After the lament in Romans 7 that even the redeemed still battle with sin, Romans 8 assures all Christians of ultimate victory.¹ In the midst of this chapter of hope, Paul tells us that the “sons of God” are led by the Spirit of God.

In this article I will answer three questions that arise from Romans 8:14.

- 1) Who are the sons of God?
- 2) What does it mean to be led by the Spirit?
- 3) Where are the sons of God being led?

If we stick to the context, the answers are clear. But elitists often make false claims based on a misuse of Romans 8:14 and other passages in Romans 8. These false claims I will address later in this article.

Who are the Sons of God?

Romans 8 begins with this promise: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 8:1). Condemnation means to be ultimately condemned by God at the last judgment because of one’s sin. Paul assures us that if we are “in Christ,” we are free from ultimate, eternal death. Here is the reason: *“For*

the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Romans 8:2). In the Greek, the verb “has set” is in the aorist, meaning something that happened at a point in time. That point in time is conversion. All who believe the Gospel, trusting the finished work of Christ who died and was raised bodily from the grave, have been set free! The “you” in “set you free” (Romans 8:2) is all true believers, all who are regenerate.² Condemnation, as we will see later, does not mean, “feeling condemned,” but means being condemned however one might feel. Freedom likewise is objective. Having been set free from the penalty of sin, the believer stays in this state of freedom, even when feeling “wretched” (Romans 7:24).

So far Paul has been talking about all true believers. Let us see if he continues to do so. In Romans 8:5-8, Paul takes up a discussion of the flesh and the Spirit. He speaks of the mind set on the flesh and the mind set on the Spirit. Some have become confused at this point and thought that Paul was speaking of two classes of Christians, the “carnal Christians” and the elite, “spiritual” ones. For example, verse 6 sounds like this may be the case: *“For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace”* (Romans 8:6). They assume that some elite Christians listen to the Holy Spirit’s inner promptings and thus experience more life and peace, and that carnal Christians listen to the flesh and experience “death” — lack of

spiritual vitality. However, the next two verses show that this interpretation is untenable. The mind set on the flesh is not just lacking inner joy, it is **hostile** to God and **unable** to submit to His law: *“[B]ecause the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; [It gets even worse:] and those who are in the flesh cannot please God”* (Romans 8:7, 8).

Being hostile toward God and unable to please Him does not sound like a description of born again believers. But it is a perfect description of the unregenerate. Consider what Paul wrote elsewhere: *“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised”* (1 Corinthians 2:14). The context of this passage shows that the “things of the Spirit of God” have to do with the message of salvation through a crucified Messiah which is considered foolishness to the Greek mind. If a person cannot accept that message, he or she is lost. The cross is the only way to salvation. So those in the flesh who *cannot please God* are the unregenerate. The next verse in Romans 8 says so explicitly: *“However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him”* (Romans 8:9). One either has the Holy Spirit and belongs to Christ, or does not have the Holy Spirit nor belongs to Him. All true Christians are born of the Spirit and belong to Christ. He calls us “His own” (John 17:9, 10).

Therefore, in Romans 8:1-9 Paul is clearly talking about all true believers. He is **not** writing about two classes of Christians — the carnal ones and the elite, spiritual ones. He is contrasting the redeemed and the condemned,

with the former having the Holy Spirit and the latter not. Those who have the Spirit belong to Christ and are truly alive. They all have the same hope, which is the resurrection from the dead and conformity to the image of Christ. Paul continues his thought: "And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you" (**Romans 8:10, 11**). The fact of being indwelt by God's Spirit assures us that these mortal bodies will be transformed even as Christ's was, He being the "first fruits" of those to be raised from the dead.³ Those without the Spirit mind the things of the flesh and cannot please God. The flesh in this context means "all that one is outside of Christ, in his sinful nature." It is not an anatomical term, but describes the nature of the entire person.⁴

The answer to the question, "who are the sons of God?" is "all true believers, all the regenerate." Nowhere in the context of **Romans 8** is Paul making a distinction between elite "spiritual, mature sons" and "carnal, immature" ones. **Romans 8:9** specifically says that one either has the Spirit and belongs to Christ or has neither the Spirit nor Christ. There is no two tier version of "have and have not" Christianity taught here or anywhere else in Scripture. This goes for the entirety of **Romans 8**, all the way through to the glorious "Christian's Triumph Song"⁵ of **Romans 8:31-39**. No blood bought child of God is excluded. All who are justified shall be glorified (**Romans 8:29, 30**) and constitute the "sons of God."

What Does it Mean to be Led by the Spirit?

The question of what Paul means by this statement: "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God," (**Romans 8:14**), must be determined by the context, Paul's grammar, and word usage. Paul uses

the logical connection "for" in each of the verses of **Romans 8:13-15**:

For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!"

The logical sequence is important.

Verse 13 begins by saying, "for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die." Having taught in **Romans 6** that the "wages of sin is death," Paul is again referring to the unregenerate. Even those who teach the two tier "carnal — spiritual" scheme of the body of Christ rarely claim that those in the carnal camp are to end up in hell. So they would have to either take "die" as meaning something other than spiritual death (which makes no sense since even believers die physically) or admit that **Romans 8:13a** is referring to the unregenerate, which is my claim. This phrase, "living according to the flesh," is antithetically parallel to **Romans 8:13b** and **Romans 8:14**. This means that the opposite of living according to the flesh is "by the Spirit putting to death the deeds of the body" and "being led by the Spirit."

Therefore the Holy Spirit provides the escape from ultimate, spiritual death. This is true of all who have believed the Gospel and been born again. "Putting to death" in verse 13 is in the continual present tense in the Greek. This shows that the battle against sin is a life long process, true for all who have the Spirit. We are not content to sin continually and unremittently; we trust God through Christ's finished work and lay aside the works of the flesh. There is no special "second blessing" or other experience that puts sin to death once for all outside of the resurrection at the return of Christ.

Paul then says that Spirit indwelt persons are "being led by the Spirit."

Remember that in context this is the opposite of "living according to the flesh." Therefore it has to at least include the idea of putting aside the old sinful practices of the flesh. The Spirit is leading us in a lifetime process of putting to death the old "deeds of the body." So far nothing in the context would indicate that "led by the Spirit" means, "gaining revelations and subjective guidance."

Now we need to consult Paul's word usage. The word translated "led" is *ago* (long O for omega). It is a common Greek word in the New Testament. It means "bring or carry," a much stronger word than the idea of, "gaining impressions from." Used elsewhere in the New Testament it can even mean, "being brought" forcibly. For example, the word *ago* is translated "brought" in this passage: "[A]nd you shall even be **brought** before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak" (**Matthew 10:18, 19**). Notice that "brought" is synonymously parallel to "deliver you up."

Paul uses the same word *ago* in a passage that is similar to his thought in **Romans 8**: "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law" (**Galatians 5:18**). In this parallel passage it is clear that "being led by the Spirit" is true of all Christians because Paul denies that any Christian is under the Law (**Romans 6:14**). The form of the verb is passive. Paul uses the term to describe how the Corinthians had been before they were converted: "You know that when you were pagans, you were **led** astray to the dumb idols, however you were **led**" (**1Corinthians 12:2**). It denotes being under their idol's control, not "gaining impressions" from them. C. E. B. Cranfield discusses the use of *ago* in **Romans 8:14**:

Though the active participation of the Christian is indeed involved [he references in brackets the Greek word trans-

lated “put to death” in verse 13], it is fundamentally the work of the Spirit (hence the passive *agontai*). For the use of *agein* [the infinitive form of *ago*] compare Lk 4:1; Gal 5:18; also Rom 2:4; 1Cor 12:2; 2Tim 3:6. It is used by classical authors of being led, controlled, by reason, anger, desire, pleasure, etc.⁶

“Led” is a strong term for the activity of the Holy Spirit showing that He “brings us” somewhere. Where He brings us will be the subject of the next section; but here is a verse which also uses *ago* that will give us a foretaste: “For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in **bringing** many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings” (**Hebrews 2:10**). “Bringing” is from the word (*ago*) translated “led” in **Romans 8:14**. Aside from the question of where we are being brought which will be dealt with later, this passage shows the sovereign activity of God. It does **not** mean that He gives us subjective directions and guidance as to where glory is so we can make our own way there. He sovereignly brings His sons to glory.

Consider all of the other things **Romans 8** has told us the Spirit does: He indwells all believers (verse 11); He will resurrect all believers (verse 11); He enables us to put to death sinful deeds (verse 13); He causes us to be adopted as sons (verse 15); He gives us a witness within that we are God’s children (verse 16); He causes us to long for glorification (verse 23); He intercedes for us (verse 26); and He brings us to glory and conformity to the image of Christ (verses 28-30). In the midst of these strong statements about the Holy Spirit’s powerful and sovereign work in the life of every believer, are we to believe that verse 14 means that the Spirit is trying to give subjective guidance but only certain elite Christians have figured out how to hear this guidance and follow it? The context and grammar show that this interpretation is in error, grossly

contrived and far from Paul’s thought.

Therefore being “led” by the Spirit means that God the Holy Spirit brings us along, toward God’s purposes for us. He “carries” us to our proper destination. That we will get there is assured by His sovereign work in our lives.

Where are God’s Adopted Sons being Led?

We have already hinted at the answer to the question about our destination: all true believers are being carried by the Holy Spirit to glorification. The proof of this is found in this passage:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (Romans 8:29, 30)

We have answered the question of “who” is being led — all true Christians. We have seen that being led means to be sovereignly carried along to our destination by the Holy Spirit. The passage before us tells us what we shall be like upon our arrival and that the destination is glorification. In the process Paul gives strong assurance that every true believer will arrive because the outcome is dependent upon God’s sovereign decision from all eternity.

The first thing Paul tells us about God’s adopted sons is that they were foreknown. This idea needs to be understood in the Biblical sense of “knowing” (*yada* in Old Testament Hebrew) that means “having a relationship with.” God’s foreknowledge of His sons is not that He merely knew that we would one day exist, nor can it be construed to mean He knew that we would choose Him. God is the active party throughout **Romans 8**.⁷ This is not about God reacting to our actions, but God acting to adopt sons and bring them to glory. Foreknowledge in

Romans 8:29 means that God chose His own from before the foundation of the world.

Cranfield comments on this passage: “The *-egno* [to know] is to be understood in the light of the use of *yada* in such passages as Gen. 18:19; Jer 1:5; Amos 3:2, where it denotes that special taking knowledge of a person which is God’s electing grace.”⁸ This is an important observation. Consider for example **Jeremiah 1:5**: “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.*” Foreknowledge in the context of God calling forth a people means more than “have knowledge of in advance,” but means to “choose for a covenant relationship.” In the Amos passage, the verb *yada*, known, is actually translated “chosen” by the NASB: “*You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth;*” (**Amos 3:2a**).

The Hebrew use of “know” in a relational sense is also seen in the New Testament. For example, consider the miracle workers in **Matthew 7:21-23**. Jesus said to them, “*I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness*” (verse 23b). “Knew” here means, “I never had a relationship with you.” Here is another instance of such usage, “[I]f anyone loves God, he is known by Him” (**1Corinthians 8:3**). Obviously, “known by Him” means “have a relationship with God.” So “foreknown” means choose ahead of time for a relationship.

This leads to the question of the meaning of “predestined” in **Romans 8:29**. Some argue that if “foreknown” means choose in advance, then “predestined” is a redundancy. However, in this passage Paul is using predestined to describe the final state of all of the redeemed, “*conformed to the image of His Son.*” All of God’s adopted sons are predestined to be conformed to the image of the One unique Son, Jesus Christ. Cranfield explains the meaning of the Greek words: “Whereas *pro-egno* [to foreknow] denoted God’s gracious election, *proo-risen* [predestined] denotes His gracious decision

concerning the elect, the content of which is indicated by the words which follow.⁹ These ideas are also taught in Ephesians: “[J]ust as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will” (**Ephesians 1:4, 5**). Remember that in Romans 8 adoption as sons is seen as already (verse 15) and not yet (verse 23). The adoption process begins with our redemption and ends with our glorification. All God’s elect are predestined to adoption in the fullest sense, conformity to the image of Christ.

The journey from what we are now as redeemed sons to what we shall be is characterized by sufferings: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God” (**Romans 8:18, 19**). Present sufferings are true for all of God’s adopted sons, but so is future glory. The “revealing of the sons of God” happens at the return of Christ and the resurrection, which is called “the redemption of our body” in **Romans 8:23**. **Romans 8:29** tells us that this means being conformed to the image of Christ. This is the destiny of all the redeemed. This passage teaches the same idea: “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (**1John 3:2**). The “already — not yet” tension is found throughout the New Testament. Both Paul and John tie the completion of the change God is working in His sons to the return of Christ.

Romans 8:30 continues the “golden chain” argument saying that all the predestined are “called.” Foreknowledge and predestination are from before the foundation of the world. Now Paul addresses what happens on the scene of history. God’s elect are “called.” This has to mean “effectively called,” because those thus called are glorified. **Romans 8:28** describes the redeemed

as “called according to His purpose.” The good end to which all things are being directed by God’s sovereign purpose is the honor that will be brought to His own name through the glorification of the Son and all the sons He is bringing to glory.

Those effectively called actually respond. Cranfield comments, “When God thus calls effectively, a man responds with the obedience of faith. Indeed, calling in this sense and conversion might be likened to the obverse and reverse of the same coin: they are the same event seen from two different points of view.”¹⁰ This call is properly distinguished from the universal call of the gospel. The universal call goes out to all people through the preaching of the gospel. Those chosen by God actually respond to it, being effectively called. Jesus describes this: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (**Matthew 22:14**). The many “called” in the parable of the wedding guests all received an invitation. Most rejected it. God is commanding everyone to repent and believe the gospel (**Acts 17:30**). The effectively called do repent and believe. This must be true otherwise Paul would not say that they are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ and glorified. The distinction between what is often described as “the outward call and the inward call” or, “the universal call and the effective call” is necessary to make sense of the terminology of the New Testament.

The fact that the call is effective is further shown by the next term that describes the same group, “justified.” Paul is using what is known in logic as a chain argument. The foreknown, predestined, called and justified are the same group of people, and all of these things are true of every member. Paul’s grammar is clear and logic inescapable. If there was one person foreknown, predestined, and called, who was not justified, then God’s word here in **Romans 8:29, 30** would be proven false. God cannot lie and His Word is inerrant. These are the people who are described throughout **Romans 8** as having received the Holy Spirit who is at work in them. These are justified

by faith as Paul argued in **Romans 3:28-30**.

The final link in the golden chain is glorification. All the justified are glorified. Herein lies rock solid proof of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. All God’s adopted sons will be glorified. They are being led by the Spirit to glory. As we have seen, they are being powerfully and effectively carried along by the Holy Spirit to glory. The Holy Spirit who regenerates all true believers will never “drop the ball” and allow one of His to perish. Our hope lies in the electing love and sovereign power of God and not in the feeble powers of man.

So certain is glorification that Paul uses an unexpected verb tense, the aorist (point in time action in the past). Leon Morris comments on the use of the aorist here: “[I]t is used of set purpose to bring out the truth that our glorification is certain. So certain is it that it can be spoken of as already accomplished.”¹¹ The “not yet” is “already” certain!

The conclusion of Romans 8 is a beautiful description of the security of all believers in God’s love. This beautiful assurance of God’s love overcoming any and all opposition to it is given to us as our ultimate comfort and hope. What amazes me is that though these verses offer hope and encouragement, many Christians apparently want neither. Some are so wed to the ideas of free choice and human ability, that they refuse to see the security of the believer in Romans 8. For example, consider Paul’s list of things that cannot separate us from God’s love (**Romans 8:36-39**). Using pairs of extremes, which is a common Biblical way of including everything (like our phrase “from A to Z), Paul lists all the possible things that could separate us from God’s loving purposes. He denies that any can. God’s adopted sons have glorious security.

Yet I have seen a number of people argue that the list actually is not comprehensive. They say, “but the list does not include our own selves, we can remove ourselves from God’s love.” I was thinking about that claim one day

and reading the text again. I saw this conclusion to the list: "*Nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (**Romans 8:39**). Not only do the pairs of extremes show that Paul intends his list to be comprehensive, but he explicitly says it is with the phrase, "nor any **other** created thing." The human will is a created thing. Only God is not created. We will not separate ourselves from God's redeeming love if we are those who are justified. We will stay in God's love not because we are incapable of gross sin or even blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, but because God's grace is effectual and the Holy Spirit has promised to lead (carry) us to glory. God will insure that we will not become apostate by all the considerable means at His disposal. God keeps his promises: "*If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself*" (**2Timothy 2:13**).

Elitist Interpretation of Romans 8

There has been a long history of the misuse of Romans 8 by those who hold to various elitist understandings of Christianity. What they have in common is the idea that Romans 8 is not about what God is doing by His Spirit for, in, and through all true Christians, but that it is about two types of Christians: carnal and spiritual. The problem starts with the King James translation of **Romans 8:1** "*There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit*" (**KJV**). The phrase "who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" is not in the best Greek manuscripts. Because it is so poorly attested in the Greek, new Bible translations do not include it because of the strength of the evidence suggesting it was not in the original manuscript. However, this phrase makes the verse sound like it may be talking about two different types of Christians. The idea would be that elite Christians who walk by the Spirit do not experience feelings of condemna-

tion, but "carnal Christians" do.

This interpretation is wrong for a couple of reasons. First, the term "condemnation" is not a reference to guilt feelings, but is forensic terminology concerning a legal sentence. Leon Morris writes, "*Condemnation* is a forensic term which here includes both the sentence and the execution of the sentence. But for believers there is no condemnation at all."¹² The passage is simply stating that all who are "in Christ" will not be condemned at the final judgment, as I noted earlier in this article. People are in Christ because they have been justified by faith -- Paul's theme throughout Romans. Justification and condemnation are antithetical. Jesus did not come so that the more advanced Christians who have learned to follow the Spirit will not have "guilt feelings." He came to deliver all who trust in Him from the final judgment, God's wrath against sin.

Second, even if one accepted the King James text here, the rest of the context rules against an elitist interpretation. The elitist idea is that "carnal Christians" are lesser in both experience and practice. They supposedly have not had a full experience of the Holy Spirit's power and do not know the secrets of the spiritual life (or "deeper life" as elitists sometimes call it). Is this what Paul means by the term "flesh" in Romans 8 -- "that which characterizes Christians who have not had a secondary experience or learned to walk in the deeper life of the Spirit"? Let us examine the issue in its context.

Consider these verses: "*For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit*" (**Romans 8:3, 4**). The previous chapters of Romans make it clear that what the Law could not do was make a person right before God through "law works." The Law shows

us how sinful we are. Those who try to make themselves right before God by works of the Law shall fail every time and remain in their lost condition. Sinners can only be justified by faith -- trusting God through the finished work of Jesus Christ. So when Paul says, "*[T]he requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us,*" he is speaking of those who have been justified by faith and therefore have right standing before God on **that** basis, not law works. Therefore "us" in **Romans 8:4** is all true believers. Therefore no true believer can be said to "walk according to the flesh" in the sense the phrase is used in this passage.

That Paul considers no Christian to be "walking according to the flesh" can be clearly demonstrated from **Romans 8:6-9** which I expounded earlier in this article. These verses show that those who "walk according to the flesh" are "hostile to God." Sinners are hostile to God and remain outside His kingdom, but surely not redeemed Christians. Consider Paul's terminology in **Romans 7**; "*For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.*" (**Romans 7:5,6**). Again he speaks of the difference between being unsaved and unjustified and being in Christ and free. Paul includes himself when he says, "*when we were in the flesh.*" Clearly this is not true now. The Christian life is serving God "in newness of the Spirit." The phrase "oldness of the letter" denotes seeking to keep the law and please God through works righteousness.

As mentioned earlier **Romans 8:9** shows conclusively that Paul is contrasting the lost and the saved and not two different types of Christian. Here is what Paul writes, "*However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ,*

he does not belong to Him" (**Romans 8:9**). To not belong to Christ is to be lost. To belong to Christ insures that one will be His for all eternity. Listen to what Jesus said about those who belong to Him:

All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. (John 6:37, 38)

Carefully follow the logic here; this is very important. Those who belong to Christ are given to Him by the Father. All of those given by the Father to the Son actually come to Jesus. Christ accepts all the individuals given to Him by the Father. None of these will be lost. All of these will be raised up on the last day. The category of persons described here is true Christians. This is what we also learned from **Romans 8:29, 30** discussed earlier. We also know from the passage before us (**Romans 8:9**), that all who have the Holy Spirit belong to Christ. Therefore, according to **Romans 8:9**, all true Christians are in the Spirit and none are "in the flesh." There is no third category called "carnal Christian" discussed here, just the regenerate who have the Spirit and those in the flesh who do not.

Elitist Answers to Romans 8:14

In the first part of this article I raised and answered three questions from **Romans 8:14**: who are the sons of God?, what does it mean to be led by the Spirit? and where are they being led? Let us consider how elitists who claim that **Romans 8** is about two classes of Christians (the carnal "have nots" and the spiritual "haves") typically answer these same three questions.

According to elitists the "sons of God" are not all Christians, but just mature ones. Ignoring Paul's obvious meaning of "son" as "those adopted into the family of God" (**Romans 8:15**), they claim "son" means "mature son" because of the use of *huios* in the Greek (the common term for son) rather than a word that would denote a small child or young person. This is bad doctrine and shoddy hermeneutics. At issue is neither the relative age nor the relative degree of development of the persons, but whether or not they belong to Christ. The context will allow no other interpretation. All who are His as "sons" by adoption shall always be so. Future growth and development all the way to conformity to the image of Christ is assured for all (again see **Romans 8:29, 30**).

The second question also has a different elitist answer. They claim that "being led by the Spirit" means that certain people have learned the secret of "hearing God's voice" and are willing to follow the subjective guidance they receive. As I showed earlier, the term "led" does not mean, "gain subjective guidance," it means to "bring or carry." The elitists think that "being led" is a spiritual capability that certain advanced Christians have learned and developed over the years. Those who have the most remarkable stories about "guidance miracles" are considered the truly advanced Christians.

There was a time in my life when I believed these elitist's interpretations. I spent five years trying to be a "mature spiritual son" who "followed the leading of the Spirit." I listened to hundreds of hours of tapes from spiritual leaders who told amazing stories about having visions of Jesus, talking to angels, hearing God's voice in their spirits, etc. When these great men of God followed the special guidance they received God did tremendous miracles. I wanted to be one of those men, desperately so. I joined a group founded by a man who had huge repertoire of "miracle stories of divine guidance." I was trained in spiritual elitism. I read books about how to be a "spiritual man" by follow-

ing my spirit, which I was told was already perfected by being one with God. I was taught that my soul was caught in a "twilight zone" between my body and the outward world of sense perceptions, and my spirit and the inward world of God's revelation knowledge. If only I could get rid of the influences of the body and its perceptions and get my mind attuned to the Spirit, then I would be one of those miracle-working men of God. I tried the "spiritual disciplines" prescribed by various elitists who knew the secrets of the deeper life. When I read the Bible, however, rather than get revelations like they did, I could only see what the words said and meant. My revelatory abilities seemed muted compared to their claims. I never got good at preaching anything but what the Bible said. I was told that the problem was my education and logical mind.

After several years living in a Christian community totally dedicated to growing past "carnal Christianity" to a deeper, purer form of living by faith and following the Spirit, I was confronted with the truth of **Colossians 2:8**: "*Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, . . . These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self made religion and self abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence*" (**Colossians 2:18, 23**). The "deeper life" did not make us more spiritual. Problems that plague the world were still evident in us. I began to notice that the real changes evident in certain people happened because of their conversion. God changed their lives through the Gospel. But the troubled Christians who sought special answers through a higher order of spirituality became more troubled, not less so.

Eventually I found help from the comfort and the encouragement of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are God's revelation to us, not the means to a subjective personal revelation some-

how hidden in them. As I am writing this I am thinking of what would have happened if this article had been written by someone else and handed to me in 1976, given who I was then. Would I have allowed the Scriptures to correct me and free me, or would I have pushed this aside as the writings of someone "not Spirit filled, not following the Spirit -- too educated"? It is impossible to know the answer. However, bringing the Scriptures to bear on important issues that trouble the saints is always the best thing to do. The Scriptures led me out of error.

There is one last question to be addressed from the elitist perspective: where are we being led? When I was an elitist myself I hoped to be led to a glorious manifestation of the Kingdom of God **now** on earth that everyone could see in external, supernatural power. I thought that if we could just follow the leading of the Spirit, all the sick people would be healed, miracles would be common events, and our group would so obviously have something superior to everything around that many, many people would want to join us.

There are many forms of elitism. I have not offered a catalogue of them in this article. I have given the basic ideas common to elitist spirituality. They all offer some form of over-realized eschatology. That is, they are promising "the revealing of the sons of God" (**Romans 8:19**) now in a way that goes beyond the Scriptures.¹³ The elitists think they are being led to some sort of heaven on earth before the return of Christ. This ranges all the way from perfectionism (that we can be sinless now), to claims that we can get immortal bodies now, to dominionist teachings that prescribe world rulership for Christians before the return of Christ and others. There are many versions. One thing they all do is belittle us "ordinary Christians" who long for the return of Christ and future glorification. They call us "defeated."

Conclusion

I have presented two radically different understandings of **Romans 8:14**. The text of Romans has to determine which is from God. The evidence is clearly against elitism. Most of us who realize that we are "ordinary" Christians -- "sinners saved by grace," know people who think we are quite pathetic. We have not reached the plane of spirituality they claim to have achieved. Paul offers hope to us ordinary Christians who stumble in many ways, but hope fully in Christ. He assures us that by the finished work of Christ and justified by faith, we are adopted into the family of God. In God's family it does not matter where you stand in someone else's estimation of being a "great person of God." In God's family the "least shall be the greatest." We have no reason to fret over others who judge us as being not very spiritual. We are trusting Jesus and because He has given us His Spirit, we shall never be separated from His love and shall surely be like Him one day. Let us be encouraged by that.

End Notes

1. See <http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue60.htm>; CIC Issue 60 for an overview of Paul's teaching in Romans 7 and 8.
2. See **Titus 3:4-6**
3. See **1Corinthians 15:20** and **Colossians 1:18**.
4. For proof of this see Paul's list of the "deeds of the flesh" in **Galatians 5**. They include bodily activities (such as sensuality and drunkenness), mental or soulish activities (such as jealousy and anger), and spiritual activities (such as idolatry and sorcery).
5. So called by Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*; (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1988) 334-342.
6. C. E. B. Cranfield, "Romans" in *The International Critical Commentary*; J.A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield ed. (T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1975) Vol. 1; 395.
7. Leon Morris makes an important observation, "An interesting feature of the chapter [Romans 8] which is not always noticed is that there is not a single imperative.;" Morris 299. An

imperative is a command. Romans 8 is not about what believers ought to do, but about what God will do.

8. Cranfield, 431.
9. Ibid. 432.
10. Ibid. 432, 433.
11. Morris, 333, 334.
12. Ibid. 300.
13. see James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom*; (Calvary Press: Amityville, NY, 2000) 154-159, White provides an great exposition of John 6:37-40.
14. There was a movement called "The Manifested Sons of God" whose ideas are still taught by some in the Charismatic movement today. This heresy can be traced back to a 17th century mystic, Jane Leade. Her teachings include first person citations of "Christ" who tells her that elite Christians can achieve not only perfection, but deification now. She is apparently the source of what later became the Latter Rain Movement. Here is a direct citation of Jesus from Jane Leade: "This should be achieved by dying out of creaturely sensation, causing a vacancy for the Holy Ghost to rise and spring and move as one entire spiritual body within. For so it will be whenever there is a cessation and a rest from the whirling thoughts and motions, which are from the outward astral birth. This will be the manner of My coming in this latter day to stand upon the earth which is thus emptied and refined by the fire that never dies. This fire is that seed of God that shall multiply itself to bring your Christ forth to numerously overspread this world until all shall be formed anew. Thus shall each one become a Christ (or anointed) from this Deified root opening within his own soul." cited from <http://www.sigler.org/shofar/janeleade/enochianpart2.htm> from The Enochian Walks with God.

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