

# THE SPIRIT AS THE BLESSING OF THE GOSPEL PROMISED TO ABRAHAM

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The Epistle to the Galatians has long been considered the banner text of the Reformation and the premier exposition of the truth that we are justified by faith alone. Much used of God, heralds of this basic truth have since led countless believers out of the darkness and slavery of a salvation by works into the liberating realm of justification by faith. God's enlightening concerning such a fundamental truth of Christian salvation calls forth thankfulness, but the subsequent obscuring of the central thought of Paul's gospel in Galatians by a preoccupation with justification by faith is a source for lament. Although untold numbers of believers have been objectively justified by faith, how many have been experientially delivered from slavery under the law to freedom in Christ—from the curse of the law to the blessing of Abraham? Ironically, most Christians today anachronistically live to the law in the age of grace, conducting themselves more as the heavy-laden disciples of Moses than as the blessed sons of God. They live mainly by the principle of the law—trying in their flesh to fulfill God's righteous demands—rather than by the principle of grace, which is to continually receive the bountiful supply of the Spirit as the reality of the resurrected Christ. Even though they may not adhere to the ritualistic ordinances or ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic law, they are unknowingly enslaved by laws imposed by their ethical principles, religious traditions, cultural practices, and even scriptural knowledge. Instead of abiding in Christ and enjoying His riches, allowing Him to be revealed in them, live in them, and be formed in them, most believers, though forever joined to Christ, have been brought to nought, separated from Him in experience.

One of the principal causes of this mournful situation is that most Christians are taught a narrow and superficial understanding of Paul's gospel in Galatians. Many expositors of the Reformed persuasion understand the theme of Galatians to be justification by faith. Regrettably, few realize that the intrinsic focus of Paul's gospel in Galatians is not a mere doctrine concerning the believers' justification by faith; instead, it is a wonderful, precious, and excellent person: the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, and indwelling Christ, who, as the life-giving Spirit, is the replacement of the law. Handley C. G. Moule insightfully points out in his commentary on Galatians, *The Cross and the Spirit*, that numerous topics in Galatians, including justification by faith, are but "accessories around the main theme, the double theme which twines itself always into one—Christ and the Spirit" (16). In Moule's view, although justification is a prominent theme in Galatians, this Epistle is not "a *merely* 'forensic' tractate"; instead, like Romans, Galatians "has all along, or at least all underneath, another supreme theme, which is in a sense its ultimate theme": the "doctrine of the Eternal Spirit" (44-45). Although justification by faith is a necessary procedure to usher the believers into God's salvation, the goal of this salvation is to bring them into participation in the resurrected Christ as the Spirit of life. The primacy of the believers' participation in the Spirit over justification by faith in Galatians is reflected in the fact that the words *justify* and *justified* are mentioned eight times (2:16-17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4), whereas the title *the Spirit*, in reference to the Holy Spirit, is spoken of sixteen times (3:2-3, 5, 14; 4:6, 29; 5:5, 16-18,