

Capitalization of “S”

By: Jason Cole

It is not possible to read modern English translations of the Bible without seeing the bias. The reality is that a translation is an interpretation. There are many places where the translators have to make decisions on how to handle a text. It is in those moments that it is not possible for theological bias to direct interpretation. It is in most English versions that we can readily see the influence of Calvinism upon translations. One area that this is clearly seen is in the way that the word “spirit” is translated. The word “spirit” (pneuma) appears over 250 times in the New Testament. Every time the word “spirit” occurs, translators have to make a decision whether to capitalize the word. The capitalization of the word spirit would imply that the reference is to the Holy Spirit. However, it is quite clear that there are times that the word spirit is not a reference to the Holy Spirit. The way that should be determined is through the context. However, any chance that Calvinist translators can make the reference refer to the Holy Spirit they will do so. Every Bible student needs to understand that the conclusions drawn are not necessarily a reflection of the original intent. In the Greek, all the letters would have been capital letters, therefore the context is what determines the meaning.

In some of the instances where the word spirit is interpreted to be a reference to the Holy Spirit by translators it is clearly a reference to man’s spirit or a general attitude. Admittedly, in some of the instances the theological implications are very small and no doctrine is impacted. However, there are several occasions where the correct interpretation does have important theological implications.

There is no question that the word “spirit” has different meanings and implications in Scripture. There are examples of the word being used in a general sense and then also being used to refer to the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes the word “spirit” is used to refer to being spiritual. In other words, sometimes it is a general designation for spiritual behavior. One example of this may be in the well-known passage about the fruit of the Spirit. Most modern translators interpret this to be the fruit or evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit indwelling a person. However, it is possible that the idea being communicated is that those traits listed are the fruits of a spiritual person. The Apostle Paul had just spoken about the fruits of a fleshly person. The context helps us to define the word “spirit” in this instance. The word “spirit” means the opposite of the word “fleshly”. Galatians 5:16 says, “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh (NIV).” Some translations even supply the word “Holy” before the word spirit. A few problems exist with this. First, there is no definite article present in the Greek. This in itself does not mean that the reference is not to the Holy Spirit, but it does help us understand better. Paul is saying, “walk spiritually”. Walk spiritually as opposed to walk fleshly. The law of apposition tells us that in a passage we can learn the meaning of a word by the fact that the same passage uses the opposite idea. The only implication to this theologically is that if we interpret this to be “fruits of the Holy Spirit” we have to conclude two things. First, we have to conclude that only a person with the Holy Spirit can actually demonstrate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. The reality is that I know of many non-Christian people to demonstrate these traits to varying degrees. Second, we would have to conclude that a person that does not show these traits does not have the

indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This would be a difficult judgment to make. The truth is that many Christian people do not perfectly display these traits all the time. They are spiritual traits that every Christian should pursue and seek. Perhaps in the end in an instance like this, the conclusions are not drastically different.

Another way that the word spirit is used is in reference to a person's spirit. Even at times the phrase "holy spirit" could speak of a person's character and not necessarily the Holy Spirit. A quick glance may not tell us which one is in mind. One example is found in 1 Thessalonians 1:5. It says, "because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with great conviction – just as you know we lived among you for your sake (ESV)." Once again the translators interpret this to speak of the Holy Spirit. However, I suggest that Paul has in mind a holy spirit, not the Holy Spirit. Paul is saying that when he was among them that he lived in a holy manner and they could observe his holy conduct. In fact, the conduct of Paul among the Thessalonians is exactly what Paul is pointing to. Modern day Calvinists seem to want to sound more spiritual by suggesting that it is not they who convert, but the Holy Spirit. This bias is brought into this text. There is no denying God's providential role in conversion of the work of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word, however, this is not what Paul had in mind. He was speaking of having a holy spirit while he was among them.

In 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul speaks about the Corinthians individual entrance into the one body; the church. He says, "for we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body." It is possible both grammatically and contextually that this is speaking something about the Holy Spirit. In fact, every translation capitalizes this usage of spirit. However, I would suggest

that it is possible that Paul was speaking of the spirit or attitude that the individuals had as they were baptized. He is saying “we all believed the same thing.” The context was about the wide variety of gifts that make up the one body. He is urging unity, rebuking attitudes of superiority in the church. Here he wants to call their attention to the fact that they may differ in their giftedness, but they are united in their doctrine and beliefs. Here the word spirit points to their attitude. Some may want this to refer to the Holy Spirit so that they can make it a reference to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. However, this is not what Paul was pointing to. He was pointing to the individuals unity of belief as they were immersed into Christ and entered into the one body.

One of the most significant times that the word spirit is used as a reference to the Holy Spirit, when it should probably refer to attitude is in Romans 8. The word spirit occurs seventeen times in seventeen verses in Romans 8. There are three or four times that there is no question that the word “spirit” is speaking of the Holy Spirit. For example, in verse 11 it says: “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you” (NIV). Verse 16 is also clearly speaking about the Holy Spirit. It says, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (NIV). While these instances are clear, the other instances are less clear.

Verse 9 says, “You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit” (NIV). When he says that “you are not in the flesh, but the spirit” the idea is not speaking of the Holy Spirit. Here he is speaking of that inner man which is dead to sin. In verse

9 of Romans 8, we see the word “spirit” three times. Most translators make this a capital “s” all three times.

Throughout much of the chapter Paul is contrasting flesh and spirit. If the word “flesh” speaks of an unspiritual way of living, then the word “spirit” has to mean the exact opposite of that. There really are a couple of options in dealing with verse 9. The first option would have the text saying, “if indeed the Spirit of God (meaning the Holy Spirit) dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ (Christ dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit), he does not belong to Him.” The second option is “if indeed the spirit or attitude of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the spirit or attitude of Christ, he does not belong to Him.”

There is a slight difference in application. The first option would be reference to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as the identifying mark of those who belong to Christ. It is true that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which we receive at our baptism is a deal and a deposit, but this is not what this verse is highlighting. It would seem interesting that within one verse reference is made to God’s Spirit and Christ’s Spirit as both referring to the Holy Spirit

The second option would be reference to a life conformed to Christ’s character as the identifying mark of those who belong to Christ. I do not believe that this is not talking about the Holy Spirit, but a spirit which is like Christ. He is not saying anything about the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is talking about our character and attitude being like Him. He is saying that we should have the spirit of Christ in terms of character. To have the spirit of Christ is to be in agreement with him or in ideologically harmony with Him. It is talking about being in agreement with Christ in character. He is saying that if you do not have a character that is

growing in Christlikeness that you do not belong to Him. I am not certain the difference is huge, because the work of the Holy Spirit in us is to conform us to Christ

I think that in verse 9, the first use of spirit refers to the inner man. The second use of “spirit” speaks of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (and should be capitalized), and the third use speaks of the attitude of Christ

Here in verse 9, JCV (Jason Cole Version), “However, you are not controlled by the outer man, that unredeemed physical body, but by the redeemed inner man. If indeed the Holy Spirit indwells you. But if anyone does not have the attitude of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”

Romans 8:14 also should be a lower case “s”. Putting to death the deeds of the flesh is the same thing as being led by the spirit. Paul is saying that those who are led and governed by the attitude of God are the sons of God. Being led by the spirit is antithetical to the spirit of adoption. He is saying that if you do not have the attitude of the father then you cannot be sons of God. In the first century sonship had more to do with one having the “spirit” or attitude of their father than it did that they were of their “flesh”. Being a son was on the basis of having the spirit of the father, not of the flesh. So, who are the sons of God? Is he talking about some miraculous Holy Spirit leading? No. He is saying those that have the attitude of God are sons of God. He is saying the sons of God are those who have the spirit or attitude of God. The main point to the Romans was how can you claim to have the mind and attitude of God and yet regard one another with condemnation.

The Calvinist have a special desire to interpret everything as being the Holy Spirit working miraculously upon a person. Due to their understanding of total inability, they want to make every positive action the work of the Holy Spirit and not the work of man in any way. A survey

of commentaries will show that the issues are not usually even considered. It is strange that even though the context clearly shows that in several cases the Holy Spirit is not being referenced. Occasionally, a footnote will cite the potential for a lower case “s”.

It is vital that we fairly interpret each text and let the text determine the meaning of words, not preconceived ideas. The problem is that Calvinists are forced to make some of those reference the Holy Spirit because their theology hinges upon it. The context should determine if the word “spirit” is speaking about the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, a spiritual attitude, or a holy disposition. There is no question that the Holy Spirit is spoken of many times in Scripture, but we cannot make the word “spirit” always refer to the Holy Spirit because that is bat exegesis.