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## Spiritual or Material?

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In these days, one may hear of one group that is more “spiritual” than another because they sing songs to a more lively tempo, or because they greet each other with a holy kiss, or because they produce a sort of “exalted feeling” by something they say or do. But what does the Bible mean by the term “spiritual?”

### Defining the Term

In most of our conversations and prayers when mention is made of “spiritual” and “material” things, they are assumed to be mutually exclusive. If we look in the dictionary, we find the first definition of *spiritual* to be “of a pertaining to or consisting of spirit, not material, incorporeal.” If it is not made up of matter, then it is probably spiritual. Is that what God means in Galatians 6:1 when he says, “Ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of meekness?” Surely not! Much of our thinking and language is built upon Socratic, Aristotelian or Platonic concepts rather than on biblical ones.

The most apparent meaning of the word in Galatians 6:1 is this: the word “spiritual” means *that which is produced, directed or controlled by God’s Spirit*. Let us see how close that comes to fitting every use of the word in the New Testament.

In Romans 1:11, Paul mentions “some spiritual gift.” If he is talking about the same thing of which he speaks in 1 Corinthians 12: 1, 11, 30-31; 14:1, 12 (and who can doubt that he is?) then the thing that made the gifts “spiritual” is that they were produced by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:8ff).

Space limitations prevent us from giving even a partial exegesis of each passage where the term “spiritual” is used, but even a casual reading of them will convince a person that the meaning I have suggested will fit all of them.

### Applying Our Definition to Some Scriptures

Romans 7:14; 15:27; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 3:1; 9:77 and 14:37 all use the term “spiritual” in such a way that we can see that it refers to that to which is produced by God’s Spirit. When he speaks of the natural body and the spiritual body in 1 Corinthians 15:44-46, we need to realize that we will *not* be disembodied spirits. We will have spiritual bodies. The present natural body was produced by the union of an earthly father and mother. The process takes about nine. Months. The spiritual body will be produced in the twinkling of an eye by the Spirit of God.

In 1 Corinthians 10:3-4 we find that the Israelites “did eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink.” If Paul was speaking of the manna they ate and the water that came out of the rock, then we must conclude that the reason they were called “spiritual” is that they were produced by the Spirit of God. They were not natural. If we wonder why he said “the rock was Christ,” the simplest explanation may be that the rock out of which the water came represented Christ, for he gives us living water.

In Ephesians 1:3, we find that "he hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ." If "spiritual" means "produced or directed by the Spirit of God," then we are to understand that all blessings such as forgiveness that we have in Christ are by God's grace, not able to be produced or achieved by man's work, wisdom or power. Of course that grace must be *accepted* on God's terms.

Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 speaks of "spiritual songs." They are songs we are to sing as a result of the fact that we are "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18) or the parallel expression that "the word of Christ dwells in us richly" (Col. 3:16). If I am not mistaken about the grammatical construction and consequent meaning of Colossians 3:16, the imperative verb, followed as it is by a modifying participle, shows that the teaching and admonishing in spiritual songs is *how* we obey the command to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. A comparable example might be, "Clean the floor, sweeping it." "Clean" is the imperative. "Sweeping" is how the command is to be done.

When Peter says in 1 Peter 2:5 that "we are built up a spiritual house," he surely means that a church produced by the Spirit of God is "spiritual" and one not so produced is not - it matters not how pretty the singing or how loving the fellowship! Peter adds that we are to offer up "spiritual sacrifices." Can anyone properly deny that the sacrifices given or ordained of God is a "spiritual" one? If my analysis and reasoning is correct, then the sacrifice of praise of Hebrews 13:15 is a "spiritual" sacrifice (offering) just as in Ephesians 5:19.

The only verse of which I am aware that my conclusion may not seem to fit at first glance is Ephesians 6:12, and it does fit there when properly understood. The King James Version reads, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood ... but against ... spiritual wickedness in high places." I suppose we normally understand that to mean "those whose spirits are wicked," and no doubt these *are* wicked spirits. But if we say "spiritual" means "produced of God." This will not do! The American Standard translators apparently recognized some difficulty with that translation and supplied the word "hosts." So "hosts" or "forces" would seem to be the logical word. Those Satanic forces were those that had been produced by God, but perverted to evil uses.

## **Conclusion**

This study has let me to conclude that in the New Testament the word "spiritual" is *never* used to refer to some ethereal, non-material thing, or something that is "better felt than told," or some quality or feeling that is ecstatic or that gives one a "holy glow," but *always* refers to something that was produced or directed by the Spirit of God. The way to be more "spiritual" our worship is not by turning on a glow of red lights to remind us of the blood of Christ when we take the Lord's Supper, dimming the lights during prayer, or going through some other psychological gimmick, but by making sure our thinking, talking and acting is produced by the Spirit of God.