

The Holy Spirit In Conversion

"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63).

Almost all who embrace the Christian faith believe that the Holy Spirit works in conversion in one of the following ways: (1) through a direct operation on the heart of the lost, (2) in conjunction with the preaching or reading of the Word of God, or (3) indirectly through the Word. The truth cannot be found in emotional experiences, but only in the revealed Word of God.

"BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT" (JOHN 3:5)

Everyone who studies the Bible must deal with this statement which Jesus made to Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). The majority of the Protestant world believes that by this statement Jesus was teaching a direct operation by the Holy Spirit on the heart in order to bring about the new birth.

Jesus did not specify how the Holy Spirit would be involved in the "new birth," but only stated that He would be involved. One must study other teachings of the New Testament in order to understand how the Spirit brings about the new birth.

While most religious groups teach that the "Spirit" in John 3:5 means the Holy Spirit, they erroneously interpret "water" in various ways.

"Water" Viewed as the Word. Some believe that "water" in John 3:5 is the "Word." "Some expositors decline to see any reference to baptism in the word 'water' at all, and assume that our Lord was speaking about the cleansing effects of the Word of God [basing their thinking on Ephesians 5:26]."¹ For example, one writer stated, "So when He mentions water to Nicodemus, He means the Word of God. The likeness is given because of the cleansing power of the word (see Psalm 119:9; John 15:3; Ephesians 5:26)."²

If Jesus used "water" figuratively, then how do we know He did not use "Spirit" figuratively also? Why would Jesus use only water figuratively in this statement and use every other word in the sentence in a literal manner? If the other words—"Spirit," "enter," and "kingdom of God"—are literal, then why does "water" not mean water?

¹A. J. Macleod, *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Davidson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), 871.

²Donald Grey Barnhouse, *The Love Life* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1980), 36.

The often-quoted Ephesians 5:26 does not say that water is the Word, but rather states that the church is cleansed “by the washing of water with the word.” The Greek preposition translated “with” is *en* (from the root word meaning “in”). Probably, the verse should be understood to say that water accompanied with the Word is what brings about the cleansing of the church. The Word alone does not cleanse. Further, water cannot cleanse unless the Word enters the heart. Only water (Mark 16:16; Acts 22:16) along with the Word (Acts 11:14; James 1:21) can bring us to the cleansing blood of Jesus which results in salvation and the new birth.

“Water” Viewed as the Spirit. Others have argued that “water” represents the Spirit. They believe that the Greek word *kai* should not be given its primary meaning “and,” but a secondary meaning of “even.” Thus the passage would read, “I say to you, unless one is born of water, even the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” The primary meaning is always to be used unless the context demands a secondary meaning. Nothing in the context indicates that “even” should be used instead of “and.” Such an effort to make “water” mean “Spirit” was surely devised in order to escape the conclusion that water refers to baptism.

Another line of reasoning is built on John 7:38, 39: “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’” But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; . . .” In this context Jesus was clearly using “water” figuratively. However, the fact that He used “water” figuratively here does not prove that He used “water” figuratively in John 3:5. Jesus was not speaking about the new birth in John 7, but was referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit that is given to those who have “believed” and obeyed God (Acts 5:32).

“Water” Viewed as Physical Birth. Those who conclude that Jesus alluded to physical birth believe that “water” refers to the embryonic fluid associated with birth. They build their case on Jesus’ statement in John 3:6: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Robert Harvey Strachan stated, “Water may also symbolize the fact of physical birth. . . . In later Jewish thought, ‘water’ is regarded as a creative element of the

womb (2 Esdras vii. 8).”³

The problem with this conclusion is that Jesus was not speaking about two different births. He was speaking about only one birth, a birth that includes water and the Spirit. Frederick Dale Bruner commented on this verse:

John does not place a second “of” (Gk.: *ex*) before “Spirit” as he would if he were describing two different events. The single *ex* describes the single occasion. The singularity is then completely established by the aorist subjective passive *gennethe* which means literally “once born” of water and Spirit.⁴

Homer Kent Jr. and other scholars agree that “the Greek . . . uses two nouns without articles and joined by *kai* as objects of one preposition, thus suggesting that they are not entirely separate but are aspects of one concept.”⁵

Jesus was not talking about one birth of water and another one of Spirit. He was speaking about a single birth, a birth of “water and Spirit.”

“Water” Viewed as Only a Sign. Others believe that Jesus meant the “water” of baptism as only a sign. They do not think that His statement to Nicodemus implies the necessity of baptism for salvation or entrance into heaven. William Hendriksen wrote, “The evident meaning, therefore, is this: being baptized with water is not sufficient. The sign is valuable, indeed, and as a seal. But the sign should be accompanied by the things signified: the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit.”⁶

The problem with this conclusion is that Jesus stated that one must be born not of the Spirit only, but “of water and Spirit” in order to enter the kingdom of God. Regardless of whether or not water was meant as a sign and a seal, Jesus said that a birth including water is necessary in order to enter the kingdom. Therefore, those who have not been born of both

³Robert Harvey Strachan, *The Fourth Gospel* (Edinburgh: Trumbell and Spears, 1917), 94. Second Esdras is an apocryphal (uninspired) book written around A.D. 100.

⁴Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 257–58.

⁵Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Light in the Darkness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1982), 59.

⁶William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1972), 134.

“water and Spirit” have not entered the kingdom of God.⁷

THE NEW BIRTH (1 PETER 1:23)

If the new birth is brought about by the use of “water” in baptism, how is the Spirit involved in the birth? Physical birth involves a coming forth from a mother’s body to physical life. That life is possible because of the father’s seed. Life is in the seed.

The same is true of the spiritual birth. “For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). The seed, the Word of God, is the source of life in the new birth. Jesus stated, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (John 6:63). The Spirit gives life through the Word which brings about the new birth. The life is in the Word as life is in a seed, and the Spirit is the agency through which the Word has been revealed. As a seed needs water to come to new life, so God requires water for one to come to a new spiritual life.

We come to life as spiritual plants in the kingdom of God through the seed of the kingdom (Matthew 13:19–23). The seed from which we obtain spiritual life is the Word of God (Luke 8:11). Without the Spirit there would be no Word; without the Word there could be no life or birth; and without life or birth no one could become a member of the kingdom.

No example or text in the New Testament indicates that the new birth is brought about by a direct operation of the Spirit. The Spirit is the source of the seed, the Word, that produces life.

In Jerusalem (Acts 2:5) on the Day of Pente-

cost, forgiveness of sins was preached in the name of Jesus for the first time (Luke 24:47). A multitude gathered (Acts 2:6) after the Spirit had come upon the apostles (Acts 2:4). Peter admonished them to hear “words” (Acts 2:14, 22). When they “heard,” their hearts were touched (Acts 2:37). “So then, those who had received his word were baptized” (Acts 2:41a). Here we see an example and commentary on how people are born again. Being filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4), Peter was being guided into the truth by the Spirit, as Jesus had promised (John 14:16, 17; 16:13).

Peter’s words moved the Jews to believe in Jesus (Acts 2:37; see John 17:20; Acts 17:11, 12; Romans 10:17) as the Messiah and motivated them to be baptized (Acts 2:36–38, 41). In this way they were born of the water and Spirit. Then they received “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38), who is given to those who are “sons” (Galatians 4:6).

The same can be deduced from Paul’s statement to the Colossians. He said that before baptism one is dead in sin. However, because of a faith in the working of God—who raised Jesus from the dead—a person who is buried with Jesus in baptism is also made alive with Him. The believer recognizes that the same power which raised Jesus from the dead can also change his life and bring him from death in sin to a new life in Jesus (Colossians 2:12, 13).

The mighty working of God as already demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ is thus the object of the believer’s confidence. The argument would then be as follows: they had accepted the fact of Christ’s resurrection. This was the signal demonstration of the power of God, and in reliance upon that power they had known a spiritual resurrection in union with Christ.⁸

Faith in such working of God comes through the Word (Romans 10:17).

In this way the new birth is brought about through faith that is produced by the power of the Word delivered by the Spirit. Faith is expressed in the action of baptism, which not only joins the person being baptized with Jesus in His

⁷The kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are not two different kingdoms, but are the same kingdom (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14, 15). This is the kingdom that John (Matthew 3:2), Jesus (Mark 1:15), the apostles (Matthew 10:5, 7), and the Seventy (Luke 10:9, 11) preached was at hand. It is the kingdom of Jesus, which Christians enter when they are transferred into it from the world (Colossians 1:13). Jesus’ reign now extends throughout heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:19–23), the earthly part of which is the church (Matthew 16:18, 19).

Jesus continually spoke of His kingdom (Matthew 5:3, 10, 19; 6:10, 33; 7:21; 13:19, 24, 31, 44, 45, 47). This kingdom owes its existence to the “good seed” (Matthew 13:37), the Word (Luke 8:11), which Jesus planted in the world and gave to the inspired writers through the Holy Spirit.

⁸Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 67–68.

burial and resurrection, but also makes known his faith in the power of God. The same power that raised Jesus will also change his life, bringing him from a dormant state to a new spiritual life. Thus the water and Spirit are inseparable in bringing about the new life.

A NEW CREATURE (2 CORINTHIANS 5:17)

The person who is in Christ is a new creature, one who has been born again (2 Corinthians 5:17). Being “in Christ” results from baptism (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27), which occurs when one obeys the truth (1 Peter 1:22). Obedience springs from hearing this truth, which is the gospel of our salvation (Ephesians 1:13a), the Word of God (James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23).

H. Leo Boles stated,

The New Testament does not teach that the Holy Spirit operates directly upon the heart of the sinner; . . . There is no case on record in the New Testament where anyone was converted who did not first hear the truth, believe in Christ, repent of sin, and was baptized into Christ.⁹

The pattern for salvation was set through Peter on the Day of Pentecost. The words that he preached (Acts 2:14, 22, 40) touched the hearts of those who heard (Acts 2:37). Their receiving of the truth resulted in baptism (Acts 2:41).

The subsequent practice in Acts followed this pattern. The Word of the Lord was preached.¹⁰ People heard and received (believed) the Word (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 8:12, 14; 11:1; 17:11, 12). Those who received the Word were baptized (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 35–39; 16:14, 15, 33; 18:8; 19:5).

The way people responded was summarized by Paul in Ephesians 1:13: “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise.” Notice that the seal of the Holy Spirit followed listening to the gospel and coming to faith. The Spirit did not put faith into people’s hearts. Rather, they believed because they listened to the gospel (see also John 17:20; Acts 17:11; Romans 10:17), recognizing it as the Word

⁹H. Leo Boles, *The Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1971), 199.

¹⁰See Acts 4:31; 5:20; 8:4, 25; 11:14, 19; 13:5, 26, 46, 49; 14:25; 15:35; 16:32; 17:13; 18:11.

of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13). This Word of God was “living and active” in their lives (Hebrews 4:12). Believers were sealed with the Spirit after they accepted the Word and were baptized (Acts 2:38; Ephesians 1:13).

We see, then, that the Holy Spirit works to save us by renewing and regenerating us. Titus 3:5 says, “He [God our Savior] saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit delivered the truth (John 16:13)—God’s powerful Word (John 17:17; Hebrews 4:12), the gospel, God’s power to save (Romans 1:16). Those who respond to the Spirit’s message are born again (John 3:5), being renewed and regenerated through the washing that takes place in baptism (Acts 22:16).

Frederick Dale Bruner correctly observed concerning Titus 3:4–8:

The whole saving event—from advent to end—is seen as one great deed. Salvation occurs because of the appearance of God the Savior’s kindness and is applied terminally by the baptismal washing-of-regeneration-and-renewal in the Holy Spirit.¹¹

The Holy Spirit’s work in the new birth, therefore, is culminated when the sinner responds to the Spirit’s revealed Word by being baptized (Acts 2:41).

CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit’s work in bringing the life-giving seed, the Word of God, is necessary for our conversion. The Bible gives no example of the Spirit’s acting on the heart of a sinner or converting him separate and apart from the Word. The Word of God is the Spirit’s agent by which the heart of the sinner is touched and turned to God. Salvation comes through God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit—each doing His part. We receive salvation only when our faith, which comes through the Word, motivates us to correct a broken relationship with God. We leave the life of sin and come to a new life in baptism, based on faith in Jesus’ blood and in God’s power to resurrect us. We are able to walk in a new life because of the same power He exhibited by raising Jesus from the dead. ■

¹¹Bruner, 259.