

The Two Destinies of Man: Hell or Immortality in the Kingdom

Jesus referred often to the awful destiny of the wicked, namely their destruction in Gehenna or hell-fire. The hell of which Jesus spoke was not, however, the endless torture of popular religion. The biblical hell or Gehenna is very real and of course equally terrible, but Gehenna is a place of destruction, not a place of endless conscious torment. The wicked will cease to exist. They will be no more (Ps. 37:10). They will disappear as smoke (v. 20) and be ashes under the feet of the righteous (Mal. 4:3). They will not experience an endless existence in conscious agony.

They will be reduced to nothing by the same destructive fire which consumed Sodom and Gomorrah. Note Jude 7: Sodom and Gomorrah suffered the penalty of “eternal fire.” But is that fire still burning? Obviously not. When it had finished its work, the fire went out. Until then nothing quenched it. “Eternal fire” then obviously does not mean a fire which goes on torturing the wicked endlessly. The Greek adjective *aionios* means “related to the [coming] age.” The sense then is “the fire of the age to come,” millennial fire or future fire. The fire which destroyed Sodom is not still burning, nor will the future “eternal” fire burn forever. The very fact that the flames at Sodom and Gomorrah are not still burning proves that the same future fire is not a perpetually burning hell for perpetually conscious human beings.

The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges observed this rather simple fact about the language here, found also in Matthew 25:46 (“everlasting punishment”): “The adjective *aionios* = ‘of or belonging to an *aion* or period of time, past, present or future.’ It does not therefore in itself = ‘unending.’”

Bibles which translate the words as “everlasting punishment” or fire do not do justice to the language facts. They simply reinforce what has been wrongly taught in church.

The hell-fire referred to by Jesus has not yet appeared. It appears at the second coming of Jesus. Jesus described two possible destinies: Either to be thrown bodily into Gehenna or to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus advised drastic steps now, in terms of cutting off sin, lest we be destroyed in that future fire. Two individuals, the Beast and his agent the False Prophet, are destined to be thrown alive into the Lake of Fire while others opposing Jesus at his Coming will be killed first and then put into Gehenna fire (Rev 19:20-21).

One of the most amazing scriptural twists connected with hell-fire is the idea that “the worm which never dies” (Isa. 66:24; Mark 9:44-48) means the “never-dying consciousness” of man! It is hard to imagine how such a concept could have entered the minds of churchgoers. It is a testimony to the fact that many churchgoers are not Bereans. They accept gullibly what they hear

preached. Believing that a worm is equivalent to an immortal soul is amazing! The Greek word means “maggot” or “worm.” The Greek word is skoleecks (we are using modern Greek pronunciation here, since that is the way we have taught it, with some other colleges, at Atlanta Bible College). Skoleecks means a worm, often a maggot found in decaying food or bodies.

The Bible does not ascribe to man a “never-dying consciousness.” That notion is the old Platonic falsehood about the immortality of the soul. Scholars of the Hebrew Bible know well that such a picture of man is without foundation in Scripture. The Bible thinks of man as a psychosomatic unit, not a person who can go on living apart from his body. Adam was not told “your body will return to dust and you will go on living”! Rather he was warned that he, the person Adam, would return to the dust from which he was originally taken (Gen. 3:19). Funeral services propagate the Platonic, unbiblical view of man, when they promise the congregants that the dead have “passed away,” rather than (as the Bible says frequently) “died,” or fallen asleep in death, as Jesus plainly said of Lazarus (John 11:11, 14).

The concept of an “undying soul” is an import from the world of pagan philosophy, and it is advisable for those seeking the mind of Christ to abandon it, since it does not reflect the thinking and spirit of Jesus.

Man is naturally mortal. He therefore must gain immortality by obeying the Gospel of the Kingdom (Mark 1:14, 15) now, receiving a downpayment of immortality by being sealed with the holy spirit (Eph. 1:13; 1 Cor. 12:13), and achieving immortality finally at the future resurrection. Jesus said that the reward of the faithful will be acquired “at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:14). 1 Corinthians 15:23 announces that the faithful will be raised from death “at the coming of Christ.” Until that resurrection from death, the believers are of course asleep in death, sleeping the sleep of death, as David called it (Ps. 13:3). Daniel 12:2 is one of the main and most basic testimonies to that future resurrection of the dead. The dead are presently unconscious in the dust of the ground. They will awake from that condition to receive “the life of the age to come” (poorly translated in our versions as “eternal” or “everlasting” life).

The Hebrew text, well known to Jesus, speaks of “multitudes of those who are asleep in dust-land. Some will wake up to the Life of the Age.” Daniel was well informed about the state of the dead. He was told to go to the end of his life, and later rise for his portion in the Kingdom of God (12:13).

The rabbis had understood correctly that the destiny promised in Daniel 12:2 means “the life of the age to come .” They were right to think of that life as belonging to the “age to come.” Since it was life acquired only by resurrection and since resurrection was the great event associated with the future coming of the Messiah, it followed that it was the Life of the Age (to come) — the future great age of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus well understood that the opposite destiny was to perish in the fires of Gehenna. Jesus took “hell” with utmost seriousness and warned those he taught that they should follow him as their Savior and teacher. Few of the sayings of Jesus are more threatening than this: “For I will warn you whom you should fear. Fear Him who after He has killed you has the power to throw you into Gehenna fire. Yes, indeed, fear Him!” (Luke 12:5).

It is good to note that translations which speak here of “killing the body ” are misleading (the NIV is to be avoided here). They insinuate the false idea that the real “you” cannot be killed! Jesus did not say “fear the one who after he has killed the body...” he spoke of the death of the whole person. The wicked according to Jesus will be killed and then cast into the destructive fires of hell as the place where the corpses will be disposed of. Being thrown alive into the lake of fire is apparently reserved for two special individuals, the Beast and the False Prophet (see Rev. 19:20).

The judgment of the unsaved has not yet happened. It will happen both at the second coming and for those who will have died before Jesus returns it will occur at the event known as the second resurrection — so-called because Scripture teaches a “first resurrection.” That first resurrection is for the faithful only — the faithful of all the ages. Revelation 20:4 speaks of this great event, and it will bring back to life all those who have died in Christ (including the saints of the Old Testament times). It is the event described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and in 1 Corinthians 15:23, and Jesus spoke of it as “the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:14). Jesus described those who come back to life at that time as “sons [products] of the resurrection” (Luke 20:36). They are the ones “worthy to take part in that [future] age” (Luke 20:35). They will be granted immortality, which is indestructible life. Their task will then be to rule and reign with Jesus in the Kingdom which he will establish on a renewed earth (Dan. 7:14, 18, 22, 27, etc; Rev. 5:10; Matt. 5:5).

The two possible outcomes for men and women were spelled out clearly by Jesus in many places, but with particular clarity in Mark 9:43-48. In order to follow the biblical plan and program it is essential to give up the idea that a person is conscious in death. If Christians are rewarded the second they die, then what is the point of their future resurrection? Churches have attempted to deal with this question by advancing the ancient falsehood that we are bipartite creatures with an immortal soul. If that is the case, so the Church has argued, then that immortal soul, which inevitably remains conscious, must go somewhere while the body goes to the grave. But the whole theory is flawed by its Platonic, philosophical premise. Man does not in fact possess that ever-conscious immortal soul. Rather the whole man dies and his only hope of recovery and “after-life” is to be raised from death, resurrected when Jesus comes back (or for many others at the second resurrection). John Brown is not in fact in possession of a soul which goes “marching on” while his body is in the grave. John Brown and even Mary and the “saints” are dead and will be resurrected only in the future when Jesus returns (1 Cor. 15:23 is quite decisive on this point).

Some churchgoers are relentless in their opposition to this simple program. They will fall into the trap of pulling isolated verses out of context to reinforce what they would prefer to believe. Starting at the end, rather than the earlier chapters of Ecclesiastes, they will quote Ecclesiastes 12:7 which speaks of “the spirit returning to God who gave it.” This sounds enough like what they have heard in church about the after-life, to be convincing.

But they forgot to read Ecclesiastes 9:5 and 10 which, if language has any meaning at all, propose that the dead are conscious of nothing at all and that there is no praising God or activity of any sort in Sheol or the world of the dead to which we are all going. If one closes one’s eyes to Ecclesiastes 9:5 and 10 and many other equally clear biblical statements about the state of man in death, one is doomed to misunderstand Ecclesiastes 12:7, speaking of the spirit which returns to God. Refusal to believe the straightforward propositions of the Bible (for example “the dead do not know anything,” Ecc. 9:5) encourages confusion in the mind. This is reinforced by church talk about “going to heaven” or “so and so is now safe and happy in heaven.” But the spirit in Ecclesiastes 12:7 is not a conscious immortal soul (that idea has to be imported from paganism), but rather the life-energy of a human being which leaves him when he, the whole person, dies and goes to the grave. Without the sustaining breath of life a human being is dead, not alive in any sense.

“Absent from the body and present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8) is frequently called on to support a doctrine that death is not really death at all but a change of location in full consciousness. But Paul in that passage is at pains to tell us that he wants to be in possession of a new body when Christ returns . At that point he will be equipped with a new immortal body and he will then be with Christ forever. Paul had explained the program quite clearly to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15 and in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 he explained that there is only one way to be “with the Lord [Jesus]” — it is by taking part in the resurrection/rapture event of the Second Coming. You cannot be “made alive” (1 Cor 15:22) if you are already alive! The whole concept of life after death is defeated if in fact we are to be alive after life . Death, that is non-consciousness, is overcome only by resurrection, and resurrection is the great collective event to be brought about by Jesus at his future return to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth. Resurrection restores dead people to life, brings them back to consciousness. Resurrection is a pointless non-event if no one is really dead before being resurrected. Falsehood trades on incoherence and illogicality.

Jesus is the only human being to have attained so far to immortality. He promised that he would spend three days in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40). The Jewish idiom “three days and three nights” does not carry the meaning of 72 hours which that expression would in modern English. The Bible was not written in English, nor were its writers using modern ways of speaking. It is important to see how Jews spoke of various time periods. Jesus said on the Sunday following his Friday crucifixion (Sunday was the third day since Friday reckoning inclusively: “today, tomorrow and the third day,” see Luke 13:32; 24:21), “I have not yet ascended to my Father”

(John 20:17). Jesus, said Peter, was not abandoned to the place of the dead (Acts 2:31). God rescued him from death on the Sunday morning of the resurrection day, by bringing him out of his tomb and giving him life forever.

After being resurrected to life from death Jesus knew that he was destined to ascend to God, his Father. Unfortunately some modern translations, like the NIV, mislead their readers quite badly in John 13:3, 16:28, and 20:17. In those three verses the NIV makes Jesus speak about going back to the Father or returning to the Father. The Greek text does not say that. It speaks of Jesus going to the Father, not going back to the Father. Jesus had not been there before, since his “genesis,” which means his “beginning to be” (Matt. 1:18, genesis), was in the womb of his mother, an essential characteristic of every human being, and Jesus was a human being, not a hybrid angel-man or God-man.

This leads us into our other main topic, the question of identifying the Jesus of the Bible by his origin.

Jesus and His Origin as Son of God

If Jesus was “going back” to God (as NIV mistranslates the Greek in John 16:28), he could not have been a human being, and Mary could not have borne the lineal descendant of David. And if Jesus was not the descendant of David, he could not have been the “ son ” of David and thus could not have been the Messiah (see Matt. 1:1 for his identity as the blood descendant of King David and of Abraham). The New Testament expects us to understand who Jesus is from its very first verse.

You cannot “be in existence” before you begin to exist. Therefore a so-called preexistent Jesus is an impossible idea. Jesus, Gabriel announced to Mary, was to be known as the Son of God precisely because he was produced supernaturally by God in Mary’s womb — and for no other reason (Luke 1:35). That one reason is quite sufficient. Luke 1:35 provides the biblical reason for Jesus being the Son of God. He began to exist by miracle, and it happened in the womb of Mary, not before. Mary truly conceived a descendant of David, and God really became the father of a real son at the time of Mary’s conception. God had promised that He would in the future become the Father of the Messiah and this would have been untrue if God was already (in BC times) the Father of the Son! The Son of God was created in Mary by a biological miracle.

It is thus wrong to imagine Mary taking into herself an already existing Son of God (angel? or second member of a Trinity? or brother of Satan?). Matthew reports that Jesus came into existence “out of” Mary, by having his origin in Mary, and not outside of Mary. Mary was no surrogate mother, but the real biological ancestor of Jesus the Son of God, and thus older than the Son of God. Mothers are not younger than their sons! Jesus was not older than his mother. And

Jesus was certainly not older than his ancestor David who lived a thousand years earlier than he.

For Jesus to be a member of the human race and not an angel or other sort of being, he had to come into existence, i.e., be begotten in his mother. All this was quite simple before the story became a hopeless tangle under the influence of post-biblical speculations. Matthew and Luke set out to report the facts about the “begetting” or genesis of Jesus, when and how it happened (Matt. 1:1: genesis ; 1:18: genesis ; 1:20: begetting in Mary).

To be “begotten” means that one is caused to come into existence . It cannot mean that an already existing Son is transformed into a different being, via his mother’s womb. That would not be a “begetting,” a bringing into existence, a beginning to be. It would be a transmutation or a transformation and all biological links with David or Abraham would be impossible. The real son of David was biologically and lineally related to his ancestors, and this would be out of the question if he was in fact older than his ancestors.

“Preexistence” is therefore a clever way of introducing a person other than the one Mary conceived and God begat in her womb. You cannot logically preexist yourself. The self who began in Mary is the true Son of God. A previously existing Son of God would be a different person and thus a different Jesus. If Jesus was alive before he began to exist, he did not really begin to exist. He did not begin to be, if he was already existing before conception and begetting. Thus a preexistent son actually rules out, cancels the actual Jesus who began “being” in his mother, as all human beings must. Preexistence is a subtle way of introducing a person other than the historical person whose mother was Mary. Mary of course conceived a real fetus who had to be, to qualify as Messiah, a blood relative via his mother of King David. At the same time, Jesus was God’s own Son, since Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. Getting into the Game

It is wise for us all to revisit the very basics of the Christian faith. Confusion about how to become a Christian has been characteristic of much of church history, with competing denominations offering their various systems . The current presence of thousands of divided denominations is hardly a testimony to the one united church for which Jesus prayed “that they may be one as you [Father] and I are one”(John 17:11).

There is a single process in the New Testament, providing us with instruction about how to become a Christian believer. That system has its origins in the teaching of Jesus. The master-teacher, as we know, explained the Christian system of initiation to Nicodemus. Jesus announced the first principles of salvation by saying: “Unless a person is born again, born of the spirit [regenerated], he cannot see or enter the Kingdom of God” (see John 3:3, 5).

In Matthew, Mark and Luke Jesus carried out a relentless campaign in Israel to invite people to salvation by responding to his own Gospel of the Kingdom teaching. He urged his audiences to be

saved by responding to his call to repentance and belief in the Gospel he preached. In Matthew, Mark and Luke this invitation to life in the coming age (“eternal” or everlasting” life) is presented in the parable of the sower and the seed. The seed is defined as the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:11), linking it of course with Jesus’ parallel statement of the same truth about entering the Kingdom by being “born of the spirit,” as recorded by John.

Fundamental to a correct understanding is a fact often overlooked. Jesus intended the same truth exactly by speaking of being born again from the spirit in order to enter the Kingdom (i.e. be saved, John 3), or being generated by the word of the Gospel of the Kingdom. This is the one process by which the Christian “game” is entered.

The process is not that complex. It may be reduced to simple terms as the process of “seeing, hearing, understanding, repenting and being forgiven (SHURF!). Lest we should miss this most basic of all biblical points, the process is repeated three times over in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus is the sower sowing the seed Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:19). Some close their eyes and ears to the saving message. Others respond and with persistence produce the fruit of the spirit. The word of the Gospel is the vital germ creating new life in the believer. The Kingdom Gospel has to be heard and understood. Then repentance and forgiveness follow. Mark 4:11, 12 state this with particular clarity: Jesus says there that an intelligent reception of the word/Gospel/Message which he preached is the trigger of new life which leads to the Kingdom. As the Gospel unfolded in the ministry of Jesus, the later facts about his atoning death and resurrection became part of that same saving Gospel.

In his conversation with the professional scholar Nicodemus, Jesus used the biological rather than the horticultural picture of a rebirth under the influence of the spirit as the essential key to becoming a Christian. To farmers and fishermen by the lake Jesus described the same saving process as the reception of the life-imparting Gospel of the Kingdom, summarized as “the word.” The process is the same, described in different language.

Peter, who heard Jesus preach everywhere, reports the same saving theology as a rebirth from the word which is the Gospel. Here is his critically important confirmation and repetition of Jesus’ theology of salvation, how to enter the Christian journey which leads to indestructible life in the coming Kingdom: “You have been born again, not from corruptible seed but incorruptible seed [cp. Jesus’ definition of the Gospel of the Kingdom as seed, Luke 8:11]...Flowers fade and wither, but that word of God endures forever. And that word is the Gospel which was preached to you” (1 Pet. 1:23-25).

James described the very same entrance into the Christian faith. He said in effect: “By God’s will you have been born from the word of the truth implanted in you” (see James 1:18).

Paul described the same initiation into the Christian life as being “born of the promise” which he then called being “born of the spirit” (Gal. 4:28, 29). Note carefully Paul’s theology of salvation which reproduces the very same words as Jesus to Nicodemus about being “born of the spirit” (John 3:5).

In Titus 3:5 Paul again alludes to Christian rebirth or regeneration, by receiving the gift of the holy spirit.

John in his epistle combines the same ideas as we find from Jesus’, James’ and Paul’s teaching about salvation when he speaks of having been born again from the seed (1 John 3:9). John had been paying close attention to Jesus’ Gospel preaching of course. Christians are “born of God” or born through the seed (Luke 8:11).

The important fact to note is that Christian initiation is said to entail rebirth from the spirit and equally rebirth from the word . This simple fact proves that the word of the Gospel transmits spirit to those who hear and understand and assimilate the Gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus spoke of being born again of the spirit (John 3) and of rebirth from the seed of the Gospel word (in the parable of the sower in Matthew, Mark and Luke). Peter, as we saw, speaks of being born of the word which of course is identical with being born again from the spirit . There is a single process by which we become Christian believers and the saving Gospel is always to be traced back to the original Gospel preacher — Jesus himself. Note the importance of Hebrews 2:3: Salvation “was first announced by Jesus.” This great truth is often lost in contemporary discussions of how to become a Christian.

The words of all prophets in the Bible are spirit-carrying words. Jesus said this beautifully as reported by John 6:63: “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” The words, that is to say, carry the spirit, heart and mind of God, His creative energy. Hence Paul can refer to the saving Gospel/word as “energizing in you who believe” (1 Thess. 2:13). This is exactly the same as the parable of the sower, which makes the saving word of the Kingdom the source of all fruit. And fruit of course is born of the word/spirit . Fruits of the spirit can come from no other Gospel message than the one proclaimed by Jesus.

The disciples of course were the first believers in the Gospel as Jesus preached it and in Jesus as the promised Messiah, bearer of the Kingdom of God Gospel. They accepted the word of the Kingdom and were thus regenerated. They accepted the spirit-words of Jesus (John 6:63). They were empowered thus to go out and preach the Gospel. Gospel preaching in the New Testament is done by those who are under the influence of the spirit of God. The word and the spirit are inseparable.

Before Pentecost the disciples were promised a special filling of the spirit for a unique occasion: the first public appearance of the church, after Jesus had ascended to the right hand of the Father. Thus in Acts we read this:

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. They were amazed and astonished, saying, ‘Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs — we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.’ And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others were mocking and saying, ‘They are full of sweet wine.’ But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: ‘Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day’” (Acts 2:1-15).

Baptism in the Spirit

The phrase “baptism in the spirit” is not found in the New Testament at all, but it has become central to various contemporary systems of theology. The phrase “baptized in the spirit” is the New Testament way of describing the way in which Christians are immersed in the Christian faith (1 Cor. 12:13). We have seen that this process begins with being born again of the spirit, or born again from the word. This teaching goes back to Jesus himself as the key preacher of the Gospel (Heb. 2:3; cp. the warnings against neglecting Jesus as the ultimate Christian teacher/preacher: 1 Tim. 6:3; 2 John 7-9).

The New Testament from cover to cover speaks of baptism as the public act of confession that we intend to become followers of Jesus. Paul speaks of following Jesus to his death, a promise to “take up our crosses” as Jesus commanded. Paul referred to this “baptism” as being buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12). Paul summarized the Christian faith in a series of “unity” statements, including the “one baptism” by which Christians entered the faith (Eph. 4:5). Peter gave us the important lesson that “baptism now saves you — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet.

3:21).

Peter faithfully followed Jesus' fundamental commission to the Church in Matthew 28:19, 20 where he had commanded believers to make disciples and baptize them. Peter demonstrated his obedience to Jesus by insisting that the first Gentile converts in Acts be baptized in water to signify their official acceptance into the body of Christ. This event, the acceptance of Gentiles as equally part of the Christian covenant with Jews, was a colossal event in the history of the Church. As Peter preached the Gospel, the holy spirit fell on those listening. This was proof that the spirit of God had been given to non-Jews and the appropriate response of Peter to this amazing new event was that they be immersed in water. "Who can forbid water that they be baptized?...And he commanded them in the name of Jesus to be baptized" (Acts 10:47, 48).

Paul's conception of the "born of the spirit" experience described by him in Galatians 4:29 is repeated by him in the important account of "entering the Christian game" in Ephesians 1:13. He speaks of his Christian brothers and sisters as "we who were the first to hope in Christ" (1:12). Then he recounts how this happened: "In him you also, after listening to the word of the truth, the Gospel of your salvation, and having believed, you were sealed with the holy spirit of the promise" (1:13). This pattern for Christian initiation reflects and echoes beautifully the standard process for believers as taught by Jesus. First the word of the Gospel of the Kingdom must be heard and then it must be understood, whereupon the believer, who also submits to baptism in water, is sealed with the holy spirit.

Paul repeats the same essential Christian teaching about becoming a Christian in Galatians 3:2 where he is particularly exercised about the dangers of other systems of initiation which will deceive potential converts. Paul asks: "Did you receive the spirit by the works of the law or the hearing of faith?" "The hearing of faith" is one of Paul's ways of describing the hearing of the Gospel. Just as he said in Ephesians 1:13, a convert must first hear and understand "the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation," that is of course the Gospel which initiates you into the salvation process. To the Galatians he adds: "Having begun in the spirit, are you now going to be perfected in the flesh?" (3:3). The idea is preposterous, of course. But note that Christianity begins in the spirit. Peter urged the audience at Pentecost when they had heard the Gospel preached: "Repent and be baptized...and you will receive the gift of the holy spirit" (Acts 2:38). Thousands then obeyed by being baptized in water and receiving that promised gift of the spirit. As Paul said "they began in the spirit." That is of course to say that they were then "born of the spirit," regenerated, born again from the spirit, exactly as Jesus had taught Nicodemus, as the proper entry into the Christian faith.

Now observe how beautifully Paul restates and confirms the all-important sequence of events for becoming a Christian. The Corinthians, threatened with division and confusion, needed to understand, as do many still today, how one becomes a Christian. Here is Paul's summary

statement of the beginning of the Christian life: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). This statement of Paul comes closest to the teaching found elsewhere about being baptized in spirit. But note carefully that Paul is not talking about some second level of Christian experience! He is describing the way Christians become Christians. He repeated this in Galatians 3:2 by linking the reception of the spirit with the initial hearing of the Gospel. He repeated this teaching again in Ephesians 1:13 by echoing the teaching of Jesus about the indispensable hearing of the Gospel and the consequent and connected reception of holy spirit.

The New Testament is united in its insistence that Christianity begins with an immersion in spirit by the hearing of the word/Gospel about the Kingdom. This is the theology of Jesus and his apostles. On no occasion did Paul ever separate initial conversion to Christ from the reception of the spirit.

But today audiences, who are not well instructed, are being invited to receive what is popularly called “baptism in the spirit” (not as such a biblical phrase at all!). And by baptism in the spirit they are being invited to think of a necessary second level of Christianity quite apart from the act of regeneration or being born again. But this is to tear up the unity of the New Testament. It also encourages a two-class system by which some Christians are disparagingly said only to be converted or regenerated but not really spirit-filled! The New Testament nowhere countenances this dual level of Christian experience. (This is not to argue, of course, that Christians should not stir up the spirit given to them, 2 Tim. 1:6.)

Baptized in the Spirit

To be baptized in the spirit means firstly in the New Testament to become a Christian by responding with intelligence to the Gospel as originally preached by Jesus who demanded that his followers “see, hear, understand and then repent and be forgiven” (SHURF!). To be baptized in the spirit is to be drenched in the spirit. Paul made this quite clear in his famous “baptized in spirit” saying: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). Indeed as Paul said in Galatians 3:3, “you began in the spirit.” One enters the Christian life by receiving the spirit via the Gospel as Jesus preached it.

Beginning and Continuing in the Spirit

The holy spirit is given to those who obey God (Heb. 5:9; Acts 5:32) and initial obedience is responding to the call to believe the Gospel (Mark 1:14, 15) and repent and be baptized in order to receive the gift of the holy spirit (Acts 2:38). The coming of the holy spirit marks the conversion and regeneration of the Christian who “must be born of the spirit” in order to be saved, or enter

the Kingdom (John 3:5).

The holy spirit marks the beginning of the Christian life, not a “second level” of conversion. Paul teaches us that the holy spirit is the seal of the Christian believer, marking him out as a Christian: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30). Sealing was effected when the Gospel was received. After all it is utterly impossible to be a Christian without the holy spirit. Paul’s words are clear beyond any misunderstanding: “But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him” (Rom. 8:9).

On the basis of this clear evidence it is obviously a complete fallacy to speak of a Christian as born again, but without the spirit. Such is theologically impossible.

There is nothing passive about the Christian faith. We are to be filled with zeal as we continue in the journey of faith that leads to the Kingdom when Jesus returns to the earth. On that basis, then, Paul urges his disciples to “go on allowing yourselves to be filled with spirit” (Eph. 5:18).

Thus Paul can speak of the same spirit as a supply of divine energy sustaining the Christian life (Phil. 1:19: “the provision of the spirit of Jesus Christ”).

In the book of Acts, being filled with the holy spirit is exactly equated with being “baptized in the spirit.” The equation is established by Luke: “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (Acts 2:4). This “filling with the holy spirit” was described only a few verses earlier as “being baptized in the holy spirit” (Acts 1:5). The expressions mean the same thing: When the event happened they were “filled with the holy spirit.” Now notice that on various occasions the apostles were again “filled with the holy spirit” (Acts 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9). It is clear then that there is no “second level” called “baptism in the spirit.” There should be special fillings for special occasions as demonstrated in Acts, and there must be a continuous filling of the spirit (Eph. 5:18). Luke can describe the passionate Christian equally as “full of the spirit” (Acts 6:3, 5, 8; 7:55; 11:24).

Some have mistakenly thought that there was no spirit at all before Acts! This is quite untrue. John the Baptist was filled with the holy spirit from the womb (Lk. 1:15) and Elizabeth (v. 41) and Zechariah (v. 67) were both filled with the holy spirit. So of course was Joshua (Deut. 34:9). Others too were filled with the spirit: “I have filled him [Bezalel] with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship” (Exod. 31:3).

Some have tried to overthrow all this evidence by pointing to John 7:39 which says literally, “there was no spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.” Then John the Baptist was not filled with the spirit from the womb. And Jesus was not filled with spirit as the preacher of the Gospel? And the disciples went out to do miracles without any spirit. And Jesus’ words to them

were not “spirit and life”?

A fuller impartation of spirit certainly occurred after Pentecost. F.F. Bruce says rightly: “John 7:39 does not mean that the spirit did not yet exist. We have seen the spirit already active in John 1:32. It means that the spirit was not yet present in the form which Jesus promised.” [1]

[1] Commentary on John, p. 182.

Focus on the Kingdom
