

The Holy Spirit and Conversion I and II

That the Holy Spirit is involved in conversion is rarely if ever denied by any Christian. There are three views of how the Holy Spirit works in conversion:

1. He works through a direct operation on the heart of the lost
2. He works directly on the heart in conjunction with the preaching of the Word
3. He works indirectly through the Word, the preaching of the gospel.

In recent centuries most Protestants believed that there must be a “direct operation of the Holy Spirit” upon a sinner for that sinner to be saved. Many religious groups employ practices that emphasize the need for a convicted sinner to “come forward” to the “mourners’ bench” and wait for an emotional experience, which they were told was the coming of the Holy Spirit.¹

This view arose theologically from John Calvin, who taught that man was predestined to be either saved or lost by a sovereign God. Nothing he could do would cause him to be saved if he not among the “elect.”

Total Hereditary Depravity
Unconditional Election
Limited Atonement
Irresistible Grace
Perseverance of the Saints

David Steele and Curtis Thomas in *The Five Points of Calvinism Defined, Defended, Documented* explain Efficacious or Irresistible Grace this way:

Simply stated, this doctrine asserts that the Holy Spirit never fails to bring to salvation those sinners whom He personally calls to Christ. He inevitably applies salvation to every sinner whom He intends to save, and it is His intention to save the elect.

The gospel invitation extends a call to salvation to every one who hears its message. It invites all men without distinction to drink freely of the water of life and live. It promises salvation to all who repent and believe. But this outward general call, extended to the elect and non-elect alike, will not bring sinners to Christ. Why? Because men are by nature dead in sin and under its power. They are of themselves unable and unwilling to forsake their evil ways and to turn to Christ for mercy. Consequently, the unregenerate will not respond to the gospel call to repentance and faith. No amount of external threatenings or promises will cause blind, deaf, dead, rebellious sinners to bow before Christ as Lord and to look to Him alone for salvation. Such an act of faith and submission is contrary to the lost man’s nature.

Therefore, the Holy Spirit, in order to bring God’s elect to salvation, extends to them a special inward call in addition to the outward call contained in the gospel message. Through this special call the Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the sinner which inevitably brings him to faith in Christ. The inward change wrought in the elect sinner enables him to understand and believe spiritual truth; in the spiritual realm he is given the seeing eye and the hearing ear. The Spirit creates within him a new heart and a new nature. This is accomplished through regeneration or the new birth by which the

¹ Jimmy Jividen, *Alive in the Spirit*, 112.

sinner is made a child of God and is given spiritual life... Thus a once dead sinner is drawn to Christ by the inward supernatural call of the Spirit who through regeneration makes him alive and creates within him faith and repentance.²

The soul who sought salvation waited for an *emotional experience* which would give him an assurance or guarantee of his salvation. This guarantee assured the person that he was saved and could *never* be lost. This grace was irresistible. Since the Holy Spirit Himself was said to be the source of these experiences (automatic actions, speaking in ecstatic utterances), the person would feel convinced within himself of his salvation and the presence of God, a “better felt than told” experience.

Jividen observes, “It was no wonder that students of the Scriptures and reasonable men saw such doctrines as false and such experiences as mere emotional excitement.”³ Some have reacted to this “direct operation of the Holy Spirit” in conversion by going to the other extreme. They deny that the Holy Spirit has any work in the world at all today. Their method of refuting the false teaching of Calvinism is to argue the Holy Spirit does not do any work at all.

Instead of showing that such emotional experiences and spiritual exercises were not from the Holy Spirit, they ended up denying much of what the Holy Spirit does do. In some writings of that time (19th and 20th centuries) the reader would think that the Holy Spirit should be put in a box and shipped back to the first century where He belonged. In other writings of that time one would think that the Holy Spirit was imprisoned in the Bible and was forbidden to have free course in the world.⁴

The Holy Spirit does work in conversion. He works through the Word, but the Word does not reveal any example of emotional experiences or paranormal happenings at the point of conversion. Some examples of conversion in Calvinistic religious groups have more in common with pagan religions than with Biblical accounts. “Barking,” “praying through,” and “ecstatic utterances” were never signs of salvation in the New Testament.

How does the Spirit work?

He works through the Word by inspiring the apostles and prophets who wrote the Word (2 Pet. 1:21). Unquestionably, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ (Rom. 10:17).

² David Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism Defined, Defended, Documented* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1971), 48-49.

³ For a concise refutation of Calvinistic doctrine on this point, see J.J. Turner and Edward P. Myers, *Doctrine of the Godhead*, West Monroe: Let the Bible Speak, Inc., 1973), 113-115. See a longer refutation in Curtis A. Cates, *Does the Holy Spirit Operate Upon the Heart of a Saint?* The first proposition of the *Hardeman-Bogard Debate* contains a fine discussion of whether there is a direct operation of the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Jividen, 113. Jividen notes: Within the Restoration Movement were both extreme views of the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. Alexander Campbell, following John Locke’s theory of knowledge, defended the exclusive agency of the Word of God in conversion. Jessie B. Ferguson in Nashville and W. S. Russell in Illinois held to the “direct operation of the Holy Spirit” in conversion. Tolbert Fanning became the most outspoken advocate of the view that the Holy Spirit can work in the world only through the Word of God. More recently Guy N. Woods and Foy E. Wallace Jr. argued this view. Robert Richardson, though denying the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion, advocated that the Holy Spirit did personally dwell in the child of God.

The Holy Spirit is involved in baptism as much as the water is involved (see John 3:5; 1 Cor. 12:13; Tit. 3:5).

The Holy Spirit is involved in conversion as God's gift (Acts 2:38; 5:32), as God's pledge and seal that the convert is God's child (1 Cor. 6:18-19; 2 Cor. 5:5; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). The Holy Spirit who dwells in the Christian gives him identity as God's child and as a brother or sister to all of God's children. This gift is received when one is baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38).

In the conversion of men, one should not rule out the Providence of God. The Scriptures are the means by which faith comes (Rom. 10:17) and are all-sufficient (2 Tim. 3:16-17). But does this mean we should rule God out of the picture? Can we arbitrarily say God has nothing to do with getting sinful man and His convicting Word together through providence?

The example of Onesimus comes to mind. As a slave of Philemon, he came to Paul in Rome, where he learned the gospel and became a Christian. In time Paul sent him back to Philemon with a letter encouraging Philemon to receive him as a brother. In the letter Paul infers that "perhaps" the providence of God played a part in his conversion. "For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (Philemon 15-16). While we do not wish to attribute more to God than Paul does, neither do we wish to rule out that God works in the world today.

Wives who cannot teach their unconverted husbands by a spoken message *may* nevertheless win their husbands by living godly lives (1 Pet. 3:1,2). While the written word is the seed of the kingdom (Luke 8:11), the lived word of God can and does influence people to be receptive to the gospel. The Holy Spirit can and does work in both to bring about conversion.

We must also consider the command from the Holy Spirit through Paul: "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of* thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak" (Col. 4:2-4). If the Spirit works only through the Word, why does the Spirit move Paul to command Christians to pray that God will open a door for the Word? Opening the door for the Word is not the same as preaching the Word; it is preparatory. We do not know how God works in such matters to prepare opportunities and hearts so that they may hear and obey the gospel. Yet we are commanded to pray to God to open doors for the Word and to pray for the preacher that he may be bold. Do we believe such prayers matter? If we do, then we must admit that the Holy Spirit (God) is involved in opening doors for the Word to work.

In determining the truth, one should not look to emotional experiences but to the Scriptures themselves. Anytime one's feelings or experiences contradict the Scriptures, one must realize that while feelings may deceive, the Scriptures are always true.

"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).

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16).

But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart"—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, ⁹that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰for with the heart a person

believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation (Rom.10:8-10).

In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures...Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls (James 1:18, 21).

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For, “ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER.” And this is the word which was preached to you (1 Pet. 1:22-25).

In the parable of the soils, the seed is the word of God (Matt. 13:19-23; Luke 8:11). Scattering the seed, in which is life, is preaching the Word. Owen Olbricht said, “Without the Spirit there would be no Word; without the Word there could be no life or birth; and without life and birth no one could become a member of the kingdom.”⁵ There is no indication here that a direct operation of the Holy Spirit brought about conversion; rather the seed of the Word brought about the life.

At this point we must raise a caution about the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. We must understand that the source of the Word of God is the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). Jimmy Jividen said:

The Word of God and the Holy Spirit are not the same. They are, however, related in their work in the world. The Holy Spirit inspired the Word of God, and the Word of God reveals the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the agent, and the Word of God is the instrument of much of the Spirit’s work in the world.⁶

The Scriptures and the Holy Spirit cannot be separated any more than an agent can be separated from the instrument he uses. When the writer of Hebrews quoted Psalm 95:7, he said, “the Holy Spirit says” (Heb. 3:7). Though David (Heb. 4:7) was the human author of this psalm, the Hebrew writer understood that David was inspired by the Holy Spirit in writing it. David wrote it, but God through the Holy Spirit said it.

We must understand that the Holy Spirit does His work through the Word of God in many ways. Many of the things the Scriptures attribute to the Holy Spirit are also attributed to the Word of God. Jimmy Jividen gives us this chart:⁷

Activity	Holy Spirit	Word of God
Begotten/Born Again	John 3:3-5	James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23-25
Saved	Titus 3:5	James 1:21; Acts 11:14
Sanctified	2 Thessalonians 2:13	John 17:17
Convicts	John 16:8-11	Acts 2:37
Guides	John 16:13	2 Timothy 3:15-17
Comforts	John 14:16-18, 26	Romans 15:4

⁵ Owen Olbricht, *The Holy Spirit: Person and Work*, 87.

⁶ Jimmy Jividen, *Alive in the Spirit*, 53.

⁷ Jimmy Jividen, *Alive in the Spirit*, 54.

Many things done by the Holy Spirit are done through the Word of God. If you were to dig a hole with a shovel, it could be said that a *person* dug the hole or the *shovel* dug the hole. Both would be correct. One statement tells the *who*; the other statement tells the *instrument* that was used.

The Word of God reveals the work of the Holy Spirit. “One would know nothing of the Holy Spirit were it not for the Word of God. Just as the Scriptures are “God breathed” by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is revealed by the Scriptures.”⁸

How the Spirit Works in Conversion

The Spirit played a great role in the Day of Pentecost. The apostles 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 is the first time that the apostles preached “repentance for forgiveness of sins” in Jerusalem (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:5). Peter’s emphasis was not that day on feelings or experiences; he urged the people to “give heed to my words” (2:14). When they heard Peter preach the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, knowing that they were guilty of his death, they were pierced to the heart by his words (Acts 2:37). Peter taught them to “repent and be baptized.” Those who “had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls” (2:41). Notice that the added were the obedient to the Word. In 2:47, the Scripture reveals, “And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (2:47). Those who gave heed to the preaching of the word were obedient in repentance and baptism; these are the ones saved and added to their number (i.e., the number in the church, God’s kingdom, Acts 4:4; 5:14; 6:1,7).

In the conversion stories of the book of Acts, one thing stands out clearly: those who were saved first heard the preaching of the gospel. The Spirit worked through the “sword of the Spirit” to pierce hearts and change hearts.

Examples of Conversion	The Holy Spirit’s influence on the messenger	The Holy Spirit’s influence on the convert
Pentecost	Filled apostles with the Holy Spirit and gave them utterance (2:4)	Pierced to the heart by the things that they heard (2:37), they repented and were baptized (2:38) They gladly received Peter’s word (2:41)
Philip at Samaria	Philip worked signs (Acts 8:6-7, 13) as he preached the gospel	The Samaritans believed the preaching and were baptized (8:12), witnessing the signs.
Ethiopian Eunuch	Angel of the Lord spoke to Philip (8:26); the Spirit told Philip to join the chariot (8:29)	Philip preached (evangelized) Jesus to him (8:35)
Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9, 22, 26)	Jesus appears to Saul and tells him to go into the city where he will be told what he must do (Acts 9:6). The Lord in a vision sent Ananias to Saul (9:10-18) to heal him and that he might be	Ananias was to tell Saul what he must do. Ananias told Saul to be baptized and wash away his sins (22:16)

⁸ *Ibid.*

	filled with the Spirit.	
Cornelius (Acts 10 and 11) ⁹	Peter has a vision (Acts 10:9-16) whose purpose is to open his eyes to the need of the Gentiles for the repentance that leads to life (11:15). The falling of the Spirit on Cornelius was not to save but to convince the Jews of the open door for the Gentiles (11:17-18)	Cornelius has vision to send to Joppa for Peter (Acts 10:3-8). Peter will ‘will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household’ (11:14). Though the Holy Spirit filled the household of Cornelius and they spoke in tongues, the report was that the Word of God came to the Gentiles (11:1).
Lydia	Paul’s vision of the Macedonian call (Acts 16:9-10)	was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul (Acts 16:14)
Jailer	Paul cast out the spirit of a slave girl, which landed him in jail. (Acts 16:17-21). God caused an earthquake and the freeing of the prisoners (16:25-26).	Paul spoke the word of the Lord to the Jailer and his household (16:32). They were baptized, having believed (16:33-34).
Thessalonica	The gospel came with the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:5).	Paul reasoned with Jews in synagogue, explaining and giving evidence that Christ had to suffer. Some were persuaded (17:1-4). The gospel (word of God) does its work in those who believe (1 Thess. 2:13). The Jews were “hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved” (2:16).
Berea		Noble minded, they studied the Scriptures to see if the things Paul spoke were so (17:11). They believed after hearing.
Corinth		Paul was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:4). God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21).
Twelve disciples at Ephesus (Acts 19)		When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5). After Paul laid his hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues and

⁹ Note Appendix A on “The Case of Cornelius”

		<p>prophesying (19:6-7). Paul reasoned and persuaded Ephesians concerning the kingdom of God (18:8); some became hardened and disobedient.</p> <p>“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, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of <i>God’s own</i> possession, to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:13-14).</p>
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The consistent pattern of these examples shows that when the Holy Spirit intended to act directly, He acted upon *the messenger*. When the Holy Spirit worked on *the convert*, He worked through the Word. The Holy Spirit often used messengers to work signs of miracles in order to confirm the Word (Mark 16:20; Heb. 2:3-4). But the message of the gospel is the important means by which the Holy Spirit convicted and converted sinners. While the Holy Spirit supported and confirmed the message through signs, the Word itself without signs is fully able to bring about a change in the soul and life of a Christian.

Born of the Spirit

While forgiveness of sin and standing in the grace of God are most important features of the new birth, the point of conversion is more than merely cleaning up an individual. Conversion seeks to change the heart and life of a person. Calvinists believe that this takes place through a miraculous operation of the Spirit directly upon the heart of a sinner. This assumes that one is born totally, hereditarily depraved and is incapable of doing any good to bring about his salvation. Calvinists believe that faith and repentance are gifts of God and that God actually stimulates the repentance in a sinner in the emotional experience of salvation. But the imperative “repent” argues against this. Repentance is something the sinner does to “die to sin” (Rom. 6:1-2). Conversion is when the old man of sin is dead and a new man, made in the image of Christ, begins living to righteousness (Rom. 6:1-7, 12-19). Paul said to the Ephesians:

So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of* God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Eph. 4:17-24)

Conversion takes place when one is taught the truth (gospel) in Jesus and lays aside the old self (repents). The Christian life is built upon renewing the spirit of your mind by putting away the lusts of deceit and by becoming like God. We are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:1-2). A converted person is one who gets out of the sinning business and into the serving business. This is why conversion is not merely the cleaning up of a person; it is the transformation of a sinner into a saint.¹⁰

If a sinner were merely “cleaned up” but not changed inside, he becomes like the proverbial pig or dog (2 Peter. 2:20-22). Jesus tells of the man who cleans out his house:

“When the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and not finding any, it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and takes *along* seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.” (Luke 11:24-26)

Heaven would be filled with unchanged sinners, if man needs no change when he is converted. James said, “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you” (James 4:7-10).

John 3:3-8

Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus said* to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

The new birth is a birth of water and the Spirit

The new birth involves both elements, both water and the Holy Spirit. Since the Scriptures are clear that baptism brings about both the death of the old man of sin but also newness of life; it may clearly be understood as the new birth (Rom. 6:3-7; Col. 2:12-13; Tit. 3:3-7). John was practicing baptism in water up to this point (John 1:26); and Jesus also was beginning to baptize (John 3:23ff.). Even among the covenant proselytes baptism was a prerequisite to becoming a “perfect Israelite.”¹¹ Proselyte baptism was performed in the presence of three witnesses and was a complete immersion. Alfred Edersheim describes proselyte baptism in these terms:

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion on this point, see Gus Nichols, *Lectures on the Holy Spirit*.

¹¹ Alfred Edersheim, “On the Baptism of Proselytes,” Appendix 12, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Edersheim noted two types of proselytes: the “proselyte of the gate” (God-fearers who believed in God and promised to keep the seven laws of Noah) and the “proselyte of righteousness,” who would become a child of the covenant. To become a “perfect Israelite,” who was bound to covenant with all its promises and duties, a proselyte would have to be circumcised (if male), be baptized in water, and offer a sacrifice. That *baptism* was absolutely

More especially was he to regard himself as a new man in reference to his past. Country, home, habits, friends, and relations were all changed. The past, with all that had belonged to it, was past, and he was a new man—the old, with its defilements, was buried in the waters of baptism. This was carried out with such pitiless logic as not only to determine such questions as those of inheritance, but that it was declared that, except for the sake of not bringing proselytism into contempt, a proselyte might have wedded his own mother or sister (comp. *Yeb. 22a; Sanh. 58b*).

The baptism of covenant-born Jews was rather remarkable. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, wherein the Jew was promising to leave sin and be committed to God. For Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews and a Pharisee that was committed to keeping the Law, this would have been quite a humbling matter. It meant that he needed repentance in his life.

Baptism, whether among the proselytes, the Jews, or Christians, was always unalterably linked to repentance, a change of life.

The new birth is a spiritual birth.

In Christianity, the body is immersed in water, but it is the spirit of the person that is changed. Baptism is not for the filth of the flesh but an inquiry for a clean conscience (1 Pet. 3:21); it is the time when one's spiritual filth is washed away (Acts 22:16). One is changed as to sin, since he is made righteous (justified). One is changed as to relationship, since he is reconciled to God. One is changed in spirit, in that his purposes and practices also change (Eph. 4:17-24).

Jesus said, "That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). The new birth is one that takes place in our human spirit. Conversion means that one is free from sin, free from the love of sin, free from the purposes of sin, and free from the practice of sin. In repentance, one literally dies to the love of sin. We are freed from sin and its consequences by the cleansing blood of Jesus in baptism (Rev. 1:5); but our hearts (our inner spirits) are changed by the Spirit, when we turn our hearts from the love of sin to the love of God. This birth of spirit takes place as we believe, repent and obey the gospel in baptism. Belief and repentance are spiritual exercises which show themselves in confession, baptism, and a change of life. The Spirit regenerates us through the Word, the gospel of grace and mercy (Tit. 3:3-7). That story of love and the cross like a sword (Eph. 6:16) pierces the inner man to convict him of his sins and to bring about a commitment of heart, purpose, and desire.

While most people teach that the Spirit in John 3:5 means the Holy Spirit, there are several erroneous interpretations of "water."¹²

1. "Water" viewed as the Word. Some refuse to see baptism associated with the word "water" in this verse and prefer to understand this as the cleansing effects of the Word of God (cf. Eph. 5:26; John 15:3). Olbricht notes that if the word "water" should be

necessary to make it a proselyte is so frequently stated as not to be disputed (See *Maimonides*, u.s.; the tractate *Massekhet Gerim* in *Kirchheim's* Septem Libri Talm. Parvi, pp. 38-44 [which, however, adds little to our knowledge]; Targum on [Ex 12:44](#); Ber. 47b; Kerith. 9a; Jer. Yebam. p. 8d; Yebam. 45b, 46a and b, 48b, 76a; Ab. Sar. 57a, 59a, and other passages).

¹² See Olbricht, 82-85.

understood figuratively, why are the words “Spirit” and “kingdom” not figurative? In Eph. 5:26 one is washed in water accompanied by the word.

2. “Water” viewed as the Spirit. Some believe the Greek word “and” (*kai*) is better translated “even”: “born of water, even the Spirit.” Nothing in the context warrants this view. Some have appealed to John 7:38-39, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” This, however, is a reference to the Holy Spirit that is given to those who have believed and obeyed (Acts 5:32) the gospel in baptism (Acts 2:38).
3. “Water” viewed as physical birth. Some believe the water here is the embryonic fluid associated with birth. They build their case on Jesus’ words: “that which is flesh is flesh, and that which is Spirit is spirit” (John 3:36). The problem with this view is that Jesus is not speaking about two different births in John 3:5; rather he is speaking about only one birth, a birth that includes both water and Spirit. John does not say “born of water and of Spirit,” as if he were describing two events. Here is one preposition with two objects joined by *kai*, suggesting that the two are aspects of one concept.
4. “Water” viewed as only a sign. Others hold that Jesus meant the “water” of baptism as only a sign of their salvation. They argue that Jesus’ statement does not imply the necessity of baptism for salvation or entrance into heaven. The problem here is that Jesus said one “must” be born again and describes this birth as one of water and the Spirit. Those who have not been born both of “water and Spirit” cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That baptism as a birth of water and Spirit purifies can be seen in John 3:25-26:

Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John’s disciples with a Jew about purification. And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.”