
The Unity of the Spirit

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"In the Bond of Peace"

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Dear Fellow-Believers:

The Bible declares that before the heavens and earth were ever created that God already existed "from everlasting to everlasting" (Psalm 90:2). He is, therefore, the eternal God, "the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see ..." (I Tim. 6:15-16). As the eternal God whose kingdom "rules over all" (Psalm 103:19), God's ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9). In fact, the Bible declares that God's judgments are "unsearchable" and his paths "beyond tracing out" (Rom. 11:33). Man is, therefore, limited in his understanding about the "whys" and "wherefores" of God, his ways, and his creation.

God has not, however, left us without a guide for this life. For he has revealed "everything we need for life and godliness" (II Pet. 1:3) within the Bible, the God-inspired Scriptures (II Tim. 3:14-17). It is here in the holy Scriptures, which are able to make us "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (II Tim. 3:15), that God has graciously revealed to us his reasons for creation, his plan of salvation and his ultimate purposes for those who love him.

The Bible clearly teaches that God's eternal purpose and plan were "destined for our glory before time began" (I Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:3-5, 9-11). The creation of the heavens and earth was not an arbitrary event which simply happened by chance, nor did the world mysteriously evolve out of nothing. Instead, the Bible declares that the heavens and earth were created by a sovereign, loving and all wise God who acted according to his own divine purpose and will (Gen. 1-2; Prov. 8:22-31; Job 38-41; Isaiah 40-43). The first two chapters of the Book of Genesis show that the whole created order of the heavens and earth, as well as all that was within them, had a set purpose and proper relationship with its creator, God.

Simply put, the heavens and all the celestial bodies (sun, moon and stars) were made in relationship to the earth (Gen. 1:14-15). The earth with all its physical elements, plant life and animal life was made to be ruled and enjoyed by man (Gen. 1:26; I Tim. 6:17). And man, created in God's own image, was created to glorify God and to walk in intimate fellowship with him (Gen. 1:26-27; Acts 17:24-28). In short, everything that God created was "very good" (Gen. 1:31), fit within the divine order of his plan, and redounded to his own glory (Psalm 19:1; Rom. 1:20).

After God's creation had been completed, God placed the first man (Adam) and the first woman (Eve) in the original paradise of the garden of Eden. There he abundantly supplied them with all they needed for a life of fellowship with him. But he also gave them the freedom to either enjoy this abundance in harmony with his will or to disobey him and reap the consequences of that rebellion. Genesis chapter two gives us the details:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "you are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:15-17).

Unfortunately, man and woman under the influence of Satan (the serpent, cp. Gen. 3:1; Rev. 12:8), chose to sin against God's command. The consequences of this decision were cataclysmic for both mankind and the entire created order. Sin and death entered the world and, as a result, all of life was thrown into turmoil. Hardship, sickness and death became the constant foes of all humanity (Gen. 3:7-19). Creation itself fell into "bondage to decay" and continues to the present time "groaning as in the pains of childbirth" (Rom. 8:21-22). From that day forward mankind's intimate fellowship with God was broken. In fact, all who were born into the world from that time onward were "dead in sin" (Eph. 2:1) with physical death the common fate awaiting all (Rom. 5:12-14).

But the sovereign God whose "throne is in the heavens" and who "lives forever" (Psalm 103:19; Isaiah 57:15) was not defeated. For in his infinite wisdom he had foreseen the events that would occur. Thus, he set in motion his "plan of the ages" (Eph. 3:11) to bring about the ultimate redemption and salvation of all those who love him. The first great biblical promise of this is recorded in the Book of Genesis, chapter three, as God pronounced doom upon "the serpent" and ultimate victory to God's people:

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Gen. 3:15).

Here, in the colorful language of the Hebrew people, the spiritual battle of the ages to follow is predicted. Satan and his forces of evil will be constantly at enmity with God and his people throughout history. And yet, though the serpent will "strike the heel" of the woman's "offspring," the day will come when "he" (the woman's offspring) will "crush the head" of the serpent. This verse is a wonderful promise for the people of God. For the Bible reveals this promised offspring of the woman to ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus Christ - the promised redeemer. This promise is, therefore, the assurance that through Christ,

the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet (Rom. 16:20).

When this occurs, the cause of man's oppression will finally be destroyed and a new and everlasting paradise will be established forever. It is for the purpose of inheriting this "new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness" that we who have the "firstfruits of the Spirit" wait with patience and hope (Rom. 8:18-25).

Richie Temple

The Promise of Salvation Fulfilled

Christ, the Kingdom, and the New Covenant

By Richie Temple

Cary, North Carolina

Throughout the history of the Old Testament the faithful people of God looked forward to the day when God would send his promised savior or redeemer to restore his people to their original and destined purpose with God (Acts 3:19-21). These faithful people lived by faith in the promises of God. Though living in this world they were, through the eyes of faith, looking forward to "a better country - a heavenly one"² (Heb. 11:16) and to a "city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). And yet, despite having persevered in faith, all of these Old Testament believers died not having yet received these promises (Heb. 11:13). For the day in the timetable of God's plan had not yet arrived for the promises to be fulfilled (Heb. 11:39-40).

Old Testament Prophecies: The Christ and the Kingdom of God

As the history of the faithful people of God continued through the later stages of the Old Testament the vision of this coming kingdom or paradise became even clearer and was foretold by "all the prophets" (Acts 3:21-24). Examples of these prophecies can be found in the Old Testament Books of Isaiah and Daniel. Isaiah spoke of a coming ruler whose righteous kingdom would reign forever:

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his

kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever (Isaiah 9:6-7).³

The prophet Daniel also spoke of a coming everlasting kingdom. A kingdom to be brought to pass by "one like a son of man" and which would replace all other kingdoms and rule so as to establish God's righteous rule forever:

In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed ... it will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever (Daniel 2:44).

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven ... He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-17).

This everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace eventually came to be summed up by the one term - "the kingdom of God." The many titles of its future ruler were also summed up in one term - the "Messiah" or "Christ" - God's anointed Savior and King. It was on this biblical promise of the coming Christ and the glorious everlasting kingdom of God which he was to establish that all the hopes of the Old Testament faithful rested. For then, and only then, would their God whom they loved "wipe away the tears from all faces," "remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth," and "swallow up death forever" (Isaiah 25:8).

The Birth of Christ

When, in the plan of God, "the time had fully come" (Gal. 4:4), Jesus Christ, the promised Savior and King, was miraculously

conceived by the power of God's Spirit and then born into the world (Luke 1:26-2:38). Though the faithful people of God within the Jewish nation were looking expectantly for his coming, much confusion existed as to who this "Messiah" or "Christ" would be and as to what kind of kingdom he would establish. Some four hundred years had passed since the last Old Testament Book of Malachi and during this inter-testamental period the Jewish people had been in captivity to the Persian, Greek and, finally, Roman Empires. As a result, many of the Jewish people of that time were looking for a Messiah or King who would immediately deliver them from their political captivity to Rome and establish a kingdom that would restore Israel to its heights of glory which it had once held under the kingdom of David in the Old Testament.

Jesus was to show, however, that there was much more to his mission than this. For Christ came first and foremost to bring spiritual deliverance to mankind by destroying the work of the Devil (I John 3:8), thus making possible man's reconciliation back to his proper and intended relationship with God (II Cor. 5:18-19). Only after this was accomplished would he be able to come again in power and glory to establish the paradise of God's kingdom in a new heaven and new earth where righteousness would dwell.

The Good News of the Kingdom of God

Jesus began his public ministry at the age of thirty after being anointed with the power of the holy Spirit (Luke 3:21-23; 4:16-21). At that time he made it his chief mission to proclaim, expound, and demonstrate the true nature of the coming kingdom of God which he was to establish. All four of the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - show this. Look, for example, at the Gospels of Mark and Luke:

'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent [turn to God] and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15).

At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.' And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea (Luke 4:42-44).

Jesus stated that he was sent by God to preach the "good news" of the kingdom of God. Why was it good news? Because Jesus, as the anointed Messiah, promised deliverance, salvation and eternal life in the paradise of God's coming kingdom to all who believed his message and accepted him. In addition, he also demonstrated the love, power and deliverance of God's kingdom by many miraculous healings. In this way the power of the kingdom of God was already present in Jesus, the Messiah, before the kingdom itself was established in a restored earth as had been foretold by all the prophets.

This mighty display of God's love and power was a foretaste of all that God's coming kingdom was to be. It also showed the stark contrast between the goodness of God's kingdom and the oppression of Satan's spiritual kingdom that had engulfed the world since the time of Adam. Look at the following verses:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Matt. 4:23).

Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'it is only

by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.' Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Matt. 12:22-28).

Jesus' healings were an invasion of the power of the kingdom of God, which was then in heaven (Matt. 6:9-10), into the realm of Satan and his kingdom of darkness in the world. Since the time of Adam's sin this spiritual darkness and evil had engulfed the entire world (I John 5:19). Only where God's will was done and God's Spirit displayed in power did the light of God's kingdom penetrate and dispel this spiritual darkness of Satan's kingdom. The Book of Acts summarizes Jesus' entire ministry in the light of this spiritual battle as he delivered people from the oppression of the devil:

...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went about doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him (Acts 10:38).

Here we see the key point that had been missing in the understanding of the people of Jesus' day. Their problems and oppression were not due to the Romans, Greeks or Persians who had held them in captivity. Instead, the root cause of their oppression was spiritual. Satan and his spiritual kingdom of evil had, since Adam's day, deceived the world and brought sin, sickness and death into it. The whole world was lying in the web of its spiritual deception and oppression. Until the spiritual causes of

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man's dilemma were defeated and overcome, God's kingdom could not come in all of its power and glory.

The True Nature of the Kingdom of God

Jesus, therefore, opened up the spiritual understanding of his followers. Though God's kingdom will one day fill a new heavens and earth, it will not be a political kingdom based on the worldly standards of this age. Instead, it will be a spiritual kingdom – that is, a kingdom that will come *from* heaven to a renewed and glorious earth, and whose character and standards are "not of this world" (Matt. 6:9-10; John 18:36; Rev. 21:1ff). To enter, or inherit, that future kingdom a person must now be born of God's Spirit so as to become a child in God's family and an heir of that kingdom to come (John 3:1-16; Rom. 8:16-25). Then, at the time of Christ's future second coming all of God's faithful people from all generations will be raised and transformed so as to have a share, or inheritance, in this new world to come. For, as the Apostle Paul was later to state, "... flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50).

In short, the kingdom of God which is to come will necessitate a whole new order of things where the mortal will become immortal, the perishable become imperishable and the entire creation "delivered from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:18-21; I Cor. 15:35-54; Rev. 21:1f). Jesus called this the "making new" or "regeneration" of all things and promised that his followers would be rewarded in that "age to come" for their faithful service in this life (Matt. 19:28-29; Luke 18:29-30).

Christ had also taught, however, that in order to enter the kingdom of God a person's righteousness must "surpass that of the Pharisees" (Matt. 5:20), for God's holiness required perfection (Matt. 5:48). However, since man was unable to attain such perfection on his own (Matt. 19:16-26; Rom. 3:23), it was

necessary that Jesus give his own life as the ransom sacrifice for man's sins - the righteous for the unrighteous (I Pet. 3:18) - so that man could receive righteousness, not by his own merit, but as a gift from God through faith in Christ (Rom. 3:20-24; 5:15-19). As Jesus himself stated, "...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

The Two-fold Purpose of Christ

It was therefore for the purpose of doing for sinful man what he was incapable of doing for himself that Christ had come into the world. As the savior of the world, the perfect man, it was necessary for him to first defeat the spiritual causes of man's oppression and separation from God: sin, death and Satan. Only after this could he come again in power and glory to bring about salvation in all its fullness by destroying God's enemies and establishing forever the kingdom of God in a new heaven and new earth where righteousness would dwell.

Though this two-fold purpose of Christ - his sufferings on behalf of mankind and his future glory - had both been foretold in the Old Testament, the first part was not understood by the people of Jesus' day - not even by his closest followers (Luke 18:31-34). It was only after his sacrificial death, and then resurrection, that Jesus was finally able to open the understanding of his disciples so that they could realize the significance of his crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 24:44-47). As the "lamb of God" who was to "take away the sins of the world" (John 1:29) Jesus freely gave up his own life as the ransom payment for the sins of all mankind (II Cor. 5:21; I Pet. 1:18-21; Isaiah 53). On the third day God raised him from the dead gaining victory over sin, death and Satan for all of God's people.

After his resurrection Christ then appeared to his chosen disciples and taught them about the significance of his death and the glory of God's kingdom to come (Luke 24:44-47; Acts 1:1-11). He then ascended into heaven

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where as the exalted Lord over God's people he poured out the gift of holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost upon all who believed in him. On that same day, after receiving the gift of holy Spirit, the apostle Peter set forth a summary of the events that had just taken place in fulfillment of the plan of God:

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:22-24, 32-36).

Jesus freely gave up his life as a sacrificial offering on behalf of mankind. In doing this he paid the price for man's sins and made possible a new covenant relationship between God and man. No longer does sin have to keep man separated from his proper relationship with God. Because of Christ's sacrificial death, resurrection, ascension into heaven and his giving of the holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, it is now possible for man to be reconciled to God and to enjoy the blessings of salvation already in this present age. The following verses explain the significance of

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these events and the resulting new covenant relationship between God and man:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:6-11).

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance - now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant (Heb. 9:15).

In solving the problem of sin Jesus also made possible freedom from the bondage of death and, therefore, from the oppression of Satan himself. For it was because of sin that death had come into the world and Satan had gained power over mankind (Rom. 5:12). By his sacrificial death and then resurrection Jesus broke the power of death and destroyed Satan's hold on mankind. The NT Letters to the Hebrews and Corinthians explain:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15).

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits, then when he comes, those who belong to him (I Cor. 15:20-23).

Christ is the "firstfruits" of those who have fallen asleep; therefore, his resurrection is the guarantee that all who believe in him will also one day be resurrected to share fully in the eternal life of the coming age. With the death and resurrection of Christ, along with his giving of the holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the end of human history in this present evil age has already begun. The spiritual cause of man's oppression, Satan, has already been defeated and his future doom awaits only the second coming of Christ. As the "firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18), Christ is the beginning of a new people of God (Rom. 8:28-30) - called out from every nation, family or race upon earth.

Those who believe in Christ are now born of God's Spirit becoming children in God's family and a part of his new covenant people - the church of the body of Christ. This Spirit, which the people of God now receive, is the "power of the coming age" (Heb. 6:5) and the "firstfruits" (Rom. 8:23), or "down payment" (Eph. 1:13-14), of the full harvest of eternal life which will be received at Christ's second coming. In short, the victory has already been won for God's people and history is now moving towards a known climactic end - the second coming of Christ and the final establishment of God's kingdom (I Cor. 15:20-28).

The New Covenant Perspective

It is precisely this Biblical perspective that dominates all of the New Testament writings from the day of Pentecost onwards. Christ now "reigns" at God's right hand in

heaven and gives salvation, through the Spirit, to all who come to God through him (Heb. 7:22-25). However, even though his reign as Lord and Christ has already begun, it will not be fully consummated until the time of his second coming when all his enemies will be destroyed and God's kingdom will be established "on earth as it is in heaven." The time period between the first and second comings of Christ is the new age of the Spirit - that is, the age of the new covenant relationship which Christ has established between God and his people (II Cor. 3:6). For with the giving of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost the blessings of God's future salvation have already begun - even in the midst of this present evil age.

This period of time between Christ's first and second comings is sometimes called "the last days" (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; etc.), "the last times" (I Pet. 1:20) or "the ends of the ages" (I Cor. 10:11; Heb. 9:26). But it is also called the "day of salvation" (II Cor. 6:2), because it is the period of time in which the salvation made possible through Christ's first coming is now being offered to the world. For those who choose to accept it the blessings of this salvation begin already in this present life and will be received in all their fullness at Christ's second coming. The Book of Hebrews summarizes the greatness of this two-fold purpose of Christ and the fullness of salvation which awaits those who believe in him:

... But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Heb. 9:26-28).

[Both the opening letter of this newsletter issue as well as this article have been adapted from this writer's booklet "God's Plan of Salvation". The booklet is available free of charge from the address on the back of this newsletter]

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The Kingdom of God: Present and Future

In his commentary on The Book of Acts the late NT scholar F.F. Bruce put the subject of the kingdom of God in its proper light based on its Old Testament background as well as the salvific events of Christ's accomplishments: past, present and future.

"From the earliest times in Israel, God was acknowledged as king (cf. Ex. 15:18). His kingship is universal (Ps. 103:19), but is manifested most clearly where men and women recognize it in practice by doing his will. In Old Testament times his kingship was specially manifested on earth in the nation of Israel: to this nation he made known his will and he called it into covenant relationship with himself (cf. Psalm 147:20). When human kings arose over Israel, they were regarded as vicegerents of the divine King, representing his sovereignty on earth. With the fall of the monarchy and the end of national independence, there arose a new conception of the kingdom of God as destined to be revealed on earth in its fullness at a later date (cf. Dan. 2:44; 7:13-14). It is in the light of this later conception that we should understand the New Testament teaching about the kingdom of God ..."

"At Christ's first coming the age to come invaded this present age: at his coming in glory the age to come will have altogether superseded this present age. Between the two comings the two ages overlap; the people of Christ live temporarily in this present age while they actually belong to the heavenly kingdom and enjoy by anticipation the life of the age to come. Biblical eschatology is largely, but not completely 'realized'; there remains a future element, to become actual at the parousia. A balanced account of the New Testament presentation of the kingdom of God requires that due regard be paid to this future element as well as to those which have been realized"

[F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of Acts*, Revised Edition, pp. 32-33, Eerdmans]

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Born of God

By Tassos Kioulachoglou

Thessaloniki, Greece

The kind of relationship we have with God is certainly one of the most important things that as Christians we should understand. The reason is that there are various kinds of relationships, and if we do not know what is the specific one that connects us with God, it is very possible to not utilize to the full extent all that God has made available to us. Given therefore the importance of this topic and the relative confusion that there is about it, it is necessary to see what the Bible says.

Our Relationship with God

The first thing that will be considered in this article is the kind of relationship that is available for us to have with God. That will leave for the next two sections the examination of how and when this relationship becomes a reality.

Starting therefore from John 1:12-13, we read:

"But as many as received him, to them he gave power to become CHILDREN OF GOD, to those who believe in his name: who WERE BORN, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but OF GOD." (John 1:12-13)
 [All scripture verses cited in this article are from the KJV or NKJV unless otherwise noted]

As we previously said, there are various kinds of relationship that one may have. One of them, and doubtless one of the most important, is the relationship that connects us with those that bore us. However, in addition to those about whom we usually think of when we hear about birth (i.e. our human parents), there is someone else from which one can also be born. Who is he? The answer is God. As the above passage tells us, those who believe in the name that God has made available to believe in – i.e., in his

Son - are CHILDREN OF GOD and ARE BORN OF GOD. In other words, there are two births that a man may have. The one is from his human parents and the other is from God. The fact that there are two births is also confirmed by other passages, as John 3:1-8, where starting from verses 1-3, we read:

"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: This man came to Jesus by night, and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him. Jesus answered and said to him, Verily, verily, I say to you, UNLESS A MAN IS BORN AGAIN, HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD." (John 3:1-3)

As we can see from this passage, to enter the kingdom of God it is necessary to be "born again". Regarding now the phrase "born again", it is a translation of the Greek phrase "*gennethe another*" which means "born from above", where the word "above" is put for God who is in heaven "above". In other words, "born from above" means "born of God", who is in heaven above. As can be seen, therefore, this passage, similarly to John 1:12-13, speaks about a second birth that a man may have, the birth from God, which, as Jesus explains, is a prerequisite for the entering into the kingdom of God.

The fact of the two births is made even plainer in verses 4-5 of the same chapter, where we read:

"Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, "Verily, verily, I say to you, unless one is BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:4-5)

As it can be seen, this passage again tells us that there are two births that one must have to enter

the kingdom of God. The one is the birth from the water, where the word "water" is put for the first birth - which as we will see later is also called birth from the flesh. This is the birth that all people have i.e. the birth from our human parents. However, apart from this birth the above passage speaks also of a second birth, the birth from the Spirit.

Regarding now the word "spirit", though it has many usages, most of the time it is used either (i) of God who is Spirit (John 4:24) or (ii) of what God gives and which is also spirit. Determining the usage of this word in any specific passage, is something that should be seen from the context of the respective passage. Regarding our case, it is obvious that this word is used with the first usage, as it speaks of the giver, the parent of the second birth i.e. God. To this also agree, the context of the passage (see verses 1-3) that is about the birth from above which as we saw is an expression that is used to denote the birth from God.

The distinction between the two births, as well as what is taken from them, is made clearer in verses 6-8 of the same chapter of John, where we read:

"THAT WHICH IS BORN OF THE FLESH IS FLESH; AND THAT WHICH IS BORN OF THE SPIRIT IS SPIRIT. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again [Gr.: born from above]. The Spirit⁷ breathes where it desires, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is every one that is born of the Spirit." (NKJV - Interlinear Bible) (John 3:6-8)

As in the first birth, the birth from our human parents, we got what they are, i.e. flesh, so in the second birth, the birth from above, or from God, we get what the parent of this birth is, i.e. spirit. And as the five senses, the flesh that we inherited from the first birth, enables us to communicate with our human parents, so also the spirit that we inherited from the second birth

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enables us to communicate with our spiritual father, God.

To conclude therefore: God has made it available for man to become His children, through a second birth that gives them what He Himself is, i.e. spirit. How it is possible for a person to become a child of God, is something that we will now examine in the section that follows.

Our Relationship with God: the "How"

To see how one becomes a child of God, we will go again to John 1:12-13, where we read:

"But as many as received him, to them he gave power to become CHILDREN OF GOD, TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIS NAME: who WERE BORN, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but OF GOD." (John 1:12-13).

This passage, apart from telling us that one can indeed become a child of God, also states *how* this may happen. As it says, this occurs by believing "on his name", i.e. on the name that God has made available to believe in and on which there is no other name to believe in for salvation – that is, the name of Jesus Christ. As Peter characteristically said in Acts 4:12 about this name:

"Neither is there salvation in any other, FOR THERE IS NO OTHER NAME UNDER HEAVEN GIVEN AMONG MEN, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

The only name that God has made available to believe in and be saved by is the name of Jesus Christ. What exactly one should believe about Jesus Christ to be saved and therefore born again, is something that is given in Romans 10:9, where we read:

"That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that

God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved." (Romans 10:9-10 NKJV-KJV)

The only that is required to be saved and born again, thus entering the kingdom of God, is to believe that Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead.

The fact that the only way to be born of God is through believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, is also confirmed by other passages about the same topic. One of them is I John 5:1, where we read:

"WHOEVER BELIEVES THAT JESUS IS THE CHRIST IS BORN OF GOD: and everyone who loves him who begot also loves him who is begotten of him."
(I John 5:1)

Moreover I John 4:15 tells us:

"Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God."

As it can be seen from these passages, when one believes that Jesus is the Christ i.e. the Messiah, the chosen one of God, he is born of God. Thus, this passage as the previous one, tells us that the only way to be born of God is by believing in Jesus **CHRIST**. And because almost everyone believes something about Jesus (wrong or right), it should be made clear that what is important is not that ones believes, but **WHAT** one believes. Only believing what the Bible says are the things that should be believed for salvation, can really give salvation.

This is really a point of special importance, as the devil has guided great masses of people to believe some "good" things about Jesus (as for example that he was "a good man", "a great humanitarian" etc.), denying however such fundamental truths for salvation as the resurrection or that he is the Messiah and the Son of God.

To conclude therefore: We are not all children of God, as many believe, because as they say, "we all believe in the one God". To

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their surprise, the Bible does not speak for one God. Instead, it speaks for ONE **TRUE** God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ and another false god, the devil, the "god of this world", as II Corinthians 4:4 characteristically calls him. Moreover, the Bible defines ONE and not many ways that guide to the ONE TRUE God. This way is no other than Jesus Christ. As Jesus said in John 14:6:

"Jesus said to him, "I AM THE WAY, the truth, and the life: NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER, EXCEPT THROUGH ME."

Jesus is the ONLY way to God. By believing what the Bible requires to believe about him, we are saved and born of God. All the other beliefs that are supposed to guide to "the one god" are false ways that though indeed guide to a god, they do not guide to the big "G" God, the Father of Jesus Christ but to the false god, the devil.

Though from the above two passages it should already be clear that one is born of God by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, let's also examine one more passage that will reconfirm what we have seen by now. This passage is Galatians 3:22-4:7, where starting from verses 22-24 we read:

"But the scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up to the faith which would afterwards be revealed. Therefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."
(Gal. 3:22-24 NKJV-KJV)

Many Christians believe that the law is still valid and continue to follow it, thinking that there they will find the will of God for our administration. Obviously, the main cause of this confusion is the inability of discriminating among the various Biblical administrations. As

the above passage tells us, "the law WAS OUR SCHOOLMASTER to bring us unto Christ THAT WE MIGHT BE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH". Obviously therefore, the law is not still our schoolmaster. It WAS. The fact that now we are no longer under the law is made even clearer in Galatians 3:25, where we read:

"But after faith [or believing] has come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster."
(Gal. 3:25 NKJV-KJV)

Who was our schoolmaster? The law. Are we still under a schoolmaster? NO. Why? Because "faith [or believing] is come" and we can, by believing in Jesus Christ, be saved, and at the same time born of God, thus becoming sons and daughters of God. Really, as verses 26-28 tell us:

"FOR YOU ARE ALL SONS OF GOD BY FAITH IN CHRIST JESUS. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
(Gal. 3:26-28)

WHAT are we? The children of God.
HOW? BY BELIEVING IN CHRIST JESUS. Now, there is neither Jew nor Gentile (this is meant by the word "Greek") there is neither male nor female, there is neither bond nor free. Instead we, all that believe in Jesus Christ, are all one, being all members of the same family, the family of God. In contrast therefore to the world, whose main characteristic is discrimination, in Christianity the main characteristic is unification, under the name of Jesus Christ. Reading further, verses 1-7 of the fourth chapter tell us:

"Now I say, that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all; But is under tutors and stewards until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage

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under the elements of the world: But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because YOU ARE SONS, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. THEREFORE YOU ARE NO LONGER A SLAVE, BUT A SON; AND IF A SON, THEN AN HEIR OF GOD THROUGH CHRIST." (Gal. 4:1-7)

What are we? What is our identity? Children, sons and daughters of God. Do we have therefore the right to call God our Father? Of course yes, as we are His children. That's why the title "father" is used of God so many times in the part of the Bible that refers to our administration. For God is really our father, our "Abba father" as the text says, and as Christ called him in Mark 14:36. There, it was Christ that called Him "Abba Father". Today it is the spirit of Christ in us by which we also call Him with the same title. As also the text says, today we are no longer slaves of God, as many believe, but CHILDREN OF GOD, and thus heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. Really as Romans 8:17 tells us:

"AND IF CHILDREN, THEN HEIRS - HEIRS OF GOD, AND JOINT-HEIRS WITH CHRIST;" (Rom. 8:17)

How was this obtained? Only by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his resurrection. Isn't that amazing?

Now We are the Children of God

In the above sections we considered our relationship with God and how it becomes a reality. Among the passages that speak for this reality is also I John 3:1-3. There we read:

"Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did

not know him. Beloved, NOW ARE WE THE CHILDREN OF GOD, and it has not yet appeared what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."

(I John 3:1-3)

What are we? Children of God. When? The text does not say when we reach a certain level of good works and behavior or after wedie. What it says is that WE ARE THE CHILDREN OF GOD NOW, at the present time. It is a reality that happens NOW, and started from the day we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his resurrection. If we think and care for our children, really how much more God thinks and cares for his own children, among whom many of us also belong? As Matthew 7:11 and Psalms 40:5 characteristically tells us:

"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, HOW MUCH MORE will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?" (Matt. 7:11)

and Psalms 40:5

"Many, O LORD my God, are your wonderful works which you have done, and your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted to you in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered."

God thinks and cares for us, his beloved children, many times more than we care for our children (his thoughts towards us are innumerable, as Psalms 40:5 tells us). As a good father (the best), He is always with us, protecting and caring for us. As He Himself confirms and encourages us:

"I will NEVER leave you, nor forsake you. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me." (Heb. 13:5-6)

and Matthew 10:30-31

"But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. DO NOT FEAR THEREFORE..."

We might have had reasons to fear when we didn't have the Lord as our helper. However, this does not happen now. Today we are the children of God, the children of the creator of heaven and earth, of the one that made everything, seen and unseen. Really, what is impossible, when we have such a mighty Father? What should we fear? "... tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?....NO, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Romans 8:35-37). For as Jesus says in John 14:12 and Paul confirms in Philippians 4:13

"HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME, THE WORKS THAT I DO HE WILL DO ALSO; AND GREATER WORKS THAN THESE HE WILL DO, because I go to my Father." (John 14:12)

and Philippians 4:13

"I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST WHO STRENGTHENS ME"

Such is the power that we have as children of God. It is not a power that comes from our first birth but from the second one, the birth from God. It is not a power that we have by "believing in ourselves", but a power that we have by believing in Christ and the abilities of the almighty God, who is now our father and who backs up our steps in life.

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Notes & Quotes on the Bible

The Washing of Rebirth

The purpose of being born of God is to become a child in God's family and an heir of God's glorious kingdom to come. This subject is one of the most important and, unfortunately, controversial topics in all of Bible scholarship. It is important because of its life changing and practical effects on the life of a person who is born of God by virtue of accepting Jesus Christ as his risen Lord (I John 5:1-12). However, it is also controversial because of disagreement over whether this new birth occurs *by means of* water baptism or simply *by means of* faith in Christ - irrespective of water baptism. This article will support the latter view in the firm belief that God is not bound by ritual of any kind; instead, he looks on the heart and gives his Spirit in direct response to faith (e.g. Acts 15:7-9). Though water baptism can be highly significant and very meaningful in many of its forms, we believe that it is only *symbolic* of the much greater spiritual reality that occurs at the moment that a person initially chooses to believe in and confess our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

There are only a couple of verses that speak *directly* to this subject and we will let the scholars speak for themselves:

John 3:1-8:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he can not enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (NIV).

James Dunn, the highly respected NT scholar who is Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, England, has done a close study of these verses in his book *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Westminster Press). I quote from his chapter "The Spirit and Baptism in John's Gospel" (pp. 183-194):

Does John give us to understand that the Spirit is mediated through the sacrament of baptism? One automatically thinks of 3:5, and the affirmative answer really stands or falls with this passage. The chief arguments for seeing a baptismal reference in 3:5 are as follows:

- a. The sacramentalism of John: together with 6:15-58, 3:5 is regarded as the most explicit of the sacramental references.
- b. In view of the almost thematic repetition of 'water' in the early chapters of John, it is often said that 3:5 is the Evangelist's [the apostle John's] description of Christian baptism in contrast to John's [the Baptist's] ...
- c. The reason most frequently given is that the Christian reader of 3:5 could not fail to think of the rite of initiation [baptism] into the Church.

After exploring the background of the symbolic usage of the words "water", "bread",

“flesh”, etc. – especially showing how “water” is used symbolically for “Spirit” in other places in other chapters of John (eg. Chs. 4, 7, and 9) - Dunn makes the following comments about the so-called sacramental understanding of John 3:5 in relation to water baptism and the new birth:

In the light of these facts we must re-assess the three arguments used to support the view that 3:5 is baptismal reference.

- a. ‘The sacramentalism of John’ is a misnomer. John is not really interested in the sacraments in his Gospel. This does not mean that he is anti-sacramentalist; but it certainly excludes the view that much of his symbolism was directed towards the sacraments. We may say that his symbolism points to and portrays the same basic facts of the eternal life won and bestowed by Jesus which the sacraments point to and portray. But that is quite different from saying that his symbols portray the sacraments themselves and indicate that the eternal life is received through the sacraments. This we cannot say. What our survey has shown is that John’s symbolism always centres on Jesus, and on, Jesus as the mediator of eschatological salvation – that is to say, on Jesus in his salvation-effecting action at the climax of his ministry in his glorification and exaltation, above all in his giving of the Spirit; for it is through the Spirit that eternal life is bestowed on his followers ... This greatly lessens the probability of a sacramental reference in 3:5, and any suggestion that water-baptism is the channel through which the life-giving Spirit is mediated is almost totally excluded.
- b. The argument drawn from the context of the Nicodemus episode is greatly weakened. In the immediate context, water stands on the far side of the contrast between the old and the new dispensations – as that which the gift of the Spirit is contrasted. But the water reference in 3:5 is of a different order: in 3:5 water is a co-ordinate, not contrasted, with the Spirit. It is more likely therefore to belong to that other set of water references which symbolize something other than water. Moreover, in the parallel episode in

ch. 4 we have an example of that other Johannine use of water – as a symbol of the life-giving operation of the Spirit (4:14). If there is any significance in the fact that these water references, together with 7:38, are the only one which appear on the lips of Jesus, and that on each occasion there is a triple link between water, Spirit and life, it would suggest that the water of 3:5 likewise symbolizes the life-giving operation of the Spirit.

- c. The argument that no Christian reader could fail to see Christian baptism, though powerful, must give precedence to the argument drawn from John’s theology. Besides assuming that we know when the Gospel was written, and the sacramental understanding of the readers to whom it was addressed, it assumes also that it was John’s intention to fit his writing into the context of that understanding and not to challenge or alter it in any radical way. But the gospel itself hardly gives these assumptions credibility. On the contrary, John seems to be challenging any sacramentalism which he assumes on the part of his readers.

We must bear in mind that Jesus expected that Nicodemus should be able understand what he was talking about based on the Hebrew Scriptures. This rules out Christian water-baptism and points rather to water as a symbol of the life-giving power of God through the Spirit, as the Old Testament often portrays it. Summing up his arguments, Dunn concludes that the phrase in 3:5 “born of water and the Spirit”

“... is a hendiadys, and the single preposition governing both words indicates ... a single concept – water-and-Spirit. This implies either that Christian conversion-initiation is a (theological) unity of which both water-baptism and Spirit-baptism are integral parts (in which case the verse does not tell us how they are related), or that the water is a symbol of the life-giving power of the Spirit as in 4:14 and 7:38. The latter is perhaps more likely in view of the fact that the OT finds water a fitting symbol of God’s activity in quickening

men to life (e.g. Isa. 55:1-3; Jer. 2:13; 17:13; Zech. 14:8; Ezek. 47:9), and one not infrequently linked in Jewish thought with the eschatological re-creation and renewal effected by the gift of the Spirit (Isa. 32:15-17; 44:3-5; Ezek. 36:25-27; 39:29; Joel 2:28). It should not go unnoticed that the closest parallels to the water and Spirit correlation of John 3:5 are to be found in Ezekial 36:25-27 and I QS 4:20-22 [in the Dead Sea Scrolls]. The further we set John's Gospel into the context of Palestinian Judaism, as expressed particularly in the Qumran sect, the more weight will we have to give to this use of 'water' with 'Spirit' to symbolize renewal by the Spirit. Nor should we forget that John's baptism seems to have been for the Baptist himself a symbol of the eschatological purging effected through the Spirit. As it is the Spirit-of-truth which makes spiritual worship possible (4:23f.), so it is the water-of-the-Spirit which effects birth from above.

The next verses are Titus 3:5-7:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we become heirs having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7).

In his book, *God's Empowering Presence* (pp. 857-858) Gordon Fee, Professor of New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver,

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P.O. Box 467
Cary, NC 27511

B.C., Canada, explains the importance of the role of the Spirit in these passages about "washing" and "rebirth":

The metaphor "washing" as a work of the Spirit first occurs in I Cor. 6:11 ... This metaphor occurs again, along with the metaphors of "rebirth" and "renewal" in Titus 3:5 ... The final genitive "of the Spirit" is the key to the whole. Salvation is not appropriated through baptism – that is foreign to Paul – but through the work of the Spirit, which in this case is imaged as a "new birth" or a "renewal" in the new believer's life.

The two words "new birth" and "renewal" are as close as one comes to the concept of "regeneration" by the Spirit in the Pauline Corpus. But if this metaphor is itself infrequent, the idea behind it is thoroughly Pauline, namely, at the beginning of one's life in Christ one has been given life by the Spirit himself. In Paul's view, the "washing" is that "of the Spirit" which includes rebirth and renewal. By the Spirit, God not only cleanses people from past sins, but also transforms them into his people, "reborn" and "renewed" so as to reflect God's likeness in their lives.

[For more information on this subject I recommend a detailed study of the two books quoted above and the articles "Baptism" and "Spirit, Holy Spirit" in *New Bible Dictionary*]

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E-mail addresses: richie@unity-of-spirit.org

gracemusa@home.com

Web-site: <http://www.unity-of-spirit.org>