

## Spirit, Mind, Word and Regeneration

The parallel between “heart” and “spirit” in the Hebrew Bible points strongly to the spirit as the very self of God operating in our hearts, the heart of the Christian providing a residence for the creative activity of God — His Spirit (2 Cor. 1:21, 22). How very much more personal is the idea that God shares His very heart with us, rather than simply His power. The latter, without further definition, sounds cold and impersonal and brings nothing of the warmth and intimacy conveyed by the “heart.” The God of Israel put His heart in the temple (1 Kings 9:3). He shares the plans of His heart with every generation (Ps. 33:11).

Spirit and mind are also most interestingly interchanged, telling us again that God transmits to us the center of His being. When Paul marveled at the divine Plan, he quoted Isaiah 40:13: “Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord or as his counselor has informed him?” Paul was happy to cite the verse as the LXX had rendered it. Spirit had been translated as “mind” (see Rom. 11:34; 1 Cor. 2:16). The equation of spirit and mind is found also in Paul’s illuminating discussion of the spirit in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 where spirit and wisdom are interchanged and the passage comes to its climax with Paul’s joy over the Christian possession of “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16).

Spirit and mind are again closely related when Isaiah speaks of the time coming when “those who erred in mind [lit. spirit] will know the truth and those who criticized will accept instruction” (Isa. 29:24). The absence of “holy spirit” led to a failure of understanding. They will receive indeed a new heart and a new spirit dramatically affecting their power to reason and grasp truth. John’s preference for “the spirit of the truth” as the designation of the holy spirit/counselor reminds us that truth is the essential characteristic of the holy spirit, which is the mind, heart and character of God as His operational presence with believers.

“Word” is intimately linked with spirit. Just as breath carries the audible voice, so words transmit the spirit and the thought of God. “To whom have you uttered words and whose spirit was expressed through you?” asks Job (26:4). Words are the audible form of the spirit which

inspires them. Likewise in Proverbs 1:23 Wisdom declares; “I will pour out my spirit on you. I will make my words known to you.” The words are the words of the spirit, recalling Jesus’ striking statement that “the words I speak to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). Indeed it was the unparalleled measure of the spirit in Jesus which enabled him to “speak the words of God” uniquely (John 3:34; Cp. 2 Sam. 23:2). In the Bible, therefore, we have a collection of “spirit-words”: indicators of the very life and thought processes of God Himself, imparting His very being to us. All Scripture, written words, is “inspired” by God (2 Tim. 3:16).

This fundamental biblical terminology is nowhere more critically important than in the definition of regeneration, the doctrine of Christian rebirth. It is here that the Bible dictionaries often fail to root the vital facts about rebirth in the teaching of Jesus, with whom this central doctrine originates. The parable of the sower is given immense prominence and space in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and Mark reports Jesus as saying that this parable is the basis of all parables (Mark 4:13). It is also the *locus classicus* for understanding the process of regeneration. The spirit is not mentioned in the parable but the activity of the spirit is implied in the “word” which must lodge in the human heart, just as seed germinates in the soil. In the world of the Bible the spirit is the life of God communicated by a “word.”<sup>1</sup> The word is the medium of the spirit, and the word in Jesus’ parable about regeneration is expressly said to be “the word about the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19). No other word will do. The spirit as the character and mind of God is planted in the human heart when receptive minds grasp the saving Gospel of the Kingdom.

To miss this point is virtually to miss the intention of the whole of our New Testament. One can discuss at length (as Bible dictionaries do) the teaching of Peter that it is the “seed” of the Gospel which causes the believer to be born again (1 Pet. 1:23-25). One can speak of John’s account of Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus in which the spirit is the agent of the rebirth. One can refer to James’ discussion of regeneration through the “word of Truth” (James 1:18) and to John’s allusion to the vital “seed of God” as the indispensable factor in the new life (1 John 3:9). But little progress in understanding is achieved if the teaching of Jesus, on which the Apostles depend, is omitted from the discussion. Yet this is precisely the case in much contemporary teaching about regeneration: The “seed-word of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:11) provides the

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<sup>1</sup> Cp. Ps. 33:6; 51:11; 104:30; 139:7; 2 Sam. 23:2; Prov. 1:23.

initiating spark of life on which the new creation depends. No wonder that Jesus observed that “when anyone hears the word of God [the Gospel of the Kingdom — Matt. 13:19], the Devil comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart, so that he cannot believe it and be saved” (Luke 8:12). When delivering this marvelous teaching, Jesus would customarily raise his voice (Luke 8:8).

Apparently, according to Jesus’ illuminating intelligence report, there has been a dramatic theft of the vital seed of regeneration provided by the word of the Gospel as Jesus preached it. Bible dictionaries and “theologies” of the New Testament, valuable as they are in so many ways, attest to that loss. They fail to tell us that without the intelligent reception of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God no planting of the divine seed takes place, and no spirit of new life is communicated. When this tragedy occurs the very self of God, His spirit, is denied to the potential convert. As E. F. Scott says so well

a word in the Bible is something real and active . . . a vehicle of living power. Through His word God communicates some part of Himself. His energy passes over into matter previously dead or into human souls, which are then awakened to newer and higher activities. A similar quality is ascribed by John to the words of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

For Jesus the key issue is our responsiveness or non-responsiveness to the life-imparting “word of the Kingdom,” the saving Message (Matt. 13:19).

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<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, Vol. II, T & T Clark, 1917 “Word,” 838.