AFFIRMED: The only basis upon which one may know that the Holy Spirit indwells him is the promise of God, Who said He would give that gift at baptism (e.g., Acts 2:38). That a person exhibits fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) does not necessarily mean that he is inhabited by the Spirit. All people are created in the image of God, so it is to be expected that everyone will display some degree of love, joy, peace, etc. And people are able to keep God’s moral law to some extent without the indwelling of the Spirit, as proven by benevolent atheists and other non-Christian philanthropists.

QUESTION: How may the words of Jesus at Matthew 7:18 be reconciled or harmonized with this statement? How is it possible for a non-Christian (bad tree) to produce good fruit? Do not the words of Jesus mean that anyone who produces good fruit must be a Christian (good tree) indwelt by the Holy Spirit (regenerated)?

COVENANTAL CONTEXT

It is necessary to identify the context in which something is said or written in order to understand correctly the author’s intended message. The words of Jesus in Matthew 7 were spoken in the context of the Old Covenant. At the time Jesus lived the Holy Spirit did not dwell within people. The benefits of His indwelling, therefore, were not available. The writings of Paul, however, were in the context of the New Covenant. His letters were written to Christians, all of whom, by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit they received at their baptism by the promise of God, had the capacity or power to produce the spiritual fruit corresponding to the divine nature. The point is that the words of Jesus in Matthew 7 should be understood in the pre-Pentecostal context.

CONTEXTUAL PURPOSE

Matthew 7 relates to identifying false prophets by examining the results (fruit) of their teaching. The point is that the teaching of false prophets does not produce faithful disciples of Jesus. Jesus is not saying here that false prophets are incapable of doing anything good. Nor is He implying that His disciples are incapable of doing anything wrong or bad. Despite any good things false prophets may do, and despite any good qualities a false prophet may exhibit, the outcome of his teaching will fall into the category of bad fruit. Jesus is here warning against people who look, smell, and taste like His disciples but are impostors. Worse than that, they are deceivers. They are wolves disguised as sheep (by imitating characteristics of sheep – i.e., simulating the Spirit’s fruit).

Jesus’ warning is consistent with our affirmation (above) that just because a person exhibits what looks like the fruit of the Spirit does not mean he is indwelt by the Spirit and, therefore, a Christian. Beware! Do not be deceived! What looks like a sheep is not always a sheep. You do not want to be among the bad fruit they produce through deceptive means. Avoid them. Reject them.

The very next thing Jesus says in this context emphasizes the point. Jesus does not recognize these imitators. He doesn’t know them. In fact, He rejects them, identifying them as those who practice lawlessness (vv. 21-23).

NATURE OF THE FRUIT

Matthew 7 refers to the results of teaching – the fruit borne by the seed, fertilizer, and cultivation utilized by these impostors. The fruit to which Jesus refers is not descriptive of the “good tree” or the “bad tree” itself, but rather of those who subscribe to what the false prophets teach – those produced by the tree. People who believe their false message comprise the “bad fruit.” There are two parties involved in Matthew 5 – The teacher and those who follow the teacher.

In Galatians 5, however, there is only one party involved – the Christian. Paul refers to the personal display of divine characteristics emanating from the one who is controlled by the Holy Spirit. Paul’s focus is not upon the extended results in the lives of other people. In fact, no one else is even in view. He is affirming the fact that the Christian has the power of the Holy Spirit of God within him to be victorious in the battle between the Spirit and the flesh (see v. 17). By the Holy Spirit’s power we can display the divine nature and not be defeated by the flesh.

DOCTRINAL / LOGICAL FALLACY

The one who affirms that the display of this fruit indicates that a person is a Christian has some serious considerations to harmonize or explain. What about the benevolent atheist or the genuine Mormon? What do we think of the selfless benefactor and philanthropist who, though religious, does not believe the claims of Christ? Does the display of the Spirit’s fruit identify one as a Christian, despite the fact that he does not subscribe to the teaching concerning Jesus?

Think about this from the standpoint of logic. God is the One who determines who is saved. The Holy Spirit is given by Him alone. He is the one Who decides who receives His gifts. To put ourselves in the role of determining who has the Spirit, based upon our human observation and examination of fruit, is to assume a role for which we are woefully unqualified, due to the fact that we have been and can be deceived.
But for the sake of argument, consider the difficulty we encounter when we assume that the appearance of good fruit emanating from one’s life leads us to the conclusion that he is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Since everyone is created in the image of God and displays by nature some of His divine characteristics, what quantity and quality of fruit is needed to determine that the Holy Spirit inhabits a person and may be considered a Christian? Who has the ability or authority to make that determination? Is salvation to be determined on a subjective basis? Each of us has a differing opinion about the same person. Which one of us, then, is bold enough to assert that our evaluation is the one that should form the basis for determining another’s relationship with the Lord? Fruit does not make a Christian, but rather marks a Christian. In other words, it isn’t our fruit that determines our relationship with God, but our relationship with God will be indicated by fruit.

Such “fruit inspection” provides no objective basis by which to make this determination. Therefore, it is up to each person to subjectively make his own determination. And that means that salvation is whatever you want to make it. That means that each of us has to determine whether or not we are saved based upon the standard we have set. That means that each of us is, for all intents and purposes, our own god. And that means that God is not God. And that means we are all lost. Or it means we are all saved. If each of us is free to determine the degree of fruit bearing that is essential for salvation, then we have to conclude that everyone is saved, because the threshold will be different for everyone. We will want to make it low enough to accommodate those whom we love, so we will change the standards to make allowances. The necessary end to that process is that there is no threshold and everyone is saved.

One may well say that the determining factor is that a person espouses faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus clearly and definitively rejected this (Matthew 7:21-23). We are back to a subjective basis by which to determine one’s salvation. Jesus provided a purely objective basis – “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). The Holy Spirit expressed it this way through the Apostle Peter, “Repent and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). There is nothing subjective about this. It is a clear and precise, completely objective basis, a definite and knowable event to which we may confidently point as the moment we received God’s grace gifts, trusting the promise of God.

To make Matthew 7:18 a test of the Spirit’s indwelling necessitates taking the position that the one who is not indwelt can do nothing good and the one who is indwelt can do nothing bad. This position also amounts to salvation by good works.

It is not the point of either passage that a person’s salvation be determined by the fruit he exhibits. Instead, the point in Galatians 5 is that the one who is inhabited by the Spirit of God will exhibit this fruit. It isn’t the fruit that determines the Spirit’s presence, but rather the promise of God. There is no connection or parallel between Matthew 7 and Galatians 5.

CONCLUSION

The Bible teaches that baptism into Christ for the remission of sins is when God promises to give us His gift, the Holy Spirit, to take up residence in us. To affirm that the Holy Spirit is given at some other time is to completely rob baptism of its purpose and meaning. The Bible speaks of no other purpose for baptism other than the gift of forgiveness and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. To affirm that the Holy Spirit is given at a time other than baptism – that one can be saved / regenerated who has not been immersed into Christ – also means we can be saved apart from our participation in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, which Paul clearly states occurs in baptism (Rom. 6). To affirm that one may be regenerated by the Holy Spirit at a time or on an occasion other than baptism is also to contradict the teaching of Colossians 2:12, which clearly states that it is in baptism that God does His work of raising us to new life. To diminish or deny the necessity of baptism for salvation, therefore, is a most serious error. Baptism and regeneration by the Holy Spirit cannot be separated. Likewise, baptism and the indwelling of the Spirit cannot be separated.

The objective basis established by Jesus is that one who repents and is baptized shall be saved (Mark 16:15-16). The Holy Spirit’s answer through Peter is that the one who repents and is baptized in the name of Jesus will receive the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). This is the clear and consistent message of all the apostles. It is the uniform practice followed in every conversion recorded in Scripture. It is simple, straightforward, and determined by God, not man. It leaves no guesswork or judgment. Inspecting fruit is not for the purpose of determining one’s salvation, but rather to be judicious in selecting whom we will follow and to whom we will listen.