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POWER OF THE NEW BIRTH

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REGENERATION:  
BEGINNING WITH GOD

ERIC ALEXANDER

# EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF  
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

SPRING 2019

No. 26

## THE NEW BIRTH



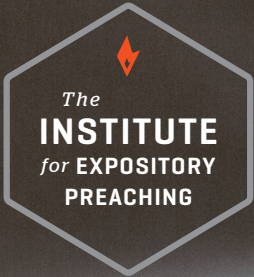
SPECIAL FEATURE

### THE NEW BIRTH

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# EVANGELISTIC POWER

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



There are few subjects that have captured my heart as much as the doctrine of the new birth. It seems that every time I preach this truth, God accompanies it with soul-saving power. As I stand in the pulpit, this subject firmly grips my own heart even as it resonates with those who hear me.

Years ago, I pastored a church that I came to realize was largely unregenerate. The challenge of providing spiritual and biblical leadership to an unconverted church proved to be extraordinary. In the face of constant challenges, I chose to exposit the book of 1 John with its recurring emphasis upon the new birth. More specifically, I underscored the necessary evidence of the new birth.

I was not prepared for the response. People began to examine whether they had ever been born again. In the past, they had walked an aisle, prayed a prayer, and joined the church. But as they began to search their hearts, they were confronted with this haunting question: *Had they been born from above?*

During that one year, some one hundred adult members converted to Christ. There were people in their later years of life born again. One older deacon was birthed into the

kingdom during a deacons' meeting. A steady flow of church members, week by week, would follow me back to my pastor's office after the sermon, seeking spiritual counsel about the state of their soul. My office was transformed into a birthing room for many who were being born from above.

The reason for this response was quite simple. People shifted their focus away from what they had done toward Christ in their church attendance and personal involvement. Instead, their focus became fixed on what Christ had done toward them in the saving power of the cross. They recognized that when regeneration is the root, there must be the necessary fruit of a dramatically changed life.

As you preach this truth of the new birth, I believe you will see, God willing, the life-giving power of sovereign regeneration accompany your sermons. May you faithfully preach this glorious truth—"You must be born again." ♦

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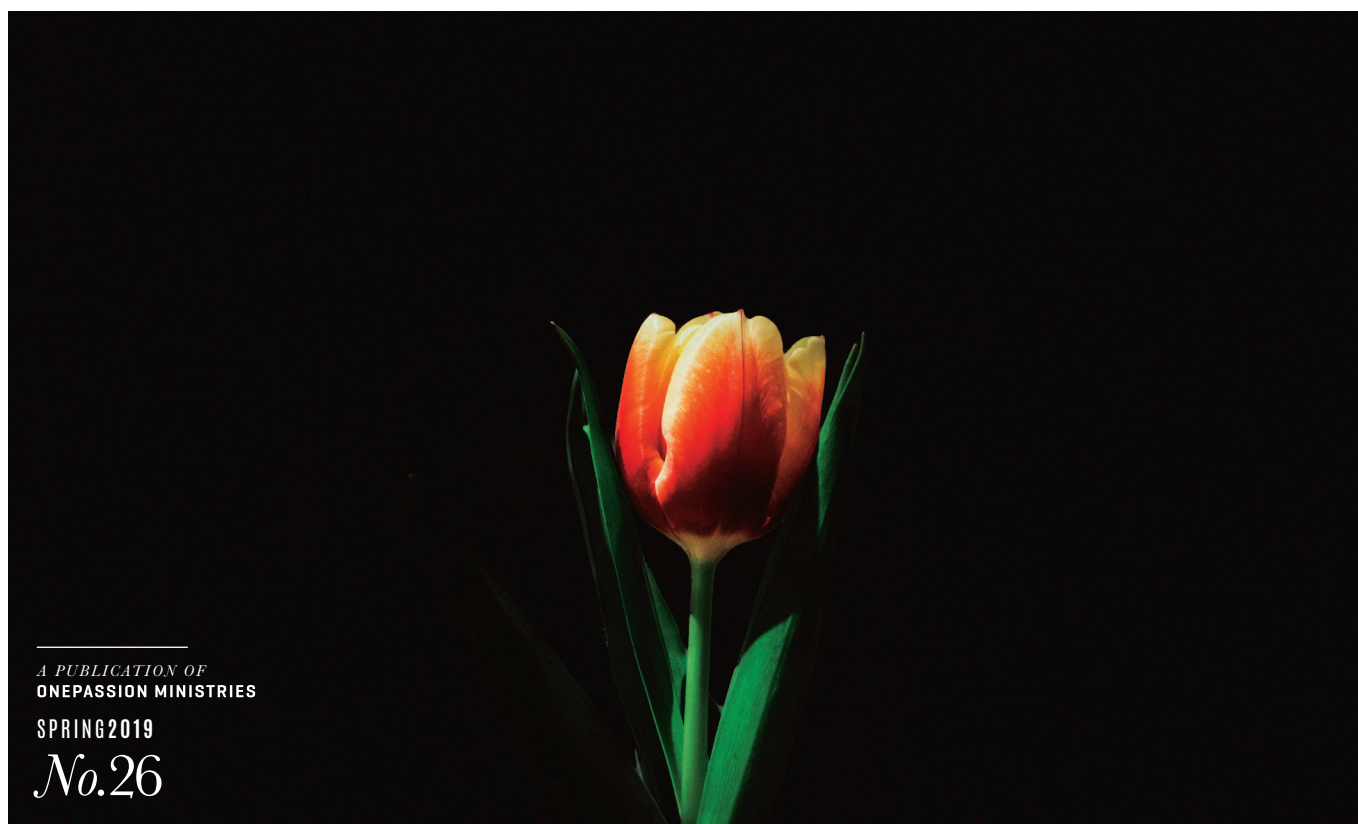
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**EXPOSITOR**

ONEPASSION



SPRING 2019 ISSUE 26 © 2019 ONEPASSION MINISTRIES EXECUTIVE EDITOR *Steven J. Lawson* EDITOR *Dustin W. Bengé*  
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# PROCLAIMING THE POWER OF THE NEW BIRTH

STEVEN J. LAWSON

During past spiritual awakenings and heaven-sent revivals, the preaching of the new birth resounded like a trumpet blast, summoning listeners to seek this encounter with God. This was especially true during the Great and Evangelical Awakenings of the eighteenth century, when the noted English evangelist George Whitefield preached this truth on both sides of the Atlantic. This intense season was, arguably, the greatest movement of the Holy Spirit on American and British soil. In the Colonies, some fifty thousand souls were converted to Christ, and over two hundred churches were swiftly planted. It was the preaching of the new birth that effected such a powerful outcome.

The primary biographer of Whitefield, Arnold Dallimore, affirms that this preaching of the necessity of the new birth electrified the day. He writes, “There can be no doubt that the man on the street in Bristol, Gloucester, and London, had he been asked in 1739, ‘What do Whitefield and the Methodists believe?’ would have answered, ‘They claim everyone must be born again.’” The message of the new birth seemed to echo in the ears of all who heard.

So prominent was the new birth in Whitefield’s preaching that he was once approached by a woman who asked him after a sermon, “Why do you keep telling us, ‘You must be born again?’” He immediately answered, “Because, dear woman, you must be born again.” Repeatedly, Whitefield

pressed this urgent message of the new birth to the hearts of his hearers—“You *must* be born again.”

This gifted evangelist insisted that merely being religious was not enough for a person to enter the kingdom of God. Neither would being a church member or teaching Scripture to your children be sufficient to receive the grace of God. Being baptized and living a moral life would not suffice. Whitefield went so far as to say that it was not enough to be a minister and stand in a pulpit. The great itinerate preacher insisted that even the clergy must be born again. From those in the pulpit to the pew, Whitefield maintained that the new birth was essential to enter the kingdom of heaven.

## A CONTROVERSIAL MESSAGE

One of the most controversial sermons Whitefield preached in the American Colonies was “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry.” It was delivered in March of 1740 at the Presbyterian Church in Nottingham, Pennsylvania. Benjamin Franklin subsequently published the sermon, and it came under bitter attack.

Whitefield made a bold claim that there were “many Judases” in the ministry. He asserted that vast numbers of ministers are “blind as moles and as dead as stones.” He pronounced, “The reason why congregations are so dead is

# IF WE WANT TO SEE ANOTHER GREAT AWAKENING IN OUR DAY, WE MUST HAVE A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO SPIRIT-EMPOWERED PREACHING OF THE NEW BIRTH.

because they have dead men preaching to them.” He added, “How can a dead man beget living children?” This message sent shockwaves throughout the Colonies.

## LIKE A LIGHTNING STRIKE

Having studied the ministry of Whitefield, Dallimore maintains that the predominant message of the evangelist’s preaching was the new birth:

Throughout these sermons there runs one great Scriptural truth—the truth indicated by Whitefield when he summarized his early ministry and its effect, saying, “The doctrine of the new birth . . . made its way like lightning into the hearers’ consciences.” He stood, not as declaring his own message, but that of God as set forth in His word, “Ye must be born again.”

## GOD’S LIFE IN MAN’S SOUL

Whitefield preached the message of the new birth with power, because its truth was powerful in his own soul. It was the very truth that brought him to saving faith in Jesus Christ. While a student at Oxford, Whitefield was religious, but entirely lost. He joined a small group Bible study on campus known as the Holy Club. Included in this group were John and Charles Wesley, future leaders in the Methodist movement. They studied, fasted, and prayed, attempting to gain salvation through these spiritual disciplines. Amazingly, each man remained unconverted. The more Whitefield tried to earn acceptance with God, the further away he seemed to be.

One day, Whitefield was handed a book to read—Henry Scrugal’s *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. Its pages explained the new birth—the saving work of God in the spiritually dead soul of man. For the first time, Whitefield understood that salvation was not achieved by what he could do to gain eternal life. Rather, God must accomplish the new birth through His supernatural work. With new clarity regarding the gospel, Whitefield was born again. His life was immediately and radically changed by the grace of God. For the rest of his days, he preached this truth of the new birth, leading to the Great Awakening in the Colonies and the Evangelical Awakening in Britain.

## TODAY’S NEEDED MESSAGE

If we want to see another great awakening in our day, we must have a renewed commitment to Spirit-empowered preaching of the new birth. We need to recover this compelling message that Whitefield proclaimed with power to the American and British populations.

But the preaching of regeneration is a sadly neglected truth in pulpits today. Tragically, such messages are few and far between. With the Reformed resurgence, there is a recaptured emphasis on justification by faith alone. But with this resurgence, one major doctrine has been inexplicably overlooked—the new birth. This truth is critically important for a proper understanding of salvation. In the *ordo salutis*—Latin for “order of salvation”—regeneration precedes justification. In fact, regeneration produces the faith that is exercised in justification. If there is no regeneration, there is no justification. The new birth is simply *that* important.



### ***A Strange Silence***

A neglect in preaching the new birth is a strange omission, considering this truth is taught from cover to cover in Scripture. This doctrine is featured throughout the whole counsel of God. The new birth is not relegated to hidden places in the Bible. It is not an obscure truth, tucked in the remote back verses of books in the Bible. To the contrary, this teaching is seen in prominent places in God's Word. It does not arise from the mind of any evangelist or pastor. Neither is it the result of human philosophy or long-standing religion. This doctrine arises from the infinite genius of God, and it is the divinely inspired truth of Scripture. It is found in both the Old Testament and New Testament, and is taught by the prophets, Jesus Christ, and the apostles. If we faithfully preach the Bible, we will inevitably preach the new birth.

### ***A Critically Important Message***

The new birth is a critically important truth, because it is the catalyst for the gospel to become real in human hearts. Preaching this truth must be an essential element in every healthy pulpit. Regeneration is where the life of God enters the spiritually dead soul. It is where eternal life invades the empty heart. It is where repentance and faith are granted to unbelievers. This doctrinal truth of regeneration is the entry point into the kingdom of God. Apart from the new birth, there is no access into the sphere of His salvation.

A proper understanding of the new birth determines how we understand many other doctrinal truths. On many occasions, R. C. Sproul expressed to me that a person's understanding of regeneration reveals whether or not he is truly Reformed in doctrine. What a person believes about the new birth defines what he believes about many other biblical doctrines. This truth is inseparably linked to one's understanding of the fall of Adam, the depravity of man, and the bondage of the will. It is indissolubly connected to one's belief in God's sovereign election, the source of repentance and faith, and the necessity of sanctification. It cannot be isolated from one's convictions about the certainty of glorification, the indwelling of the Spirit, and the perseverance of the saints. A right belief in the new birth is necessary for an accurate grasp of all systematic theology.

### **THE NEW BIRTH DEFINED**

If we are to rightly preach the new birth, a proper definition is necessary. Theologians often refer to this truth as the doctrine of regeneration. Regeneration, or the new birth, is when God implants new life into the dead soul. The new birth is the life of God—*spiritual* life, *eternal* life, *abundant* life—in the soul of man. It is exclusively a work

of God, not a joint effort between God and man. Where justification is forensic, regeneration is experiential. Justification effects a person's standing before God legally, but regeneration effects one's life with God practically.

The eminent Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield defines regeneration as:

a radical and complete transformation wrought in the soul by God the Holy Spirit, by virtue of which we become new men, no longer conformed to this world, but in knowledge and holiness of the truth, created after the image of God.

As Warfield notes, regeneration is not a mere behavior modification. Instead, it is a "radical and complete" change in "the soul." There is a decisive break from one's past life in bondage to sin and the beginning of a new life in the pursuit of holiness.

Prominent author J. I. Packer explains the new birth as:

an inner re-creating of fallen human nature by the gracious sovereign action of the Holy Spirit . . . [It] changes a person's disposition from the lawless, godless self-seeking that dominates, into a disposition of trust and love, marked by repentance for past rebelliousness and unbelief, and ready compliance with God's law . . . [It] enlightens the blinded mind to discern spiritual realities and liberates and energizes the enslaved will for free obedience to God.

### **THE NEW BIRTH EXPLAINED**

With these definitions in mind, what are the distinguishing marks of the new birth? There are several hallmarks worth noting.

#### ***A Necessary Birth***

The new birth is absolutely necessary to enter the kingdom of God. No one can enter into saving grace apart from this new birth. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of heaven. . . . Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, 5). The word "cannot" leaps off the page and grabs our attention. It stresses the total impossibility of entering into the sphere of salvation except by God's work in the heart. Jesus added, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). It does not matter how long a person has attended church or how religious they may be. It does not matter how much Bible knowledge they have or how much they give to charity. Unless they are born again, Jesus said, they cannot see the kingdom of heaven.

### ***A Second Birth***

The new birth is a second birth. Jesus said every person must be “born again” (John 3:3, 7), meaning they must be born a second time. Jesus states, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). In other words, every person must experience two births—a physical birth and a spiritual birth. The necessity of a second birth is clearly the result of the tragedy of our first birth. If we must be born *again*, something was desperately wrong with our first birth. When Adam sinned in the Garden, his sin nature was, subsequently, passed down to all humanity (Ps 51:5; 58:3). Our physical birth so polluted us with sin that we must be born a second time. We were born outside the kingdom the first time, and we can only enter it by the second birth.

### ***An Unmerited Birth***

Before you were born physically, what did you do to deserve to be born? The answer is nothing. You could not do anything to deserve to be born the first time. God simply caused a person to be conceived and born because it pleased Him. The same is spiritually true in the new birth. There is nothing anyone can do to deserve entrance into the kingdom of heaven. No amount of good works, church membership, water baptism, personal integrity, or spiritual service can ever merit the new birth. This miraculous change is entirely by the grace of God (Titus 3:5).

### ***A Heavenly Birth***


When Jesus said “you must be born again” (John 3:3, 7), the word “again” (*anōthen*) can also be translated as “from above.” In other words, the first birth is from earth, and the second birth is from heaven. God imparts life from heaven to the soul of man. This heart transformation does not arise from within a person, but must descend from a higher realm. Heaven must divinely come to a person in the new birth before he or she can go to heaven.

### ***An Illuminating Birth***

When Jesus said “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3), He emphasized that the new birth is an eye-opening experience. Before the new birth, every person is spiritually blind and lives in darkness. But the new birth gives eyes to see what could not otherwise be perceived. The new birth gives spiritual insight that allows a person to see who God is and their need for His grace. It enables a person to grasp who they are, who Christ is, and what He has done to achieve their salvation.

### ***A Cleansing Birth***

Jesus also said that every person must have their sinful soul washed clean by God. He affirmed, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven” (John 3:5). Jesus was not referring to literal water, but was speaking through an analogy. As water washes away



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GOD MUST PERFORM ON THE HEART.**

the filth and dirt from our body, the Holy Spirit must wash away the pollution of sin from the soiled soul. God must first clean out the filthy soul before He places a new heart into the depths of one's being.

### ***An Instantaneous Birth***

The metaphor of the new birth further implies the reality that it is an immediate act, a sudden work of God in the soul. No one is progressively born again. Though sanctification is progressive, regeneration is immediate. Just as each of us was physically born on a particular day at a specific time, we, likewise, are spiritually born at one moment of time. For example, there were three thousand souls birthed into the kingdom on the day of Pentecost. It was not during the week, or the month, or the season of Pentecost (Acts 2:1, 41), but on that exact day. Saul of Tarsus was “suddenly” converted in a split second on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3–5). Like the flash of light Saul experienced, every new birth occurs instantaneously, in a split second of time.

### ***A Comprehensive Birth***

At the moment of regeneration, the person who is born again receives every spiritual faculty. In physical birth, healthy babies are born with two eyes, two hands, two feet, and two ears. No one is born with one eye, then later develops a second eye. No one is born with only one hand, later to grow the other hand. So it is in the spiritual rebirth of a soul. At the moment of the new birth, the one regenerated receives a new mind, new heart, and new nature. The new birth is comprehensive, to counter the completeness of total depravity. From the inside out, the new birth affects the whole person. No part of a person is left untouched.

### ***A Radical Birth***

The new birth is not a subtle change of a person's life. Rather, it is a life-altering metamorphosis of the human nature. In regeneration, Paul writes, “The old things have passed; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17). By the new birth, we passed from death to life, from darkness to light. Literally, a person is no longer who he once was. This is not a mere external makeover. This is a supernatural takeover. Regeneration puts new life into a new person. Paul elsewhere adds, “The new self . . . has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4:2). This dramatic change involves a radical alteration of the person in every way.

### ***A Sovereign Birth***

In discussing the new birth, Jesus further explains, “The

wind blows where it wishes” (John 3:8). By this analogy, He likens the sovereign operation of the Holy Spirit to the blowing of the wind. The point is that no one controls the wind—it is independent and autonomous from any individual. No person can stop it, and no one can steer it. The path of the wind is directed by the will of God. The same is true in the work of the Spirit. God works by His own sovereign discretion in those whom He elects, according to His own eternal purpose. God's will is so determinative and powerful that nothing can hinder it—no one can divert His life-giving work.

### ***An Inscrutable Birth***

Jesus states that this work of God is largely unfathomable: “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” (John 3:8). That is, no one can see the wind. It can only be heard and felt. Human eyes can only see the powerful effects of the wind. Neither can any person predict where it will go next. The same is spiritually true of the movement of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's work in the new birth is utterly mysterious, regarding where He works, when He works, and on whom He works.

### ***A Permanent Birth***

When Jesus says “you must be born again” (John 3:3, 7), the analogy implies the permanence of the new birth. No one is born, and then unborn. Neither is anyone ever born twice physically. Once born, always born. So it is with the new birth. Once a son or daughter of God, always a child of God. The Spirit gives eternal life—the life for ages to come, a life that shall never end.

## **THE NEW BIRTH PICTURED**

Throughout the pages of Scripture, the new birth is illustrated by means of a variety of analogies. Each image emphasizes a different aspect of the multifaceted nature of the new birth. From both the Old and New Testaments, the doctrine of regeneration should be preached from the following images.

### ***A Circumcision of the Heart***

Moses taught there must be a spiritual circumcision of the heart. “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart . . . to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live” (Deut 30:6). Paul describes the new birth using circumcision in Romans 2:28–29 and Colossians 2:11.

Circumcision was a surgical procedure practiced by ancient Israel on its baby boys, cutting off the foreskin of

the male organ. Physical circumcision was intended to be an object lesson, a picture of the spiritual circumcision that must occur in the heart. Only when God performs a spiritual circumcision can the regenerated one love God and live as He intends. This divine act depicts the spiritual surgery that the invisible hands of God must perform on the heart. He must cut the hardened heart and remove the foreskin of unbelief.

There is only one instrument capable of such a drastic incision. The surgical knife is the sharp, two-edged sword of the living and active Word of God (Heb 4:12). This instrument alone can cut into the depths of the soul, laying bare the heart and bringing deep conviction of sin. The Scripture alone reveals the spiritual need of the inner life.

### ***A Transplanting of the Soul***

The new birth is also implied in the spiritual transplant of the soul from the barren desert to river banks of flowing water. The psalmist says, “He will be like a tree planted by streams of water” (Ps 1:3). Regeneration uproots the dead tree, moves it from the waterless desert where death dwells, and plants it by streams of water. Trees do not transplant themselves. They must be uprooted from one location and planted in another location. Once existing in a dry wilderness where nothing grows, believers are now sovereignly transplanted to streams of water. God sets their roots into the fertile soil of His word, and they begin to draw up the nutrients needed to grow and be fruitful.

### ***An Extraction of the Old Heart***

The new birth is also pictured as a heart transplant that begins with the removal of the old heart. God says, “I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh” (Ezek 11:19). Again, He makes this promise, “I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh” (Ezek 36:26). This refers to the divine act of regeneration. This spiritual surgery is an operation performed by God, the Physician of the soul. The heart of stone is sin-hardened, lifeless, and resistant to God. It is unresponsive to the gospel when it is presented. This unbelieving heart must be removed before anyone can believe in Jesus Christ.

### ***A Purification of the Soul***

God further states, “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols” (Ezek 36:25). Before He implants a new heart where the old heart once resided, God must clean out the depraved soul. In the new birth, God sprinkles clean water upon the filthy soul and washes away the dirty pollution of its iniquities. One must be

“born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). This could be better translated, “born of water, even the Spirit.” Simply put, “water” is a picture of the Spirit.

Note the monergistic nature of the new birth in this passage from Ezekiel. There is only one active Agent in regeneration—God Himself. The Lord says twice in this one verse that He will act alone in this purifying step; “I will sprinkle,” and “I will cleanse.” Also, note the order of this procedure. First, God says “I will,” and then He says that the sure result is “you will.” This human response is the result of the divine operation.

### ***An Implanting of a New Heart***

Moreover, God will implant a new heart of flesh in the person whom He rebirths. He says, “I will . . . give them a heart of flesh” (Ezek 11:19). Again we read, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will . . . give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek 36:26). This new heart is beating, spiritually alive to God. It possesses a spiritual pulse that pumps spiritual life to the soul. This heart of flesh is receptive to the gospel. It is a believing heart with a “new spirit,” which includes a new attitude and new disposition with new desires to please God.

### ***An Indwelling of the Spirit***

Further, God pledges, “I will put My Spirit within you” (Ezek 36:27). In the new birth, the Holy Spirit indwells the new heart. He becomes the royal Resident within the cleansed soul. When the Spirit moves in, He will never move out. His presence within the regenerated soul immediately enables the person to repent and believe the gospel. He then instantly begins the onsite work of sanctification that continues throughout one’s Christian life.

### ***An Inscription Upon the Heart***

In the new birth, God writes His Word upon the new heart. He says, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it” (Jer 31:33). This internal inscription, written by the invisible hand of God, causes the one regenerated to walk in obedience to His statutes. Again, God says, “I will . . . cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Ezek 36:27). God pledges to continually work in the one regenerated, so that people will live in obedience to His word throughout his or her entire life.

### ***A Resurrection of the Soul***

The new birth is further described as a spiritual resurrection of one who is spiritually dead. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet Ezekiel was given a prophecy of Israel’s future

salvation, when the Jewish people will be sovereignly regenerated. This, nevertheless, portrays the new birth of all people in every era.

Human nature is the same in every age, and the powerful operation of divine grace remains the same. In Ezekiel's vision, he sees a valley of dead bones that are lifeless, dry, and scattered on the ground. Ezekiel is told to preach to the dead bones, and God promises to cause life to enter these bones. A noise begins rattling, a rushing wind flows through the valley, and the dead bones are raised as life enters them. These dry bones picture spiritually dead sinners on the day of their new births. God will open the closed grave of their unbelieving hearts and resurrect them to new life.

### ***A Transformation of the Life***

The new birth is likewise illustrated as a spiritual miracle, transforming the old life into an entirely different life. When Jesus performed his first miracle, He changed dirty water into sparkling wine (John 2:1–11). This miracle was called a “sign” (John 2:11), a miracle displaying the spiritual teaching on the new birth that follows in the next chapter. Each sign that Jesus performed was intended to authenticate Him as sent from God. But more than that, when Jesus turned water into wine, this portrayed the spiritual transformation of a sin-infested life (3:1–21). In the new birth, Jesus takes our polluted lives and transforms them into the best they can be. He delights in taking the dirtiest lives and making them sparkle in His kingdom.

### ***A Begetting of Spiritual Life***

The regeneration of the soul is also represented by the analogy of a second birth. The human side of conversion occurs when an individual believes in Jesus Christ and receives Him as their Lord and Savior. They trust Him and are saved (John 1:12). But the divine side of salvation is regeneration, which precedes and produces conversion. In John 1:13, John begins by listing three ways a person is not regenerated.

People are not born again “of blood,” meaning not by human lineage or descent. They are not born again “of the will of the flesh,” meaning not by human effort, good works, or moral or religious behavior. Neither are people born “of the will of man,” meaning not by man's volitional choice. Rather, man is born into God's family by His sovereign procreation and delivery. The spiritually unborn person makes no contribution to his regeneration. The new birth of God is exclusively His work of sovereign grace.

### ***A Delivery of New Life***

The new birth is the conception and delivery of an entirely new life in Christ. Jesus describes the new birth as the second birth. The Greek word for “new birth,” *gennaō*, is found in the Gospel of John and means “to be born, to be begotten.” Jesus says, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Jesus adds, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). God must create new life in the soul before admitting someone into His kingdom. This new birth is a second birth that comes from above.

### ***An Opening of the Ears***

In addition, Jesus taught, “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25). This speaks not of the bodily resurrection at the end of the age, but addresses the spiritual resurrection of the soul. In the new birth, those who have been deaf to the voice of Jesus Christ will be given ears to hear. They will hear with understanding and be made to live in Christ.

### ***A Giving of Saving Faith***

Jesus also described the new birth as a spiritual resurrection (John 11:26). He is “the resurrection and the life,” who gives eternal life to those dead in sin. Those who believe in Jesus will live forever, even if they die. A spiritually dead sinner must first be made alive to exercise saving faith in Jesus Christ. This spiritual life will never come to an end—it is everlasting life that will last throughout eternity. The order is important—regeneration, pictured here as a resurrection, precedes and produces saving faith. Though this all occurs at the same moment, those who are regenerated immediately believe, as the fruit of the new birth.

### ***An Opening of the Heart***

The apostle Luke also describes the new birth as a spiritual surgery. On his second missionary journey, Paul traveled to Philippi and preached the gospel to a group of women. “A woman named Lydia . . . was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Lydia's heart had been previously closed by sin. Though she feared God, she did not know Him. While she was listening to Paul speak the truth, God suddenly opened her sealed-shut heart. Only then was she enabled to respond to the gospel that Paul preached. If the Lord had not opened her heart, she would have remained closed to the truth of the gospel.

### ***A Creation of the New Man***

The new birth is also illustrated as the spiritual creation of a new man. Paul states, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17). This is the powerful creation of new life out of nothing, as when God created the universe out of nothing. “New” (*kainos*) means new in quality, not merely new in time or sequence. The one who is born again is recreated into an entirely new person, unlike what they previously were in their sinful ways. Their old values, previous priorities, and past affections have passed away. In its place, new desires, new ambitions, and new purposes motivate them.

### ***A Making Alive of the Soul***

In the new birth, the dead soul is raised from the grave of sin and made alive with Jesus Christ. Paul writes, “When we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:5). It should be a self-apparent truth that a spiritually dead soul has no moral ability to please God. It certainly has no capacity to believe in Jesus Christ. Dead men can do nothing pleasing to God—certainly not repent and believe the gospel. In the divine act of regeneration, God makes the dead soul alive, which enables it to believe in Jesus. Only a living heart can exercise living faith in a living Savior.

Paul adds, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). In the new birth, believers are “created in Christ Jesus.” “Created” (*ktizō*) means “to make habitable.” The new birth radically recreated us so that the Holy Spirit can come and live with us. This word also carries the idea “to completely change or transform.” The change that the new birth effects is a dramatic alteration of our inner person.

### ***A Renovation of the Life***


The new birth is also conveyed as renovating what has been ruined by sin. For example, the entire universe that is suffering the curse of sin will be renovated, resulting in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). Jesus speaks of “the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne” (Matt 19:28). An even greater renovation occurs in the new birth. In Titus 3:5, Paul writes, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.” The Greek word for “regeneration” (*palingenesia*) is another compound word. *Palin* means “renewal, anew, again” and *genesis* means “birth, nativity.” This describes the regenerating work of God in the believer in salvation as a renovation or renewal of what has been destroyed. As the future renewal of the universe will “make all things new,” so the regeneration of the soul is restored after being ruined by the devastations of sin.

### ***A Procreation Within the Heart***

Yet another picture of regeneration is found in James 1:18, “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures.” Here, the imagery is again procreation. The Greek for “brought . . . forth” is *apokueō*. It is a compound word in which the prefix, *apo*, means “of origin, of a cause,” and the main root, *kuma*, means “to swell.” The word means “to bring forth from the womb, to give birth, to beget, to produce.” God permeates the heart, imparting spiritual life, and brings forth a new person from the womb of the soul. This is entirely a work of God, according to His sovereign will in His elect.

### ***A Germination Within the Soul***

The new birth is, moreover, represented as a spiritual



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germination that takes place in the soul. The apostle Peter writes, “God . . . has caused us to be born again” (1 Pet 1:3). Again, he writes, “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’” (1 Pet 1:23–25). Peter uses a different Greek word, *anagennao*, a verb that means “to be born again, to produce again, to be born anew.” It is a compound word in which the prefix, *ana*, means “repetition,” and the main root word, *gennao*, means “to be born.” When the seed of the Word is sown into the divinely prepared soil of the human heart, God causes it to germinate and produce new life. Again, this life-giving act is according to God’s unconditional election of those whom He will save.

### THE NEW BIRTH PREACHED

How should we preach the new birth? What are some general guidelines for us to follow in expounding this truth? The following are steps to direct us in this important endeavor.

#### *Expound the Scripture*

The new birth occurs only after the Word of God is sown as life-giving seed in the heart (1 Pet 1:23–25). As the Word is preached, God regenerates sinners and births them into His kingdom (James 1:18). Therefore, it is incumbent on every preacher to exposit the Scripture if he is to see the spiritually dead brought to new life in Christ. Only “the word of life” (Phil 2:16) can give eternal life where spiritual death reigns.

As we preach, we must unsheathe the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12). Only this razor-sharp instrument has penetrating power to pierce the outward façade of an unbeliever’s life and cut to the soul. When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, the text says, “They were pierced to the heart” (Acts 2:37). “Pierced” (*katanussō*) means “to cut deeply,” like a butcher’s knife slaying and quartering an animal to be eaten. The same word was used of a priest taking a knife and slitting the throat of an animal for sacrifice. In the same way, the sharp-edged blade of the Word of God must put to death the old sinful man before he is raised anew.

#### *Explain the Doctrine*

Preaching the new birth requires theological clarity and doctrinal specificity. It is necessary to expound both negative denials and positive assertions. We must teach what the new birth is not and what it is, which is precisely how

the apostle John taught this truth. In the opening prologue to his Gospel account, he writes, “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). Here, John uses three negatives with one positive statement to describe being “born . . . of God.” Such black-and-white distinctions are absolutely necessary in explaining the new birth.

#### *Employ the Metaphors*

A picture is worth a thousand words, as the saying goes, and pictures are vital in the preaching of the new birth. As we have already discovered, the Bible represents this cardinal truth with many metaphors. The Scripture speaks of the new birth as a spiritual circumcision, heart transplant, divine begetting, spiritual regeneration, new creation, and spiritual germination. Each of these images convey the same truth through different pictures. The Bible rarely uses so many metaphors to illustrate a particular doctrine. We should guide the listener to a proper understanding of the new birth by using biblical imagery.

#### *ESTABLISH THE NEED*

The preacher must emphasize the dire need of every person for the new birth. No one can be regenerated who does not first come under deep conviction of sin. People must know that they are spiritually dead and desperately in need of escaping the judgment to come. They must know they are outside the kingdom of God, needing to gain entrance. They must be aware that they are perishing in their lost condition. Apart from the new birth, they have no hope of deliverance from the coming wrath of God.

#### *EXTEND THE GOSPEL*

In our preaching, we must present the gospel, centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We must proclaim His virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, and exalted enthronement. No one will be regenerated who has not had the seed of the gospel sown in the soil of their heart. We are to preach the gospel by throwing generous portions of seeds. Proclaim the essential aspects of the gospel with special attention given to the sin-bearing, wrath-absorbing death of Christ. Preach Christ and Him crucified, unto the salvation of lost souls.

#### *Elicit the Response*

The indicative of the gospel must be followed by imperatives—calling people to repent and believe. More than explaining the facts of the gospel, we must also command the listener to enter through the narrow gate. We must declare that the listener must turn away from a life pursuing

the world in its sin. We must compel them to turn to Jesus Christ and throw themselves upon His mercy. We must not be timid or reticent to preach with authority in this manner.

### ***Emphasize the Urgency***

In preaching the gospel, we must stress the urgency of the moment. We must press the listener for an immediate response to the proclaimed Word of God. The best time to respond to the gospel's appeal is *now*. Delayed obedience is disobedience. Procrastination is a dangerous sin. The listeners must feel the urgency of the moment to repent and believe. They must respond today, not tomorrow, to the summons of this great message.

### ***Entreat the Lord***

The expositor's responsibility is to preach the gospel and trust God to work in human hearts. Only God can regenerate the spiritually dead. When the preacher opens the Bible, he preaches to some who have no spiritual life. It is as though he is standing in the Valley of Dry Bones, expounding the Scripture to those who are dead. As he preaches, God must raise dead bones to believe. Without God intervening and acting in such a powerful manner, no one will ever respond to the gospel with saving faith. As he preaches, the preacher can only bring the gospel to the ear, but he can go no farther. God must take the message from the ear to the heart. No matter how well he may preach, the preacher must recognize and rely upon God's sovereign role in accomplishing the new birth.

The new birth is a monergistic act by a sovereign God, who is the only active Agent in regeneration. In the new birth, man is passive, and God alone is active. Only God can impart spiritual life. Dead men cannot resurrect themselves. God alone must raise the spiritually dead. Consequently, as we preach, we must be mindful that God alone can cause lost souls to be born again. Thus, we must entrust the work of regeneration to God as we preach.

### ***Expose the Counterfeits***

Many people falsely assume they are born again. Countless numbers of people are self-deceived into presuming they are in a state of grace when that is not the case. It is necessary that we preach to expose the lost condition of those who have an empty profession of faith. One chief means of doing this is by preaching the necessary evidence of a changed life. Where regeneration is the root, the pursuit of personal holiness will always be the fruit. Other visible evidences of the new birth include love for the lost, a commitment to the local church, and continued growth in grace.

We must call people to examine themselves, to see whether they are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5).

### ***Establish the Believers***

As people make profession of their faith, the preacher must explain the basis of what constitutes a true assurance of their regeneration. No preacher can give anyone assurance of the new birth. Only God knows the heart. Moreover, only He can give assurance of salvation. The preacher must explain the basis by which true assurance is experienced. The Spirit, who convicts, calls, and regenerates, is the Spirit who bears witness with the human spirit that a person belongs to God (Rom 8:16). Only God Himself can give assurance of salvation.

### ***Explain the Connections***

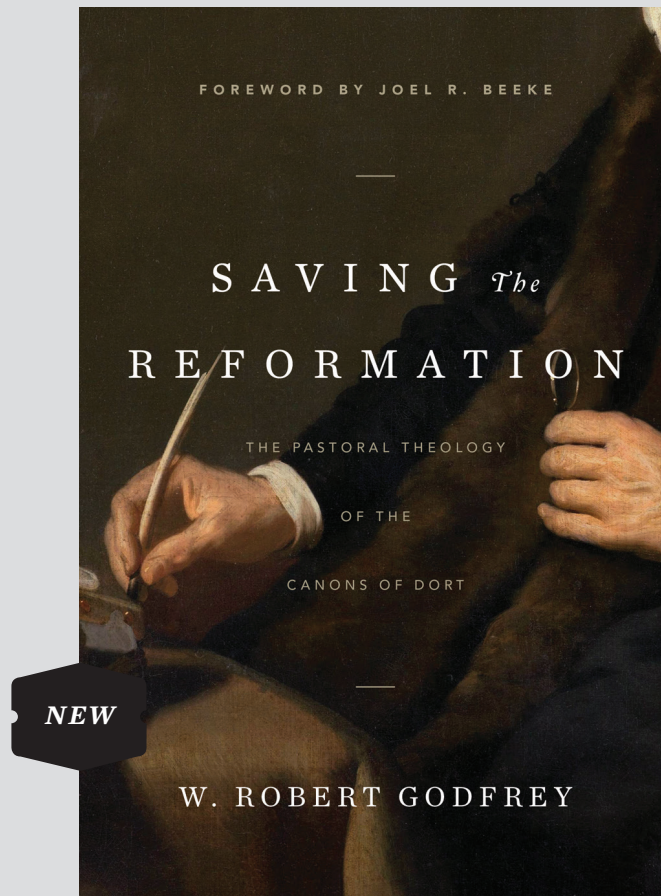
No biblical doctrine stands alone, disconnected from other truths taught in the Scripture. The doctrine of regeneration is no exception. Having preached the new birth, the expositor should show its connection with other theological truths. He should explain how the total depravity of the sinner and the bondage of the will work together with regeneration. He should show that the doctrine of sovereign election stands behind the new birth. He should teach how regeneration precedes and produces saving faith. He should demonstrate how being born again can never be reversed because of God's preservation of His people.

### **NEEDED YET AGAIN**

As the new birth was proclaimed by George Whitefield in the Great Awakening, this vital message desperately needs to be preached today. The need is urgent—countless churches are filled with unconverted church members. Now more than ever, this truth must be declared with all its life-giving power. Regeneration plays a necessary role in bringing souls into the kingdom of God. This gospel preaching is of first importance. Consequently, the new birth must be stressed with ongoing consistency.

If we are to see God's Spirit powerfully move in our day, the doctrine of regeneration must be preached with precision and power. This truth is at the heart of God's saving grace. A new generation of expositors must take up this theme and herald it for all to hear. As a result, let us pray that hearts will be won for the kingdom of God, and Christ will be exalted as a result of the preaching of the new birth. ❖





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# EXPLORING JOHN 3: THE NEW BIRTH

JOHN MACARTHUR

“Everybody talkin’ about heaven ain’t goin’ there.” This line, from an old spiritual, accurately describes many in the church. Outwardly they identify with Christ, but inwardly they have never been genuinely converted. Because they cling to a false profession, they fool themselves into thinking they are on the narrow path leading to life, when in reality they are on the broad road that leads to destruction. To make matters worse, their self-deception is often reinforced by well-meaning but undiscerning Christians who naively embrace them as true believers. Such confusion stems from the watered-down pseudo-gospels that are propagated from far too many pulpits. Cheap grace, market-driven ministry, emotionalism, subjectivism, and an indiscriminate inclusivism have all infiltrated the church with devastating consequences. As a result, almost any profession of faith is affirmed as genuine—even from those whose lives manifest no signs of true fruit. For many, no one’s faith is to be questioned. Meanwhile, key New Testament passages regarding the danger of false faith and the need for self-examination go unheeded.

The ministry of our Lord provides a stark contrast to the contemporary evangelical confusion. Christ was not interested in shallow responses or quick pseudo-conversions. He refused to compromise the truth or give anyone false hope. Instead of making it easy for people to believe, Jesus turned away more prospects than He received. The rich young ruler,

for example, eagerly sought out Jesus and asked Him sincerely, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” Yet the Bible says that he went away grieving and unsaved (Matthew 19). To His shocked disciples Jesus later explained, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

As a result of Christ’s uncompromising demand for total commitment, many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. He repeatedly warned His followers of the danger of spurious faith, even on the part of those who ministered in His name:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” (Matt 7:21–23)

Jesus also explained that being His disciple meant dying to self, declaring, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). Such a high cost was often too much for would-be disciples:

As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, “I will follow You wherever You go.” And Jesus said to him, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. And He said to another, “Follow Me.” But he said, “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.” But He said to him, “Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God.” Another also said, “I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home.” But Jesus said to him, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:57–62)

Clearly, an emphasis on abandoning self and submitting to Him permeated Jesus’ evangelistic approach, both in His public ministry and in His private conversations. John 3:1–10 recounts one of those private interactions, a nighttime meeting with the prominent Pharisee Nicodemus. Throughout their conversation, Jesus refused to soften the truth simply to gain the approval of this influential religious leader. Instead, He spoke with clarity and precision—confronting Nicodemus’s misconceptions and telling him exactly what he needed to hear. Christ’s dialogue with Nicodemus can be discussed under three headings: Nicodemus’ inquiry of Jesus, Jesus’ insight into Nicodemus, and Jesus’ indictment of Nicodemus.

### THE INQUIRY

Now 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 have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (3:1–3)

The placing of the chapter break here is unfortunate, since the story of Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus is logically tied to the previous section (2:23–25). As I have noted elsewhere, John 2:23–25 described Jesus’ refusal to accept shallow, sign-based faith, since in His omniscience, He understood the people’s hearts. The story of Nicodemus is a case in point, since Nicodemus himself was one of those superficial believers whose heart He read like an open book. Instead of affirming his profession, the Lord refused to accept Nicodemus’

faith, which was solely based on the signs he had witnessed (v. 2). Jesus pointed him to the life-transforming nature of true saving faith.

Nicodemus (“victor over the people”) was a Greek name common among the Jews of Jesus’ day. Some have identified Nicodemus with a wealthy man of that same name mentioned in the Talmud. But since that Nicodemus was still alive when Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, he would probably have been too young to have been a member of the Sanhedrin during Jesus’ ministry four decades earlier. The implication of verse 4 that Nicodemus was already an old man when he met with Jesus argues further against that identification.

Nicodemus was a member of the elite religious party the Pharisees. Their name probably derives from a Hebrew verb meaning “to separate”; they were the “separated ones” in the sense of being zealous for the Mosaic law (and their own oral traditions, which they added to it). The Pharisees originated during the intertestamental period, likely as an offshoot of the Hasidim (“pious ones”), who opposed the Hellenizing of Jewish culture under the wicked Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes. Unlike their archrivals the Sadducees, who tended to be wealthy priests or Levites, the Pharisees generally came from the middle class. Therefore, though few in number (there were about six thousand at the time of Herod the Great, according to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus), they had great influence with the common people (though, ironically, the Pharisees often viewed some people with contempt). Despite being the minority party, their popularity with the people gave them significant influence in the Sanhedrin (cf. Acts 5:34–40).

With the disappearance of the Sadducees in A.D. 70 (after the temple was destroyed) and the Zealots in A.D. 135 (after the Bar Kochba revolt was crushed), the Pharisees became the dominant force in Judaism. In fact, by the end of the second century A.D., with the completion of the Mishnah (the written compilation of the oral law, rituals, and traditions), the Pharisees’ teaching became virtually synonymous with Judaism.

Ironically, it was their very zeal for the law that caused the Pharisees to become ritualized and external. Having unchanged hearts, they would only replace true religion with mere behavior modification and ritual. In response to their pseudo-spirituality, Jesus scathingly pointed out: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Matt 23:23). Even worse, the wide gap between their teaching and their practice led to gross hypocrisy, which both Jesus and, surprisingly, the Talmud (which lists seven classes

# JESUS WAS NOT INTERESTED IN DISCUSSING HIS SIGNS, WHICH HAD RESULTED ONLY IN SUPERFICIAL FAITH. INSTEAD, HE WENT STRAIGHT TO THE REAL ISSUE—THE TRANSFORMATION OF NICODEMUS' HEART BY THE NEW BIRTH.

of Pharisees, six of which are hypocritical) denounced. As a result, despite their zeal for God's law, they were "blind guides of the blind" who made their proselytes doubly worthy of the hell to which they themselves were headed. Even if they had not been hypocrites, keeping the law could never have saved them, because by the works of the law no flesh will be justified—a truth that the zealous Pharisee Saul of Tarsus eventually discovered.

But Nicodemus was no run-of-the-mill Pharisee; he was a ruler of the Jews. That is, he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing council of Israel (under the ultimate authority of the Romans). Jewish tradition traced the origin of the Sanhedrin to the seventy elders who assisted Moses. Ezra, also according to tradition, reorganized that body after the exile. However, the Sanhedrin of New Testament times probably originated during the period of Persian or Greek rule. It consisted of seventy-one members, presided over by the reigning high priest. It included men from the influential priestly families, elders (family and tribal heads), scribes (experts in the law), and any former high priests who were still alive.

Under the Romans, the Sanhedrin exercised wide-ranging powers in civil, criminal, and religious matters (though the Romans withheld the power of capital punishment). It had the authority both to make arrests and to conduct trials. Although its influence extended even to Jews of the Diaspora, the Sanhedrin's direct authority seems to have been limited to Judea (it apparently wielded no power over Jesus while He was in Galilee). After the failure of the Jewish revolt (A.D. 66–70), the Sanhedrin was abolished and replaced by the

Beth Din (Court of Judgment). Unlike the Sanhedrin, however, the Beth Din was composed solely of scribes (lawyers), and its decisions were exclusively limited to religious matters.

The fact that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin probably explains why he came to Jesus by night. He might not have wanted his coming to imply the approval of the entire Sanhedrin, nor did he want to risk incurring the disfavor of his fellow members. Nighttime would also have afforded more time for conversation than during the day, when both he and Jesus would be occupied. The important point, however, is not when Nicodemus came, but that he came at all. Though coming to Jesus does not always guarantee salvation, it is a necessary beginning.

By using the respectful term "Rabbi," Nicodemus, although a member of the Sanhedrin and an eminent teacher (v. 10), addressed Jesus as an equal. He did not share the suspicion and hostility that many of his fellow religious leaders had toward Christ. Nicodemus, and others like him, accepted that Jesus had come from God as a teacher—even though He had not received proper rabbinic training. As Nicodemus acknowledged, "No one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." He was impressed with and believed that the undeniable power manifested in Jesus' miracles was divine. Undoubtedly, he was also aware of John the Baptist's testimony about Christ. That, coupled with the evidence of them, may have caused Nicodemus to wonder if Jesus was the Messiah.

But Jesus was not interested in discussing His signs, which had resulted only in superficial faith. Instead, He went

straight to the real issue—the transformation of Nicodemus’ heart by the new birth. Jesus answered Nicodemus’ unasked question and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” The phrase *amēn amēn* (truly, truly) appears in the New Testament only in John’s Gospel. It solemnly affirms the veracity and significance of what follows. In this instance, Jesus used the phrase to introduce the vitally important truth that there is no entrance into God’s kingdom unless one is born again. The new birth, or regeneration, is the act of God by which He imparts eternal life to those who are “dead in...trespasses and sins,” thus making them His children.

The kingdom of God in its universal aspect refers to God’s sovereign rule over all of His creation. In that broadest sense of the term, everyone is part of God’s kingdom, since “the Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all” (Ps. 103:19).

But Jesus is not referring here to the universal kingdom. Instead, He is speaking specifically of the kingdom of salvation, the spiritual realm where those who have been born again by divine power through faith now live under the rulership of God mediated through His Son. Nicodemus, like the rest of his fellow Jews, eagerly anticipated that glorious realm. Unfortunately, they thought that being descendants of Abraham, observing the law, and performing external religious rituals (particularly circumcision) would gain them entrance into that kingdom. But in thinking this, they were severely mistaken, as Jesus made clear. No matter how religiously active someone might be, no one can enter the kingdom without experiencing the personal regeneration of the new birth.

The implications of Jesus’ words for Nicodemus were staggering. All of his life he had diligently observed the law and the rituals of Judaism. He had joined the ultra-religious Pharisees, and even become a member of the Sanhedrin. Now Jesus called him to forsake all of that and start over; to abandon the entire system of works righteousness in which he had placed his hope; to realize that human effort was powerless to save.

### THE INSIGHT

Jesus’ shocking statement in verses 4–8 was far more than Nicodemus had expected. Incredulous, 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?” Certainly, this highly educated Pharisee was not so obtuse as to have misinterpreted Jesus’ words in a simplistically literal sense. He knew our Lord was not talking about being physically reborn, but he replied in the context of the Lord’s analogy. How could he start all over, go back to the beginning?

Jesus was telling Nicodemus that entrance to God’s salvation was not a matter of adding something to all his efforts, nor topping off his religious devotion, but rather canceling everything and starting all over again. At the same time, Nicodemus clearly could not grasp the full meaning of Jesus’ point. His questions convey his confusion, as he openly wondered at the impossibility of Christ’s statement. Jesus was asking for something that was not humanly possible (to be born again); He was making entrance into the kingdom contingent on something that could not be obtained through human effort. But if that was true, what did it mean for Nicodemus’ works-based system? If spiritual rebirth, like physical rebirth, was impossible from a human standpoint, then where did that leave this self-righteous Pharisee?

Far from minimizing the demands of the gospel, Jesus confronted Nicodemus with the most difficult challenge He could make. No wonder Christ would later say to His disciples, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” By calling him to be born again, Jesus challenged this most religious Jew to admit his spiritual bankruptcy and abandon everything he was trusting in for salvation.

Jesus answered Nicodemus’ confusion by elaborating on the truth He introduced in verse 3: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” A number of interpretations have been offered to explain the phrase “born of water.” Some see two births here, one natural, and the other spiritual. Proponents of this view interpret the water as the amniotic fluid that flows from the womb just before childbirth. But it is not clear that the ancients described natural birth in that way. Further, the phrase “born of water and the Spirit” parallels the phrase “born again” in verse 3; thus, only one birth is in view. Others see in the phrase born of water a reference to baptism, either that of John the Baptist, or Christian baptism. But Nicodemus would not have understood Christian baptism (which did not yet exist) nor misunderstood John the Baptist’s baptism. Nor would Jesus have refrained from baptizing people if baptism were necessary for salvation. Still others see the phrase as a reference to Jewish ceremonial washings, which being born of the Spirit transcends. However, the two terms are not in contrast with each other, but combine to form a parallel with the phrase “born again” in verse 3.

Since Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand this truth, it must have been something with which he was familiar. Water and Spirit often refer symbolically in the Old Testament to spiritual renewal and cleansing. In one of the most glorious passages in all of Scripture describing Israel’s restoration to the Lord by the new covenant, God said through Ezekiel,

For I will take you from the nations, gather you from

all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. (Ezek. 36:24–27)

It was surely this passage that Jesus had in mind, showing regeneration to be an Old Testament truth with which Nicodemus would have been acquainted. Against this Old Testament backdrop, Christ's point was unmistakable: Without the spiritual washing of the soul, a cleansing accomplished only by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, no one can enter God's kingdom.

Jesus continued by further emphasizing that this spiritual cleansing is wholly a work of God, and not the result of human effort: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Just as only human nature can beget human nature, so also only the Holy Spirit can effect spiritual transformation. The term flesh (*sarx*) here refers merely to human nature; in this context, it does not have the negative moral connotation that it frequently does in Paul's writings. Even if a physical rebirth were possible, it would produce only flesh. Thus, only the Spirit can produce the spiritual birth required for entrance into God's kingdom. Regeneration is entirely His work, unaided by any human effort).

Although Jesus' words were based on Old Testament revelation, they ran completely contrary to everything Nicodemus had been taught. For his entire life he had believed that salvation came through his own external merit. Now he found it exceedingly difficult to think otherwise. Aware of his astonishment, Jesus continued, "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" The verb translated "must" is a strong term; John used it elsewhere in his Gospel to refer to the necessity of the crucifixion, of John the Baptist's inferiority to Christ, of the proper method of worshipping God, of Jesus carrying out His ministry, and of the necessity of the resurrection. It was absolutely necessary for Nicodemus to get over his astonishment at being so wrong about how one is accepted into God's kingdom and seek to be born again if he was to enter. And he could never do so based on his own righteous works.

Then the Lord illustrated His point with a familiar example from nature: "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 wind cannot be controlled; it blows where it wishes. And though its general direction can be known, where it comes from and where it is going cannot be precisely determined. Nevertheless, the wind's effects can be observed. The same is true of the work of the Spirit. His sovereign work of regeneration in the human heart can neither be controlled nor predicted. Yet its effects can be seen in the transformed lives of those who are born of the Spirit.

### THE INDICTMENT

Although he was a renowned teacher, Nicodemus proved to be a poor learner. His question, "How can these things be?" indicates that he had made little progress since verse 4. Despite Jesus' further clarification in verses 5–8, Nicodemus still could not accept what he was hearing. He could not let go of his legalistic religious system and realize that salvation was a sovereign, gracious work of God's Spirit.

Because of his position as the teacher of Israel, Nicodemus could have been expected to understand the things Jesus had said. His lack of understanding was inexcusable considering his exposure to the Old Testament. The use of the definite article before "teacher" indicates that Nicodemus was a recognized, established teacher in Israel. Jesus found it inexcusable that this prominent scholar was not familiar with the foundational new covenant teaching from the Old Testament regarding the only way of salvation. Sadly, Nicodemus serves as a clear example of the numbing effect that external, legalistic religion has on a person's spiritual perception—even to the point of obscuring the revelation of God.

His ignorance also exemplified Israel's spiritual bankruptcy. In Paul's words the Jews, failing to recognize "God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own . . . did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God." Therefore, their "zeal for God [was] not in accordance with knowledge" (Rom 10:2), meaning that it was all for naught.

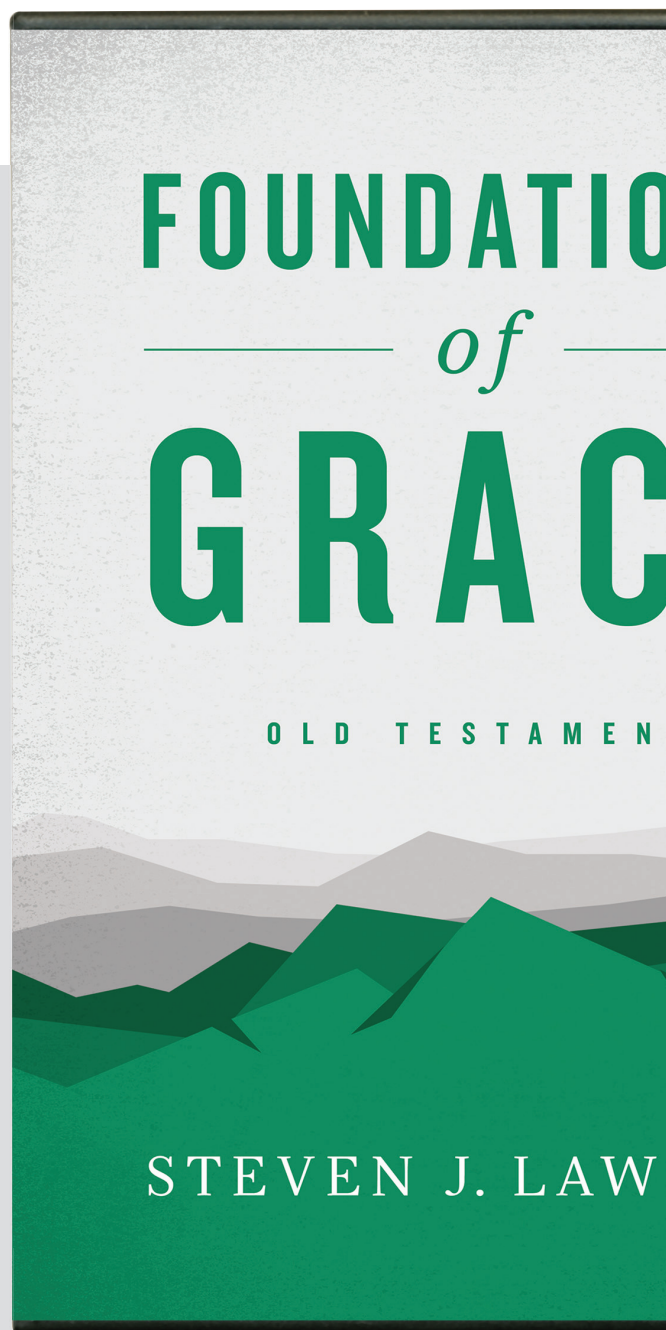
Although nothing in this passage suggests Nicodemus was converted that evening (and v. 11 strongly implies that he was not), he never forgot his discussion with Jesus. Later, he boldly defended Him before the Sanhedrin, and helped Joseph of Arimathea prepare His body for burial—actions that indicate the presence of genuine faith in his life. Some time after that memorable evening he spent with Jesus but before the crucifixion, Nicodemus came to understand sovereign grace and experience the reality of the new birth. ♦

**JOHN MACARTHUR** is pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA, and can be heard daily on Grace to You.



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# THE NEW BIRTH

R.C. SPROUL

Regeneration precedes faith. This assertion that captures the heart of the distinctive theology of historic Augustinian and Reformed thought is the watershed assertion that distinguishes that theology from all forms of semi-Pelagianism. That is, it distinguishes it from *almost* all forms of semi-Pelagianism.

There is one historic position of semi-Pelagianism that advocates the view of a universal benefit that embraces all mankind as a result of the atonement of Jesus. This universal benefit is the universal regeneration of all men—at least to the degree that it rescues them from the moral inability of their original sin and now empowers them with the ability to exercise faith in Christ. This new ability to believe makes faith possible, but by no means effectual. This type of regeneration does not bring in its wake the certainty that those who are born again will, in fact, place their trust in Christ.

For the most part, however, the statement “regeneration precedes faith” is the watershed position that creates apoplexy in the minds of semi-Pelagians. The semi-Pelagian would argue that despite the ravages of the fall, man still has an island of righteousness left in his soul, by which he still can accept or reject God’s offer of grace. This view, so widely held in evangelical circles, argues that one must believe in Christ in order to be born again, and so the order of salvation is reversed in this view by maintaining that faith precedes regeneration.

However, when we consider the teaching on this issue as found in John’s record of Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus, we see the emphasis that Jesus places on regeneration as a necessary condition, a *sine qua non*, for believing in Him. He says to Nicodemus in John 3:3: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Then again in verses 5–7, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter 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 must-ness of regeneration of which Jesus speaks is necessary for a person to even see the kingdom of God, let alone to enter it. We cannot exercise faith in a kingdom that we cannot enter apart from rebirth.

The weakness of all semi-Pelagianism is that it invests in the fallen, corrupt flesh of man the power to exercise faith. Here, fallen man is able to come to Christ without regeneration, that is, before regeneration. On the other hand, the axiom that regeneration precedes faith gets to the very heart of the historic issue between Augustinianism and semi-Pelagianism.

In the Augustinian and Reformation view, regeneration is seen first of all as a supernatural work of God. Regeneration is the divine work of God the Holy Spirit upon the minds and souls of fallen people, by which the Spirit quickens those who

are spiritually dead and makes them spiritually alive. This supernatural work rescues that person from his bondage to sin and his moral inability to incline himself toward the things of God. Regeneration, by being a supernatural work, is obviously a work that cannot be accomplished by natural man on his own. If it were a natural work, it would not require the intervention of God the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, regeneration is a monergistic work. “Monergistic” means that it is the work of one person who exercises his power. In the case of regeneration, it is God alone who is able, and it is God alone who performs the work of regenerating the human soul. The work of regeneration is not a joint venture between the fallen person and the divine Spirit; it is solely the work of God.

Thirdly, the monergistic work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit is an immediate work. It is immediate with respect to time, and it is immediate with respect to the principle of operating without intervening means. The Holy Spirit does not use something apart from His own power to bring a person from spiritual death to spiritual life, and when that work is accomplished, it is accomplished instantaneously. No one is partly regenerate, or almost regenerate. Here we have a classic either/or situation. A person is either born again, or he is not born again. There is no nine-month gestation period with respect to this birth. When the Spirit changes the disposition of the human soul, He does it instantly. A person may not be aware of this internal work accomplished by God for some time after it has actually occurred. But though our awareness of it may be gradual, the

action of it is instantaneous.

Fourthly, the work of regeneration is effectual. That is, when the Holy Spirit regenerates a human soul, the purpose of that regeneration is to bring that person to saving faith in Jesus Christ. That purpose is effected and accomplished as God purposes in the intervention. Regeneration is more than giving a person the possibility of having faith; it gives him the certainty of possessing that saving faith.

The result of our regeneration is first of all faith, which then results in justification and adoption into the family of God. Nobody is born into this world a child of the family of God. We are born as children of wrath. The only way we enter into the family of God is by adoption, and that adoption occurs when we are united to God’s only begotten Son by faith. When by faith we are united with Christ, we are then adopted into that family of whom Christ is the firstborn. Regeneration therefore involves a new genesis, a new beginning, a new birth. It is that birth by which we enter into the family of God by adoption.

Finally, it’s important to see that regeneration is a gift that God disposes sovereignly to all of those whom He determines to bring into His family. ♦

**R.C. SPROUL** was the founder of Ligonier Ministries and pastor of St. Andrews Chapel, Sanford, FL.

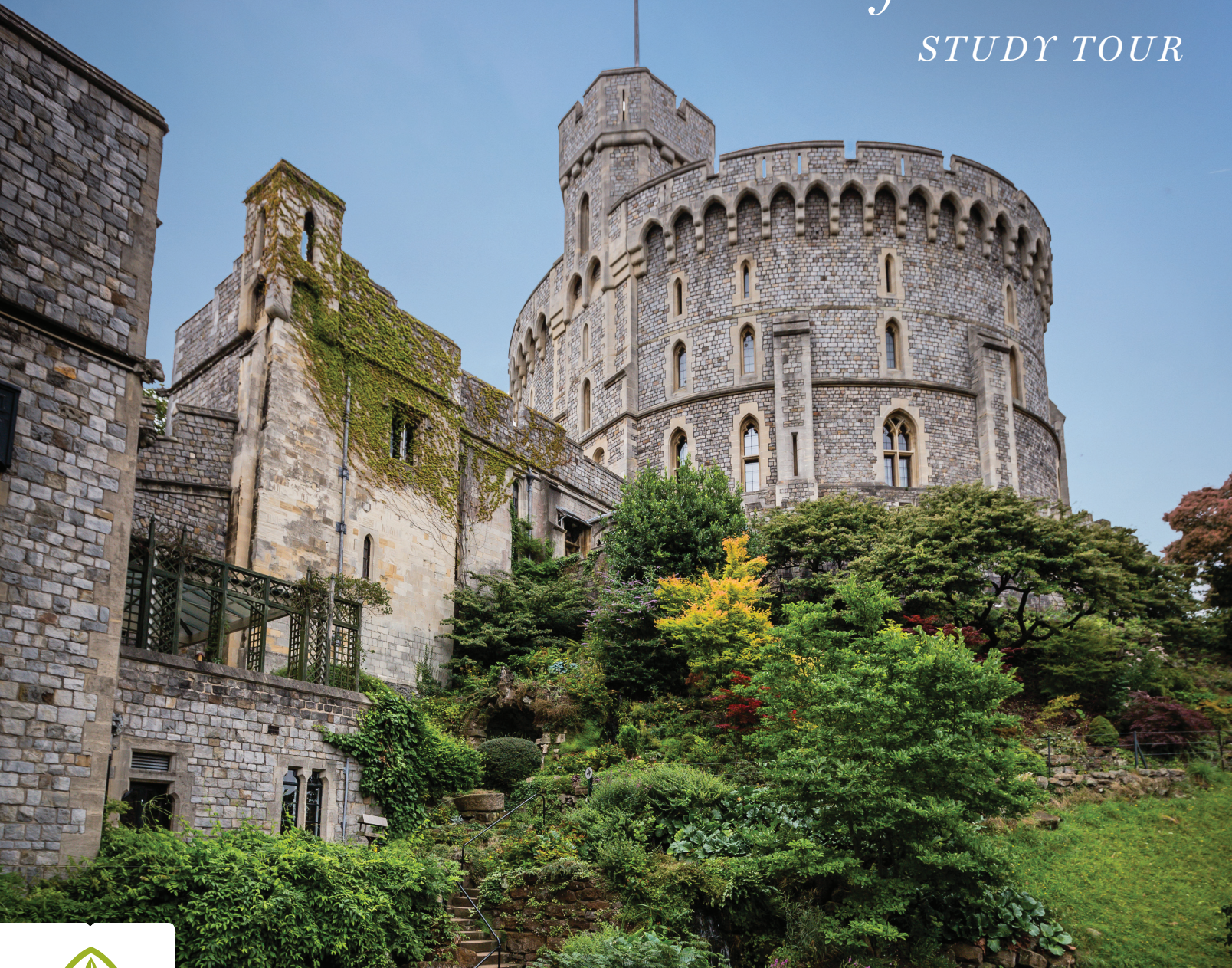
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# YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

JOEL R. BEEKE

Few things rejoice the heart more than life. When a pregnant mother feels the little one within her womb kicking or hears her baby's heart beating rapidly on the ultrasound, her soul is immediately filled with joy and gratitude. Conversely, few things bring greater sorrow than death. When the heart monitor indicates there is no pulse, when the final breath is taken, when a loved one becomes a lifeless corpse, does it not bring the soul into the depths of anguish and despair? Words simply fail to describe the contrast.

The point is that life matters. It is of monumental significance. And if this is true in the physical realm, how much more so in the spiritual realm! When we talk about spiritual life as Christians, we are referring to what is often called the new birth. There are few subjects of such immense importance as this one. The new birth is the fundamental blessing of the Spirit's saving work. Without it, there is no hope for us. Without it, we remain dead in trespasses and sins. Without it, we head to a Christ-less, grace-less eternity.

Jesus Himself had much to say about the new birth. In John 3 we are invited into a most enlightening discussion between Christ and a Jewish teacher by the name of Nicodemus. What is the initial subject of their conversation? The new birth. Of all the important topics Jesus could have talked about with this religious leader, He chose to begin with this one. It was, for Christ, the doctrine upon which the soul

stands or falls. We would do well to pay careful attention to His words.

## THE MAKEUP OF THE NEW BIRTH

The term *regeneration* is a synonym of the new birth. The prefix "re" means *again*. Generation means *to generate* or *to quicken into life*. Therefore, regeneration means *to be brought into life again*, or *to be born again*. It is vital for us to think through what the makeup of the new birth is.

### *What Regeneration Is Not*

Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus helps us to understand, first of all, what the new birth is *not* by nature. Regeneration is not the same thing as religion, not even the same thing as orthodox religion. You can give mental assent to the whole of Scripture, and yet not be born again. You can be very conservative, and yet not be born again. Nicodemus in John 3 is a prime example of this, is he not? He belonged to the Pharisees. He was not only a religious man but a religious teacher. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" (v. 10, KJV). Yet our Lord warned him, "Ye must be born again" (v. 7). You can possess religious knowledge, have religious experiences, be involved in a frenzy of religious activities, and yet never have been born again.

Second, the new birth is not the same thing as reformation.

# WHAT THEN IS THE NEW BIRTH? REGENERATION IS THE RADICAL TRANSFORMATION WROUGHT BY THE SPIRIT WHEREBY HE MAKES SPIRITUALLY DEAD SINNERS ALIVE IN CHRIST

No doubt, Nicodemus was open to changing some of his thought patterns and lifestyle choices. If not, he never would have risked coming to Jesus late at night. Seeing the wreckage sin has made in their lives, people often confess, “I need to change.” And many times they do reform their lives, at least to some degree. But a self-produced morality is not the new birth. You can be reformed; you can see the emptiness of a worldly life, and yet not be born again.

The new birth, third, is not the same thing as religious education. That was, of course, one of Nicodemus’ great mistakes when he came to Jesus by night. He came asking for teaching. What is problematic about this? He approached Jesus as a fellow teacher. He said, “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (v. 2). Jesus reads right into what Nicodemus is doing. He wants a little instruction. But Jesus essentially tells him, “Nicodemus, it is not a little teaching you need. It is *life* that you need. You are dead, Nicodemus. You must be born again.” It is possible to be taught much Christian truth, and yet not be born again.

## **What Regeneration Is**

What then is the new birth? Regeneration is the radical transformation wrought by the Spirit whereby He makes spiritually dead sinners alive in Christ. The Canons of Dort describe it as “a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid. . . . It is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable.”

Regeneration is *a divine miracle*. The whole thrust of what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that a man can no more produce his spiritual birth than he could produce his natural birth. God works it in us, without any help on our part. The

Bible makes it clear that fallen man is not merely impaired, but spiritually dead (Eph 2:1–3). Therefore, it is impossible for him to cooperate in the new birth. Man is passive in regeneration; he is born of the Spirit (John 3:5–6), born of God, and not born of anything in man, not his blood, his flesh, or his will (John 1:13). The biblical doctrine of the new birth leaves no room for synergism. It is a monergistic work of the sovereign God, speaking life into the souls of dead sinners. As Jesus called forth the physically dead Lazarus from the tomb (John 11:43–44), so too Jesus speaks His life-giving Word into the hearts of dead sinners, quickening them by His authoritative, powerful voice.

Regeneration is *a comprehensive miracle*. When a baby is born, the principle of life pervades the whole of his or her humanity. Similarly, God doesn’t renew a part of man, but every faculty of man’s soul. He effectually renews the mind to understand the gospel, the heart to believe it, and the will to desire and respond to it. In “The Necessity of Regeneration,” Stephen Charnock wrote, “The new birth is necessary in every part of the soul. . . . Because there was an universal depravation by the fall, regeneration must answer it in its extensiveness in every faculty. Otherwise it is not the birth of the man, but of one part only.” Because the new birth entails the whole man, we are enabled to honor the Lord in every aspect of life.

Regeneration is *an irreversible miracle*. In the world of chemistry, there is a great difference between mixing two substances and making the two substances into a compound. In an experiment, you might take two substances, iron and sulphur, and mix them together. But this mixture can be easily reversed by taking a powerful magnet and passing it over the mixture of iron filings and sulphur; all the filings will be drawn rapidly to the magnet. The mixture is easily reversed. But a compound is an entirely different matter. To make a



compound, you would put the iron filings and the sulphur together and then subject them to extreme heat. And as you do so, the mixture becomes a new substance altogether. No magnet can draw out the iron filings again.

Similarly, the Holy Spirit, in regeneration, makes a new substance that is irreversible. No magnetizing power of the world, the flesh, or the devil, can draw that new life out of the sinner. John Flavel, in *The Method of Grace*, says that the new life of regeneration is “no transient, vanishing thing, but a fixed, permanent principle, which abides in the soul for ever.” Furthermore, “grace cannot be separated from the soul: when all forsake us, this will not leave us.” God keeps us in a state of life by His omnipotent grace.

Regeneration is *a necessary miracle*. Jesus tells Nicodemus three times that he *must* be born again (John 3:3, 5, 7). The new birth is not optional. J. C. Ryle wrote, “A man may be ignorant of many things in religion and yet be saved, but to be ignorant of the matter handled in this chapter [John 3] is to be on the broad way that leads to destruction.” Because human depravity is a universal reality, the necessity of the new birth is a universal reality. In other words, our pervasive need of regeneration exists because of our pervasive sinfulness. This is why Jesus says, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). Apart from this gracious work in our lives, we will die in our sins. George Swinnock put it helpfully, “There must be a change from Nature to Grace, before there can be a change from Grace to Glory.” Here is a necessity that is true throughout all ages. From Adam’s fall to the end of the world, there is not one person who ever walked the face of this earth who did not need to be born again.

This is what Jesus is referring to when He tells Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again.” He is talking about a divinely wrought resurrection from the dead: “You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). He is speaking about a comprehensive new creation: “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). He is speaking of the new birth.

### THE MEANS OF THE NEW BIRTH

As He instructs Nicodemus, Jesus illustrates this gracious work of regeneration with the wind: “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). There is a double connotation to Jesus’ illustration. “Wind” in Greek and Hebrew is the same word for “spirit.” Not only is the new birth like the activity of the wind, but the Spirit who authors the new birth is the wind. He is not an impersonal power, but

rather a powerful Person who brings about regeneration in a manner similar to the way the wind blows in nature. Being the bond between believers and Christ, the Spirit makes sinners alive in the Savior.

### *The Sovereign Spirit*

Jesus emphasizes that the wind is free and sovereign. “The wind,” He says, “bloweth where it listeth.” Listeth is an old-fashioned word meaning “desires”—the wind blows where it desires. No man can stop it. We cannot manipulate or control the wind. And in the same way, we cannot manipulate and control the Holy Spirit. He blows upon the hearts of whomever He pleases.

Like the wind, the work of the Spirit is mysterious. We cannot tell “whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” He often saves the most unlikely characters, at the most unlikely time, in the most unlikely way. He is sovereign, saving whom He will, where He will, when He will, by what means He will.

How fatal Jesus’ words are to the modern conceptions of revival! Men declare they will have a revival and put it on the calendar as if they have the power to control the Spirit. That is not true revival. Genuine revival is unpredictable and often surprising. It is not something we can manipulate, but it is something we must pray and plead for. The Spirit’s normal way of working in regeneration and revival is to stir up His people to pray for these things and then in response to their prayers to bring it. Are you crying out for Him to blow upon the dead hearts of lost family members, neighbors, and co-workers?

### *The Saving Scriptures*

The Holy Spirit uses the Word He inspired as the great means by which He brings the new birth about. Jesus’ entire discussion about regeneration with Nicodemus reaches its climax in the proclamation of the gospel (vv. 14–16). The sovereign Spirit employs the instrument of the Word, in particular the gospel, to make men alive in Christ. Peter tells us we are “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Pet 1:23). He goes on to explain that the Word by which the new birth was effected was nothing less than the gospel itself (v. 25).

The Spirit joins Himself to the Word of God. He delights to take the things of Christ and to reveal them to sinners. He plants the seed of regeneration through the hearing of the Word, and from that regenerating act comes saving faith. A spiritual sight of the glory of Jesus Christ in the gospel can have no other response than a humble and ardent faith.

Let us be clear, it is the Spirit who alone does this work of

the new birth. He is the final and sole agent. But He is pleased to use the means of the Word of God to bring it to pass. Is this not great incentive to lay yourself bare before the Scriptures? Should this not motivate us to share the Scriptures with others? Anthony Burgess exclaims,

Oh therefore how careful should people be both to get and to live under the preaching of God's Word! This is the wind that must make dry bones live: This is the voice of a trump, that must make the dead come out of the grave. How mean [insignificant], impotent, contemptible, men may esteem it, yet God hath appointed no other means to convey supernatural life, but after this manner.

Read the Scriptures, meditate on the Scriptures, proclaim the Scriptures to others, and bring the Scriptures before the throne of grace, asking God to make them effectual.

### THE MARKS OF THE NEW BIRTH

Everything we have considered thus far about regeneration begs the question: "How may I know if it has happened to me? What are the inevitable fruits of the new birth? Teaching the necessity of regeneration without explaining what it actually looks like in real life would be useless. How may we know if this wonderful, miraculous, and irreversible work of regeneration has been wrought in us?

Wherever regeneration takes place, it will evidence itself in spiritual fruit. Where there is life, there will be evidences of life. While there are numerous marks of the new birth revealed in Scripture, our attention will be given to that which Jesus sets forth in His discussion with Nicodemus in John 3. There are two essential fruits of the new birth which our Savior here reveals.

#### *A Spiritual Perception*

The first is found in the words of Jesus in verse 3: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Where the Spirit makes a person a new creature, he or she will receive spiritual eyes to see the kingdom of God. This is an inevitable evidence of regeneration—*spiritual sight*.

Nicodemus, of course, saw a great deal. He saw that Jesus was a great teacher who came from God (v. 2). And yet, despite this, Nicodemus was utterly blind to the things of the kingdom of God. He had never been brought to surrender all to the sovereign will and rule of Jesus Christ. He could not perceive his unrighteousness and his desperate need of the righteousness of Christ. He simply had no ability to see these things.

By nature, we are all like Nicodemus (2 Cor 4:4). But when God causes us to be born again, we begin to see ourselves as never before. We begin to see our selfish motives, our sinful inclinations, and our grave need of cleansing. We begin to see God in the glorious panorama of His holy attributes. And the gospel which before was viewed as a putrid thing, becomes the sweetest, joyous, most liberating truth in all the world.

Dear reader, do you know anything of this spiritual sight? Have you seen Him in His majestic holiness and sovereign glory? Has your wretched condition in Adam been unveiled to you? Has your heart been drawn out to Christ? Have you come to see that He alone can deliver you from your woeful condition in sin?

The new birth will evidence itself in such a newfound spiritual perception. If you know yourself to be blind this day, seek His grace. Cry out to Him to open your eyes to His glory, your sin, and the all-sufficiency of Christ. And if the eyes of your soul perceive these truths, give praise and glory to God for His regenerating, life-giving, sight-producing grace!

#### *A Spiritual Pursuit*

Jesus gives a second evidence of regeneration in verse 5: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Nicodemus presumed that he could earn God's grace by his own achievements. He thought he could receive the privileges of salvation without the new birth. But Jesus crushes his fleshly confidence. To enter the kingdom, one must first know this inner transformation of soul.

When a man is born again, he longs, more than anything else in the world, to please God. He bows, imperfectly yet sincerely, to the rule of Jesus Christ. There is not only a *seeing* of God's kingdom, but an *entering into* that kingdom. There is a newfound submission of heart, soul, strength, and mind to the King of kings.

This is why so many things change when a man is born again. His outward walk changes, his manner of conversation changes, the way he spends his time and money changes, his reading material often changes, and even the way he dresses may change. A man made alive by divine grace desires to run in the way of God's commands. His new heart longs for the smile of his King.

Jesus explains this further in verse 6: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." By nature, we all live in the realm of the flesh—the realm of fallen, sinful, human nature. But when we are born again, we are transferred into the realm of the Spirit. And the Spirit works in us increasing submission and conformity to Christ the King. Do you long to be like Jesus? Such a desire is one of the surest evidences that you are born again by the Spirit of God.

## YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

According to Jesus, the new birth is not optional. Without it, one cannot perceive Christ in His kingly glory and thereby exercise faith in Him. Without it, one cannot enter under the redemptive rule of Christ and thereby be delivered from the wrath to come. William Whately most pointedly states, “If Christ should come, and die, for one man, ten thousand times; all those deaths should profit that one man nothing at all for his salvation, unless he be made a new creature.” The way of eternal life is the way of the new birth.

The pressing concern is not whether or not you *know*

*about* the new birth. But do you *know* the new birth in living experience? Has your soul been quickened and radically renovated by His grace? Stephen Charnock warns, “An evangelical head will be but drier fuel for eternal burning, without an evangelical impression upon the heart and the badge of a new nature.” You and I will perish eternally if we are not born again.

May these sober words of Jesus resound in our minds and hearts: “Ye must be born again.” ♦

JOEL R. BEEKE is president of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI.



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# REGENERATION: BEGINNING WITH GOD

**ERIC ALEXANDER**

I spent the first fifteen years of my ministry in a small country town in Ayrshire in Scotland. Not far from there, in the seventeenth century, a godly young man named David Dickson ministered in a town called Irvine. Some remarkable revivals broke out, associated with a series of sermons on the subject of regeneration. That often seems to have happened in times of revival.

The history of revival bears witness to the frequency with which regeneration was a theme accompanying it. David Dickson preached twenty-seven sermons in his series, which is a more appropriate time scale for the subject of regeneration, I would think, than one occasion. But in the midst of it he gave this definition:

Regeneration is the work of God's invincible power and mere grace, wherein by his Spirit accompanying his Word he quickeneth a redeemed person lying dead in his sins and reneweth him in his mind, his will and all the powers of his soul, convincing him savingly of sin and righteousness and judgment, and making him heartily to embrace Christ and salvation, and to consecrate himself to the service of God in Christ all the days of his life.

It would be difficult to find a more satisfying summary

of regeneration than that. I want to try to come to grips with it biblically by turning to the third chapter of John's Gospel, where our Lord is presenting this truth to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews and a teacher in Israel. Not that the teaching of Jesus in John 3 is unique or out of harmony with the rest of His teaching in the Gospels! Indeed, the doctrine of regeneration that is taught in this chapter is really the logical link—as Professor John Murray points out—between our Lord's teaching on the pollution and depravity of the natural human heart, on the one hand, and the demands and requirements of membership of His kingdom, on the other.

There is a tremendous gulf between the teaching of our Lord on the depravity and sickness of the human heart, including the inability of man by nature, and the requirements which He urges upon us as members of His kingdom. The logical and vital link between these two is regeneration.

## **YOU MUST BE BORN ANEW**

The necessity of regeneration could scarcely be put more categorically than in Jesus' words in verses 3, 5, and 7: "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God . . . You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" This necessity has certain specific characteristics.

First, it is an indispensable necessity. I mean by that, that there are some things more important than others, even amongst the things which Scripture presses upon us, and that regeneration is among those items of utmost importance. That is the significance of our Lord's words in verses 3 and 5: "I tell you the truth [literally, verily, verily]." They are a kind of underlining. Here Jesus is underlining His words to score their significance for us. There are some things, you see, that a man may dispense with and still enter the kingdom of God. He may enter the kingdom of God without ever being baptized or sitting at the Lord's Table. They are important, although not indispensable. But what Jesus is here describing is an indispensable necessity, for a man will never in all eternity enter the kingdom of God without being regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

Second, it is a universal necessity. Not everything Jesus says is a universal necessity. For example, He said to the rich young ruler that he must sell all that he had and give to the poor. But Jesus does not tell everybody to sell all that he or she has and give to the poor. That was necessary for him, but not for everybody.

However, Jesus' words about regeneration are of a different order. Jesus said, "Unless a man is born again," and this means that regeneration was a necessity for Nicodemus personally precisely because regeneration is a necessity for all men universally. This truth derives from the fact that by nature every man is defiled, deadened, and corrupted by sin. This is what Jesus is referring to in verse 6: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

"Flesh" here means human nature as it is dominated and polluted by sin. So, what Jesus is telling us is that unrenewed human nature dominated by sin can only reproduce itself. Regeneration is a universal necessity because man by his own fleshly effort has a universal inability to produce anything except the flesh. No amount of education will produce regeneration. No amount of external religion will do anything to change this basic position. This is the law of generation, which we find illustrated in the first part of Genesis: "Creatures . . . according to their kinds" (Gen 1:21). Man brings forth flesh from his flesh, and sinful flesh remains sinful flesh. So Jesus says in verse 7, "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" The new birth is a universal necessity because the disabling, defiling power of sin is universal.

You will notice in verse 4 that Nicodemus misunderstands. He thinks that Jesus is speaking about a new start. If only a man could be born again in the sense of entering his mother's womb a second time! Nicodemus thinks that Jesus is referring to this kind of new beginning. But Jesus says that this would not help in the slightest, because a thousand new

starts would only produce the same weary tale of defeat, pollution, and disablement. It is a new nature, a new heart which man needs. That is, he needs to be born of the Spirit.

This is a very important thing for us to grasp, because the point is not merely academic. It is significant for our evangelism. We need to recognize that man is not just confused and needing to be sorted out in his thinking, nor is he merely needing to be redirected into the ways of God, nor is it only the fact that he is guilty and needs to be forgiven.

Basically, his problem is that he is dead and needs to be resurrected. He needs new life. Our evangelism needs to be based on this foundation. We need rightly to diagnose the problem of man before we even begin rightly to understand the gospel that he needs. We may help a man to understand his confusion and lead him into the right way. We may indoctrinate him. But the one thing that we can never do is regenerate him, and this is why our Lord is at pains to lay down the universal necessity of regeneration.

But regeneration is not only an indispensable and universal necessity; it is also an unchangeable necessity. It is unchangeable because of the issues with which it deals. I refer to verses 3 and 5 particularly, for these show that regeneration deals not with passing, changing things but with the unchanging laws of God concerning His kingdom—how a man may perceive the kingdom and enter it. The kingdom of God is the sphere in which God brings rebel sinners into subjection to His gracious rule and authority. It is the realm in which God's grace is to be tested and experienced.

To see the kingdom is to grasp or understand it, to have the glory and wonder of it dawn upon one. But the glory of the kingdom will never dawn upon a man until he has been born again. Similarly, to enter the kingdom of God means to experience the blessings of the kingdom, to be admitted to its privileges and joys both present and future. But apart from the new birth, says Jesus, we shall never experience any of these joys. This is an unchanging necessity because it deals with these unchanging laws of God's kingdom.

## A NEW CREATION

What, then, is this work of grace that is an indispensable, universal and unchangeable necessity? This question leads me to the nature of regeneration, which is a radical, total change in sinful man accomplished solely by God the Holy Spirit, producing new life—what Paul calls "a new creation." The very metaphor that our Lord uses in His conversation with Nicodemus reveals the nature of it, for He is saying that regeneration is as momentous as birth itself.

It is significant that the New Testament uses such radical language to describe Christian beginnings, language like "resurrection," "regeneration" and "recreation." For it is teaching



# ONE OF THE THINGS WE NEED SO MUCH TO GRASP IN OUR DAY IS THE WONDER OF WHAT HAPPENED TO US WHEN WE WERE BORN INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD'S GRACE.

that being brought out of darkness into light is something that can only be paralleled by a birth. It is like a new life beginning. It is parallel, if you like, to a new creation. “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

One of the things we need so much to grasp in our day is the wonder of what happened to us when we were born into the kingdom of God’s grace. I am sure that one of the reasons people are looking for additional, secondary thrills offered at some future stage in their spiritual experience is that they have devalued the initial work of grace. We speak as though it were something we had done, something anyone can do. But the Bible describes it as the miracle of resurrection, as the miracle of a new creation.

This is something which we greatly misunderstand when we speak, as we often do, about people who have been saved from some particularly dissolute level of society and some particularly debauched kind of life. I remember a young boy who had been a gang leader in the district where I originally served as a pastor. He had committed just about every sin you could imagine, but he was saved by Christ and was brought into the church. People used to say to me, “Well, you know, it really took a miracle to save him!” I was very interested when I heard that because the implication was, you see, that it took something less of a miracle to save respectable sinners like us. These people had not really understood the nature of man’s total depravity, whatever form it takes, or the miracle that God performs when He raises anyone into newness of life in Christ.

This is what is involved in the well-known phrase “born

again,” which occurs in verses 3 and 5. It is what old Henry Scougal called it, in the title of that famous book which had such an astonishing influence on men like George Whitefield, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. That title expresses exactly what regeneration is. As John himself said in 1 John 3:9, it is having God’s nature abiding in you because you are “born of God.”

Regeneration is characterized by both cleansing and renewal. That is the truth of verse 5: “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” Being born of water does not refer to baptism, since that would be to interpret Jesus as reinforcing the Pharisees’ false notion that inward spiritual problems can be resolved by external physical rites. We need to look, rather, at verse 10 for help in understanding verse 5.

In verse 10, Jesus is gently chiding Nicodemus for not understanding Him despite Nicodemus’ being a teacher of Israel. What was God’s great promise to Israel to which Jesus refers? Well, in Ezekiel 36:25, 26 the prophet says from God, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean.” (This is the promise of the new age of the Messiah’s coming.) “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.” [That is the double promise of spiritual cleansing and spiritual renewal.] Similarly, this is how Paul characterizes the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in Titus 3:3–5:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passion and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. 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 the renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Regeneration deals with two things, then: the pollution of our nature and the perversity of our will. God implants a spirit of obedience to give us a new heart, and He grants us a cleansing to take away our defilement. The essence of the new birth is this miraculous work of grace, akin to the creation of new life by God the Holy Spirit. And the character of it is that it is a dual miracle of cleansing and renewal.

### BORN FROM ABOVE

Who is the author of the new birth and to whom do we look for it? This question leads us to the source of the new birth and to our Lord's clear teaching in verses 5, 6, and 8, that the author of the new birth is God the Holy Spirit: "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit . . . The Spirit gives birth to spirit . . . The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." As someone has put it, the Holy Spirit is the womb out of which the new birth comes.

Jesus emphasizes the same truth in another way when He speaks of being born "from above" (v. 3). Most of the translations say either "born again" or "born anew." But Jesus really says, "Unless one is born from above." The Greek word is *anōthen*.

One of my friends who has been instrumental in the growth of a real work of grace among evangelical ministers in Scotland, the Reverend William Still of Aberdeen, had a large poster put outside his church. Providentially the buses stop outside his church on Union Street in Aberdeen; they stop there for quite a long time. So, he had a monstrous sign erected which one day bore this message: "You must be born *anōthen*." Many people stopped and stared at this. The morning it went up, he had a telephone call from a business house in Aberdeen, and the man on the line said to him, "Sir, I was passing your church this morning and saw this ridiculous notice you have up. What does it mean? You must be born *anōthen*."

"Oh," Still said, "it means you must be born from above. It means that from below, that is, from man, there is no hope of eternal life. It must come from above, from God."

His caller chided, "Well, why couldn't you simply have put that up in your notice?"

He answered, "Then people like you would never phone me up and give me the opportunity of telling you what I have just said."

The word *anōthen* is the same word, incidentally, that is

used by Jesus with Pilate in John 19:11 ("You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above") and again in John 3:31 ("The one who comes from above is above all"), where Jesus is contrasting coming from the earth, that is, from man, and coming from God. The implication is clear. The new birth has its source in God alone. The very metaphor makes this even stronger. Jesus is saying that a man can no more procure his own spiritual birth than he was able to undertake his own physical procreation and conception. So, the one thing that is necessary for us is the one thing we cannot do for ourselves.

Now some might say, "But that would drive us to despair, if we believed that. How are we to preach this to men?" But that is precisely the point. It is the effect we want. Spurgeon writes, "Do I hear someone complain when I preach on the new birth being from above? This will be discouraging. But from what will it discourage us? It will discourage us from trying to save ourselves, and that is exactly what I want to discourage you from."

This is not an academic question. It affects me if I am not born anew. To whom do I look for the new birth? To whom shall I apply for it? It affects me if I am born anew. To whom shall I give all the glory, honor, and praise for the new birth? It affects me if there are other people whose new birth I desire. To whom shall I look for their regeneration? What is the work that is going to be significant in producing regeneration? The proper answer to those questions will make us realize that prayer is fundamental and not supplemental in the work of evangelism.

The theological terms to which this question points particularly are monergism and synergism. Monergism means "one person (as in monotheistic, one god) working (as in energy)." Synergism means "several persons working together." Our Lord is saying that regeneration belongs to the realm of monergism. Only God is at work in regeneration. Do we contribute anything? Oh, yes, we do! The one thing that you and I contribute to our salvation is the sin which makes it necessary.

### WHERE AND WHEN GOD WILLS

The manner of the new birth is taught in verse 8, where our Lord draws a comparison between the activity of the wind and the activity of the Spirit: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

You will know perhaps that the word for "wind" and the word for "spirit" are the same in Greek, the language in which the Gospel is written. But the Lord nevertheless seems to be making a comparison. He is saying that the manner of the Spirit's work in regeneration is like the operation of the wind.

And that is marked by several things.

First, it is marked by efficacy. The wind blows; it has a dynamic within it. There is an effect when the wind is blowing. In some parts of the world the wind has a tremendous efficacy. When it blows, things bend before it that nothing else will bend. Jesus is saying that wherever the Spirit of God is blowing, He leaves new creations in His wake. There is an efficacy in the Spirit's power as He moves in regenerating grace.

There is also a sovereignty to the Spirit's work, for the wind blows "where it wills." We sometimes wish we could command the wind to come. I used to do a bit of sailing on the Firth of Clyde, a beautiful part of Scotland, where on some days we were becalmed and used to wish that we could command the wind to come. But the wind cannot be commanded like that. Or, on the other hand, some days there may be wild storms, and you might wish to command the wind to stop. But the wind has a sovereignty; it blows where it wills. And so does the Holy Spirit, who is sovereign in His work of regeneration.

That is why we are often completely surprised by the way God is working and why we must not try to drag the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit down to the level of our manipulation. If you had taken a poll in the churches of Judea in the period before that of Acts 9, asking who was the least likely man to be converted, Saul of Tarsus would have come pretty close to the top of the poll. But in His sovereignty, the Holy Spirit moved where He would and regenerated Paul.

There is also a mystery about the wind. You cannot tell, says Jesus, where it comes from or where it is going. We must never seek to remove either this element of sovereignty or this element of mystery from the Spirit's work. God by His Holy Spirit often comes in mysterious ways to bring people to new birth.

### THE MARKS OF REGENERATION

C. R. Vaughan, who was R. L. Dabney's successor in Richmond, Virginia, speaks of the reality of regeneration as an inference to be drawn from evidence. He urges in his book *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, which I commend to you, that the inference be drawn cautiously and deliberately, not hurriedly. We can see some of the evidence for which we look in our Lord's own words to Nicodemus: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (v. 6). That is, there are works of the flesh (which Paul elaborates in Galatians 5:19–21) by which the flesh is recognized. And there are works of the Spirit (which Paul elaborates in Galatians 5:22, 23) by which the Spirit is recognized.

All spiritual activities depend on God's Spirit. Dr. Packer has put it with typical neatness in this way: "There are no spiritual activities without regeneration." But here is the other

side to it: "There is no regeneration without spiritual activities." No spiritual activities without regeneration and no regeneration without spiritual activities. The sound of the Spirit blowing, that is, the recognizable signs of His presence, is the fruit of the Spirit.

And, basically, these are the marks of regeneration. John spells out some of these in his first epistle, for example in 1 John 2:29, which teaches that the practice of righteousness is one evidence of regeneration: "If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him."

Another mark is a departure from the practice of sinning, as in 1 John 3:9: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin," that is, the way he did before. First John 4:7 speaks of the practice of love: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." We find the exercise of faith in 5:1: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." So faith, too, is an evidence of regeneration. First John 5:4 says that the victory over the world is an evidence of regeneration: "Everyone born of God has overcome the world."

This, too, is not mere theology. It is precisely what we see happening when true regeneration takes place. Our church, in the center of the city of Glasgow, is next door to the Royal Academy of Music, and we have seen God begin to do some remarkable things through the Christian Union in the Academy of Music. I regularly get telephone calls asking, "Could you see so and so? Could you go and see someone?" Recently, one of the girls rang me and said, "I've made an appointment for somebody to see you." (It's one of the lovely things students do. They imagine that you don't have anything else scheduled.) She said, "I've made an appointment for you to see so and so today at two. I think he's wanting to become a Christian, and we're trying to help him." I met this young man at two, and we got to know each other a little. Then I said to him, "Now, tell me about what's been happening to you."

He said, "Well, that's what I want to know. I don't know what's been happening to me. But I've suddenly discovered that I'm longing to read the Bible. I've found that Jesus has become everything in life to me! I want to know God! The things I longed to do before have begun to die away, and things I never thought I would be found longing after, these are beginning to be the great things in my life!"

I said, "But somebody said to me that you wanted to become a Christian! You already are!" There were all the evidences of regeneration in the boy's heart, you see. God had given him newness of life in Christ.

### THROUGH THE WORD OF TRUTH

Jesus presents the truth of rebirth to Nicodemus in the context

of verses 11–16, which is really the context of the preaching of a crucified Savior. “I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

The context of regeneration of our Lord’s conversation with Nicodemus is the preaching of such a gospel as this. Indeed, the sovereign Spirit employs the instrumentality of the Word in the production of regeneration. As Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 1:23, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” Similarly, in James 1:18 we have: “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth.” This means that the context in which God creates newness of life is the reading, preaching of, and testimony to the Word of God, whether publicly or privately. The Word of God is the instrument the Holy Spirit is pleased to use.

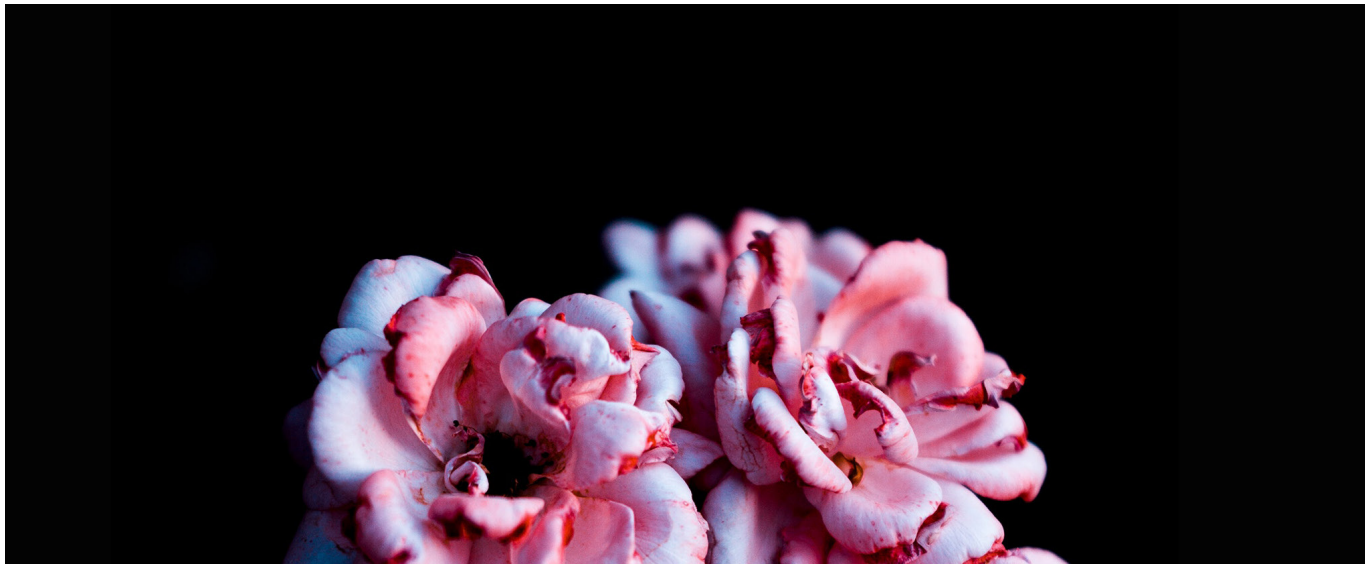
Professor John Murray says, “Regenerating grace is carried to us in the bosom of the effectual call, and since the latter is by the Word, we must never think of regeneration . . . as wrought outside of a context that has reality and meaning only as a result of the Word.” That is why, in connection with his writing on regeneration, Stephen Charnock, the great Puritan, urged us to prize the Word of God as the Spirit’s mighty instrument in regeneration. He says it is an instrument to unlock the prison doors and take them off the hinges, to strike off the fetters and draw out the soul into a glorious liberty. Nothing else ever wrought such miraculous change.

Therefore, prize the word of truth that works such great effects in the soul. Value that as long as you live which is the cord whereby God has drawn any of you out of the dungeon of death. How should the law of God’s mouth be better to us than thousands of gold and silver? How shall we prize that word whereby any of us have seen the glory of God in His sanctuary, the glory of God in our souls! When corruptions are strong, it is an engine to batter them. When our hearts are cold, it is a fire to enflame them. When our souls are faint, it is a cordial to refresh them. It begins a new birth and maintains it. Have a great regard to it, keep it in the midst of your hearts, for it is life.

That is why we are concerned with a ministry, life, and evangelism that are utterly biblical, not only conforming to biblical truth but also with biblical content. Our confidence must be in the Word of God in its saving power under the ministry of God’s Holy Spirit.

What should this doctrine of regeneration do for us then? It should thrill our souls with a new sense of worship as we observe the sheer miracle that God has performed in us in this regenerating grace. It should enlarge our understanding of what it means to be redeemed. It should drive us to God in a new way for those who are yet without eternal life, recognizing that it is He and He alone who can bring it to men. It should bow us down before Him in wonder that the God of all the ages, the creator of the universe, should apply such mighty works of power to the souls of men in order that He might raise us into new life to conform us to the beautiful image of His Son. ♦

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# A MIRACLE FAITH: PREACHING THE NEW BIRTH

OWEN STRACHAN

From the beginning, God has spoken, and His words have carried thunder. When the Lord wants to create, He does not open drafting software or fire up His buzzsaw. He issues words, and His words have the power to make something from nothing, and then to shape order from chaos. If the Lord says it, it is as good as done; if the Lord speaks it, it is firmly fixed in the heavens, immoveable and uneditable.

The Bible's pattern of divine activity through divine speech progresses throughout the canon. The Lord reveals His moral will to Moses through speech (Exodus 19); the Lord creates life through Ezekiel's sermon to the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37); the Lord pronounces judgment upon His wayward covenant people, and Israel shrivels into near-nothingness, captive and defeated (see the book of Jeremiah). But hope is not lost, for the Lord speaks through His Son, the living Word, Jesus Christ (John 1; Hebrews 1:2). His Son, the very speech of God, brings the new law and the new covenant, but the center of all His incarnate ministry is the preaching—and thus the actualizing—of the “new birth.” As Christ said to a rather bewildered Nicodemus, Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν, “You must be born again” (John 3:7).

This startling sentence could be translated “You must be born from above.” Each of these translations helps us see the catalytic nature of the change both demanded and offered by Jesus. Nicodemus, as with all humanity, was born of his

mother; Jesus tells him he must now go through a second birth, the birth of *regeneration*, the total spiritual renewal of the hell-bound sinner.

This birth cannot come through the help of any normal person; it must come from heaven itself, as God works in the depraved heart of fallen mankind to make what was dead come to life. The new birth is thus the blazing core of New Testament Christianity. It is a miracle, a miracle given by God such that wicked sinners, hearing the gospel as the Spirit moves, trust in the finished work of Christ to fully cleanse and save them. Regeneration precedes faith; regeneration *produces* faith. In the regenerative moment we come alive (Eph 2:5; Col 2:13); in this moment we are made a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15); in this moment we are born again (1 Pet 1:23; 1 John 5:1).

But how does this miracle materialize? Only through preaching. Preaching is the God-ordained means of regeneration; the preacher, accordingly, is the God-ordained instrument of regeneration. All this work is of God, yet preaching and teaching the new birth is so important that the Apostle Paul solemnly communicates that no one will be saved unless preachers herald the new birth (Rom 10:14–17). Gospel proclamation summons the sinner to faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; God-given faith in Christ justifies the sinner; this faith comes only by hearing, and hearing

through the word of Christ (Rom 10:17). Without preaching, no one will hear about Jesus; without hearing about Jesus, no one will trust in Him; without saving trust in the Son of God, all will perish eternally.

The hope of the new birth is not a *part* of the Christian ministry, one spoke among many in the salvific wheel of God. The hope of the new birth is the *core* of Christian ministry. Preachers exist to herald this doctrinal truth, and to shepherd and teach all who are born from above. Pastoral ministry is little other than the outworking of the ramifications of regeneration. We do not apply the whole counsel of God to vaguely interested religious types with a propensity for attending services on Sunday morning; we apply the whole counsel of God to those born again by the Spirit, teaching them all things that the Lord has commanded (Matt 28:16–20). Regeneration is the fountainhead of every new covenantal preaching and teaching ministry. Without it, the entire system of Christian doctrine cracks apart and crumbles into the ether.

The stakes are clear, and could not be higher. The central need of mankind is regeneration; the one appointed to announce the sure and certain promise of regeneration is the preacher of God's Word. Having laid our basic claim about this jewel of a doctrine, we now consider six aspects of the preacher's duty regarding the new birth.

**First, we must preach the need for the new birth.** Today, when everything is politics and politics is everything, the preacher and teacher of God's Word can be drawn off by other concerns. But the herald of God's truth does not hold his office to agitate for cultural change. He exists so that the good news of the gospel can be made public. Sinners are not okay; humanity is not fine.

The idea of the "second birth" presupposes that something has gone wrong with the human race. This tragic occurrence is not essentially physical, emotional, or psychological; it is *spiritual*. We have all fallen in Adam, our federal head (1 Cor 15:22). We are lost, damned, depraved, and hopeless. We have not only lost God in our sin; we have made God our enemy because of our self-enacted conspiracy to displace Him from His throne.

Biblical preachers do not announce to fellow sinners that they need a life boost, a better way of calendaring their day, or a healthier diet. Biblical preachers announce to fellow sinners that they are *sinners*. They not only have *little hope* of improvement, but *no hope* of personal salvation in themselves. In Adam, we are truly hopeless and helpless. We think that we need a new nose, or a new year, or a new marriage, or a new job. But what we need in desperate measure is a new birth. So, in the pulpit and every chance we get, we preach about this need in order to awaken sinners to their terrible situation.

**Second, we must preach the nature of the new birth.**

After we have established the terrifying nature of Adamic depravity, we must help people understand that they do have hope—but not one scintilla of it resides in us. The nature of the new birth is divine. Our rescue comes not from within, from reading the right measure of self-help psychotherapy such that we now trust ourselves, or forgive ourselves, or see ourselves as perfect just the way we are. Our rescue comes from the heavens. Our salvation comes from the hills. We who are in the valley of death need a supernatural solution. This is what the new birth is: it is divine regeneration, the remaking of the human person from a sinner to a saint. This is expressly spiritual in nature. It is truly *supra naturam*—"above nature."

The preacher is not the one who effects or produces the new birth. The preacher is the one who proclaims the promise of the new birth. We do not point to ourselves as the hope of the sinner; we point straight to heaven once we have people's attention, for it is only heaven that can save them. They do not need earthly solutions; they need God.


The new birth is of God and from God and to God. In our pulpits, and classrooms, and discipling sessions, and counseling appointments, we must continually show people that they have no earthly hope or help in ultimate terms. They cannot solve their problems. They need God to work, God to move, God to bless. Preaching is not *one way* these supernatural truths are communicated; preaching is God's appointed way of sounding and celebrating the divine nature of the new birth. We are arrows pointing to heaven, but we point through our words, through the exposition of the biblical text, through the Christocentric proclamation of the whole counsel of God.

**Third, we need to preach so that people know what the new birth is not.** This point works hand in glove with the preceding affirmation. In preaching the true nature of the new birth from given texts, we will naturally nudge people away from false conceptions of Christianity. But we need to do more. In winsome but no uncertain terms, we need to direct people away from unbiblical understandings of the faith. This means many things, but chief among them is the careful delineation of the miracle of biblical regeneration from the false positive of every other thought-system, religion, and spiritual teacher.

This is true for modern and historic challengers. As mentioned, we cannot stress enough how much people are encouraged today to find hope and help and salvation in themselves. As mentioned above, we commonly hear today that we need to "forgive ourselves" in order to be whole and healthy. But this common self-help formulation (which has made a thousand easy fortunes) gets not only the cure wrong, but the diagnosis. We have not firstly offended ourselves in our transgressions; we have offended and justly angered God. Conse-



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## NOTHING COULD BE MORE FRIENDLY TO OUR INNATE NARCISSISM THAN SELF-HELP TEACHING; NOTHING COULD BE MORE OPPOSED TO SUCH NARCISSISM THAN THE DOCTRINE OF THE NEW BIRTH.

quently, the solution to what ails us is not a human forgetting, but a divine forgiving.

All this we must preach and teach to our people on a continual basis, for they are swimming in man-centeredness today, and drowning in psychologized spiritualism that sounds happy but saves and sanctifies no one. Nothing could be more friendly to our innate narcissism than self-help teaching; nothing could be more opposed to such narcissism than the doctrine of the new birth.

Beyond self-help pieties, we must also instruct our people about more traditional spiritual competitors. Sacramental theology, for example, promises regeneration upon baptism through the faith of a sponsor. This is not the new birth; it is the performance of a religious rite and nothing more. Neither will we find truth in universalism, which effectively sees all humanity as regenerate without repentance. Protestant liberalism downplayed the very concept of “soul salvation” and seemed once to recede from view, but today is making a largely non-institutional comeback. In this brand of thought, regeneration is not a miracle; regeneration is a process, an ethical reconstruction of the self. Bringing out these distinctions in one’s ministry is not a distraction from the sacred text; it is a focusing of the people’s attention on the one true way to God, and a warning about every other system.

**Fourth, we must preach the newness of the new birth.** Many today think they are preaching the biblical gospel. But they are actually teaching a half-supernatural, half-natural Christianity. As one example, we hear that we can embrace “gay Christianity,” and so break with homosexual behavior

but retain a homosexual identity. Doubtless we hear this from some who have left homosexual behavior behind, for which we are glad, but this is not whole-gospel theology. It does not have the newness of the new birth about it. It has a terrifying sameness and oldness and unchangedness, in fact. In this kind of system, we may become a Christian, but stay much the same we were before our conversion. Our identity, in fact, is depressingly old; we not only still have old attraction patterns, but also find our very personhood in those patterns.

By contrast, the new birth is gloriously new. According to Scripture, the new birth makes us a new man—part of the one new man created by the cleansing cross-work of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:11–22). We are a new creation with a new nature and a new name (Romans 6, 8). The old has gone; the new has come. We formerly were enslaved to sin, but not only to certain behaviors—we were enmeshed in certain wicked identities, as 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 makes clear. Like the first-century Corinthians, we defined ourselves by our iniquities, and were thieves, idolaters, deceivers, homosexuals, adulterers, and revilers. But now that Christ has given us new life, we are no longer these things. We have lost not only our old nature, but our old identity.

In sum, the new birth smacks of newness. It speaks of supernaturalism. It sings of salvation. The preacher and teacher of God’s Word must distinguish the gospel of Christ, the hope of the sinner, from any diminished counter-offer. We are not forming half-Christians in Christian ministry. We are in the divine business of taking the child of Satan and making them by grace into a child of God. But mark this: we

may only accomplish this end when we preach a new birth that is truly *new*.

**Fifth, we must preach biblical polity to protect the new birth.** It will not do to preach the new birth faithfully from Scripture but render biblical polity of no consequence. This is not an uncommon move in our time according to received wisdom; the gospel we hold tightly, with a closed hand, but polity—church structure—we hold loosely, with an open hand. With all due respect, this thinking sets the church up to lose the gospel.

God structured His local church to protect the gospel, the announcement of the new birth. The local church is led by elders who preach and defend the word of salvation; the church together pursues holiness, with local churches holding responsibility for corporately exercising discipline against those who fail in this regard; the congregation is composed of believers who have experienced the new birth, and only such folk (see, respectively, 1 Timothy 3, 2 Timothy 1; Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5; Eph 3:10; Gal 6:1–2).

Any believer may (and must) preach the new birth, but only the local church can by strength of numbers protect those who have experienced the new birth. The Baptist vision of congregational life is often called “regenerate church membership,” an explosive little phrase that links soteriology and ecclesiology. As in our phrasing, so in our practice: the one who wishes to promote the gospel and call sinners to experience the new birth needs to anchor born-again believers in the institution established by Christ to bless and protect His blood-bought people (see Matt 16:18). Let us preach and teach about biblical polity, and thereby show people that their membership in the local church is the direct outworking of regeneration. We are not saved into the universe; we are saved into the *church*. People raised in isolationist, me-directed religion need to hear this case, and they need to embrace a meaningful doctrine of membership in order to thrive and grow as believers.

**Sixth, we must preach the new birth.** We have all had that terrifying feeling. We finish our sermon, gladly receive people who wish to talk a bit afterward, and then make our way to the car. Driving home, we rehearse the sermon, checking to make sure that we hit our main themes and did justice to the passage in question. All seems fine, but then—bang!—it hits us: did we call sinners to repentance and faith in the name of Jesus Christ? Was that call clear as a bell? Did the unbelievers in our hearing learn of their terrible need to turn to Him in the very hour of our preaching?

If you have had such a troubled epiphany, you are not alone. None of us is a perfect or perfectly faithful preacher. We all fail in many ways. But we cannot rest in our imperfection. We must never miss that the Word of God demands not

merely that we delineate the new birth from counterfeits, and show the need for the new birth, and unfold the ten thousand glorious implications of the new birth, but that we actually *preach the new birth itself*.

There is no other way for sinners to go to heaven but this: They must have the gospel preached to them. They need not only a doctrinal summary of soteriology that old Princeton would approve of, but an actual call to turn from sin to the grace of God in Christ. They need that call offered not hesitatingly, or haltingly, or half-heartedly, but confidently, with sureness borne of the recognition of the divine power that is in gospel preaching (Rom 1:16). There is no suggestion in the Word of God and its doctrines; there is *certainty* (Luke 1:3–4).

## CONCLUSION

We are in strange times in 2019. Our spiritualist age shows tremendous hunger for spiritual things and mystical experiences, but misses the greatest heaven-sent miracle of them all: divine regeneration. It's like saying you're dying to go skiing, strapping on your equipment, and then setting off down a grassy hill instead of the snow-covered mountains right beside you. It's like saying you want to get stronger, then going to a local gym to take a nap. It's like saying you're hungry, then going to a Subway and standing there, without ordering a BLT, for hours.

We crave God and the things of God (so we say), but the greatest miracle given among men is right before us, and we disdain it. We would rather find Mary's face in a potato, or tune our inner frequency to the divinity moving strangely within, than repent and trust Christ in order to be born again.

We know why this is so; we know why humanity believes everything and nothing at once. Our problem is sin, and unbelief, and idolatry of self. But great as our problem is, our hope is greater still. God is still speaking through His finished and authoritative Word. The Scripture is still calling sinners to salvation. The Bible has not lost its authority. The gospel has not lost its power. As we preach the whole counsel of God, and call sinners to trust Christ as their Savior, we will witness afresh the very dynamism of God. This is a greater work, after all, than creation; this is *re-creation*, divine rescue, spiritual regeneration, the miracle the world quests after but which only Christian preaching brings near. ✦

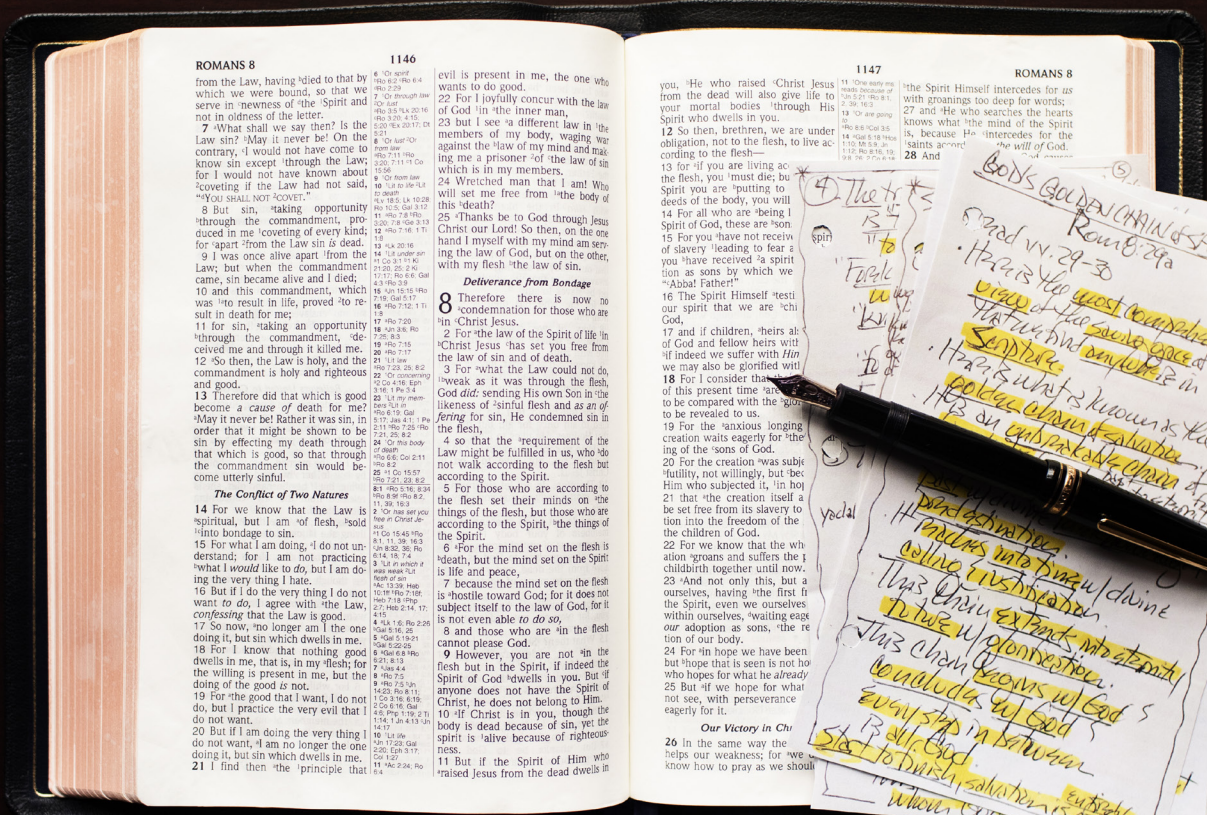
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