

Newsletter November 2012

This newsletter contains edited excerpts from Book I, *Essential Doctrines of the Christian Faith*, Chapter 5.4. *The New Birth of Man*. The new birth is not a concept that can be understood by the unsaved because of its purely spiritual nature. “Born again” is often a term that the unsaved uses when describing a person who has become interested in a religious system of works. The implication is that one is trying to clean up their life by putting on a religious facade. What then does it truly mean when Christians speak of being born again?

We find the primary Scriptural text for the “new birth” or “spiritual birth” in the Gospel of John Chapter 3, verses 3 through 8. Jesus has just told Nicodemus that a man must be “born again” to see the Kingdom of God (Jn.3:3). We must realize that the word for “again” in John 3:3 is *anōthen* in the Greek, which literally means “from above.” Therefore, a man must be “born again” in the sense that the first or physical birth only brings him into this temporal world, while a second birth from above is required to prepare him for entry into God’s eternal Kingdom. Although the natural man may be living and breathing in the physical sense, his hold on life is tenuous and lacks eternal dimensions. The new birth is a spiritual birth out of the bondage of time into the far reaches of eternity for that man or woman who receives the Spirit of God.

We know that the things of God cannot be seen by the carnal mind, and that man’s being is spiritually blinded by his fallen nature. Therefore, it is not surprising that Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus and asked Him how a person can be born again: “...can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb and be born” (Jn.3:4)? Although, he may have understood Jesus to say that one needed to be born “from above” in a spiritual sense, he may have understood that act to occur simultaneously at the time of physical birth. If a man must be “born from above” at the time of his physical birth, there would be no hope for a man who is merely born of the flesh to see the Kingdom of God unless he could be *physically* born all over again.

Jesus corrected Nicodemus by saying, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (Jn.3:5). Jesus is relating carnal with spiritual things in this verse to help Nicodemus. “Water” as it is used in this verse is a physical metaphorical equivalent of the Holy Spirit. A man can cleanse his outward being with water, but the Holy Spirit cleanses the inner being. As the flesh is “renewed” by the partaking of water, so the inward man is “regenerated” by “drinking in” the Holy Spirit. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn.3:6). Therefore, Jesus is speaking of a spiritual rebirth that follows physical birth.

Just as physical birth takes place in a brief moment of time, spiritual birth instantaneously takes place by an act of God, which is unperceivable by human senses, within specifically chosen men and women as the Holy Spirit suddenly indwells them. The result is the creation of a new being that is spiritually minded rather than carnal minded. Therefore, spiritual rebirth is not that the “old man” or the “old creation” is patched up or somehow made to conform to God’s standards. Rather, our old fleshly nature has been fully severed from us, and it is as good as dead because we no longer look to it for life (which it could never supply), but to our new nature, which God has given us in the Spirit.

Our “old man” has been crucified with Christ. In the words of Paul, we must “put off... the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created...” (Ep.4:22–24). When we are born from above, we must reckon that the old nature, which once was our manner of life, is not just reformed or cleaned up, but is stone cold dead! Any attempt to live in the old nature after being born into the new would be like dragging a corpse around with us. As new spiritual

beings, we must reckon ourselves to be "...alive unto God through Jesus Christ or Lord" (Ro.6:11) whereas before the new birth we were spiritually dead in Adam.

Being born again does not mean that our old personality is annihilated and that we are replaced with a new person. The person, that is the soul, remains the same, but that person's nature is entirely new. We still have all our memories intact — often painfully intact; we are still the same person, not someone else. But, just as when we shall be physically resurrected with a new body in the future, and our bodies shall be translated "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" into glorified flesh (1Co.15:52), so we are translated from the old carnal man into the new spiritual nature the moment we are born from above. We are suddenly awakened out of a dark slumber that is akin to that which preceded our physical birth while we were yet in the womb. During that time, we were alive, but we were unaware of our physical surroundings in any cognitive sense. At birth, the physical world came crashing in on our being as we gulped in our first breath of air, and our eyes were opened to a new sphere of physical existence. In like manner, the new birth results in our awakening to a spiritual sphere of existence as we breathe in our first spiritual breath as a newborn child of God.

The new birth is not only a reality in the way in which we respond to the indwelling Holy Spirit, but also in the way that God sees the newborn as his own child. We are born of his Spirit to full acceptance in the beloved of God the Father within his Son, Jesus Christ. Our old man, who was created in the likeness of Adam, no longer lives in the mind of God but has been replaced by a new creation that appears in the likeness of Christ. The infant Christian is declared not guilty in the mind of God much as a newborn babe is assumed to be innocent in the mind of the world having not yet done anything amiss. (Nevertheless, a newborn babe is not innocent in the eyes of God but brings into the world with it the full depth of Adam's sin). In Christ, we are declared not guilty because of our participation in Christ's atoning death that destroyed our sin in his flesh and made possible the receiving of his perfect righteousness as our own. "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2Co.5:17).

The new birth is freely given through an instantaneous act of God's mercy and not by any attempts of our own to attain it. The Apostle Paul said that it is "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Tit.3:5). Unshakable belief and even faith itself comes about by means of the new birth through the Holy Spirit (Ep.2:8), not by human effort. For, by the Spirit of God we are "Being Born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever" (1Pe.1:23).

We cannot be more saved than we are at the very instant that spiritual conversion takes place. Nevertheless, the mind, which affects our manner of life, and holds mature understanding, requires a lifetime for the Holy Spirit to regenerate it. When we were born in the flesh as infants, we did not immediately mature and suddenly become capable of instant knowledge of our world. As Paul said, infants do not immediately eat solid food (1Co.3:1,2). They must first grow teeth and develop their digestive tract that can digest solid food. Furthermore, the infant must be taught and corrected until he or she is capable of mature understanding. In like manner, the newborn of the Holy Spirit does not immediately take on the stance of a mature believer. Changes must come about gradually as the Spirit of Christ confers with and shapes his being leading him toward a state of ultimate spiritual maturity.

Even the Apostle Paul did not immediately begin his ministry after the revelation of Jesus Christ in his new birth (Ac.9:3). A time passed during which he was taught by the Holy

Spirit (cf. Ga.1:11,12) in the wilderness of Arabia before he spent time with the disciples at Damascus and preached Christ in the synagogues (Ac.9:19,20). If Paul, having a great zeal for God, and being one who knew the Hebrew Scriptures like the back of his hand, required a period of time for the Holy Spirit to teach him, how much more must a new born in Christ who knows nothing of the Scriptures and the things of God? So, the newborn must begin with simple knowledge, often related in carnal terms, and progress upward toward full spiritual knowledge as the Holy Spirit continues to teach him.

Therefore, even as the Holy Spirit begins working within a person, we should not expect to see immediate outward results, because we carry in our minds remnants of the old fleshly life that continues to haunt us. That does not mean that we cannot enter into God's spiritual kingdom in this life in order that we may walk on the spiritual plane in our innermost being, but that we cannot inherit all things in perfection until our mortal bodies are changed and raised incorruptible (1Co.15:52,53). Therefore, we should not immediately expect to attain perfection of knowledge or actions while we are yet walking about in mortal bodies. Positive changes will and must occur within the soul who has the Spirit of Christ as the Holy Spirit turns his desire away from committing sin and toward serving God (i.e. repentance). Although repentance is immediate in the new birth, the path of repentance is long and often a bumpy one with many conflicts and setbacks. Through it all, salvation remains permanent; it can never be lost (cf. Jn.10:28).

We often attempt to rush the Holy Spirit into transforming an infant believer into a mature adult Christian. We seem not to understand that spiritual maturity takes considerable time. (The process of *Christian Maturity* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.1 of Book I). That is why the witness of a newborn in Christ can often be so disastrous in matters of doctrine. While it may be true that he can testify of his conversion in a simple experiential way, to expect mature doctrine from him is like expecting a baby in the crib to explain the meaning of life or for that matter even the process of his own birth. Not only is understanding and wisdom lacking, there is the problem of communication itself. The newborn in Christ is most likely to speak spiritual "baby talk" (1Co.13:11), and his behavior will be that of a child. For that reason, a newborn Christian should not be put into a position of teaching or counseling others (1Ti.3:6). Not only is there the danger of feeding incorrect doctrine to the flock of other new believers, we also abuse that newborn child of God by pushing him forward too soon. We must give him time to mature spiritually so that the faith within him is not shipwrecked through error and pride.

If you truly believe within your heart — your innermost being — that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and seek to walk in the spiritual plane beyond this carnal life, discerning spiritual matters to be above the things of this world, you are most surely born again. The evidence of that fact is living within you. The unsaved man does not live by faith in Christ, nor does he seek to walk on a spiritual plane, nor does he seek to serve God, but himself. Therefore, there is no need to seek some supernatural sign or perform some ritual act that you can hold on to as evidence; rather, cling to the inward reality that is many magnitudes greater than any outward sign or ritual. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Ro.8:16). For, how can one know that Jesus is the Son of God except that the Holy Spirit tells him (Mt.16:16,17)? Therefore, continue the path that the Holy Spirit shows you, never doubting or fearing, for by his Spirit you know that you have passed from death into eternal life (1Jn.5:10–13). *Arthur J. Smith, November 2012*