

The Holy Spirit in Regeneration

John 3:1-8

by Ron Fisher

Introduction: A rabbi from the Jewish Council came under cover of night to meet the greatest Rabbi of all time. He approached with considerable respect: "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" (John 3:2). - (All quotes from the American Standard Version.)

Our Lord explored an entirely different topic. To Nicodemus he replied, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [anew], he cannot see the kingdom of God" (3: 3). As a Pharisee ruler, Nicodemus came with strong confidence—"we know." Now he expresses plain astonishment—"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?" (3:4).

The Master pushes the enigma; "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God Do not marvel that I said to you, 'you must be born again'"

(3:5-7). With such terms Jesus lays out the concept of regeneration. Man as he is needs a new birth, a new life, a new value system, a new outlook.

Nicodemus is still mystified. Jesus chides him for being a teacher of Israel without the capacity to understand (3:9-10). He was not perceiving what the Master Teacher sought to impart (3:11). He should try harder. The Lord spoke of heavenly issues and had heavenly authority behind Him. He had already been in those regions and knew their priorities (3:12-13). God had sent Him to be the Savior of the world. Without Him there can be no new birth (3:16-17).

The New Testament background for regeneration is found in the Greek verb *gennao*. Kittle identifies it as carrying the idea of "begetting" by a father and "bearing" by a mother (Vol. I, p. 665). He notes that in John's writings all verb forms rooted in the aorist passive infinitive of *gennao* are always used with reference to the point of origin (Vol. I, p. 667). Some examples are—

- a. Out of God - 1 John 2:29.
- b. Out of water - John 3:5.
- c. Out of human will - John 1:13.
- d. Out of human flesh - John 3: 6.

Peter used a compound form of the verb (anagennao) once in his first epistle to convey the idea of "beget again" or "be born again." See 1,1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The ana prefix stands as a fitting equivalent to the adverb anothen in John 3:3,7 - "be born again" [from above] and "be born again" [from above]. The "being bom again" terminology furnishes the basis for the regeneration concept.

My method of presentation will be simple and direct. I propose to discuss regeneration from the base text of John 3:1-8 and locate primary support for my conclusions from the body of John's Gospel. Secondary underpinnings will be resorted to in other portions of other New Testament texts on a limited basis. I will proceed to explain the text from the focus of four perspectives: Regeneration's Need, Regeneration's Distinction, Regeneration's Identity, and Regeneration's Necessity. Let the quest begin.

I. REGENERATION'S NEED - A WORD FROM JESUS

(v. 3 - "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God").

A. The present world order is hemmed in by spiritual darkness and death.

John's Gospel couches much of his spiritual viewpoint in terms of the light/darkness contrast and the life/death antithesis. The world centered in Satan suffocates in darkness and death. God has shined into its region the light of life through His Son (John 1:4). By virtue of their intrinsic natures, God's light and Satan's darkness face an inevitable clash. When Christ's brilliance invaded the realm of darkness, the darkness tried to snuff it out but failed (1:5). Messiah's coming into this murky world is neither

understood nor appreciated by most inhabitants (1:10). Even His own nation, by and large, did not receive Him (1:11).

The Great Physician diagnosed the world's spiritual health, and His diagnosis was not encouraging. His light in the world discloses the unnerving fact that many prefer darkness to light. Darkness is a cloak behind which to hide evil deeds (3:19). Evil doers detest light because it exposes their vile acts (3:20). At this very juncture, we are brought face to face with a common reasoning flaw. We are prone to conclude that if people were better informed spiritually, they would live more heroic spiritual lives. Not so, says our Lord. Many persons know what to do but don't want to do it. Unbelief is moral and not intellectual.

There is a sharp cutting edge to the world steeped in darkness. It is ready to challenge and defy God at every turn. Jesus noted that the world hated Him because He uncovered its deeds as evil (7: 7). The world persists in darkness (8: 12). God's judgment stands over the world and will result in expulsion of the world's ruler (12:31). Christ arrived on earth to shed His light into its far corners; rejection of His rescue ministry condemns one to abject darkness (12: 46-47). Repudiation of His redeeming desire for mankind will bring condemning judgment by His Word (12: 48).

The world settled in darkness cannot receive the Holy Spirit any more than it can receive Christ (14:17; 1:11). This is a reality because its mind set is ordered by the god of this world (14:30). It desperately needs the convicting power of the Holy Spirit to turn its priorities of darkness to ones of light (16:8-11). It needs to notice that the prime sin is rejection of Christ as Savior and Lord (16:9). It needs to understand that authentic righteousness is found in Him (16: 10). It needs to comprehend that the world's ruler has been judged and is unmasked by God for the fraud he really is (16:11).

Curiously, in His great high priestly prayer our Lord did not pray for the world; He prayed rather for His apostles to penetrate the world (17:9). Yet the world would hate them because they were not of the world's intention (17:14). Nevertheless, the Lord was planning to send them into his hostile world scene (17: 18). Obviously, the world does not know God (17:21). It has a critical

need to experience the breaking in of the kingdom "not of this world" (18:36-37).

B. God's Savior for this dark, dying world has arrived.

In the fulness of time, God sent John to bear witness to His Son's light (1:6-8). He was not a radiant sun but a lamp glowing until the great light should shine (5:35). John had no misgivings about the Messiah's identity. He was truly God's Son singled out by the Spirit's descent upon Him at His baptism (1:32-34).

As Jesus came to be baptized by John in Jordan, the way-preparer announced to multitudes, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). God's anti type Lamb on earth would enable Him to pass over mankind's sins. The Rescuer was now present to become victim to the Father's wrath for human iniquities. Like the brass serpent impaled upon a post in the wilderness, the Son of Man must be lifted up to die on a cross (3:14; 12:32-34).

In time the chief priests and Pharisees became desperate to convene a council strategy for disposing of Jesus (11: 47). Caiaphas, the high priest of that year, spoke prophetically of the outcome for the teacher from Nazareth. He recommended executing Him as an expediency to spare Israel (11: 50). He did not grasp the gravity of what he said. In actuality, he predicted the necessity of Jesus's death for the deliverance of the Jewish nation as well as for the scattered lost across the world (11:51-52).

Our Master gave testimony that He came to earth to save humanity, not to condemn it (3:16-17). However, those who refused to welcome His saving mission will be judged for their unbelief (3:18). After hearing the testimony of the Samaritan woman about Jesus and His own profession about Himself, citizens of Sychar concluded emphatically that He was the Savior of the world (4:42).

Once Matthew finishes documenting his account of Jesus' wilderness temptations by Satan, he directs attention to the public ministry centered around Capernaum in the region once occupied by the tribes Naphtali and Zebulun. He brings to bear Isaiah 9:1,2 as predictive of the event. People sitting in darkness will be brought to see God's light, and they will no longer sit in the land of

the shadow of death (4:15-16). Jesus concurred with this expectation, pointing out that positive responders to His Word will be escorted from death to life (John 5:24). An ethical resurrection is predicted—truly a veiled reference to the coming new birth.

The Lord heralds His coming death of substitution as the key to new life. He comes down from heaven as God's genuine bread to be assimilated by belief (6:33,35). He will be made accessible to needy sinners with a broken body and shed blood. The benefits are complete as one shares by faithful remembrance the eating of His flesh and the drinking of His blood (6:51, 53-58). Last day resurrection is in prospect because of His essential sacrifice (6:54).

John records one other remarkable comment Jesus made about delivering mortals from death. The occasion arose in a hostile environment where Jewish enemies mocked Him with scornful epithets. He is a child out of wedlock (8:41). He is a Samaritan with a demon (8:48). He must be suffering from dementia (8:52). How could a mere man promise words that deliver from death? Abraham and the prophets are dead. Just who does He think He is (8: 51,52)? His claims become more outlandish: "Before Abraham was born, I am" (8: 58). James Burton Coffman puts it well — "What a flower was this that bloomed in the sewer of their hatred..." {Commentary on John, 1974, p. 226}.

H. REGENERATION'S DISTINCTION - A DIFFERENT KIND OF BIRTH

(v. 5 - "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God")

A. Regeneration has an identity distinct from physical birth.

Jesus never did respond to Nicodemus' question with a direct answer (3: 4). By implication He was saying, "No, a man cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born." "Truly, truly, I say to you unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:5, 6).

In the prologue of his Gospel John has already dealt with the distinction between physical and spiritual birth. After observing

that many Jews did not receive Jesus as God's Son (1:11), he makes allowance for those Jews who did: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (1:12). Then these distinctives: "who were born not out of blood [bloods (pi.) - blood lines of human parents], nor of the will of flesh [the human urge to procreate], nor of the will of man [the noble intent to bring heirs into the world], but of God (1: 13). Children of God exist by His own supernatural action ["that which is born of the Spirit is spirit "] (3:5,6).

In contrast, that "which is born of the flesh is flesh" (3:6a). Like gives birth to like. "By natural birth people become members of an earthly family; to become members of the family of God,... a birth 'from above' is necessary ... two distinct * births' are necessary to the one order and to the other" (F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 1983, p. 85).

Physical life comes through the intimacy of a shared relationship between man and woman to bring a union of egg and sperm. Spiritual life comes through the union of God's Word (Holy Spirit generated) with the human heart. It begets a new heart outlook which takes God seriously and lovingly. There is an embracing of the Word initially, and there must be an embracing of it continuously (John 4:50; 5:24; 8:31; 17:14,17). The quickening Person behind the Word is the Spirit. He remains such because the Word continues to be His creation (John 6:63,68).

]Roger Frederickson relates the story of a Mr. Nou, a refugee from Laos, who came to the congregation he served. When he first emigrated to America, he frequently beat his wife and children and gave his weekends to drunken orgies. A persistent friend introduced him to the gospel and led him to Christ. He emptied his whiskey bottles and began treating his wife and children with new love and respect. He gave himself to avid Bible study each morning at five. In her amazement Mrs. Nou remarked, "I don't have a different husband. I have a new one" (*Mastering The New Testament - John*, 1985, p. 82).

B. Regeneration has two components.

Jesus filled in the meaning of being "born anew" with the terms "born of water and Spirit" (3:3, 5). The phrase has been the center of much debate, and some Bible students have disagreed heatedly over it. It is an expression that deserves careful study. In the Greek text it involves the preposition (ek - "out of) uniting water and Spirit as one construct. Being born anew is one coherent process.

These are two aspects of a single happening. Some Bible thinkers try to pit water against Spirit and Spirit against water in a mutually exclusive way. This is a regrettable practice, and there is no need for it (grammatically or theologically).

In a discussion of the John 3: 3-5 context R. C. Foster has drawn attention to its focus in the Rice-Campbell debate. The debate was held in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1843 with Henry Clay as moderator. It involved a sixteen-day meeting that targeted three issues: baptism, the Holy Spirit, and men's creeds.

Nathan L. Rice was a Presbyterian Calvinist. He laid out carefully the elementary tenets of the "faith only" position. Mr. Foster observed that little has been added to Rice's case since that time. Mr. Rice directly linked being born again with pardon and eternal life. Yet he deliberately omitted "water" out of the born again equation.

Alexander Campbell took Rice to task for making the passage "half literal and half spiritual." Campbell continued, "Water, they say, means the Spirit, and the Spirit means the Spirit. But might not anyone say, if water means Spirit, Spirit means water—and thus make it all water and no Spirit? Certainly this is as rational as to make water mean Spirit and thus make it all Spirit. But the great Teacher said neither the one nor the other. He did not say, 'ye must be born of Spirit and the Spirit'; nor did he say, ye must be born of water and the water—but of water and Spirit" (C. R Debate, p. 481 - Studies in the Life of Christ, 1995, fifth printing, pp. 372-373).

Beasley-Murray sees the "water-Spirit" expression as a definition of the manner in which a person is "born again" (Baptism in the New Testament, 1962, p. 228). "In John 3:5 it is the occasion when the Spirit gives to faith the regeneration that qualifies for the kingdom" (Ibid., p. 231).

Jack Cottrell has offered this qualifier to the water-Spirit equation: "Does this mean that water and Spirit have an equal or identical causal relationship to the new birth? ... The only true source, cause, or origin of the new birth in any literal sense is the Holy Spirit. This is true not just because Spirit alone can impact upon spirit, but also because this birth is something that only God can accomplish. No physical act performed by a creature could do what only the Divine Spirit can do. Nevertheless, the language of John 3:5 makes the action of the Spirit at least simultaneous (emphasis by the author) with the act of baptism. Thus the least that should be said is that baptism is the occasion for the new birth" (Baptism, A Biblical Study, 1989, p. 42).

REGENERATION'S IDENTITY - BIRTH THROUGH THE SPIRIT

(v. 6 - "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit").

A. The Spirit spearheads the "new birth" process.

In the recently published essay compilation, *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement* (2002) (hereafter in my paper referred to as EATS-CM), Professor Robert C. Kurka has contributed chapter six with the title, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Conversion." He opens by identifying the views of three broad "tradition" lines regarding the issue of Holy Spirit influence in the process of regeneration. He cites Packer, Stott, and McGrath as representatives of the Reformed tradition. He rightly traces their roots to the Anglican faith. He quotes David Wells as a writer for mainline Reformed thinking in the states, "The Holy Spirit is the supreme resource for the church's life and mission. Only as the Spirit is poured out will there be convincing speech.. It is the Holy Spirit who gives power in evangelism as he glorifies Christ" {*God the Evangelist*, p. 45 - Kurka citation on p. 139).

Professor Kurka next features Gordon Fee as a representative of trinitarian Pentecostals within the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition. He excerpts a portion from pages 76- 78 in Fee's volume, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*. That portion reads, "In 1 Corinthians 3: 8 [sic] Paul contrasts his own ministry with that of Moses and indirectly with that of the 'peddlers of another Jesus.' In doing so,

he refers to his own ministry as the 'ministry of the Spirit,' meaning the 'ministry of the covenant*, which is empowered by the Spirit

These passages (1 Corinthians 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 3:3) and the next, make it clear that Paul understood Christian conversion to begin with Spirit-empowered proclamation."

Kurka turns finally to the words of a few representative Restoration Movement writers. He mentions Winston Atkinson from a 1964 Fort Worth Christian College Lectureship: "We fail to recognize the impossibility of our task without the power of the Spirit's words. We often are not cognizant of His power and influence upon us and our hearers" (The Holy Spirit, p. 62). He adds a citation from C. C. Crawford in his volume on The Eternal Spirit, 2:625. It reads, "God's Spirit and God's Word go together, act together, and together effectuate the Divine purposes on earth."

Dr. Kurka deduces that the tight Word/Spirit relationship expressed by such Restoration thinkers makes them liable to two criticisms from the evangelical world.

- a. The Spirit seems to be swallowed up in divine writ.
- b. They appear to be guilty of bibliolatry.

He concludes that these tendencies seem to have gotten their start from Alexander Campbell's expressed statements in his debate with Nathan L. Rice (referred to earlier). Campbell especially challenged Rice's Calvinistic bent on mankind's ability to understand the truth of the gospel.

Campbell argued that God has always brought "something out of nothing" {ex nihilo) by means of His Word, involving the cosmos in general and mankind in particular. Since human beings are intelligent, rational beings, it follows that God would not address them other than through words. God's Word as recorded in the apostolic testimony (Acts 2: 42) initiates the spiritual viability of conversion when men and women receive it in faith. "Whatever, in Scripture, is ascribed to the Holy Spirit's role in conversion is also ascribed to the Bible itself (Kurka, p. 142).

Through writings on other occasions, Campbell expressed similar views. He maintained that when the gospel is proclaimed in an intelligent manner, every normal person possesses the rational faculties to respond positively to the message. Faith is not a gift

given to the elect by means of supernatural influences (the Holy Spirit separate and apart from the gospel) so that there will be a sympathetic hearing of the message. In contrast, faith is the initial response of the listener to the divine message that initiates the process of conversion (Campbell, *The Christian System*, n. d., pp.113-15).

Campbell rejected the concept of Holy Spirit preconversion witness (exerting influence on the human heart before the gospel is preached). He wrote pointed comments explaining his view of that idea. "In the rage for proselytism the 'Holy Ghost' is an admirable contrivance. Every qualm of conscience, every new notion of heart, every strange feeling or thrill—all doubts, fears, despondencies, sorrows, remorse, etc., are the work of this Holy Ghost" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1831, p. 212). It appears to your speaker that Campbell was sounding a caution against every human feeling and impulse being traced to the Holy Spirit's prompting on the heart. We do well to note that there is an unholy spirit in the world (1 John 4:1-3).

However, numbers of Calvinists and Arminians believed that Campbell was too caustic in his denunciations and thus made himself an alien outside many evangelical circles. Several criticisms were leveled against him.

- a. His rigid Spirit/Word identification seemed to be a depersonalization of the Spirit.
- p, b. His view made him liable to the charge of bibliolatry.
- c. His firm position made him seem to be a binitarian (only two members of the Godhead).

Professor Kurka believes that Campbell has been somewhat misrepresented, although the sage of Bethany seems to have engaged in intemperate language at times (pp. 139-148). He refers to Church of Christ contemporary historian Richard Hughes' comment that the Spirit has spoken all its arguments in the Scripture and therefore "all the power of the Holy Spirit which can operate on the human mind is spent" (*Discovering Our Roots: the Ancestry of Churches of Christ*, 1988, p. 95).

Kurka also mentions James Bales as a non-instrumental Church of Christ representative counterbalance to the Campbell

comments. In an exposition of Romans 8: 26-27, Bales asks, "Is not this passage proof that the Holy Spirit does something for us beyond the aid which He gives us in the Word. The Spirit dwells in us in same way other than simply through the influence of the Scriptures. He dwells in us. He helpeth us" (The Holy Spirit and the Christian, 1966, p. 103). Bales goes on to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit does not give mankind any message other than the message of the Word.

I plan to assess some of these varied comments in the next upcoming section.

B. The Spirit uses several factors to complete the process.

Mainline Calvinism holds that regeneration comes only from the initiative of God and none of it from lost sinners. Several terms and notions are employed to champion this conviction. The regeneration process is said to be monergistic and not synergistic. It is said to occur by direct encounter between God and man. This relief is depicted also by the expression "immediate influence" (no mediating factor as opposed to a mediating one). One curt utterance puts it this way: "God's naked Spirit makes direct contact with man's naked spirit." Cottrell has made a compelling case in refutation of these claims. He notes that "when the transcendent One comes to us in revelation, he condescends to use a creaturely medium there is no such thing as a 'direct encounter* with God even by means of these forms...direct confrontation with God'... involves a contradiction of terms, i. e., that concept of a direct encounter by some means" (What The Bible Says about God the Creator, 1983, p. 382). In addition, let it be noted that New Testament data offers numerous instances when God has used creaturely means to bring about conversion and regeneration. They were always subservient to the proclaimed message of the Spirit's gospel.

Consider the messengers He prepared for gospel proclamation. John the Immerser was called from his mother's womb to be the Messiah's way preparer. He was filled with the Spirit in his mother's womb (Luke 1: 15); Gabriel further added that he would turn many sons of Israel back to the Lord their God (1: 16). The core thrust of his message was "Repent, for the kingdom is at

hand" (Matthew 3:2). John's Gospel information dovetails harmoniously with these synoptic facts. He records the Immerser claiming a commission to prepare the way of the Lord (1:23). The One to follow Him is far superior to Him (1:30). He testified to beholding the Spirit descending upon the Messiah as a dove at baptism and confirming that this was God's Son (1:32-34). He received these assurances from the One who commissioned him to baptize (1:33). Jesus applauded him as a shining lamp whose witness Israel should heed (5:32-35).

In His first public message in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus lay claim to Holy Spirit anointing for His preaching ministry and applies the words of Isaiah 42:1-2 to Himself (Luke 4:18-19). Like John, He calls the nation to repentance and announces God's coming kingdom (Matthew 4:17). Like John He entered a baptismal ministry that called people to repent so as to have their sins forgiven (John 3: 22-26). John refused to be jealous that the Lord's ministry was eclipsing his (3:27-30). The Master had an ever expanding baptismal ministry administered by His disciples (4:1-2). His words and deeds impacted an entire Samaritan village, and they came to accept Him for who He was (4:41-42).

The Lord called and chose a cadre of twelve men to be His personal representatives in kingdom proclamation (Luke 6:12-13). He promised them Holy Spirit guidance to sustain them in times of proclamation before unfriendly religious and political authorities (Matthew 10:17-20; Luke 12:11). After His ascension to the Father, the exalted Christ sent the Holy Spirit to equip and direct these apostles to call people of all nations to repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name (Luke 24:47-48; Acts 1:8).

John's Gospel testimony once again harmonizes with synoptic witness. Jesus assures the apostles that after His departure from earth, the Father will send the Spirit unto them in His name (14:16-17). The Spirit was going to teach them all things necessary in the redemption message and refresh their memories about all Jesus had taught them (14:26). This second Comforter would guide them into all truth, some of which Jesus was not able to impart to them while with them personally (16:12-13). He would take information from Jesus and the Father and make it known to the apostles (16:13-15).

F. F. Bruce offers a telling summary of why some persons did not believe, though hearing the Spirit-quickened Word. Jesus called attention to this reality (6:63). Bruce writes, "The history not only of the apostolic age but of the whole Christian era shows what regenerative power resides in the words of him who spoke as no other ever did. But if his words do not 'meet with faith in the hearers' (Heb. 4:2), they cannot do them the good they otherwise would; and so it was with those disciples" (Gospel of John, p. 163).

This speaker believes that the best grid on which to study the source of the conversion process has been provided by Jack Cottrell. The professor spells out three centers for man's life. There is the essential center of God as Creator; this fact sets mankind's primary relationship to Him. There is the epistemological center of the Bible as our authentic source of knowledge about the One who is central in our lives. Last, there is the existential center of Christ as the mediator of our strongest felt relationship to God (God The Creator, 1983, pp. 188-191).

Now to several conclusions of my own.

1. The Holy Spirit is a person with deific nature (personal and demonstrative masculine pronouns refer to Him - John 14:26, 15:26, 26:16; 16:13-14, He is God - Acts 5:4.

2. This Spirit has inspired the Holy Writings - 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21; 3:15-16.

3. His Word is living and active to achieve its convicting work - Hebrews 4: 12.

4. His Word includes the gospel message of Christ - 1 Peter 1:12, 23-25.

5. God (the Holy Spirit as participant) has chosen human messengers to proclaim the indestructible gospel to the lost - Romans 10:12-17.

6. God (including the Holy Spirit) uses preachers to exhort the lost to act upon what they know to be true - Acts 2:40.

7. God (again the Holy Spirit) uses inspired penmen to admonish Christians to pray for hearts open to the gospel and for bold proclaimers to make Christ known - Ephesians 6:18-20; 1 Corinthians 16:9.

8. God (again the Holy Spirit) uses inspired penmen to challenge His people to pray for harvest workers and the lost they will confront - Matthew 9:37-38; Romans 10:1.

Who is to say that the Holy Spirit does not use all these factors in conversion and regeneration? Still the primary agency is the message of the Spirit's Word. If we did not have it, how would we know He is God? How would we know He is the Word's author? How would we know that His Word is living and active? How would we know that the Word is indestructible? How would we know that human messengers are to proclaim the gospel of salvation? How would we know we should exhort the saints to pray for the lost? How would we know we should take up His cause if we do not sense the urgency of His pleas from His very own Word? How? How? How? We would not! It is inaccurate and foolish to affirm that the Spirit is controlled by any of these agencies that He has set in operation. He supervises them all as they contribute to the entire process. With our human limitations we cannot predict His timing for bringing all or some of these factors into play with each other. However, we can trust His Word and let Him work. How much He deserves our gratitude!

IV. REGENERATION'S NECESSITY - GOD REQUIRES IT

(v. 7 - "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again!'")

A. Rebirth is a necessity to kingdom citizenship.

Jesus' third comment to Nicodemus presents a weightier bearing than did the first two: "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again!'"* (3:7). John uses a literary device which expresses "oughtness" or "mustness." The Greek structure utilizes a verb form of "to bind" as a set form meaning "it is necessary." This is combined with an infinitive to convey what must be done. It is necessary for something to happen (in this instance, "to be born anew"). There is a divine obligation here. John uses this device nine other times in his Gospel narrative. Every example expresses a divine imperative (John 3:14,30; 4:4,20,24; 9:4; 10:16; 12:34; 20:9).

No one denies that sinners need to be regenerated in order to be renewed within. The crux issue is what constitutes regeneration. Mainline evangelicals are reluctant to believe that water baptism is part of the regeneration process. They want to attach disclaimers to its importance. Craig Blomberg (a Baptist) explains the phrase "born of water and Spirit" with the figurative expressions of Ezekiel 36:25: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols." He sees no need for the involvement of literal water (Chapter 7, EATS-CM, p. 153). Yet he concedes that in the Acts history account there is always just a short interval between a person's actual coming to faith and their baptism in water (Ibid., p. 157). He further admits that a few evangelical fellowships are playing down the practice of sprinkling infants and of emphasizing believers' baptism by immersion (Ibid., p. 158).

At the same time, H. Wayne House (another Baptist) acknowledges that numbers of "Christian" groups over the past few centuries have sought some sort of outward evidence for conversion other than baptism. He turns attention to such acts as Puritan conversion experiences, anxious seats, walking down aisles, and prayers of faith (Chapter 10, EATS-CM, p. 187). He seems to be fixated on the concept that baptism is only an outward evidence of conversion. He concludes that Acts 2:38 carries an odd disjunctive grammar style. It commands one to repent and asks him/her to submit to baptism. He does not consider the reality that the believing sinner is to repent on his/her own and then let someone baptize them. With an awkward exegesis of Acts 22:16 he attaches forgiveness to confession and not to baptism (Ibid., p. 189).

Professor Jon Weatherly from the Christian Church/Church of Christ heritage makes this observation respecting the Acts 19:1-7 text of the twelve men at Ephesus. He writes, "The assumption that reception of the Spirit normally is the consequence of baptism in the name of Jesus is reinforced by the narrative's outcome" (Chapter 8, EATS-CM, p. 169). Yet he refers to Acts 8:16 and 11:16-17 as apparent exceptions to the normal outcome of gospel responses. Of Acts 8:16 he states that "Samaritan believers receive

the Spirit only after Peter and John lay hands on them; baptism in the name of Jesus does not bring this outcome (Ibid., p. 168).

The tentative conclusion of Professor Weatherly seems to be unwarranted. Professor Emeritus Donald Nash's translation of the New Testament {A Literal and Consistent New Testament Version, Second revised edition, 1998) throws considerable light on the Acts 8:16 passage. Here is his rendering, "for He not yet had fallen upon anyone, but only having been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, they were possessing (Him)," pp. 201-202. The Greek text features two separate participles, each of which leans upon a state of being or state of circumstance verb. The gist of what Luke is reporting is this: the Samaritans were not in a state whereby the Spirit indwelt them by falling upon them; rather they were in a state in which they possessed the Spirit because they had been baptized into the name of Jesus. Acts 8: 16 is in no way a contradiction of Acts 2:38. Moreover, there is no need to pit Acts 11:16-18 and Acts 19:1-7 against the clear teaching of Acts 2:38. Because of time limitations we cannot offer a critique to sustain our claim at this juncture.

Professor Jack Cottrell's suggested "plan of salvation" equation is hard to improve upon — "The sinner is saved by grace (as the basis), through faith (as the means), in baptism (as the occasion), ./.br good works (as the result)" (Chapter 3, EATS-CM, p. 89).

B. Kingdom citizenship calls for distinctive living.

The topic for my message has been the subject of regeneration. In conclusion, I want to draw an important connection between it and sanctification. As lost sinners are regenerated (changed within) and justified (made right before God), they are put in a position where God gives them the adequate spiritual resources for keeping their lives changed for Him. Sanctification changes the condition of the saved sinner. We are sanctified initially when the Spirit comes in to dwell (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 6:11). He indwells us as God's pledge that we are going to be totally redeemed in body and spirit (2 Corinthians 1:21, 22; Romans 8:10,23). In the meantime the Spirit gives us the new covenant of Jesus Christ as a mirror to reflect into our hearts

the glory of our victorious Lord (2 Corinthians 3:6-10, 18). The more Christians gaze into this mirror with rapt attention, the more they are transformed into the likeness of Christ's image (2,3:18). In that connection, every Christian is a work in progress.

In early August it was my privilege and pleasure to begin a soul winning study with an eight-year-old girl. The day the studies started she told her mother, "I want to wear my best outfit today; I'm going to study to become a Christian." Her engaging smile with two upper front teeth missing was a sight to behold. We studied in four separate one-hour sessions. She knew what to do, and she decided to do it.

On August 25th young Joylyn was ready to make her decision. That morning, once again, she said, "Mother, I want to wear my best clothes today; I'm going to become new!" What an attitude and what an insight! What a joy it was to baptize her into her Lord's death for her forgiveness and her renewal in Him (Romans 6: 3-4). I earnestly pray that gloomy, cynical older Christians don't try to extinguish Joylyn's enthusiasm and heart-felt tenderness. Yet this is a very possible hazard. More than a few times church members lose their first love and seem bent on dousing the love of others around them. How tragic!

With waning love for Christ there follows a waning sense of pride for Him. Today seems to be the day of sloppiness, slovenliness, crudeness, rudeness, grossness, and crassness even within the church. Elton Trueblood's remark is still quite relevant, "Holy shoddy is still shoddy!" In his recent book, *Boiling Point*, George Barna takes note of several indicators that point to spiritual anarchy in the United States. Among them are "average Christian rejection of church loyalty, respect for clergy, acceptance of absolutes, reverence for God, a desire to strive for personal holiness, sensitivity to theological heresy..." (Barry L. Cameron, "Worldliness in the Church" *Christian Standard*, p. 4, August 11, 2002).

In a seven-page report of Tim Stafford's interview with George Barna ("The Third Coming of George Barna," pp. 32-38, *Christianity Today*, August 5, 2002), nine "Barna Beefs" are featured. We can't report them all here, but a few more pertinent

ones rise to the top. Notice these quotes: "Every day, the church is becoming more like the world it allegedly seeks to change"; "In the last quarter century it seems that we have learned how to sell Bibles not how to sell what's in the Bible"; "Christianity has no cost in America. We've made it too easy to be 'born again'"; "Shockingly few Americans understand the power and significance of the supernatural world — Most... are blissfully ignorant of the spiritual battle that rages around and within them" (pp. 34-35). Barna believes that his ten-year campaign to help reform the church has failed.

How can we reverse this discouraging trend? We can begin by reading what the Bible has to say about holiness (sanctification). References are very plentiful, but we can feature only a few. The most basic injunction of all is found in 1 Peter 1:15-116: "but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in your behavior; because it is written, 'YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.'" The one true and living God is sinless in character and stands always as the benchmark for all Christian moral conduct (Isaiah 6: 3). The entire concept of Christian priesthood is rooted in God's holiness. Christians are living stones positioned upon Christ, the ultimate Living Stone, so as to be formed a spiritual house of holy priests who offer up spiritual sacrifices to God (1 Peter 2:5). This priesthood serves the Supreme King (royalty) and is expected to celebrate the compliment He has paid it by delivering it from darkness to stunning light (2:9). They are His special possession for His exclusive use.

Acts of sanctification are marked out clearly in the New Testament scriptures. Holiness involves cleansing of one's body and spirit (2 Corinthians 7:11). Consecration of one's body will bring a transformed lifestyle that defies the present world system (Romans 12:1-2). Honorable marriage is an imperative for Christian behavior (Hebrews 13:4). The new self needs continued renewal in the likeness of God's nature to the attaining of righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:23-24). Every appearance of evil is to be avoided (1 Thessalonians 5: 22). No unwholesome word is to proceed from one's mouth; only words which build up Christ's body (His church) should be stated (Ephesians 4:29;

Colossians 4:6). As part of God's holy sanctuary (the church) we should be earnest to pursue holiness and blamelessness before the Lord (1 Corinthians 3:17; Ephesians 5:27). "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Conclusion: God has saved us not upon the basis of our good works but upon the basis of His mercy through the washing of regeneration and the renewing by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3: 5). In Christ everything is new (2 Corinthians 5: 17). The old life will beckon, but we can escape its temptation (1

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Corinthians 10:1-13). Eyes must remain transfixed upon Jesus in His heavenly exaltation (Hebrews 12:2). We are the first fruits of the new creation; let us live that way (James 1: 18). The new heavens and the new earth summon us forward; let us be found in Christ in peace, spotless, and blameless (2 Peter 3: 13-14).