



INFUSED WITH LIFE Thoughts on Regeneration

Kory M. Capps

The teacher asked her third-grade students what they wanted to be when they grew up. One boy piped up, “a fireman!” Another student chimed in, “an NBA player.” Another said, “an Astronaut.” A young girl raised her hand. The teacher called on her. “When I grow up, I want to be alive!”

To be truly alive is not a given in this life. The Bible is clear about that. In the following pages, we will take a look at what it means to be “alive” from a biblical perspective. These meditations were originally written to stand alone. They focus on what the Bible calls “regeneration” or “new birth.”

The New Birth in John 3

The late-night conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is quite instructive regarding the role of the Holy Spirit and our entrance into the kingdom. I love the

fact that Jesus was accessible at all hours of the day or night. Apparently, he was no stranger to inconvenient late night ministry (Mk 1:32). He is an accessible God inviting us to come at anytime. His door is never closed and his lights are never off.

“APART FROM THE GRACIOUS
MOVEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN
THE LIFE OF AN INDIVIDUAL THE
DOORS OF THE KINGDOM REMAIN
SHUT TO THEM”

Nicodemus came to him enthralled by his skillful teaching. Jesus responds to his glowing compliments with a lesson that proves the praise of Nicodemus is indeed fitting. At the heart of his lesson to Nicodemus is the necessity of a birth of sorts that comes only from the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:1-16). It is a new birth, a birth from

“Just as in the beginning, God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light, so at the moment he appointed for our new birth, he said, ‘Let there be life,’ and there was life.”

J.A. Motyer

above, a divine injection of new life---and the Spirit alone is the source of this gift.

Apart from this gracious movement of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual the doors of the kingdom remain shut to them. Entrance into the kingdom is possible only through the new birth. It is as a person passes through the birth canal of the Holy Spirit that they are ushered into the kingdom.

In the flow of the text there are two crucial truths about the new birth that stand out to me. First, conception and birth are not the result of our volition. It is the supreme and sovereign volition of the Holy Spirit that makes the new birth a possibility. Like breath the Spirit breathes on those he desires when he desires.

Like wind the Spirit blows as he wills. Whether we feel his breathe upon us or know his wind in our face---that is up to him (Jn 3:8). Just as we had no control over our first birth we have no say in our new birth. We stand dependent upon the mercy of God to birth us anew. Salvation is a divine gift it has nothing to do with man. This gives us one more reason to be thankful to God for his free mercy.

The second thing to recognize about the new birth in the flow of the text is its connection to the cross. Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus about the new birth drives inexorably downward to the root of that divine gift. The new birth is a new covenant gift.

Nicodemus should have recognized the new covenant language used by Jesus in their discussion (Ez 36:16-32). Jesus helps Nicodemus understand that entrance into the kingdom is dependent on the new birth, but the new birth is dependent on the cross.

The Son of Man must be lifted up like the serpent was in the wilderness that men may look to him with faith and be rescued (Jn 3:14-16). The benefits of the new covenant

are made effective only when the blood of Christ is spilled.

If there is no cross there is no new birth. The regenerating, indwelling, and empowering work of the Holy Spirit is a gift from the crucified and risen Lord (Acts 2:33, 1 Pet 1:3). This gives us one more reason to be grateful to Jesus for his cross-work.

Babies breathe, eat, cry, grow, and develop. These are the natural results of being born into this world. This is what living people do. If a baby did not do these things then they would not be living.

The baby, however, cannot take credit for these things. The child did not choose any of this. The impulse to eat is a result of being born as a living creature. The involuntary act of breathing is the fruit of their involuntary birth. As humans we live simply because we were given life. It is no different with the second birth.

What do we have that we have not received? Answer: nothing. Any and all impulses that compel us to desire God, love God, obey God, love neighbor, and cling to the gospel are the natural results of the new birth. As regenerate people we have the impulses/desires of the new nature within us.

This is to be distinguished but not separated from the indwelling work of the Spirit whereby he creates in us desires in conformity to his. The long and short of this is that living people live---its what they do. In the next post I will explore a few of the ways this works itself out when we are reborn.

The New Birth in 1 John

The most natural thing to do after your born is to live. Life is the result of birth---it is a necessary consequence. This is so simple and yet, so profound if you think about it in light of the new birth. 1 John gives us the practical

side of the new birth. It catalogues some bits and pieces of what the new birth naturally brings forth in an individual.

The birthing language of 1 John is quite pervasive. John uses various forms of the verb γεννάω, the Greek term for birth, around ten times. Nine of these occurrences are in the perfect passive tense. Two things are significant about this.

First, the new birth is something that happens to an individual not something they produce. We do not act but are acted upon in the new birth. The passive verb or participle communicates the passivity of the recipient of God's new creation act.

Second, when the verb is in the perfect it most often communicates a once for all act in the past with ongoing implications. The new birth cannot be repeated. Just as a human cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be reborn so a Christian cannot receive the new birth twice.

The new birth is efficacious---it will inevitably produce life in its recipient. Here are six significant texts that shed light on the life of one born anew in Christ.

1 John 2:29

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born (γεγέννηται) of him.

The practice of righteousness is the fruit of the new birth. Righteousness points to the new birth and new birth leads to righteousness. The text tells us that the life of Jesus is the pinnacle of righteousness.

The new birth is intended to begin the process of conforming us into his righteous image. You can be certain, from this text, that a life that reflects something of Christ's character is impossible apart from regeneration.

1 John 3:9

No one born (ὁ γεγεννημένος) of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born (γεγέννηται) of God.

This is quite an amazing text of Scripture. The language of new birth brackets the text assuring us that all the contents in the middle flow from this divine gift. This verse teaches that it is impossible for a regenerate individual to live a life void of repentance. A believer will inevitably sin, to deny this is to be a liar (1 Jn 1:8, 10).

The mark of a believer is not the absence of sin but the presence of repentance. Though the believer will plunge himself into darkness the fact that he is consistently driven back to the light demonstrates what he is really made of (1 Jn 1:5-2:3).

“THE MARK OF A BELIEVER IS NOT
THE ABSENCE OF SIN, BUT THE
PRESENCE OF REPENTANCE.”

This text makes clear that the new birth assures a believer that they will not, indeed cannot, continue on in sin. The new creation impulse and the Spirit residing within us will always win the day by leading us back to repentance. Though a righteous man falls seven times he gets back up---that is the mark of the regenerate man.

This text does not specify how long a believer may remain in a pattern of sin or how quickly he will come to a place of repentance it just assures us that he will. As Luther rightly noted: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said "Repent", He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." The new birth creates just such a life.

1 John 4:7

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever

loves has been born (γεγέννηται) of God and knows God.

The new birth brings about two things in this text. First, it creates in us a love for one another. In 1 John the "another" is referring to fellow members of the body of Christ. A man born anew will love his brother. This love, as 1 John makes clear, takes on the shape of the cross (1 Jn 3:16). A cruciform love is the inevitable fruit of regeneration. Sacrificial love issues forth from and points back to the new birth.

The second thing regeneration brings about is a knowledge of God. Apart from the new birth knowing God simply will not and cannot happen. We are ignorant in our thoughts of God and cut off from his life (Eph 4:17-18). His sovereign grace expressed through the renewing work of the Spirit leads us back to himself.

1 John 5:1

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born (γεγέννηται) of God, and everyone who loves the One who birthed (τὸν γεννήσαντα) him loves whoever has been born (τὸν γεγεννημένον) of him.

There are three things that the new birth is connected to in this text. First, the belief and confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the chosen Savior and Ruler, is created by the new birth. A crucified Messiah is one of two things to this world: madness or a stumbling block (1 Cor 1:22-25).

“EVERY REFERENCE TO THE NEW
BIRTH IN 1 JOHN HAS THE FATHER AS
THE PRIMARY ACTOR.”

It is only the power and wisdom of God to one slice of humanity (1 Cor 1:24)---those who have received the new birth. The new birth unveils blind eyes to the glory and truth of a crucified King (2 Cor 4:4-6). The natural eye cannot recognize the identity of the man on Golgotha.

Only the spiritual eyes given by God can enable us to see him for who he is.

The second thing that the new birth is connected to in this text is a love for God. The text literally speaks of those who love the one who begat or birthed them. Just as a child loves the one who brought them into this world so the child of God loves the one who brought them this new life. Loving God does not come natural to us since the rupture of Genesis 3. God must bring about renewal for us to love him rightly.

It is instructive to see the role of the Father here in the new birth. In John's gospel there is a heavy emphasis on the role of the Spirit in the new birth. Here in 1 John the Father takes the front seat when it comes to the new birth. Every reference to the new birth in 1 John has the Father as the primary actor.

The third thing the new birth brings about is love for everyone else that has been born of God. There is a unique love that exists within a family united by their own blood. How much more then those who are united by the blood of Christ and the Spirit of God. The mark of the renewed life is a love for the Messiah, a love for the Father who begat us, and a love for the begotten

1 John 5:4

For everyone who has been born (τὸ γεγεννημένον) of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

The new birth brings victory. We become overcomers who cannot be defeated by the world in and through regeneration. God's new creation work within us guarantees that evil will not have the final say. It guarantees that we will be on the winning side when all is said and done. It causes us to be overcomers in the present precisely because we are in Christ and his victory

is secure.

We must be careful to not read our cultural conceptions into the victory envisioned here. The New Testament only knows one way of victory---the cross. We overcome precisely through death--death to ourselves, dying for our brothers, and laying our lives down for the world. New birth unites us to the one true victor, Christ crucified, thus making his victory ours. It also creates in us the same cruciform obedience that marked his life and was the cause of his overcoming.

1 John 5:18

We know that everyone who has been born (ὁ γεγεννημένος) of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born (γεννηθείς) of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

The new birth leads to two different things in this passage. First, John reaffirms what he said earlier about regeneration and sin. The man born of God does not continue on in sin. In the previous text (1 Jn 3:9) he emphasized the impossibility of this ever happening (he did this by using a phrase that stressed inability or lack of power---οὐ δύναται).

Here in this text John just states it like a fact. A man who is born of God simply won't continue in a pattern of sin. His life will be marked by a pattern of repentance.

The second result of the new birth is divine protection. When we are born into God's family we are guaranteed his protection. God protects those who belong to him. Regeneration speaks to us about security and assurance. The evil one is after us but will not be able to lay his hands on us precisely because we have been reborn.

Divine protection is therefore connected to God's mercy. God is not obligated to protect us. As children of wrath, enemies of God, and rebels he is obligated only to punish us. New birth is a facet of God's gracious intervention in

our lives. It is part and parcel of being brought into God's family and under his care.

Summary

The new birth is the saving work of the Triune God. It is authored by the Father, accomplished by the Spirit, and grounded in the cross and resurrection of Christ. It is a movement of God whereby he brings life, renewal, and restoration to those dead in their sin.

“GOD’S NEW CREATION WORK
WITHIN US GUARANTEES THAT EVIL
WILL NOT HAVE THE FINAL SAY.”

This birthing work also known as regeneration creates many things in the life of a Christian. The new birth produces belief in Christ, a knowledge of God, a love for God, a love for neighbor, a life of repentance, a life of righteousness, victory over the world, and protection from the evil one.

Regeneration is a definitive act that has inevitable ongoing impact on the life of the believer. The natural result of the new birth is new life---a life no longer lived for self but for God and neighbor. A life gladly dominated by the lordship of the Triune God. A life shaped by the centerpiece of God's redeeming and revealing work: the cross.

The New Birth in 1 Peter

Peter touches on the theme of the new birth at two different times in his first letter. In both places he adds some new and vital information for understanding regeneration. These two texts of Scripture will serve to round our perspective on the subject even more.

1 Peter 1:3-5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According

to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again (ἀναγεννήσας) to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this short text Peter describes for us the cause, the means, and the purpose of the new birth along with the appropriate response to it. In other words, these three verses form a tightly compacted statement about some of

“APART FROM CHRIST, ALL HOPE IS DEAD HOPE. EVERY HOPE OF THE MAN WHO REJECTS CHRIST WILL INEVITABLY BE CRUSHED.”

the essentials of regeneration.

Cause: Born again because

Peter locates the cause of the new birth in nothing other than the mercy of God. Regeneration, according to Peter, is in accord with his mercy. That is, it flows out of the stream of his mercy, finds its source in that mercy, and can be attributed to nothing besides his mercy.

The new birth is something we do not deserve and cannot produce. Peter is not saying something new here. He is just stating it in his own way. God alone gives the new birth. He determines who, when, why, and how. If we have been born anew it is because of the mercy of God alone.

Means: Born again through

Peter tells us that we are born again *through* the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The conquered grave is therefore the means by which we receive new birth. New life in the New Testament is most often connected to the resurrected life of Jesus.

If Jesus would have remained in the tomb we would still

be in our sins and there would be no hope for regeneration. We saw in John 3 that the new birth is the fruit of the cross. Here we see the equally vital role of the resurrection. Regeneration is impossibility apart from the complete work of Christ in his death and resurrection.

Purpose: Born again to

Peter tells us that there is purpose behind the regenerating work of God. New birth is not an end in itself. We are born again *to* something. Peter pulls out two purposes of the new birth in this text.

First, he tells us that we are born again to a living hope. This gracious work of renewal rips us out of our hopeless situation and gives us hope. This hope, however, is categorically different than any hope we had known prior.

Apart from Christ, all hope is dead hope. Every hope of the man who rejects Christ will inevitably be crushed. Without the intervention of the Triune God we are all on a path to the land of hopelessness and despair.

The new birth brings with it a genuine hope, a certain hope, and a living hope. It is a hope that does not disappoint. It is a hope we can bank our existence upon (1 Pet 1:13). It is a hope centered in the living God and therefore a hope that cannot die. Peter tells us that the purpose of our regeneration is this hope.

The second thing we are born again to is an inheritance. I think Peter is fleshing out the living hope we just touched on. The work of regeneration places in our hands the rights to an inheritance. Peter uses three potent words to describe this inheritance. It is imperishable. It is undefiled. It is unfading.

In other words, it is an inheritance that will know no end, no corruption, and no loss. This is an indestructible inheritance that cannot be taken from us and cannot be ruined. This is certainly a piece of the secure living hope

that awaits us.

Peter tells us that this inheritance is kept in heaven for us and protected by God. The hope and inheritance that Peter is discussing is tied to our certain future. The hope of heaven, the hope of the new earth, the hope of life with the Triune God, the hope of life with God's community, the hope of complete rescue from sin, death, Satan, and hell---all of these are contained in this living hope and immutable inheritance. Regeneration gives us this hope and hands us this inheritance.

Response: Blessed be God

What else can a man do when being confronted with such lavish grace but fall on his face and worship. Peter models just such a response for us. He is clearly overwhelmed by the mercy of God in regeneration as he bursts forth in praise.

He blesses the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He lifts him up and extols him precisely because of his mighty work of regeneration. As he considers the resurrection of Christ, the new birth, the living hope, and our certain inheritance he is caught up into a wave of exaltation. The only proper response to regeneration is worship.

1 Peter 1:22-25

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again (ἀναγεννημένοι), not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding 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, but the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

Peter tells us two clear things about regeneration in this text. First, he tells us that sincere love for our brothers flowing from a pure heart is produced by the new birth.

Peter affirms what we have seen elsewhere, authentic love for other people is the fruit of God's life changing work within us.

Peter calls on believers to love others because they have been born anew. The new birth is therefore one ground of moral imperative in the New Testament. Regeneration is of fundamental significance to a life of obedience.

The second thing we learn from Peter is very important. He shows us the mechanism of the new birth. We know the new birth is a divine work of the Triune God. We know it springs forth out of mercy. We know it produces many fruits in the life of its recipient. But how exactly does God bring it about? What is the mechanism?

Peter tells us it is the Word of God that ignites the act of regeneration. He is very specific about the nature and content of this Word of God. In terms of its nature it is a word that is living, abiding, and imperishable. It is a word that outlasts the created universe. This is a strong, powerful, and indestructible word.

What are the exact contents of this word? Peter tells us that it is the gospel. It is the good news of Jesus the Christ, his cross, and his empty tomb. When this word is preached the Spirit works in and through that gospel to bring about the new birth. God brings men to life by his gospel. It is the power of God for salvation---starting with regeneration.

The implications of this are significant. God's chosen mechanism for bringing about the work of regeneration is the Word of God. The Father and the Spirit will not produce this new birth in a person apart from the hearing of the gospel.

The gospel must be heralded if men would be made new. There is a vital link here between the Spirit and the word. He never works this divine miracle apart from the

proclaimed word. The gospel made public to the ears of men is a fundamental piece of the work of regeneration.

New Birth in Paul

Though Paul does not speak in depth about the new birth as he does other doctrines what we glean from his letters is indispensable for our understanding. Sometimes his entry point into the topic is different. Sometimes he utilizes language and images that are fresh and distinct from other NT writers. Here are five texts that get at Paul's thinking on the subject of regeneration.

1 Corinthians 4:15

For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father (ἐγέννησα) in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

It is not certain if Paul is utilizing birth language here to refer to the new birth or just the relationship that he has with those in Corinth he brought to faith. It is possible that Paul envisions his gospel ministry to be the instrument of the new birth.

As we have seen, the Spirit works in and through the gospel word that Paul was entrusted with. If this is an appropriate reading of this text then Paul understands himself to play an important, although secondary, role in the new birthing process.

The apostle envisions his work as planting gospel seed, being there for the delivery (if possible), and fathering that newborn child. Paul sees himself as playing a crucial role in the life and development of those who have received the new birth. As their father he seeks to model, instruct, and nourish them in the regenerate life.

Galatians 4:23

But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born (γενένηται) through promise.

Paul utilizes symbol and allegory in this text to describe the difference between those in covenant with God and those outside of that covenant. He compares and contrasts Isaac and Ishmael. These two sons were born of very different means. Ishmael was born of human contrivance and effort. Isaac was born of miraculous promise. The promise was responsible for his very life and existence.

Paul holds up the birth of Isaac as the paradigm for all who are brought into covenant with God. "Now you brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise" (Gal 4:28). This gets at the nature of the new birth. Our new birth is grounded in and made possible by God's gospel promise. We do not place ourselves in God's good graces we are placed there by his promise.

Titus 3:4-6

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration (λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας) and renewal (ἀνακαίνωσεως) of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Here Paul draws on his rich understanding of God's work of salvation. In this tightly compact text he speaks of multiple facets of that saving work. Smack dab in the middle is the work of new birth. We learn many invaluable lessons about the new birth from this text.

First, we see that the new birth is rooted in the goodness, kindness, and mercy of God. Paul explicitly says it is not grounded in our good deeds or acts of righteousness. This is Paul's way of saying what we have seen in both Peter and John. The new birth stands outside our capacity. If it happens to us it's because God is kind. Every time God regenerates an individual he reveals his mercy, shows his goodness, and touches that person with

kindness.

The second thing we learn from this text is that the new birth is one element of God's saving activity. Notice here that salvation is by regeneration in this passage. Paul is helping us grasp the vital importance of this work of God. There is no salvation apart from regeneration.

We recognize the crucial saving role of election, redemption, justification, sanctification, and glorification, but do we have a diminished view of regeneration? If you remove regeneration from the mix then all the other components are made void.

The third thing to observe is the language Paul uses to describe the new birth. He calls the new birth regeneration and renewal. To be more specific his first phrase is the "washing of regeneration." The word he uses is *παλιγγενεσία*. The idea is being twice born. It is to be birthed again. This birth has a washing and cleansing affect.

The second image is that of renewal. Both of these describe what happens in the new birth. An individual is transformed, renewed, and begins again. Regeneration is fundamentally a new beginning. It rights a person's inner man and enables him to do what he was created to do. It does not create something that was never there but restores something that was lost.

The "re" prefix means again. Note some of the "re" words that describe God's saving work in the Bible: redemption, reconciliation, regeneration, and renewal. Salvation is about restoration. Regeneration is one piece of that.

The only other New Testament occurrence of the term *παλιγγενεσία*, which is translated "regeneration" in this text, is found in Matthew 19:28. In that passage Jesus speaks about his return and the restoration of entire world. Jesus is speaking about the fulfilled longing of

Paul's groaning creation (Rom 8:18-22).

He speaks of a time when all that has been fractured in this world will be mended. It is instructive that he uses the term "regeneration" to describe that future certainty. God's program of restoration is literally cosmic in scope. The renewal of the human being is one piece, albeit a central one, of a much larger project.

The fourth thing to note in this text is the Trinitarian nature of the new birth. In every text I have looked at in the last three posts only one or two persons of the Trinity are explicitly mentioned as actors in the work of regeneration.

More often than not only one person is mentioned. Here, however, we have the explicit mention of all three. God the Father sends the Spirit through the Son to accomplish the new birth. The Father authors the event, the Son's death and resurrection grounds the event, and the Spirit executes the event.

Here in this text it is clear that the Holy Spirit is playing the central role in the work. He is richly poured out upon us to work in us regeneration. The event is called the "renewal of the Holy Spirit."

This is a perfect example of what has been historically termed the doctrine of appropriation.

This doctrine "insists that the work of the Trinity are a unity; every person of the Trinity is involved in every outward action of the Godhead. Thus, Father, Son, and Spirit are all involved in the work of creation, which is not to be viewed as the work of the Father alone...Yet it is appropriate to think of creation as the work of the Father. Despite the fact that all three persons of the Trinity are implicated in creation, it is properly seen as the distinctive action of the Father. Similarly, the entire Trinity is involved in the work of redemption. It is, however, appropriate to speak of redemption as being the

distinctive work of the Son" (McGrath, *Historical Theology*).

So it is with regeneration. All three persons are intimately involved in the work but it is appropriate to distinguish the Spirit as the main player.

The way I remember this doctrine is by envisioning three fighter pilots on a mission. These three pilots have each been given a distinct role to play. The mission they are on requires that they each execute their role with perfection.

I envision them flying in formation, one taking the lead while the others play a supporting role. As they go about their mission, the formation shifts and moves according to the task before them. All three play a vital role in the mission, but there is always one point man leading the charge.

In creation and election, the Father takes the point. In redemption and reconciliation the Son leads the way. In the work of regeneration and progressive sanctification, the Spirit is out in front. We should not miss the fact that all three persons are always present in every work. At the same time we should recognize the person who plays the central role in the work.

The fifth thing to pull out of this text is the relationship of regeneration, justification, and sonship. The work of regeneration is not an end in itself as we have seen in other places. The gift of the Spirit brings about our regeneration so that we might receive justification leading to sonship. Faith, the necessary mechanism that unites us to Christ, is the fruit of regeneration.

Regeneration is a vital piece of the saving work of God for what it does in renewing us and for ushering us into union with Jesus that we might be clothed with his righteousness. Apart from regeneration we would never know the grace of justification.

The gift of justification leads us into a right relationship with God the Father. We become his sons and thus his heirs. God's rescue mission drives toward this point. Being clean, forgiven, declared righteous, and redeemed are wonderful gifts but they are not the destination. The destination is God himself. We are heirs of and with God. Life eternal is sharing in the life of the Triune God. Could there be anything greater!

1 Corinthians 6:11

And such were some of you. But you were washed (ἀπελούσασθε), you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

In the previous verses Paul gives a litany of sinful lifestyles and patterns, all of which exclude an individual from the kingdom of God. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they once lived that way and were outside of God's grace. However, God's saving intervention brought a drastic change to all of that. Paul reminds them that they were washed.

It is possible and maybe even likely that this is a reference to the washing of regeneration. If so then we see once again the importance of this event alongside the other saving elements of God's plan. We also learn that the washing comes in the name of Jesus and by the Spirit.

Ephesians 5:25-27

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word (τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι), so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

This is a debated text of Scripture. There tend to be three interpretations of the washing language. 1) Baptism; 2) Regeneration; 3) Cleansing or Forgiveness. I am not certain of the best option. If the text were talking about regeneration and renewal, which could include within it

cleansing, then we would have another confirmation of the Word of God as instrument for the event.

Summary

The new birth is the work of the Triune God. Paul provides the fullest Trinitarian framework for grasping this saving event. We learn that regeneration is from the Father through the Son and by the Spirit. This new birth is as necessary for our salvation as is any other saving element in God's plan.

This work of new birth is fundamentally about restoration. Through the new birth the human being is reoriented and enabled to be what he was created to be. It also includes renewal, cleansing, and transformation.

Regeneration is also a crucial doctrine in the way it relates to other doctrines. Regeneration leads to faith, justification, and sonship. If you take regeneration out of the equation we remain enemies of God rather than sons.

Paul understood that his apostolic ministry was connected to this saving action of God. As he preached the gospel of promise God the Spirit would bring about the new birth. He saw himself as sowing the gospel seed, delivering the twice born individual, and helping the newborn grow to maturity. Paul identified himself as the spiritual father of spiritual children.

From this we learn that Paul's confidence in ministry was in the sufficiency of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit. He preached the gospel that saves and trusted the Spirit to bring it about.

New Birth and Discipleship

Thinking deeply about the doctrine of regeneration and observing my newborn daughter have sparked some new thoughts and questions about the discipleship process. I think that the new birth motif may be one helpful lens through which to view discipleship. Consider some of

these observations and potential implications for discipleship from regeneration.

The New Creation Impulse

The newborn child naturally breathes, cries for milk, and longs to be with their mother. These are the normal impulses and desires of a new child. So it is with the new birth. There are new creation impulses that are simply there. The desires to be near God, hear God's word, be with God's people, stay away from sin, and love other people are all new creation impulses.

If these impulses are absent in one who has made a profession than we must seriously consider the authenticity of the confession. The new birth creates new desires. That is what it does. These desires are foundational to all discipleship. The new creation impulses together with the indwelling Holy Spirit are the engine of a Christian's obedience.

The Dependency of the newborn

Though the impulses are present in a newborn the ability and training to fulfill the desires is lacking. A baby may be hungry for milk but they simply can do nothing about it but desire it and cry for it. The role of the mother is to discern the cry for milk and literally take the baby to the breast. At first the baby does not even know exactly how to latch on to get the milk. With some training and encouragement the mother shows the baby how to get what they desire and need.

And so it is with the newly regenerated individual. There is a craving and longing for God's word and we take them to the breast and teach them how to receive. A newborn will not find milk if they are not taken to it. This is a critical thing to understand in discipleship. Newborns can do very little and that is to be expected. We must think similarly with a new disciple.

The Expected Mess

Newborns leave a mess wherever they go. From projective vomiting to exploding diapers infants have a way of making clean things dirty. This does not shock us nor should it. We simply help the infant clean up because even that they cannot do. This may be one of the most misunderstood areas of discipleship.

“THE NEW BIRTH CREATES NEW DESIRES. THAT IS WHAT IT DOES. THESE DESIRES ARE FOUNDATIONAL TO ALL DISCIPLESHIP.”

Discipleship is anything but a clean process. In fact it is an absolute mess through in through. Old sinful patterns do not go away with the new birth. New life is created alongside an old selfish way of life. Just as new creation impulses flow out from the new child so do the old sinful inclinations.

It is inevitable that a new Christian will find himself in many a mess. In fact, this is true of all Christians whatever their maturity level. Discipleship is about journeying through the mess together. We must clean new believers through the gospel and in so doing instruct them how to go about receiving that cleansing themselves.

They must understand from the get go that the mess is part of the journey. It is not some oddity. The way we front in our churches leads many young believers to assume that they are the only messy one there. They must understand that the mess is normal and that it must

compel them to the gospel again and again.

The Developmental Process

I treat my five year old different than I treat my infant. They need different things. My five year old no longer needs me to hold a spoon to his mouth so he can eat his mutilated bananas. The developmental process of a child is a helpful perspective for thinking about the process of growth in a disciple.

Every stage is different because the needs are different. One of the biggest challenges we face in discipleship is discerning where an individual is at and meeting them there. More often than not we assume that a person is further than they actually are. Each development stage is important for they all build upon each other. We end up stunting a disciple's growth if we fail to meet them where they are.

Family Discipleship

Discipleship and training is a family affair. When a child is born into a family they are given parents, siblings, and relatives. So it is in the family of God. In the new birth an individual is born into a family of people who are at all different places in their journey.

Some will play the role of a father in their life while others may play the role of mothers. There will be sibling interaction and even grandparent dynamics. It is in this family context where discipleship flourishes. It takes a community to raise a child. When discipleship is placed in this line of thinking it becomes an intimate and relational process marked by loyalty and love.

FROM THE FRAY

PROVIDING BATTLE WORN SOUL CARE

www.fromthefray.com