

“Born Again”

There is an arresting text in verse 3 of the first chapter of First Peter: “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

This, like almost all Bible teachings, has fallen into cold hands. We feel as if we were in a mortuary instead of the church of the living God. Instead of a man just having come fresh out of the tomb, we feel as if we were in the presence of a corpse brought fresh in from the street. For ‘born again’ have become words that mean precious little. They are used as a hyphenated adjective among us. We say, ‘Yes, he’s a born-again man.’

I don’t mind telling you that I revolt from it, not because I don’t believe it but because I always shrink from hearing dead men talk about live subjects. A Christian brother said it for us not so long ago, “There is nothing quite so disheartening, as a man without the Holy Spirit preaching about the Holy Spirit.” And I don’t think there’s anything worse than to hear the hyphenated adjective “born-again” tossed around by people without spiritual understanding, with manufactured smiles, and headed for the nearest restaurant.”

These words by A. W. Tozer three decades ago are even more appropriate today than when he first spoke them. Being “born again” has become almost as fashionable as women’s pants, men’s high heels, C.B. radios and rock music. Everyone has it, from the top politician through a host of “Hollywood” actors, to the current athletic idol. All of this would be delightful news if these new professors of Christianity were bearing its fruits in holiness, separation from sin, worldliness, and were true believers in the Holy Scriptures. But the fact that they are not presses upon us the unwelcome but inescapable conclusion that they know nothing of the birth from above or the God of the Bible.

The fact that such a host of prominent people, who have a great deal of public exposure of their unholy lives, can successfully pawn themselves off as truly regenerated Christians to the larger segment of the Christian community gives evidence that that very Christian community is as ignorant of what the Bible teaches about the New Birth as these deluded heathens.

It is true that words change their usages over the years, and ultimately, their meanings. Some are dropped altogether. Others, not suitable for use in polite society, develop euphemisms; and the euphemisms in turn take on the meaning of the offensive word. Idioms come to mean the literal thing they at first expressed in a colloquialism. But a theological term never changes. It expresses an eternal truth revealed to us by the immutable God. To tamper with it is to affect the eternal destiny of men’s souls. Since Jesus said, “Ye must be born again,” we had better know exactly what that means.

Especially ought men who preach from the text found in John 3:3-7 know what it means to be born again, and ought to make clear to their hearers the meaning of the truth and how it relates to salvation. Two main errors are embraced which can be traced directly to a faulty understanding of the new birth and its relation to evangelism.

The first rightly interprets the passage, but wrongly applies it to man’s responsibility. This error is generally associated with “Hyper-Calvinists,” “Hardshells,” or Primitive Baptists. Since regeneration is a sovereign and unassisted work of God’s grace, and one cannot repent and believe until he is regenerated, he reasons there is nothing he can or should do to effect his salvation. Nothing is left for him to do except passively wait for God to awaken him so that he can be saved. This error has a modern modification in which regeneration and conversion are not necessarily viewed as separate distinct events, but which both converge together in a “salvation experience.” Victims of this error discover their lostness, then spend the rest of their lives seeking some great mystical experience in which they get “born again” or “saved.”

George Whitfield, God’s mighty evangelist of the 18th century American Great Awakening, effectively used the theme “Ye must be born again” to stir masses of unconverted people from their false hopes in church membership, catechisms, and sacraments. But it must be remembered that he preached in a context of sound theology, in the wake of the Reformation, and easy believism had not yet set in. His target was dead so-called Calvinism and careless sinners. The former were well acquainted with theological truth, and the latter unencumbered with religious lies.

Today’s preachers of the new birth, however, are addressing crowds with grossly erroneous concepts of God, man, and salvation by grace. Hence, the second and broadest error that is prevalent today. To the average religionist today, the new birth is a command, not a condition, and hence it is something man does. It is some sort of change which is effected by a decision man makes, or a prescribed course of duties he takes up. It may very well mean a new way of life of sorts.

The worst usage of the term is found in sects like the Mormons and certain religious fraternities in which the initiate undertakes certain vows and follows a certain liturgy in which he is told he has become a new creature and his life will never be the same again.

In some “Christian” denominations, the new birth or regeneration is effected by liturgies, catechisms or sacraments, such as baptism or the Lord’s Supper. But the greater segment of evangelical Christianity views the new birth as simply repentance and faith; and that is done totally by the believer with some assistance by the Holy Spirit. Billy Graham states it nicely in his mis-titled book How to Be Born Again. “All you have to do to be born again is to repent of your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus as your personal Saviour: (p. 156). This is the common opinion of most evangelicals. But how far from the truth this is!

These same evangelicals would be horrified by the suggestion that the new birth is nothing more than moral reformation, the old man turning over a new leaf, quitting all his bad habits and becoming religious and moral. They would insist that the Holy Spirit

must have something to do with it, but they are careful to not allow Him too much. Mr. Graham again: “the Holy Spirit will do everything possible to disturb you, draw you, love you . . . but finally it is your personal decision . . . He gives the Holy Spirit to draw you to the cross, but even after all of this it is your decision whether to accept God’s free pardon or to continue in your lost condition” (p. 162). This is called a Synergistic view of salvation, man and God working together in man’s salvation. Thus man is made to cooperate in his own regeneration, and salvation is not solely of the Lord, but of the Lord plus man.

The teaching of regeneration or the new birth in the Holy Scriptures, however, is something quite different from any of these. There are three senses, or usages of the terms, each of which can be quite clearly distinguished from the other two.

1. The first, the more narrow usage of the term, is found in such passages as John 1:13, John 3:3, 6 and 7, ! Peter 1:3, and 1 John 5:1. In these passages the work of regeneration is viewed in its purest sense as monergistic, a sovereign act of God independent of cooperation on the part of the person being born again. It is below the level of consciousness and effects no sensible experience in the person. In such a new birth the sinner is inactive and passive. It is entirely subjective, yet non experimental. A sinner is affected by it, however, because for the first time in his life he finds himself seriously alarmed about his sinful condition, and possessed with an undeniable longing to be reconciled to God. He has been awakened from his spiritual deadness by the infusion of the Holy Spirit into his fallen spirit, making him conscious of God, the truth and his need of a Saviour. Repentance and faith are the sure results of being born of God: But they follow the new birth, not precede it (John 1:13, 1 John 5:1). They are the sure consequence, not the hopeful cause.
2. The second sense in which the new birth is taught is broader, and includes not only spiritual awakening by the Holy Spirit, but repentance and faith on the part of the sinner. This usage of the idea of begetting to life in the Lord Jesus Christ is found in such passages as John 3:5, 1 Cor. 4:15, Philemon 10, and James 1:18. In these passages, the word or the gospel is indicated as instrumental in regeneration. Also, the instrumentality of men is interjected. Paul claims to have begotten the Corinthians through the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:15), and to have begotten Onesimus in his bonds. The apostle would never have ascribed to himself the power to infuse spiritual life . . . to resurrect a man dead in trespasses and sins. That is emphatically declared to be a work of God alone, without the agency of man (John 1:12-13). He is, however, claiming to be God’s instrument in declaring to them the word of truth to which that infused spiritual life responds. Similarly James declares God to have begotten us by means of the word of truth (James 1:18). Regeneration, thus considered, is the combined work of the Holy Spirit and the preacher. It also includes the sinner’s response to the gospel in repentance and faith. Taken in this sense it includes objective responsibility on the sinner’s part. He is not to wait for a subjective experience wherein God acts upon him, but is urged to repent, forsake his sins, and believe upon Jesus Christ.
3. The third scriptural usage of regeneration terms is broader yet. It presupposes infusion of spiritual life to the dead sinner and his response to the gospel in faith, but concerns itself mainly with sanctification . . . the whole life-long process of renewing the man in the image of Christ Jesus. Thus in Titus 3:5 God is said to have saved us by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost. Washing is generally associated with the word as in Ephesians 5:26: That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.” The idea of being renewed is found in Romans 12:2: And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind . . . “ Also, 1 Peter 1:23 speaks of the saints as “being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.” That this has reference to sanctification through obedience of the word of truth is made plain by the context if verse 22, “Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren . . .” The converted child of God is being saved from his uncleanness by the washing of regeneration, purified by obedience to the truth, and being transformed into the image of Christ by the renewing of the mind. It must be clear to us here that regeneration, thus viewed is a process, not a once for all experience, and that it demands continued responsibility on man’s part.

Now, what is a man saying when he declares himself to be a “born again Christian?” If he has reference to the Bible, he is saying, “God, in His great mercy quickened me to life by the Holy Spirit. I, seeing myself as a poor wretched sinner in need of a Saviour, cried out to Him and He received me, gave me a heart to love Him and obey His truth, and He is daily washing me and conforming to the likeness of His sinless and perfectly obedient Son” I would hope this was what every man meant when he professed to be born again. But in far too many cases such persons know nothing of spiritual life and has no more love for God, or inclination to obey His law than ever.

Yet more important, what are men thinking when they hear us declare the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again?” Too often, I fear, we leave them with the impression that they are to seek some great mystical subjective experience in which they can place their hopes. Too many are either placing their hopes in that as a “born again” experience, or either in some moral reformation which they themselves made in their outward behaviour.

But what was Jesus telling Nicodemus in John 3:3? Surely He was telling him that spiritual things, heavenly realities, are not observed . . . known by carnal faculties. Nicodemus had declared his belief because of his seeing certain miracles. Jesus was quick to inform him that faith does not come that way. In fact, He declares man’s inability to ever “see” the kingdom of God until he is born again. His subsequent discourse to Nicodemus, therefore, through verse 21 is not on the *way* of salvation; He is not telling him *how* to be born again: He is describing the nature of salvation. The new birth is not something man does, but a work of the sovereign Holy Spirit. Spiritual light, sight and life are then the consequences. It is a gospel message as such, but has *no* command to the sinner in it. He never tells Nicodemus what to do; He only reproves him for his ignorance and unbelief (John 3:10,12).

The evangelists of the New Testament did not command sinners to be born again. That would have been foolishness, since no such command is found in the Bible. Nor did they urge upon them to seek a “born again experience.” That would have given them an experience as an object of faith, when the Bible declares that Christ alone is to be our object of faith. Rather, their message was 1) a declaration of the character and holiness of God, 2) the justice and perfection of His law, 3) the fallen and hopelessly sinful state of

man, 4) God's impending righteous judgment, and 5) the free pardon and deliverance from sin secured in Christ Jesus. In view of these truths, men were then urged to repent and believe.

The new birth is God's business. Our concern is the declaration of God's message and response to it. Those of us who have rightly responded to truth through the grace of God now find ourselves new creatures in Christ. We have had to start anew as newborn babes, and we are being transformed in our thinking and behaviour into His likeness. As such, we have valid scriptural grounds to consider ourselves as having been born from above by the will of God. But we did not get that way by seeking a mystical experience, by waiting passively until something happened to us, or by a moral reformation in our own strength. We gained such hope when we began to respond to the truth as it was made known to us in the Spirit by the faithful preaching of God's word. Nor is our hope in the new birth, however we may view it. Our hope is in the mercy and kindness of God as revealed to us in His Son Christ Jesus.

- C. M.