

What Does it Mean to be ‘Born Again’?
John 3:1 – 21
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
June 4, 2017

Defining the Terms

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Who was Nicodemus? He was a religious leader. He was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were known as ‘the separated ones.’ Their efforts to scrupulously observe all the commands of God’s law set them apart from common folk. They ‘built a fence’ around God’s law: they set the expectations and requirements even higher than God had established, reasoning that if they could meet the more stringent demands they would thereby be certain to meet God’s conditions. The Pharisees were men who exercised both religious and social authority, much as mullahs do in some Muslim countries today. The Pharisees were men of great learning, devoting their lives to the study of God’s word, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. But being knowledgeable is not the same as being wise. In his interview with Nicodemus, Jesus is surprised by his lack of spiritual understanding. “Are you a teacher of Israel and do not know these things?” Jesus asks. Nicodemus may have had his degree in theology but he was hardly out of kindergarten when it came to understanding God’s activity.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. He was curious. Jesus’ ability to do miracles, together with the authority of his teaching, had led Nicodemus to conclude that he was a man sent by God. But Jesus lacked the typical pedigree of a rabbi of the Pharisees: he was independent and had not come from a traditional pharisaical school; he associated with sinners; he claimed friendship with tax collectors; his chosen disciples were common men; and he included women among those whom he was willing to teach spiritual truths. Nicodemus came at night in order to satisfy his curiosity while not damaging his reputation.

Nicodemus begins his discussion with Jesus by flattering him, saying that he knows he is sent from God. Jesus is not interested in his flattery and instead shifts the discussion by declaring “*most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” To this Nicodemus flippantly replies, ‘*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?*’ Nicodemus’ answer was crude and inappropriate. A recurring theme of the Hebrew Scriptures is the hardheartedness and hard headedness of God’s people, the Jews. Nicodemus was a man who had studied God’s Word all his life, but had never comprehended God’s promises that one day God would make the dry bones live (Ezekiel 37), replace stony hearts with living flesh (Ezekiel 36), or pour out his Spirit upon his people (Joel 2).

Born Again

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh,

and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

The two word phrase commonly translated ‘born again’ is, literally ‘born from above.’ The idea is that, for all people, there is first their physical entry into the world – ‘helpless, naked, piping loud’ as William Blake poetically puts it. And there must follow, if entry into heaven is to be secured, a second, spiritual rebirth. The source of this rebirth, as Jesus’ words make clear, is ‘from above.’ It is different, distinct and separated from our natural entry into the world.

This is why Jesus marveled at Nicodemus’ spiritual ignorance. Jesus tells him that the spiritual rebirth he is speaking of is from God, ‘from above,’ and Nicodemus responds with a crude analogy to the physical world. He was a teacher, a man schooled in God’s Word, and he apparently lacked even the most rudimentary spiritual understanding.

Regeneration

⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Part of the study of theology includes the naming of things. Theologians have developed an appropriate, multisyllabic word to capture and express the idea of spiritual rebirth: regeneration. Regeneration is simply a fancy term for being ‘born again.’ To ‘generate’ something is to bring it into being and generation is the process of coming into being. Thus, regeneration is doing it again, generating something a second time. Thus the word ‘regeneration,’ when a theologian uses it, speaks to the renewal of the human heart. What was spiritually dead is now alive.

There are a number of insights taught in John 3 regarding the nature of regeneration, of spiritual rebirth, of being ‘born again.’ We will look at several of them.

The Nature of Regeneration

It is not Baptism

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

The first thing to be said is to clarify what regeneration is not. There are several confusions about its meaning abroad in our world. The first is to state clearly that regeneration is not baptism.

If it appears that a new born baby is about to die, there is often a rush to have the baby baptized before she dies. This sense of urgency is a consequence of the impact of Roman Catholic teaching upon our culture. This is a key difference between Protestant and Roman Catholic understanding. Catholic teaching

associates regeneration with the physical act of baptism. According to Catholic teaching, when a baby, or older convert, is baptized, they are at that moment regenerated. Roman Catholic teaching is that in baptism God places an indelible mark on the human soul. The baptized person is placed in a state of grace. Baptism washes away the effect of original sin. They are saved. If a baby appears to be on the verge of death, they need to be baptized in order to be saved.

Interestingly, there are some Protestants who make a similar mistake of confusing regeneration with baptism. These Protestants teach that one must be baptized in a particular manner, usually insisting upon full immersion, in order to be truly and completely saved. Like the Roman Catholics, they insist that a particular physical act of baptism is necessary to inherit the salvation God offers his elect. If you are not baptized in a particular manner then you are not truly redeemed from sin and death.

But this is to confuse what we do with what God does. Baptism has an important place in Christian faith and practice and I am not diminishing that place. But baptism is something we do, as a sign and seal of faith. It is our response to what God has already done. We do it in obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ and, in this sense the near universal practice of baptism within the Christian church is 'from above.' Yet particular acts of baptism, performed in space and time and observed by fallible and wayward humans are 'from below.'

This is the first thing regeneration is not. The second is this: it is not reformation.

It is not Reformation

⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

This is the most common misunderstanding regarding regeneration in our world. It is the belief that we can reform our self and in so doing so please God. This is bootstrap theology: the belief that we can be self-reliant spiritually. In this understanding the human person is seen as spiritually ill, but not spiritually dead. We can accomplish what needs to be accomplished by our own efforts. If we pray more, if we serve more, if we sacrifice more deeply, if we do more good deeds, give away more money, control our emotions more fully, observe the 10 Commandments more completely, etc. then by these efforts we will reform our lives, making them pleasing to God. In this understanding regeneration is collapsed into the natural world. It becomes something we do, not something God does.

The difficulty, of course, is the Biblical teaching that one result of Adam and Eve's disobedience, the Fall, is that we have inherited from them, our spiritual father and mother, the moral and spiritual inability to do what God requires. This is why the Biblical image is not that we are 'sick' in our sins, which would suggest the possibility of unaided recovery, but that we are 'dead' in our sins (Eph. 2:1). And you were dead in the trespasses and sins. There is, literally, a world of difference

between the two. The idea of a moral reformation as a substitute for regeneration is also undercut by the imagery Jesus uses. He tells us that in order to see heaven we must be born a second time. One of the fundamental elements of physical birth is that it is not something we choose. No one is ever born because of their own efforts. No one chooses to be born. Being born is not an accomplishment but a gift. Jesus' use of the image of birth makes it clear that regeneration is not something we accomplish.

Regeneration is not baptism. It is not reformation. Thirdly, it is not conversion.

It is not a Conversion Experience

⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

In response to Nicodemus' crass remark Jesus tells him that the wind, that is, God's Spirit, blows where it pleases. We hear the sound and so know his presence, but we do not know from where it comes or to where it goes. As with the two previous points enumerating what regeneration is not, Jesus' words further emphasize that being born again is not something we have control over. It is not something we do.

What this means practically is being regenerated by God's Spirit is not the same thing as having a conversion experience, or praying the sinner's prayer. I had a friend in high school who attended a youth rally with me. The preacher that evening was very powerful and emotional. When he gave the invitation to come forward and receive Christ, my friend went forward and prayed a sinner's prayer. As the week's went by afterward, I noticed that my friend had no abiding interest in Bible study, Christian fellowship or spiritual matters. She had gone forward. She had had an emotional experience. She had prayed the sinner's prayer – no doubt sincerely at the time. But there was no change. There had been no regeneration.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that it is possible for a baptized, regenerated person to fall from grace and thereby lose their salvation. This is why Catholic teaching makes a distinction between venial and mortal sin. A venial sin increases your stay in purgatory. A mortal sin results in the loss of salvation. According to Catholic teaching, there are those in hell who bear the indelible mark of baptism. Similarly, as Protestants, we must remember that there will be those who are lost who did raise their hand and come forward at an evangelistic crusade and prayed the sinner's prayer. Such outward things are important. I believe in evangelistic efforts and the importance of issuing an invitation to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But we must always be careful not to confuse the outward things with the inward realities they seek to point to or persuade.

These are three things regeneration is not: baptism, reformation and / or conversion. By this point you are probably asking, "What is it?" The first thing to be said is that it is supernatural.

It is Supernatural

⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

In the previous three points I have drawn a sharp contrast between what we do and what God does. Here then is the positive counter-point. Regeneration is what God does. He is its author. He provides the quickening. He gives the new life. It is outside of the natural world. It is a supernatural reality. The temptation, when we say that it is a supernatural reality, is to think that therefore it is a lesser reality. We are all materialists at heart. We tend to naturally think that it is the material world that is more concrete, real and meaningful. But it is precisely here that we must learn to think Biblically, spiritually. The material world is important. We are embodied creatures. But the material world finds its meaning and fulfillment in the spiritual. The act of regeneration is supernatural; it is above nature, beyond it. But, it is a result of regeneration that we gain true and right understanding of nature.

Spiritual regeneration is like conception. At physical conception new life is present, but that new life must grow and develop. In a similar way, regeneration precedes faith. Faith is the fruit of regeneration. We are reborn by the work of God's Spirit and grow to an understanding of faith.

And, regeneration is unpredictable. Jesus says, 'the wind blows wherever it pleases.' God gives the supernatural gift of regeneration, spiritual new life, to those whom he chooses and according to his sovereign purposes. It is not within our control. There is an element of mystery to it.

I know a young man who is from an ethnic group in India in which there are very few Christians. This young man's other family members are all Hindus. He had met a Christian and after a period of time discussing the faith, came to place his faith in Christ. Why this young man and not another? The wind blows where it will.

There are three things regeneration is not: baptism, reformation and / or conversion. The first thing to be said that regeneration is, is that it is supernatural. The second is that it is a work of God, alone.

It is a work of God (alone)

⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Note carefully Jesus' words, 'flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit.' The Lord is drawing a sharp distinction between flesh and spirit. In doing so, he is making it abundantly clear that the new life that is given in regeneration is

a work of God, alone. If there were a human element then it would produce only human results. But if there is to be a true spiritual rebirth – from above – then it really has to come ‘from above.’ Spirit gives birth to spirit.

The emphasis upon the word ‘alone’ is essential. Human pride is such that we want to believe that we must contribute something. I have heard Christians say that God does 99% but we have to do our 1%. What we do is flesh, not spirit. The only thing we contribute to our salvation is our need for it.

Being born again is a supernatural work. It is a work of God alone. Thirdly, it is a work of grace.

It is a work of Grace

¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus tells us that no one has ever gone into heaven, except the one – himself – who has come from heaven. His point is that heaven would be unattainable to us if God had not sent him and he had not come from heaven for our rescue. Recall the point we noted last week that in Jesus Christ earth and heaven meet. He is the one who connects with the things of heaven. The coming of Jesus Christ into our world is a gift, an act of grace. We were dead. We were lost. We were weighed down by guilt. Christ has come to rescue us.

We do not deserve the salvation God gives. We do not earn it. It is a work of grace. Justice is getting what you deserve. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace is receiving what you do not deserve. As the opening verse of the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ puts it,

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.

John Newton wrote this hymn after his conversion to Christ. His prior life had been one of debauchery and cruelty, as a ship's captain and slave trader. Justice would have been condemnation for his sins. Mercy would have given him escape from judgment. But grace gave him a new life. He who had been lost was found. We sing this hymn with delight and pleasure because we know its truth and applicability in our own life. The new life that is ours in Christ is not what we have earned, or deserved, or obtained. It is a gift. It is grace. And it really is amazing.

Regeneration is three things. It is a supernatural work of God. It is a work of God, alone. It is a work of grace. Having said these things, there is one last thing which must be said about regeneration. This has to do with the necessity of regeneration.

The Necessity of Regeneration

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

I have emphasized the sovereignty of God in the act of regeneration, for this is the Biblical emphasis. The priority is God's. He initiates. At the same time, it is not correct to conclude that therefore there is nothing for us to do. We are responsible to know whether or not we are spiritually alive. Jesus says, 'except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.' There are no exceptions listed. No age, sex, position, or condition exempts us from this necessity.

It may be that you are wondering, 'how do I know if I have been regenerated by God's Spirit?' Those who have been regenerated by God's Spirit find themselves awakening in their understanding. One of the first discoveries is an awareness of our sinfulness before the holiness of God. Like Christian at the beginning of Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress,' we realize for the first time that we are carrying a great weight of sin and guilt and we strain under its burden. But then, God in his sovereignty enables us to hear the gospel. We learn of the message of Jesus Christ and we see that his death has meaning for us personally, individually. We turn to Christ, asking him to take the burden from our shoulders. We sense his acceptance and welcome. The things of faith become clearer and more meaningful. We take pleasure in worship. We begin to understand the meaning of the scriptures. We enjoy the company of other believers. We find ourselves grieving when we sin and displease God. We begin to seek God's guidance in our lives and, over time, learn to live our lives before his face.

Close

Where are you in your faith walk today my friend? Are these things true for you? Have you as yet confessed faith in Jesus Christ? Have you turned to him? Do you feel the burden of your sin? Do you carry the weight of judgment. Turn to Christ. Embrace him. Ask him to enter your life and take charge, guiding and leading you into the fullness he has promised.

What about the person who is hearing (or reading) this message, but whose heart is cold to Christ? Is this then a message of hopelessness for you? Not at all. In your coldness, turn to God. Confess your need. Ask him to awaken in your heart a sense of the terribleness of your sin. Ask him to give you new life. And draw you to himself. You may be thinking (or saying) that such a thing is impossible. The coldness of your heart means that you do not deserve such kindness. You are right. You do not deserve it. That is why it is called grace.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

John 3:1 – 21

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God So Loved the World

¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”