

THE NEW BIRTH

Eva Peck

Introduction

We each have unique backgrounds and life experiences. In speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus pointed out that to gain entrance into the Kingdom of God, one must be *born again* or *born from above*. He compared and contrasted the natural human birth with the “birth of water and the spirit.”

John 3:3-8 – Jesus answered and said to [Nicodemus], “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again [the Greek literally says “born from above” – see also NIV margin], he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus 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?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Indeed, the physical birth can serve as an analogy – though imperfect as all analogies are – of the spiritual birth. Here are some insights.

Introduction

Before we are born as humans, we go through three stages: Firstly, *conception* when the short-lived female ovum is fertilized by the male sperm, giving it a much greater potential and longer life than it would have of and by itself. Secondly, there is a period of *gestation or development*, during which the embryo undergoes a remarkable transformation into a tiny human being with the characteristics of its parents. Thirdly, the actual *birth* take place, through which the baby enters the physical world. (In the original Greek, there is just one word, *genao*, which apparently can mean both begettal/conception and birth.)

The “new birth” or “birth from above” also can be seen as having three stages, summed up in Romans 8:

Romans 8:29-30 – For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also *called*; those he called, he also *justified*; those he justified, he also *glorified*.

The new birth of Spirit can be equated from the above passage with being conformed into the likeness of Jesus, or becoming a son or daughter of God in the same way that Jesus has become. He is the firstborn or pioneer of our salvation, with many to follow in his steps. The process very broadly consists of a calling, justification and glorification.

Introduction

Theologian John Wesley also conceptualized grace – the process of salvation – into three types or phases. He called them *prevenient grace*, *justifying grace*, and *sanctifying grace* (<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/our-wesleyan-heritage>).

Below is a brief summary of each of the three phases which, with their sub-phases, are discussed in more detail in the chapters of the book.

The Calling – In this first step, the soul is opened or awakened through the Divine Love, and the person is open to and enabled to follow the way to salvation. This is analogous to conception.

In John Wesley's concept of prevenient grace, God's grace stirs up within us a desire to know God and empowers us to respond to His invitation – the calling – to a relationship with God. Wesley understood grace as God's active presence in our lives. This presence is not dependent on human actions or response. It is a gift that is always available, but that can be refused. God takes the initiative in relating to humanity. We do not have to beg and plead for God's love and grace. God actively seeks us and want all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). Because of being given freedom to choose, not all will, however, accept this most gracious offer.

Justification – Secondly, we are *justified* or in Paul's words to the church in Corinth: "In Christ God was *reconciling the world to himself, not counting their*

Introduction

trespasses against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). There is reconciliation, pardon and restoration of relationship with God. According to John Wesley, the image of God — which has been distorted by sin — is renewed within us through God’s grace. As we shall see later, there is actually more to it than that. But again, this dimension of God’s grace is a gift. There are no special requirements that we have to fulfil in order to be loved by God. Our heavenly Father has acted through Jesus Christ – though somewhat differently than is traditionally believed, as shown in the Introduction and reiterated later in the book. We only need to respond in faith.

By accepting and responding to God’s call in faith, we are forgiven and raised above the law of compensation or judgment. The consequences for our sins and shortcomings will no longer come and haunt us after our death when we enter the spirit world. By following the God-given path to salvation, we transcend and are freed from the ultimate penalties of the law of compensation – though cause and effect still operate in this world. The more we develop into God’s likeness, the more we’ll “walk in the Spirit” – be motivated by the Divine Love in our daily actions – and reap blessings as a result. Being justified and growing in the Divine Love and nature will not, however, make us immune to suffering and the challenges of earthly life. In fact, trials are stepping stones and provide opportunities for growth during this period of spiritual gestation.

Introduction

Glorification – Finally, we are “*glorified*”. This is when our souls are fully transformed by the Divine Love from the image of God into divine substance and we are ready for the Celestial Kingdom. The new birth has at this stage come to fruition and we will have beautiful glorious bodies and countenances. We’ll each be given a glorious dwelling and have unlimited opportunities for happiness, growth and service.

Chapter Part I – The Calling

The calling includes concepts and processes like soul awakening, soul enlivening, or soul opening, as well as a radical change of heart. It is also a drawing and enabling that comes from beyond. Of and by themselves, most humans are not interested in the things of God. By excessively pursuing material knowledge, many neglect their souls, which can get into such a state of inertia or lethargy that, as far as being a part of the person's activities, it may as well be dead. (Vol 2/56)

Salvation – redemption from the penalty of the law of compensation and being given a place in the Celestial Kingdom of God and immortality – is by grace, not by human effort. Of course, human effort and cooperation are required once God has opened the soul of a person to receive the Divine Love, but the initial step and the soul transformation is accomplished solely by divine means. Through His mercy and love, God has offered humanity a part of Himself. This offer is available to each human soul, regardless of their state of being. God had no need or obligation to make this offer – it doesn't add to or diminish His Divine Being. It was a free choice decision out of Love. It is up to each individual to decide whether or not to accept the offering of the Divine Love.

Chapter 1: Soul Awakening, New Heart, and Repentance

This chapter shows how a sin-filled soul is a dead soul which needs to come to an awakening (New Birth) in order to be receptive to the path of salvation. It points out how the Old Testament prophecies of the new heart became fulfilled in Jesus' coming to announce and exemplify the availability of the Divine Love. Two kinds of repentance – that exhorted to by John the Baptist and by Jesus – are contrasted, as are the old and new covenant.

State of an Unawakened Soul

A soul in a state of sin and error is not responsive to the inflowing of the Divine Love imparted by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to get into a state of receptivity, it must be *awakened to its condition of enslavement by sin*. Until such awakening occurs, receiving the Love of God is impossible. Neither is such soul open to turning its thoughts to the Truths of God and practices of life that will help it progress towards a condition of freedom.

The awakening doesn't come through the Holy Spirit, but must come from other causes that influence the mind, as well as the soul. The person has to arrive at the realization that their life is not in accord with the laws of God, or with the real longings of their heart and soul. Until such awakening takes place, the soul is dead as far as

any consciousness of the truths of its redemption is concerned. Such death means a continuance in thoughts and desires of sin and evil, and in life which beyond death leads to condemnation and suffering for long years. When the awakening occurs, the Holy Spirit can come to the soul and bestow the Father's Love in abundance, for that is its mission. (Based on TGRABJ-1/113ff)

Pre-Requisite to Receiving Divine Love

Paraphrased, TGRABJ-V1/317ff tells us: *No one can come to the Father's Love, except they be born again.* This is the great and fundamental Truth which humans must learn and believe, for *without this New Birth one cannot partake of the Divine Essence of God's Love,* which, when possessed, makes a person at one with the Father. This Love comes to an individual by the workings of the Holy Spirit, which causes the Love to flow into the heart and soul, and filling it, so that progressively all sin and error, which tends to make them unhappy, is eradicated.

Here the New Birth is equated with the soul awakening and condition for the Holy Spirit being able to work and bring the Divine Love into the heart and soul. Elsewhere, we learn that the New Birth is the end-result of the transformation, when the soul has become fully transformed from divine image into divine substance. So we can conclude that as in the Greek, the word *genao* denotes the entire process from conception to birth, the spiritual New Birth can be regarded in the same way. It

spans from the first soul opening (of which many may be initially unaware), till the full soul transformation of the soul and complete at-onement with the Father.

The gospel of John echoes the same truth regarding the ability to receive Jesus' teaching and be open to the Divine Love:

John 6:44-45, 65 – “No one can come to me [Jesus] unless the *Father who sent me draws him*, ... It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me [and receives my teaching.] ... [Jesus] went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the *Father has enabled him*.”

With the initial opening of the soul, followed by transformation of heart by the Divine Love imparted by the Holy Spirit comes *receptivity to spiritual knowledge and development of soul perceptions* – understanding at the soul level what cannot be grasped by the mind.

A Path to Awakening

Some people's soul condition may not enable them to embark on the path of salvation through the Divine Love, but they are open to embarking on a path of morality taught by spiritual teachers over the millennia, for example, the Buddha, Confucius and others. Even the teachings of Jesus were twofold. While bringing the truth of salvation through the Divine Love, for those unable to

understand his higher spiritual truths, he preached things, which if followed, would make them better men and women and help them develop their natural love. Such teachings even today in churches and elsewhere may turn the hearts and minds of hearers to spiritual things. This in turn may open their souls to the influence of Celestial spirits, and from this may follow the longings for the Love of the Father.

Everything that tends to cause people to progress towards a way of love is commendable, for the Father works in His own way and can use it. The Divine Love operates at the soul level, and frequently comes into a person's soul without their intellectual understanding what It is. All humans are children of God by creation, and if they will not become His beloved children in the divine sense (by possessing His substance and nature), He wants them to become the pure and perfect beings that the first parents were before the fall. (Based on TGRABJ-3/303ff)

New Heart and New Covenant

The Bible sheds further light on the truth of heart transformation. Old Testament prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel foresaw people receiving *a new heart* – which Jesus later equated with receiving the Divine Love. As the scriptures below and other passages show, the new heart would lead to a radical change in the relationship between God and the individual, abolish the old covenant based largely on letter-of-the-law obedience, and establish the new covenant wherein *the law written in the heart*

through the Divine Love would motivate to loving actions. This heart change – ability to do what is right from within – would transcend human striving to keep the law.

Old Testament history proves that the Israelites, with and despite all their good intentions to obey God, failed time after time. The result was repeated cycles of promises to obey, rebellions against God, consequences of disobedience in the form of oppression by enemies and other curses, repentance and crying out to God, and deliverance out of trouble. Not only does disobedience to and lack of harmony with God's Laws bring suffering here and now, but after death, in the spirit world, everyone is destined to reap the penalties of the law of compensation. More on this point, and how the law of compensation can be transcended later.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 – I will give you a *new heart* and put a *new spirit* in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit [my Love] in you and *move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*

Jeremiah 31:31 ... “I will make a *new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will *put my law in their minds and write it on*

their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me.

To re-iterate, the new covenant is of the spirit or inner transformation, and is based on love. By contrast, the old covenant was of the letter or written code and based on law keeping. We are also told that the letter kills while the spirit gives life (Romans 2:29; 2 Corinthians 3:6). The law only pointed to, or was a shadow of, ultimate spiritual realities (Hebrews 10:1). With the advent of the new covenant, the old covenant becomes obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).

Even though we are in the new covenant dispensation, some Christians still have the mentality of the Jews and Pharisees in Jesus' time. They tend to judge others based on how well they keep laws – be it biblical laws and/or church laws and traditions. Judgement and criticism is often unloving and leads to divisiveness, discrimination and disunity. We are exhorted not to judge (Luke 6:37, Matthew 7:1-5), and reminded that as followers of Jesus in God's Love, we are all one body (Ephesians 4:1-6).

Repentance

Repentance involves coming to recognize one's sinful condition and wanting to change and follow God's way. It is turning around, or returning to God – which is what the Old Testament prophets so often exhorted the people of

Israel and Judah. This was also the repentance preached by John the Baptist in preparing the people for Jesus' message. We read in the gospel of Mark:

Mark 1:2-8 – It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way – a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and *preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ... This was [John’s] message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

We read further in Mark’s gospel:

Mark 1:14-15 – After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. *Repent and believe the good news* [of the re-bestowal of the Divine Love that will open to its recipients God’s Kingdom]!”

In another source (NTR/17), we learn the following about the contrast between the repentance preached by John the Baptist and by his younger cousin, Jesus.

John preached repentance in the traditional sense of the word – turning away from sin and error and renewed obedience to the Law of Moses, with love of God and one's neighbour. This leads to the condition of the perfect natural man. Jesus also preached repentance, but he meant *a turning anew to God and seeking the Celestial Kingdom of God through prayer*. He taught that God had re-bestowed the great gift of immortality upon humankind in his person, and that the soul's yearning for God's Love and seeking this Love through earnest prayer was real repentance. When he said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance," (Luke 5:32), he meant that by turning to God, sinners, as well as the righteous, could receive the gift of the Divine Love. But while it was available to both, it was not the righteous in Jesus' day, but the sinners who repented and sought God and His Love. Unfortunately, the righteous, or those who considered themselves righteous, refused in their self-satisfaction the great gift that was theirs for the asking.

In the Acts of the Apostles following Jesus' death, we read about Peter telling a crowd of onlookers that gathered after witnessing the miraculous healing of a crippled man: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out." (Acts 3:19).

While a soul is not instantly cleansed by receiving a portion of the Divine Love, *the inflowing of the Love into a person's soul starts them on the way of right thinking and makes them realize that their soul is open to the*

influence of the Love. Both mortals and spirits may receive this awakening of Divine Grace as soon as they recognize that they have sinned and fall under judgment (penalties of the law of compensation), and that this Love is the only thing that will free them from having to pay these penalties. (Vol 2/56). This is the act of repentance, exhorted to by Jesus and his apostles.

Many Christian writers, including John Wesley, also use the term *conversion*. This is a turning around, leaving one orientation for another. It may be sudden and dramatic, or gradual and cumulative. But in any case, it is a new beginning and can also be seen as rebirth, new life in Christ, or regeneration.

The calling / drawing / enabling / awakening / rebirth / regeneration / coming to repentance / being converted / becoming open to receiving the Divine Love / starting on a new life in Christ can all be compared to human conception. The first inflowing of God's Love changes a *child of God by creation* – which we all are because our souls were created by God – into a *true child of God*. Like the male sperm impregnating the female ovum, the initial amount of the Divine Love has started them off on a journey to the Celestial Kingdom and immortality by giving them a *new heart, new understanding, new perspective, and new relationship with God*.

In Part II and associated chapters, we'll learn more about forgiveness of sins and justification, both as an event and a process. In fact, while the "events" discussed

Soul Awakening, New Heart, and Repentance

in this chapter can be compared to spiritual conception, Part II will discuss “spiritual gestation”.