

THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Study Seven

You Must Be Born Again

JOHN 3:1-21

The passage falls into three sections:

verses 1–3 The Opening Gambit

This takes place after the cleansing of the Temple (2:13–25): an act favourable to Pharisees, who opposed the centralising of power in the Temple, the influence of Hellenism on Jewish culture and identity, and the dominance of the wealthy aristocracy over the poor, that is, who opposed the Sadducees whose ‘power base’ was the Temple.

Nicodemus—member of the ruling class; a Pharisee. Quite possibly the Pharisees saw Jesus as a possible ally in their cause. He comes at night, perhaps fearful of his association with Jesus being widely known; certainly Jesus is already now a political hot potato.

His statement:

‘**Rabbi . . .**’ An honorific title, commonly used by the inner group of Pharisaic leaders of one another—an invitation in?

‘**We . . .**’ **Some** discussion had been going on; perhaps precipitated by the Temple cleansing

‘**. . . know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.**’ Perhaps there is something in this that is an unspoken overture to Jesus: ‘Do you want our approval?’ Perhaps too there is an admission of perplexity—‘We are not sure about you, but then there are the signs, which are unarguable.’

Jesus’ answer is authoritative—‘*Ἀμην αμην λεγω σοι . . .*’ He cuts to the real issue, and does so very personally and directly (singular ‘you’) even though what he says has universal application (no one). It is confrontational. (Is it ever possible for a person to be evangelised without some ‘biffo’, some offence to be faced? Can a person ever simply gently slip into the kingdom? I am not sure . . .) Nicodemus is outside something that he, like all people, will not find his way into by his own efforts. ‘No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’ There is no understanding of the kingdom before new birth. Understanding (=seeing) proceeds from, it does not precede, new birth. ‘Born again’ is also ‘born from above’—the latter is the more regular meaning of the word *ανωθεν*.

This section of John contains the only two explicit references to the kingdom of God in the whole Gospel (although there are references to Jesus being king of the Jews at his trial before Pilate in John 18, and couple of occasions where he is acclaimed as king of Israel—Nathanael in 1:49 and the crowds at the triumphal entry in 12:13). It is paralleled by ‘eternal life’ and ‘heavenly things’ later in the passage. Jesus has shifted the focus from the concern of Nicodemus and the Pharisees with their own positions of power in Israel to the larger

question of who God is and what He is doing and how we stand in relation to that. He cannot be squeezed into the narrow agenda of any human being.

verses 48 Nicodemus Checkmated

Nicodemus hears the ‘again’ meaning of the word, and is astonished at some idea that a person could re-enter the womb for a second birth. In his (mis)understanding, the focus is on human action. Somewhat absurdly he sees this new birth as the result of the action of the one being born! The initiative in his imagined absurdity lies with the one being born climbing back into his mother’s womb. His statements disclose the pre-occupation of his thinking.

Jesus’ answer is again commanding and personally addressed. This is not a matter for debate or discussion; it is simply the way it is! Some parallels and developments from the first statement to the second:

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| v. 3 ‘see the kingdom of God’ | v. 5 ‘enter the kingdom of God’ |
| v. 3 ‘born again/from above’ | v. 5 ‘born of water and the Spirit’ |

The development in the restatement focuses on the fact that our relationship with the kingdom is not simply an intellectual one, but rather a matter of entrance; there are moral and personal dimensions of obedience and whole-hearted committal/trust in the issue. Further, to be ‘born from above’ is to be ‘born of water and the Spirit’. There is a lot of discussion about the meaning of this phrase. Most likely, in my view, ‘water and the Spirit are joined terms (a hendiadys) signifying the one action event that Paul in Titus 3:5 describes in the phrase ‘the washing of rebirth (παλιγγενεσιως) and renewal by the Holy Spirit’.)

The thrust of Jesus’ answer is to contrast divine action (the works of the Spirit) with human action (the works of the flesh). Without divine action, no person can enter the kingdom of God. Everything born of the flesh is flesh. Human action is marked by this fact that it begins outside the kingdom, i.e. it is outside of relationship with the Father and His actions. So it can only produce what it comes from, and so end up where it begins. The total inability of humanity here for salvation is grounded in the total depravity of our nature.

On this subject, James Denney, in ‘Lecture IV, Man and Sin’ (pp. 74ff.) in his *Studies in Theology* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1902) says:

Sin as a state or condition refers, of course, not to actions, but to persons; it is a conception which bids us think not of what man has done, but of what he is. The sinful action is the symptom or the outcome of a sinfulness which already characterises the actor; it proceeds from a corruption or depravity of nature which may be a far more serious thing than any given manifestation of it . . .

Its extent is characterised in traditional orthodox theology as ‘total depravity,’ or ‘the corruption of our whole nature’; and probably the strongest expression ever given to this is that of the Westminster Confession (ch. vi. § 4), which declares that by this corruption ‘we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to evil.’ A simple reader coming across these words would probably feel that there is an element of exaggeration in them, and that though they may seem to be supported by an occasional strong expression in Scripture, they are really not a scientific description of man’s actual condition . . . [but that in man] there remain tokens of his greatness as created in the image of God; that he possesses a knowledge of God and of duty; that he is responsible for compliance with the moral law and with the gospel; and that, although unable without the aid of the Holy Spirit to return to God, he is yet capable of affections and actions which in themselves are virtuous and praiseworthy . . .

What it means is not that every individual is as bad as he can be . . . but that the depravity which sin has produced in human nature extends to the whole of it. There is no part of man’s nature which is unaffected by it . . . man’s nature is all of a piece . . . what affects it at all affects it altogether. When the conscience is violated by disobedience to the will of God, the moral understanding is darkened, and the will is enfeebled. We are not constructed in water-tight compartments, one of which might be ruined while the others remain intact; what touches us for harm, has effects throughout our nature none the less real than that they may be for a time beneath consciousness . . .

At a primitive state of advancement, indeed just as in childhood, men repent of what they have done; but at a more mature stage they repent of what they are. At first they feel that they must make amends; but when they come to know themselves, they feel they must be born again. ‘Oh for a man to arise in me that the man I am may cease to be!’—that is the prayer which answers to a true consciousness of the extent of human depravity; and it is justified by the words of our Lord Himself about the necessity of the new birth . . .

[T]he doctrine of spiritual inability, as consequent on the corruption of man’s nature by sin, remains and will always remain to represent the great truth that there is *one* thing which man cannot do *alone*. He cannot bring his state into harmony with his nature. He cannot fulfil the destiny for which he was created. He cannot enter into peace with God, as if his sin and its consequences were nothing; he cannot, in spite of it, enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God . . .’

The totality of the infection of sin in humanity means that all the spiritual aspirations and movements of humanity arising from ourselves will also be the expression of this sinfulness. Our native morality and spirituality are not the starting point for new birth but part of the way by which we refuse to come to the light. See Romans 1:18ff. for the devastating critique that gives to the human religious impulse, which is located in the defiant and inexcusable refusal of the truth of God, and is called by Paul an action of wickedness to suppress that truth. (When we read Paul in Acts 17 at Athens at the Areopagus we must be sure that this is his presupposition in his address. He is actually confronting, not even slightly endorsing, the religious systems of his hearers.)

The preaching of the necessity of new birth is an affront to human pride and a direct confrontation to the idolatry by which human beings assume some religious virtue about themselves. Is there ever the possibility of that affront being taken to our own preaching? In what ways may we be side-stepping this matter?

What is needed is the breath of the Spirit. The person who enters the kingdom does so by the action of the freedom and power of the Holy Spirit outside of any human action or will (cf. John 1:13). Moreover, the work of the Spirit in bringing a person to new birth will not ever be able to be analysed on a human level. Where the wind is blowing is obvious, but it is impossible to track its path to or from there. So also, the new birth is not discernible by a track or process.

*See the article concerning **The Unchurched Next Door** at the end of this article and the discussion it entails.*

verses 9–21 Finally The Truth Comes: How The New Birth Happens

Nicodemus’ question in verse 9 is an admission of perplexity, of defeat, and so, is at last an open door!

Jesus’ answer is again personal and confrontational. Somehow in the confrontation Jesus also manages to communicate openness to Nicodemus, and the conversation continues. The confrontation is on two scores:

1. As a teacher in Israel this is a matter that Nicodemus personally should understand. A teacher who is not *real*, i.e. speaking from the reality of the futility of human effort with regard to the knowledge of God, fails his or her mandate. (This is a good test for our teaching and preaching, testing whether we are being real to our flock about their situation and ours, or instead are flattering our audience with delusions of their grandeur, and ours!)
2. Jesus actually speaks with knowledge, not theoretically, and yet his testimony was not accepted by Nicodemus and his people. Jesus says he has been speaking of earthly things—the matters of sin and the necessity of new birth for entrance to the kingdom—and that they have not believed. How could they then believe should he

speak of heavenly things—those things of the Father in His holiness, goodness, truth, love and righteousness that he has knowledge of as one who came from heaven?

What is needed is new birth, but how will this new birth will happen? In what follows Jesus says nothing at all about what happens interiorly to the unregenerate person. The unregenerate person actually disappears to the background and into the foreground of the discussion comes the person and work of the Son in his death on the cross. There is an exteriority and objectivity to the new birth. It is an event that is located outside us in an action of God for us in His Son. Primarily new birth is not about the transformation of our nature—it is rather about the crucifixion, death and resurrection of humanity in Jesus Christ. New birth is intrinsically linked to the propitiatory sacrifice, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

From this point on in Jesus' talking with Nicodemus, the language of new birth disappears and a new focus arises. No one has ever gone into heaven, except for the one who has come from heaven, the Son of Man. There will be no entry to the kingdom of God outside him. It is he in his ascending to heaven that gathers a family into the presence of God (Heb. 2:10–13). He does not simply open the way, he *is* the way.

The Son of Man is to be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert (v. 14). The story is told in Numbers 21:4–9. The Israelites had complained, accusing God and Moses of carelessness for them. The LORD sent a plague of venomous snakes; many were bitten and died. Israel came in confession to Moses of their speaking against the LORD and him and asked for Moses' intercession. Under instruction from the LORD Moses made a bronze snake, which was draped on a pole. Anyone bitten who looked up to the pole, lived.

Looking to the snake in the desert is paralleled by faith in Christ. The Son of Man is to be lifted up. In John, this always means the exaltation of his death on the cross (8:28; 12:32). The bronze snake represented the actual judgment facing the people. Christ in his death did not simply represent judgment but bore the judgment, bearing the sin of the world. Jesus is pointing to the reason for his being sent of the Father. In the Father's love, he has been sent so that all who will believe in him do not perish but have eternal life. He was sent not for the world's condemnation but for the world's salvation (so also 12:47). Condemnation is the situation in which the world already stands, and by its refusal of faith in the sent one, there it remains.

1 Peter 1:3, exalts that we were born from above (*αναγεννησας*) not by our conversion, but rather by the occasion of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead. I was born again two millennia before I was born (just as I died many millennia before my birth)! The objectivity and exteriority of the new birth *in Christ* secures and steadies those who have been born again. The certainty of new birth is not to be looked for in the fruit of new birth, but rather in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this sense, the new birth is an article of faith for us, and will remain such until the day of sight in the resurrection of our bodies.

1 John 5:18 is an interesting verse! 'We know that everyone born of God (*πας ο γεγεννημενος εκ του θεου*) does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God (*ο γεννηθεις εκ του θεου*) keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him'. There are two 'born of God' in this sentence, and they are not the same person. Jesus is the one born of God who keeps safe everyone born of God. Jesus Christ was not 'born again' but in his death and resurrection he established the new birth for us to enter.

New birth then correlates with justification by grace, and hence reconciliation, forgiveness, redemption, adoption, and incorporation with Christ. It cannot really be separated out from these matters. Each of these matters must be clearly proclaimed as grounded in the Father's action in Jesus Christ, not in primarily in some action later in us.

The agency of new birth is in the preached word through the Holy Spirit

James 1:18—by the will of God, we have been brought forth (*απεκυθησεν*) *by the word of truth* to be a kind of first fruits of his creatures

1 Peter 1:23—we have born again (*αναγεγεννημενοι*) not by perishable seed, but through the imperishable seed of the living and enduring word of God.

This is the reason that Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God by which all the action wrought in Jesus Christ is taken to the depths of the sinful human heart and works its saving power there. He will not refuse the foolishness of preaching. He serves God with his whole heart in the preaching of the Gospel.

The effect of the new birth

1 John 2:29: ‘If you know that he (Jesus Christ) is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.’

John goes on to remind us that we are the children of God because of the love lavished on us in Christ. He tells us that what we will be has not yet been made apparent, but that when Christ appears we will be like him. With this hope in us, we purify ourselves as we, or he, is pure.

1 John 3:9: ‘No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning because he has been born of God.’

This verse has as much promise as it does exhortation. (The future tense often works in this double way.) The power of the word of God by which we have come to new birth is a living active power which works obedience in us. And we are urged to not go on sinning, but rather to live in love.

1 John 4:7: ‘Dear friends let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.’

1 John 5:1–5: ‘Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.’

There is an interplay of realities here:

- (1) being born of God means we come to love the Father, who has shown himself as love to us
- (2) being born has its source in believing in Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (who the Father gave in love as a propitiation—4:10)
- (3) loving the father means we now love his children
- (4) we know we love the children when we love the Father and live in his commands
- (5) that’s what love for God is—obeying his commands; there is nothing burdensome to the one born of God
- (6) overcoming the world is in loving the Father, obeying his commands and loving the brothers and sisters
- (7) the victory that overcomes the world is faith, not love—love is the fruit of the victory. Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God overcomes the world.

***THE UNCHURCHED NEXT DOOR: UNDERSTANDING FAITH STAGES AS KEYS
TO SHARING YOUR FAITH—THOM S. RAINER***

‘Most of the unchurched are your neighbors, your coworkers whom you know well, and even your family members,’ he explains. ‘That is why we call them ‘the unchurched next door.’ They have much in common with us. Many of them have your moral values. Most are not antichurch or antireligion. They are very much like you—except that they are lost without Christ.’

Rainer’s Scale:

After interviewing thousands of unchurched Americans, the Rainer research team looked for patterns in the profiles. Based on the results, Rainer suggested five different levels of responsiveness to the gospel. ‘U1’ identifies unchurched Americans who are highly receptive to hearing and believing the good news. They know something about Christianity, and have a positive attitude toward the church. (11%) ‘U2’ individuals are receptive to the gospel and willing to hear a message from the church. (27%) Those categorized as ‘U3’ are identified as neutral, ‘with no clear signs of being interested, yet perhaps open to discussion.’ (36%) The ‘U4’ group demonstrates resistance to the gospel but no antagonism. (21%) The most unresponsive group in the population is identified as ‘U5’ The most secular Americans are ‘highly antagonistic and even hostile to the gospel.’ (5%—majority of whom are *women; wealthy; older; 1/3+ in rural areas*)

Questions for discussion:

- *What theological issues does this classification system raise for you?*
- *What practical considerations does this description analysis raise, if any?*
- *What could be some misapplications of an analysis like this?*

Albert Mohler comments:

‘In reviewing the research, Rainer and his team came to some surprising conclusions. First of all, most Americans have never been invited to church—never. Yet, 82% indicated that they would be at least ‘somewhat likely’ to attend church if invited. As Rainer comments, ‘Only twenty-one percent of active church goers invite anyone to church in the course of a year. But only two percent of church members invite an unchurched person to church.’ He concludes: ‘Perhaps the evangelistic apathy so evident in so many of our churches can be explained by a simple laziness on the part of church members in inviting others to church.’

‘One of the most devastating insights drawn from the research is the fact that most unchurched Americans feel themselves safe from the evangelistic reach of believing Christians. They do not sense that Christians are seeking actively to share the gospel with them, and many nonbelievers are actually wondering what makes Christians so reticent to talk about their faith. Furthermore, most of the unchurched indicate that their Christian friends have little actual influence on their lives . . .

‘*The Unchurched Next Door* is a serious look at a serious problem. The undeniable fact is that America's churches are falling behind in the challenge of evangelism. The best data available indicate that the percentage of the population active in Christian churches has failed to grow in even a single metropolitan area in the United States over the last twenty years. More to the point, churches have failed to grow even at a pace that would equal the growth of

the population in general. America is being transformed into a secular society at a pace that would shock most Christians—if they ever cared to look.

‘Thom Rainer is a specialist in church growth, and he clearly wants to help churches to grow—both numerically and spiritually. At the same time, however, he wants to make certain that it is the church that grows, not merely a crowd or voluntary association. He is a powerful advocate for expository preaching and clear Gospel proclamation.

‘For that reason, he gives serious attention to theological issues at stake. Specifically, Rainer identifies a creeping inclusivism in the pews, combined with a growing disbelief in Hell among the public, as sources of evangelistic malaise.

‘Inclusivism, the belief that personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is not fundamentally necessary for salvation, has been growing among some Christians for decades. Driven first by liberal theologians who intentionally sought to redefine the faith, inclusivism now fits the cultural mood, and allows Christians to claim simultaneously to be believers in Christ and to deny the gospel.

‘As Rainer claims, belief in inclusivism goes completely against the teaching of Christ and Scripture. The Bible teaches exclusivism, the belief that explicit faith in Christ is the only way of salvation.’ The impact of creeping inclusivism is obvious. ‘Why should one go to the trouble of sharing Christ when that person can be saved without placing explicit faith in Christ? Why waste your time?’

‘The denial of Hell is another issue that diminishes concern for evangelism. The denial or redefinition of Hell is now found among many who claim to be Christians, and Hell has disappeared almost entirely from the public consciousness of the nation. Today’s Christians should note that Jesus himself was bold to warn sinners that they should fear Hell and understand its very real and pressing threat. Far too many Christians see Hell as an embarrassment rather than as a motivation for sharing the gospel . . .

‘A simple conversation with our neighbors will help to reveal their own disposition toward the church and the Gospel. Nevertheless, we should not assume that one who fits the U5 category is further from the reach of the gospel than those who seem to fit U1. The fact is that every single unbeliever is united in an absolute and unconditional need for the gospel. Furthermore, there is a basic antagonism between belief and unbelief.

‘We cannot predict who will respond to the Gospel. Often, those who appear most likely to respond never do so. At the same time, many of those who are most antagonistic to the church and to the gospel, do come to Christ. This is an important reminder to us that every single conversion is a miracle of God.’¹

General discussion...

¹ Albert Mohler, ‘The Unchurched Next Door: A New Look at the Challenge’, <<http://www.crosswalk.com/1231090>> page1 (and following pages), accessed September 3rd 2009.