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# THE WORD AS SEED: NEW BIRTH AND DISCIPLESHIP

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When I was a child we used to drive along a road with a line of very distinctive trees. As soon as I saw them coming I would be on the lookout for a carved wooden notice, 'Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God' (John 3:3, AV). Someone hoped those words from the Bible would act like a seed taking root in the heart of a passer-by and lead them to being born again and becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

When I was a UCCF staff worker in the 1970s we regularly had Norwegian students attending our annual conference. The Norwegian movement was one of the founder members of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. They liked to send delegates but usually sent a staff worker to watch over them in case British teaching about 'being born again' would be 'unhelpful' or 'confusing' to their students. I had not given this much thought in recent years until I read 'Born Again: What did Jesus mean?' by the Baptist NT scholar, Alastair Campbell.<sup>1</sup>

Campbell argues that evangelical theology often narrows down the point of reference for the term 'new birth', to a moment of internal action by the Holy Spirit and raises expectations of sudden character change that can lead to disillusionment. He suggests we should understand the term to include outward as well as the inward ways the Spirit works in conversion.

## NEW BIRTH—NOT AN OLD TESTAMENT TERM

There is a relatively small amount of biblical material that uses the theme of new birth. Most of the New Testament words or phrases referring to our salvation have substantial roots in the Old Testament: redemption, freeing from slavery, atonement through shed blood, washing away of sin. But with birth we draw a blank, apart from a phrase in Deuteronomy 32:18, 'you [Israel] forgot the God who gave you birth,' a reference to the origin of the nation.

There are, of course, OT promises of renewal. God promises through Ezekiel (36:26) to replace a heart of stone with a heart of flesh and put his Spirit within us. Heart in Hebrew is a word for mind, emotion and

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<sup>1</sup> R. Alastair Campbell, *'Born Again': What Did Jesus Mean?* (Grove Biblical Series 66; Cambridge: Grove Books, 2012).

will, the centre of our inner consciousness. Hard hearts are unresponsive to God or refuse to obey him. So God replacing a heart of stone with a heart of flesh suggests an inward experience, a heart that responds to the good news of Christ and turns to God in repentance and faith. Theologians have linked the word ‘regeneration’ with this verse but, although that term basically means ‘reborn’, the Latinized form of the word tends to distance us from the imagery of birth. Look up ‘born again’ on Google and you get theological sites. Look up regeneration and you may get town planning. So the first clear connection between new birth and conversion comes in John 3.

### BORN AGAIN OR BORN FROM ABOVE

There is a trailer for the theme in the prologue (John 1:12). Jesus gives to all who receive him the right (or authority or power) to become the children of God. We do not have that right through natural descent or any human will or decision. The God who sent his uniquely begotten Son also in some sense begets those who believe in the Son and they are *ek theou egennēthēsan*, born of God (1:13).

In the conversation with Nicodemus the same verb is used in the phrase *gennēthē anōthen* which has the double meaning of ‘born again’ or ‘born from above’ (John 3:3, 7). Nicodemus is a Pharisee and member of the ruling council. He belongs to the class of people who sent interrogators in John 1 to check out John’s authority to baptise. In chapter 2 Jesus in Jerusalem is questioned about his authority to clean traders out of the temple. The conclusion of the chapter is that ‘many in Jerusalem saw the signs and believed in Jesus’ name but Jesus would not trust himself to them—he knew what was in a man’ (2:23–25). That alerts us to notice that one of those people, who has seen the signs and is in some sense a believer, is Nicodemus who comes to talk with Jesus at night: ‘We know that you are a teacher come from God—no one could do the signs you are doing if God were not with him.’ (3:2) And Jesus responds with ‘no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born again [or, born from above]’.

John, the evangelist, structures his presentation of Jesus round significant events or conversations from which flow discourses that usually have a strong image at their centre. At one level these are accessible, able to appeal to people coming fresh to the gospel. But there are also layers below the surface and one of these layers is a conversation with the Judaism of his day. Living water, bread and light, good shepherd: all have significant resonances with temple worship or feasts or Jewish leadership. Where does birth fit into this pattern?

The answer would seem to be that Nicodemus has been born into Israel; he assumes he is a member of God's congregation or *ekklēsia*, the word we translate as church. As a Pharisee he lives by a system that ensures he keeps God's law meticulously, so he expects to be one of the people to whom the messianic kingdom of God will come. Probably the question on his mind is, 'When?' But Jesus, in effect, says the question is 'Who?' Flesh only gives birth to flesh; you must be born again, born from above to see the kingdom of God. The Spirit of God blows like the wind where it wills. You cannot control it, you cannot see it but you can see its effects. And Jesus expands it with, 'You must be born of water and the Spirit (3:5).'

### THE CONNECTION WITH BAPTISM

Much ink has been spilt dismissing the idea that we are intended to see a connection with baptism in this phrase 'born of water and the Spirit' but the indications are very strong. Jesus has already been described as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1:33). As the discourse ends (3:21), it is immediately followed by a description of Jesus and his disciples baptising with water.

John has been asking Jewish people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah by repenting and acknowledging their repentance publicly by baptism. Jesus' challenge to Nicodemus is: will he take this public step that involves humbling himself in repentance. Will he admit that despite his efforts at righteousness he needs cleansing? Will he look to God to provide a way of salvation as his ancestors in the desert recognised their dire need, looked in faith to the snake on the pole and lived.

Throughout the book of Acts we see that repentance and faith in Jesus is confirmed or sealed in public baptism and from our earliest extant Christian writings after the New Testament the language of being born again is strongly associated with baptism. When you pass through the water in baptism the visible action is a sign pointing to being cleansed from sin and born into a new life in which you can see the kingdom of God—God active and reigning.

There is a subtle difference between thinking about birth as the beginning of life, the moment of breathing, or thinking about it as emerging into the world. We increasingly live in a society that tries to push God out of the picture and recognise only what can be experienced through our five senses. So it is exciting to know we have been born into an enlarged world in which the living God communicates with us in ways that include yet surpass those senses.

## BORN OF GOD IN 1 JOHN—LIVE UP TO WHAT YOU ARE

The epistle that makes most use of the theme of birth is 1 John, nine times within six verses.<sup>2</sup> The elder John writes in a cyclical rather than a linear style—typical for instance of an African rather than a European sermon. He keeps returning to key themes interwoven with each other and one of them is that we are ‘born of God’, the phrase from the prologue of John’s gospel.

In 1 John 3:9 the metaphor is developed by linking it with the seed that begets: ‘No-one who is born of God sins (or continues to sin) because God’s seed remains in him.’ The Greek *sperma* is both seed in the farming sense or the sperm that leads to biological conception. Jesus, of course, loved the farming metaphors. In his parables about the kingdom of God he speaks of the seed which is the Word that produces life and growth. John has begun his letter by describing Jesus as the Word of life (1:1, 2). For those who hear and receive the Word, God takes the initiative. God begets and what is begotten has the genetic likeness of God.

In his references to ‘born of God’, John interchanges subjects and predicates. Sometimes anyone who is born of God is or does this; at other times anyone who is or does this is born of God. Howard Marshall concludes ‘there is a one-to-one correspondence between those who are born of God and those who do what is right [2:29], love one another [4:7], believe in Jesus [5:1], overcome the world [5:4], and refrain from sin [3:9; 5:18]’.<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably we wrestle with these statements because John puts it in such emphatic, ideal terms. Each of these verses tells us what is appropriate for someone born of God. They do not offer a lower standard than perfection. But the same letter is quite emphatic that we do fall short. If we don’t recognise that, we deceive ourselves. We have to go on confessing and being forgiven (1:8). Being ‘born again’ means God has made a new beginning in our lives and the rest of our discipleship is about claiming God’s power to enable us to live up to it.

I cannot remember any moment of being converted. As a nine year old I was very troubled about being cross or irritated with my brother and surreptitiously undermining him. I worried that I was ‘not saved’. I am deeply grateful to the young worker at the CSSM beach mission who talked with me about this at a ‘sausage sizzle’ in the sand hills. She read 1 John 1:9 with me and helped me confirm that I did believe in Jesus. I could go on confessing sins that troubled me and know I was forgiven.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:29; 3:9 (twice); 4:7; 5:1 (twice); 5:4; 5:18 (twice).

<sup>3</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 186.

The incident also provided a story to tell if I was asked to give a testimony about being born again.

### BORN THROUGH THE LIVING WORD OF GOD IN 1 PETER

The other epistle that has more than one reference to new birth is 1 Peter. Twice in chapter 1 he uses a composite verb *anagennaō* meaning '[cause to] be born again'. It takes a prominent place in the opening doxology (1.3): 'God has caused us to be born again into a living hope.' It happens through the resurrection and it has a forward looking emphasis. The new life is lived looking forward to what is to come. The readers know that God is judge, to be viewed with reverent fear, but they also know they have been redeemed with the precious blood of Jesus who is raised and glorified. So they have purified themselves ... 'for they have been born again not of perishable seed but of imperishable through the living and enduring word of God' (1:23). Here we have the clearest linkage between being born again, the seed that causes it, and the word of God. And it comes in a chapter that makes it clear what Peter means by the word of God. He insists that the writings of the prophets that he grew up knowing as 'the scriptures' had been predicting and interpreting the events that find their climax in Jesus (1:10-11). The word of God is found in the Hebrew scriptures and in the words and deeds of Jesus. That word is active and enduring; it is the seed that causes us to be born again.

So Peter now urges them to clean out malice, deceit, envy, hypocrisy. These character flaws have not been automatically cleaned out by the process of new birth. The believer is to set about getting rid of them; to behave like new-born babies craving spiritual milk. As we saw in 1 John, so this epistle holds out a high view of what it means to be born again but sees it as the incentive to be active in cleaning out sin and cultivating holiness. Of course Peter has made it quite clear from the start that this process of sanctification is presided over by the Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 1:2).

### PARALLELS WITH BAPTISM

Neither 1 John nor 1 Peter make any direct linkage between new birth and baptism. What we do get later in 1 Peter 3 is a glimpse of Peter's view of baptism. As Christ passed through the waters of death to resurrection so we pass safely through death to resurrection life, like Noah in the safety of the ark, the antitype of baptism. This baptism saves you, says Peter, but not the mere physical action, not the removal of dirt. We can detect here echoes of Jesus' words insisting that rituals of washing, however much commanded by God, do not deal with the inner pollution of the heart.

The candidate presented for baptism, repenting for sin and believing in the death and resurrection of Christ, is communicating with God about a clear conscience. The communication is either ‘making an appeal to God’, or ‘receiving a pledge from God’ (3:21). Translators find it hard to choose between these interpretations since both would be expected to take place in baptism.

Howard Marshall says of this verse: ‘We should not make the mistake of limiting the significance of *baptism* to the precise moment and action of being immersed or sprinkled with water. Rather, for Peter, the word “baptism” symbolically represents the whole process by which the gospel comes to people and they accept it in faith.’<sup>4</sup> And that seems also to be the view that best fits the texts about being born again, born of God, or born through the Word. New birth has the same comprehensive significance. It is one term for the whole process of initiating us as Christians and this is why it has been so closely associated with baptism throughout Christian history.

#### FIRST FRUITS OF THE REBIRTH OF CREATION—JAMES AND MATTHEW

There is one reference to new birth in the epistle of James. He uses a word with a different root for begetting, *apokueō*, but it is the same image as the words related to *gennaō*. He says the Father ‘chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all that he created’ (1:18). He is closely connecting birth and harvesting, reminding us of Jesus’ teaching about the word as seed. But the way he puts it also draws attention to the one place in the synoptic gospels where Jesus speaks of rebirth, Matthew 19:28. ‘We have left everything to follow you,’ says Peter. ‘What will there be for us?’ ‘At the rebirth of all things,’ replies Jesus, ‘when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you will sit ... and inherit eternal life.’ Here rebirth translates *palingenesia*—quite literally, being born again. The people in the new congregation of Jesus the Messiah are the advance harvest looking forward to all things in creation being born again.

#### REBIRTH IN PAUL’S LETTER TO TITUS—THE WHOLE OF SALVATION

The number of references to new birth in the epistles is small because the majority are written by Paul and he normally does not use that language.

<sup>4</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter* (IVP NT Commentary Series; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1991), p. 130 (*italics in original*).

He uses his own distinctive image of 'adoption', a familiar process in the Graeco-Roman world, to convey that united with Christ we are brought in to the family of God where we are welcomed and loved and disciplined and commissioned for service.<sup>5</sup>

He also uses a variety of expressions to say that something new has happened; a new kind of life has begun. You were dead, lifeless: now you are alive, you have been raised. In Romans 6:1-5 this new life is firmly linked with baptism. And Paul echoes James' use of the harvesting metaphor. We are first-fruits, pointing forwards to the grand harvest, the recreation of all things (Rom. 8:21-23).

So new birth is not Paul's way of expressing what happens to us. But there is a little gem in Titus 3:4-7 which is a gospel summary with all the great Pauline themes: salvation, justified by grace, heirs, hope of eternal life. In the middle of it comes the phrase, 'He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit'. *palingenesia*, the word from Jesus in Matthew referring to the rebirth of all things, is linked here with washing and the very Pauline idea of renewal.

Calvin, in his commentary on Titus 3:5, writes: 'I have no doubt that there is at least an allusion here to baptism and, I have no objection to the explanation of the whole passage in terms of baptism; ... because baptism seals to us the salvation obtained by Christ.'<sup>6</sup>

From this survey of the biblical references we see that new birth is one of the expressions used by Jesus and the apostles to describe what God does for those whom he calls to repentance and faith in Jesus, though not an especially prominent theme. It certainly challenges any who think they are automatically God's people by physical birth. It conveys the idea that there is a new kind of life to be started and a new family to enter and an enlarged world in which we are aware of God to be active and reigning. So it embraces both internal changes in the mind and heart of the new convert and external or social changes involved in public acknowledging that and accepting fellow believers as brothers and sisters. In other words it embraces all that is signified in Christian baptism.

<sup>5</sup> See further on this theme, F. Lyall, 'Roman Law in the Writings of Paul: Adoption', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88/4 (1969), 458-466; *idem*, 'Metaphors, Legal and Theological', *SBET* 10/2 (1992), 94-112.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. by T.A. Smail (Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, 10; London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), p. 382.



THEORY *VERSUS* PRACTICE

There is a story that circulates in the prison service. Some prisoners had broken out on a prison roof and were maintaining a protest there. The senior officers were sitting round a table discussing how to deal with it. One of them said, 'We had this problem in the last prison I worked in. We decided to play the fire hoses on them. It made them wet and uncomfortable and also the roof became slippery so it was harder for them to sit on it. In the end they just gave up.' At this point, one of the mandarins of the prison service spoke up, 'That sounds all very well in practice but will it work in theory?'

Given the history of Christian faith in this country, we all struggle with the practise of baptism, who do we baptise and when? It is a great excitement and joy when someone comes along with a new found faith in Christ, unbaptised and eager to make a public confession and be welcomed into our church. But many of us have a more complicated relationship with the Church and with faith in Christ which may have started early in life. I rarely hear a reference to baptism in a sermon unless it is at a baptism service. We sometimes seem to downplay the public and outward identification with Christ and his church which is very clearly signalled in baptism.

The divisions in the church make this almost inevitable. 'Which part of the divided Christian community is this convert is going to identify with?' may seem a question too delicate to be addressed early-on. But diminishing that link has allowed reformed theology to narrow down new birth to an inward experience and develop a theory that distinguishes regeneration from adoption. The distinction is too sharp. Surely this is a case where different human authors in the New Testament use different terms to say similar things and the variety of overlapping images is helpful because of the variety of contexts in which the gospel is presented. New birth, for instance may be particularly hard hitting for someone who thinks being a Christian is their birth right, as we saw in John's gospel.

## NOT A HEAD START IN HOLINESS

Campbell maintains there is a tendency for preachers who make this distinction to attach to a 'regenerated' heart an expectation of immediate character change.<sup>7</sup> Expressions like 'radical change' or 'supernatural change' are used. We would all agree that conversion is supernatural in that it is the work of the Holy Spirit but the word can raise an expectation

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<sup>7</sup> See footnote 1.

of something inevitably dramatic and discontinuous in how I think and feel and behave—some kind of head start in holiness.

I am sure we can all think of people who had an experience of conversion that did produce immediate dramatic effects in their mood, their attitudes and their behaviour. It is the evangelist's privilege to see many of God's miracles, the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. But believing that God is at work need not preclude us from discerning the psychological elements in what was happening. If huge cognitive and relational changes were involved in this person identifying themselves as a Christian, there may be visibly dramatic effects. Falling in love can lead to temporary behavioural changes which wear off to be replaced, one hopes, by the deeper, more lasting experience of faithful love. Similarly some of the dramatic effects of a conversion may wear off as the convert becomes used to the new way of thinking and the new relationships that have been formed. Other changes may become embedded from the start and remain.

For many Christians there is no obvious radical or dramatic change even if they can pinpoint a moment repentance and faith. And for some there is no definite memory of when they first turned to Christ in repentance and faith. The ways in which the Holy Spirit unites a person with Christ are so varied they defy our attempts to reduce them to a theory or a pattern.

One of the writers that Campbell takes issue with is John Piper whose book, *Finally Alive*, looks at all the material on new birth.<sup>8</sup> Campbell claims that Piper does not specifically say it means a change in character. Piper's characteristic phrase is that new birth is about 'experiencing the supernatural in yourself'. But the impetus behind the book was a report with statistics suggesting that Christians who say they are born again are just as likely as others in society, to divorce, to have premarital sex, to be colour prejudiced and so on. To Piper these statistics prove we have lots of people in our churches who never were born again. So, in effect, he believes new birth does involve a predictable level of character or behavioural change.

Those of us who have been involved in pastoral ministry over a number of years must be all too aware how sinful behaviours among church members tends to mirror what is going on in society as a whole, with new problem areas such as internet pornography emerging all the time. I am sure, like me, you can think of people who, say fifty years ago, were sure they were born again but perhaps twenty years ago were part of the statistics that would have convinced John Piper that they were not.

<sup>8</sup> John Piper, *Finally Alive: What Happens When We are Born Again* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009).

And thankfully some today are once again faithful and prayerful in their walk with Christ, though perhaps not worshipping in the churches that had written them off for their failures.

## NEW BIRTH AS A CHANGE OF IDENTITY

Campbell suggests it is more helpful to think of new birth as a change of identity rather than radical change of character. Who am I? I am a sinner who has been pardoned, I have been united to Christ, I am adopted into God's family, I have been set free from slavery to sin. I have been called to be Christ's disciple; I am a member of Christ's church. I have God's Spirit in my heart. All these overlapping images describe that I have been born again. This is what God has done.

When a baby is born, it enters the world and gets a name, an identity. Growth and character formation all lie ahead though very rapid growth would be typical in the early stages. In the Christian life it is the knowledge of our identity which is the key to the way of holiness. God has welcomed us into his family and given us his Spirit to produce the fruit such as love, joy and peace in us. As we saw in 1 Peter, in 1 John, in Titus the summaries of who we are and the declarations of what God has done for us are set in the midst of words that exhort us to be what we are:

- John says: You are born of God, God's seed is in you, you cannot go on sinning—it is completely inappropriate.
- Peter says: You have been born again of imperishable seed. What about this malice, this deceit, this envy? Spew it out and drink in something wholesome that gives you the taste of how good God is. Grow up in your salvation.
- Paul tells Titus: You are ministering in Crete where the culture is notoriously dishonest, violent, gluttonous and lazy. Keep reminding your people of the grace and love of God and the meaning of their baptism and urge them on to do what is good and not to live unproductive lives.

## GROWING UP – DISCIPLESHIP

If being born of God sums up our identity—who we are as Christians—then the question arises: how do we live that out? What shape does it give to our lives? Recently churches and other Christian organisations have been focussing on discipleship as the headline that sums it up. Jesus' disciples were followers and learners. They were not learning alone, but with companions. They learnt as they were going and talking and doing. They were learning positively from Jesus and from each other but significantly

they were also learning through mistakes, getting it wrong. The failure of the disciples is a running theme in Mark's gospel.

A wide variety of themes are embraced by discipleship. Jesus showed his disciples how to use the scriptures, quotations, allusions, stories. He showed them and taught them how to pray. He taught them about the virtues, love, humility, how to apply God's commandments. He taught them to resist the attractions of financial security, sexual conquest, dominating others. He drew them into his mission to heal the sick, release people from evil, have compassion for the poor and preach good news. He taught them to live looking forward to resurrection and a future when God will renew all things but meanwhile to recognise that God's reign had begun in what he was doing.

The Evangelical Alliance in England reckons that a 'discipleship deficit' is a key challenge facing the church today and they are currently gathering significant leaders from across the UK to work out how to move forward. My own perception is that the picture is patchy. We are quite good at creating discipleship where there is a team with an identifiable task: for instance students in Christian Unions, the people in a church who run a youth activity or a holiday club, ministry candidates in colleges. Groups like this often model themselves quite closely on the patterns in the gospels and they represent a highly significant period of growth for the Christians who are part of them. But we fall down at the point of sustaining discipleship for people whose time and energy are fully stretched in the work place. I remember when I was in my early forties being bemused and alarmed by the number of people I knew who were changing churches and even dropping out all together at this point. The reason seemed to be two-fold. On the one hand, the churches they had been worshipping in and serving for twenty years were saying so little about the issues and challenges they faced at work and giving so little support. On the other hand, it was making them feel guilty if they did not take on more and more roles in church.

## CONCLUSION

Paul wrote that he was confident that God 'who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus' (Phil. 1:6). For those who are born of God there is a vast world to explore in which God is living and active. We want to discover more and more of the power of the Spirit and be rooted in love. But we also have to discover God's purpose for us in our struggles, in our failure and in the routine and mundane aspects of our lives—to see the kingdom of God in all its wide variety.