

YOU ARE STILL YOU, BUT NEW

In this chapter, we will continue the answer to the question of Chapter 1, *What happens in the new birth?* Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:7, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” In verse 3, he told Nicodemus—and us—that our eternal lives depend on being born again: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” So we are not dealing with something marginal or optional or cosmetic in the Christian life. The new birth is not like the make-up that morticians use to try to make corpses look more like they are alive. The new birth is the creation of spiritual life, not the imitation of life.

We began to answer the question *What happens in the new birth?* with two statements: 1) What happens in the new birth is not getting new religion but getting new life, and 2) What happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself.

NEW LIFE THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and had lots of religion. But he had no spiritual life. And he saw the supernatural work of God in Jesus, but he didn't experience the supernatural work of God in himself. So putting our two points together from Chapter 1, what Nicodemus needed was new spiritual life imparted supernaturally through the Holy Spirit. What makes the new life *spiritual* and what makes it *supernatural* is that it is the work of God the Spirit. It is something above the natural life of our physical hearts and brains.

In John 3:6, Jesus says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The flesh does have a kind of life. Every human being is living flesh. But not every human being is living spirit. To be a living spirit, or to have spiritual life, Jesus says, we must be "born of the Spirit." Flesh gives rise to one kind of life. The Spirit gives rise to another kind of life. If we don't have this second kind, we will not see the kingdom of God.

BY THE SPIRIT, IN JESUS

Then, as we came to the end of the previous chapter, we noticed two very important things: the relationship of the new birth to Jesus, and the relationship of the new birth to faith. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the *life*" (John 14:6). The apostle John said, "God gave us eternal life, and this life is *in his Son*. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:11-12).

So on the one hand, the new life we need is "in the Son"—Jesus is that life. If you have him, you have new spiritual, eternal life. And on the other hand, in John 6:63, Jesus says, "It is the

Spirit who gives life.” And unless you are born of the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5).

So we have life by being connected with the Son of God who is our life, and we have that life by the work of the Spirit. We concluded, therefore, that the work of the Spirit in regeneration is to impart new life to us by uniting us to Christ. The way John Calvin says it is: “The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”⁹

Then we saw the connection with faith in John 20:31: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” And we saw the connection in 1 John 5:4: “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” So we summed up what we had seen like this: In the new birth, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us new spiritual life by connecting us with Jesus Christ through faith.

NEW CREATION, NOT IMPROVING THE OLD

Which brings us now to the third way of describing what happens in the new birth. What happens in the new birth is not the improvement of your old human nature but the creation of a new human nature—a nature that is really *you*, forgiven and cleansed; and a nature that is really *new*, being formed in you by the indwelling Spirit of God.

I’ll take you with me on the short version of the trip I took to arrive at this observation. In John 3:5, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” What does Jesus mean by the two terms “by water and the Spirit”? Some

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 538 (III, 1, 1).

denominations believe that this is a reference to water baptism as the way the Spirit unites us to Christ. For example, one website explains it like this:

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church, and made sharers in her mission: "Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word."¹⁰

Millions of people have been taught that their baptism caused them to be born again. If this is not true, it is a great and global tragedy. I do not believe it is true. So what then does Jesus mean by the words "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit..."?

WHY "WATER" IS NOT A REFERENCE TO BAPTISM

There are several reasons why I think the reference to water here is not a reference to Christian baptism.

First, if this were a reference to Christian baptism and it were as essential for new birth as some say it is, it seems strange that it drops out of view in the rest of this chapter as Jesus tells us how to have eternal life. Verse 15: "Whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Verse 16: "Whoever believes in him [will] not perish but have eternal life." Verse 18: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned." It would seem strange, if baptism were that essential, that it would not be mentioned along with faith in the rest of the chapter.

Second, the analogy with the wind in verse 8 would seem strange if being born again were so firmly attached to water baptism. Jesus says, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where

¹⁰ www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/baptism.html, accessed 04-30-08

it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” This seems to say that God is as free as the wind in causing regeneration. But if it happened every time a baby is sprinkled, that would not seem to be true. In that case, the wind would be very confined by the sacrament. It does not sound as if Jesus is thinking in sacramental or baptismal terms.

Third, if Jesus is referring to Christian baptism, it seems strange that he would say to Nicodemus, the Pharisee, in verse 10, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” That makes sense if Jesus is referring to something taught in the Old Testament, which Nicodemus should have known and applied. But if Jesus is referring to a Christian baptism that will come later, and get its meaning from the life and death of Jesus, it doesn’t seem like he would have scolded Nicodemus that a teacher in Israel does not understand what he is saying.

Finally, that same statement in verse 10 sends us back to the Old Testament for some background, and what we find is that water and spirit are closely linked in the New Covenant promises, especially in Ezekiel 36. This text in Ezekiel is the basis for the rest of this chapter.

WATER AND SPIRIT IN EZEKIEL 36

Ezekiel is prophesying what God will do for his people when he brings them back from exile in Babylon. The implications are much larger than just for the people of Israel, because Jesus claims to secure the New Covenant by his blood for all who will trust in him (Luke 22:20). And Ezekiel 36:24–28 is one version of the New Covenant promises like the ones in Jeremiah 31:31–34.

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from

all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezek. 36:24–28)

I think this is the passage that gives rise to Jesus words “Unless one is born of *water* and the *Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” To whom does God say, “You shall be my people, and I will be your God” (v. 28)? Answer: To the ones to whom he says, “I will sprinkle clean *water* on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses” (v. 25); and verse 26: To the ones to whom he says, “I will give you a new heart, and a new *spirit* I will put within you.” In other words, the ones who will “enter the kingdom” are those who have a newness that involves a *cleansing* of the old and a *creation* of the new.

So I conclude that “water and Spirit” in Ezekiel 36 refer to two aspects of our newness when we are born again. And the reason both are important is this: When we say that a new spirit (or a new heart) is given to us, we don’t mean that we cease to be the human being—the morally accountable self—that we have always been. I was the individual human being John Piper before I was born again, and I have been the individual human being John Piper since I was born again. There is a continuity. That’s why there has to be cleansing. If the old human being, John Piper, were completely obliterated, the whole concept of forgiveness and cleansing would be irrelevant. There would be nothing left over from the past to forgive or cleanse.

We know that the Bible tells us that our old self was crucified (Rom. 6:6), and that we have died with Christ (Col. 3:3), and that we are to “consider ourselves dead” (Rom. 6:11), and “put

off the old self” (Eph. 4:22). But none of that means the same human being is not in view throughout life. It means that there was an old nature, an old character, or principle, or bent, that needs to be done away with.

So the way to think about your new heart, new spirit, new nature is that it is still you and so needs to be forgiven and cleansed—that’s the point of the reference to water. My guilt must be washed away. Cleansing with water is a picture of that. Jeremiah 33:8 puts it like this: “I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.” So the person that we are—that continues to exist—must be forgiven, and the guilt washed away.

THE NEED TO BE NEW

But forgiveness and cleansing are not enough. I need to be new. I need to be transformed. I need life. I need a new way of seeing and thinking and valuing. That’s why Ezekiel speaks of a new heart and a new spirit in verses 26–27: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my *Spirit* within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Here’s the way I understand those verses: To be sure, the heart of stone means the dead heart that was unfeeling and unresponsive to spiritual reality—the heart you had before the new birth. It could respond with passion and desire to lots of things. But it was a stone toward the spiritual truth and beauty of Jesus Christ and the glory of God and the path of holiness. That is what has to change if we are to see the kingdom of God.

So in the new birth, God takes out the heart of stone and puts in a heart of flesh. The word flesh doesn’t mean “merely human” as it does in John 3:6 (“that which is born of the flesh is flesh”).

It means soft and living and responsive and feeling, instead of being a lifeless stone. In the new birth, our dead, stony boredom with Christ is replaced by a heart that senses the worth of Jesus.

Then when Ezekiel says in verses 26–27, “A new spirit I will put within you....And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes,” I think he means that in the new birth, God puts a living, supernatural, spiritual life in our heart, and that new life—that new spirit—is the working of the Holy Spirit himself giving shape and character to our new heart.

The picture I have in my mind is that this new warm, touchable, responsive, living heart is like a soft lump of clay, and the Holy Spirit presses himself up into it and gives spiritual, moral shape to it according to his own shape. By being himself within us, our heart and mind take on his character—his spirit (cf. Eph. 4:23).

RECEIVE HIM AS YOUR TREASURE

So now let's step back and sum up these last two chapters. What happens in the new birth? In the new birth, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us new spiritual life by connecting us with Jesus Christ through faith. Or, to say it another way, the Spirit unites us to Christ where there is cleansing for our sins (pictured by water), and he replaces our hard, unresponsive heart with a soft heart that treasures Jesus above all things and is being transformed by the presence of the Spirit into the kind of heart that loves to do the will of God (Ezek. 36:27).

We will have much more to say about the role of faith in the new birth and how a person may seek the new birth and may help others seek it. But you need not wait. If your heart is drawn to the truth and beauty of Christ, receive him as your life. John holds out this amazing promise: “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).