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The New Birth 1.0: The Dynamics of Conversion

STEVE STATEN

As many seekers follow a well-worn path to salvation, they are unknowingly diverted in their attempts to really grasp the gift of the new birth, which the New Testament associates with entrance into the kingdom of God (John 3.3–5).

In each age, the seeker's understanding of the main facets of new birth—the nature of faith, repentance, baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit—has been shaped by the ecclesiastical viruses of their times. The challenge at hand is to reinstate the original version handed down from Jesus and the apostles, which is gaining wider consciousness in the greater church. This version I have dubbed the New Birth 1.0.

Well-meaning developers, unfortunately, set in motion widespread changes. There was the sudden move in the third century toward infant baptism. After the sixteenth century, Reformation preachers emphasized the necessity of a private moment of adult belief for accepting grace. This eventually led to the widespread use of the Anxious-Seat techniques developed by Charles Finney through which he justified substituting baptism with other measures.¹ In my view, many subsequent developments bring popular Christianity up to something we might call New Birth 7.0 where one finds the new birth most commonly by “praying the sinner's prayer” or just “accepting Jesus.”

The Restoration Movement has not sorted out its confusion on the matter even though it has often articulated a new birth theology closer to the original. In my view, the Churches of Christ have sometimes been too step-by-step formulaic, the Christian Church has been vague, and the left-most Disciples of Christ appear open-minded to the point of difference. From my personal experience, we in the International Churches of Christ (ICOC) have often been too dogmatic about discipleship vernacular and associating Jesus' baptism with being in the right group.

In the wake of centuries of confusion it has been difficult for the translators of scripture to give the reader a fresh, genuine view of this topic because some commonly used English words have been spoiled. Ongoing rediscovery is crucial or sincere people will continue to be inoculated against the original gift by a look-alike. Prayerfully we can all refresh our own study of the matter, doing our part to help more people to experience the gift of the new birth.

The good news for this post-denominational age is that a widespread recovery of a sound and accessible understanding of new birth could lead to, or greatly aid, a large-scale revival throughout the world. A fresh approach to this important Christian practice is needed to help the original ideal come into clearer view.

1. Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Oberlin: E.J. Goodrich, 1868), 248. From his chapter entitled “Lectures to Promote Revival,” Finney's theology is clear: “The church has always felt it necessary to have something of the kind to answer this very purpose. In the days of the apostles baptism answered this purpose. The gospel was preached to the people, and then all those who were willing to be on the side of Christ were called on to be baptized. It held the precise place that the anxious seat does now, as a public manifestation of their determination to be Christians.”

A FRESH APPROACH

The method here is to retrieve the original intent from the primary teachers of the New Testament by examining their most crucial speeches or texts on the new birth. Jesus Christ and the apostles Peter and Paul provide most of what we know on the subject. All three of them at least loosely adopted the general practices of John the Baptist on repentance and baptism (John—Luke 3.1–3; Jesus—Luke 24.45–47, Matt 28.19; Peter—Acts 2.38–39; Paul—Acts 13.23–26), but we will observe the unfolding new birth theology from the biblical record of their thoughts.

Jesus and these two apostles had particular windows to the present topic. The theology of this special birth first appears as a future gift in Jesus' words in the Gospel of John. After his ascension it is broadcast in practical terms by Peter in Acts 2, than carried over by Paul who developed its theology and implications. The order and circumstances of the various contributions are significant because understanding the original concept and the flow of developments can reduce the perception of tensions or disagreements between the sources.

The Announcement: Jesus and the Forthcoming Gift

The disciples of Jesus were “out-baptizing” John (John 4.1), having apparently adopted his framework for baptism and repentance. Candidates were simply to have a change of heart, stop various wrongs and undo them if possible. Then they were baptized, provided there was enough water (John 3.22). These measures preceded any clear discussion of another kind of birth associated with the Holy Spirit.

In those days, a private, late-night encounter between Jesus and a teacher named Nicodemus brought the topic of the new birth to the surface for the first time (John 3.1–16). The conversation began when the Lord abruptly spoke of new birth, saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” The term *gennaō* can be translated “born from above.” To this, Nicodemus expressed his befuddlement at a greater birth saying, “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus replied, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit.”

The play between flesh and spirit involves a highly debated typology, but it is not central to this discussion. Jesus' point could have been either that flesh referred to the human effort involved in natural childbirth, or the human side of conversion process up until that point. It is worthy of note that early Christians who cited this passage were unanimous in the interpretation that water referred to baptism.² Certainly, the positive life changes that many Jews had undertaken with John's baptism are a tenable basis for the term “born of water.” It is even more certain that the spirit and a rebirth are fused together as a requirement for seeing the kingdom of heaven, but this option was not yet available.

Jesus had leaked (so to speak) privy information to Nicodemus. Perhaps this teacher would share his discussion with others and it would create a buzz. It was not long before Jesus went on public record:

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were *later to receive*. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7.37–39, emphasis mine).

The formal announcement was that the Spirit's residence within the believer was going to be available, but it would not occur until after Jesus departed this world and sent him (John 7.39; 14.16; 15.26). The end of

2. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chap. 61; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book I, chap 21, 1; *Fragments from Lost Writings of Irenaeus*, 34; Second Clement 6.7.

John's Gospel indicates that there was an exception. In advance, the apostles were to have an experience with the Spirit, as Jesus breathed the Spirit onto them just after he had been glorified (John 20.21–23).

The Release: Peter and Acts 2

If we get *the announcement* of this new birth in Jesus, we can say we have the *release of version 1.0* in Acts 2. The events in Jerusalem between Passover and Pentecost were providentially arranged and underscored with God's extraordinary presence. The circumstance of the first post-resurrection sermon makes Peter's words both exemplar and irrevocable. Miracles, signs and wonders appeared on both sides of his well-attended discourse on Christ, the gospel, the opportunity for salvation and the gift of the Spirit.

... how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Heb 2.3–4).

Most of the audience comprised Diaspora Jews whom God had orchestrated to see their collusion in the murder of the Christ. The chief apostle was poised to speak of the credal tenets of the Christian faith, citing words of the prophets and the miraculous signs and developments leading to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2.14–36). Once their guilt set in, thousands sought a remedy.

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2.27–38).

Peter promptly offered them a message of new life. It is noticeable that he did not use the same new-birth language found in John's Gospel. However, with closer examination, it seems as though (Luke's) Peter and (John's) Jesus used equivalent concepts. Some three decades later, Peter produced a letter that incorporated Jesus' rebirth terminology.

The letter of 1 Peter is generally categorized as catholic catechism, or general instruction. It contains our best source for Peter's rebirth theology to complement his practical message on Pentecost. He opens with "the Father caused us to be born from above" (1 Pet 1.3 NASB), which is consistent with John 3.6 but emphasizing the Spirit's role in the new birth. Peter reinforced the fact that human actions do not make this birth happen. God, upon his pleasure and in response to his requirements, will cause a spiritual birth.

The motivation within Peter's letter still emphasizes a faith that is Christ-centered (1 Pet 1.3–12). He believed that faith led to baptism, and that informed and refined faith led to spiritually transformed behaviors (1 Pet 2.9–3.22). His fundamental assumption of his reader is clear: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet 1.23).

The User's Manual: The Teachings of Paul

Once this new "operating system" was released, there was the need for a well-written *user's manual*. It is vogue nowadays to overemphasize Paul's role in founding Christianity. The facts are clear—he was dependent upon judgments reached by Jesus and other forerunners like Peter. This apostle was more of an expounder than an originator, and if he contradicted his predecessors, he could have been condemned with his own words (Gal 1.6–9, 2.2).

Long before Saul became a follower of the Way, a practical theology of faith, repentance, baptism and the Holy Spirit was well in place. His intimate acquaintance with the new birth came after a crisis, three days of reflection, prayer and fasting (Acts 9.22, 26). Luke's narratives make it possible to read both about

the conversion of Saul in third person (Acts 9.17–19) and reflective Paul in first person (22.14–16). It is apparent how he responded, came to be baptized, had his sins washed away and received the Holy Spirit. Except for the initial measures that introduce Saul's conversion, Saul's experience was no different than what we would expect from someone converted under the influence of Peter and the other apostles in Jerusalem. God's plan involved Saul hearing the message and coming to the kingdom like everyone else—through a human agent, a fearful but obedient disciple named Ananias, who would call him to a decision.

Paul's first sermon in Acts 13.16–41 is given significant treatment—almost as if Luke is pointing out that the main points of faith in Jesus are similar to Peter's from Acts 2.14–39. They both recall fulfilled prophecies, Jesus' lineage with David, a conspiracy that led to his death, his burial without decay, the resurrection, repentance and baptism as part of the remedy and forgiveness. These points don't appear in the same order, but Paul seems to copy Peter.

Paul's longest recorded sermon is very similar to Peter's first and longest recorded sermon. Like Jesus and Peter, Paul appropriated baptism and repentance from John the Baptist and called for it to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 13.23–26). Likewise, his concept of repentance was similar to John's, “. . . and to the Gentiles also, I reached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds” (Acts 26.20b).

This dependence is not surprising, but what was lacking prior to Paul's contributions were the abundant theological insights and applications from the atonement. He picks up and writes about these things, whereas the other apostles left off with the basic message. There is no evidence that he replaced the message that Jesus and Peter orally relayed. Rather, he appropriated it for various audiences.

Paul's contributions became priceless because his letters serve as an enduring user's manual for connecting the gospel and the new birth to so many possibilities. The Epistles of 1–2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians and Colossians are full of positive repercussions and possibilities of the gospel. So much is said about this in these letters that it led a former professor of mine and well-known evangelical scholar, Robert Webber, to say that what we find in the New Testament is that “there is no life but the baptized life”—meaning that we spend our lives living out our baptism.³

The letter of Colossians captures the overall conversion theology of a well-travelled Mediterranean minister, in contrast to the main theological sermons in the book of Acts that came out of a largely Judean/Syrian provenance. New terms came to replace old ones, evidenced by the fact that Paul never used the language of discipleship although he used its equivalence—“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord” (Col 2.6). Similarly, Paul used metaphors. For repentance, “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature . . . done by Christ” (Col 2.11).

Faith and baptism were tied together and reliance on God's power, not the faith or the baptism, “. . . having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2.12).

Lacking everywhere with Paul's new birth descriptions is the term *gennao* (*born from above* or *born again*) that was used by Jesus (John 3.5–6) and Peter (1 Pet 1.3, 2.9), but Paul once employed a comparable term in a pastoral letter, “. . . he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of *rebirth* (*paliggenesias*) and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3.5).

THE NEW BIRTH COMPOSITE

This composite picture of the new birth considers the interdependence of the nature of faith, repentance, baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit.

3. Robert Webber, *The Divine Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 158, 243.

The Nature of Faith

The Gospels portray the object of our common faith—the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is presented in the book of Acts through preaching and in confessions at baptisms. Throughout the Epistles, Jesus and his victory find expression in creedal type statements, teachings about the Lord's Supper and in hymns.

Perhaps the nature of faith is best seen through one of the Paul's diatribes concerning the law in his letter to the church at Rome. Abraham and his descendants were not justified through their performance, holding to the commandments or its regulations (Rom 4). Righteousness comes from God, apart from the law, to all who believe (Rom 1.22–23). Paul argues that believing, properly understood, is enough; however, he does not mean an antinomian faith (Rom 6.1–14). He envisioned that faith achieved and coincided with obedience (Rom 1.5).

For Christians in the ICOC, it is important to state and restate that one can't prove their justification by impressive momentary successes such as evangelism. However, many passive believers today should be put on notice—nowhere does discipleship-free faith exist in the Bible. It was a faith that focused on the cross and a faith that compelled each person to take up their own cross (Gal 2.20). The nature of faith is that if it is sincere, it will always have consequent features that validate it.

Repentance

After the resurrection of Christ, the bar for repentance was raised from John the Baptist's call to turn away from wrongs and anticipate the coming Messiah. It became connected to accepting responsibility in Jesus' death and publically turning to Jesus as Lord, which was but another way of echoing Jesus' call to put everything under the reign of God and to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

A single process of evaluating someone's repentance or confession is difficult to establish from scriptures. This is not a sign of ambiguity, but rather of variety, depending on the situation. Most of the conversion narratives that speak to repentance occurred when candidates were placed in a situation that revealed their hearts. The book of Acts reveals that many of those called to repent faced immediate litmus tests.

Sometimes standing in a conflicted crowd and making an unpopular decision to side with Christ is proof enough that one is repentant (Acts 2.14–21). At other times, a period of reflection established that a tough character had surrendered to God (Acts 9.1–18). Or, a sign of repentance would be risking one's livelihood, or even one's life, by responding to the gospel (Acts 16.16–34).

Repentance is both a turn away from known wrongs and a turn obediently to the Lord, ready to face whatever consequences may come. Christians who are helping people experience rebirth do not need to present an elaborate maze for deciphering repentance, action which may only damage the prospective convert's faith. Most in the ICOC now seek to highlight what sins are and merely call sinners to repent.

Baptism

The Greek word *baptizo* can be defined “to dip, immerse, submerge for a religious purpose, to overwhelm, saturate, baptize” (John 1.25).⁴ This visible act illuminated things about the one being baptized and the observers as well. Just as John's baptism could become telltale about where one stood with God (Luke 7.29–30, 20.3–7), the baptism associated with Jesus was full of implications.

After Jesus rose from the grave, he procured John's baptism for converting the nations (Matt 28.18–20). From the beginning of the church, being baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit became integral and timeless (Acts 2.38–39). As far as the historical record shows, the connection of baptism and rebirth was not questioned for a long time.

Throughout the Epistles, baptism is associated with many things that are mostly insights into its accomplishments, a look in hindsight you might say (Gal 3.26–27, 1 Cor 12.12–13, Gal 6.1–5). But in the book of Acts, it has features that are evident at the time of baptism. On the human side, baptism is a

4. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN; AMG Publishers, 1992, 1993, 2000, electronic ed. 2007).

culmination of faith, sorrow, conviction and spiritual direction and is a crucial moment of decision. On the divine side, baptism marks the occasion of God's forgiveness of sin along with new features brought about by the Holy Spirit. A careful study will reveal that God does far more in baptism than we do.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is involved in the details of someone's conversion long before their rebirth. Most significantly, the Holy Spirit works on the inner man: "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16.8). Upon a response to the gospel associated with "a washing," the Spirit causes a "renewal" of the sinner (Titus 3.5), which is an analogous term for the new birth. He leaves himself as a deposit, a seal of his presence (Eph 1.13). As a result, "we both have access to the Father by one Spirit" (Eph 2.18b).

The New Testament portrays the Holy Spirit as being involved in every step of the conversion. He is capable of providing the same power that was involved in the resurrection of Jesus. And without him, there would be no sustaining resistance against sin.

CONCLUSION

A portrait has emerged containing four common features in the new birth. The precise roles of faith, repentance, baptism and the Holy Spirit are not canned, sequential steps. A message is heard, the heart responds, God works—and this may go on for some time until the sinner surrenders and God's Spirit finishes his work.

A person's previous religious and spiritual history may complicate their chance at receiving the gift of new birth. Here, Christians can take a cue from midwives. Various studies conclude that mothers are more likely to deliver healthy babies and recover more swiftly through midwives compared to normal hospital care. This is largely because the helper recognizes emotions and provides personalized care of the individual, and the process involves less artificial bodily interventions. Midwives are less likely to treat a mother and unborn child with a "Let's get 'er done!" attitude.

There have been many so-called advances in Christian history designed to swiftly generate large numbers of conversions. In many of these cases, repentance is superficial and something is substituted for baptism.⁵ Observers are unable to tell if they witnessed new births or stillborns. Our family of churches began with an outstanding ability to inspire faith, repentance and baptism. Increasingly, during the nineties, the gospel train was derailed with too many baptisms that happened prematurely, fueled by the development of wrong motives. Our desire is to once again see one of the greatest aspirations of evangelism be realized—witnessing that which God does in the life of another when we play our supporting role.

The Spirit consummates his word in the hearts of sinners through our testimony. Our role is improving our testimony (2 Tim 4.16) and our ability to carefully handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2.16). The responsibility of faith and repentance belongs to the hearer. The Holy Spirit will take over from there.

If you are like me, you sometimes get a new operating system for your computer and wish they had left well enough alone. When were first given the New Birth 1.0 in scripture, it was virus free. We don't need to upgrade to another means of renewal. Rather we should reclaim and proclaim the original rite of passage into the new life.

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5. Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 153, where he bemoans the fact that men replace God's mark of identity, which is baptism, with something they decide is better.