

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

The Necessity of Regeneration

Written by Bob DeWaay

“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; . . . For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith.”

(1John 5:1a, 5:4)

Biblical Christianity is not merely one of many competing religious philosophies, nor is it merely a system of belief and practice that will hopefully make one a better person. Biblical Christianity is an intimate relationship with God through the person of Jesus the Messiah. To be a Christian, a person must be born of God. This “new birth” is spiritual regeneration. The Holy Spirit indwells and gives new life to the people who by faith entrust their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Most evangelicals know this; it is primarily what makes them “evangelical” (one who believes the “evangel” - “gospel”). However, the danger is that this essential truth and experience become a cliché or a slogan rather than a powerful, life changing, ongoing reality. John makes the matter profound and practical. The one born of God does not continue to practice sin (**1John 3:9**), does practice righteousness (**1John 2:29**), loves God and others (**1John 4:7**), believes that Jesus is the Messiah (**1John 5:1**) and overcomes the world (**1John 5:4**). Clearly such a person's life has been radically changed.

An Experience That Begins a Process

Many people answer “yes” to the question, “have you been born again?”¹ However, some individuals who have none of the signs of having been born of God that John delineated can point to a

“born again” experience. Many concerned Christian parents hope to arrange for their children to have a born-again experience at camp or church so that they can know that their children will be with them in heaven. It is good that we want our children to be born of God. If, however, a one time emotional experience that was carefully orchestrated using Christian peer pressure and the dynamics of group motivational techniques is substituted for a life truly dependent upon Jesus Christ, we might end up with pagans who think they are Christian.

When I was first apprehended by Christ in July of 1971, I began to witness of my faith to my best friend. He had been living with no more indication of the work of Christ in his life than I had. We were living the sinful lifestyles of most of the other college students of our era. Yet when I was born again and began to share with him about it, he replied, “I was born again when I was twelve - I went forward at an altar call and was baptized; I know I am saved.” I was taken aback. He made no indication of desire to serve God or even remotely concerned himself about God's will. The hunger for sanctification was absent. I did not know what more to say to him; but I knew that the regenerating power of Christ in my life would not allow me to go on living for self. We went our separate ways.

The apostle John more than any other Biblical writer spoke of being born of God and its significance. The Greek tenses that John used in **1John** help us understand his meaning. In all five instances when John writes of being born of God in his first epistle (sometimes using a verb, sometimes a participle) he uses the perfect tense - “having been born of God.” This indicates an action in the past that continues to exist in its finished results.

An example of the perfect tense is the word of Jesus on the cross, “it is finished,” - *“tetelestai”* (**John 19:30**). The

crucifixion of our Lord was an event in time the influence of which continues to exist in its finished results throughout the ages. Jesus did not mean, “it's all over now, that's it.” He exclaimed that His redemptive mission had reached its point of completion, the results of which would go on for eternity. Leon Morris comments, “This is not the moan of the defeated, nor the sigh of patient resignation. It is the triumphant recognition that He has now fully accomplished the work He came to do.”² The finished work of Christ on the cross is the ongoing basis of our salvation.

Having been born of God is a state of being that began at a point in the past and continues to be true. It means that the a lost sinner who had been alienated from the life of God was regenerated and continues to live as a Holy Spirit indwelt child of God. This means that salvation is an accomplished fact and sanctification is a consistent, progressive experience. We cannot continually and persistently live in sin if we are truly born of God. John wrote, “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (**1John 3:9**). The Greek tense here for “sin” is the present indicative - continuing action. John is not saying that a Christian cannot possibly commit a sin (**1John 2:1** disproves that idea), but that he cannot keep sinning as if nothing had happened.

This means that being born again is not the same as belonging to a certain denomination, having gone forward at an altar call, or having an emotional response to an evangelical message. It is far more profound than any of these. It means that the Holy Spirit indwells and regenerates a person who no longer lives as a self-centered, alienated sinner. It means that Christ is the center of one's life and that the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit will not just leave us to our own devices.

Many years ago I heard a Chinese pastor explain **1John 3:9** to someone who was struggling to understand it. He said, “if we are born of God and then sin,

we feel very badly. We cannot keep sinning because it grieves us and we must get to God and repent.” We are regenerated by the **Holy Spirit** and He will work holiness into our lives. John says he “abides” in the one born of God. In **John 3:4-8** Jesus explained that being born again was to be born of the Holy Spirit. The Bible shows that this is the most important determinate in one's life. I am afraid that many of us do not take it seriously enough. We begin in the Spirit and sadly, like the Galatians, think that we can be perfected by the flesh (**Galatians 3:3**).

The Effects of Regeneration

1John 5:1a says, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” Interestingly, “believes” is a present participle. All the believing ones have been born of God. Those who are regenerate continue to believe and trust in the person of Jesus Christ. That Jesus is “the Christ” (which means “the anointed One”) signifies His Messianic work and the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises as the Hope of Israel. John instructed us to test the spirits by examining their confession of Christ as the Incarnate Son of God (**1John 4:1-3**). Many cultists claim to be born of God and believe in Jesus, yet they deny Christ's deity or His humanity. Thus they fail the test. Jesus the Messiah is fully human, came in a literal, physical body (see **1John 1:1-3**) and is also the pre-existent, eternal God (see **John 1:1-3**).

Those who are born of God affirm these truths about Jesus the Messiah and cannot be persuaded by any means to deny them. Over the centuries, many Christians have suffered torture and death rather than deny their Lord. Nothing is more important to us than our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Regenerate people abide in Christ and always want to both know Him better relationally and know more about Him Biblically. Those who deny are the antichrists: “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.” (**1John 2:22,23**) It is troubling

that some who claim to be born again care so little about the doctrine of Christ. If they seriously distort the Biblical doctrine about the person of Christ, they belie their claims to being born again.

Perhaps the slogan “born-again” has been so misused in popular American jargon that many falsely think that they are. It is often used merely to designate a more conservative version of Christianity as compared to liberalism, or to mean simply “one who has a new beginning” (like a baseball player who comes back later in his career after an injury and does well). Born again means to some that a person holds to certain political views. Perhaps it means to many that they had a religious experience at some point in their life that had something to do with “Jesus” whether or not they know who He really is. None of these definitions fit the Biblical one.

The apostle John was careful to distinguish that which is born of God and that which is not. One's relationship to and teaching about the person of Christ is the key issue. The Gnostic heretics of the first centuries failed on these points and were not to be considered born of God. If we follow in their steps, we also fail the test. The evidences of regeneration are a correct belief in the doctrine of Christ, a relationship of love and trust with Him, and a life that shows victory over sin because of the work of God. John said, “By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit” (**1John 4:13**).

Regeneration & the Holy Spirit

The gift of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is central to the spiritual reality of regeneration. An effect of the Fall was the alienation of the entire human race from the life of God. All humans are born after the flesh in the likeness of Adam as he was after the fall. This means that we are born as fallen sinners, needing redemption. Spirituality is not a process of natural generation, but of supernatural regeneration. Missing this point has been the tragedy of much

of church history.

For centuries, it was thought that if some process was devised by which parents could insure that their children were Christian and a part of the church, then the church would grow and prosper. The problem is, for such a system to be guaranteed to work, it must be in the hands of man. Humans do not have the power to make others regenerate. That is why, for example, Christianity spread by the edge of the sword is a distortion of what Christ called, “My church.” Historian Justo Gonzalez writes of Charlemagne's campaigns against the Frisians and Saxons, “Repeatedly, Charlemagne invaded their territory and forced them to submit, only to have them rebel again as soon as he was away. Charlemagne resolved to drown rebellion in blood and the waters of baptism. Those who proved intractable were slaughtered. The rest were forced to accept baptism.”³

Does a forced baptism make a person regenerate? Sometimes, a “Christianized” culture with cathedrals, priests, and

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the customs of medieval Christianity was successfully introduced by military force. Once introduced, it is much easier for future generations to grow up “Christian” since children can be subjected to baptism without their willingness much easier than adults. Does any of this make a person born of the Spirit? I do not believe that there is any process, no matter how innocuous, whereby an individual or group of individuals can make another person become regenerate.

Jesus said that one must be born of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God, the third Person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is not a “force” to be manipulated by magical processes, called up by incantations, or imparted by religious or magical activities that bind Him to enter another person. Simon Magi thought that this was the case (see **Acts 8**), hoping to pay money for the power to impart the Holy Spirit. This pagan view of things was

firmly rejected by Peter. The Holy Spirit, as the person of God, is sovereign. He does what He wills and is not controlled or manipulated by the whims of humans. He can neither be forced upon people at the edge of the sword nor cleverly tricked into them through modern marketing technique.

Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus comes and abides in His people. Jesus told His disciples, “*And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*” (**John 14:16-18**). The world cannot receive the Holy Spirit. Therefore all the techniques and ideas the world offers about success that the church might be tempted to borrow to fill its pews can never give anyone the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

Regeneration as the Work of God

We no longer force people to become Christians as Charlemagne tried to; but we do try to entice them one way or the other. David Wells comments;

The church can offer handy child care to weary parents, intellectual stimulation to the restless video generation, a feeling of family to the lonely and dispossessed - and, indeed, lots of people come to churches for these reasons. But neither Christ nor his truth can be marketed by appealing to consumer interest, because the premise of all marketing is that the consumer's need is sovereign, that the customer is always right, and this is precisely what the gospel insists cannot be the case.⁴

Paul said, “*For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.*” (**1Corinthians 1:21**)

We need to face the reality that God has chosen the method of preaching the message of a crucified and resurrected

Messiah to save those who believe. The regenerating power of the Holy Spirit does not come through any device of man. Unregenerate Christianity ought to be an oxymoron, yet history is such that it is a problem to be dealt with. A religion exists which goes by the name of Christianity and at least superficially acknowledges some facts about Jesus; but belonging to it is not the same as being born again by the Holy Spirit.

Paul explains the basis of regeneration:

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (**Titus 3:5-7**)

This is, has been, and will be true for all who become joined to Christ and a part of His church. We do not make this happen for ourselves, our children, or anyone else by any process of man. It is a matter of promise and faith, not genetics or national heritage (see **Romans 9:6-8**). What we do is preach the gospel and live on the face of the earth as witnesses to the truth of Jesus Christ. Those who believe the gospel and repent will live spiritually.

The Holy Spirit makes those who are dead spiritually become alive to God through His indwelling presence. He gives us the gift of eternal life and begins the work of conforming us to the image of Christ. God created humans in His image; but this image is marred and distorted because of sin. We lived as those who, according to Paul, “. . . were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (**Ephesians 2:12**). The good news is: “*But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*” (**Ephesians 2:13**). This is not the work of man, but the work of God.

Woe to us if we become so clever and successful in our marketing and management strategies that we are able to build

a “church” that sounds, looks, and feels like a church only that it is made up of the unregenerate. The Psalmist said that unless God builds the house, the builders labor in vain (**Psalms 127:1**). This can happen to those of us who believe in being born again if we relegate the regenerating power of the Spirit to a one time experience that no longer has any meaning or reality. If so, we would have good reason to doubt the validity of that experience. As John wrote, we are those who “have been and continue to be” (an attempt to give the sense of the Greek perfect tense in English) born of God and therefore overcome the world.

Regeneration and the World

“*For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith*” (**1John 5:4**). Regeneration is by faith, not works. Those who believe the truth of the gospel are at odds with the world - its beliefs, behavior, purpose, and motivations. When John uses the word “world” (Greek *kosmos*⁵) in this sense he means the world in its collective alienation and rebellion against God and His Word. Those who are born of God are immediately placed at odds with the fallen world system. It is the realm of temptation and doubt that always battles against our faith and it is the devil's alternative to depending on God. The world is the arena of idolatry.

John warns us about this because he had already witnessed false teachers misleading the saints and portraying a “christ” and faith that was in keeping with the world and its lusts (see **1John 2:14-26**). The battle is for the hearts and minds of humans and only the power of the Holy Spirit can give victory to God's people. The world offers the fulfillment of all our “perceived” needs: “*the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life*” (see **1John 2:16**). This encompasses pleasure, possessions and power - what we can experience, what we can have and what we can be out side of submission to God.

The idols of pleasure, possessions and power are attractive because they offer self-fulfillment now - an escape from the spiritual battle through surrender. The alternative is found in **1John 2:17**: “*And*

the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever." The Holy Spirit empowers those who are born of God to believe and live with different purposes and allegiances. The victory that overcomes the world is faith because the person of faith believes in God's Messiah who said "it is finished." We believe the promises of God and do not consider eternal life with the One whom we love to be worth compromising for the pleasures of a dying world.

This is not true because of religiosity, an "holier than thou" attitude, naivety, unreality, or cultural conditioning. It is true because of regeneration. If a person is not truly born of God, he cannot see the kingdom of God (**John 3:3**) because the world fills all his horizons and obscures the spiritually discerned purposes of God.

It makes no sense to the unregenerate to give up pride, pleasure and possessions for the hope of an eternity in the presence of the Lord. It makes no sense to have as one's purpose: "to do the will of God" when so many other vistas remain to be explored.

The Chasm Between the Church and the Sinful World

There is a chasm between the purposes of God and those of the world; but it is not always obvious to the undiscerning. David Wells offers this meaningful description of the "world" that John warns is the enemy of the church:

This "world," then, is the way in which our collective life in society (and the culture that goes with it) is organized around the self in substitution for God. It is life characterized by self-righteousness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-promotion, with a corresponding distaste for the self-denial proper to union with Christ.⁶

The world in this sense and the church as the "called out ones," those who are born of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, are incompatible. When John says, "*We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one*" (**1John 5:19**) he is articulating

this incompatibility.

I am convinced that this chasm that must exist between the beliefs and practices of the church and the world has sometimes been unwittingly bridged by perhaps well meaning church leaders who lost sight of the Biblical doctrine of regeneration. An organization carried on by the children and grand-children of the regenerate founders of a movement can exist for different purposes than originally envisioned.

It was in such a church that I was raised and told (by a pastor) at the age of sixteen that the Bible was mythological, that we could not know about such things as heaven and hell, and that our purpose was to make the world a more pleasant place for people to live in. If this were true, there was nothing to be called out of since the church was merely a subset of the world.

I was a "Christian" because of heritage and the blessing of having been born into a kind and loving Christian family (for which I am exceedingly thankful) but I was unregenerate. By the time I was in college, I could reason that there must be a God because of the evidence I saw in the creation, but I acknowledged no reason that He should have anything to say to me about the purpose and manner in which I would live my life.

It was on July 18th, 1971 that I became so confronted by the Christ I had ignored and the reality of the Holy Spirit that I confessed my sinful and lost condition and believed the Gospel. I have never been the same since. God did what religious training, social conditioning, higher education, and occasional good intentions never did - he transformed a lost sinner into a person born anew. It was only then that the chasm between the world and God's purposes became apparent.

I am not unique. Though it is not always possible or necessary to point to a time and a place, everyone who would be rescued from this perishing world must be born again. The good news is that it has nothing to do with where we came from and everything to do with where we are going and with whom!

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End Notes

1. 32% of Americans claim to be born again, see David F. Wells, God in the Wasteland, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 78.

2. Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 815.

3. Justo L. Gonzalez, The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 1984) 267.

4. op. cit., Wells, 82.

5. see the entry under "*kosmos*" in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Gerhard Kittel, Editor; Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 883-895 for an explanation of the three meanings and the theological significance of this word.

6. op. cit., Wells; 40.

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