

When the Gospel Gets Under Your Skin
Christlikeness That Is More Than Skin Deep

For the past four weeks we've been talking about walking with God, living by faith, *For we live by faith, not by sight...* 2 Cor. 5:7. Now, the final stage of faith is attainment of character. God said to Abraham ... *walk before me and be thou perfect* Gen. 17:1; that is, walk closely with me and my perfect and holy character will get into you. The walk of faith has a purpose. It's called "sanctification."

We all pick up the mannerisms and characteristics of our families, without thinking about it. In the next several weeks we'll be talking about the characteristics of God's true family, those who have been born into a new life in the Spirit, by virtue of the spiritual action of Jesus on the Cross. This is about the regeneration of our souls, returning us to the spiritual relationship we had with God before sin entered the world and our lives. It's about Christlike character becoming more than skin deep. It all starts with a foundational experience that brings the Spirit deep into our souls.

Foundational Experience

If there are any understandings, any doctrines, of the Christian faith that are foundational they must be: justification and the new birth. For without understanding these two truths one can hardly comprehend what it means to be a Christian. Justification refers to that great work which God has done for us, in forgiving our sin. New birth refers to the great work God does in us, by renewing our fallen nature.¹ In actuality these two things happen at once. The moment we are redeemed from sin, that is, justified by God's grace in offering Jesus, in that moment we are also given a new birth in the Spirit. Our usual experience tells us that we first perceive our forgiveness in Jesus, by his paying the price of sin on the Cross. Then we realize that His Spirit is at work in our hearts.

If you grew up in my era and were anywhere near Christian circles you have likely heard the term "born again Christian." What it generally referred to was some sort of experience whereby a person realized that his or her sins truly were forgiven through Jesus Christ and they found a new lease on life and, hopefully, began to live as an earnest and genuine follower of Jesus, shaped by the Holy Spirit. This concept of "born again" is not new to Christianity but is found in Scripture and throughout Christian history. Unfortunately, in modern America, it became a term used to identify one as belonging to the "right" kind of Christian group. A changed life did not always follow.

However, in John Wesley we have the example that became the model for Methodism. He said of his experience that his “heart was strangely warmed.” Subsequently he became much more than a nominal or “institutional Christian.” He further experienced and shared with all England (and beyond) the new life and his growth in Christ. This new, growing-in-Christ life is what we’ll be talking about in coming weeks. It begins with a new birth, which Wesley well explained in his sermon “The New Birth.” The teaching of this sermon remains as relevant today as it was in 1748. Let me walk through these thoughts now.

Must One Be “Born Again?”

Is there really a solid basis for this concept or doctrine of Christian faith? The answer is “yes,” it actually has its origins in creation itself, God’s eternal purposes, and the meaning of the gospel. Scripture tells us that God created humankind in His own image: God said, *“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...”* Gen. 1:26. This means God made man in His natural image, immortal, a spiritual being with understanding, free will, and various affections. He made man in His political image, the governor of this lower world with dominion over creation. But most importantly He made man in His moral image *...created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness...* as St. Paul says (Eph. 4:24).

When he came from the hands of his Creator man was guided by love in all his thoughts, words and actions and he was just and true and spotless and pure, just as God is. Otherwise God would not have been able to pronounce man (and the rest of creation) as “very good.”

Though made in God’s image (and all that implies), humans were not made unchangeable. Humans were created with the ability to stand, but also with the possibility to fall. God Himself warned them – that is, Adam and Eve – of this possibility. Nevertheless, they fell to temptation, willfully disobeying God, thereby declaring that they would no longer have God rule over them. Rather they chose to be ruled by their own will, that they would not seek their happiness in God but in the world and the works of their own hands. The immorality and wrong-doing that is so prevalent among humans is the symptom of the sin-sickness within. Instead of a God-created disposition, humanity is now born with the cancerous disposition of self-realization – “I am my own god.” In that initial moment of temptation humankind lost the life of God. All the attributes of God were extinguished and rather than driven by love, they were driven by fear *...and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden,* Gen. 3:8. They became unholy as well as unhappy. Humankind sank into pride and self-will, the image of the devil. They were consumed by sensual appetites and desires, the image of the beasts that perish.

“In Adam all died,” all of humankind, descended from that first man, now enters the world spiritually dead, void of the life of God and all the holiness and

righteousness that is the image of God. To restore the full of image of God, then, one must be reborn of the Spirit of God.

How Is One Born Again?

So, if one must be reborn to be restored to God's image, how does this happen? Many of you know that I recently became a grandfather for the second time. I look at photos of his cute little face and tiny body and it reminds me how wonderful, how beautiful, how precious is life. Before he was born he had eyes, but did not see; he had ears, but heard only partially. His senses were imperfect. He had no knowledge of the world. Yet as soon as he was born his senses began to operate properly. He began to see the light and various objects around him. He now breathes and lives in a manner completely different from how he did before. We count his days beginning with his entry into this world.

It's much the same with being born anew of the Spirit of God. In the natural state, before a person is born of God, in a spiritual sense he has eyes but sees not. Before a person is born anew of the Spirit, he/she has no true knowledge of the things of God, for his/her spiritual senses are locked up. Such a person is living yet still dead spiritually – and not a vital Christian regardless of church attendance or acts of charity. That is why Jesus said: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God,”* John 3:3.

As soon as one is reborn of the Spirit the eyes of his understanding are opened. The One who commanded light to shine out of the darkness now shines in one's heart. His ears become capable of hearing the inward voice of God saying, “Fear not, your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more.” When once a man or woman is born anew of God, as Jesus describes, they enter a spiritual realm and begin to understand the things of God. Let us not forget that the spiritual state of a man or woman has a tremendous impact on his/her living in this world. The new birth is the necessary beginning of that journey toward to the original, full, and living relationship with our Creator.

What Is The Goal Of The New Birth?

Simply put the goal of rebirth in Christ is to conform us to the holiness of Christ. The new birth of which the Bible teaches is the gateway to holiness and a restoration of the complete image of God in us. So, what is holiness? First let's consider what it is not. True holiness is not simply external religion or outward religious observances, no matter how often or how long performed. We've said it here before: attending church for many years does not make one born anew in the Spirit of God, just as going to McDonald's for years does not make one a hamburger.

Gospel holiness, that the Bible speaks of, is no less than the restored image of God implanted in the heart. It is so that, as the apostle says, *...the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind*

toward each other that Christ Jesus had, Romans 15:5. It is a disposition that becomes our new nature to love all men and women as does God, with mercy and long-suffering. This holiness allows us to present our souls and bodies, all our thoughts, words, and deeds, in purity before our Heavenly Creator. This cannot commence without the power of God who brings us from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lest we think this holiness is just an option for believers, listen to what it says in the Bible: *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord, Hebrews 12:14.* Jesus himself said, *“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again,”* John 3:3. The new birth is necessary to salvation. The Bible does not say that God punished the human race for one man’s sin, but the disposition to sin entered the human race through one man. Then another man put away that disposition for all humanity. On the cross Jesus redeemed the human race from the possibility of damnation through the heredity of sin. The condemnation is not that I am born with the heredity of sin, but if when I realize Jesus Christ came to deliver me from it, I refuse to let Him do so.² Oh sure, we can flatter ourselves and say, “I’m as good or better than my unbelieving neighbors and I attend church and take the sacraments.” Yet, “just as good” is not good enough, for human efforts cannot attain to God’s holiness. Doubtless there have been thousands of opportunities of doing good which we have passed by, yet for which God will hold us accountable if we insist on our own will.

Even in this life humans cannot really be happy if not holy. The reason is easily seen: all unholy dispositions are unhappy ones. Malice, hatred, envy, jealousy, revenge, all create a hell within the mind and heart. Every desire which is not attuned to the will of God pierces us with sorrows. Sin, pride, self-will and idolatry are sources of misery. As long as these remain in the soul, there is no rest or contentment. In the coming weeks we’ll talk about how this contentment of new life in the Spirit can be nurtured.

One Thing Is Needful

All the religious rituals, practices, study, or attendance cannot take the place of the new birth. This Jesus made clear. New life in Christ amounts to the regeneration of God’s disposition deep within, replacing our disposition to make a god of oneself. John Wesley urged all Christians: if you have not already experienced this inward work of God, let this be your continual prayer: “Lord, add this to all Your blessings: let me be ‘born again.’” Take away whatever may seem good to you, be it reputation, fortune, friends, or health, only give me this: to be “born of the Spirit!” Let me be born “not of the corruptible seed, but incorruptible, by the Word of God, which lives and abides forever.” And then let me daily “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!”³

¹ John Wesley, "The New Birth" (1748), *John Wesley's Sermons, An Anthology*, Outler & Heitzenrater, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 336.

² Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, October 5.

³ John Wesley, "The New Birth," 345.