

Who Is Your Mother?

In a previous lesson we inquired as to the identity of your spiritual father, whether it is God or the Holy Spirit. We concluded that they are one and the same. In speaking of the birth of Jesus, we noted that he was born of the Holy Spirit and his mother, Mary. Can there be a birth without a mother? The answer is evident. Then, granting that you were born again of the Holy Spirit of God, who filled the role of mother in that process?

I can imagine seeing you looking seriously puzzled, if you have never been asked that question before.. But now some of you are shifting your eyes away. A thought is coming to you that you do not want to acknowledge. You do not want to hear me say it and are ready to explain away the words of Jesus, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”* (John 3:5).

Enough of my teasing. I hope that you will be willing to give some real reevaluation to this very basic teaching of Jesus which has been so distorted, abused, and rejected. Am I so foolish as to say the Holy Spirit actually inseminates water? Am I going to propose that in baptism one spirit is annihilated and another is born replacing it? Or is it true that a sinful spirit is so changed in baptism that it is compared to a new birth? None of the above. I do believe, however, looking up from my low rung of the scholarship ladder, that Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus is one of the least understood and most misapplied passages in the Scriptures. Even if you have long since graduated from such simplistic teachings, will you please consider this elementary lesson? Thank you.

In the time of Noah when the world was hopelessly mired in sin, God cleansed the earth by a flood of water by which he saved Noah and his family. Peter wrote that it was when *“God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.”* (1 Peter 3:20). Even though literal terms are used, we can all recognize figurative meanings. No, flood waters could not wash away sins, neither was it the literal earth that was sinful. We can see the figure of a rebirth of the earth though no former element was annihilated nor was a new element created. We can also describe Noah’s new life in a new earth as a new birth. Yet in all this God made use of literal water. Noah believed God before, during, and after the whole event, being saved in a physical sense from drowning and in a spiritual sense from sin by the principle of continued obedience of faith rather than faith at a point in time.

God had a chosen people into which he was to develop a nation as He had promised to Abraham. Instead of them being a nation, however, we see them as an enslaved people in Egypt. You remember the unforgettable story of their escape from Egypt. Their faith led them to follow Moses and the fire / cloud of God’s presence through the Red Sea. After they crossed that body of water, they were free -- a new nation. Centuries later Paul pointed to that event as a type of how God made those enslaved in sin into a spiritual nation. *“I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all*

passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.. .” (1 Cor.10:1). Thus they became a new-born nation in a figurative birth of the water and the Spirit. The water was literal, and God let it be the defining line of their salvation from Egypt though not the cause of it.

Throughout the OT record, veiled prophecies pointed to the fulfillment of the spiritual promise to Abraham through his seed who was later revealed to be Jesus. But the Jews expected this Messiah, the Anointed One, to restore their fallen earthly kingdom. When Jesus entered his ministry, it is disappointing but not surprising that they soon wanted to recognize him as the king to restore the kingdom. His temptations in the wilderness were to use his powers to rule an earthly kingdom and thus avoid the cross. Jesus labored to convince them that he was to be King of a spiritual kingdom which was not of this world like the Jews anticipated. He was not rejected and crucified for trying to restore the earthly throne of David but because he sought to restore mankind to God.. How sad it is that disciples of our time still think that Jesus came to restore the earthly kingdom, was deterred from it, and will come back to Palestine to accomplish it!

John the Baptist, and then Jesus, came preaching, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near*” and calling for baptism. The Jews were familiar with proselyte baptism through which a Gentile would identify with and commit himself to God’s chosen nation. John and Jesus were calling for spiritual change and commitment to the kingdom of heaven, though at that time its nature was not made clear to them. Through John and other early disciples, word was spread about the land that the King, the Messiah, had come.

A devout ruler named Nicodemus heard about this and decided to check it out. Evidently, he came to Jesus thinking of the benefits of his birthright as a Jew which would entitle him to all the benefits, promises, and prerogatives of the restored kingdom. Being a ruler he might be given some seat of power in the restored kingdom.

Here I adapt from *Free To Accept*, Chapter 27, “Nicodemus In Context” (Read more there): The recorded conversation is abrupt, but surely they had talked at length about what was on Nicodemus’ mind, or at least Jesus knew Nicodemus’ thoughts. So Jesus explains to him, “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*” In effect he is saying, “Nicodemus, if the approaching kingdom were a restoration of the nationalistic kingdom of Israel, your citizenship in it would be assured because of your physical birth and circumcision. But I am speaking of a spiritual kingdom. You must abandon Jewish nationalism with its hopes and expectations and become a proselyte into a different kingdom. You must undergo a baptism declaring your change and giving public commitment to a spiritual reign of God. It will demand such an abrupt and complete change that it will be like dying and being born again. Metaphorically, it will be a new birth of the water of proselyte baptism and the working of the Spirit of God. You will no longer be counted as a Jew, nor will your Jewish heritage any longer offer special blessings. You will give up fleshly Israel for spiritual Abraham. Being a Jewish ruler will give you no special prerogatives in the kingdom of God.”

Whereas, in the claims of national Israel, the birth of an Israelite was fully visible and could be attested to by fleshly circumcision, the birth of the Spirit would be as invisible as the wind. Even as the effects of the wind may be discerned, though, the affected fruit of the spirit may be seen and verified. It will be a circumcision of the heart (Col. 2:9-14).

And what of us Gentiles? In the same setting (Col. 1:11-14) Paul wrote, “*May you be strengthened with all power, ... giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints of light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*” Paul here alludes to this metaphor of birth through proselyte baptism in speaking of our transition from fleshly to spiritual expectations.

The conversation with Nicodemus was not primarily about what he must do to be saved. As an upright Jew serving under the Law, if he had died the night before, he surely would have been among those redeemed by Jesus’ atonement. God sent Jesus “*to redeem those who were under the law*” (Gal. 4f). After Pentecost he could have claimed that redemption immediately even as 3000 others did that day by change of allegiance. Neither Nicodemus nor Cornelius were called upon to repent like the Jews on Pentecost. They were both devout, God-fearing men, but Peter was addressing the very ones who had called for Jesus’ crucifixion earlier, and he warned them to save themselves from the imminent judgment coming upon that rebellious generation (Acts 2:40).

For the few of you who did not walk out on me at the suggestion that the new birth is figurative instead of literal, let me add a bit. Here I adapt from *Free As Sons*, Chapter 3, “*Are We Really Born Again?*” (Read more there.): Numerous references speak of being born again, being born anew, being raised, being made alive, being regenerated, becoming a new creature, receiving newness of life, and putting on the new man. In this transaction one becomes a son, or child, of God which, in analogy with natural birth, would indicate that a new life comes into existence. These expressions seem to indicate that a new spirit-being is initiated into life replacing an old, dead, discarded one.

If a person dies literally and is born again literally, then he has experienced being two literal persons! Talk about Nicodemus being confused! If we think in terms of a *literal spiritual death* and a *literal spiritual rebirth* – two oxymorons in one breath ☹ -- we are letting our mind play tricks on us!

Metaphors are only one of the many literary devices used in scripture. A metaphor is a figure of speech where a word literally denoting one idea is used in place of another to suggest likeness or analogy between them, like Jesus saying he was a door, a vine, or a shepherd. So, an abrupt, sanctifying change of life is referred to as a new birth. The change initiated by faith which produces repentance confirmed by baptism is like a person putting off one life and putting on another. An old identity is repudiated and a new one is established with Christ involving new desires, aims, goals, and purposes.

The physical body is not changed in this conversion process. Each organ still functions as before. The body is still responsive to the same desires, instincts, and inclinations. Although there is help in controlling the appetites, the alcoholic is still tempted by alcohol, and the sexual interest of the lustful is not diminished by some act of God in the new birth.

In the new birth personal traits are unchanged. The person has the same knowledge, memory, experience, self-image, abilities, and emotions as before baptism. While it is true that the convert will have a new determination and added help to use and control these, these elements were not refined and changed by an act of the Spirit in the person. We, not the Spirit, must “put to death” our sinful nature (Col. 3:5). In the conversion process the old, sinful person is not perfected by an act of God but, through the grace of God applying the merit of Jesus, the person is accounted as pure and innocent as though righteousness were actually accomplished in him. Because of the sinner’s faith, righteousness is imputed to him. He is justified by grace through faith rather than being transformed into a different kind of person by the Spirit.

If an actual, “literal” new birth (anything spiritual cannot be literal!) is required for inclusion in the heavenly kingdom, then what of Enoch, Abraham, and Daniel? Will that kingdom have some inhabitants who were “born again” and some who were not?

There is no indication that the OT worthies underwent any sort of “conversion experience” or new birth making them children of God. From our vantage point we can look back and see that their righteousness was not achieved. Dying with their guilt, they “slept” in the hades world because their guilt still separated them from God. But when Jesus died, his atonement was applied to account them as righteous because of their faith. After Christ, the High Priest, presented his offering in the Holy of Holies, they were reconciled to God and brought to him by spiritual resurrection when Jesus returned at the fulfillment of the covenant of law, judging and dismantling the nation of Israel, receiving the firstfruits who had died since Pentecost, and inaugurating the spiritual reign in its fullness by delivering the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24).

So God used water in a process of giving a figurative rebirth of the earth and the race. He used water in the birth of his nation promised to Abraham. And he used water in the birth and increase of his spiritual kingdom. In a figurative sense, they all emerged from the womb of water through the power of the Spirit of God. Peter saw a type and fulfillment “..during the building of the ark, in which few, that is, eight persons were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, etc.” (1 Peter 3:20-21). Paul saw a type and fulfillment in the birth of the earthly kingdom and the spiritual kingdom in that “..our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea..” (1 Cor. 10:1). This was verified by Jesus in telling Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Although Nicodemus’ interest was in an earthly kingdom, Jesus pointed him to salvation in submitting to a spiritual

kingdom. He used a figurative term of a new birth because baptism of the Great Commission was not proclaimed until Pentecost.

Adding to this, Paul declared, “.. *he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit ..*” (Titus 3:5-6). Water has no efficacy, except as the word of God assigned to it, for he sanctified the church, “*having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word*” (Eph. 5:26). The Holy Spirit directed convicted believers to “*repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:38). Because the Spirit directed and authorized baptism, Paul could later write, “*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ..*” (1 Cor. 12:13). Peter speaks of “*having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth ... You have been born anew, not of perishable seed (physical insemination - ch) but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God*” (1Peter 1:22-23). Sinners became the church, having been cleansed “*by the washing of water with the word*” (Eph. 5:26). The word produces faith developing into the new birth.

What is salvation? It is not something put in a person and installed there. It is forgiveness of sins. Those forgiven comprise the church, Christ’s spiritual and figurative body. God chose to forgive involving the birth of water and the Spirit -- an unseen transaction of forgiveness in the mind of God marked by a visible emergence from literal water. Water is not the cause of forgiveness but it and baptism hold symbolic meanings. And it gives the obedient one a point in time from which to reckon his new life. That is God’s arrangement -- not mine nor that of a church. We allow for God to make exceptions to his rule but, since we know his rule, we must follow the rule instead of the exceptions.

Ridiculous? Far-fetched? Then who is your mother?

Naaman, commander of the army of Syria, was a leper. Through a captive maid, he was told of a prophet in Samaria who could cure him. With much pomp, luxurious gifts, and much money, he went to the king of Israel who felt mocked by expectations that he might heal a man. But Elisha sent word for Naaman to come to him. Naaman, with his pompous procession, went to Elisha’s house. Elisha didn’t even invite him in but sent a servant to tell him to go dip seven times in the Jordan river. Naaman started back home in a rage at such silliness. But a servant ventured to ask, “*My father, if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’? So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean*” (2 Kings 5). God offers gracious cleansing “*by the washing of water with the word.*” []

(Cecil Hook; January 2004)

