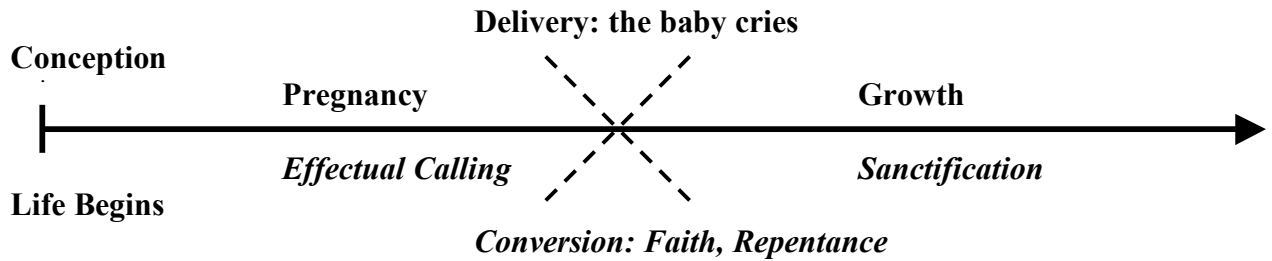


PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL BIRTH

John 3:1-8

PHYSICAL BIRTH



SPIRITUAL BIRTH--*REGENERATION*

What is effectual calling?

Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby:

*Convincing us of our sin and misery,
Enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and
Renewing our wills,*

*He doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ,
Freely offered to us in the Gospel.*

(Westminster Shorter Catechism, #31)

EXPLANATION OF THE NEW BIRTH USING THE "BIRTHLINE"

by Stephen E. Smallman

A. Remarks on John 3:1-8.

When told he must be "born again," Nicodemus immediately thought of physical birth. This was obviously deliberate. Jesus started with the known then moved to the unknown. "Spirit" is correctly a reference to the Holy Spirit. The new birth is not an inward reformation, but an actual supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit. The "birth by water" has several possible interpretations, but the main issue is the second birth, that which is "of the Spirit". "The Spirit gives birth to spirit" (NIV) is also a proper understanding of the Greek text although there is no capitalization in the Greek text. There is an article in the Greek -- "the Spirit."

Verse 7, "You must be born again," is significant in the practical application of this truth. This is not the issuance of a command. It is an indicative not an imperative statement that it is necessary for you (plural), i.e., anyone who will enter the kingdom, to be born again. A birth cannot be commanded. Therefore, the new birth is something the Spirit does to people; it is not something people do for themselves. It is not an act of cooperation. God acts in the human life where there was no life, and begets life. The Greek verb, gennaō is normally used in reference to the act of conception, not the act of birth itself. Jesus is saying that there must first be a work of the Spirit in your soul before we have life with God.

Verse 8 is one of the more sublime verses of all Scripture. It is a deliberate play on words for "wind" and "Spirit". Just as we do not know where the wind comes from, and only see the effects of the wind, not the wind itself, we must recognize that ultimately the new birth is a mystery of God at work in the human soul. We should not think that the new birth fits into a nice, neat, four step package.

Therefore, John 3:1-8 is not a discussion of conversion, but of a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. The human response of believing is later in the chapter, vv. 14-18. Regeneration and conversion go together, but they are not the same thing.

B. Parallels of physical with spiritual birth, using the "Birthline" diagram.

The work of God in the soul is hidden (although the effects are visible), but Jesus' analogy is extremely helpful in understanding the new birth. In particular it should be noted that the physical birth is really a process not a single event.

The key to the entire birth process is conception (note diagram). That which is conceived grows for about 9 months. A crossing then occurs (indicated by a dotted "X") from one phase of life to another phase of life. The baby has been alive for some time, but now it is time to "go public." It is essentially the same pattern with the life of a Christian. The critical moment in the work of salvation is the conception, when the Spirit implants spiritual life. The outward expression, or conversion, is the inevitable consequence of a work that God sovereignly initiated. It is very important to have a conscious sense of having trusted Christ, but Evangelicals have tended to make the experience of "accepting Christ," and even particular types of conversion experiences to be the totality of the new birth. In fact, conversion, or the act of trusting Christ, is a consequence, not a cause of the inner work of the Spirit. The work of God precedes the human response. The response we call conversion is indicated on the diagram by using a

dotted X instead of a solid one. Knowing we have "passed from death to life" is critically important, knowing precisely when is not so important. For many conversion includes many spiritual events and experiences.

The process of coming to a conscious faith once the work of God has begun is what is known in Scripture as "calling" or what in the Westminster Confession is "Effectual calling." It includes conviction of sin, enlightenment in the knowledge of Christ, and a changing of our desires to want Christ (cf. Sh. Cat. #31). Unlike a physical pregnancy whose length is fairly fixed, spiritual pregnancy goes on as long as it takes God to bring us to repentance. He uses family, the preaching of the Word, even suffering to bring us to this place. But once we finally come to faith, we can look back and see God's hand long before we believed. John Newton wrote of his experience of calling: *T'was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved, how precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.*

The old concept of the pastor as a "physician of the soul" or "curate" is particularly apt in describing the sensitivity required to know the right time to lead someone to faith. People mean well when they try to press others to pray the "sinner's prayer", with little sensitivity as to their spiritual readiness. But it must be asked if such attempts don't result in what might be called "spiritual abortions"--conversions without true preparation by the Spirit.

C. Summary and implications for witness.

Certain realities must be kept in mind as we try to faithfully share the Gospel with others:

1. God justifies people solely because of the work of Christ on the cross. This was accomplished 2000 years ago. But God the Father's saving love is not only what Christ accomplished, but that he also sends his Spirit to our dead spirits.
2. The Holy Spirit awakens one dead in sin and gives the gift of saving faith. Any presentation of the Gospel will fall on deaf ears until the Spirit begins to "call." For most people their "awakening" is very much like waking up from sleep—it doesn't happen immediately.
3. In the actual experience of coming to Christ, very few people have an adequate understanding of the work of the cross. The faith that is exercised to reach out to Christ is frequently based on very elementary knowledge. This can be seen in many Scriptural and contemporary examples of people coming to Christ.
4. Those who share the good news of the Gospel must be careful not to omit essential elements of the truth. At the same time it is vital to be sensitive to the realities of what is stated in #3. The beginnings of experiencing life in Christ should not be made to depend on understanding certain information, however true. (However people cannot truly come to Christ if they reject truths of the Gospel.) Life in Christ is a gift of pure grace, received by childlike faith, which is part of the gift. We come to believe in Jesus, however inadequately we may understand.
5. Spiritual growth of those who have begun with Christ is rooted in a deepening awareness of Jesus (the Gospels) and the cross (Romans). Assurance of salvation in Christ will come as new steps of understanding and obedience are taken. Do not talk people into assurance of faith, this is a witness of the Spirit.