UNDERSTANDING THE NEW BIRTH

Remarks on the Theology behind the "Birthline"

Stephen E Smallman
214 Brookdale Ct.; Dresher PA  19025
steve@birthlineministries.com
PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL BIRTH

John 3:1-8

PHYSICAL BIRTH

Conception

Delivery: the baby cries

Life Begins

Effectual Calling

Pregnancy

Sanctification

Growth

Conversion: Faith, Repentance

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)
UNDERSTANDING THE NEW BIRTH
Remarks on the Theology behind the "Birthline"

by Stephen E. Smallman
(Revised, February 2003)

I. Introduction

Several years ago I preached a sermon from Jesus' well-known conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, and attempted to explain the new birth in terms of how it is actually experienced. Listening to me that day were two members of the fledgling ministry, Prison Fellowship. After the service they approached me and asked if I would give that same message to a group of inmates who would be coming to town. I still remember how they expressed their request, "There is no group of people who are more evangelized than those in prison. They are exhorted over and over to 'get saved,' or 'give their hearts to Jesus'. BUT no one explains God's part in their getting saved. You just did, and we would like you to tell that to the inmates."

When I teach, I like to use visual aids. So when I prepared to talk to the Prison Fellowship group, I illustrated my teaching by drawing a simple diagram that drew a parallel between physical and spiritual birth, which I believe was Jesus' intention in John 3. On the most basic level, it points out that the critical "moment" in the wonder of birth is not the delivery of the baby, but the conception--whether that describes physical or spiritual birth. Little did I know that the refinements and implications of what we now call the "Birthline" would be a tool that would help numbers of people deepen their understanding of God's grace in their lives and, in turn, enable them to become much more sensitive and effective in their evangelism and pastoral work.

But the fact that something "works" on a practical level doesn't necessarily make it true. Therefore, I have tried to continually test my teaching not only in terms of biblical fidelity, but in terms of confessional standards and respected teachers of theology. I have appreciated the number of pastors and teachers who read the original version of this paper very carefully, and responded with very useful comments. Thus far, that testing has not only encouraged me to continue to develop the birthline paradigm, but also to appreciate that what I have been learning is nothing new. In my view, this is a restatement of matters that were carefully thought out by our fathers in the faith, but have been largely overlooked in our generation.

The heart of the matter in writing this is not theology proper. There is ample material available on the doctrines of salvation. The more I read on this subject, the more I appreciate how much careful thinking has been done, and the more cautious I am about the use of undefined terminology. I will try to cite many of these excellent resources as I work through the birthline. But what has been lost, in my view, is the skillful pastoral application of these doctrines in the "cure of souls". In the language of the older teachers (here I cite Archibald Alexander and Abraham Kuyper, whose works have been the most helpful in my study), the pastor was known as the "physician of the soul". Using the same imagery, I speak of our ministry of bringing people to Christ as being that of a "midwife rather than a salesman". But both the physician and midwife are skilled people who have given serious attention to understanding the process of birth
and growth. Those of us involved in the sacred task of dealing with the birth and growth of peoples' souls must likewise give these matters serious attention.

The discussion that follows is an attempt to provide a biblical and theological basis for the use of the birthline paradigm in pastoral ministry. I will not try to discuss every detail and will also use endnotes to provide more extensive citations. I encourage the reader to take the extra time and ponder these sources of wisdom. As I have continued reading on this topic, I have been greatly enriched, and so I keep adding these resources to the "Endnote Archive" so the body of the paper will not get too large.\textsuperscript{2}

My intention, as I noted above, is to search for practical wisdom that grows out of sound theology and exegesis. In that respect, I feel that I have a distinct advantage writing not as an academic, but as a pastor who is putting these concepts to work in personal conversations, teaching, and preaching.

As ardent "pro-lifers" we insist that recognition be given to the reality of human life before the baby "goes public." My passion is that we do the same in the spiritual realm, and give far more attention to the presence of spiritual life before it "goes public."

II. Discussion of the Issues

A. The Birthline as a paradigm of regeneration.

It would be well to begin by studying the diagram at the front of this paper, and then note the terminology I will be explaining. \textit{Regeneration} is the word for the \textit{process} of spiritual birth, but I will make a case for also considering it as equivalent to the conception of the child--the moment when spiritual life begins. \textit{Effectual calling}, then, is a period of spiritual gestation or pregnancy; \textit{conversion} is the actual delivery, or "going public" of the baby; and \textit{sanctification} is the spiritual equivalent of the child growing to maturity. It is very important to note that there are no universally accepted definitions for the terms I am using. Through my reading I have been impressed how important it is to understanding the author's definition before coming to conclusions (the use of \textit{conversion}, for example is particularly elusive). I will therefore try to define my use of the terms, but also point out how authors can use the same \textit{idea} even if their actual words are different.

However, before trying to understand the parts, there is a vitally important conclusion that comes from viewing the birthline as a whole. It is the obvious truth that salvation is a \textit{process not an just an event}.\textsuperscript{3} I call this "obvious," but I have learned that for many of us, it is not easy to move away from the grand event of "accepting Jesus," toward an ongoing "work" of the Spirit in the life from the "cradle (or before) to the grave" (and after). Once we do, we begin to come to a much more biblical and practically applicable understanding of salvation.

It is also very important to keep in mind my use of the term \textit{paradigm}. That means the process of human birth provides a very helpful model or pattern for understanding what is ultimately an invisible and supernatural process (John 3:8, \textit{As the wind blows where it wills, ... so is everyone born of the Spirit}).\textsuperscript{4} There are other explanations in Scripture for the miracle of regeneration\textsuperscript{5} so many pictures of the new life in Christ are not of birth. Even when using this paradigm, not every experience of the new birth will match up in every detail, and we should not
try to force it into this mold. Nevertheless, when I have presented the birthline idea over and over, I have found that most Christian people considered it very valuable in helping to illuminate their experience with God.

B. The Application of Redemption.

The birthline explains what is called the Application of Redemption. The term for this is "experimental religion" in much of the older literature. In other words, this is the division of theology that explains what God does in our souls, not what he ordained in eternity or accomplished at the cross. Note how this distinction appears in the explanation of justification in the Westminster Confession of Faith: "God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them." (XI,4). The birthline focuses pastorally on what happens "in due time".

In the Westminster Shorter Catechism (S.C) following a presentation of the work of Christ to obtain our redemption, the question is asked, "How are we made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ?" (#29) The answer is, "We are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ, by the effectual application of it to us by his Holy Spirit." So it is a distinct operation of the Holy Spirit to apply to us personally what Christ has accomplished through his finished work on the cross.

I believe that we can think of election and predestination as taking place "off stage" in terms of the actual experience of God transforming the soul. I have no question that the work of the Spirit is a fulfillment of God's eternal purpose (Those whom he predestined, he also called, ... Rom. 8:30), but the birthline deals with the real-time activity of God in a person's life. My experience in dealing with people about their spiritual condition, whether before or after conversion, is that if we deal first with their awareness of God's unique work in their souls, as Paul did in Rom.1:6; I Cor.1:9; etc. (you are called ...), then the "big picture" of sovereign grace is much more appreciated.

C. The Priority of Regeneration.

The watershed issue theologically is the fact that regeneration, or the work of God in the soul, is prior to conversion, which is the human response. It is regeneration that enables us to trust Christ. If there is one thing very explicit in the birthline, it is the distinction between regeneration and conversion. That has enormous practical consequences in helping people understand the meaning of grace and the work of God in their souls. I believe people who are born again have an intuitive sense that God has been moving in their souls long before they found Christ. Consider, for example, the way people respond to the words of Amazing Grace. That hymn has remarkable power even with unbelievers--perhaps it touches people's sense of powerlessness--but Christians feel a particular affinity with the message.

In general evangelical writing, however, the distinction between regeneration and conversion is usually muddled. An author will say something about the Holy Spirit being necessary, but then identify conversion as the beginning point of spiritual life. This may include language such as, "When you received Christ, you were born again", actually reversing the order, or making rebirth and believing in Jesus synonymous. Theologically that could be
clearly identified as Aminianism, and in some cases it is. But in my opinion, most of that type of teaching is rooted in modern indifference to serious theology and shouldn't be given any label other than "carelessness".¹³

The sad reality is that far too many of those who wear the label "Reformed" or "Calvinist" do not understand this distinction in terms of their evangelistic or pastoral ministries. John Gerstner in an article on Jonathan Edward's teaching on "preparation" said, "Nothing brings more blinking stares than to lecture to American Calvinistic groups today on seeking as the cutting edge of Calvinistic evangelism."¹⁴

D. The Relationship of Regeneration and Calling.

Once the fundamental issue is determined, that God's work of regeneration must come first, then comes the recognition that within the Reformed tradition there is a variety of ways to define how that actually happens in the "experimental" sphere. I will try to explain some of the variations, but I do not believe that there is any substantial difference among Reformed teachers, once their definitions are understood. I have discovered that a study of the use of regeneration can be very confusing unless careful attention is given to the matter of definition of terms.¹⁵

It is my own conviction that regeneration, in addition to a word for the process of spiritual birth, is equivalent to spiritual conception. That means it is the first move of God on the soul. It can be argued that the Greek word, gennan, (John 3) should be translated "begotten," rather than "born."¹⁶ Once the conception occurred, then the new life would grow on the analogy of pregnancy, which fits beautifully with the Shorter Catechism's description of effectual calling (#31).¹⁷ So regeneration, strictly defined, is that invisible moment, known only to God, when spiritual life begins. However, the new birth, like physical birth, is actually a process, and both processes end with the delivery of the baby.¹⁸

Another NT image for regeneration is spiritual resurrection--the idea that we who were dead in transgressions and sins have been made alive with Christ (Eph. 2:1-5; Col. 2:13). Following through with the birthline paradigm, the act of resurrection or being made alive ("quickening" in the KJV) would not be the conversion, but that point where one formerly dead now has the ability to respond to God, and can hear and ultimately believe the Gospel. It was common for the older pastors and teachers to speak of "awakened sinners."¹⁹ These were sinners no longer "dead" but not yet converted. Whether or not these awakened sinners are actually regenerate can be debated, but there is no dispute that something supernatural is going on within them--God is causing his seed to grow (I Cor. 3:7; I Thess. 1:4,5).²⁰

A primary source that supported this understanding of regeneration was Abraham Kuyper in his Work of the Holy Spirit.²¹ In a chapter introducing regeneration, he speaks of the "old and new terminology." He recognized that regeneration could be used in a limited sense, in which case it is "the starting point. God comes to one dead ... and plants the principle of a new spiritual life in his soul. Hence he is born again".²² Or it could be used in a wider sense, in which case regeneration "denotes the entire change by grace effected in our persons, ending in our dying to sin in death and our being born for heaven." Kuyper argued, as I would, that too broad a definition of regeneration would ultimately dilute a true appreciation of the wonder of salvation by grace alone. Therefore he answered the question, "What has God wrought in the soul?", with the answer, "the first implanting of life."²³

It is also possible to reverse the order and place calling before regeneration. Dr. John
Murray (along with many others) argues for this but acknowledges that no fundamental issue of theology would be at stake if regeneration were put first. However Murray understands "the call" as an act of God the Father summoning us to Christ, and takes exception to the Shorter Catechism's definition of calling as a work of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration follows the call, and is the work of the Spirit enabling us to respond to it. When Murray defines regeneration, it is little different than any other Reformed author. It was interesting to me that in his Thoughts on Religious Experience, Archibald Alexander treats regeneration in the same way Murray does, but in his biography, I found a statement that would be closer to Kuyper's explanation.

The Westminster Confession does not even have a chapter entitled Regeneration. It would seem that it is understood as the same as Effectual Calling (ch. X). However, that chapter also deals with the question of children who die in infancy. It states, "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit ... so also are all other elect persons who are incapable [sic] of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word." (sec. III). This teaches that while ordinarily those elect and therefore regenerated will be called through the preaching of the Word, there may be instances of those whom God saves who never consciously exercise faith. Therefore Jesus' statement that no one can enter the Kingdom unless they are born again/regenerated, is without qualification.

As I noted above, there is limited value in trying to be overly precise about defining an invisible and supernatural work. But pastorally, I believe it is an invaluable insight to be reminded that there was life well before we consciously entered into a relationship of faith. Furthermore, we must labor on a practical level to distinguish being born again as a work of God, from our response of faith and repentance. In my experience, the simple analogy of conception leading to a time of spiritual pregnancy and inevitably to a point of delivery, or "going public," has been extremely useful in introducing this deeper meaning of salvation.

E. Effectual Calling.

That leads to further consideration of effectual calling, which in my paradigm is equivalent to the time of pregnancy. How long such a "spiritual pregnancy" lasts is a wonderful example of the mysterious blowing of the wind (Jn. 3:8). I know examples of people genuinely converted the first time they hear the gospel with almost no time of preparation. We should not presume the Spirit will take a long time to call, although that seems to be the more common pattern.

As much as I respect John Murray, I would be very reluctant to give up the wonderful description of calling as a work of the Holy Spirit. This is not to deny that we are called by God the Father (which seems to be more the emphasis of the Westminster Confession); or for that matter that Jesus also calls (clearly so in the case of Paul). But I believe the Catechism is correct in assigning the actual work of calling to the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the biblical language for this is that we come to faith through the sanctifying work of the Spirit (II Thess. 2:13; I Pet. 1:2), since both times that phrase is used it is in the context of acts by the other two persons of the Trinity in the bringing of salvation. Our calling is the first part of the continuum of the Spirit's making us new creatures in Christ.

Consider the masterful way the authors of the Catechism describe the process of our coming to faith: "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit whereby [three progressive participles indicate inward changes beginning to unfold]: convincing us of our sin and misery,
enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills; he [the Spirit, having prepared our hearts] doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered in the Gospel." (#31)

The various nuances of that catechism answer are extraordinary and provide great insight into helping a person recall the powerful working of God before he or she consciously believed. Usually when people give a testimony of their salvation, they will allude to these kinds of experiences but often with the thought that they were almost random events rather than the deliberate moving into their lives of the Holy Spirit of God. It seems to me that taking time to reflect back on our lost condition and then recall how God moved in and changed us is a pattern frequently applied by Paul (I Cor. 1:26-31, "think of what you were when you were called ..."; Eph 2:1; Col. 1:13,14,21).

For those in the position of pastors or spiritual counselors, an understanding of effectual calling as a "work of the Holy Spirit" is extraordinarily important. The matter of helping people discern the work of God in their souls, gave rise to the idea of the "cure of souls" as I noted above. I have read recently of the use of the term by those providing counseling--in the modern sense of counseling--but I am anxious for a return to focus on the historic meaning of the cure of souls. Only God, of course, changes the soul, but the pastor as "physician of the soul" needs to develop expertise in the "cure". He needs to be patient and sensitive and learn to listen carefully as people describe their spiritual struggles.

Not only is an understanding of the process of calling valuable as a pastoral tool, it also makes a major difference in the way we present the Gospel to unbelievers. In I Cor. 1, Paul made it clear that he understood the limitation of his message to affect those dead in sin. But he nevertheless faithfully preached the cross of Christ because among the Jews and Greeks hearing him were those whom God has called, and to them that message of foolishness was the power and wisdom of God. This means we must be patient while the Holy Spirit does his work and not force the birth. But it also means we should not change the truth of the Gospel in an effort to make it more winsome.

There have been frequent occasions when I have actually drawn out the birthline with those who may not have come to a place of conversion. Based on one or more conversations, I have discerned that they were sincerely seeking. In several cases this was in response to a direct question about what it meant to be "born again." (Unbelieving people are not as reticent to speak of these matters as we often assume. However we must be willing to take the time to sincerely listen to them, and "hear" their hearts.) The birthline has been used to explain that if their spiritual struggles are truly the work of the Holy Spirit, they will inevitably be brought to a place of surrender to Jesus Christ (the X of conversion). However, the birthline also demonstrates that there is a right time for such surrender, and they may or may not be at that “point”. Some may be concerned that this does away with the sense of urgency that accompanies the gospel, but in my experience, the Spirit is the one who presses the case, and as a discerning "midwife/physician of the soul" I need to know when it is time to “push,” and when it is time to wait and pray. This approach has made spiritual conversations a great delight and privilege rather than a form of salesmanship, and I find that people feel much more comfortable speaking to me about the state of their souls.

F. The nature of Conversion.
The next issue that is surfaced by the birthline is that of *conversion*. In the process of physical birth, that which is conceived will ultimately grow to the point where he/she is delivered into the world. We usually associate this with the baby's first cry. When we hear the cry we usually don't make a statement like, "Johnny's ALIVE!" because we know Johnny has been alive for some time. But now it is time for him to announce that fact and for his life to take a very major new step.

On a spiritual level, we recognize this new step as some form of conversion and public profession. Scripturally, we could note any number of passages calling for faith and repentance, for trusting in Christ, etc. But of particular significance is Rom. 10:10: *For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.* It would seem that in Paul's understanding, the initial process of salvation is not complete until some kind of verbal confession is made. Perhaps it means that while God knows our hearts (and has already justified us, if I understand that verse correctly), *we* cannot get on with the challenge of living out our life in Christ until we have used our mouths in confession of Christ. This thought has given me new appreciation of the importance of baptism in the context of the New Testament culture. Often we minimize the value of baptism because of the abuse of the sacrament. But it points to the importance of public profession in the salvation process.  

In a public presentation of the birthline, I take a great deal of time to talk about the importance of conversion, but for this paper, let me go on to say more about the phrase I used above, *"some form of conversion."* When I first presented the birthline, I drew out the image of conception and pregnancy and then made a firm "X" that crossed the line. The more I have listened carefully to how people have experienced the grace of God in their effectual calling, the more I am inclined to rethink the whole way in which we have understood the conversion experience, particularly as Evangelicals. I now draw the "X" as *dotted* lines. The necessity of conscious and expressed faith in Christ is absolutely clear biblically, but have we so boxed that expression of faith in our cultural wrappings that we deny assurance to some who have genuine faith even though they can't testify to a conversion experience? And just as importantly, do we give false assurance to others whose only claim to Christian faith is some sort of religious experience that fits our idea of a conversion?  

Many things have contributed to this rethinking of conversion experience. But the most dramatic push I received was a reading several years ago of the "conversion" of Malcolm X in his famous *Autobiography*. His testimony fulfills all the classic symptoms of a conversion story. He even entitled that particular chapter, "Saved." His conversion experience was genuine and life-changing--but it was conversion to faith in Elijah Muhammed and the Black Muslims!  

We need to reckon with the fact that we have built an understanding of salvation around the kinds of religious experiences that can be duplicated emotionally and psychologically in any manner of circumstances and teachings. And it would be presumptuous to assume that within the Church we do not have any number of people who have been "converted" apart from the true calling work of the Holy Spirit.

This concern about superficial conversions is not a new one and is being raised even in Evangelical circles today. But on a practical and pastoral level, I have found that the birthline is very effective in making the point that a true conversion is only part of a work of salvation that began *before* the person came to know Christ and that will continue *after* that first experience. It also has served to take the spotlight away from particular experiences without denying the validity of them. I have found that this has been particularly helpful for those raised in Christian
homes who give genuine evidence of the new birth but cannot point to a particular conversion moment. This study has given me many insights into the issue of children and faith, but that goes beyond the scope of this paper.\footnote{43}

I have also discovered that there are others, (including many Roman Catholics), who have grown up sincerely believing in the doctrines of the Faith and who have come to personally embrace Christ, but for whom the evangelical idea of conversion is foreign. Archibald Alexander remarked that Christian denominations differ from one another not only in doctrine and worship, but in their understanding of religious experience.\footnote{44} The issue is not at what moment people were converted, but, are they currently trusting only in Christ, and knowing the continued inward work of God in their lives.

G. The Nature of Faith.

My wrestling with the nature of conversion has led to thoughts about the nature of \textit{faith}. We recognize that faith is a gift from God and that by virtue of our faith we are justified and adopted. But at what point in our spiritual pilgrimage does this happen? Do we tie faith to conversion when we first believed in Jesus? I have always tended to do that. But what does this mean when conversion is not distinct? What about those who grow up believing, or who cannot identify a conversion experience, even though they give evidence of being born again?

Once again the Shorter Catechism helped solve my puzzle. Question #30 asks, "How doth the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?", and then answers, "The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, \textit{by working faith in us}, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling." So the Holy Spirit implants faith in us when He calls us.\footnote{45} Using my birthline, that suggests that when God conceives new spiritual life within us, what is conceived is \textit{faith}. That germ of faith grows until it is finally expressed in conversion and subsequently grows for the rest of our earthly existence. Abraham Kuyper again provided insights on this matter. He quoted some Scottish theologians (unnamed) as follows: "God began the work of grace with the implanting of the \textit{faith-faculty (fides potentialis)}, followed by the new grace of the \textit{faith-exercise (fides actualis)}, and of the \textit{faith-power (fides habitualis).}"\footnote{46}

So the continuum suggested by the birthline also represents a progress of faith--but a faith begun by a sovereign act of God in our souls (Eph. 2:8; II Peter 1:1). Conversion, then, is not the beginning of faith any more than it is the beginning our spiritual life. Conversion should be tied to repentance, as the fruit of conviction of sin.\footnote{47} Faith is the conscious exercise of a gift that was already given.\footnote{48}

Based on such insights, we may believe that God is moving in peoples' souls and calling them to himself in ways that transcend our efforts. But we cannot "see" that faith until it is confessed and begins to be expressed. Therefore, we must never forget that on the level where we operate, calling comes through the preaching of the gospel. So \textit{we preach Christ crucified} (I Cor. 1:17-20), we understand that \textit{the gospel is the power of God unto salvation of those who believe} (Rom. 1:16), we preach the words of the gospel, but pray that in addition to our words, it will come with \textit{power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction} (I Thess. 1:4,5) that make it the \textit{effectual} call.

H. The Benefits of Effectual Calling in This Life.

10
It follows, it seems to me, that the **benefits** of our effectual calling—*justification, adoption, and sanctification* (Shorter Cat. #32) were given to us when we were "united to Christ in our effectual calling" (#30). At conversion, when we finally "embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel" (#31), we begin to appropriate and enjoy what has been our for some time. This is a departure from the usual assumption that all of these benefits actually begin with the experience of conversion. But this new way of thinking (for me) squares with the pastoral experience of welcoming people into the church who give genuine evidence of sincere trust in Christ and a changed life, but who, because of poor teaching, have virtually no appreciation of what it means to be justified or adopted. So these are "saved" people, who therefore *are* justified, adopted, and already in process of sanctification, but they don't know this. We are quick to tell people who profess Christ what they need to be *doing*. But the Apostle Paul, it seems to me, did not begin with *doing* as much as *knowing*. That was usually his first point of stress when he prayed for the churches.49

From a practical perspective, this means we are to teach these great doctrines *after* people have come to exercise and profess their faith. That is clearly what Paul was doing in Romans. He was writing to people called *to belong to Jesus Christ... called to be saints* (Rom. 1:6,7). But the fact that they had experienced the (effectual) calling of God did not mean they understood what was already theirs in Christ. So the Apostle explained the Gospel to the church (1:14-17). He started with the human condition (1:18-3:20), the meaning of the cross and justification (3:21-5:21), sanctification (6:1-8:11), adoption (8:12-27)50, and finally predestination and perseverance (8:28-39). It is only in ch. 12 that he moves to the imperatives that are a consequence of these *mercies of God* (12:1).

If we take this as a model of teaching/discipling a young church as I think we should,51 then I believe it suggests that our starting point pastorally with people is a discerning about the effectual call in their lives and providing an opportunity for them to *confess with their mouth, 'Jesus is Lord'*; (Rom. 10:9,10). Then, to those who have experienced the call and have confessed Christ, we proceed to explain carefully what has been revealed through the Gospel of grace--justification, adoption, and sanctification.

For those who are newly converted, this is a fairly natural progression and the truth is welcomed and appropriated as one would expect to happen in a young child or new student. But in the case of those who have considered themselves Christians for some time, a careful teaching of the Gospel and the depth of grace comes as a revolution that can be so dynamic that it makes a people question whether they were ever converted.52 In many cases, there is resistance and then a need to put long-held assumptions under scrutiny of Scripture. Popular author Jerry Bridges has written a book, *The Discipline of Grace*, in which he explains the gospel--*to evangelical believers* because he is convinced that most don't really understand it.53

Not only is a careful explanation of the gospel of grace critical to personal growth, but it is key to the life and renewal of the Church.54 Richard Lovelace wrote a highly regarded book, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*. Lovelace is a church historian who documents the impact of the "Great Awakenings" that have transformed churches and nations. But he questions whether the "cyclical model" of renewal is the right one and asks what it would take for the Church to know ongoing renewal. They key, in his view, is "a depth presentation of the gospel," including particularly, a proper understanding and application of justification and sanctification.55 How sad that the need of our day is for the evangelical church to understand the "evangel."56
I. Spiritual Growth.

To conclude a study of issues raised by the birthline, we need to briefly consider the matter of sanctification. On the parallel with human growth, I have put this as equivalent of the growth of the newborn baby to maturity. This is certainly a biblical image and provides many useful analogies in understanding the pattern of spiritual growth. But before we focus on our activity in the growth process, we first need to see it as that which God graciously initiates. The Catechism labels sanctification as a "work of God's free grace" as opposed to justification and adoption, which are "acts of God's free grace." (#33-35) But sanctification, living out the life God placed within us, is nevertheless by God's free grace and is therefore to be received by faith. It seems to me that "sanctification through faith" should be seen as part of the gospel, not what follows the gospel. Romans 6-8, which explains the new life we have in Christ, is as much the gospel as ch. 3-5 and the great truth of justification through faith. It is a gospel that brings to us the power of the resurrection as well as the cross (Col. 2:9-15; 3:1-4). This emphasis on sanctification as a work of God does not deny the importance of obedience on the part of the believer, but it does put it in a context of grace and the gospel.

On the birthline, I have always started sanctification with conversion. That fits the usual theological definitions of sanctification. But as in physical birth we recognize that growth really began with conception, so sanctification actually begins with regeneration. Lovelace calls regeneration the "beachhead" of sanctification. This does not change the typical definitions of sanctification by the Reformed theologians. But it does raise some interesting issues on a practical level that once again relate to caution about focusing so much on the conversion experience. This perspective merges effectual calling and sanctification and is a reminder that "embracing Jesus Christ, freely offered in the gospel" through faith and repentance, needs to be an ongoing part of our Christian experience. On a practical level this insight gives richer meaning to the communion as a means of grace. When we come in faith to the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the Lord's death i.e., "we preach the gospel" by action rather than word as we once again "embrace Jesus freely offered to us in the gospel".

This thinking also helps me redefine the idea of discipleship. "Thirty years of discipleship programs, and we are not disciplied," laments Jim Petersen of the Navigators, a ministry devoted to discipleship. Among other things, he calls for a very deliberate overlap between what we think of as evangelism and discipleship. But why not consider the whole process as discipleship, in which teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you (Matt. 28:19), means different things at different phases of spiritual growth? In the earliest phases of discipleship, it means teaching what is needed to make an initial profession of faith and baptism (when appropriate). So evangelism is simply the first step of discipleship, not a separate category. But we don't stop presenting the gospel. The essence of discipleship is to continue "to preach the gospel to ourselves every day." Contemporary teachers like Jack Miller and Jerry Bridges are echoing the great evangelical tradition of the "doctrines of grace" when they urge us to go more deeply into the gospel, and appreciate God's grace in all its truth (Col. 1:6).

The last earthly command of Jesus was that we be fully engaged in the glorious mission of making disciples of the nations. And as he gave that command he also assured us that when we go with this mission, he who has all power will go with us even to the end of the age.
ENDNOTES

1. "We do not require our children to know the names of all the nerves and muscles of the human body ... But the physician who is not quite certain ... is promptly dismissed. ... The same applies to the life of the Church. ... The least gifted among the brethren can not understand the distinctions of the spiritual life; ... But not so the spiritual physician, i.e., the minister of the Word. If the unskilled veterinarian be dismissed, how much more they who, pretending to treat and cure souls, betray their own ignorance of the conditions and activities of the spiritual life. Wherefore we insist that every minister of the Word be a specialist in this spiritual anatomy and physiology; familiar with the various forms of spiritual disease, and always able out of Christ's fullness to select the spiritual remedies required." (Abraham Kuyper, Work of the Holy Spirit, Vol II, p. 215)

   This is part of a chapter entitled, "Analysis Necessary," which is a plea for the importance of understanding how the Holy Spirit does his work in individuals.

   "The spiritual physician, who has the cure of diseased souls, takes much less pains to inquire minutely and exactly into the maladies of his patients, than is observable in physicians of the body." (Archibald Alexander, Thoughts On Religious Experience, p. 42)

   Alexander's entire book is an extraordinary handbook for helping pastors discern properly the work of God in the soul. In the introduction, Alexander explains that there are two kinds of religious knowledge--the knowledge of truth as it is revealed in Holy Scripture, and secondly, the impression that truth makes on the human soul. The truth of Scripture is infallible, whereas discerning how that truth is affecting the soul is very difficult because we are all so different in temperament, background, etc. Ultimately only God knows the heart, but "we are not on this account forbidden to search into this subject." (p. xviii)

2. "It is the happiness of the Reformed Christians of English speech that they are the heirs of what must in all fairness be spoken of as an immense literature upon this great topic."

   (part of B.B. Warfield's "Introductory Note" to Kuyper's Work of the Holy Spirit, p.xxviii)

3. Two examples of modern writers on evangelism who make the same observation:

   "The journey to Christ is a process, not just an event. One of our most common mistakes is to try to do it all at once. We wait for an opportunity to share our faith with a friend or acquaintance, and when it comes we unload the whole message and end up calling for a decision. Few people are ready for that, and far more often than not the attempt results in polarization, rather than in faith. ... It does not have to be that way. Jesus taught that coming to faith is a process [John 4:38]. ... It is not always harvest time, but it is always time for something--planting, cultivating, watering, or harvesting. It is a relief to realize we are only part of a process. I ask God to use me to move every person I meet a step closer to Christ."

   Jim Petersen, Church Without Walls, p. 190.

   "The challenge of revealing the 'secrets of the kingdom' to people with closed eyes and calloused hearts is most often a slow process. People who become followers of Jesus and stay committed to him for the long term often move toward Christian belief step by step and stage by stage. ... Too many overzealous evangelists believe in microwave evangelism. The influence of our instant society and the driving urge to call people to an immediate decision for Christ have combined to produce 'impatient evangelism.' Consequently, some people who have been methodically walking out of darkness into light have been shoved into the kingdom--many of them prematurely."

   Donald Posterski, Reinventing Evangelism, p. 163,164.

14
4. "Although there is no subject in whose treatment the soul inclines more to draw upon its own experience, there is none that demands more that our sole source of knowledge be the Word given us by the Holy Spirit. After that, human experience may be heard, testifying to what the lips have confessed; even affording glimpses into the Spirit's blessed mysteries, which are unspeakable and of which the Scripture therefore does not speak. But this can not be the ground of instruction to others." (p.4, Work of the Holy Spirit, part of Ch.1.1 entitled "Careful Treatment Required")

5. Sinclair Ferguson points out three: Birth, Creation, and Resurrection. "What is being underscored in all these passages is regeneration, however it is described, is a divine activity in us, in which we are not the actors but the recipients."

(The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction, pp.49-51)

6. The book that helped me tremendously with this distinction was Dr. John Murray's Redemption Accomplished and Applied. The birthline is essentially the chapters of the second part of that book, although I have some minor differences that I will explain.

   As a teaching aid, I have added to Murray's title, Redemption Ordained. This illuminates the distinct role played by each member of the Trinity (although this should not be put into absolute categories--the work of the persons of the Trinity are often interchangeable). The Father ordained our salvation, the Son accomplished it, and the Spirit applies it. This can be taught from several Scripture passages, but is particularly striking in II Thess. 2:13,14 and I Peter 1:2. It is my observation that logically we present the work of the Trinity in the order of Father, then Son, then Holy Spirit. This is the order found in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. BUT pastorally, and I believe biblically, the order is reversed in that first is the focus on what people have experienced through the Spirit--calling, then what the Son accomplished on the cross, and finally the remarkable fact that all of this was in the plan of the Father.

7. I should call attention to the fact that when I speak of the "soul," I am using it in the traditional distinction of body and soul. The so-called "trichotomist" view that separates the soul from the spirit is unbiblical, and invites some misleading views of regeneration and sanctification. (cf. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, pp. 191-196)

8. It is worth noting that John Calvin did not explain the meaning of eternal election until the end of Book III of the Institutes, following his explanation of how we receive the grace of Christ, and the benefits that come to us from it.

9. I respect the fact that some would insist that I add a modifier here such as "logically" prior, or "causally" prior to avoid a rigid ordering of salvation (cf. Ch.2, Hoekema's Saved By Grace), so that salvation is seen as a single gift, albeit with many facets. However, I prefer the idea of an order of salvation, particularly in terms of the application of it "in due time."

10. The second stanza is particularly significant:

   'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.

   In other words, the author recognized after coming to faith that grace had been at work before he believed.

   Consider these words, found in older hymnals of almost every theological perspective (I found it in Free Methodist and Mennonite hymnals):

   I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me;

   it was not I that found, O Savior true; no, I was found of Thee.

   Thou didst reach forth thy hand and mine enfold; I walked and sank not on the
storm-vexed sea-- 'twas not so much that I on thee took hold, as thou, dear Lord, on me.
Anon., 1878

11. p. 70, Jim Petersen, Lifestyle Evangelism. This is a seemingly minor flaw in this excellent work, but it undermines his essential teaching that basic to true discipling is an understanding of how grace worked in our lives. (cf. my "Open Letter to Jim Petersen" in which I contend that to teach grace, he needs to take people to their lives before conversion.)

12. This is the language of the "Four Spiritual Laws." Or consider this recent message from Billy Graham: "What does it mean to be born again? To repent of your sins, to receive Christ as Savior by faith, and then to follow him in obedience. If you do that, the Holy Spirit will come to live in your heart to give you a brand-new life." ("Decision," April, 1996).

13. In B.B. Warfield's very valuable "Introductory Note" to Kuyper's Work of the Holy Spirit, he called attention to the fact that an appreciation of the Spirit's role in salvation diminishes with the focus on "the sacerdotal tendency" or "the libertarian tendency," which was a focus on the ability of man to will his own salvation. "... in proportion as it was more or less developed or more or less fully applied, interest in the doctrine of the subjective work of the Spirit languished, and in these circles too men's minds were to that degree distracted from the study of the doctrine of the work of the Spirit, and tended to focus themselves on the autocracy of the human will and its native or renewed ability to obey God and seek and find communion with Him." (p.xxxviii)

14. p. 57, "Edwardsean Preparation For Salvation," Westminster Theological Journal, Fall 1979. "I say 'poor wretch' advisedly because no one better qualifies for that description than the person who knows he needs conversion and does not possess it. Before conviction he is 'poor' without being wretched; after conviction he knows he was and in a sense is a wretch but that he is no longer poor. But when under conviction a person knows he is a poor wretch. Does such a man ask for bread and the Calvinist preacher give him a shrug?" (p.68)

I cite this article by Gerstner to call attention to the fact that earlier evangelistic ministries by Reformed people included an expectation that it usually took time for people to come to saving faith in Christ. However that also opens the larger issue of what came to be called "preparationism" in which the hope of the gospel would actually be withheld from a seeker until certain signs of true repentance had appeared (this was not Edward's approach). There were some outrageous examples of preparationism in excesses that were part of the Great Awakenings. Gerstner notes that the theologians of Princeton Seminary were opposed to preparation, for which he faults them (pp. 62-64). However I think they were correct--not because they didn't think time was needed for most people to come to faith, but because they were deeply concerned that man not try to determine what form conviction and repentance would take. Over and over Alexander pleads for sensitivity on the part of preachers.

Cf. Ch. 11, "The Old Doctrines of Calvinism," of Princeton Seminary, Vol. 1, by David C. Calhoun (Banner of Truth, 1994). There is a very useful summary of the rise of Charles Finney and the modern methods of evangelism, and how it impacted the Presbyterian Church, and Princeton Seminary.

15. An interesting example of this point is Calvin's use of "regeneration by faith," as equivalent to "repentance" (Institutes, Book III, ch. III,9). However, by reading the first few chapters of Book III, it is clear that he is using regeneration as a word representing a work begun in the sinner by the Spirit. "The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself" (ch. I,1); that "faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. ... Contrasting God with flesh and blood, he declares it to be a supernatural gift that those who
would otherwise remain in unbelief receive Christ by faith." (ch. I,3); that this Spirit-given gift of faith leads us to the "sum of the gospel," repentance and forgiveness of sin (ch. III,1).

cf. L. Berkhof's Systematic Theology, pp. 465-472 for an excellent summary of the development of the language. He states that the ordo salutis is much more precisely defined today than in was even by the Reformers (p. 468)

16. "Nevertheless, we may presume that the exact meaning within Jesus' own mind is best conveyed in English by the expression 'begotten from above.' This assumption is based upon the fact that the ancients put the greater stress on the male's role in generation: he begets by placing his semen within the female where it joins one of her eggs to form an embryo. God himself through the Spirit directly causes the beginning of new life in the human soul; this action is at the center of regeneration."

(p. 27, Born Again, Peter Toon)

17. A classic Puritan treatment of human nature and salvation is Thomas Boston's Human Nature in Its Fourfold State (Banner of Truth). I was pleased to find that Boston made a great deal of the parallel of physical and spiritual birth, and on pp.225-229 lists nine ways they are similar:

1. Natural generation is a mysterious thing; and so is spiritual generation.
2. In both, the creature comes to a being it had not before.
3. As the child is passive in generation, so is the child of God in regeneration.
4. There is a wonderful contexture of parts in both births. Both are curiously wrought, as masterpieces of the manifold wisdom of God.
5. All this, in both cases, has its rise from that which is in itself very small and inconsiderable.
6. Natural generation is carried on by degrees. So is regeneration.
7. In both there are new relations. The regenerate may call God, Father; for they are his children, "begotten of him."
8. There is likeness between the parent and the child.
9. As there is no birth without pain, both to the mother and to the child, so there is great pain in bringing forth the new creature.

18. "Regeneration is that act of God by which the principle of the new life is implanted in man, and the governing disposition of the soul is made holy. [This basic definition can be found in any number of authors, but Berkhof adds this interesting sentence:] But in order to include the idea of the new birth as well as that of 'begetting again,' it will be necessary to complement the definition with the following words: ... 'and the first holy exercise of this new disposition is secured.'"

(p. 469, L. Berkhof, Systemic Theology)

19. The Eighteenth Century pastor, Philip Doddridge, wrote a classic entitled, The Rise and Progress of Religion In the Soul (Baker reprint, 1977). The first part of the book (the rise of religion in the soul) is addressed directly to "awakened sinners" and directs them step by step to a place of surrender to Christ. Each chapter concludes with a prayer or reflection in which the reader is encouraged to internalize the lesson that has been presented.

In view of the discussion of preparationism above, it is interesting to note Doddridge's careful disavowal:

"I must add one remark here, which I heartily wish I had not omitted in the first edition, viz: That though I do in this book consider my reader as successively in a great variety of supposed circumstances, beginning with those of a thoughtless sinner, and leading him through several stages of conviction, terror, &c. as what may be previous to his sincerely accepting the Gospel, and devoting himself to the service of God; yet I would by no means be thought to insinuate, that every one who is brought to that happy resolution, arrives at it
through those particular steps, or feels agitations of mind equal in degree to those I have described."
(p. 7, italics original)

20 . Two Nineteenth Century authors reprinted by Banner of Truth have whole chapters devoted to the work of the Holy Spirit before conversion.
   The Gifts of the Holy Spirit by C.R.Vaughan, includes a chapter on the Spirit's "Awakening Influence," and one on his "Convicting Influence." In both cases these are seen as leading to regeneration.
   The Work of the Holy Spirit by Octavius Winslow, has two chapters on "The Spirit A Quickener."

21 . Vol. II. Fourth Chapter, XIX.

22 . "It is used in the limited sense when it denotes exclusively God's act of quickening, which is the first divine act whereby God translates us from death into life, from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son. In this sense, regeneration is the starting-point. God comes to one born in iniquity and dead in trespasses and sins and plants the principle of a new spiritual life in his soul. Hence, he is born again." (p. 293)

23 . "And then it became evident that God did not begin by leading the sinner to repentance, for repentance must be preceded by conviction of sin; nor by bringing him under the hearing of the word, for this requires an opened ear. Hence the first conscious and comparatively cooperative act of man is always preceded by the original act of God, planting in him the first principle of a new life, under which act man is wholly passive and unconscious."
   (p. 294)
   Kuyper also has a discussion of what he calls "Preparatory Grace" (Vol.II, Third Ch.) which even precedes regeneration as he defines it.


25 . p. 165, Ibid.

26 . "Much conversation took place concerning the nature of faith, the necessity of legal conviction, and the question whether there was an operation on the soul itself prior to all spiritual views, or whether regeneration was effected by the introduction of truth to the mind. ... But some of us were not satisfied with either of these explanations. We supposed that a soul dead in sin was incapable of spiritual views and feelings, until made partaker of spiritual life; that this principle of life was imparted in regeneration; so that the natural order of exercises was, that the quickened soul entertained new views, which were accompanied by new feelings in accordance with the truths presented to the mind. This opinion I then adopted and have always held. The Spirit operates on the dead soul, communicating the principle of life. The Word holds up to the view of the regenerated soul the evil of sin which leads to repentance, and shows the excellency and suitableness of Christ as a Savior in all his offices, and reveals the beauty of holiness."
   pp.73,74, The Life of Archibald Alexander, by James W. Alexander (1854).

27 . cf. Anthony Hoekema, Saved by Grace, p. 106 ff. "I prefer to think of regeneration (in the narrower sense) and effectual calling as identical."

28 . Cf. Murray's remarks on the relation of faith to regeneration. (pp.261-3, Writings Vol.2)

29. Archibald Alexander (Thoughts on Religious Experience) is full of pastoral wisdom on this matter:
"There is a common practical error in the minds of many Christians in regard to this matter. They seem to think that nothing has any relation to the conversion of the sinner but that which immediately preceded this event; and the Christian is ready to say, I was awakened under such a sermon ... making nothing of all previous instructions and impressions." (p. 2)

"The zealous preacher often concludes and laments that there is no impression on the minds of his hearers, when, if the covering of the human heart could be withdrawn, he would be astonished and confounded at the variety and depth of the feelings experienced. Those impressions which manifest themselves by a flow of tears are not the deepest, but often very superficial; while the most awful distresses of the soul are entirely concealed by a kind of hypocrisy which men early learn to practice, to hide their feelings of a religious kind from their fellow creatures. The attempt at immediate effect, and the expectation of it, is one of the errors of the present times; indeed, it is the very watch-word of a certain party [he refers to Methodists and follows of revival "measures" promoted by Charles Finney and others]." (p. 3)

30. "The style of Evangelical Christianity which is constantly pushing and forcing people toward conversion in order to get them regenerated, manipulating them with music, repeated invitations or a sort of sales routine, is an ugly deformity of Christian practice resulting from bad doctrine. This kind of pressure is better than hiding the gospel, and it continues to be blessed by genuine conversions through the grace of God, but we should move away from it without lessening our efforts to proclaim the gospel in a more gracious way to those who do not believe."

(p. 106, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, Lovelace)

31. Acts 9:4,5. Note also the recognition Paul gives to God's work in his soul as stated in Gal.1:15: "But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me ..."

32. It should not be thought that this was an attempt to describe a particular sequence in the work of the Spirit. Paul Helms insists that we think of these as "strands not stages" in moving toward the conversion experience (p. 44, The Beginnings: Word and Spirit in Conversion, Banner of Truth). To focus on stages of conversion would be to move toward what he calls "legalism" which in context is the same as the "preparationism" discussed earlier.

Helm's book is a practical discussion of the relationship of conviction, repentance, and faith.

33. Thomas Boston has a wonderful exposition of the meaning of enlightenment of the mind, and renewal of the will.

(Fourfold State, pp.209ff)

34. It should be noted that there is an important distinction between the "external call" as heard in the Gospel, and is given to all, and the "effectual call" which is the term used here for the actual work which the Holy Spirit does within the elect (Romans 8:29-31). Note that Berkhof discusses the external call, then regeneration, then the effectual call (Systematic Theology, pp. 454-464); Hockema devotes a separate chapter to "The Gospel Call," and argues very convincingly against those who claim this should not go forth to all. (Saved By Grace, ch. 5)

35. The pastoral office of "Curate" grew out of this understanding of the nature of the ministry.

36. For an excellent example of pastoral sensitivity in dealing with troubled souls, read Jonathan Edward's A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God. This is not only a history of the awakening at Northampton, but thoughtful comments about the way different people were affected by the conviction of the
Holy Spirit. He includes several cases studies to illustrate his conclusions.

37. cf. the work of Jim Petersen, published by Navpress. His *Living Proof* (1989) includes very helpful, practical guidance about taking people one step as a time toward conversion. (ch. 16) It is unfortunate that in my reading of contemporary Reformed authors (which is by no means comprehensive) I have not found such helpful guides to bringing people to faith at God's pace. Effectual calling, as a topic of practical assistance for searching souls, is not being written about.

38. "Because of our muted emphasis on sin, many persons experience a two-stage conversion, but we should recognize that no conversion is complete that does not deal with the problem of sin. If all of our preaching were properly centered around this problem and its answer in the cross, the number of two-stage conversions would probably decrease sharply." (Lovelace, *Dynamics*, p. 109)

39. Michael Horton has a very pastorally valuable presentation of the importance of baptism and communion ("Two Keys to Spiritual Growth") in ch. 11 of his book *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace* (Baker, 1994).


41. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

42. It is my opinion that the great controversy over "Lordship Salvation" in the broader evangelical circles is a result of ignoring the issue of the effectual calling of the Spirit. The controversy on both sides revolves around human response to the message of the gospel. This issue is explored in the book edited by Michael Horton, *Christ The Lord*, (Baker), but I particularly commend the pastoral letter that appears as an appendix in *The Pleasures of God*, by John Piper (Multnomah).

It seems that the unbiblical teaching of the "carnal Christian" has come home to roost. (cf. pp. 20-26 of *Saved by Grace* for Hoekema's refutation of the idea, and ch. 5 of *Repentance and Twentieth Century Man*, by C. John Miller ((Christian Literature Crusade)).)

43. A few references and comments are appropriate on this vital topic, that relate to issues in this paper: if we understand that the inner work of the Spirit can begin long before people consciously are able to exercise faith, then isn't that what we should pray would happen to our children?

This thought has significantly deepened my appreciation of baptism as a sacrament, and a seal, as well as a sign of the covenant of grace (S.C.#94). The baptism of our children is a prayer and a claim that the work of regeneration has already taken place.

"If piety may commence at any age, how solicitous should parents be for their children, that God would bestow His grace upon them, even before they know their right hand from their left; and, when about to dedicate them to God in holy baptism, how earnestly should they pray that they might be baptized with the Holy Ghost--that while their bodies are washed in the emblematical laver of regeneration, their souls may experience the renewing of the Holy Ghost, and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus. If the sentiments expressed above be correct, then may there be such a thing as baptismal regeneration; not that the mere external application of water can have any effect to purify the soul; nor that internal grace uniformly or generally accompanies this external washing, but that God, who works when and by what means He pleases, may regenerate by His Spirit the soul of the infant, while in His sacred name, water is applied to the body." (pp. 12,13, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*.)

The issue of children was an important part of Alexander's concern about the way conversion
experiences were being stressed without concern for the various ways people needed to be treated. I do not believe this is the same as what some in the Reformed tradition call "presumptive regeneration."

In 1847 an important book appeared entitled Christian Nurture by a New England congregationalist pastor, Horace Bushnell. He also resisted the idea that children in Christian homes, who have been baptized into the covenant of grace, should be raised as lost pagans until some later conversion experience. Rather "the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise". Busnell did not deny the fact that many will still have conversions, nor did he deny the need for regeneration by the Spirit. But he called for faith on the part of parents in the inner work of God from the beginnings of their children's lives. This work was given a long review by the leading theologian of the day, Charles Hodge. Hodge took exception to many of Bushnell's other teachings, but on this matter essentially agreed with him. He included appropriate warnings about presuming about baptism, and also expressed appreciation for the good that has been done through seasons of revival--but he still insisted that "Christian nurture" is the ordinary God-appointed means for bringing our children to Christ. A few quotes from his review will be helpful:

"And even within the pale of evangelical churches, it must be confessed, there is great neglect as to this duty [faithful parental training and example]. Where is the parent whose children have turned aside from God, whose heart will not rather reproach him, than charge God with forgetting his promise? Our very want of faith in the promise is one great reason of our failure. We have forgotten the covenant. We have forgotten that our children belong to God; that he has promised to be their God, if we are faithful to our trust. ... This doctrine is clearly implied in the circumcision [O.T.] and baptism [N.T.] of children. ... The child thus trained grows up in the fear of God; his earliest experiences are more or less religious; he keeps aloof from open sins; strives to keep his conscience clear in the sight of God, and make the divine will the guide of his conduct. When he comes to maturity, the nature of the covenant of grace is fully explained to him, he intelligently and deliberately assents to it, publically confesses himself to be a worshipper and follower of Christ, and acts consistently with his engagements. This is no fancy sketch. Such an experience is not uncommon in actual life. It is obvious that in such cases it must be difficult both for the person himself and for those around him, to fix on the precise period when he passed from death unto life. And even in cases where there is more of conflict, where the influence of early instruction has met with greater opposition, and where the change is more sudden and observable, the result, under God, is to be attributed to this parental training.

What we contend for then, is, that this is the appointed, the natural, the normal and ordinary means by which the children of believers are made truly the children of God. And consequently this is the means which should be principally relied upon, and employed, and that the saving conversion of our children should in this way be looked for and expected. It certainly has the sanction of God."

(Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, October, 1847; parts of which are cited in The Princeton Theology, ch. 16; ed. by Mark Noll; Baker, 1983. Thanks to Dr. David Calhoun of Covenant Seminary for calling this article to my attention.)

44. "There are some serious people, well indoctrinated in the Scriptures, who, while they hold a sound theory respecting the nature of regeneration, never speak of their own religious exercises; believing that such exposures are not for edification, as they tend to foster spiritual pride and vain glory, and afford a temptation to hypocrisy, which is commonly too strong for the deceitful heart. Among such professors, you hear nothing of conviction and conversion; and when any of this class fall into a distressing case of conscience which urges them to seek spiritual counsel, they always propose the case in the third person. They will talk to you by the hour and the day about the doctrines of religion, and show that they are more conversant with their Bibles than many who talk of their religious feelings. ... It is a fact, that what passes for conversion in one sect will be condemned as altogether insufficient in another."

pp. 95,97, Thoughts on Religious Experience

21
45. In I Peter 1:23 we are told that we have been "born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." But does Peter intend to refer to the Word of God in terms of Scripture, or is it the Word of God, as a divine fiat, spoken in the same sense as God speaking at creation? I would argue for the latter, based on II Cor. 4:5,6. Regeneration is a direct act of God, brought about by his Word, in the same sense as creation and the resurrection of Christ.

Jonathan Edwards has a sermon entitled "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be Both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine" (found in most editions of his collected works). He is careful to keep his thought in a biblical context, and does not suggest some sort of revelatory light. But based on texts such as II Cor. 4:6, he says that, "This plainly shows, that there is a discovery of the divine superlative glory and excellency of God and Christ, peculiar to the saints; and also, that it is as immediately [ie directly, rather than mediated through the Scriptures or a preacher] from God, as light from the sun; and that it is the immediate effect of his power and will. For it is compared to God's creating the light by his powerful word in the beginning of the creation;".

46. p. 295, Work of the Holy Spirit; Kuyper goes on to give the following helpful outline (not quoted in full):

"For a correct idea of the entire work of grace in its different phases let us notice the following successive stages or milestones:

1. The implanting of the new life-principle, commonly called regeneration in the limited sense, or the implanting of the faith-faculty.

2. The keeping of the implanted principle of life, while the sinner still continues in sin, so far as his consciousness is concerned. Persons who received the life-principle early in life are no more dead, but live. However, they have no conscious faith, nor knowledge of the treasure possessed. The new life is present, but dormant; kept not by the recipient, but by the Giver.

3. The call by the Word and Spirit, internal and external. It addresses itself not to the deaf but to the hearing, not to the dead but to the living, altho still slumbering. Under the preaching of the Word the Spirit energizes the faith-faculty, and thus the call becomes effectual, for the sleeper arises.

4. This call of God produces conviction of sin and justification, two acts of the same exercise of faith. The realization of his lost condition was already a bold act of faith. When a man can say for the first time in his life, 'I believe,' he is at the same moment completely lost and completely saved, being justified in his Lord.

5. This exercise of faith results in conversion; at this stage in the way of grace the child of God becomes clearly conscious of the implanted life. The implanting of the new life precedes the first act of faith, but conversion follows it.

6. Hence conversion merges itself in sanctification [see my thoughts on this sequence later in the paper]. This is also a divine act, and not human; not a growing toward Christ, but an absorbing of His life through the roots of faith.

7. Sanctification is finished and closed in the complete redemption at the time of death. Then faith is turned into sight, sin's excitement is disarmed, and we are forever beyond its reach.

47. Teachers from the Reformation forward insisted that faith be discussed before repentance (Westminster Conf., ch.XIV, XV; Sh. Cat. 85-87). It always seemed to me that logically, repentance should be discussed first in that we need to turn from our sin before we can turn to Christ. But, argued Calvin, what causes us to turn from our sin, but the hope, already within our souls, that we will be forgiven when we sincerely repent? "Yet, when we refer the origin of repentance to faith we do not imagine some space of time during which it brings it to birth; but we mean to show that a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God's grace." Repentance is the same as conversion, through which we finally turn to the Christ who has been drawing us to himself.
He further argued that those who place repentance before faith tend to view the need for repentance as ending once people come to trust in Christ. "Obviously, that giddy spirit brings forth such fruits that it limits to a paltry few days a repentance that for the Christian man ought to extend throughout his life."

(Institutes, Book III, ch. III, sec. 1-3)

This distinction has important consequences in the way the Gospel is presented, and in the expectations evangelists place on people coming to Christ. The sense of condemnation for sin and hope of forgiveness will vary greatly with individuals. In actual experience faith and repentance will intermingle as people come to conversion. It is not uncommon for the deepest experiences of repentance to come after conversion. If the above sequence is understood, then such seasons of repentance need not cause people to question whether or not they were converted in the first place.

Proper signs of repentance were commonly discussed during the times of the Great Awakenings. However, both Edwards and Alexander rejected the insistence that certain evidences of conviction and repentance must be evident before a person could be considered converted. (Cf. ch. VI of Thoughts on Religious Experience, which includes extensive quotations from Edward's Narrative.)

If our goal is to cultivate faith in others, out of a conviction that this is how the Spirit works within, then our particular objective will be to point them to Christ and the cross, rather than to demand certain outward evidences of repentance.

48. "We believe that, as no mortal can tell the precise moment when the soul is vivified, and as the principle of spiritual life in its commencement is often very feeble, so it is an undoubted truth, that the development of the new life in the soul may be, and often is, very slow; and not infrequently that which is called conversion is nothing else but a more sensible and vigorous exercise of a principle which has long existed; ... The first clear and lively exercise of faith and repentance is made the date of the original spiritual life, whereas it existed in a feeble state, and put forth obscure acts long before." (A. Alexander, p. 4)

Cf. warnings by Calvin (Institutes, Book III, ch. II) and others about focusing on so-called "unformed faith". Fundamentally the Scripture deals with faith as a conscious trust.

"Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit." (III, II, 7)

49. Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19; Phil. 1:9,10; Col. 1:9,10; 2:2,3; cf. Peter in II Peter 1:2,3,5,8.

The prayer in Colossians 1:9,10 makes this distinction particularly clear: "We keep asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will with all spiritual wisdom and understanding, in order that you may live a live worthy ...." It is most unfortunate, but typical of our teaching, that people use v. 10 as an exhortation that they must live a life worthy of the Lord. That is true in a sense, but the point of the text is that our right living will be a consequence of right knowing.

50. I believe adoption/sonship is placed at the pinnacle of the benefits we receive in Christ. This is also the urging of J.I. Packer in his wonderful chapter on adoption (ch. 19, "Sons of God") in Knowing God.

Another very useful resource on the matter of adoption/sonship is Children of the Living God by Sinclair Ferguson (Banner of Truth, 1989). The author notes that adoption needs to be understood as a creative act of God as well as a legal one.

"But like natural birth, in which we are unconscious of the precise moment of our conception, yet active in coming from our mother's womb and giving our first cry of life, so it is in regeneration. Given new life by God, we too cry out. But our cry, Paul tells us--significantly in his great chapter on sonship--is 'Abba, Father' (Rom. 8:15). This, perhaps more than anything else, is the sign that we have been 'born again.' We have come to know God as our Father. This is the beginning of a new life which will develop more and more in the disciplines, service, privileges, and joys of the family of God." (p. 23)
51. I have come to think of this as “gospel discipling.” Readers are welcome to request a paper I have written explaining this thought.

52. This kind of dramatic experience has been quite common in the teaching ministry of the late Jack Miller and his wife Rose Marie, and the subsequent discipling that has been popularly called "Sonship." In particular, pastors who have been trained in the best evangelical and reformed seminaries have been shocked to discover that they never really appropriated the "doctrines of grace" that they ardently believed.

Mrs. Miller writes about her personal wrestling with the idea that nothing she did could add anything to her acceptance by God, which was hers through the righteousness of Christ. Once she was finally enlightened to the real meaning of justification by faith it was so revolutionary that she wrote: "Was this a conversion experience? Many people have asked that question. I am not certain. ... But whether this was first-time redemption or a major spurt in grace, the principle remains the same. The gospel is a power in the lives of those who know they need the blood of Christ as a present power."

(p. 72, From Fear to Freedom)

53. "These observations constitute a serious indictment of our evangelical discipling process. The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it.

I believe part of the problem is our tendency to give an unbeliever just enough of the gospel to get him or her to pray a prayer to receive Christ. Then we immediately put the gospel on the shelf, so to speak, and go on to the duties of discipleship."

(p. 46, The Discipline of Grace)

This is from Ch. 3, entitled "Preach the Gospel to Yourself," which is a phrase he attributes to Jack Miller. The phrase is repeated as he develops the thesis of the book.

54. "It seems desirable to ascertain, as precisely as we can, the reasons why Christians commonly are of so diminutive a stature and such feeble strength in their religion. ... Are there not some practical mistakes very commonly entertained, which are the cause of this slowness of growth? I think there are ...

First, there is a defect in our belief in the freeness of divine grace. To exercise unshaken confidence in the doctrine of gratuitous pardon is one of the most difficult things in the world; and to preach this doctrine fully without verging towards antinomianism is no easy task, and is therefore seldom done. But Christians cannot but be lean and feeble when deprived of their proper nutriment. It is by faith that the spiritual life is made to grow; and the doctrine of free grace, without any mixture of human merit, is the only true object of faith. Christians are too much inclined to depend on themselves, and not to derive their life entirely from Christ. There is a spurious legal religion, which may flourish without the practical belief in the absolute freeness of divine grace, but it possesses none of the characteristics of the Christian's life. It is found to exist in the rankest growth, in systems of religion which are utterly false. But even when the true doctrine is acknowledged in theory, often it is not practically felt and acted on. The new convert lives upon his frames rather than on Christ, while the older Christian is still found struggling in his own strength and, failing in his expectations of success, he becomes discouraged first, and then he sinks into a gloomy despondency, or becomes in a measure careless. At that point the spirit of the world comes in with resistless force. Here, I am persuaded, is the root of the evil; and until religious teachers inculcate clearly, fully, and practically, the grace of God as manifested in the Gospel, we shall have no vigorous growth of piety among professing Christians. We must be, as it were, identified with Christ--crucified with Him, and living by Him, and in Him by faith, or rather, have Christ living in us. The covenant of grace must be more clearly and repeatedly expounded in all its rich plenitude of mercy, and in all its absolute freeness."

(pp. 165,166, Thoughts on Religious Experience)
55. "Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. In order for a pure and lasting work of spiritual renewal to take place within the church, multitudes within it must be led to build their lives on this foundation. It is true that justification can only be appropriated on the ground of our union with Christ. But we cannot be in the light about our union with the perfect righteousness which covers our sin without simultaneously being in the light about the power available to transform our lives and displace our sin. We cannot be in union with half a Christ, as the Puritans would say. We must appropriate a whole Christ if we are to remain in light and thus in spiritual life. There is a deep and indissoluble connection between our appropriation of justification and our experience of sanctification. (p. 101,102,103)

56. Dr. Jack Miller also writes convincingly of the integral link between believers applying the gospel to their own lives, and the effective witness of the Church to unbelievers. Cf. Outgrowing the Ingrown Church (Zondervan, 1986)

57. For example, I have been particularly fond of using the picture of the baby as he begins to walk. Invariably the baby falls down—but we consider that progress. When we fall down spiritually, I believe we need to see that as progress too, particularly as we come to repentance. We are ashamed of our sin and weakness, but at the same time it is only during those times that we begin to learn the meaning of God's fatherly love, and the reality that we are truly saved and kept by grace alone.

58. Cf. ch. 4-8 of The Discipline of Grace by Jerry Bridges. Following a chapter explaining what he calls "dependent discipline," the author outlines five disciplines that are basic to sanctification. But in every case, he brings the matter back to our sufficiency in Christ alone.

59. "As Romans 6 makes clear, the ground of sanctification is our union with Christ in his death and resurrection, in which the old nature was destroyed and a new nature created with the power to grow in newness of life. The Holy Spirit begins to apply this completed work in the believer's life at regeneration and continues it in a progressively enlarging sphere of renewal in the personality. This renewal will be complete only in the final resurrection." He then deals with regeneration as a sub-point of sanctification. p. 104, Dynamics of the Spiritual Life.

60. Dr. Harvie Conn of Westminster Seminary was kind enough to review my original paper. I am pleased to be able to add some of his remarks, which seem to fit well at this point.

"In fact, does that element of process, an eschatological one as I see it, not touch richly so many other biblical categories (e.g. adoption, Rom. 8:23, conversion, I Thess. 1:9-10)? It is the 'already/not yet' dimension, is it not? We have already received through the finished work of Christ our adoption as the children of God (Rom. 8:14). But we still wait for its consummation at his second coming (Rom. 8:23). And, in that sense, Paul can speak of "the redemption of our body" as our yet to come "adoptive as sons" (Rom. 8:23). Our conversion, our turning from idols to serve the living God (the 'already') will not be completed as a process until our 'waiting for his Son from heaven' (the 'not yet'). So too, even a term like 'regeneration' can be used to describe the eschaton of God (Matt. 19:28).

Does this whole emphasis on salvation/conversion as an eschatological process not then fit in well with Steve's helpful insight into discipleship as a "whole process"? And, if I remember correctly, is this not a helpful corrective to the post-Reformation shift from process to single act that has characterized particularly the Arminian emphasis--and, to some degree, the Reformed? (see my essay, 'Conversion and Culture,' in Gospel and Culture, John Stott and Robert Coote, eds. Pasadena:William Carey Library, 1979, pp. 196ff)

In terms of the cure of souls, this could also be a valuable insight. Thinking of our 'already/not yet'
life in Christ here as a process that does not end till we are there with him in glory should remind us that entrance into his kingdom is not a 'cheap grace' quickie nor is it a sealed envelope that we cannot open till we get there. It is a call to perseverance and an assurance of preservation.

61. A colleague in ministry, Ed Satterfield, first raised the issue with me about why we think the work of the Spirit in effectual calling ends with conversion. It is an excellent description of sanctification as well.

62. The impossibility of meaningful Christian growth apart from commitment to the Church--the community where we properly receive the sacrament--is outside the scope of this paper. But there should at least be recognition that sanctification is never presented in Scripture as an individual quest. We must grow together in Christ in the setting of a particular congregation.

63. p. 15, 21, Lifestyle Discipleship. Petersen is very perceptive about the needs of our culture, and the basic needs of both Christians and nonbelievers in our day.