

Born of God
1 John 5:1–4
July 16, 2017

George Whitefield, the English evangelist during the 18th century Great Awakening, had as his principal theme *the new birth*. His sermon entitled, “On the Nature and Necessity of our Regeneration or New Birth in Christ Jesus,” served as an instrument of spiritual awakening in London, Bristol, Gloucester, and Gloucestershire. What we might think normal for preaching in that era was not. The respectable Church of England clergy didn’t entertain that message [*George Whitefield’s Journals*, 86]. So powerful and so disrupting to the deadness of the religious climate, some communities banned Whitefield from preaching because, as he put it, “because I insisted upon the necessity of the new birth” [232]. Why did he insist upon preaching the new birth? He would have said, quoting the words of Jesus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Yet this message of the new birth has from time to time appeared absent in many churches, which accounts for the spiritual deadness of those congregations. Apart from the new birth we cannot know God.

I scarcely heard a sermon on the new birth while growing up. Generally, if it happened, a guest preacher addressed that theme. I would dare to say that probably very few people in my community could have explained the new birth. But a few years after coming to faith in Christ, virtually everyone in America became familiar with the words “born again.” Two events made that term current, whether understood or not. One was presidential candidate Jimmy Carter who claimed to be not just a Christian but “a born again Christian.” The other served as a title to a book by President Nixon’s so-called ‘hatchet man,’ Chuck Colson, *Born Again*. Colson chronicled his story of idolatry to the political achievements he pursued, his conviction for obstruction of justice, his conversion, seven months in an Alabama prison, and the journey *because of the new birth* that took him in a completely different direction.

Even with that exposure, most people did not understand what it meant to be born of God. But that truth is central to the gospel. *To be a Christian is to be born of God*. That’s what John insists in our text. But what did he mean by being born of God?

1. What does it mean to be born of God?

While John gives lengthy treatment of the new birth in his Gospel, here, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out, he takes for granted that his readers are “perfectly familiar with the doctrine of regeneration and rebirth” [*Life in God*, 10]. So he need not give details, as Jesus did when explaining the new birth to Nicodemus. What did Jesus tell the Pharisee about the new birth? He could not enter the kingdom of heaven without it. It’s a distinctly new life, and a spiritual rather than physical birth. The new birth is as mysterious and sovereignly wrought as the wind suddenly blowing. So John can just mention, “everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him” (1 John 2:29); “no one who is born of God practices sin” (1 John 3:9), until he gives more explanation in this text. What does it mean to be born of God? Our text identifies at least four explanations.

(1) In the new birth, God has acted upon you in sovereign mercy

It's important that we get the language clear in this text. The reason that I'm insistent on looking at it is because some people treat the new birth as something that they can make happen by good persuasion. Or they think that they can lead someone in a prayer *in order to* be born again. But that's not how John saw it.

Jesus told Nicodemus that the new birth is as mysterious and sovereign as the wind blowing, "so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). So the new birth is not something that we do in order to obtain it, as though obtaining a new status like someone who has a driver's license or a visa to visit another country. *Birth language* is critical. Not one of us did anything to cause ourselves to be physically conceived and born. Nor do we do something to cause God to act in order to grant us the new birth.

Notice how John explains it. **"Whoever believes** [lit. "goes on believing"—present tense] **that Jesus is the Christ is born of God** [lit. "has been born of God"—perfect tense]. In other words, believing follows as evidence of what God has sovereignly done in regenerating us. He regenerates us, births us, or brings us to life and the natural response as those who have been "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1) upon coming to life is to believe the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Bible consistently gives glory to the Lord God alone as the sole actor in our salvation. Theologians use the term *monergism* to explain that God worked apart from us (so not *synergistically*) to save us. That's why we react strongly to those who try to add any kind of work into the saving act. "By His doing you are in Christ Jesus." It's God's work "so that no man may boast before God" (1 Cor 1:29–30). Lloyd-Jones is right: "The first thing we must get rid of is this idea that what makes us Christian is anything that we have produced or anything for which we are responsible" [12]. That affects our obedience, worship, and attitude of heart in knowing that salvation is wholly the work of God. Then he adds, "There is nothing, in a sense, that seems to be so contrary to the New Testament teaching as the suggestion that as a natural man I believe and because I believe, I am given the rebirth. The dead cannot believe; the natural man cannot" [17].

So does that negate human responsibility? On the contrary, the new birth makes the human responsibility of repentance and faith *certain*. God birth us and we respond.

(2) In the new birth, God has enabled you to trust in His Son

Here's where the language is so clear. **"Whoever goes on believing** [present tense] **that Jesus is the Messiah, he has** [already] **been born** [perfect tense] **of God**" [my trans.]. The new birth precedes faith. How else do dead men believe? John Stott explains, "The combination of present tense . . . and perfect is important. It shows clearly that believing is the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth. Our present, continuing activity of believing is the result, and therefore the evidence, of our past experience of new birth by which we became and remain God's children" [TNTC: *The Epistles of John*, 172]. Charles H. Spurgeon agreed. "Faith in the living God and His Son Jesus Christ is always the result of the new birth, and can never exist except in the regenerate" [cited by C. Vaughan, *FSGC: 1,2,3 John*, 114, from CHS, *The Treasury of the New Testament*, 4:579]. Howard Marshall stated that faith, as well as love, is a sign of the new birth [NICNT: *The Epistles of John*, 226].

So how do we know that God has supernaturally, sovereignly birthed someone into His family? They go on believing that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah). In other words, they

don't just *believe*. They believe specifically in this Jesus who was promised after the fall (Gen 3:15), promised to Abraham (Gen 12:3), and declared by the prophets (e.g. Isa 9; 11; Micah 5) to be the Messiah sent by God as Savior and King (Psa 2; 110). He is the One announced by the angel Gabriel (Matt 1:18ff.; Luke 1:26ff.), came in the flesh through his birth of the virgin Mary, lived a sinless life, and then died an atoning, wrath-absorbing death on our behalf at the cross. But death could not contain Him, for in three days He rose from the dead as the Conquering King that delivers us from Satan's domain and transfers us into His own Kingdom (Col 1:13). Those born of God keep believing in Jesus Christ. We might struggle at times, stumbling along the way, but our sight and confidence turns to Christ once again. We cling to Him alone as our hope and life. If you're born again you keep believing in Jesus.

(3) In the new birth, God has distinguished you as His child

We see this by the nature of *begetting*. The same word is used forty times in Matthew one in the series of *so-and-so was the father of so-and-so* that John uses for God birthing us into His family. **"Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father** [lit. "loves the one who begets," where *gennao* was used of the one fathering children] **loves the child born** [perfect passive, so God acts to birth the child and nothing can change that relationship] **of Him."** How much clearer can it get? If you're born of God you are His child. Just as the genealogy section in Matthew one traces the lineage of Abraham down to Christ, with fathers begetting sons, even so, God has begotten you into His family. You and I are not the "only begotten" (*monogenes*), which title belongs only to Jesus, but we're His through the new birth.

So with God as our Father, He passes along the *family traits* to us. What theologians call the *communicable attributes of God*, e.g. love, holiness, kindness, joy, etc., He gives to us so that we become more and more like our Father.

One of the things that we do when visiting the hospital after the birth of a little one is to try to decide whom the child looks like. Of course, visiting grandparents most always think that the child looks like their child! Over time the resemblance becomes distinct. In the same way, as we walk with the Lord, the certainty of the new birth means that we become more and more like the children of God. If John can tell us, "Beloved, now we are children of God," and then declare that ultimately, "we will be like Him," then it seems apparent through the new birth we become more like the Lord our God (3:3).

(4) In the new birth, God has given you a new life

John adds, **"For whatever is born of God** [lit. "has been born of God"] **overcomes** ["keeps on overcoming"] **the world."** *Overcomes* is a strong term expressing victory or conquering. The certainty of the new birth is found in the new life that grows in conquering the desires and ambitions of the flesh. **"Overcomes"** is another present tense verse indicating the progress and continuance of overcoming. We don't overcome overnight. We grow in Christ, grow in setting our affections on Him, grow in repentance, grow in personal spiritual disciplines, grow in disciplining ourselves for the purpose of godliness, grow in holy living, grow in conquering selfishness and pride and laziness.

As new creations in Christ, the old life keeps getting put aside and the newness of life in Christ continues. When we first come to faith in Christ, initially we put off some old habits and patterns—maybe with struggle, maybe with joy. But the more we grow, the

more we see patterns of sins ingrained that we didn't even realize before. Those become more stubborn adversaries to uproot, and by the grace of God, we persist until we overcome. Some of those things we battle until the Lord calls us into His presence. But we do not give up as those fighting to overcome. And how do we do that? There is one reason: we believe that Jesus has ultimately conquered every sin and foe at the cross. **"And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith."**

2. What does it look like when we're born of God?

Let's consider five declarations in this text that helps us focus on living as those born of God.

(1) We keep believing in Jesus as the Messiah

"Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." Our believing doesn't stop at the baptism. We go on trusting in Jesus as the Messiah, that is we keep living in the revelation of God in Christ. We're gospel people, as those living in the realities of the new birth. We live in the sight of that empty, bloody cross and empty tomb, knowing that the foundation for each day rests in Jesus Christ who conquered on our behalf. We learn more and more that Jesus finished the saving work, so we're not living to merit anything from God, but living as those filled with gratitude that He had mercy on us. John's present tense, **"Whoever believes,"** is the cure for the empty, half-hearted professions of Jesus that fizzle within a few days or weeks.

Think of how John has already stated what this believing entails. We know the truth in Christ (2:21). We believe that Jesus is the Christ (2:22). We confess together with the apostles that Jesus is the Son of the Father (2:23). We live in His commandment to believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ (3:23). We do not believe the spirits, knowing they are false, but we test the spirits to see whether they are from God. Consequently, we reject the false teaching that denies that Jesus has come in the flesh (4:1–2). We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world (4:14). We confess that Jesus is the Son of God (4:15). We've come to know and believe the love that God has for us in sending His Son (4:16). We believe the testimony that God has given of His Son (5:9–10). We believe that life is in the Son and without the Son no one has life (5:11–12). The new birth keeps us believing in Jesus.

(2) We keep loving God as Father

". . . and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments." Just as a child loves her parents, even so those born of God love the Father who was pleased to birth us into His family. Is that a perfect love? No, certainly not. Do we sometimes disappoint ourselves in our failure to love? Yes, we certainly do. But here's a more helpful question. Has our love for the Father grown over time since we were born of God? A little baby loves his parents as long as those parents are paying attention to him, feeding him, keeping him dry, carrying him, etc. But if something does not suit him, he quickly complains to the parents. Where is his gratitude? Where is his cherishing love? It's hidden beneath his immaturity. But the more he matures, the more his love matures, the more he's grateful for his parents, the more he enjoys being with them and talking with them.

But there's a parallel to loving God that we must never separate.

(3) We keep loving those born of God

“. . . whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments.” So as those born of God, we love those whom He births into His family, and further, keeping in mind the present tense of the verb, we keep on loving the children of God. It's something that we naturally give attention to as those supernaturally born of God.

Calvin aptly wrote, “There is never a true love to God, except when our brethren are also loved” [*Calvin's Commentaries*, 22:252]. John has already told us that if we make great profession of loving God but do not love our brother, then we're liars. If we don't love those we see we cannot love God whom we cannot see (4:20–21).

Yet it's easy to love at a distance. It's much more difficult in the brokenness of life and messiness of relationships to love one another. That tests our patience, forgiveness, kindness, tender-heartedness, gentleness, and other relational qualities. But that's where—and often how—we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. As those in the family of God, we learn to live with each other. We give attention, as Paul told Titus, “to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men” (Titus 3:2). We seek to let no unwholesome words slip off the tongue but rather words of edification. We seek to put aside all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice, while being kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving to one another, just as God in Christ has done for us (Eph 4:29–32). An unwillingness to live in this way is a rather striking indication that such a person has never been born of God. For it is only through faith in Christ (going on believing the gospel) that we can love one another.

(4) We keep doing God's commands

Using two different verbs, John urges obedience to God's commands as the very essence of love. We might stiffen a bit at such a thought, but that's only because we tend toward thinking of love as a sentiment and affection rather than what it is, servant-hearted action toward others. Even the 2nd table of the Law focuses on obedience to God in loving others. **“By this we know that we love the children of God,”** and we stop, waiting for feelings described, but what does he give? **“When we love God and observe [“do”] His commandments.”** He adds, **“For this is the love of God”**—and so the love of God shown to others—**“that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.”** If we cringe at obedience then we know nothing of the new birth. God's commandments are not **“burdensome”** or ‘irksome,’ rather, as Marshall explains, “They are not beyond our ability to keep” [228]. That ability is rooted in the new birth. While the commands of the scribes and Pharisees were “heavy burdens” that they laid on other's shoulders, what Jesus commands is “light” since we're yoked with Him in our obedience (Matthew 23:4; 11:29–30). That doesn't mean that we don't have to fight ourselves to obey. That's part of personal discipline. But it means that God gives grace for those He has birthed into His family to walk in obedience to Him.

(5) We keep overcoming the world

“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” The victory that overcomes the world points to a

particular time, likely conversion. From that point, walking by faith, we journey through a hostile world that attempts to keep us from glorifying God and enjoying Him forever [MLJ, 36, description alluding to the first question of the Shorter Catechism]. But the new life in Christ urges us on even when we falter and fail. Our faith gets stretched and tested but rooted in Christ, we make progress toward the day when we walk no longer by faith but by sight in the presence of Christ's glory (1 John 3:1–3).

Have you been born of God?