

Born From Above - A solution to the mystery of the New Birth (part 2)

The theology of the New Birth (also called “regeneration”) has divided Christianity since the Reformation. For 1500 years traditional Christendom has believed that the New Birth occurs in baptism, the so called “baptismal regeneration”. During the early Reformation, Martin Luther continued with this conception, and the Lutheran Church still teaches baptismal regeneration. But since Calvin there have been other possibilities on the theological skyline: hardcore Calvinists believe that God causes regeneration to make a person believe, and from that faith and everything else follows. Other Protestant denominations affirm that regeneration occurs the moment a person believes, when someone puts his trust in Jesus Christ. That which once was a given explanation of the New Birth, would come into question by serious debate on the Protestant side of Christianity. And since, the New Birth has become a mystery again for most people.

The Kingdom of God is another highly debated part of Christian theology. For 1800 years the biggest part of the church has believed in the Amillennial view of the kingdom of God. According to that view, the Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom inaugurated when Christ received his throne in Heaven after his Ascension. But then, in the 1830s, John Nelson Darby introduced Dispensationalism to the world, and since that day the majority of the evangelicalism holds that we are still waiting for the Kingdom, which will be established at Christ’s second coming, when he will begin his reign from Jerusalem for a thousand years. Division on the theology of the Kingdom has obscured what once was a clear teaching and has plunged a lot of christians into confusion about God’s Kingdom.

The question of the New Birth and the question of the Kingdom are closely related, as the words of Jesus make abundantly clear: *“No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”*, says Jesus in John 3. The spiritual birth is necessary to enter - or even see – the Kingdom of God.

There is one promise of Jesus that has to do with both the Kingdom and the New Birth. Jesus said to Peter: *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* (Matthew 16,19). In Catholic theology, these verses historically have been interpreted as Christ making Peter the head of the church. From there they reason towards the Papacy and centralized authority of the Catholic Church from Rome. Eastern Orthodoxy has denied such centralization, and it is still one of the big differences between Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. What did Jesus mean when he “gave” Peter the keys of the kingdom? I believe the answer is right there in our Bibles. When I discovered it I was amazed that no one ever told me about it.

What I want to argue for in this piece, is that the three mysteries come together and are being revealed through the events that happened at Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on the disciples of Jesus, after which Peter preached about the Kingdom of Heaven having been inaugurated by Jesus taking His throne in heaven. He tells his Jewish listeners that they can be saved through repentance and waterbaptism, after which he promised them the gift of the Spirit. 3000 Jews believed and got baptized, and a new nation was born, The Church, which marked the beginning of the Kingdom’s warfare to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

Peter had been given the privilege to “use” the keys of the kingdom to open up the understanding of his listeners to the establishment of the Kingdom – Jesus, the king, now reigning from heaven. Through Peter’s speech, he communicates the Kingdom to the listening Jews.

But Peter not only opens the Jews eyes for being able to understand Kingdom reality, he also tells them *how to enter* the Kingdom. He tells them to repent, be baptized, so that they would also receive the Spirit, whom the disciples had received.

Opening up the Kingdom is the one thing that Peter clearly did on that first Pentecost. But by doing so, what he also did is revealing the mystery of the New Birth. He told those Jews then (and every bible-reading person since) how they could be born again. Remember at Jesus said that the New Birth is necessary to enter the Kingdom. Well, if Peter tells people how to enter the Kingdom, he is also telling them how to be born again. This is the central argument of this piece: to be born again one has to have faith, repent, be waterbaptized and then the Spirit will be received.

The “What?” and “When?” of the New Birth

In this piece we will equate the “New Birth” with the term “regeneration”. A person who is born again is a regenerate person. Those who are not born again we call “unregenerate”.

The question as to when the New Birth happens in the *Ordo Salutis* (the order of salvation) must be preceded by another question. What exactly is the essence of the New Birth? What is the difference between an unregenerate and a regenerate person? Before being able to answer to the question “When?” we must answer the question “What is it?” And here there is actually not a lot of disagreement between the different Christian denominations.

It is generally agreed upon, that a regenerate person is someone, who *has received the Holy Spirit*, and because of that Spirit living inside of him, is a child of God, born into the family of God. Accordingly, that person is forgiven of his past sins, has peace with God, and therefore can be referred to as one who is “saved”. The difference between an unregenerate person and a regenerate person is the presence of the Holy Spirit.

But that must mean that the essence of regeneration is “*receiving the Holy Spirit*”. Regeneration then can be defined as: *the event (or process) of receiving the Holy Spirit*. Many, *if not all*, Christian denominations would agree with that definition. Where they disagree, is on the question: “*When* does regeneration happen?”

There are basically three views on the “When?”-question. Regeneration happens *before* a person believes, regeneration happens *when* a person believes, and regeneration happens *after* a person believes (usually in baptism). Let’s start with the latter view.

Catholicism, along with Eastern Orthodoxy, Lutheranism, and Anglicanism, holds that regeneration happens in baptism (baptismal regeneration). Faith and repentance are the conditions for *adults* who are being converted; *infants* who are baptized, receive regeneration apart from faith or repentance.

Many other Protestant denominations hold that regeneration happens when a person repents and puts his faith in Christ. Repentance and faith are the conditions for regeneration, but baptism is not. Some of these denominations hold to believer’s baptism, where baptism is seen as an outward “sign” of salvation. In their view, salvation and regeneration has already happened because of the believer’s decision to put his faith in Christ. Some of these denominations practise infant baptism; they see baptism as an act of adding the infant to the church, but not at “saving” the infant. Baptism is but a sign of the New Covenant, as circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant.

Calvinists generally hold that regeneration precedes faith and thus only depends on God’s unconditional election. In Calvinist theology, because every human being is totally depraved, he *cannot* make any decision to move closer to God, not even believing the message of Christ. God has to

regenerate the person first, causing the person to have faith and repent. Baptism is the outward sign of a salvation, wrought by regeneration, being solely the work of God.

| "When" is a person regenerated? | Faith/Repentance | Baptism |
|---|------------------|---------|
| Calvinism | X | |
| Other Protestant denominations | | X |
| Catholicism/Orthodoxy/Lutheranism/Anglicanism | | X |

So, generally speaking, there are three distinct positions as to when regeneration occurs. As we will see, there are good arguments for every position from Scripture. We will exegete the most important scriptures concerning the New Birth and discuss their arguments for one of those three general positions on the "When?"-question of the New Birth.

But what can be seen clearly from the theology of the most important denominations in history, is, that they all believe that regeneration is a singular event, which does not take a lot of time. Baptism is an event, which only lasts a few seconds, and if regeneration occurs in baptism, one is forced to believe that regeneration happens almost instantly. Coming to faith in God can be a process, but when those Protestant denominations, that hold to regeneration by faith, argue for their position, they generally speak about a singular event, often called "*exercizing saving faith*" or "*putting one's trust in Christ*". When somebody puts his faith in Christ, regeneration happens, according to them. Calvinistic theology also speaks of the New Birth mostly happening instantly, when God pours His Spirit into the unregenerate person, and raises that person to spiritual life.

Maybe that is why the question of regeneration never has been settled. Different scriptures as to when regeneration happens, seemingly contradict each other, and the believer is almost forced to cherrypick those texts that fit their view best, and accordingly ignore some of the other texts, or force these texts unnaturally into the mold, which they believe to see in their preferred prooftexts. But what if regeneration is not a singular event, but a process? What if the New Birth, the birth unto *spiritual life* is somehow analogous to a *natural birth*? What if there, just as in natural birth, is a moment of *conception*, a period of *growth*, and then the *actual birth*, when the child leaves the darkness of the womb to enter into the light of life outside?

This is exactly what I wish to argue for: *The New Birth is a process*, but one with a clearly marked beginning and end. And in doing so, I believe it is possible to obtain a unified theology of the New Birth, without the contradictions of the views that hold to some kind of "*instantaneous*" regeneration. Through this solution, one will be able to harmonize the passages in the New Testament, that seem to argue for instantaneous regeneration, either *before* faith, *at* faith, or *at baptism*..

One thing I wish to make clear from the beginning. I am not trying to support or prove the theology of a particular christian denomination. That doesn't mean I do not favor some christian traditions more than others, and also outrightly would reject some systems of theology, but I do not want to make that the goal of my piece. I just wish to take a fresh look at what the Bible actually tells us about the subject. But it will surely be the case, that my solutions will lend better support to some denominations than to others, that cannot and also should not to be avoided.

Stages of the New Birth

My basic proposal for the New Birth is, that *The new birth resembles a natural birth*. In a natural birth, there are several stages:

1. *Conception*, when the new life is created in the womb.
2. *Growth*, when the new life is growing but still being hidden in the womb.
3. *Birth*, when the child leaves the womb, and enters the “real” life.
4. *Breathing*, when the the newborn baby’s lungs are filled with air.

Likewise, the New Birth has these four stages:

1. Conception, when a person believes the word of God, the seed of God meets the soil of his heart and spiritual life is created.
2. Growth, when a persons faith in Christ grows, and he starts to change for the good.
3. Birth, when a person decides to turn from all known sin, embrace and follow Christ, and is baptized in water.
4. Breathing, when a person receives and is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Within these four stages we also see four elements, that play a part in regeneration: *faith, repentance, baptism, and being filled with the Spirit*.

The flow of the teaching on the New Birth in John 3 and Acts 2:

The way I understand Jesus (in John 3) and Peter (in Acts 2) revealing the mystery of the New Birth, is as follows:

- Jesus argues for, that to enter the Kingdom of God one needs to receive the New Birth.
- Jesus also tells us that the way to be receive the New Birth (eternal life/spiritual life) is through faith.
- Jesus does not reveal more than that, for these reasons:
 - ➔ The New Birth was not possible yet, because the Spirit was not given yet.
 - ➔ The Spirit was not given yet, because The Kingdom was not inaugurated yet (Jesus was not yet on the throne).
- Jesus postpones the revelation of the mystery of the New Birth by giving Peter the keys of the kingdom.
- After Jesus’ ascension, Jesus sits on his throne in Heaven at the right hand of God the Father, inaugurating the Kingdom of God.
- At Pentecost (Acts 2) Jesus pours out His Spirit on the disciples.
- Peter then uses the keys of the Kingdom to open up the understanding of the jews to the reality of the Kingdom, and he also tells them how to enter the Kingdom of God: by repentance and baptism, after which they also would receive the Holy Spirit and enter the Kingdom.
- 3000 people believe, repent, and are baptized, and receive the Spirit: The Kingdom of God is born.