

## 13 ||| The New Birth

In Galatians, Paul contrasts the fruit of the Spirit and the work of the flesh. The passions and desires of the flesh stand in opposition to the desires of the Spirit of God. The desires of the flesh prevent the fruit of the Spirit from appearing. While the law could not prevent this sin condition, Christ made it possible for people to have victory over sin. Paul says, "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24).

Baptism symbolizes this death of the flesh and the subsequent new life that results from belonging to Christ and being possessed by His Holy Spirit. While the Lord's Supper describes how Christ accomplished salvation, baptism describes how the Holy Spirit applies salvation to those who believe. The Lord's Supper describes how Christ settled the problem of sin and made peace with God, but baptism describes how His sacrifice affects us. While the Lord's Supper focuses on the change in legal standing with God as a result of the law by Christ, baptism focuses on the change in our relationship with God as a result of a spiritual transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit. The Lord's Supper focuses on justification, and baptism focuses on regeneration. The Lord's Supper describes how God sent away the bad: sin and death. Baptism describes how God brought in the good: eternal life.

### Crucified with Christ

Christ's death makes salvation possible only for those who have faith in Him. Baptism served as one's profession of faith in the early church and symbolically represents what Christians believe has happened to them because of the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul explained the meaning of baptism to the Romans:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4).

In baptism, Christians dramatically act out what has spiritually happened to them. They have united themselves with the death of Christ. They have also united themselves with "the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10).

Union with Christ applies His substitutionary death to the believer. The benefit of Christ's death takes effect when one is united with Him through faith. Baptism symbolizes this union. Christ died for all who unite themselves with His death through faith. When we have faith, not only the substitution occurs but also a transference: I die in Christ's death, He lives in my flesh. As Paul explained, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Baptism symbolizes the Christian's faith that his or her guilt and sin nature died with Christ on the cross. He bore my sins and guilt because by faith in Him, I died with Him.

Salvation requires this union and identification with Christ which Paul described as being "in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). The Lord Himself on the night He was betrayed described this saving relationship as abiding in Him. Christ has already experienced death for those who abide in Him. In retrospect, those who abide in Christ have already died with respect to sin and the domination of evil over their lives. Peter said of this experience, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24). Paul also remarked, "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?" (Col. 2:20).

In salvation, the old self with its guilt and domination by the world order dies. United with Christ in His death, the believer experiences the transformation of His resurrection. Baptism represents this death of the old self, for the "old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed" (Rom. 6:6). Baptism also represents the creation of a transformed life resurrected from the body of death:

"Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Both in death and resurrection, the essential qualification for these to affect one's salvation is that one experience them "in Christ." A reflexive substitution must take place in order for Christ to bear our sins and us to bear His life.

Paul clearly described the symbolism of baptism in his Letter to the Colossians. The visual image of baptism focuses on the burial of a dead person. Brought to the grave, the body is lowered into the ground. In baptism, believers are lowered under the water as though entombed. Here they publicly declare that they have shared the death and burial of Jesus who was placed in the tomb. As Christ rose from the dead, however, believers also rise out of the water as testimony of their faith that they share the resurrection of Christ (Col. 2:12-15).

Unless one shares the death of Christ, one cannot share the resurrection of Christ. By uniting in His death, we are reconciled to God in Him who carried our sins to the grave. Unless our sins die with Him as we die with Him, we must bear our own sins. If we do not share His resurrection, we have no power over the tomb. One can hardly rise from the dead with Him if one has not died with Him. This spiritual death and resurrection occur as one unites with Christ through faith. Through this process one puts on Christ (Gal. 3:27) and puts off the body of flesh (Col. 2:11). As a result, Christians should consider themselves "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11).

This reflexive substitution has profound implications for living the Christian life and bearing spiritual fruit. Holy living depends upon knowing that one has died to sin and to the control that sin has over human nature. Holy living depends upon knowing that one has experienced the life-changing power of the resurrection, and this means a new capacity for victory over the temptation and domination of sin. Holy living depends upon "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:10). Holy living depends upon the manifestation of Christ in our lives.

Baptism pictures this experience and dramatically portrays why the death and resurrection of Jesus two thousand years ago have signifi-

cance for someone living today. Baptism in and of itself has no saving significance, but as a vivid enactment of one's experience with Christ, it serves as a point of reference in Christian spiritual life that recalls what happened when one first turned to Christ in faith. Baptism represents one's reliance on Christ through death to life. Rather than corresponding to the washing away of sin, baptism corresponds to the appeal of faith in God: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 3:21). The act of baptism proclaims a new Christian's faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died for our sins, was dead and buried, and who rose again from the dead (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Baptism expresses this essential kernel of the gospel with the conviction that we too may be "raised with him through faith in the working of God" (Col. 2:12).

### Born of the Spirit

In explaining the reflexive character of salvation, Christ declared, "Abide in me, and I in you" (John 15:4). While death to sin occurs as one abides in Christ, eternal life comes through Christ abiding in us. God does not give eternal life as a commodity that one might possess or hold title to. Rather than a possession, eternal life refers to the condition of being possessed by God. Eternal life depends upon belonging to God, and it happens when God takes possession of someone who desires to belong to God.

Christians obtain more than immortality, they obtain Christ, the Source of life: "This is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life" (1 John 5:11-12). Those who pursue life miss it, but those who pursue Christ gain life as the by-product. Paul considered all of the reasons for religious confidence to be of no value and gave up everything that he might "gain Christ and be found in him" (Phil. 3:8-9). Christ Himself is the goal and the prize. Those who abide in Him find that He abides in them.

Christ abides in believers through His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings eternal life by virtue of His presence. Eternal life results from someone receiving the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit. God's presence is the sign that He has forgiven sin and restored the relation-

ship He intended to have with people before creation. The Holy Spirit brings into believer's life the salvation that Christ made possible: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you" (Rom. 8:11). Baptism depicts this giving of life or regeneration that the Spirit accomplishes.

Jesus explained the necessity of regeneration to Nicodemus in the third chapter of John. The conversation has a rather abrupt beginning. Nicodemus saluted Jesus as a great teacher of the law who had come from God as the miracles He performed bore witness. Jesus responded with a statement that does not seem to follow. As though He had not heard what Nicodemus said, or perhaps as though His mind was wandering, Jesus replied, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). The disjunction between the two greetings may be disturbing, unless one recognizes what Jesus was doing.

Nicodemus knew the law well as a leader among the Pharisees and a member of the Sanhedrin court. While Nicodemus wanted to deal with the law, Jesus immediately challenged every presupposition Nicodemus had about righteousness and admission to the kingdom of God. Rather than being drawn into another lengthy conversation about the right way to do religion, Jesus immediately penetrated to the essential problem of the human race and why its attempts at morality always lead to failure. The nature of people prohibits them from fulfilling their own view of righteousness, much less God's view. They have to be changed in their nature. They have to be born again.

In the next chapter, Jesus used the same rhetorical approach when talking with the woman at the well. She raised the question of religious observance. Her ancestors had worshiped on the mountain in Samaria for centuries, but her distant relatives, the Jews, worshiped on the mountain in Jerusalem. She wanted to know which was the right place. Jesus did not answer her question, just as He had not responded to the agenda of Nicodemus. Instead, He challenged her understanding of the meaning of worship:

"You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such

the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:22-24).

A fundamental change must occur in the nature of people before even true worship can happen. People must have a basis for acting in a spiritual way, rather than a fleshly way.

In pursuing the matter with Nicodemus, Jesus stressed the distinction between flesh and spirit. In their natural state, people cannot experience the spiritual kingdom. They cannot enter it or exist in it for "that which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). This dramatic distinction between flesh and spirit serves as a haunting reminder of the plight of humanity: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). The radical separation of the sinfulness of people, referred to as the "flesh," and the holiness of God, the Spirit, appeared in the encounter between God and Moses. Moses desired to see the glory of the Lord, but the Lord told him, "You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live" (Ex. 33:20).

The fact that God went to some pains to allow Moses a glimpse of His afterglow demonstrates that God meant no malice toward Moses. He did not say, "If you look at me, I will kill you." He simply informed Moses of the reality of the curse of sin which forms a barrier between humans and God. Sin cannot exist in the presence of the holiness of God. Some have mistakenly paraphrased God's exchange with Moses to read, "God cannot look upon sin." Actually, God can do anything He wants to do. The problem lies with us. We cannot behold Him. To behold His glory in a sinful state would be like the morning mist that vaporizes in the light of the morning sun. Sin is not just a legal problem that must be set right; it is a problem of the nature of the human spirit that must be changed.

Jesus explained that this radical change in nature is like being "born again" or, as a literal translation of the Greek would read, "born from above." This birth comes through the agency of the Holy Spirit from above. Jesus used water as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, and baptism symbolically represents the transformation that occurs when someone experiences the new birth through the Holy Spirit. In explaining the new birth as the prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom, Jesus said, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot

enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). In verses 6 and 8, however, Jesus did not mention water and only spoke of being born of the Spirit.

The reference to water seems to be in the form of Hebrew parallelism whereby a prophet said the same thing in two ways. An example from the Psalms would be: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me (51:10, KJV). Both lines say the same thing, and "heart" serves as a metaphor for "spirit." This seems to be the way Jesus used water with spirit. He used the same meaning in several other places in the Gospel of John.

In the fourth chapter of John when Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman in conversation beside Jacob's well, He used water to speak of the Holy Spirit as the source of regeneration. He told her: "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Later in John, Jesus carried the metaphor further, and this time John gave the specific explanation of what was meant by water:

"If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive (John 7:37-39).

As a final clue to understanding the symbolic relationship between water and the Spirit in John's Gospel, consider how John the Baptist used the words in the first chapter. John said that he came baptizing with water (John 1:26,31,33), but One was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). Water baptism by immersion symbolically represents the baptism of the Holy Spirit whereby God regenerates a believer.

### **The Baptism of the Holy Spirit**

The use of water to describe the regeneration that comes by the Spirit has its roots in the Old Testament. The baptism of the Holy Spirit fulfills prophecy. In the early part of the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is spoken of in terms of wind or breath. During the time of the prophets, however, God began to reveal the Spirit as bringing life and refreshment, like water in a desert. Isaiah prophesied:

"For I will pour water on the thirsty land,

and streams on the dry ground;  
 I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants,  
 and my blessing on your offspring" (Isa. 44:3).

Ezekiel spoke of the Spirit as a river that flowed from the temple of God which could make the Dead Sea swarm with life, and "everything will live where the river goes" (47:9). Jeremiah spoke of God as the "fountain of living waters" (2:13; 17:13). Joel prophesied about the last days: "It shall come to pass," God declared, "that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh" (2:28). On the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fell upon the church, Peter cited this passage from Joel to explain to the people what had happened. Prophecy was fulfilled.

The baptism of the Spirit is not a subsequent second blessing after salvation, as some have argued. Apart from this experience of the Spirit a person does not belong to Christ. Viewing salvation as only a legal matter has probably led to the error that people can be saved without the Holy Spirit taking possession of them. On the contrary, Scripture asserts, "Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom. 8:9). This error has also led to an emphasis on ecstatic gifts rather than fruit as a sign of one's relationship to Christ and of one's maturity in the faith. This misplaced emphasis seems odd since gifts can be imitated, but fruit cannot be. While every Christian is gifted in some way by the Holy Spirit, only the mature in the faith produce much fruit.

### Conclusion

Baptism represents symbolically how Christians have died to sin in Christ, how they have risen with Christ from the tomb, and how they have been born from above by the Holy Spirit. As water symbolically represents the Holy Spirit, baptism by immersion in water dramatically portrays their faith that God has engulfed them in His Spirit. Baptism serves as a way of proclaiming the message of the gospel because it portrays the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord as well as His gift of life through the Holy Spirit to those who have faith in Him.

Baptism is meant to occur once for a Christian because one's death to sin and rebirth through the Holy Spirit occur only once. Because the new birth has happened, however, baptism supplies a source of comfort and reminds Christians that they have a reason for hope and a basis for spiritual growth. Baptism reminds Christian's that the Spirit

of God dwells within them and that they now belong to Christ. Because baptism also represents the new birth, it reminds Christians that they begin salvation as babes in Christ. Baptism itself reminds Christians that they must grow to maturity in Christ.

Without an understanding that salvation involves more than one's legal standing with respect to sin, a Christian has no real basis for growing in the faith. If salvation only means forgiveness of sins, then sanctification with its growth in holiness has no basis. On the Day of Pentecost when Peter preached the first gospel sermon, however, he made the point clearly that salvation also involves the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who applies the forgiveness and changes the nature of the people Christ has justified: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Because we have been crucified with Christ and have risen with Him to walk in newness of life, the flesh no longer has the same power over us. *Flesh*, one should note, does not refer to one's physical nature but to one's sinful nature. God created the physical body good. *The flesh* refers to the corruption of the human nature, but Paul reminds us that "you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you" (Rom. 8:9).

Baptism represents what has happened to release a Christian from the corruption of sin. Obedience to the law does not create the change. Rather, the change now makes obedience to God a possibility. Because "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24), Scripture instructs us, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions" (Rom. 6:12). He has recreated us to grow a different way.