

THE DIVINE OBSTETRICIAN

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Ask any obstetrician, he's got the best job in the world, delivering babies and making moms and dads happy. There's something new, fresh, innocent, delicate, and exquisite about a newborn. Now can an old geezer come out looking brand new and that everyday?

Now comes an astounding new scientific discovery, reports a *NY Times* article, that offers us a good news window on John 3:4, Nicodemus's question, "How can a person be born when he is old?" A team of American and Swedish scientists report they have found positive evidence "for the first time" that old people grow new brain cells, "overturning years of conventional wisdom." "The new growth was discovered in the hippocampus, the center of learning and memory in the brain . . . it's called neurogenesis. . . . Cells were in fact dividing and producing new mature neurons as well. . . . This process continues until death. . . . Things we thought were ending are not ending," says Dr. Fred Gage, of Salk Institute.

When does one start getting "old"? When you're 7 or 8, because already deep neurological paths have formed, creating selfish, loveless thought and emotion patterns and addictions that continue through life unless a new life develops that Jesus calls being "born again." Now comes the scientific underpinning that helps us believe what the Bible has said all along—you can repent at any time you

are willing to choose to respond to the Holy Spirit. He never gives up on you! Biggest problem that humans have: learning how to love when you don't know how to love, when the delicate mental and emotional processes have been stunted or cauterized in childhood and youth, and you think "It's no use! I can't change!" The solution is simple: "Look," "behold what manner of love (agape) the Father has bestowed upon us" (1 Jn. 3:1). In so doing you begin to "comprehend . . . the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of the agape of Christ" (Eph. 3:14-19). That simple choice to "look" and to "comprehend" starts the new cells growing, and things you thought "were ending" are just beginning. You are learning agape revealed in Christ. You begin to "comprehend" the seven steps He took in coming down still lower until He reached where you were (apart from His grace) in hell itself—"even unto the death of the cross" (see Phil. 2:5-8). You see agape portrayed more vividly than you saw the tsunami on the screen. And then "the agape of God is shed abroad in [your] heart by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5). Great good news!

In going through the four Gospels, I find that only once did Jesus say we "must" experience something, and then it turns out to be something we can't "do." He told Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again" (Jn. 3:7). And in only one other place in the New Testament are we told we "must" do something, and that is Hebrews 11:6 where we are told, "He that cometh to God must believe that He is . . ." And when the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" they answered,

“Believe . . .” (Acts 16:30). Were they teaching the heresy of “only-believism”?

First, let’s face reality: John 3:16 does not list all the things we must “do” in order to “have everlasting life.” It plainly says, “Believe.” So, was Jesus teaching “only-believism”?

Secondly, when Hebrews 11:6 says we “must believe” it is stating the one and only thing Scripture tells us we “must” do. “The Scripture cannot be broken” (Jn. 10:35). We can’t force the Bible to teach salvation by faith and by works; it teaches salvation “by grace through faith,” “faith which works” (Eph. 2:8, 9; Gal. 5:6).

Thirdly, our English Bibles translate what Jesus said in John 3:7 as “You must be born again.” To me that word “must” has come across as a demand that I must do something, and unless I do it, I won’t even be able to “see” the kingdom of God, let alone “enter” it. The problem is that I don’t know how to do the something that I must do.

Evangelists have told me, three things: (1) Study, (2) Pray, (3) Witness. But how can I know that I have studied, prayed, witnessed, enough? Am I to think of Jesus as demanding that I do something I don’t know how to do? And if I can’t do it, He pulls a trigger?

When Jesus says we “must be born again,” He is not talking about a program of works. Can’t be; nobody can “born” himself (forgive me!)—or give birth to himself. We must be born, passive voice of the verb. And who does the conceiving and “giving birth”? Jesus says in verse 8, as you can’t tell where the wind comes from or goes, “so is

everyone that is born of the Spirit.” It is He who conceives in you the new life and gives birth to the new heart; you welcome the new birth, you let it happen, you stop the abortion practice you’ve been doing all your life prior. Call it cooperation if you wish, but please don’t think of it as being 50% your own Saviour. You cooperate by letting Him do His blessed will in you. And when all is done at last, to Him alone will you give all the glory.

Should one be worried about whether he is “born again”? The answer is No. But should one be seriously concerned about whether he is truly converted? The answer is Yes. Right up to the moment when the Sanhedrim condemned Jesus to death, the apostle Peter was dead sure he was well converted. When Jesus told him Thursday night that he was not, he became upset, and loudly protested his being thoroughly “born again.” In his conscious understanding, he sincerely believed he was already “converted,” but when a mere lass (probably an attractive one) challenged his identity with Christ, his unconscious motivations took over and he denied Christ with vile cursing and swearing (Mt. 26:74). Peter did not know himself! One can be very highly educated and know a lot of things—yet not know that.

And who is “Peter”? Anyone who belongs to the seventh church of world history, “the church of the Laodiceans” (Rev. 3:14-21; well, more particularly, anyone who is part of “the angel of the church,” its leadership). Jesus tells us frankly that “Peter” is indeed our patron “saint”: “You say, “I am rich, have become wealthy [by some assumed historical

enrichment!]. and have need of nothing,”—and do not know that you are [the one of all the seven, Greek, ho] wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked,” strutting around on the stage of the universe and of the world—“naked.”

Poor Peter made a fool of himself, thinking he was “rich” in his born-again experience and knowledge. He even argued with the all-knowing Lord, contradicting Him as if to say, “Lord, You don’t know me! Give me a chance, and I’ll prove to You that I am the most devoted follower You have! I’ve been (a) baptized, (b) ordained to the ministry, (c) have cast out devils in Your name, (d) finished my 3½ years Seminary training with cum laude under You as Teacher, (e) have my doctoral diploma, (e) I really understand Your gospel and I teach it powerfully. Lord, do You think I need to go back to the spiritual kindergarten and start over and get ‘born again’ again?!! You’re wrong, Lord!” Sadly, the Lord had to tell him honestly, “When you are converted, strengthen your brethren” (Lk. 22:32).

Why should we be “concerned” about our true conversion? Not because of craven fear lest we won’t make it into the kingdom, but for a more important reason: lest in our unconscious selfishness we bring shame on Him in these closing hours of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The best Laodicean in the world can well pray that prayer, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13). Edward R. Sill probably had an even better idea in his heart-wrenching poem: “O Lord, be merciful to me, a fool!”

Is it hard work to be “born again”? We know that we need to be changed from the inside out. Years of being what we are have made us set in our ways, we feel. Our problems are a part of us, through and through, whether it’s lust, appetite, jealousy, or whatever vice has a hold on us. How can we become really different than what we just are?

We can change the color of our hair but how can we change the color of our eyes? If we were born to be short how can we become tall? For a selfish person to become unselfish seems as impossible. And most poignantly, for a lustful, sexually impure person (a rapist? an abuser?) to become pure in heart seems totally impossible—so say our courts of law.

And now here comes Jesus telling us that “except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). To many people it sounds like a death-knell. “I am what I am, and there’s no way I can be different! If only blue-eyed people can enter heaven, I’m sunk for I have brown eyes!”

Sit down and read the whole of John 3. Nicodemus asked precisely the same questions. You’ll be surprised how much better is Jesus’ good news of the new birth than what we have thought it is:

(1) Because of what Jesus accomplished on His cross, the Holy Spirit has become everyone’s new “parents.” When He impregnated the Virgin Mary to bring Jesus to birth, He impregnated everyone with a divine seed of a new life to be formed within. The new birth is not you “birthing” yourself anew (excuse me; we need a new verb); “the wind

bloweth where it listeth,” says Jesus; “so is everyone that is born of the [Holy] Spirit.” He is constantly casting seeds into human hearts, for Christ is “the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (1:9). The “seed” is the Light of Good News in Christ.

(2) Now, don't practice abortion on the new life that the Holy Spirit is constantly begetting within you. Stop resisting Him. If you choose darkness, you set yourself up for judgment.

Why did Christ teach Nicodemus the truth of the most well-beloved and memorized verse in all of the Bible, John 3:16? It must have been because of a deep theological misunderstanding which Nicodemus had regarding God's dealings with the world. Jesus told him, “For God so loved the world.”

Nicodemus believed, as did all the religious leaders and elite of Judaism, that God's covenant with Israel meant that only they were the elect ones for salvation. Nicodemus was the Calvinist of his day. Only the Jews were predestined for eternal life. All the Gentiles were predestined for damnation and destruction.

This theology continues to this day in the great systems of religion including Catholicism and Protestantism. Its Protestant representatives are Presbyterians, Reformed Baptists, Reformed Church, etc.

The other evangelical counterpoint to this is Arminianism which arose during the seventeenth century in Europe which saw the universal dimensions of Christ's death for the world. It teaches that Christ's death was sufficient to

embrace every one, but it is not effective until faith is exercised by the recipient. In other words, Christ offers salvation to all. The atoning sacrifice is an atonement for sin provided one believes. So there is prevenient grace and means by which God has of reaching mankind with the gospel of Jesus Christ, but man must choose to believe the provisional gift. This might be expressed in terms of showing some genuine proffer of building a relationship with God.

However, Jesus taught the pure truth to Nicodemus when He said, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16). Christ is God's gift to the world. This gift has a legal basis in that Christ has been constituted Head of the race; and this gift is voluntary in that Christ of His own volition, motivated by love, pledged Himself as Surety for sinners.

Christ uses a legal term to indicate what this means for the world. “For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.” John 3:17. If the world was condemned by God in sending His Son, then it would be instantly destroyed for its sin. But it does not stand in a judicial state of condemnation for it is not condemned. The extent of this Divine judicial action embraces the totality of the world.

Jesus went on to teach, however, that the present, individual choices with respect to God's gift of Christ, short-circuits God's pardon. “He that believeth on Him is not condemned: but He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” John 3:18. Thus the future day of

judgment for the unbeliever becomes a present reality of condemnation. Nevertheless, the probationer continues to live briefly by the gracious life of God given to him or her; and at any time prior to death or the coming of Christ one may choose life in the Son. John 3:36.

Someone in distress writes: "I understand justification, and I believe the Bible. I have prayed many times for God to convert me, to let me be born again, but I am still the same sinful 'me' I have always been. Why doesn't He answer my prayers?"

Believe that He has answered and He does answer your prayers; believe that He loves you "in Christ;" repent of doubting His faithfulness to you. This is why the Bible says, "Be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). Kneel down beside the distraught father in Mark 9:14-24 (he is crying tears) and pray with him, "Lord I believe; help Thou mine unbelief." You can never perish as you pray that prayer, says someone very wise.

Also, remember that your Savior Jesus Christ was tempted as much as you are tempted to doubt that the Father heard His prayers. Yes! On His cross He cried out in despair, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mt. 26:46; read His entire prayer in Psalm 22).

Maybe also remember that it's not your job to judge yourself, for it's true that the closer we come to Christ, the more unworthy we feel ourselves to be. This is because the more clearly we see and comprehend His righteousness, the more unrighteous we appear to be.

So, what follows? The more of the "new birth" we are experiencing, the more we will want to be "born again," the more hungry we will be for "the bread of life," the more we will want to pray, crying, "Father . . .!" and the more we will feel naked and long to be covered with Christ's robe of righteousness. The closer we come to Jesus, the more we will delight in His holy law and want to obey Him. Sound backwards? But it's true!

You still want some visible evidence that you have been born again? Let's overcome the idolatry of ancient Israel: we are to worship the unseen God. We walk by faith, not by sight. Learning to believe is your only difficult problem. "Fight the good fight of faith."

To "believe" in Christ is to let one's little shriveled up selfish heart be "enlarged" and "quicken" (made alive) to at least begin to "comprehend" the "breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of the love of Christ which "passes knowledge" (Psalm 119:25, 32; Eph. 3:14-21).

It's painful, not because the Lord wants to hurt us, but because we have been "brought forth in iniquity" (Psalm 51:5, "shapen" in it, KJV), and every cell of our souls is egocentric in its being. You sit with legs crossed, your leg "goes to sleep," you lose consciousness in it, it feels as though it is not there; then when it begins to "awake" it tingles with painful feelings. When you're being converted, you're being "born again" and it tingles with painful feelings; it's always painful to be "born," much nicer to stay snug and cozy in mother's womb.

But your Creator and Savior says, “No, come out into the world and face Reality; be what you are; share life with its Author.” The New Covenant gospel assures you that even though you have left the “womb,” you are still as secure in the battlefields of life as if you were still in the womb. The Lord assures you, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5, 6). So, now instead of cozying up in the “womb” you are living by faith. Exciting, but it’s living with Christ.

To refuse to be “born” is therefore the sin of unbelief.

God is not saying that you must do this or do that in order to be saved eternally; but He has to tell us, You must believe: “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe [1] that He is and [2] that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (11:6). Hard work, learning to believe? It will stretch every “muscle” of your soul, but it’s the beginning of eternal life.

“You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:7, 8, NIV).

Surprising as it may seem, the good news is very good: (a) the Holy Spirit does the new-birth work, and (b) He will do it if you don’t frustrate Him. (People who love bad news won’t like this.)

That “wind” is forever blowing seeds of heavenly truth into minds and hearts. No one is wise enough

to tell where they come from, for the grace of God has been working on human hearts in multitudinous ways ever since time began. What parents have said, friends, songs of praise, Bible messages heard or read, sermons, expressions of true love—all can be ways that the Holy Spirit uses to plant “Good News” ideas in the heart.

These “seeds” may lie there deep, unrecognized for years, but they are certain to germinate because each one has within itself the mysterious principle of eternal life. Each “seed” of Good News truth “is the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

Here is another illustration of how the divine word of truth accomplishes its purpose:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:10, 11, NIV).

Christ’s illustration of the wind blowing “wherever it pleases” is a picture of God’s compassionate concern for every person. As surely as you have felt the wind blowing on your cheek, so surely is the Holy Spirit trying to convert you. “God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34, NIV).

It’s exciting, for at times you can almost feel those seeds of truth germinating within your soul like a pregnant woman can feel the baby growing within her. She is thrilled with new life forming. What

greater joy to experience something even more wonderful—"I'm being born again!"

Nicodemus asked a pointed question that troubles every one of us, young or old: "How can a man be born when he is old?" (John 3:4). The word is *geron* in the Greek, from which we get gerontology, the science of growing old. (We get our word "grey" from that! In other words, Nicodemus asked, "How can a grey-haired person get converted!?") Roman Catholic leaders say that if they can train a child up to the age of seven, they have him/her for life. Child psychologists pretty well agree that one forms his patterns of thinking and emotional response by that age. Even a teenager has a decade of habit patterns of neurotransmitters developing a momentum hard to change, so he/she too is "old." If you haven't learned to play the violin well by 12, you'll probably never make it to Lincoln Center.

Now, how can a person be truly converted when he is "old"? The world says, "It's impossible." But Jesus took on Nicodemus, and said a decided "Yes!" to his question, "Most assuredly, . . . do not marvel!" (vss. 5-7). Then He said that this miracle new birth comes about entirely by the work of the Holy Spirit (vs. 8). Nicodemus was right in one respect—you can't re-birth yourself. Jesus hands out no do-it-yourself "be-born-again" kits. Paul got His point when he said, "From first to last this has been the work of God" (2 Cor. 5:18, NEB). God plants the seed of the new birth in your soul like a wind carrying tree seeds far and wide and you "can't tell" how that gospel seed of hope got blown into your soul (see John 3:8), but it will germinate if

you don't step on it and stamp it out. A seed germinating can break rocks and concrete! No human heart is too hard for what the Holy Spirit does therein.

Yes, Nicodemus! when a person is old, he/she can be born again! Jesus said, "Listen!" It happens by looking at Moses's "serpent" lifted up on a pole like the Israelites bitten by the poisonous snakes (vs. 14). The "serpent" represents Christ on His cross. You look and the poison of sin (self-love) is drawn out of your heart. You are born again by believing that love (vs. 16). "By grace you have been saved, through faith" (Eph. 2:8). Perk up, Nicodemus! There's hope.

Obviously, the initial experience of conversion or of justification by faith, is good in itself; but it must deepen and extend throughout the mind and heart until there is no hidden portion that is left unaffected, uncleansed. This is why sanctification is a daily work of the Holy Spirit, requiring a daily surrender to Him, until every nook or cranny of the heart is exposed to the merciless light that shines from the cross of Christ, and every egocentric motivation is made painfully distinct, so it can be repented of. A person may die with that process of being sanctified "wholly" still uncompleted; and we trust that person's soul with the Lord's mercy in the final judgment. But how could any of us "stand" in the final "great day of the Lord" when Jesus returns if there are sinful dark secrets of evil still left in the heart not yet "sanctified wholly"? Wouldn't that bring shame on our Savior, like a good Christian threatening to kill his wife, or saying indecent

words? Thank God we have a new day, today—a new opportunity to be sanctified!

God has inspired His holy word, the Bible, for “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16). But He has not made the Bible difficult to understand! He has promised, “Turn you at My reproof, . . . I will make known My words unto you” (Prov. 1:23).

One of those “words” that He “will make known” unto us is “justification.” Ask Him to! The root idea is to make something that was crooked become straight. On the sixth day of creation week God ended that work; when sin entered planet earth, He turned His infinite power into re-creating sinful human hearts. Justification by faith is the sinner receiving this mighty power of re-creation, that is, the new birth. The sinner’s faith is awakened by his “beholding” the love of Christ revealed in His cross, just as the stricken Israelite bitten by poisonous snakes was healed by beholding, looking at, the brass serpent lifted on the pole.

You watch a hero or heroine in a movie; now spend your time more wisely by “watching” Jesus Christ. “Eat” the Bible story of the cross; turn off your radio, TV, everything; just kneel and patiently, in prayer, read about Jesus straight from Scripture. Wait before Him. God wants to hear a sincere, honest, unhurried prayer. I know; I am as unworthy as anyone, but I know He responds. He loves you as much as He loves me! I have never heard the literal voice of God, but I want to encourage those people who also must confess they haven’t either; the Holy Spirit imparts spiritual life through the

word, the Bible. He wants your faith to be established on the solid rock of Bible truth, not on dreams or impressions or “voices.”

Will the one who is “justified by faith” live in obedience to God’s word? Yes, obedience is the direct fruit of the experience of justification by faith. It has now become your joy.