

The New Birth: What is its Source?

Dear Friends,

What is the source of the new birth? Does it occur by the instrumentality or “free will” decision of humans? Does it occur by the intermediate instrumentality of a man preaching the gospel? These views dominate the Christian landscape in our time, but do they express the truth of New Testament teaching? Jesus did not build His teaching on populist concepts of His time, nor should we build our theology on populist fads of our age. A friend recently raised a thought-provoking idea that has given me seasons of productive reflection on the new birth/salvation spiritual landscape of our time. Humans who examine the ideas of other humans may do so with honesty that reflects Paul’s line of reasoning and the ancient dialectical method of honest reasoning; it attempted to understand and articulate the other person’s ideas so faithfully and accurately that they would congratulate you on your representation of their views. It carefully avoided the common “straw man” argumentation tactic that imposes false ideas onto the person with whom you disagree. In our time many folks who disagree with the New Testament view of God’s sovereign grace in the salvation of sinners accuse those of us who hold this view of being either “antinomian,” (implying that we view sin in the life of a believer as no significant issue since we are not really “under the law but under grace,” or they accuse us of being anti-evangelistic because we do not believe that God uses the gospel as either the cause or the instrument in accomplishing the new birth—as if any other divine use of the gospel is unacceptable), or they accuse us of being “hyper-Calvinistic.” The thought occurs to me as I examine the rather significant variety of theological views, all set forth under the name of “Calvinism,” that many ideas travel under the Calvin banner today that John Calvin and the other Reformers did not hold. The straw man depiction implies that our view of salvation—specifically of the new birth—wholly apart from human instrumentality represents an extreme view that goes beyond both Calvin’s and the Biblical view. First, my response is that, though I respect many of the teachings of Calvin and the Reformers, none of them represents the authoritative basis or standard for what I am to believe about God and Biblical teaching. Secondly, I observe that this straw man accusation misrepresents our view. When we take a “big picture” view of God’s interaction with humanity, especially in terms of His elect, we see two areas of logical activity. One area relates to the new birth and how a condemned sinner in the family of man ends up in eternity in the family of God in heaven. The second area relates to how regenerate (born again) elect live here and now, Biblical discipleship. How do each of these activities occur?

1. Arminians believe that both our eternal salvation and our discipleship (our “time salvation”) are conditional. So we would classify their view as “**conditional-conditional.**” Man is in the driver’s seat and God must follow man’s lead.
2. 3. Determinism, or absolute predestination, holds that both our eternal salvation and our discipleship (our “time salvation”) are unconditional. So we would classify their view as “**unconditional-unconditional.**” In this view God is in the driver’s seat to such an extent as to reject the Scriptures dealing with our responsibility and accountability.
4. 5. The more Biblical view that we represent holds that our eternal salvation is unconditional and our discipleship (our “time salvation”) is conditional. Thus our view is “**unconditional-conditional.**” Those who accuse us of being antinomian or “hyper-Calvinists” attempt to paint us as holding an extreme view significantly beyond their own, painting the philosophical continuum as going from Arminian to their perception of traditional Calvinism to their depiction of our view as antinomianism or “hyper-Calvinism” (I prefer Reformed as a word because most of the Reformers held to a strong view of grace; Calvin did not stand alone in his theology among the Reformers. Further “the doctrines of

grace” is true and less polarizing than “Calvinism.”). In fact on the essential issues of eternal salvation and discipleship, we do not hold the extreme view in the continuum; they do!

6. May God be glorified in our consideration of His method of producing the new birth, Joe Holder

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He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. ([Joh 1:11-13](#))

In the last chapter we laid the foundation for this question. How can a person impose any interpretation onto this lesson that contradicts the clear point that John makes at the end of his commentary in these verses? This birth is of God. It does not occur by family ties. This point rejects a dominant view of many historical Christians that God's family also runs predominantly in certain human families to the exclusion of others. The teaching presumes that if you as a parent are a child of God, your children will also be children of God. In many of these traditions you even baptize your infant children on the basis of your faith being counted for theirs till they become sufficiently mature to profess their faith personally. How did Jesus deal with this idea? Simple; He said that the birth that comes from God does not occur because of blood, of family relationships. Further John's words reject all theological views that presume that the decisive movement in the new birth, in a person's personal salvation experience, occurs because of an act of that person's will. If that person is "flesh," then John rejects the idea outright. And, as if to add emphasis to the point, John concludes his examination of ideas that tend to supplant and contradict the true source of the new birth, God alone, by categorically stating that this birth does not occur by the will of man. If a person is "flesh" (and who isn't?), and if a person belongs to the human race (Does any human not belong to the human race?), his/her new birth does not occur by-or through the instrumentality of-his/her will. When Jesus taught a leading Jewish teacher (Some manuscripts use the definite article "the" rather than the indefinite article "a" in [Joh 3:10](#), indicating that Nicodemus may have been the leading teacher of his day in Judaism.) about the new birth, He carefully chose a word to describe this birth that affirms its true origin. "Again" in this lesson (verses 3 and 7) is translated from a specific first century Greek word whose primary meaning is "from above," not a mere repetition of his natural human birth. Many King James Bibles with center reference columns include a footnote that makes this point. While the view of the new birth that imputes it to any human action, mental or physical, requires a person to see and enter God's kingdom by his personal will, Jesus specifically rejected this idea by stating that the origin of this birth is "from above." He further affirmed this point by reversing the human order of events. Rather than telling Nicodemus that he must first see and enter God's kingdom before he could be born again, Jesus stated that a person must be born again, "from above," before either seeing or entering God's kingdom. Another passage in John's gospel that is commonly misquoted and sadly misinterpreted appears in the Lord's priestly prayer for His own in John seventeen.

"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." ([Joh 17:3](#))

How many times have you heard someone paraphrase this verse by saying that "...knowing Jesus is eternal life"? Notice the order and sequence of the words in this sentence. Jesus did not state that "knowing Him" is eternal life. Rather He stated the same truth that He spoke throughout John's record-and throughout the gospels for that matter. In the second verse He clearly states that He is to give eternal life to as many as the Father gave to Him. Then in the third verse Jesus clarified the point. Why does He give eternal life to all whom the Father gave to Him? He gives them eternal life that they might know him the only true God and Jesus Christ whom the Father sent in Incarnation. Knowing Jesus or God is not the equivalent of eternal life; rather He gives those whom the Father gave to Him

eternal life so that they might know God and Him as God Incarnate. The knowledge doesn't cause the life; divinely bestowed eternal life produces the knowledge. I have quoted below the entire section from John Gill's Body of Divinity regarding the instrument that God uses in regeneration or the new birth. "Fourthly, The instrumental cause of regeneration, if it may be so called, are the word of God, and the ministers of it; hence regenerate persons are said to be "born again by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever", ([1Pe 1:23](#)) and again, "of his own will begat he us with the word of truth", ([Jas 1:18](#)) unless by the Word in these passages should be meant the Eternal Logos, or essential Word of God, Christ Jesus, since *logos* is used in both places; though ministers of the gospel are not only represented as ministers and instruments by whom others believe, but as spiritual fathers;

"though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ", says the apostle to the Corinthians, ([1Co 4:15](#)) "yet have ye not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel"; so he speaks of his son Onesimus, whom he had "begotten in his bonds", ([Phm 10](#))

yet this instrumentality of the word in regeneration seems not so agreeable to the principle of grace implanted in the soul in regeneration, and to be understood with respect to that; since that is done by immediate infusion, and is represented as a creation; and now as God made no use of any instrument in the first and old creation, so neither does it seem so agreeable that he should use any in the new creation: wherefore this is rather to be understood of the exertion of the principle of grace, and the drawing it forth into act and exercise; which is excited and encouraged by the ministry of the word, by which it appears that a man is born again; so the three thousand first converts, and the jailor, were first regenerated, or had the principle of grace wrought in their souls by the Spirit of God, and then were directed and encouraged by the ministry of the apostles to repent and believe in Christ: whereby it became manifest that they were born again. Though after all it seems plain, that the ministry of the word is the vehicle in which the Spirit of God conveys himself and his grace into the hearts of men; which is done when the word comes not in word only, but in power, and in the Holy Ghost; and works effectually, and is the power of God unto salvation; then faith comes by hearing, and ministers are instruments by whom, at least, men are encouraged to believe: "received ye the Spirit", says the apostle, "by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith": ([Ga 3:2](#)) that is, by the preaching of the law, or by the preaching of the gospel? by the latter, no doubt." I copied this quote from the Ages Christian Library's electronic edition of Gill's systematic theology text, pages 1079 and 1080. You will notice that this respected English Christian opened his dialogue with a struggle as to the identity of the true agent in the work of regeneration. However, he quickly and decisively moved from viewing [1Pe 1:23](#) as teaching the instrumentality of the gospel-or of the man preaching the gospel-and settled decisively into the view that the "Word" of God in this lesson refers to Jesus, God Incarnate, the living Word of God, not the written or preached word of God. Gill begins by reasoning that, since God used no intermediate instrument in the first creation-of the natural, material universe-we must conclude that He also did not use an intermediate instrument in the special spiritual creation of the new birth

(Paul refers to our salvation in [Eph 2:10](#) as "...created in Christ Jesus....")

. A couple of chapters back I made passing reference to the common cliché that Jesus' death was "sufficient for all of humanity, but efficient only for the elect." This cliché typically appears in a context-and is offered by folks who hold to the general appeal of the gospel to all humanity. Their normal doctrine is that God "offers" the blessings of the gospel to all humanity on condition that they believe it. It seems obvious that this doctrine considers the possibility that someone not included in divine election might hear the gospel and be convinced of its truth, believing it sincerely and thus gaining final salvation by his personal act of believing and receiving the "offer of the gospel." This view contradicts many passages, but especially

[Re 17:14](#), "...and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful."

In this context John depicts all of the saved who will be "with" Christ at the final day in three descriptive terms. These terms do not look back to their life on earth, but to their present character in their final saved state in heaven. All who are with Him there are chosen! John leaves no basis for a single human being in heaven based on a "free offer" of the gospel to people who were not elect. All who will be with Him there are chosen. The "sufficient-efficient" idea further contradicts the clear character of the gospel in the New Testament. It is not an offer of potential new birth that is contingent on the human response. It is a proclamation of factual truth, of redemption accomplished, of grace enacted, of salvation successfully purchased and bestowed upon God's chosen heirs. Proponents of this idea criticize any who reject their "sufficient-efficient" idea and its "free offer" of propositional eternal salvation by suggesting that any theology that fails to include it becomes antinomian and anti-evangelistic. This objection is a straw man argument built on a false concept of the gospel and a man-centric view of the value of Jesus' death rather than a God-centric view of its value. From every passage dealing with Jesus' redemptive death for the sin-debt of His chosen people, Scripture consistently lays the value and the application of Jesus' blood upon the Father's valuation, not man's. The "free offer" intrinsically leaves the final outcome of the family of God to the human will and to a human being's valuation of the death of Christ. The Biblical view presented in the Biblical gospel proclamation declares that God viewed the death of Christ as fully satisfactory for all the sins of all for whom He died-period! So how do we answer the question, "What is the source of the new birth?" Is it from man or from God? Does man initiate it or does God? Does man provide the intermediate instrument or does God perform it without human instrument? Is it merely a "new beginning" as commonly taught in our age, nothing more than a golden opportunity to change your mind and get a "new start" from God? Is there not a subtle hint in this "new beginning" idea of reincarnation? Birth produces a new life, not a new philosophy. If you have any concerns about this point, visit the maternity ward of any major hospital. Do you see adult human beings in the ward who have adopted a new philosophy of life, or do you see newborn babies who just entered the world? At best this "new beginning" theology avoids the basic concept of the term in the New Testament. At worst it implies that your decision begins to work off your old karma and gives you a new start in a new life. All of the passages that we have examined, along with an extensive quote from a highly respected English Christian scholar from the past, affirm the point that we here make. The origin of the new birth is "from above," from God and God alone. In the dialogue with Nicodemus Jesus characterized the new birth as being similar to the wind that blows without human consent, knowledge or control. He further affirmed its source, "

...so is every one that is born of the Spirit." (Joh 3:8)

He did not tell us that the new birth occurs because of human decisions or actions, merely aided or encouraged by the Holy Spirit. He rather affirmed that the new birth occurs by the direct work of the Holy Spirit. Any form of human instrumentality takes the final and decisive cause and source of the new birth away from God and gives it to man. He decided before creating the material universe who would be in His family out of the family of man. He then took the necessary steps to move all of those whom He thus chose from the family of man to the family of God. To God alone be the praise and the glory for His saving work in new birth!

Elder Joe Holder