

From Faith To Faith

by Robert Brush

“For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” —Romans 1:17

Suppose a hospital did away with its prenatal care unit and its pediatrics department. What if they had no interest in the child's development either before or after birth. "We will devote all of our attention to see to it that new babies are being born," the hospital states. Would those babies be as healthy as they could be if they had supervision and direction throughout the developmental process?

Many churches which emphasize being born again neglect to care for the new life either before or after birth. Most of their pastors would report a high infant mortality rate among converts.

38% of all Americans claim to be born again. Research by George Gallup, Jr. indicates that most of them do not know the basic teachings of the faith. They do not act significantly different from non Christians in their daily lives. The practice of both groups includes cheating, tax evasion and petty theft. Gallup found fewer than 10% of all Americans are committed Christians.

Our generation has reduced conversion to four spiritual laws presented by a high-pressure salesperson. We have not said enough about God's grace at work even before conversion. Wherever you are in the salvation process, God's grace is at work in your life. I'm inviting you to ask yourself what God is doing in your life and what you can do to cooperate with His program.

Grace which precedes salvation

We are sinful and powerless to do good on our own. We need a new beginning. Everything which can be called good in us before that new beginning is the work of the Holy Spirit. God in His goodness brings us to salvation (Titus 2:11). He does not bring full restoration in one broad sweep. Grace comes in smaller intervals which we can absorb. *Prevenient grace* is the grace which goes before or precedes salvation. Sometimes it is also called preliminary *grace*.

Several references in Acts are to God fearing people who worshipped God before they experienced the new birth. The list includes the disciples before Pentecost (Acts 1:14), the Samaritans (Acts 8:14-17), Saul (Acts 9:4-5), Cornelius (Acts 10:2), Jews and proselytes (Acts 13:43), Lydia (Acts 16:14), Apollos (Acts 18:25), and the Ephesians (Acts 19:2-5). In each instance the Holy Spirit led them into a more comprehensive understanding of salvation.

Natural birth/Spiritual birth

The answer the questions of Nicodemus, Jesus used being born as a baby to teach him about being born as a baby Christian. We often quote "You must be born again" (John 3:7) without considering all that is involved.

When does life begin? Life exists in the womb before birth. 'Today expectant mothers can even watch that life move on a screen in their doctor's office.

Paul wrote to the Galatians that he was in the pains of childbirth until Christ was formed in them (Galatians 4:19). Peter called the Word of God a "seed" which leads to the new birth (1 Peter 1:23-the original word was "sperm").

As we hear the Word of God, truth is planted in our mind. And as we hear the Word,. the Spirit of God calls us to salvation. This awareness of the will of God leads to a conviction that we are sinners and unable to do His will.

We are aware that we are guilty and may attempt some feeble reformation of our life. We may start going to church. We may go forward at church and "accept Christ" or even be baptized without yet experiencing the new birth. We are in a pre-birth state like a developing fetus in the womb.

Not only does the Bible use birth to describe the salvation process; Paul uses adoption to explain the same process in Galatians 4:1-7. An underage child represents pre-Christian experience. Although a son, he is treated more like a servant. The child is enslaved by the ways of the world and held prisoner because he breaks God's law.

But when the child reaches a set age there is an adoption ceremony, he receives the full rights of a son and is no longer a servant. God's Spirit assures him of his adoption into God's family.

Let's look in more detail at the salvation process.

STAGE 1

Unaware

Like a fetus having never experienced life outside the womb, we cannot grasp "the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Even after birth, an infant perceives the world is centered in him. He cannot even make a distinction between himself and the rest of the world. Like a newborn child, we are only aware of our own impulses and appetites.

Are you indifferent to God? Are you living only for the here and now? God's word to you is, 'Wake up, Oh sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!' (Ephesians 5:14).

Careless

As children grow older they become more aware of the outside world. They may conform when they are forced to do so, but they have no internal conscience. They are driven by self-interests and will only do what they must do to get what they want in return.

People who are in this spiritual condition are careless. They violate God's law regularly, sinning more or less every day with little remorse. Their spiritual senses are not alert. They are ignorant of God and have no concept of holiness. Those who fall under stage 1 are called in Scripture "natural people." They are unaware of God.

STAGE 2

Awakened

When God gives us a "wake-up call" we become conscious of our sins. We begin to feel sorry because of them. We realize we are in a condition of bondage and fear (Romans 8:15). This leads to a desire for the forgiving and renewing grace of God. The process is called *awakening*.

The Bible tells about people whose alarm clock" went off. The prodigal son woke up in a pigpen. When Jesus looked at Peter just after Peter denied he knew Jesus, Peter was "awakened." Saul got his "wake-up call" on the Damascus Road.

The Holy Spirit may use circumstances such as sickness or the loss of a loved one to get through to us. He may work through the influence of a godly person or the struggles of youth with all its confusion. He may speak to our mind through the reading of biographies or the influence of good music. We may wake up as we meditate or hear a gospel sermon.

Something happens as you are growing up. You become conscious of how important people really are. "Being good" is now important. For the first time ever you think about how other people see you and how they must feel. The world runs according to rules. The desire to please others drives you and when you fail your first response is to justify yourself.

We also sense a growing awareness of God and we really want to please Him. But people often try to please God through "legalism." Legalism is an attempt to earn God's favor through our good deeds. For the legalist, religion consists in keeping the rules we have made about how we should please God.

A certain amount of time must be spent here to develop a conscience, but we are not to remain here. While many Christians accept this condition as the normal Christian life, it is only the servant stage. The Bible makes a distinction between

a servant who works for God and a child of God who is part of God's family.

If this description fits your condition, then you have made progress. Remember that change does not occur without pain. Your discouragement and doubt should not be misread as symptoms of failure. They are signs of life and promise. We do not grow when we are contented. Becoming conscious of your performance is necessary in order to change it.

However, Paul warned that the letter of the law kills (2 Corinthians 3:5-6). Don't get bogged down in legalism. Paul wrote in Romans 7 that the harder he tried to do right, the more conscious he was of his sin. Paul points us to a higher level-life in the Spirit. We will not receive spiritual life until we die to self-righteousness. We will not know resurrection until we have first suffered and died (Philippians 3:10). We cannot bypass conviction.

Guilty

At this state we fear God and make a real effort to obey Him, but we fail over and over. Paul confessed, "When I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (Romans 7:21).

Have you experienced this? I certainly remember when I did! I was under the condemnation of the law. I felt I was a guilty, lost sinner deserving hell. I was scared to death not wanting to do one thing to offend God. I worried whether every move I made met with God's approval. I watched every word I said and condemned myself over the slightest action that did not quite measure up.

The effects of awakening and guilt differ according to personality. With quiet persons, the effect may be slow and gentle. However, with strong personalities, it can be forceful and even sudden. If our sense of right and wrong has become blurred, we may receive a loud wake-up call!

We cannot judge the impact of the Spirit's work by our tears or distressed actions. Some temperaments may appear more deeply convicted, but the impression may be as quickly forgotten.

Other types may show little emotion, but may be driven to overreact. They may become super strict or even despondent. They may go to extremes to make sure every restitution is made. When salvation came to Zacchaeus, the Bible tells that he did what he could to correct the imbalance which his greed had caused. We may need to correct a lie we have told, return stolen property, or replace damaged property. While we must repent and make restitution where possible, we can never remember every sin for which we need to repent. We cannot correct every wrong we have done. Our acceptance with God can never be based on what we do. We are saved by grace through faith. God will give us faith when we turn from sin and turn toward Christ.

We need not seek to duplicate someone else's experience. Testimonies which emphasize "what I had to do to get saved" are misleading. You need enough conviction to turn from sin and to turn toward Christ.

Losing ground

Just when it seems we are making progress things often go from bad to worse. I tried hard to reform my ways, but then under stress and pressure I lost it becoming angry and exploding. Sometimes I used bad language while angry. Under pressure, I told a lie. I would feel guilty and depressed for days, even after I repented. Paul explained, "Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died" (Romans 7:9). With Paul, I could also say, "What a wretched man I am!" (Romans 7:24).

Are you awakened, but attempting to serve God out of fear? God wants to pour out His love. "Love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). John Wesley, an evangelist God used in the eighteenth century, explained, A natural man has neither fear nor love; one that is awakened, fear without love; a babe in Christ, love and fear; a father in Christ, love without fear [notes on 1 John 4:181.

Servant or Son?

John Wesley also said that the distinction between a servant and a son was "a point of no small importance" ["On the Discoveries of Faith"]. In Galatians 4, Paul compares a servant to a son by comparing the old way with the new and living way from the life of Abraham. He makes four contrasts:

1. Those under the old way were not born from above. Ishmael, Abraham's son was born naturally; Isaac was born to Abraham supernaturally.
2. Those under the old way did not have the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our guarantee of an inheritance (Ephesians 1:14). Servants do not have the Holy Spirit and have no assurance (Galatians 4:30).
3. Those under the old way do not see continued growth (Galatians 4:27). Abraham had two wives. I-His wife, Hagar, represents the old way. Sarah, @s other wife, represents the new way. Although Hagar's son, Ishmael, was born first, Sarah's descendants outnumber Hagar's.
4. Those under the old way persecute the new way (Galatians 4:29). When they hear that all their good deeds cannot earn God's favor, they become angry.

Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants" (John 15:15). Seek Christ to give the assurance of salvation as a divine revelation from God. O servant of God press your claim until God reveals His Son in you.

If you are guilty, cry out to God for mercy. All who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21). You can pass from a servant to a son with the Spirit of adoption in your heart crying, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). God will pour out his love into your heart by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). Then, we are no longer under the condemnation of the law.

STAGE 3

The new birth

The final giving up of our efforts to change ourselves, of trying to believe on our own, that final abandonment of ourselves and complete trust in the merits of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection does not come without struggle and pain. When people struggle to find God, they are trying to save themselves, although they may not realize this. Often they are confused over the guilt of sin and they try to reform their life and quit sinning. Sometimes they are encouraged to "exercise" a faith they have not received.

A child will not be born without pain, but when it is ready it will be born. In a final act of faith, deliverance will come'

Many people claim to be born again before they are. The scriptures teach that it is the Spirit who produces the new birth. Through the Spirit of adoption, we become the children of God. 'For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). The baptism by Christ with the Holy Spirit results in our adoption into the body of Christ or the church. As a child of God, we belong because of our relationship, not because of our works.

A born again Christian is filled with the Holy Spirit. According to 'Titus 3:5-6 we are saved by the washing of regeneration "and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior." "And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" as a child of God (Romans 8:9).

For the born again Christian the law of God has been internalized. You may have once done right because you wanted to please other people. Jeremiah 31:33 indicates that God wants to write His law on our heart and Ezekiel 11:19; 36:27 ties this inner principle with receiving the Holy Spirit. The indwelling Spirit leads us to conform to God's law and empowers us to say "no" to sin.

Spiritual retardation

Growth is not automatic. Some do not develop past a certain point. In brain development when a person becomes "stuck" at a certain level he is said to be "retarded." Furthermore, it is possible to lose ground. Psychologists observe that people who cannot accept traumatic events tend to regress-returning to

immature behavior patterns.

Even in some traditional churches people may be awakened to their need.

But where leaders do not understand or accept the new birth, they may be "stuck" and only much later go on to a crisis experience of the new birth.

In churches which pride themselves in their doctrine of salvation, there is also a danger that we mistake human effort for the work of the Holy Spirit. Didn't I start coming to church? Didn't I accept Jesus? Wasn't I baptized? Am I not sincere? Yes, all this can be true without the new birth. Jesus warned that except we are born again we cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5).

Even churches which emphasize a changed lifestyle can have a problem. You might adopt certain standards of the church and even change your conduct. This emphasis on careful living can become a substitute for a real inner change produced by God's work in your heart.

Among certain churches, the awakened state is often confused with regeneration. It is possible to be convicted of sin, to see truths taught in the scriptures, and begin to serve God without the Spirit of adoption. Living in a legalistic state they realize a deeper need. They are taught that they need a second work of grace. When they are given saving faith they sincerely think they have the "second blessing."

So you see, there are two or three ways to get "stuck" or mixed up. We may speed up the process, slow it down, or stop it. In each case, we get out of step with the Spirit and fall into confusion.

Premature deliveries

None of us can respond to God until He calls. When God calls anyone to follow Him that person becomes His responsibility. From the moment we determine to seek God the Holy Spirit will lead and protect us until we are brought into the kingdom.

Everyone is saved who dies seeking God. Our hunger for God shows that God's life is at work in us already. The statement made by Jesus that we cannot enter the kingdom unless we are born again is a general statement usually true under normal conditions. It does not include infants, children, the mentally retarded, or other unusual conditions. Though children are not born again Jesus said of them, "The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14; Luke 18:16). While infants and small children are not born again or regenerated, they are safe within the kingdom of God until they consciously choose to rebel. We are saved until we have enough knowledge to choose to be lost.

The awakened sinner seeking God is under what we call "the preventent grace"

of God. You are safe, however, only while you are seeking God. You must do all within your power to respond to this Prevenient grace. Some "ran well" but became discouraged and development was blocked. It is possible to experience a spiritual miscarriage.

Romans 1:17 tells us that God has revealed in the gospel a righteousness that is "by faith from first to last." Literally it reads "from faith to faith." Preaching "on the discoveries of faith," Wesley exhorted the hearer to "press on by all possible means, till he passes 'from faith to faith; from the faith of a *servant* to the faith of a son; from the spirit of bondage unto fear, to the spirit of childlike love."

Just as God revealed Himself to the world a little at a time, so He reveals Himself in our lives the same way. John divides the family of God into three groups: young children, young men, and fathers (1 John 2:12-14).

It is possible to receive even more grace than we experience in the new birth. We can reach a point of - maturity in - the will of God where the Spirit of God perfects what He has already been developing. "Instead of remaining infants, let us grow up in every respect" (Ephesians 4:14-15). "Let us go on unto maturity" (Hebrews 6:1). It is a mistake for people to claim this perfecting grace, however, when they barely have grasped what it means to be justified by grace through faith.

'In the New Jerusalem," a gospel song about heaven declares that we will continue to 'grow in perfect love in the new Jerusalem." Do not limit the possibilities of God's grace. Wherever you find yourself in this blueprint of God's grace, remember there is more grace for you. Paul wrote that he could pray with joy because he was "confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

FOR FURTHER READING:

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