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THE BIRTH PROCESS

A woman could probably tell you more about this than I can, but birth is a process. It is a singular event, but without the process the event does not happen. After conception, there is a long series of events leading to “the event.” In humans, that takes about nine months. In rabbits it takes approximately one month, and twice that in dogs. For an elephant, being much larger, it takes about 22 months. If physical birth is such a process, then it makes sense that the spiritual new birth is not a singular event, either.

Jesus introduced the concept of new birth to Nicodemus. Nearly the first thing Jesus sprang on him was, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (Jn 3:3) All Nicodemus could understand was physical birth, but Jesus had other ideas.

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (verses 5, 6)

Peter compared the new birth to the growth of a plant. “Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.” (1 Pet 1:23) The word of God, then, is the beginning of the process. Paul looks farther into the process and works backward.

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? ... So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Rom 10:14, 17)

Paul agrees with Peter that the process begins with the gospel. Then one hears the word of God, and that is conception. It is the beginning of the process. But it is only the beginning. There must be growth. After the hearing comes faith.

Faith is the beginning of growth in the process of being born again. It is trust that God is truth. One can watch videos of people bungee jumping. One can understand with the mind that the cord will not break. Faith is when one takes the leap off a bridge when attached to a bungee cord. “He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (Heb 11:6)

Some would say that faith is the point of the new birth. This, however, is only part of the process. A baby grows for up to nine months (in humans), but legally, medically, and even morally, it has not yet been born. There is still more to come before it has been born. Faith is part of the process of new birth, but the process is not complete. A baby who remains in the womb is not born.

For birth to occur, there must be movement from one place to another. Physically, this is, appropriately, known as labor. The baby moves from womb to world. Nor is this an immediate and singular act. Spiritually, this movement can be known as repentance. It is a conscious decision to change from a state of sinning to one of righteousness. “For godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” (2 Cor 7:10) Again, this is not the point of birth because Paul says it is “unto” or toward salvation.

The end of the process is the act of birth. A child is born into the world. Spiritually, a child is born into a new life. If there is a single act in the process that can be called birth, this is it. The new birth into Christ occurs at the act of immersion/baptism.

We are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:4)

Without immersion there is no forgiveness of sin. Without it there is no birth into a new life. It is the end of the process. After birth, one must continue to live in the new world, and a Christian must continue to walk in righteousness. Nevertheless, the process of birth has been completed.

CONTENTS

The Birth Process	1
Galatians, a Summary	2
A Disclaimer	4

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GALATIANS, A SUMMARY

Thomas Wolfe was the greatest author to come out of North Carolina. He was born in Asheville and knew my multiple-great cousin George Vanderbilt, whose estate, Biltmore, is the largest private home in the United States. Wolfe was noted for his semi-autobiographical novels. After he died, his publisher found one last novel which could be said to be based on what Jesus said, "A prophet is not without honor save in his own country." (Matt 13:57) The novel was published under the title, *You Can't Go Home Again*. While that may be true, what is even more true is that you can't go back to somewhere you have never been.

Some people say the book of Galatians was written to convince the readers not to "go back" to the Law of Moses. These readers, however, had never been Jewish and so had never been under the Law. How, then, could they go back to someplace they had never been?

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Instead, the book is written to tell the gentile believers in Galatia that they don't need to add the Law to what they had believed. It wasn't a case of "going back" but of "going beyond." Paul creates a reasoned, almost lawyer-like, treatise about why their faith is sufficient as it is. Perhaps it would be good to outline his argument.

Introduction (Gal 1:1-10)

Paul opens his letter with a greeting that foreshadows his arguments. He is an apostle, not by man but named so by God. He follows with his standard greeting of "Grace and Peace." However, he explains this comes from Jesus, "Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world." (Gal 1:4) This introduces the thought that the grace of God is not earned. Instead it was purchased by Jesus. It is not the Law, then, that saves, but forgiveness through Jesus.

After his greeting, he states the purpose of the letter. He expresses surprise that the people of Galatia "are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel." (Gal 1:6) Why the surprise? Paul had preached in Galatia. He knew the doctrine he had taught, and that it did not include

circumcision for non-Jewish converts. Some people had subsequently taught the Galatians what Paul called a "perverted" or "twisted" gospel. (1:7)

He is so surprised that he tells them twice that they should not pay attention to anyone who would teach something other than what he had taught. He even warns them that if he were to come again and preach a different gospel they should ignore even him.

Authority (Gal 1:11-2:10)

Before Paul enters into his argument, he establishes his authority as an apostle. This is the equivalent of a modern lawyer citing his *curriculum vitae*, "Harvard Law Review, Clerk to Supreme Court Justice X, Circuit Court of Appeals." If they are to respect his arguments he needs to remind them why he has the authority to make those arguments.

Paul reminds them of his beginnings. He was as zealous in persecuting the church as he now is in defending it. Even before his conversion his respect for authority is evident.

He reminds them that no man had a part in his conversion. Therefore, the gospel he preached to the Galatians came directly from God. He began preaching immediately, first in Arabia and then in Damascus.

Although his gospel came from God, he obtained the approval of those who preceded him in the apostleship. First he met with Peter, representing the apostles, and James representing the elders in Jerusalem. He obtained their approval of his gospel. This was approximately the time of the conversion of Cornelius. He then preached in Syria and his home territory of Cilicia. This, presumably, was the beginning of his preaching to the Gentiles.

Fourteen years later, Paul again went to Jerusalem, along with one of his gentile converts, Titus. He makes a point of saying that Titus was not circumcised, as this was a foretaste of the arguments later in the letter. The apostles and the elders acknowledged that Paul's mission was to the Gentiles, as theirs was to the Jewish people.

The Case against the Law (2:11-4:31)

The bulk of Paul's letter presents his case against reliance on the Law of Moses for salvation. He presents his case by calling several "witnesses." Most scholars who outline the letter begin this section with the third chapter, but the end of chapter 2 is less about Paul's authority than it is a presentation of his first witness.

The witness of Peter. (2:11-21) Paul relates an incident in which Peter acted inconsistently. When no

other Jews were around, he associated freely with the Gentiles of Antioch, but when Jews from Jerusalem came to town he refused to eat with them. Paul accused him to his face, and in so doing presents his first argument. If Peter was willing to live like the Gentiles, who were justified by faith in Jesus, why should the Gentiles be required to live like Jews? Peter, a Jew, lives in two worlds; the Gentiles need not be required to do the same.

The witness of the Galatians. (3:1-5) Next he calls the Galatians themselves to testify. How did you receive the Spirit? It was not by works of the Law but by the "hearing of faith." If that is so, then why would you need to later add the works of the Law?

The witness of scripture. (3:6-25) For his next witness he calls on multiple scriptural examples of justification by faith and the curse of the Law. The first example is that of Abraham. Abraham lived prior to the Law of Moses. He was justified by faith when he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. He was promised that in him all nations, not just the Jews would be blessed. Through his faith, not obedience to a law that did not yet exist.

Paul next points out that scripture itself says that those who do not keep it perfectly are cursed. And nobody except Jesus has yet lived it perfectly. Instead, "the just shall live by faith." (Hab 2:4) Jesus took the curse upon himself when he died on the stake.

Finally he calls upon scripture to show the priority of the promise to Abraham, and the superiority of that promise. The promise to Abraham preceded the giving of the Law by about 400 years. It therefore has priority, especially for those who were not given the Law. These promises were based on faith, whereas the Law was given to show the sinfulness of sin. Nobody could keep the Law perfectly, therefore all required justification by faith.

The witness of family. (3:26-4:7) Through immersion the Galatians, and all, entered the family of Jesus. Some argue that baptism is a work, and cannot save. Paul, on the other hand, would disagree. Baptism is not something we do, but something done to us. Therefore it is not a work of the Law. Instead, it is the way we are accepted into the family. There are no divisions, such as Jew and Gentile, but all are children of God in Jesus Christ. He even argues that Jesus had to live under the Law so that he could save those under the Law.

The witness of sentiment. (4:8-20) Paul had acted in the place of a midwife at their birth into Christ. Will they now turn their backs on him? Will they rely on "days and months and times and years?" Did he labor in vain to bring them to Christ? He gave them birth, and they would rather be dead.

The witness of allegory. (4:21-31) This may be the most confusing of Paul's arguments to the modern mind. We are not used to allegory. Even to the Jews, the interpretation of this allegory may have seemed all wrong. How could Hagar represent the Law and Jerusalem represent faith? Was not Jerusalem the capital city of the Jewish nation? But Paul was not writing to Jews. He could

do with allegory whatever he chose. In this case, he compared the Law of Moses to the slave woman, Hagar. The Law kept people in slavery. The children of promise are represented by "the Jerusalem which is above." Again, he makes the comparison between Isaac, who preceded the Law, and Moses. The Galatians were Isaac, so why should they want to be Moses?

The Case for Liberty (5:1-6:10)

Following up on the allegory of the bondswoman and the free, Paul makes a case for liberty in Christ. The Law is bondage. The first case he makes is liberty from circumcision. Life in Christ is participation in the grace of

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God. Circumcision negates grace because anyone who submits to circumcision is bound by the whole law. Even the Jewish people could not keep the Law perfectly. Circumcision and uncircumcision are all the same. Neither justifies or condemns.

Liberty in Christ is fulfillment of the Law. Paul urges the Galatians not to listen to anyone who would bind the Law on them. Instead they are to walk in love, and love is the fulfillment of the Law. Even the Jewish rabbis agreed that loving your neighbor is the one phrase that sums up the Law.

Walk in the Spirit and be free; free from the works of the flesh. Instead we have liberty to grow the fruit of the Spirit. That fruit is separate from the Law, or any law. To walk in the Spirit is to be free indeed.

Liberty, though, comes with responsibility. The responsibility is to do good to all. Correct those who need correction. Support those who need support. "Do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." (Gal 6:10) The primary responsibility is to other Christians, but that does not exclude doing good to others.

Conclusion

Flesh and Spirit are in opposition to each other. Those who would bind circumcision (and the rest of the Law) are of the flesh. Christ is the Spirit. Do not submit to the bondage of the flesh.

A DISCLAIMER

Local radio and television stations that play religious or political programming often start or end the program with a disclaimer that says, "The opinions expressed in this program do not necessarily reflect the opinions of this station or its owners." This is a way to keep the station from being named in a suit brought by someone who disagrees with the content of the show or ad. While it is effective in doing that, some people think that such a disclaimer is a way to evade responsibility before God for their own actions.

There are some scholars of the Bible who might as well use this disclaimer about the Bible itself. They spend their lives and careers studying and writing about the Bible, but their writings show a lack of faith in what it says. This covers a whole range of belief.

There are those who study the Bible as an academic exercise, but do not believe what it says. It is like making a critical reading of *Moby Dick* or *The Magic Flute*. You know it is fiction, but it is fun to write scholarly papers about the symbolism the author used. Moses and Jesus become little more than the white whale or the Queen of the Night. They deny that Jonah or Jesus even existed. When it is scholars that engage in such exercises, one wonders why they are wasting their time. Unfortunately, there are more people in the pews on Sunday morning that act like this than there are scholars who do so. They claim to have faith but leave it inside the building when they get into their cars to go home. Jesus spoke of these people.

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. (Matt 7:22-23)

A second group are, in fact, believers. They will tell you that the Bible is an authoritative guide to living. Jesus was a great teacher, and maybe even the sacrifice for sin. They sound like their doctrine is orthodox, and to a point it is. But then you study the miracles of the Bible and find that their belief is not as strong it appears. They begin to explain natural occurrences of the miracles. The reason Israel was able to cross the Red Sea was an earthquake that temporarily dammed the water. The plagues of frogs, locusts, and gnats were the result of seasonal migrations. Lazarus and Jesus weren't really dead. They had just "swooned" and woke up three or four days later. And on and on. They believe in God. They just don't believe he has the power to violate the laws of nature that he set up. If he set them up, since the creation was not six literal days but periods of hundreds or thousands of years. At least the Pharisees were honest enough to say that Jesus performed miracles "by Baalzebub." (Lk 11:15) They recognized miracles. The problem is that if the miracles were not miracles, then Jesus was not resurrected. "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain." (1 Cor 15:14)

In biblical archaeology the range goes from "minimalists" (who say that archaeology cannot prove the Bible, because the Bible is false) to "maximalists" (who say that all biblical archaeology proves the Bible). In between are the "conservatives" that admit that some things the maximalists say may not be totally accurate, but admit that "archaeology cannot prove the Bible, but nothing in archaeology disproves the Bible."

A true believer does not need a disclaimer. In fact, they will readily admit that "the opinions expressed in this book are necessarily those of this person."

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