Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (17-3-1991 Cleland Baptist Church)

John 3:3

New Birth

Introduction

Someone once said, "You cannot drop big themes and create great saints". New birth is the "big theme" that lies at the heart of evangelical belief and preaching. The two basic truths at the heart of the Gospel are new birth and redemption through the Cross. This is the framework for understanding everything else. The Cross is Christ's work for us. New Birth is the Holy Spirit's work in us. Christ's work does not benefit us unless there is also the Holy Spirit's work inwardly. Forgiven – and also changed. Redeemed – and also renewed. Christ died to make us happy – and also holy. We need pardon – and also purity.

Generally, new birth is not a popular subject. People like to think all is well, and it offends their pride to be told they need new life and inward change. But here the Son of God Himself is affirming the necessity. "I tell you the truth", or "verily, verily", "Truly, truly" as it has been translated in the past, shows Jesus underlining this statement in red pen, such is the divine certainty of this point.

The theme of new life from God runs throughout Scripture. **I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts** (Jeremiah 31:33). **I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you** (Ezekiel 36:26). **Born of God** (John 1:13). **Born again** (John 3:3). **Made alive** (Ephesians 2:5). **New man** (Ephesians 4:24). **New creation** (2 Corinthians 5:17). **Born again through the word of God** (1 Peter 1:23). **Partakers of the divine nature** (2 Peter 1:4). **Born of God** (1 John 5:4).

It indicates a radical change, a drastic change. Deep and inward, going right to the root of the personality. God's power enters the soul. Technical term – "regeneration".

Into whose lives must this change come?

Simply and directly, this applies to everybody, with no exceptions. To understand spiritual truth, to know God, to have a nature fit for fellowship with God in heaven, for God and spiritual things to become alive – lives must be changed. Everybody – great or small, rich or poor, man or woman, religious or irreligious. Herein can be a problem for some people. They can see the relevance for the criminal, the immoral, and the social outcast – but surely it is not applicable for the churchgoer, the good neighbour, the solid citizen, and the thoroughly decent?

Note that these words were spoken to Nicodemus – he was a decent, law-abiding, God-fearing Pharisee, who kept the law meticulously. Not only the Old Testament laws, but many extra rules to ensure the Old Testament laws were kept as precisely as possible. He was most fervent in his belief in God. He was cultured, sincere and polite. He believed Jesus was a teacher come from God. He believed Jesus' miracles. He was an expert theologian, a most able, learned and popular teacher in Jerusalem at the time. He had everything going for him – religion, morality, culture, good manners,

excellent position, theological orthodoxy, and intellectual competence. If he came into our church today, he would be welcomed with open arms. We would want him in membership as quickly as possible. He would be unanimously elected to a position of importance. His wife would be most suitable to be the president of the ladies meeting. His daughter would get the soprano solo in the church choir, and his son given charge of the youth group. But, here is Jesus, knowing all Nicodemus's plusses and bonuses – and saying it is not enough. He needs to be a new person; he needs new birth, a radical inward change. If Nicodemus needed it, we all do.

Why is this new birth necessary?

Despite all his religion and culture, there was one basic and fatal fault with Nicodemus. He was dead and blind to God and spiritual things because of the sin in his life. Despite all our differences in nature and character, we all have this in common, we have inherited sin. We can talk and discuss God – but still not know Him. Have no fellowship with Him. He is not a reality, just a name, an idea, a concept, but not a living person. We do not understand spiritual truth. The Bible is a closed book as far as its spiritual truth is concerned. The great truths are not a reality to us. We may say prayers, but we do not actually pray. It is possible for us to preach from the pulpit, and lecture in theology, but not be dealing with eternal living truths for which we should give our lives. They are just intellectual concepts and viewpoints to be examined merely in a cold clinical way.

It is a frightening thought – that even if we have a sincere belief in God, sing hymns and solos, even preach, we may still be spiritually dead. In the deepest sense, to not know what we are talking about. Despite our ideals and standards and outward appearance, the state of our hearts when the wrappings are torn away may reveal our nature is biased towards evil. The Ten Commandments have all been broken – in desire and motive at very least. We would not be happy if our inner life was thrown onto the screen and made public. Our sayings and attitudes do not always reflect the real us.

Then, for all our standards, at the centre of our lives is self, not God. It is self we love, live to please, seek glory for, everything revolves around. God is on the edge of things, a super servant there to help us and rescue us and support us as we pursue our own self centred way through the world. With such a nature, we are not fit for God's presence, here or hereafter.

We may all say we would like to go to heaven after death. But would we be happy there? Heaven is a holy place, with God at the centre. The inhabitants are redeemed, and live to serve and worship. To someone who has not experienced regeneration, heaven would be the most miserable and wretched place. People who live for self have no interest in spiritual things, no love for God, never really prayed, embarrassed by real Christians, find the Christian life too strict and precise – how would they ever be comfortable and content in heaven for a day, let alone eternity? They would be out of place, no common ground.

What is the new birth?

Nothing less than a miracle by God. The Holy Spirit comes on a man and imparts the principle of spiritual life. His new nature is God's own nature. He is made alive, recreated. Not a repair job, but a radically new beginning. It has a vital effect at the deepest level. The whole heart and tenor and current of life are altered. Not mended, patched up, few minor adjustments, try a bit harder. Not new religious practices, outer reformation. Not a personality disorder or psychological change. Not inherited from parents, or imparted through a priest as he administers sacraments. Not effective through baptism, though believer's baptism does set it forth in outward form.

Men can change themselves or be changed by effort or by coming under certain influences. But these do not give them peace of conscience, capacity for heavenly things, make them spiritually alive or cause them to know God.

The new birth is supernatural. A miracle. Men cannot do it. Cannot make selves born again. Can no more bring it about than an infant can contribute to his birth by creating himself. It is not about what we do, but about what God gives. Divine activity. We are recipients and not actors. Blind people cannot create their own sight. Dead people cannot make themselves alive. This is one of the Bible's paradoxes – we need this, must have it, but only God can give it.

It is a radical and far reaching change. To use the Bible terms of "new person", "new man" is no exaggeration. We have new heart, outlook, tastes, loves. God is loved. We desire to please Him. God becomes real. The Bible is a new book. Prayer is a living experience. We have spiritual understanding about truth. Still with natural faculties and gifts, but now even these have new direction and new use. We have a new family, those with the same experience. They are very close now, we are no longer uncomfortable in their presence, but have a real bond and sense of belonging.

Only God can do this. We are dead and helpless. God alone can breathe new life. Supernatural interposition. Power outside and above us. Family likeness is stamped on us. Image of Christ formed. Beginning of new life, increasingly changed by indwelling Holy Spirit. Enormous private and public changes.

The testimonies of others speak of this change. Augustine said his heart was flooded with light and peace. Luther said he was delivered from the tortures of conscience, as he was ashamed of what he had once loved. Wesley described, "This new birth is as miraculous and supernatural as one 1700 years ago". D.L.Moody faced the claims of Christ at the back of a shoe store, and left it a new man. He fell in love with the sun and the birds on Boston Common. George Muller said the change in his life was proof of the sovereignty of almighty grace. C.H.Spurgeon said, "We have been spiritually quickened. Conscious of new life. New creatures in Christ. We dwell in a new world. We have been illuminated. We are guided into truth."

The means used by God in regeneration

God is free and sovereign. The Holy Spirit is paralleled with the wind. Invisible, but seen by its effects. His work in some lives is instantaneous, shattering, and dynamic. For others, it is a gradual awareness. But the fact of ignorance of birth does not mean we are not alive.

His instrument is His Word and the Gospel of His grace. He works through the truth as it is presented in the person and saving work of the Son of God. New birth is associated with the Gospel and our response. We cannot give ourselves new life. We are called to respond to the Gospel. On God's side, regeneration and new life is ours when we are united to Christ. On our side, there must be repentance and faith, which comes about when we hear about sin, helplessness, God's wrath, and God's summons to turn from sin and cast selves on His mercy.

The Holy Spirit enables us to turn to the Lord, and as we do, we are aware of new beginning, new life, and new capacity to understand the truth about God. Aware of life, which is in His Son. Regeneration is God's action in giving us new life. Conversion is our action - turning to Christ. Holy Spirit works in and through our response to the Gospel.

If you are aware of your need for new birth, it is vital that you search the Scriptures, the sword of the Spirit, attend to the preaching of the Word, and ask the Holy Spirit to show you your need and lead you to the truth as it is in Jesus.

Evidences of new birth

Have we been born again? It is not adequate to answer this question with "I am a church member", or "I went forward at such and such a mission", or "I signed a decision card". The New Testament never lets us get away with claims and assertions. It gives us tests. There are certain evidences of the new birth. Have you got them? There are always certain marks and features. May not be equally strong because the work of grace is gradual. But the roots must be there. May not be able to recall actual moment.

Consider the baby's first cry. A tense moment when a baby is delivered. Everyone waits for it to draw its first breath and cry out. So, spiritually, the newborn baby cries out. The first cry we utter is to call on Christ to save us. Aware of unworthiness, sin, helplessness, with humble and broken spirit. Our heart knows it has to depend on Christ, who loves us and gave Himself for us. After that, there are repeated cries to God our Father. In His family now, we call out to Him "Abba, Father", not as an empty ritual, but honest heart-felt cries for help. Prayer is hard at times, but it is the most natural thing in the world. Constantly looking to God, talking to Him in and from the heart.

Then the baby sucks instinctively. It longs to satisfy its hunger. So the newborn Christian hungers for spiritual food, first milk, and then the meat of God's revealed word. He loves the Scriptures, asks questions, and thinks about it, concerned to understand. Wants to hear the word preached – not any preaching, but that which is based on the Scriptures. **How sweet are your words to my taste. Sweeter than honey to my mouth** (Psalm 119:103).

The newborn baby starts to move. Turns his head, flexes his limbs, soon he rolls, crawls, toddles, explores, walks and runs. The newly born spiritually should also show clear signs of movement. He sorts out his priorities and reshapes his life in light of new allegiance. There is movement in the Christian's relationships – special love for the people of God. Concern for the house of God, His glory, His day, and His will.

Service for the Lord. Zealous of good deeds. Different life, standards and values. Spiritual interests and conversation. He revels in the company of God's people. Concern for holiness and for God's cause in the world. Conscientious and reliable in daily work.

Not perfect of course, the old nature is still there. But sin grieves and upsets him now. It is no longer a joke. There is warfare against sin that was not there before. The things he once lived for have lost their attraction. Eternal and spiritual things are now much more important. He is now a different husband, wife, son, or daughter. The Christian life is not an awful burden which he would want to escape. He has new power to obey and serve.

Finally, babies rest. Relax, sleeping soundly in their mother's arms. The newly born Christian rests knowing God's everlasting arms are around him and underneath him. Can spend our days now, no matter what they bring, in peace without panic. Peace of God keeping our hearts and minds. Leaving God to rule and overrule, to bring all things to work together for good. Trust and dependence.

Conclusion

Need for new birth. This doctrine cuts the congregation in two. The wheat and the tares. The natural and the spiritual. The sheep and the goats. The living and the dead.

Have we solid reasons to believe we are reborn spiritually? It is not wise to ignore this issue. Without rebirth, there is no heaven or salvation. With new birth we have all that is worthwhile – a pearl of great price.

God makes His gracious promises. No heart is too hard for Him to soften. Cherish every influence of the Holy Spirit. Do not stifle God's voice or your convictions. Ask God to open your eyes to Christ, His power to save, His sufficiency, His mercy. Respond at once to Christ as He is offered in the Gospel.

"Spirit of faith, come down,
Reveal the things of God
And make to us the Godhead known
And witness with the blood.
Tis thine the blood to apply
And give us eyes to see.
Who did for every sinner die
Hath surely died for me."