



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.3 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Regeneration or Being Born Again

Jesus Himself said to Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to see Him by night: **“You must be born again”** (John 3:7). Regeneration, or being born again, is necessary because our first birth from our biological parents provides physical life, but not spiritual life. **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh”** (John 3:6). Our parents are sinners, and therefore we are sinners also. In fact, by nature we are **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1). That is why Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”** (John 3:3). In further explanation Jesus said: **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”** (John 3:5). This second birth is a spiritual birth brought about by the action of the Holy Spirit. **“That which is born of the Spirit is spirit”** (John 3:6).

The result of the second birth is faith in Jesus and thus becoming a child of God. For it is written: **“As many as received Him (Christ), to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”** (John 1:12-13).

How does the Holy Spirit bring about this new birth? The apostle Peter explains that we who believe in Christ have **“been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God, which lives and abides forever”** (1 Peter 1:23). The Holy Spirit creates spiritual life through the Word of God, specifically, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. **“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God”** (1 John 5:1). Jesus’ brother James also tells us how God brings about this second birth. He uses the Gospel. **“Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth”** (James 1:18). God uses human instruments to proclaim His Gospel, and through the Gospel we proclaim, He regenerates sinners, and brings them out of spiritual death to spiritual life. He makes them alive. Paul wrote to his converts in Corinth: **“Though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel”** (1 Corinthians 4:15).

Just as no one can contribute to his own physical birth, so also no one can contribute to his own spiritual birth. Paul says: **“God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ”** (Ephesians 2:4-5). God gets all the credit for regeneration, for He does this without the help of the person being regenerated. **“You, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses”** (Colossians 2:13). A dead person certainly cannot contribute anything to his being made alive.

The regenerating power of the Holy Spirit is also present in baptism. Paul says: **“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”** (Titus 3:5-7). God works regeneration through the Holy Spirit’s washing of regeneration and renewal, which is baptism. For baptism is **“the washing of the water by the word”** (Ephesians 5:26). It is not simple water only, but water that is connected with the Word of God and used by God’s command. That is why Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”** (John 3:5). Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, was not willing to

be baptized by John the Baptist, and therefore Jesus made it clear that Nicodemus needed baptism just like any other sinner. For it is through baptism that the Holy Spirit washes away our sins and creates in us new spiritual life. We begin to have faith in Christ through the Holy Spirit's cleansing in baptism.

The new life God that creates in us in our second birth through God's Word can be lost again through our rejection or neglect of the Word of God. In His parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus spoke of the seed that fell on the rock and grew up quickly but soon withered away and then explained: **"But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away"** (Luke 8:13). In such cases the person needs to be regenerated anew by the Spirit through the Word of God.

God warns us through Paul: **"If you live according to the flesh, you will die"** (Romans 8:13). **"Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"** (1 Corinthians 10:12). **"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace"** (Galatians 5:4).

Thus, Jesus and His apostles teach us that there are those who believe in Christ for a while and then fall away. For this reason, we cannot agree with Calvinists and others who teach that a believer in Christ can never lose his faith. "Once saved, always saved" is their motto. This has led some persons who were once believers to think they are still believers, even though they are living in a way that is directly contrary to the Word of God without repentance. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy that Hymenaeus and Alexander had **"suffered shipwreck" "concerning the faith"** (1 Timothy 1:19-20). Referring to some of his converts in Galatia who had fallen from faith in Christ, Paul said: **"My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you"** (Galatians 4:19).

For this reason Martin Luther wrote in the *Smalcald Articles*, one of our Lutheran confessions: *"Therefore It is necessary to know and teach that when holy people – aside from the fact that they still have and feel original sin and also daily repent of it and struggle against it – somehow fall into a public sin (such as David, who fell into adultery, murder, and blasphemy against God), at that point faith and the Spirit have departed. The Holy Spirit does not allow sin to rule and gain the upper hand so that it is brought to completion, but the Spirit controls and resists so that sin is not able to do whatever it wants. However, when sin does whatever it wants, then the Holy Spirit and faith are not there"* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 319).

Questions

1. Why is it necessary for a person to be born again?
2. What is the difference between physical birth and spiritual birth?
3. What is true of every believer in Christ?
4. How does the Holy Spirit bring about spiritual birth?
5. How can baptizing with water bring about regeneration?
6. Why did Jesus tell Nicodemus that he had to be born of water and the Spirit?
7. How do we know that spiritual life can be lost again?
8. What is wrong with the slogan: "Once saved, always saved"? Explain.
9. Summarize Martin Luther's statement in the *Smalcald Articles* printed above in your own words.