

## **Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?**

- Nicodemus' Question Revisited – by Rev. Tom Aicken -

It's the desire of every Christian parent that his or her children should be born again and serve the Lord, and this longing, if unfulfilled, intensifies over time until it becomes a reality that their children are so born again. This is why, of course, that, by fervent praying, sound teaching and faithful example, such parents seek to raise their children in the fear of the Lord. This is not to say that by these means the children will ever become Christians, necessarily, but there is no doubt that this kind of upbringing has an influence and makes an impact upon them.

This is not enough, however, for many parents. Though they pray for their children, and may even plead persistently for them, they are not content to commit their children wholly to the Lord who judges righteously, but think that they can and should play an active role in making them a new creation in Christ. If, after all, they were active in bringing their children into the natural realm – and they were – why should they not believe that they play an active role in bringing them into the spiritual realm and giving them new life in Christ?

The answer to that question is found in John 1:13, the fact that this new birth is “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” These three phrases, each beginning with the word ‘not’ or ‘nor,’ have been variously interpreted, but the most satisfying explanation for them I have found is by Matthew Poole. “Not of blood” means that they don't become children of God by virtue of their being the children of believing parents, and presuming one can trace them back by that means to Abraham. “Nor of the will of the flesh” means that they don't become children of God whether by the lusts of the flesh or by any natural means of procreation. “Nor of the will of man” means that they don't become children of God by a freewill decision of their own, as if they're free to do what is right and good and not bound by the dictates of their indwelling sin.

What, then, is the sole cause and only power by which anyone dead in sin is born again? It must be, as we're told, “of God.” Indeed, it's all of God, and He does this great work through the quickening or life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. As He tells us, Rom. 9:15,16, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I

will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.’ So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.”

If this is so, that the new birth is all of God, why are people commanded to repent of their sins, and even promised the gift of eternal life if they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Does that make any sense if the new birth is all of God and not of them? It’s right here that we need to distinguish between regeneration (the new birth, which comes first) and conversion (the act of turning from sin to the Saviour, which is the result and inevitable response of the new birth). Nowhere in the Word of God are sinners commanded to be born again. Nicodemus was informed that he had to be born again (John 3:7), but that was a statement of what he needed from the Holy Spirit, not a command to which he could contribute anything of himself. Only if one is born again, receives new life in Christ and so made willing in a day of God’s power, is he then able and eager to flee to the Lord Jesus for refuge.

Again, if this is so, that the new birth is all of God and not of any human origin, why does the Bible say, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it”? Does that not imply that parents play an active part in the rebirth of their children? What I just quoted from Prov. 22:6 is not the only possible translation of the Hebrew text, nor is it consistent with what we too often see, and for that reason should be discarded. Another translation (and, I submit, a better one) is “Train up a child in the way he would go – not *should* go, but *would* go – and when he is old he will not depart from it.” Some have taken this to mean ‘in a manner that is appropriate to the child’s age and understanding’, but I take it to mean ‘in the way he wants to go’. Train up a child in the way he wants to go, therefore, and when he is old he will not depart from it. This is the broad way that leads to destruction. This understanding of the text underscores what Jesus meant when He said to Nicodemus, “You must be born again,” and why it is, John 3:3, “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

If this is so, finally, that the new birth is all of God and nothing of us or anyone else, why then should parents seek by prayer, precept and example, to raise their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord? What good can that possibly do for children who, like all people everywhere, are dead in trespasses

and sins? The answer is that such nurturing is what God is pleased to use to impart life (see Rom. 10:17); it will affect people in different ways (see 2 Cor. 2:14-17), but God's Word will always achieve what He sends it out to do and will never return to Him void (see Is. 55:10,11). This is what it means when the Shulamite maiden (the Church) cries out to her Lover (Christ), "Draw me, and we will run after You" (Song of Solomon 1:4). May we never stop praying, both for ourselves and our children, for the Lord our God to draw us and grant us such a heart for Him!