

Spirit-Filled (3) – How the Spirit-Filled Life Begins

Reading: John 2:23-3:12

I believe the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives can be summarised under three ideas – regeneration, empowerment & sanctification. I believe these three ideas help us understand the essence of what the Holy Spirit comes to accomplish in our lives. These three areas often overlap in the life of the Christian. For example one of the reasons we need the empowerment of the Spirit is to aid us in our sanctification... So we don't want to pull these aspects of the Spirit's work apart too much, nor do we want to put these ideas in neat little boxes. The Holy Spirit & his work will always explode the boxes we build... However I believe looking at the work of the Spirit under these three ideas helps us understand something of the totality of what he has come to do in, for, through & with us.

These three things must certainly be present in the life of the genuine Christian at some level. We cannot do Christianity without them. We cannot be or do Christian with the regenerating, empowering & sanctifying Spirit. The Holy Spirit has come to bring life, power & transformation. The Christian life is not conceived, continued or completed without the presence & power of the Holy Spirit. There is no genuine Christianity or Christian without him – that is how much we depend on the person & work of the Spirit.

This morning I want to highlight that no one can be Spirit-filled without regeneration. This is how the Spirit-filled life begins. The most important thing the Holy Spirit can ever do for you is make you born again! Therefore it is of enormous consequence that we know what being born again really means. Everything else is dependent on this!

Born Again Christian is a term that can be banded about a lot, but sometimes I wonder how well it's actually understood. I was once witnessing to a man in Ballina. He said to me; *'you're not one of those born again Christian's are you'*. I said; *'well that's one way of putting it'*. He said *'you people just take one verse & make everything about being born again.'* I tried to explain why I didn't entirely agree with him, but at the same time he did make me wonder. Is that how 'Born Again Christian's' are perceived, as making too much of a single verse in the Bible?

The reality is, in house; we don't actually talk that much about being Born Again anymore? What does it mean to be a Born Again Christian? Are we Born Again Christians? Is it the best way to describe ourselves? It's certainly one valid way, but is it the best way to distinguish ourselves? You can decide. All I want to do is show you this is the first & most important thing the Holy Spirit personally does in the life of every genuine Christian, whatever term we prefer. The Bible uses a number of terms & metaphors to describe this reality – darkness to light, new birth, regeneration, being raised from spiritual death, removing the veil, replacing a heart of stone with a heart of flesh or being born again. So this is not a teaching dependant

on one verse in the Bible. However this morning we're going to focus on how Jesus explained this reality to one man called Nicodemus.

The reason I included John 2:23-25 in the reading is because I want us to see something very important.

These words set the scene for Jesus' encounter with this man called Nicodemus. John records;

V23-25 "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person."

Notice that many people, at some level, believed in Jesus because they saw the signs he was doing.

However also notice that **"Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people"** as John puts it. What does he mean? Simply, Jesus knew people can be fickle. People can get caught up in the excitement of a moment or an event... People change their minds... People can be for you one day & desert you the next... John 6:66 tells us many of these same disciples deserted Jesus just before the next big religious event - they found his teaching too hard. For this reason Jesus did not put much trust in their initial believing. Jesus knew that true & lasting faith rested on something much deeper, much more powerful & much more miraculous than human response or decision, it rested on a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in a human life.

It's very significant that John highlights this just before the Born Again discussion between Jesus & Nicodemus. Puritan William Gurnall wrote; *"We have known many who have joined the army of Christ and liked being a soldier for a battle or two, but have soon had enough and end up deserting. They... are easily persuaded to take up a profession of religion, and are just as easily persuaded to lay it down."*

Jesus knew this was the case & therefore Jesus knew something deeper had to happen in people if he was to make lasting disciples... The only persuasion that lasts is new birth... I can testify to this in my own life. I prayed a prayer of commitment to become a Christian a number of times in my childhood & teens; but none of them lasted or led to lasting change until the Holy Spirit done a deeper work in my life. A work that produced what I could not produce myself – genuine & enduring faith in Christ alone.

My reason for highlighting this is not to be overly pessimistic about human decisions, but because I personally know there is much more security & assurance to be found in God's miraculous work in my life than any prayer, decision or commitment I ever made to him... For me the prayer did not work until the Holy Spirit did a work in me & made me born again – that's my story! And more importantly it's what Jesus is pointing out in this story. It's significant that these verses come right before the Nicodemus story.

V1-3 "Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

1. We Need New Life, Not New Religion

Being born again is not getting new religion but new life. John is very careful to include that Nicodemus was a Jewish religious leader. The Pharisees were the most rigorously committed of all Jewish groups... Here's what we need to understand: All the religion in the world cannot replace the need for new birth. All the study, discipline, rule-keeping, good works, morality & devotion cannot replace the need for new birth. Jesus says; **"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."** NO ONE Jesus said – that includes you & me!

Genuine Christianity is not about finding religion, joining a new church, or a new stream of Christianity it's about personally experiencing new life. This is what we need to understand. We could try every church & stream of Christianity there is but if there is no new birth in us we cannot see the kingdom of God. Why did the 12 stay with Jesus when the many deserted him? Peter answered; **"Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"** (John 6:68). They saw life in the teaching of Jesus that they did not find in their own religion. A few verses before Jesus says; **"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life"** John 6:63. The fundamental need of every human being is new life if they are to see the kingdom of God.

Of course Nicodemus was physically alive. He was breathing, thinking & talking to Jesus. But Jesus sees no spiritual life in him – even though he is a rigorous religious leader & teacher – spiritually he is unborn. He needs life, not more theology, morality or religion – he has more of those things than most. He needs life.

Genuine Christianity is not fundamentally about going from bad to good, or good to great, or immoral to moral... It is fundamentally about going from death to life – it's being raised from spiritual death to spiritual life so you can have a living relationship with a living God. As Paul writes to the Ephesians in 2:4-5 after highlighting the total depravity of mankind; **"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved."** Therefore the only genuine Christian is a Born Again Christian, that's what we need to realise.

2. We Need To Experience God, Not Just Affirm Him

New Birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus, but experiencing the supernatural in yourself! Like the many at the end of chapter two, Nicodemus believed at some level Jesus had come from God. He said in V2 **"Rabbi we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."** Nicodemus sees Jesus' ministry as from God. He affirms Jesus is from God & that Jesus is doing the works of God. You would think this would impress Jesus since so many other Pharisees & religious leaders didn't share Nicodemus' belief. However Jesus says; **"Very truly I**

tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” And he says very directly to Nicodemus in verse 7; **“You must be born again.”**

Affirming things about Jesus is not the same as being Born Again. All across this Island today there are people affirming things about Jesus at some level through liturgies, songs & prayers. This is not wrong but it does not mean they are born again because new birth is not merely affirming things about Jesus; it's experiencing supernatural awakening to new life in him.

The demons affirmed Jesus at some level. In Mark 1:24 one said; **“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God.”** So affirming Jesus in & of itself is clearly not enough. We need to be born again as Jesus puts it. Jesus teaches us this is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. He says;

V5-8 “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

The Spirit. He is above nature. He is supernatural. He is God. He blows where he wills. We don't control him. We can see his work but we cannot predict where is going to blow next. There is unpredictability about him but wherever he blows he brings new life. THIS MEANS HOPE FOR EVERYONE... He is the agent, the immediate cause of New Birth... We cannot become spiritually alive unless he breathes life into us. If we are spiritually dead we cannot hear, see, think or feel spiritually speaking. New birth gives new eyes, new ears, new heart, new mind, new appetite, new hope - new life. The Friend sent by Jesus has come to do all this in us & for us. We were spiritually dead in sin but the Spirit brings new life in Christ.

You may have failed at religion altogether or you may feel burned out doing good works. You may have failed at living a moral life or you may have lived a relatively good life but still feel there's something missing. Or maybe you have spent your whole life affirming God at some level, but have you experienced the new life Jesus brings? Have you been born again? Can you say you have a living relationship with a living God?

1 Peter 1:3 says; **“According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”** Can you say you have living hope in a living Jesus? Romans 15:13 says; **“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in (overflow with) hope.”** This is what the Holy Spirit has come to do for you & in you & this is how the Spirit-filled life begins. It begins as a supernatural work of God & it continues as the supernatural work of God as he transforms us through the supernatural work of

sanctification & enables us for ministry & mission through his supernatural empowerment. The Christian life is a supernatural experience from beginning to end, from inception into eternity.

3. We need spiritual illumination, not just information

In verse 9 Nicodemus said to Jesus; **“How can this be?”** Jesus replies; **“Are you not the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”**

Nicodemus still doesn't get what Jesus is talking about. He has the information but he does not have the illumination.

Paul makes it clear that *only spiritual people can understand spiritual things!* That's the basic point of 1 Cor. 2:6-16. In verse 14 of those verses Paul says: **“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”** So in order to both accept & understand spiritual wisdom we need to be spiritual people. Meaning we need to be people who are spiritually awakened, spiritually alive, spiritually hungry, spiritually illumined & spiritually perceptive! The point Paul has been arguing in previous verses is that it's only the Holy Spirit who can make us any & all of these things. We so depend on him.

When the Holy Spirit comes into a person & brings new life he awakens our spiritual senses & illuminates our minds so we can understand spiritual things & see the kingdom of God. So the answer to Nicodemus' question; **“How can this be”** & Jesus' question; **“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”** The answer is the Holy Spirit he is how! Without him there can be no genuine spiritual life, experience or illumination... We depend on him for all these things & it is the Spirit's work of regeneration that causes this spiritual awakening in us. There is no true spirituality without the Holy Spirit. All other so called spirituality is dead spirituality – there is no true spiritual & eternal life in it. For there is no true spiritual life, spiritual experience or spiritual seeing without the life giving, supernatural & illuminating reality of the Holy Spirit which connects us to Christ...

Nicodemus had the theological information but he needed the spiritual life, experience & illumination. He had the Word but he needed the Spirit to bring him to life & to guide him into all truth! And so do we! As Jesus said; **“You must be born again.”**