

How Does an Unbeliever Believe?

Summary: *The Bible clearly states that mankind is naturally resistant to God and His purposes. So how is it that resistance is overcome and some believe the gospel? The Scriptures relate the change of inclination to the power of the Holy Spirit in granting new birth or regeneration.*

In speaking about conversion in relation to the doctrine of God's election,¹ it is often said that God does not force salvation upon anyone; rather, He is so beautiful that when He reveals Himself, people willingly respond in faith. He is so splendid and glorious and man cannot help but love and trust Him.

But did not Satan and the demons who were formerly angels see the exalted Lord in His splendor and yet rebel? Did not Israel see shadows of His goodness and yet revolt against Him? How are we to answer the question of why it is that two people sit through the same teaching, hear the same gospel presentation and one walks away thoroughly engaged by the picture of the Son of God and the other is completely unimpressed?

I think the answer is found in the Christian doctrine of the new birth or regeneration – an aspect of the new covenant promise prophesied in both Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 and fulfilled in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Before we get to this solution, though, we need to more clearly see the problem that is man's inclination toward wickedness.

The reality of man's absolute depravity is well developed in the Scriptures.² An unregenerate person is said to be "darkened in their understanding" and "calloused" (Ephesians 4:18-19), "slaves to sin" (Romans 6:17), "dead in [their] trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1), with a deceitful and desperately sick heart (Jeremiah 17:9) that suppresses the truth of God's goodness, rule, and beauty (Romans 1:18). We are rebellious not only because of what we do, but also who we are. We are "by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3).

Due to this rebellious disposition, the Scriptures declare that "no one seeks God" (Romans 3:9-12). In fact, Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3 that we naturally hate the light and will not come to it out of fear of being exposed by it.³ We must take Scripture seriously when it says that no one seeks God and that we hate Him and His Word. There are no exceptions (except of course the Son of God who is like us in every way except sin). So, if man is so inclined against God, how is it that some now believe in Him, trust Him, love Him?

I think that John 3 is really instructive for the church in answering this question. This is exactly the point that Jesus makes to Nicodemus. Here is that dialogue:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 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. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not*

¹ See article "What is Unconditional Election?" which is part of the series starting with "What is Calvinism?"

² For a brief intro, see article "What is Total Depravity?"

³ John 3:19 **And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. It is really important to remember the opening verses of John's gospel which state the following. John 1:4,5,9 In him was life, and the life was the light of men...The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light, which enlivens everyone, was coming into the world. In other words, John's use in chapter 3 of "light" is not some ambiguous term. He is here saying in effect that the light of the gospel is hated by the unregenerate man. He will not naturally come to Christ because he is naturally inclined to despise Him. Man is inclined away from God.**

believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19** And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. **20** For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. **21** But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

John 3:1-21

Notice what is happening in these verses. Nicodemus comes to Christ and basically says "I know who you are." Jesus responds by saying that one must be born again to truly know Him and thus enter into the kingdom of His Father. Nicodemus hesitates over the imagery and Jesus continues by comparing the new birth through the Spirit to the unpredictable moving of the wind.

Jesus is here doing something interesting in vs. 8 that English translations can miss. He is engaging in a word play between the words "wind" and "spirit." The Greek word for "wind" is the same as the Greek word for "spirit" or "Spirit" (the word is *pneuma* – where we get the English words *pneumatic* [involving air] and *pneumonia* [think lungs which are responsible for our intake of air]). The relationship is therefore drawn between the blowing of the wind (*pneuma*) and the birthing of the Spirit (*pneuma*).

If you go outside, you can hear and see the effects of the wind, but you cannot actually see the wind itself. Even if you were to see a leaf or feather caught in the breeze, would you be able to predict exactly where it will land? No, "you do not know...where it goes." Even the most complex mathematical and meteorological equations fail to absolutely account for the unpredictability of the minute details of our environment.

In the same way, we can see and hear the effects of the work of the Spirit in regenerating people, but we cannot accurately predict who it is that He will regenerate. Just as we have no control over the wind, we have no control over the Spirit to move as He wishes for the glory of Christ.

I think that the doctrine of regeneration or the new birth is therefore critical in distinguishing why it is that one person finds Christ lovely and good and another judges Him repulsive. A natural heart (that is one which has not been granted the new and clean heart promised in Jeremiah and Ezekiel) looks upon Christ and sees condemnation and shame. The spiritual heart (that which has been quickened by the Holy Spirit) looks upon Christ and sees loveliness and compassion and grace.

What I am suggesting theologically is that there is a logical (if not chronological) order to the doctrines of regeneration and belief. Regeneration preceding belief seems to be the logical order of

salvation. An unregenerate heart will not trust Christ, because it does not deem Him trustworthy. This seems to me the best explanation of the data which the Scriptures provide. 1 John 5:1 is really instructive for us here as it says "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him."

Those who now believe (present tense) do so because they have already been born of God (past tense). In Greek the verb translated "has been born" is in what is called a perfect tense which suggests a completed action of the past with continuing effects in the present. In other words, what I think John is saying is that current belief is an effect of having been born again. Therefore, rather than saying "if you believe, you will be born again," it is more theologically correct to understand that "if you have been born again, you will believe."

When God reveals Himself to a hardened heart it only further hardens in self-preserving rebellion. When God reveals Himself to a heart which He Himself has softened it responds by basking in His marvelous light. As the old saying goes, the same sun which hardens the clay melts the ice.

So, how do we understand why it is that some believe and others do not? I think we need to let Jesus answer that question for us. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

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Recommended Resources

For Readers

→ ***Finally Alive*** by John Piper

For Listeners

→ ***Regeneration / New Birth***