

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

VITAL SIGNS OF THE NEW BIRTH

1 John 5:1-5

By

Steven J. Cole

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1 John Lesson 22

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Pollster George Barna classifies the *born-again* as all who say “they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today,” and who also indicate that they “believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior” (*The Barna Update* [3/5/2001], cited by Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* [Baker], p. 18). By those criteria, anywhere from 35 to 43 percent of the U.S. population claims to be born again.

At first glance, those numbers might cause us to rejoice. But, as evangelical theologian Michael Horton laments, “Gallup and Barna hand us survey after survey demonstrating that evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general” (*Modern Reformation* [May-June, 1993], cited by Sider, p. 13).

Even among pastors, *Leadership* journal (Winter, 1988, p. 24) found that 20 percent viewed pornographic material at least once a month, and that was before the Internet was invented! Another survey from the same year found that only 64 percent of evangelical seminarians thought that watching pornographic movies is morally wrong (David Wells, *Christianity Today* [1/15/1988], p. 25).

Jesus warned that there will be many who call Him “Lord” who even have done miracles in His name, but at the judgment He will say, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23). In light of these things, we all need to be clear about whether we truly have been born again or not.

Every parent knows the great joy of seeing a new life come into this world. Some parents must go through the pain and sorrow of having a stillborn baby. The difference consists in that one quality, which even modern medicine cannot impart—life. In the spiritual realm, as in the physical, new life means everything! If a person is truly born of God, there will be signs of life. If those signs are missing, there is cause for great alarm.

As the apostle John moves toward the conclusion of this letter, he brings together into one paragraph the three tests of authentic Christianity that he has repeated throughout the book. He does this to summarize and to show that these three tests are part of an interwoven fabric. They all depend on the new birth as their foundation. We may view them as three vital signs of the new birth. If a person has truly received new life from God, these vital signs will be evident. While they grow stronger over time, if there is no evidence of these signs, a person needs to examine whether or not he truly has been born again. John shows that...

The vital signs of the new birth are faith in Jesus Christ, love for others, and obedience to God's commandments.

John's line of thought is not easy to outline here, in that he seems to intertwine ideas. John Stott (*The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 172) says, "What he [John] is at pains to show is the essential unity of his threefold thesis.... The real link between the three tests is seen to be the new birth. Faith, love and obedience are the natural growth which follows a birth from above, ..." So we will look first at the new birth and then at the three tests.

1. The new birth is the basis of the Christian life (5:1, 4).

John mentions being "born of God" in verses 1 & 4. The new birth must be the starting point of any relationship with God. You can go to church all your life, you can be religious and moral, and you can tithe your money to the church. But none of that will get you into heaven. Jesus told Nicodemus, who was a very religious and moral man (John 3:3), "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." He underscored again (John 3:7), "You must be born again."

You can dress up a corpse in the finest of clothes, but it is still a corpse. What it needs is *life*. Spiritually, before we are born again, we are all dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). All of the finest religious clothes in the world will not help that corpse. What we need is new life that only God can impart. We cannot attain to this new life by our own efforts. It is not a matter of trying harder, of cleaning up your life with New Year's resolutions, of going to church more often, or anything else that you can do.

Rather, the initiative and the power lie with God. Jesus said (John 5:21), "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes." That was true of Jesus' miracles of raising the physically dead back to life. But it is also true spiritually, that the Lord Jesus gives life to whom He wishes. God is the sovereign over our salvation.

The apostle Peter exclaims (1 Pet. 1:3), "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Or, as Paul puts it (Eph. 2:4-5), "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)...."

Regeneration (or the new birth) is *totally* a work of God. We cannot play an active role at all, in that we are spiritually dead. Many mistakenly think that being born again is a matter of our "free will" or choice. Certainly, we must choose to trust in Christ (John 1:12). But the question is, how can a dead sinner do that? John 1:13 states, "who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." Just as none of us had any say in whether we would be born physically, neither did we determine that we would be born spiritually. It is entirely a work of God according to His sovereign will. (For more, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan], pp. 699-706.) In other words, the Bible teaches that the reason you choose to trust Christ is that God has quickened you from the dead. Otherwise, no one could or would choose to trust in Christ. The new birth is essential.

2. Faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, is a vital sign of the new birth (5:1, 4, 5).

John both begins and ends this section with an emphasis on faith in Jesus Christ. Note three things:

A. Faith is the result of the new birth, not the cause of it (5:1).

For some reason, even the New American Standard Bible, which is usually quite literal, obscures the sense of the Greek verb in verse 1. The English Standard Version translates correctly, "Eve-

ryone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God....” The Greek verb (perfect tense) indicates an action that took place in the past with continuing results in the present and future. In other words, John is emphasizing that faith is the *result* or *evidence* of the new birth, *not* the *cause* of it. A person who has been born of God in the past will be characterized by ongoing faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. So one way that you can tell if you’ve been born again is to answer the question, “Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?”

Many evangelicals object to the teaching that regeneration precedes saving faith. (By *precedes*, I mean logically as the cause, not chronologically. Chronologically, faith occurs immediately after regeneration.) Critics say, “How can God (or preachers) call upon people to believe in Christ as Savior if they cannot believe?” So they make faith the *means* of regeneration, rather than the result.

But I would counter, how could Jesus command a dead man, “Lazarus, come forth” (John 11:43)? Isn’t it futile to command a dead man to do anything? Yes, unless it is the will of Jesus to raise him from the dead! Then, with the command, God imparts the power of new life, so that Lazarus can obey the command. Lazarus’ coming forth is clear evidence that he had already received new life from God. Faith is the evident result of the new birth, not the cause of it.

B. Faith has a clearly defined object (5:1, 5).

Faith in faith itself or faith in some vague, “I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows,” is not saving faith. Saving faith believes in the person of Jesus. Specifically it believes that He is the Christ (5:1), the Son of God (5:5). To believe that Jesus is the Christ means that the historic person, Jesus of Nazareth, is God’s Anointed One (or Messiah), the one promised and prophesied of in the Old Testament. He is the one who would “save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

To believe that Jesus is the Son of God means that He is the eternal God, the second person of the Trinity, in human flesh. The Jews of Jesus’ day clearly understood that His references to Himself as the Son of God were a claim to deity. When Jesus stated (John 5:17), “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am

working," the Jews sought to stone Him because (5:18) He was "calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." Jesus responded to these charges, not by correcting their understanding as being wrong, but by affirming His equality with God (John 5:19-47). John (20:31) affirms that the purpose of his gospel was "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

To *believe* in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, means that you entrust your eternal destiny and your right standing before God not to anything in yourself, including your faith, but entirely to Jesus and His substitutionary death on the cross for your sins. You believe that He paid the debt to God that you owe. Your faith rests completely upon the person and work of Jesus Christ.

C. Faith has a clearly observable result—overcoming the world (5:4, 5).

Three times John mentions "overcoming the world." "World" refers to the evil, organized system under Satan's dominion that is opposed to God and His purposes. Bishop Westcott (*The Epistles of St. John* [Eerdmans], p. 179) says that the term "gathers up the sum of all the limited, transitory powers opposed to God which make obedience difficult."

The Greek noun for "victory" (*nikē*) is the same root as the verb for "overcome." These are terms for warfare or battle. The Christian life is armed combat against the enemy of our souls. John uses two different verb tenses here. "Overcomes" (5:4a, 5a) is present tense, indicating ongoing, repeated victories over worldly powers and influences. But "has overcome" (5:4b) is the Greek aorist tense, which may be taken several ways. It may look at the overall result as a whole, showing that the normal Christian life is one of overcoming the enemy (constative or gnomic aorist). Or, it could point to the position of victory that we inherit in Christ. Or, it could indicate John's readers' decisive rejection of the false teachers and their damnable doctrines.

The emphasis is not on our faith, but on the object of our faith, Jesus Christ. John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 255) puts it, "faith receives from another that by which it overcomes." He says that if we put the emphasis on our faith, we "take

away from God what is his own." He adds (p. 256), "For by *faith* he means a real apprehension of Christ, or an effectual laying hold on him, by which we apply his power to ourselves."

John's point is that the faith that God imparts to us in the new birth results in a life of consistent victory over the evil forces of this world. While none of us will be completely untainted by worldly influences or values in this life, John's point here is the same one he made in 2:15, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Those who are born of God should consistently and progressively overcome the world.

Thus the new birth is the basis of the Christian life. Faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, is a vital sign of the new birth.

3. Love for God and His children is a vital sign of the new birth (5:1, 2, 3).

I am not going to spend much time here, since we just studied it (4:7-21). John's point here is the same as there, that love for God and love for His children are inextricably bound together. If you love the Father, you will love the child born of Him (5:1). You can't divorce the first and the second great commandments.

Also, love for God and His children is primarily volitional, not emotional. Love for God is expressed by keeping His commandments (5:3). Loving God's children is seen when we love God and keep His commandments (5:2). While you should have feelings of love for God and for His children, feelings are not the basis of such love. As we've seen, biblical love is primarily a self-sacrificing commitment to seek the other person's highest good.

At first, it sounds as if John is reasoning in a circle here. In 4:20, he said that you can't love God if you don't love your brother. But in 5:2, he states that you can know that you love your brother when you love God. How do we sort this out?

First, John is at pains to show that you cannot divorce love for God from love for your brother, and vice versa. One clear application of verse 1 is that we must love all that have truly been born of God. If there is evidence that a person is a child of God through the new birth, then he is my brother, even if I disagree with him about certain doctrinal matters. I must accept him, just as Christ accepted me (Rom. 15:7). While we may need to draw more

narrow lines when it comes to laboring together in the gospel, we should not draw those lines when it comes to love.

Second, John may be saying (in 5:2) that our motive for loving the children of God should be genuine love for God in obedience to His commandments. In other words, the reason we love others should not be natural factors, whether in them or in us. Rather, we are doing it to please God in obedience to His Word.

Third, in 5:2 John may mean that genuine love for others must be defined by obedience to God's commandments, not by cultural definitions of love. For example, our culture would say that if a brother falls into serious sin, the loving thing to do is to be nice and overlook his sin. To call it sin or try to correct the sinner would be judgmental and unloving. But to show genuine love to a sinning brother, we must love God and obey His commandments. This means going to the sinner in love to try to get him to repent. It means showing him that Jesus Christ is ready to forgive and give victory over this sin. Anything less than this is not biblical love, either for God or for the sinning believer.

Thus the vital signs of the new birth are faith in Jesus Christ and love for others. Finally,

4. Obedience to God's commandments is a vital sign of the new birth (5:2, 3).

John uses the word "commandments" three times. As we've seen, John is not saying that believers obey God perfectly. Rather, he is looking at the overall direction of our lives. A Christian's life should be marked by obedience out of a heart of love for God. When a child of God sins, he confesses his sin so that he can be restored to fellowship with God (1:9; 2:1). The person who claims to be born again, but who is not concerned about a lifestyle of disobedience to God's Word, should examine himself to see if he really is in the faith (1 John 3:4-10; 2 Cor. 13:5).

John adds an uplifting word at the end of verse 3: "and His commandments are not burdensome." He does not mean that obedience to God's commandments is always easy or effortless. The warfare terminology of "overcoming" and "victory" shows that obedience is often a battle. The world, the flesh, and the devil

are formidable foes that we must constantly fight against. So in what sense are God's commandments not burdensome?

First, God's commandments are not burdensome because we have a new nature that has the power to obey. That is the implication of "for" at the beginning of verse 4. (Some versions put a comma or semicolon at the end of 5:3, rather than a period.) God's commandments are not burdensome because "whatever is born of God overcomes the world." "Whatever" is a neuter in Greek, which probably focuses on our new nature that overcomes the world. Thus John emphasizes not "the victorious *person*," but "the victorious *power*." "It is not the man, but his birth from God, which conquers" (Alfred Plummer, cited by Stott, p. 174).

Second, God's commandments are not burdensome because they are the commands of God, not of man. The commandments of men are burdensome. Invariably they stem from an attempt to earn standing with God or status before men through a system of human works. The Pharisees had added their commandments to God's commands, but Jesus called them "heavy burdens" (Matt. 23:4). Even God's law, apart from the grace of Christ, was a heavy yoke that no one could bear (Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1). But, God's commandments come from an all-wise heavenly Father, designed for our good. Our gentle Savior said, "My yoke is easy and My load is light" (Matt. 11:30).

Third, God's commandments are not burdensome because they are given and received in the context of love. A loving father does not tell his child to stay away from a busy street because he wants to take away his fun, but because he loves him and wants to protect him from injury or death. An immature child may think that his father's commandment is restrictive, but he needs to trust his father's love and obey anyway.

An immature believer may view God's commands as restrictive. But our heavenly Father knows that sin will damage and destroy us. If we have come to know His love in Christ through the new birth, then we must trust His love and obey His commandments. When we see that God's commands stem from His love for us as His children, they are not burdensome.

Conclusion

The very first test given to a newborn in the delivery room is called the Apgar score. The test was designed to quickly evaluate a newborn's physical condition after delivery and to determine any immediate need for extra medical or emergency care. It measures things like muscle tone, heart rate, reflexes, skin color, and breathing rate.

Our second daughter came out of the womb with blue skin, and I was very alarmed. The doctor calmly cleaned the mucus out of her nose, and in a minute she was pink and crying. She didn't get a very high Apgar score, but thankfully, she was alive. If she had not started breathing, we would have been overwhelmed with grief, not filled with joy. The vital signs of birth are essential!

A true child of God will have a spiritual Apgar score. We could probably come up with more, but John gives us three vital signs of the new birth: *faith* in Jesus Christ, *love* for others, and *obedience* to God's commandments. If you claim to be born again, you may want to check your spiritual Apgar score. If the vital signs of new life in Christ are not there, you need to get down on your knees and plead with God to cause you "to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3).

Application Questions

1. If faith is the result, not the cause, of the new birth, why does the Bible call upon all people to believe in Christ? Is this contradictory, as some allege?
2. Why is it important to affirm that the new birth is totally from God? What practical spiritual implications does this have?
3. Why must we define love for others in terms of love for God and obedience to His commandments (5:2)?
4. What should a believer do when he feels that God's commandments are burdensome? What steps should he take?

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