

The Divine Birth

Being begotten of God, the divine birth, is a particular stress in John's Gospel and in his first Epistle.¹ John mentions the believers' divine birth at the start of his Gospel (1:12-13), and when he presents nine cases that illustrate the need of unregenerated humanity (2:23—11:57), he begins with the divine birth (3:3, 5-6). With the divine birth as its base (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18), his first Epistle then focuses on the need of regenerated humanity to remain in fellowship, to practice the truth, to abide in God, to practice righteousness, to keep the commandment of love, to do the will of God, and to overcome the world. Throughout his writings, John emphasizes the divine birth, which suggests that a proper understanding of what it means to be begotten of God is necessary not only to appreciate the significance of our salvation but equally to know how we should walk once we are saved.

The Divine Birth in the Gospel of John

In chapter 1 of the Gospel of John, the divine birth is declared to be the focus of the incarnation of the Word: He came to His own, and those who receive Him have been given the authority to become children of God, having been begotten of God (vv. 11-13). In His talk with Nicodemus in chapter 3, the Lord Jesus spoke in more detail concerning this birth, revealing that the divine birth is of water and the Spirit, and that the Spirit's begetting is focused on the human spirit (vv. 3, 5-6). Water refers to the ministry of John the Baptist (1:26), which prepared men for the ministry of the Lord Jesus, a ministry of the Spirit (3:34). The former was a ministry for the termination of the old creation, and the latter is a ministry for the germination of the new creation, which involves the divine Spirit and the human spirit: "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (v. 6). The impersonal pronoun *that* indicates the faculty of the human spirit within man. In the divine birth, the human spirit is enlivened and indwelt by the Spirit.

Beginning in chapter 3, John presents nine cases that

show how the eternal life, which enlivens humanity, is able to meet humanity's every need. The first case, the case of Nicodemus, points to the most basic need of fallen humanity—regeneration based on the redemption of Christ. Nicodemus, who was a ruler of the Jews and a teacher of Israel, came to Jesus seeking teaching (v. 2) because he had not attained to the righteousness that he was seeking through the law. In His response to Nicodemus, the Lord spoke of humanity's need for regeneration based on His redemption. While regeneration is a matter of being born of the Spirit (vv. 5-6), it is

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based on the redemption of Christ on the cross, which dealt with our fallen "serpentine" nature. This is the reason that the Lord spoke of the Israelites in the wilderness, who, after rebelling against God, were bitten by fiery serpents and were dying. Salvation came to those who looked at the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up on a pole. The bronze serpent on the pole

bore the judgment of God for all the children of Israel. Those who looked at the bronze serpent on the pole became identified with the judged serpent; hence, God could justify them, and they lived. The bronze serpent typifies God's Son, who was sent in the likeness of the flesh of sin to condemn sin in the flesh (v. 14; Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21). The bronze serpent is a type of the Lord Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross. Nicodemus needed to see that although he was a moral man, he was still a "serpent," fully infected with the poisonous nature of the serpent. He needed both forgiveness and life: "Everyone who believes into Him may have eternal life" (John 3:15). Through the Lord's death, the serpentine nature of fallen humanity was dealt with so that humanity could receive eternal life to be begotten of God.

The divine birth involves the impartation of the divine life, which is the eternal life that the Lord promised to give to those who believe into Him. Eternal life does not refer to an everlasting existence, nor is it given for the purpose of improving human behavior. Rather, it is the life

of the Triune God, which is imparted into redeemed humanity. Being born again, being born of God, is to receive the eternal life of the Triune God in addition to our human life. This life is a life that is not only eternal in time but also eternal and divine in nature. When this life enters into us, it not only enlivens us but also becomes a new source for our living. This life flows within us from our innermost being as rivers of living water, signifying that there are different aspects of this life, all of which originate from this river of life (7:38). The different aspects of this life, which we received with the divine birth, are further developed in John's first Epistle.

The Divine Birth in 1 John

In his first Epistle, John speaks of the mysteries of the divine life: the mystery of the fellowship of life (1:3-7); the mystery of the anointing of the Divine Trinity (2:20-27); the mystery of abiding in the Lord (2:28—3:24); the mystery of the divine living that practices the divine truth (1:6), the divine will (2:17), the divine righteousness (v. 29; 3:7), and the divine love (vv. 11; 22-23; 5:1-3) to express the divine person (4:12); and finally, the mystery of overcoming the world, death, sin, the devil, and idols in 5:4-21. In writing of these mysteries John repeatedly refers to the fact of our divine birth (2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18), because it is the divine birth that assures us, the God-begotten believers, of the ability and virtue of the divine life.

The Mystery of the Fellowship of Life

"That which we have seen and heard [the eternal life] we report also to you that you also may have fellowship with us" (1:3). After receiving the eternal life through the apostles' report, the believers have fellowship, not only with the apostles but also with the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (vv. 3, 5-6; the word *fellowship* implies the Spirit, 2 Cor. 13:14). Fellowship is the flow of the eternal life within the believers, as prophesied by the Lord in John 4:14 and 7:38, and it is illustrated by the flow of the water of life in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:1-2). The term *fellowship* in Greek means "joint participation." By the fellowship of life, we participate in and enjoy the riches of the eternal life; that is, we participate in all that the Triune God is, has, and has accomplished for us.

The divine birth assures us of our possession of eternal life, whereas the fellowship of life maintains us in the participation in life. The eternal life which we receive through our divine birth establishes a relationship of life with the Triune God that can never be broken or annulled. Our possession of eternal life is eternally secure (John 10:28-29). However, the fellowship of life, the flow of life within us, is conditional, and in experience it is often broken by sin (1 John 1:5-10). When this happens, our

participation in the Triune God temporarily ceases until the fellowship is restored. Restoration requires only that the conditions of the fellowship be fulfilled; it does not mean that we need to receive eternal life once more, because it was never lost or forfeited. When we confess our sins, that is, the sins that we commit after salvation, the blood of Jesus the Son of God cleanses us, and the fellowship is immediately restored (v. 7).

The purpose of the divine birth is also fulfilled by the fellowship of life. The apostles reported to the believers the eternal life in order that they may have fellowship with the apostles, whose fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (v. 3). Without the divine birth, our fellowship would be empty, void of content, and without the fellowship of life; the purpose of our divine birth could not be fulfilled. The divine birth makes us children of God (3:1), and the fellowship of life causes us to participate in the riches of God so that we may grow unto full maturity in the life of God to be His complete expression (v. 2). In particular, we participate in the nature of God that we have received by the divine birth. God is light (1:5), God is love (4:8, 16), and God is Spirit (John 4:24), and we have become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). The first Epistle of John was written to encourage the believers to partake of the divine nature in the fellowship of the divine life.

The divine birth is also substantiated by the fellowship of life. The divine birth is mysterious and intangible. The fellowship of life gives us a consciousness that is sensitive in two directions; one is toward sin, and the other is toward the brothers, those begotten of God. When we sin after receiving eternal life, we sense that we are in darkness (1 John 1:5-6), and when we do not love the brothers, we also sense darkness and death (2:9-11; 3:14).

The divine birth lastly brings us into a fellowship which is not only with the Triune God but also with all those who have also been begotten of God, who are represented by the apostles (1:3; Acts 2:42). By the divine birth we become part of the corporate expression of God, God's household. "Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God; and we are" (1 John 3:1). This verse continues, indicating that the expression of God is uniquely in those who are begotten of God: "Because of this the world does not know us, because it did not know Him"; that is, the world did not know Him experientially by the impartation of life. All the children of God are one in the expression of God. However, this oneness needs to be maintained, and it can easily be broken. By the fellowship of life we can remain in the oneness in which we love the brothers, those who have been begotten of God, to be God's corporate expression for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose.

The Mystery of the Anointing of the Divine Trinity

“You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know...And as for you, the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you” (2:20, 27). First John is unique in the New Testament Epistles in referring to the anointing with a gerund. The term refers not only to the ointment itself but to the movement of the ointment. In the type in Exodus 30:22-33, the ointment is a compound of the oil, signifying the Spirit of God (Heb. 1:9), with four spices in particular quantities, all of which are full of meaning in their denotations. When the priests and the tabernacle were anointed with this compound ointment, all the elements of the olive oil and the spices were added to them. This is a type that is deep in its significance for the believers, in whom the Spirit is today. The notes in the Recovery Version describe this anointing as “the moving and working of the indwelling compound Spirit” within us by which the Triune God with the elements of Christ’s divinity, humanity, death with its effectiveness, and resurrection with its power “is transfused, infused, and added into all the inward parts of our being that our inner man may grow in the divine life with the divine elements” (1 John 2:20, note 1; v. 27, note 5).

The anointing is an issue of the divine birth, which is accomplished by the Spirit (John 3:6). The Spirit is now indwelling us, and He moves within us as the anointing. By the sense of the anointing in our spirit we all know what is of God and what is not of God, what God approves and disapproves, what He desires, and what His will is. By the anointing we know the truth concerning the person of Jesus Christ and the lie, which is of the antichrist (1 John 2:22), and also we abide in the Triune God.

The fellowship of life and the anointing are very closely related. Both teach us to abide in the Lord (vv. 24-25, 27). The fellowship of life gives us the consciousness of life in two directions, toward sin and toward the love of God and the brothers. These are sensed in the parts of our spirit related to conscience and fellowship. The anointing gives us the inner ability to know God and to abide in Him. This concerns the intuition in our spirit. Through our divine birth we receive an inward capacity in all the three parts of our spirit to know both life with its fellowship and the anointing with its teaching.

The Mystery of Abiding in the Lord

“Now, little children, abide in Him, so that if He is

manifested, we may have boldness and not be put to shame from Him at His coming...Everyone who abides in Him does not sin...And he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And in this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He gave to us” (2:28; 3:6, 24). The section from 2:28 to 3:24 reveals that abiding in the Lord is the living of the children of God in which they practice the divine righteousness of their begetting God (2:29) and the divine love of their begetting Father (3:10-11, 14-23). By His begetting, God imparts His eternal life (v. 15) and His seed (v. 9). The seed is the container of life and implies the matter of growth. By the growth of God’s eternal life as the divine seed in us, we live, abiding in the Lord. “Such an abiding and its bases—the divine birth and the divine life as the divine seed—are mysterious yet real in the Spirit” (Recovery Version, 3:24, note 1).

The Mystery of the Divine Living

The living of the children of God is mysterious in its practice in that it expresses not merely morality or virtue but the divine reality, which the children of God have because of their divine birth. There are several components to their practice—they practice the divine truth: “if we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and are not practicing the truth” (1:6); the divine will: “he who does the will of God abides forever” (2:17); the divine righteousness: “he who practices righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous” (3:7); and the divine love: “this is the message which you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (3:11); and by their practice of love they express the divine person: “no one has beheld God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us” (4:12).

The apostle John regards these practices of the believers’ living as manifestations of what they are according to their birth, not what they perform as their behavior. “In this,” that is, whether or not they practice sin and whether they can or cannot sin, “the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest” (3:10). A child of God practices righteousness and loves his brother. This does not mean that one who is born of God never sins; the fact that he “cannot sin” in 3:9 means that he cannot live in sin habitually. He may sin occasionally, but practicing righteousness is his life, and not practicing righteousness is contrary to his life and nature.

By the sense of the anointing in our spirit we all know what is of God and what is not of God, what God approves and disapproves, what He desires, and what His will is.

Whether one is a child of God or a child of the devil is manifested by what he practices, righteousness or sin. A reborn believer may commit sin, and an unsaved man may do righteousness. Both are their outward behavior, not their outward living, and thus do not manifest what they are in their inward life and nature. (Recovery Version, v. 10, note 1)

Similarly, the commandment of love, which is both the new commandment and the commandment that the believers received from the beginning (2:7-8), is according to their nature as children of God, expressing the very God who has begotten them with His life. "Righteousness is the nature of God's acts; love is the nature of God's essence. What God is, is love; what God does is righteousness. Love is inward; righteousness is outward" (Recovery Version, 3:10, note 2). For the apostle both righteousness and love are practices which manifest the children of God, and the latter is a stronger manifestation, because it is according to the nature of God's essence.

The Mystery of Overcoming the World, Death, Sin, the Devil, and Idols

Three exceedingly evil matters that oppose the believers, one pernicious source, and one dreadful result are addressed by the apostle John at the end of his Epistle. The evil matters are the world (5:4), sin (v. 16), and idols (v. 21). Behind these is the devil, "the evil one" (v. 18), who opposes the believers' abiding in the Lord in the fellowship of the divine life. The whole world lies passively in him (v. 19); he tempts the believers to sin and by it seeks to touch them (v. 18); and he utilizes idols to substitute and replace the true God, bringing those he so leads into an evil fellowship (cf. 1 Cor. 10:14, 20). The result of sin and, by implication, the world and idols, is death, which may not only be spiritual but even physical, that is, in the believers' lifetime (1 John 5:16-17).

By the divine birth, which brings in the divine life, we overcome the world, sin, and idols. "Everyone who is begotten of God does not sin"; nevertheless, he still needs

to keep himself (v. 18). Likewise, those begotten of God overcome the world (v. 4), yet John still charges them not to love the world (2:15), indicating that the possibility of succumbing to the world's temptation exists. And concerning the idols, which particularly refer to teachings of the heretics who were denying the person of the Son of God, the believers need to guard, or garrison, themselves (5:21). Therefore, on the one hand, the divine birth is the assurance of our ability to overcome. On the other hand, it is also a warning to us that without remaining in the reality of the eternal life, we will be defeated. Where is this reality? It is in "everything that has been begotten of God" (v. 4). Although this refers generally to the person who is begotten, the impersonal expression especially refers to that part within him that has been begotten, namely, the regenerated spirit. "The regenerated spirit of the regenerated believer does not practice sin (3:9) and overcomes the world" (Recovery Version, 5:4, note 1), and it is this part, in particular, that the evil one does not touch (v. 18.) Hence, "the believer's divine birth with the divine life is the basic factor for such a victorious living" (Recovery Version, v. 4, note 1).

In the Gospel of John, the divine birth is the means whereby those who believe into the Son receive the divine, eternal life that fully meets the need of man's every case. In the first Epistle of John, those who have received this life enjoy its fellowship and partake of all the riches of this life, which are all the riches of the Triune God. By such a partaking, spontaneously and habitually, without any performance of outward behavior, they live a life that manifests the very divine person who begot them.

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Notes

¹See Recovery Version, 1 John 5:4, note 2.

Works Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003.

Footnote from the Recovery Version of the Bible

"Behold what manner of love the **Father** has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and we are. Because of this the world does not know us, because it did not know Him" (1 John 3:1).

Father: Of the Triune God implied in the preceding verse, here the Father is mentioned particularly. He is the source of the divine life, the One of whom we have been born with this life. The love of God was manifested by His sending of His Son to die for us (4:9; John 3:16) in order that we might have His life and thus become His children (John 1:12-13). God's sending of His Son was that He might beget us. Hence, the love of God is a begetting love, particularly in the Father.