

The Bible's teaching about the nature of regeneration is presented under four main figures: a "new birth," a "new life," a "new creation," and a "new nature." What meaning does each of these figures convey?

A. Regeneration as a New Birth

In John 3:1-8 (the classic text on the new birth) we read:

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is begotten again, he is not able to see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus says to Him, "how is a man able to be begotten, being old? He is not able to enter the womb of his mother a second time and be begotten, is he?" Jesus answer, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is begotten of water and Spirit, he is not able to enter the kingdom of God.

Some interpreters of this passage have taken it to refer to the necessity of water baptism for salvation or to the Spirit's use of water baptism to bring about regeneration; others have taken it to refer to the cleansing which the Holy Spirit accomplishes in regeneration; and still others have understood it to be speaking of the Spirit's use of the Word of God to bring about regeneration.

I would suggest that the position that best unifies the passage and seems to make the best sense of this remarkable conversation is the one that views Jesus as saying that unless one is begotten, not only naturally but also spiritually, he or she is not able to enter the kingdom of God. In this view "water" is not a figure for water baptism, or for cleansing, or for the Word of God, but for natural birth; and that being "begotten of or out of water" is an excellent figure to represent physical birth. As you know, a baby in its mother's womb is enclosed in a membrane or sac containing a water-like fluid (the amniotic fluid), and that the sac ruptures shortly before the baby is born, releasing the "water" (even today we say "the water broke").

This view proposes that Nicodemus was told, "You must be born again"; and that he answered, "How is a man able to be born naturally a second time?"; and that Jesus replied "A man must be born, not only naturally, but also spiritually, since that which is born naturally is flesh (i.e., natural), whereas that which is born spiritually is spirit (i.e., spiritual). I commend