

Being Born Again, Baptism, and the Subjective and Objective Work of the Spirit

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Welcome back. Today I'm answering two related questions. The first is, what is your understanding of what regeneration, being born again, and the new birth mean in scripture? And how do common contemporary Christian understandings align or deviate from what scripture means by these things?

The second question is, really quick follow-up, I missed your earlier video on baptism, possibly, but I'm wondering if you wanted to fill in your view of the role of the Spirit in both the objective and subjective dimensions to baptism you talk about here.

In other words, what is the connection between the baptised and the regenerate, or the agent of regeneration and the act of baptism? Another way of putting it is, what do we make of the baptism of the Spirit in Paul?

The first question I've answered largely in a video I've produced on the question of what does Jesus mean by being born again. I'll leave the link to that in the notes below, but briefly summing up the argument of that video and my position on this question more generally, I don't believe that the terminology of regeneration or being born again, as it's used within the New Testament, primarily has reference to the work of the Spirit in quickening the heart of a person to believe the gospel, to believe and respond to spiritual things.

I think that's a different sort of thing. I think what regeneration means, as it's used in scripture, and being born again, is a far more specific historical reality. It's referring to Christ's rebirth from the dead.

[1 : 27] It's referring to the bringing in of a new order, the eschatological order of the renewal of Israel, this conquest over the grave, rebirth from the dead.

And that, I think, is what is being referred to. It's the in-breaking of resurrection life. And so there is a way in which each individual who has their heart quickened by the Spirit to receive the gospel can be receiving something similar to this.

But I think being born again has a bit more of a redemptive historical weight to it than people think. And so when Jesus talks about these things, he's not talking about truths that are just generically true in the Old and New Testament, just about the work that the Holy Spirit engages in in a timeless fashion.

Rather, when he talks about you must be born again, he's referring to Israel particularly. And the nation needs to be raised from its grave. And there needs to be a rebirth of humanity that has died in Adam.

And that rebirth is something that happens in Christ's resurrection, and we participate in that in different ways. And so as we're united to Christ by the Spirit, there is a way in which we are regenerated.

[2 : 42] We participate in resurrection life here and now in anticipation of a fuller resurrection on the last day. And putting these things together, I think what we have in the reference to regeneration then and being born again is something that is associated with the death and resurrection of Christ.

And with the final resurrection that that anticipates. Now that means that when we're talking about the first spark of spiritual life in the soul of a person, we should be careful to distinguish that from this more detailed redemptive historical notion that is important in different ways.

And so when we've distinguished those two things, we can see that they are related very closely in different ways. But within the New Testament, for instance, there are a lot of people who have genuine faith, whose hearts have been quickened by the Holy Spirit to receive divine truth, and yet they have not been born again in that fuller sense.

Being born again is an entrance into a redemptive historical reality. And so someone like Cornelius was a true God-fearing Gentile. He believed God's truth, but yet he had not been entered into the life of the resurrection, into the life of the age to come.

He had not participated in the life of Christ. And that, I think, is resurrection, regeneration, being born again. It's associated with that. Christ is the firstborn from the dead.

[4 : 14] The language of death and resurrection is associated with birth. So Christ is the one who opens up the womb of the tomb.

As we read through the Gospels, we see a parallel and juxtaposition of the events of Christ's birth and the events of his death and resurrection. And Mary and Joseph are laying, wrapping up in linen clothes and laid in a stone container.

The appearance of signs and angels to shepherds. All these sorts of things. Being taken into the temple after 40 days.

The earthly temple and then the heavenly temple. All of these themes are playing out. So I think we have these themes of regeneration, this rebirth associated with the woman whose hour has come and birth pangs and then this child being born into the world.

Christ is the child that is born into the world. And that, I think, leads to an understanding of regeneration. Christ is the firstborn from the dead. The relationship between the womb and the tomb, which is throughout the Old Testament.

[5 : 21] Naked, I came from my mother's womb. Naked, I will return there. Knit together in the lowest parts of the earth. The association in the curse with the woman's womb and the earth as well as the site of death.

All of these things, I think, are at play behind that language of regeneration, rebirth. And that then leads to the second question, which is how the spirit relates to both the objective and subjective dimensions of baptism.

How the baptized and the regenerate relate. And these connections more generally. First of all, when we're talking about the objective aspect, we need to think about the redemptive historical dimension.

Once again, we're talking about an event that is redemptive historical. And baptism is connected to a redemptive historical series of occurrences.

It plugs us into those. And so Pentecost is significant. If we're talking about baptism of the spirit, it's not an individual thing that should be atomized in that sense.

[6 : 23] It's referring to the event of Pentecost primarily. That is how the church is baptized by one spirit into one body. The church is unified in this Pentecostal event.

The Pentecostal event as it, the church, is formed by the spirit in an event that is public. It's not just a private event within the individual soul.

But this is an event by which the church is formed by the pouring out of the spirit. And so there's an objective dimension there. And the objective dimension is also carried out in the practice of baptism, where we are knit into the life of the visible church.

We are made part of the life of the visible church. We participate in its fellowship. And that is significant because the church, the visible church, is the realm of the spirit's special operation and presence and activity.

It's a realm of life in the spirit. We all drink in the spirit. And so if the church has been baptized by the spirit at Pentecost, baptized into one body, as we are brought in to share in the life and the fellowship of the church, we are participating in the life of the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 36] And so the significance of baptism is not so much just seen in itself. It's what baptism brings us into. And so in the same way as adoption, adoption is significant because of what it brings you into.

Not so much the event in itself, but it's the life that you come to share in as you celebrate that, as you are adopted and as you become part of a new family.

And so the church has been baptized objectively by the spirit at Pentecost. We have been objectively plugged into it as a communion of life, visible communion of life and its activities and its fellowship.

And then that is something, a realm of life that we're supposed to take into ourselves. So this is all, it's very hard to distinguish neatly between subjective and objective.

In many senses, it's like Mobius strip where the inside and the outside are ultimately the same side. And so when this is properly understood, I think that in the same way as there are many objective dimensions to a marriage, having your spouse's name, having shared practices, eating together, things like that, living under the same roof, sharing resources, all of these things are objective dimensions of marriage.

[8 : 52] But if you see those just as purely objective, things that stand out there in the world and face this outward cold reality and are merely legal, merely pieces of paper, for instance, the way that people talk about objective realities in a dismissive sense in our society, then you're missing the point.

These so-called objective realities are deeply tied up with the subjective reality at the heart. The love and the fellowship of the home is seen in these and experienced in the context and in the realm created by these objective realities.

And in the same way, the union of the church is found in the communion of the spirit, a participation in the life of Christ. And this is found in a context where we're baptized into a visible church, where we fellowship with others, where we eat at the table of communion, where we hear God's word spoken to us, where we are built up, where we are challenged, where we enjoy the fellowship and the encouragement and the discipline of other brothers and sisters in Christ.

And that objective, subjective distinction can only take us so far. In some ways, it will always break down because it is like that Mobius strip where the inside and the outside coincide ultimately.

Baptism is always something that is bound up with the work of the Holy Spirit. Even the objective work of baptism, it's first of all, it's bringing us into the realm of the spirit, the visible realm that has been formed by the spirit's work at Pentecost, that has been sustained by the spirit throughout history and where the spirit works through the means of grace.

[10 : 37] And so it's tied up with the work of the spirit. But it's also something that is calling for a subjective entrance into that, a subjective appropriation of these realities.

And so it's not enough just to have that, if a merely objective participation is not a true participation at all, because ultimately these things go together.

As I've described when we talk about marriage, if we think about marriage purely in objective terms, that you have objective aspects of marriage and then you have subjective aspects of marriage, you have this piece of paper, this legal status, all these sorts of things that are the objective aspects of marriage that go along with the wedding ceremony and all these things that occur in a public stage and then you have these official documents.

And then you have the subjective love. And if you hold those two things apart from each other, you get the nonsense that we get in our society about marriage just being a piece of paper and only having as much validity as the love that is within it.

And if the love goes, then the marriage goes. These sorts of things. But when we think about marriage more generally, the objective and the subjective are bound together.

[11 : 54] The true meaning of marriage is not found merely in some objective status. And if that's all you have, you don't really have a marriage. If it's merely an objective status, then there's something seriously wrong.

If you've just got a piece of paper, if you've just got some legal status, and then you go off and go your separate ways and live as if you've never been married, then there's something very badly wrong.

Rather, marriage is always, has its illocutionary force, its purpose, its the end towards which it tends. It has a union of life. And that is what a marriage involves.

And the objective and the subjective are knit together as a unity there. You inhabit that objective reality. That objective reality makes space and possibility for the subjective love to be fostered and to grow and to be strong and supported.

And in the same way, those subjective elements are always presupposed and anticipated by the objective celebration. So if you are going to celebrate a wedding, you presume and you hope for pretty good evidence that the couple that are getting married love each other and are committed to each other.

[13 : 07] Likewise, you only marry people when you have the anticipation that they will grow into the full realisation of the life and love that is appropriate to marriage and the union and the sharing of life and body.

Now, if we're thinking about this strict objective, subjective opposition, I think we miss so much of what baptism means, what marriage means, what adoption means, all these sorts of things that are involved with entrance into new forms of life in communion with others.

And when we're thinking about baptism, then we're unplugged from old solidarities and plugged into a new one. But that new solidarity is not a mere objective thing, a mere status or a mere piece of paper or a mere legal position or a mere position within an institutional structure.

It can be seen as those sorts of things, but so much more. It's an entrance into a life that those things circumscribe and those things adumbrate and give shape to and an identity to and fill out.

They give form to it and the life that fills that is made possible by that form. And so trying to tease these things apart, the objective and the subjective, I think gets us into confusing and unhelpful places.

[14 : 29] Marriage always has this bringing together of the objective and the subjective that the love is never going to be pitted against the legal status, the pieces of paper, things like that, and radically opposed or alienated.

Rather, there's going to be a knitting together of these things as people live out the unity of love and communion in the context made possible by the forms of marriage, by the forms of society that enable us to remain faithful and committed and to have a structure within which these things can take place, a sharing of life.

And so subjective participation in the life of the Holy Spirit is always presumed and it's always on the basis of some prior participation in the life of the Spirit.

When we think about, for instance, I've given the example of coronation, as coronation relates to accession to the throne, or as adoption is performed. And adoption is not performed with a child that hates the prospective adoptive parents because the adoption has as its goal the sharing of life and the knitting into a single shared communion of love.

And where that is not a realistic prospect, the adoption does not take place. Likewise, when a child is, or when someone is baptised, they are baptised on the basis, first of all, of a prior status, some sort of prior connection with Christ and the life of the Spirit.

[16 : 05] So in the same way as someone who gets a coronation, there's a change in their publicisation of their status and their life and their entrance into the full enjoyment of their role and their position and their office, but there is, at the same time, that is performed on the basis of something that they already have, that they now stand as the heirs to the throne.

They have exceeded, indeed, they have acceded to the throne upon the death of the previous monarch. And so the coronation follows after that, but in following after that, it's, in part, a reaffirmation or an affirmation of that original fact.

Likewise, when we're talking about baptism, the person who is baptised is baptised in part on the basis they are a fitting candidate for baptism because they already show signs of the Spirit at work, because they already are part of the life of the Spirit.

They're already included in the realm of the Spirit's operations. And so we bring them into a fuller recognition and enjoyment of that reality also in the anticipation that they will receive that more fully, that they will grow into it more fully, that it won't just be abandoned.

And so when we think, for instance, about the work of baptism, baptism is always anticipatory. Baptism, we're baptised into Christ's death and that position of being baptised into Christ's death and being buried with him, being buried with Christ is a very potent position to be in.

[17 : 42] It's this charged position between death and resurrection, this realm of anticipation, this realm of we have died to our old selves, we're no longer defined in the same way, and we're cut loose, unplugged from old solidarities and connected to a new one.

But this is always an anticipation of coming to share in the life of the Spirit, that we will be raised on the last day. And it's an anticipation of, in this moment in time, sharing in that life of the Spirit that characterises the communion of the Church.

This objective, visible, public reality of the Church's life is the realm where the Spirit is present and active. And so as we participate in that, it's presumed that we will take this into ourselves, that what has been objective for us will be, in the same sense, subjective.

Those objective realities will be the deepest things about ourselves. ourselves. And that relationship between subjective and objective is important when we think about any person's identity.

Some of the things that are deepest to me are things that were once most outside of me, those things that are most given about me. I did not choose my family.

[19 : 00] I did not choose to be born with this particular body. And I did not choose to be born into a particular nation, into a particular context and location, all these sorts of things.

But these become deep aspects of my identity as they are internalised. And I take these things that are in some sense outside of me into myself. And so the body particularly is the meeting point between the world and the self.

It is at once world and self. It's at once other and myself. It's at once inner and outer. And baptism is performed upon the body.

Baptism is performed upon that site of greatest givenness. Those things that are most intimate to myself but also those things that are in some sense most most characteristics of the world's intrusion upon myself.

The world's claim upon myself. And the body is the site of that. And baptism is performed upon the body. Baptism is a claiming of the body. And in that sense I think it breaks down the opposition between objective and subjective ultimately.

[20 : 14] Those things can serve a certain heuristic purpose, take us a certain degree of the way to understanding certain concepts, but ultimately they fall apart because the body which is the site of baptism, which is the site of baptism's meaning, your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Your body has been set apart. And when we think about the body set apart as a member of the temple of the Holy Spirit, the church is a temple.

It's the temple of the Holy Spirit's presence. But in the same way as the high priest recapitulated the order of the temple or the tabernacle in his own vestments, so the Christian is in themselves a temple of the Holy Spirit, not just a member of a temple and a priest within a temple.

So when we think of our bodies as a temple of the Holy Spirit, I think we're building out on some of that biblical terminology, that biblical typology, and that participation is always something that is deeply intimate.

Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, your limbs and your organs are set apart for Christ. The limbs and the organs like the sacrificial animal cut up into its limbs and organs and its different parts and then presented as a sacrifice.

[21 : 37] So our bodies are presented as a living sacrifice to God in baptism. Our bodies, there's a certain objectivity to that, but then that needs to be taken into the deepest of personal facts, that our bodies are no longer our own, but we belong both body and soul to Jesus Christ.

And from that point onwards, we think of our bodies in a different way. You look at your body and you realise that your body is not just an object that you do things with.

It's not just an instrument of your agency. It's a realm of the Spirit's presence. It's something that God has marked out for resurrection, marked out as his own. And so I believe once this is better understood, oppositions between internal and external, objective and subjective, and the work of the Spirit in an objective sense and a subjective sense, they ultimately fail to capture the reality because those things in their proper sense should be joined together and are joined together.

It's only when we see those things broken apart, and that's a violation of the reality, that's a violation of what baptism means, it's only then that the categories of objective and subjective start to come to the fore because it's the merely objective.

But that is a breaking down of the true meaning of the sign. The true meaning of the sign is seen in the joining together of objective and subjective, so they're not opposed. And when those are broken down, then we start to see those things standing in stark relief over against each other.

[23 : 16] And that, I think, is not the normative category, set of categories within which we should understand what baptism means. Beyond this, on the question of the relationship between the baptism of the spirit and the baptism of water in Paul, I think these things are related to each other.

The baptism of the spirit is related to the events of Pentecost, it's related to sharing in the life of the spirit in the church. We are all baptised by the spirit into one body, and that's seen primarily in the baptism of Pentecost, but also seen in each and every baptism as people enter into the life of the spirit, which is within the church.

And so every single baptism is performed by ministers of Christ, in the name of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, bringing people into the realm of the Holy Spirit.

And so, ideally, in its proper sense, where these things are joined together, it is spoken of as something that is a work of the Holy Spirit, it is the baptism of the Holy Spirit, it is the means by which we come to a full participation and sharing in the work of Christ.

And as I've spoken about this subject before, I've made clear that the biblical language takes as paradigmatic this connection between internal and external, so these things are never opposed to each other, there's this bringing together of the sign and the reality, there's this bringing together of the mobius strip of the spirit's work in this objective sense and this subjective sense.

[24 : 48] So that baptism can be spoken of in the most powerful ways possible. Baptism is the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is that by which we are sealed for redemption. Baptism is that by which we are washed, we are justified, we are sanctified. This is the language that scripture use and it shocks us but that's because it's holding together the true reality where it has not been torn apart by unbelief.

And where it is torn apart by unbelief, what we are seeing is not the true meaning of baptism as a purely objective thing but what we are seeing is a violation of the true meaning of baptism, a falling short of the true meaning of baptism.

And so being baptised doesn't mean that you're going to be saved on the last day, it doesn't mean that you're automatically set apart as someone who enjoys the full life of the spirit but rather being baptised, if it's received by faith, is a reception of that reality in its proper manner.

And as you receive that in its proper manner, you share in the life of the Holy Spirit. All these things that baptism signifies are realities for you. In the same way as I've given the example of marriage in this context, that when a couple are married, the point of marriage is not just you're put in this ambivalent status, you are now married on paper, you can make of that what you want.

[26 : 13] You can be unfaithful, you can be faithful, you can keep your promises, you cannot keep your promises, but you've got this objective status. No, that's not the meaning of marriage or wedding at all.

The point of the wedding is to bring you into a new status where the objective and the subjective are knit together as one and there's no opposition between the two, where marriage is never just a mere sheet of paper, piece of paper, but it's something that has deep and lasting significance and shapes your understanding of who you are at the very deepest level.

Likewise with baptism. The baptism brings together the objective and the subjective work of the spirit in such a way that there's no line and separation that can be drawn between them.

Because like a mobius strip, the internal and the external are one. They're connected in every single sense. I hope this helps and if you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account. Or if you want, you can buy books that I've linked or buy books using those from moving out from those links and I will get some money from Amazon.

[27 : 25] That also helps. Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. Thank you very much for listening and for your time. God bless you.