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## **The Great Debate: Sinner's Prayer & Believer's Baptism What Makes for a Healthy Birth?**

It happened in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Life was warm and cozy. Then the unexpected occurred. Your mother gave a final push and you entered into a whole new world. The doctor announced your arrival: "Here she is!" and then began the time sensitive tasks to make certain your arrival was a healthy one.

Immediately, the doctor began clearing your nostrils for that first breath of air. As soon as you could breathe, the doctor looked at the clock on the wall announcing the exact time of arrival. The delivery team began cleaning all the residue of birth off you. One cleared your eyes so you could see. The doctor then clipped the umbilical cord, and the nine-month attachment to Mom officially came to an end.

Nurses rushed in and wrapped you in a white blanket, placing you under the heat lamp where you were quickly weighed. The lights, lamps and all the personnel were too much for you, and by now you were screaming at the top of your lungs. (*That in itself was good for your development!*) The nurses then began performing a simple test on you to determine how healthy a birth you had just experienced.

The test is explained to parents in childbirth classes as the Apgar Test; a tool that helps predict which infants might need closer observation or more intense care after birth. A baby is given zero, one or two points on each of five variables as determined by the nurses: appearance (specifically color), pulse rate, response to stimulation, activity (including muscle tone) and respirations. This test was administered to you at both one and five minutes after your arrival. For most of you, the process went pretty well, and soon the nurses handed you over as a beautiful bundle to your mom and dad.

Why all the concern and special care surrounding your birth? What was it about that process that demanded so much attention and care? It is simple actually; new birth is a crucial time in your human development and must be taken seriously. Doctors, nurses, mom and dad all knew that how you arrived would dramatically influence how you lived. Complications at birth tend to create problems in life that often take huge amounts of time, money and effort to correct. Sometime when you are in a hospital, stop by the Neonatal ICU for a glimpse at the incredibly sophisticated care these precious little ones receive.

What does any of this have to do with evangelism, salvation or the Evangelical debate regarding the Sinner's Prayer and Believer's Baptism? Simply put: *How we are born affects our living*. This is certainly true of physical birth, but isn't it true of spiritual birth as well? A complicated, protracted and painful delivery can have a harmful effect upon maturity—physically or spiritually.

Many Christians today are poorly delivered at birth. Because of an incomplete delivery, lack of proper cleansing or a misunderstanding about spiritual breath, some Christians are barely alive and are soon abandoned. If Jesus sends us into the world with a two-fold mission to make disciples by baptizing and teaching, we must see that the beginning point of new birth dramatically shapes the future life of the disciple. This issue is important not so much to be right, but to be healthy. Future development of a soul is certainly at stake.

According to the Bible, coming to salvation is a process. Simply saying a prayer saves no one. Likewise, simply being baptized saves no one. The Bible makes clear that we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We are saved because God's demand for justice, and God's desire for mercy, was met at the cross. Met in the person, Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Savior. The apostle Paul said it best when he declared, "*God made him who had no sin [Jesus], to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteous ones of God*" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Salvation can be understood this way: We are saved by coming into contact through the person of Jesus (a holy Jesus for a sinful me) with Jesus' blood offered on our behalf, and by entering into a covenant relationship with God that radically alters our identity and commitments. Just like physical birth was a process taking around nine months, spiritual birth is a process as well. New birth may be realized in an instant, but it occurs over a period of time. We call this process atonement, and it speaks of how God saves us.

There are several key words and ideas that are mentioned with regards to salvation: grace, faith, repentance, confession, baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit. These concepts are sometimes mentioned in isolation, at other times in harmony with each other. Due to this, salvation must be seen either as an emphasis of one concept above all the others, or a compilation of the group together in a process. In other words, do I pick grace over faith? Repentance over confession? Or Baptism over the Holy Spirit? If not, then I see salvation as a process involving them all.

Notice how the New Testament writers spoke of these important concepts. Each one is mentioned somewhere in the New Testament as bringing a person to salvation in Jesus Christ:

**Salvation comes by repentance.**

*"Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing might come from the Lord." (Acts 3:19)*

### **Salvation comes by faith.**

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)*

### **Salvation comes by confession of faith.**

*"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom. 10:9)*

### **Salvation comes by baptism.**

*"Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)*

### **Salvation comes through receiving the holy spirit.**

*"He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, who he poured out on us generously through Jesus our Savior." (Titus 3:5-6)*

In addition to these verses, there are at least fifty more that speak of some combination of these five bringing about the process of salvation. You can even find all five together in Acts 2:37-39 and Acts 19:1-6. You might question, "So salvation in the Bible is a process of coming to God...but so what?" "Why are you trying to tell me to look again at the Sinner's Prayer and Believer's Baptism?"

**Answer:** Consider them for the sake of health. Healthy births are at stake, and future complications need to be avoided, if possible.

Let's pretend for a moment we are the nurses administering a "Spiritual Apgar" to those coming to salvation. When the process of becoming "born again" reaches the stage of "new birth", we will stop and look at the health of the new child in Christ. We will begin by looking at the Sinner's Prayer, and then take a look at Baptismal Conversion. Afterward, let's assess what the healthiest newborns might look like.

Get your pencils out, and write your score for each in the margin. We can assign zero, one or two points to new Christians based upon the following five New Testament categories: repentance, faith, confession, baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. Let's get started...

**The Sinners Prayer:** In *How to Be Born Again*, Billy Graham writes of the dramatic, heartfelt conversion experience he both received and teaches. His book is a volume on how to find this type of salvation experience as well. He leads his readers in a simple method to make it happen: If we are willing to repent for our sins and to

receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we can do it now. We can either bow our heads or get on our knees and say a little prayer. The prayer suggested goes like this:

*O God, I acknowledge that I have sinned against you. I am sorry for my sins. I am willing to turn from my sins. I openly receive and acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Savior. I confess him as Lord. From this moment on I want to live for him and serve him. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

As a spiritual nurse, look at the conversion prayer and search for our five categories; circle each one you find. Assign your own score: zero, one or two for each piece of the salvation process mentioned in the New Testament.

**Believer's Baptism:** On a Sunday morning at the end of a church service, a young girl walks to the front and tells the minister she wants to be baptized. The minister stands before the congregation and announces her intentions. The young lady is then asked to come to the microphone, where she is asked to repeat, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." After this, older women from the congregation escort her to the baptistery area where she changes clothes. She joins the preacher in the water, and he pronounces: "I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for the forgiveness of sins, so that you may receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The young woman is immersed and arises from the water to hugs and a song from the congregation.

Now again, as a spiritual nurse, look at the baptismal conversion and search for our five categories, circling those you see. Assign your own score: zero, one or two, for each piece of the salvation process mentioned in the New Testament.

*The Results:* If you took this exercise seriously, I would suspect neither Christian described above scored a possible high score of ten. The Sinners Prayer omits baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit (and may only score a one in other areas in your estimation). The Baptismal Conversion mentioned above basically omits repentance and has little emphasis in the areas of confession (it is forced) and receiving the Holy Spirit (mentioned in formula). If spiritual health is at stake, perhaps we all need to look again at the New Testament example.

What would true repentance look like, the kind to which you would give a score of two? Maybe like Zacchaeus (Luke 9:19)? What kind of faith do you see as serious faith? How about the faith of the paralytic (Mark 2:5)? What is a true confession supposed to sound like? What do you think of Peter's (John 6:66-69)? Might the Ethiopian provide a standard for baptism (Acts 8:36-39)? Do we need to take receiving the Holy Spirit more seriously, as Paul reminded Titus (Titus 3:5-6)? Remember, It's not a matter of being right. The issue comes down to this: Is there a healthier, more obedient way?

Salvation is a process; for everyone born again So let's quit arguing about being right, and concern ourselves with being more healthy. Let's be more concerned about winning a brother or sister to Christ than winning an argument. Let's admit the areas where we need more emphasis. Let's learn from others who seem to be healthier in an area than we. Let's celebrate the areas on which we agree--building bridges wherever possible while holding distinctions only where necessary. A healthy birth is the launching pad to a healthy life.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Is it fair to say that faith in Jesus is the Key? In what ways do repentance, confession, baptism and the Holy Spirit all relate to faith in Jesus Christ? Does saying, "faith is primary" nullify the importance of the others in a healthy birth?
2. Do you agree that salvation is a process? If so, what is lost in a new birth where there is no repentance, confession, baptism or knowledge of the Holy Spirit? Is there a spiritual difference between not realizing the need for a particular concept and denying the importance of a concept specifically mentioned in the Bible?
3. How should we treat others who have not known about a need to further complete the salvation process into Christianity? Do you agree some paths to salvation are more obedient to God's word than others? How do you think we should view those who haven't experienced a full and complete new birth?
4. What is gained by talking to others in terms of spiritual health, rather than whether his or her salvation is valid? Which strategy is more effective: a) showing another how we are right and they are wrong, or b) showing another how she or he could be more healthy?
5. Ultimately, who decides our salvation? If our role is ambassadors for God (2 Cor. 5:16-21), then what should be our posture? Can we speak anything other than what we see in the Bible as the desires of God? Does being an ambassador make us a judge or a spokesperson?