**Regeneration – supernatural, mysterious and essential**

Text: John 3:1-8

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**Scriptures:** Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 3:1-8

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 344, 438, 436, 121

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#11, Articles 3:11-13)

**Theme:** Entry into the Kingdom of God only comes through the supernatural regeneration of the human heart by God’s Spirit

**Proposition:** To have life, you must be born again

**Introduction**

You cannot be born physically by your own doing. Birth follows a process initiated by our parents and nurtured by one or both of them or someone else. Being able to do things independently – like getting dressed, eating and moving around is a blessing. If they live long enough on this earth most people experience some decrease in independence in their later years (Eccl 12:2-6). When we are born, we enter this world very dependent on others. We are not able to dress ourselves, eat or move around independently. Being born itself is not something we can bring about ourselves. Like physical birth, spiritual birth is initiated and nurtured by our ‘Heavenly Parent’ and is outside our own doing. In both physical and spiritual birth we are completely passive.

Jesus refers to spiritual birth as being ‘born again’ (John 3:3). The theological term is ‘regeneration’. Regeneration is the topic covered by the Canons of Dort in Articles 3:11-13. Reformed theology is systematic and as precisely defined as the primary authority of the Scriptures allows. Some people might be a little surprised to find the words ‘mysterious’, ‘inexpressible’, ‘amazing’, and ‘incomprehensible’ in this learned theological document penned by the authors of the Canons of Dort just over 400 years ago. These words are helpful because they reflect the truth that at the heart of the gospel, whereby God delivers people like us from the domain of darkness and transfer us to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col 1:13), there is a supernatural, mysterious and powerful work of God.

If you still have questions about spiritual regeneration after this sermon don’t be surprised because there is so much detail that I cannot provide, because God has not revealed it to us. In the words of Article 3:13: “*In this life believers cannot fully understand the way in which God does this work {of regeneration}. Meanwhile, however, it is enough for them to know and experience that by this grace of God they believe with the heart and love their Saviour*”. Let’s look at this marvellous work of God under three points as we look at the words of Christ to Nicodemus from John 3:1-8.

1. A supernatural new birth
2. A mysterious new birth
3. A necessary new birth
4. **A supernatural new birth**

Nicodemus was a man who held a prominent position in the Jewish religious hierarchy when he went to see Jesus. John identifies him as a Pharisee, a ‘ruler of the Jews’ – a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, and as a ‘teacher of Israel’ (John 3:10). He was an authority on the interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures. He greeted Jesus with respect by using the title ‘Rabbi’. He would have known that God’s appointed messengers were often given power to perform miracles to confirm their calling.

John records that Nicodemus came ‘at night’ suggesting perhaps that he did not want his fellow Pharisees to know of his personal interest in Jesus. The darkness of night also reflected his ignorance in contrast to the light of Christ’s revelation of truth. Jesus responds to Nicodemus with these words *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* The Greek word translated ‘born again’ here as two meanings: ‘born again’ and ‘born from above’. Both meanings are conveyed here. Jesus is referring to a second birth which is a heavenly one. After Nicodemus expresses his confusion in verse 4: “*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*” Jesus explains further in verse 5: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God”.*

What does ‘born of water’ mean? – what can we say? It is **not** the water of the baptism of John the Baptist. That would exclude everyone in the Old Testament. It is **not** the water of the sacrament of Christian baptism. That would have made no sense to Nicodemus prior to Christ’s institution of the sacrament of baptism. We do know that in Hebrew writings water/rain/dew is linked to male semen. We also know that in Bible times new born babies were washed at birth (e.g. Eze 16:4). Babies are born wet with amniotic fluid. We speak of a mother’s ‘waters breaking’ prior to giving birth.

The water here is a reference to physical birth. Jesus is teaching that all people who enter God’s Kingdom have first had life in human body tissue. There are going to be no people in New Heaven’s and new Earth who have not lived (even if only for a short time in the womb) on this earth.

Entry into the Kingdom of God requires not only physical birth but also that a person is born of the Spirit of God. This is the “regeneration’ referred to in CofD Art 3:12 “*the new creation*”, “*the raising from the dead*”, “*the making alive*”. This is “*entirely a supernatural work*”. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we may not think of ourselves as ‘supernatural beings’ but we are in the sense that we have been supernaturally born again by the Holy Spirit. The evidence for this spiritual life is that we ‘*believe with the heart and love our Saviour*’. Our spiritual birth is supernatural, and it is also mysterious – which brings us to our second point:

1. **A mysterious new birth**

Jesus made clear to Nicodemus that mere physical birth into the covenant people of God (that is being a physical descendant of Abraham) did not in any way guarantee access into Kingdom of God. It seems that Nicodemus was really surprised that this was so. He asked “How can these things be?” (verse 9). Jesus was surprised also – that Nicodemus didn’t know that a supernatural work of God was needed. Nicodemus, as a Jew, and especially as a Pharisee would have known the Old Testament Scriptures well, for example the Lord’s promise of coming spiritual renewal through the prophet Jeremiah (31:33).“*But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people*”.

Jesus had explained the mysterious nature of the new birth by illustrating the Holy Spirit’s activity in comparison to the wind. “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*”. Wind movements were not well understood in the 1st century AD. Modern meteorology predicts high/low pressure systems, but localised air movements unpredictable and can appear to be random. Christ is saying more than just illustrating that the Greek word for wind is the same as the word for spirit – pneuma – from which we get the English word ‘pneumatic’. Jesus is teaching that spiritual re-birth, like the weather, is unpredictable.

Just as the sound of the breeze is entirely a physical effect of the wind, so being born again is the effect of an entirely a supernatural mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. The Canons of Dort Article 3:12 notes that regeneration. “*is by no means brought about*”:

1. Only by outward teaching – merely sitting under the preaching/teaching of God’s Word does not automatically cause spiritual re-birth.
2. By moral persuasion – merely being convinced that behaving in a Christian-like manner is the right thing to do does not cause spiritual re-birth

There is a mystery to the operation of the Spirit in re-birth. This is entirely a work of God who, by the work of His regenerating Spirit ‘*penetrates into the innermost recesses of man*’. In spiritual birth there is a complete transformation of the inward being of a person. God (in the words of Canons of Dort 3:11) ‘*opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will*’. This is clear from the revelation of God in Scripture. Exactly how He does this work of radical transformation is incomprehensible to us. This is knowledge that is too high, too spiritual, too divine for us to know, at least until the time when Christ comes, and we will have greater understanding (1 Cor 13:12).

Before the Protestant Reformation, being ‘born-again’ was understood to be a spiritual regeneration via the sacrament of baptism. This view is still held in orthodox Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. Sadly, some people think that Reformed Churches teach this error because we baptise infants who likely have not, as yet, been born again. If you want to show people from other churches that we whole-heartedly teach and believe that all God’s people must be born again with a supernatural, mysterious regeneration by the Holy Spirit, then you could point them to Canons of Dort Articles 3:11-13.

Adults, children, infants, babies in the womb - all need to be born again of the Spirit. This can take place at any time from conception through to physical birth or after this at any stage up until physical death. The timing for each individual person is a mystery. The Spirit works in an unpredictable way – somewhat like the wind. We, brothers and sisters in Christ, cannot fully understand the way the Holy Spirit works and must rest content with knowing and experiencing that by this mysterious grace of God we do believe with the heart and love Jesus Christ our Saviour. This is a supernatural, mysterious and essential new birth – which brings us to our third point.

1. **A necessary new birth**

Jesus drives home the necessity of being born again/from above: v3 “*Truly, truly, I say to you,* ***unless*** *one is born again* ***he cannot see*** *the kingdom of God.”;* v5 “*Truly, truly, I say to you,* ***unless*** *one is born of water and the Spirit* ***he cannot enter*** *into the kingdom of God*”; v7 *“You* ***must*** *be born again*” literally “it is necessary that…”

Why is it necessary to be born again? Because those who are not are spiritually dead and are unable to respond to the gospel (Eph 2:1). Just as physical birth is absolutely essential for life on this earth, so spiritual rebirth is necessary for life in the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus may well have thought that physical birth into the covenant community of Israel was enough. He may have thought that obeying the oral law of the Scribes and Pharisees was sufficient for entry into the Kingdom of God. The words of Jesus are clear – simply being born into a believing family does not regenerate a person. You must be a born-again Christian. Parents, we cannot save your children, but we are called to be faithful in bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). They must be born again.

Everyone must be born again if they are to be in God’s Kingdom. Everyone must be born again to be able to receive the redemption purchased by Christ on the cross. Everyone must be born again to be part of the New Israel, God’s elect. Spiritual re-birth is a glorious aspect of the irresistible saving grace of God to those He has chosen from before foundation of world. Regeneration is, in the Words of Canons of Dort 3:12, ‘*a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvellous, mysterious, and inexpressible work*’.

Regeneration is always 100% effective in God’s elect because ‘*all those in whose hearts God works in this amazing way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe*’. The sure knowledge of the reality of regeneration in the heart of a believer and the incomprehensibility of the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in transforming the hearts of all God’s chosen people is expressed in the hymn ‘I know not why God’s wondrous grace’.

*I know not why God’s wondrous grace to me He hath made known,*

*nor why, unworthy, Christ in love Redeemed me for His own.*

*I know not how this saving faith to me He did impart,*

*nor how believing in His word wrought peace within my heart.*

*I know not how the Spirit moves, convincing men of sin,*

*revealing Jesus through the Word, creating faith in Him.*

*But I know Whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able*

*to keep that which I’ve committed unto Him against that day.*

You cannot make yourself a Christian by your own effort. It is the work of God alone. If you can respond to the gospel call to come to Christ in repentance and faith then it must be that you are already been supernaturally regenerated by the Holy Spirit, mysteriously, and necessarily because this is the only way for people like you and me to gain entry into the Kingdom of God. AMEN.