Supernatural Births for all God’s children

Text: Matthew 1:18; John 3:3

Scriptures: Matthew 1:18-24; John 3:1-8

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 238, 232, 349, 51b, 23, 531+532

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism LD 3, Q&A 6-8

**Theme:** All of God’s children, including His own begotten Son Jesus, are born by the Spirit of God

**Proposition:** Spiritual life is a gift from God

**Introduction**

We’re in the ‘Misery’ section of the Heidelberg Catechism in our series through this 16th century ‘pattern of sound words’ which summarises the teaching of Scripture using the format of 52 Lord’s Days containing questions and answers. This part of the Heidelberg Catechism is called “Man’s Misery” because of mankind’s natural inability to keep God’s perfect law resulting in God’s just judgement.

Q6 of LD3 reminds us that our common ancestors Adam and Eve were created by God to be good (Gen 1:31). Adam and Eve were created in God’s image (Gen 1:26,27) – in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24). Our inability to keep God’s law is not a Divine design characteristic, but rather it is a consequence of the disobedience of our first parents which results in all of us being conceived as sinners (Ps 51:5), rather than beginning life as perfect image-bearers. This means that we are naturally ‘inclined towards all evil’ – using a phrase from A8 in the Heidelberg Catechism.

We know that God raised up many human leaders through the period of Old Testament history, men like Abraham, Moses and David. They were children of God who were used by Him to do good works for His glory, yet they were also flawed men who inherited Adam’s corrupt nature. They all died in faith, not having received the things promised by God (Heb 11:13) They looked forward to ‘the seed/offspring of the woman’ (Gen 3:15) who would conquer Satan and death

Which brings us to our 1st point:

1. **The Spirit gives life to Jesus the man**

A conundrum is a difficult problem - a quandary, a dilemma. God was faced with a conundrum. A Saviour was needed who was fully human in order to substitute Himself for other people. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: “*Therefore he had to be made* ***like his brothers in every respect****, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people*” (Heb 2:17)

But also, a Saviour was needed who was able to keep God’s law perfectly, a human being unpolluted by the corruption of our first parents. God could have created another man as He had Adam when He: **“...***formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature*” (Gen 2:7). But such a human being could only die in the place of **one** other. In order to substitute Himself in the place of **many** others – all of God’s people, He must also be true God. Therefore a Saviour was needed who could substitute Himself in the place of all the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Gal 3:29)

God’s solution to the conundrum of providing a Saviour who was an offspring of Eve, a true human being, yet also powerful enough to bear the wrath of God for many human beings and perfect in His obedience to the law was to send His own Son, the 2nd person of the Godhead. It was a brilliant plan, an astounding solution to the conundrum of providing a suitable Saviour. It was an incredibly costly plan, a sorrowful solution to the conundrum of God saving a people for Himself. It was an extraordinary plan, requiring the supernatural intervention of God in the creation which He had made, and which mankind has corrupted.

God took an ordinary woman, godly and upright, yet also corrupted ‘inclined towards all evil’ as we all are. Mary had a sinful nature inherited from Adam, and He caused her to become pregnant with a son, even though she had never had sexual relations with any man. She was engaged to be married to a man called Joseph who was a godly man, Matthew describes him as ‘a just man’ (1:19), yet like his fiancé, He too was a descendant of Adam and had inherited a sinful nature.

Imagine the shock for Mary and Joseph when they found out that she was pregnant. In our 21st century Western cultures such an event is so commonplace that it carries little or no shame today, but not then. In the small township of Nazareth the conception of a child out of wedlock would have caused a great scandal. Joseph resolved to divorce (break off his engagement to Mary) quietly. In those days, divorce was almost the prescribed course of action for infidelity during a betrothal.

But God had other plans, explaining to Joseph via an angel in a dream: "*Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*” (Matt 1:20b). The conception of Jesus Christ was supernatural. The Holy Spirit gave life to Jesus Christ, the man. Through this means, Jesus did not receive a corrupt nature, but He did become fully human, a good man truly righteous and holy, whilst also remaining fully God.

At Christmas time many Christians especially remember the incredible way in which God solved the conundrum of providing His people with a Saviour. Fellow Christian believers, our ‘older Brother’, the only begotten Son of God, had a supernatural, spiritual conception through the agency of the Holy Spirit, in a somewhat similar, but also different way to all of us who also have a supernatural, spiritual conception.

Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **The Spirit gives life to everyone in God’s Kingdom**

The ‘misery’ section of the Heidelberg catechism does have some joy and comfort, some good news within the ‘bad news’ of mankind’s natural condition. Have a look with me at Q&A8: “*But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?” “Yes,* ***unless*** *we are born again, by the Spirit of God.”*

You’ve probably heard the phrase ‘born-again Christian’. It’s used in many evangelical church settings to differentiate between ‘nominal’ Christians – those who attend church and engage in religious rituals, but who do not truly believe in, and submit to, Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour – and true followers of Christ who have undergone inner spiritual renewal.

Really the phrase ‘born-again Christian’ is tautology. Tautology is saying the same thing twice in different words for example:

* The evening sunset was beautiful
* She always over-exaggerates
* The Gobi is a very dry desert

All true Christians, without exception, are born again as Jesus explains to Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews as recorded by gospel writer John: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is* ***born again*** *he cannot see the kingdom of God."* The Greek word translated here ‘born again’ has two meanings – ‘born again’ and ‘born from above’. Both senses are true. This new spiritual beginning is both a ‘second birth’ and a divine, supernatural, birth. A ‘birth from above’.

Our Lord Jesus expands the meaning in v5: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”* You may ask ‘What is the water here’? What can we say?

It is not the water of the Baptism of John – that would exclude everyone in Old Testament, and we know, for example, that Abraham’s faith was counted/reckoned to him as righteousness by God (Gen 15:6). He was a born-again believer.

Neither is it the water of the sacrament of baptism – that would have made no sense to Nicodemus when he came to Jesus by night prior to initiation of Christian baptism by Christ.

The water here is a reference to physical life:

* In Hebrew writings water/rain/dew were linked to male semen
* In Old Testament times new-born babies were washed at birth (Eze 16:4)
* Babies are born wet with amniotic fluid

The phrase ‘born of water’ here is an indication of new life in the flesh. The formation of a new human being, a new identity. Jesus is teaching that all people who enter God’s Kingdom have first had life in human body tissue: flesh and blood. All human beings in the New Heavens and New Earth will have lived physically on this earth (even if only for a very short time in the womb). However, physical birth is not the only requirement for entry in to the Kingdom of God for human beings, it is also necessary to be born of the Spirit of God. The theological term for this is ‘regeneration’.

One of our confessions, the Canons of Dort, provides a very helpful summary of what this Biblical concept means. We find this in, Article 3.12

“.. *this regeneration is by no means brought about only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a mode of operation that, after God has done his part, it remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not regenerated, con­ver­ted or not converted. It is, however, clearly a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvel­lous, mysterious, and inexpressible work. According to Scripture, inspired by the Author of this work, regeneration is not inferior in power to creation or the raising of the dead.2 Hence all those in whose hearts God works in this amazing way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe. And then the will so renewed is not only acted upon and moved by God but, acted upon by God, the will itself also acts. Therefore man himself is rightly said to believe and repent through the grace he has received*”

Referring again to Spurgeon’s illustration which James mentioned this morning: Above the door to heaven is a sign which reads "All who will may enter." Those who choose to enter the door find on the back side of the door a sign which reads, "Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world." We could equally say that the back side of the door would have another sign saying: “Born-again – supernaturally regenerated by the Holy Spirit.”

This work of God, like election, is entirely a work of grace, not only saving sinners like you and me, but also changing our hearts to be inclined toward all good, not all evil.

Which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **The Spirit inclines people toward all good**

One of the webpages I visit frequently here in Christchurch is metservice.co.nz – I like to get some idea of what the weather is going to be like on any given day because it is so changeable! Modern meteorology predicts, with some degree of accuracy, high/low pressure systems but still Localised air movements unpredictable, can appear to be random.

Wind movements were not well understood in 1st cent AD. It has been suggested that there was a gust of night wind when Nicodemus came to see Jesus, this is possible, but not proven from Scripture. What we do know is that Jesus uses the wind as an image of the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. **John 3:8** "*The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit*"

Christ is doing more here than only illustrating the unpredictable - from a human perspective - nature of the Holy Spirit’s work. The Greek word for wind is the same as the word for spirit. Pneuma is the word from which we get ‘pneumatic tyre’. Like the wind, spiritual re-birth is unpredictable. There is a mystery to the operation of the Spirit in spiritual re-birth. Just as the sound of the wind and the movement of objects like wind-chimes, flags and windmills is entirely an effect of the wind; so faith in the life of a believer and an inclination towards all good is entirely a supernatural work of the Spirit.

Canons of Dort Art 12 brings this out. “It certainly does not happen”

* Only by outward teaching – merely sitting under the preaching/teaching of God’s Word does not automatically cause spiritual re-birth.
* By moral persuasion – merely being convinced that behaving in a Christian-like manner does not cause spiritual re-birth
* Not by any other such mode of operation e.g. baptism

In the pre-Reformation era: “born again” was understood to be spiritual regeneration via the sacrament of baptism. This view is still held in orthodox Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Eastern Orthodoxy. Sadly, some in in other churches think we in the Reformed churches teach this error of ‘presumptive regeneration! We Do Not!

It necessary for all God’s children to be born again because those who are not born again by the Spirit are spiritually dead: unable to respond to God’s grace and love, unable to do any good works. Good works are acts of obedience to Christ which are motivated by love and gratitude for what God has done. Jesus said ‘*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*’ (John 14:15)

Good works are an essential component of the Christian life. As James writes “faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26). We are not saved **by** good works, but **for** good works. Spiritual rebirth inclines a person to all good. This is a wonderful work of God for his glory.

As Jesus said, people are like trees - in that you can get a view of what type of person they are by the fruit in their lives (Matt 7:16-24).

Brother, sister, in Christ, how can you glorify God this week by demonstrating to a watching world that you are inclined towards all good because you have been supernaturally reborn by the Spirit of God?

AMEN