

HISTORY OF THE BORN AGAIN DOCTRINE

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We need to turn our attention to the fragments of information available on the history of this teaching. By so doing we might penetrate the dark veil which may prevent us from obtaining an historical background to this teaching and understand its roots.

I. EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

Beside the Bible, the earliest references or inferences to a new birth at the resurrection may be found in literature in the first few centuries after Christ. Note the following quoted from Lampe's *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* concerning the new birth:

"3. the Nativity; a ... generation, engendering, also birth ... parallel with eternal generation ... threefold birth of Christ (Nativity, Baptism, Resurrection) dist. by Jo.Nic.nativ.(M.96.1440a)... 4. spiritual birth, regeneration ... through practice of virtue ... through baptism ... ; hence of man's threefold birth, physical, baptismal, and in resurrection, Gr.Nyss. *Eun.4* (2 p.64.21;M.45.636c); Max.ambig.(M.91.1325B); 5. = ... creation, Hipp.haer.5.25(p.126.27; M.16.3194B); ...Ath.exp.in Ps.109:3(M.27.46ID); Gr.Nyss.*Eun.4* (2 p.58.3; M.45.628D); *ib.8*(p.185.10,22; 780A,B)."

It would appear from this reference that John of Nicosia or Nicea and Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa in the 4th century, in his work *Eunomius* reflected knowledge, albeit a knowledge that had almost died out completely in the non-sabbatarian churches, that the resurrection is likened to a birth. One wonders how much material was destroyed on this teaching over the previous 200 years. Certainly this knowledge has been lost for centuries. Hippolytus (c170-236AD), in *Philos. X.34* stated:

"thy body shall be immortal and incorruptible as well as they soul. For thou hast become God. All the things that follow upon the divine nature God has promised to supply to thee, for thou was deified in being born to immortality".

Here he seems to make the new birth current rather than future, and may be indicative of the gradual process of corruption of the truth.

Theodore of Mopsuestia (c 350-428AD) wrote in terms of baptistry as a womb preparing Christians for birth; he describes the baptismal water as the water of second birth, itself typed by the fluid surrounding the foetus in the mother's womb (*Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*, pages 53-54). While Dionysus (5th century AD) stated the following in reference to baptismal candidates:

"They have not received an inspired existence in the divine birth, but areas yet being incubated by the paternal scriptures ... It is just as when children of the flesh arrive before their proper incubation. They are unready and unshaped like still-born fetuses".

This could be a reference to a vague understanding or residue of the truth of the conception process which was still extant in some form in the non-sabbatarian churches.

Trying to track any doctrine resembling a birth to occur at the time of the resurrection is difficult to find until the 19th century. However, there may be something in the last line of the following poem attributed to

Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Order of Friars (1182-1226AD), but, I am told, actually composed by gentlemen of the Order last century:

ETERNAL LIFE

If you can Lord,
Make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled, as to console
to be understood, as to understand,
to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Could there be some inference in the last line of this beautiful poem? Perhaps we shall never know in this life; but we could at least speculate that this idea may well have been lurking around for centuries in both the Sabbatarian communities and mainstream 'Christianity'.

But what is the purpose of such a birth? Perhaps some early 'Christian' writings reflect beliefs of primitive Christianity in terms of Christian destiny and human purpose upon the earth:

"God became man that you might become gods" - Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century AD

"For we cast blame on Him, because we have not been made gods from the beginning, but at first merely men, then at length gods" - Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapter XXXVIII; ANF, Vol. I, pg 522.

"And thou shalt be a companion of Deity, and a co-heir with Christ, no longer enslaved by disease., For thou hast become God ... For the Deity (by condescension,) does not diminish aught from the dignity of His divine perfection; having made thee even God unto His glory! - Hippolytus, *The Refutation Of All Heresies*, chapter XXX; ANF, Vol. V, pg 153

"If, therefore, man has become immortal, he will also be God. And if he is made God by water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the laver he is found to be also joint-heir with Christ after the resurrection of the dead" - Hippolytus, *Discourse On The Holy Theiphany*, (section) 8; ANF, Vol. V. pg 237).

Indeed, divinisation has been a component, albeit radically decreasing component, of 'Christian' theology. To early Christians, being given immortality was equivalent to being ascribed or granted godhead or a relationship with God that is so close and so akin to the life He experiences, that it is divine or godly. See further details in my paper *God's Glory and Man's Destiny* which discusses in more detail

divinisation/deification which was taught in the early Eastern churches and, in fact, in the Eastern Orthodox Church to this day.

This concept continued in a limited undercurrent over the centuries. The *New Dictionary of Theology* states that Calvin taught that “Christians are admitted, through the Holy Spirit, to participation in the inner life of the Godhead” (page 694).

“The passage which Christ quotes [ie John 10:34] is in Ps. lxxxii.6 ... Christ applies this to the case in hand, that they receive the name of gods, because they are God’s ministers for governing the world. For the same reason Scripture calls angels gods, because by them the glory of God beams forth on the world” - John Calvin, in his *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids, Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, vol. 1, pg 419.

One wonders whether we may deduce from these quotes how close to the truth on this issue these people were. Note that even famous researcher and trinitarian, Spiros Zodhiates, wrote the following concerning John 1:18:

“The word *monogenees* actually is a compound of the *monos*, ‘alone’, and the word *genos*, ‘race, stock, family’. Here we are told that He who came to reveal God - Jesus Christ - is of the same family, of the same stock, of the same race as God. There is ample evidence in the Scriptures that the Godhead is a family ...” (*Was Jesus God?*, page 21).

We are destined to have a very close family relationship with God. God is indeed our Father. A father is a member of his family. Thus those in God’s family are in the very family of God - the God Family if you wish. Peter Toon in *Born Again. A Biblical and Theological Study of Regeneration* writes:

“ ... Paul ... speaks of believers as being changed to bear the image and likeness of God that Christ himself perfectly bears and reflects .. we are to bear the true image of God ... [Christians] are able to have an intimate communion with their heavenly Father, just as a child might address his or her earthly father by a familiar term like the Aramaic *Abba* or the English *Daddy* ... Birth from above is birth into a family ... Growth in new life is growth into Christ within his body, the church” (page 44-45, 65).

Certainly the knowledge of some of the early ‘Christian’ writers on such subjects as man’s destiny, eternal bliss or the future age of bliss (somewhat different to the ‘bliss’ taught by Buddhists), the nature of God (in some cases), divinisation, God as the ground of being or the source of all that exists, water baptism, the bodily resurrection, mortality of the soul (eg Arnobius), showing concern about the infiltration of paganism via icons and crosses etc into the church, the works of Simon Magus, the 1,000 year reign of the Messiah (see for example the extra-biblical *Epistle of Barnabas*; the writings of Ireneaus, Hippolytus, Justin Martyr etc), and the birth at the time of the resurrection, all would have been reminiscent of the doctrines of an earlier primitive Christianity and the traditions of the Church of Jerusalem (under the auspices of James) and their descendants, the Nazarenes.

Over time these doctrines receded and gradually disappeared in the non-Sabbatarian churches. Although a small residue of the truths seemed to remain in the Eastern churches (which were originally sabbatarian) for some time (to this day the Eastern Orthodox Church teaches divinisation). It should be noted here that more and more historians confess that the Jerusalem Church was a sabbatarian community which kept the Holy Days, clean & unclean foods, had a close affinity to Israel and so forth; they admit that the Jerusalem Church actually gave rise to the Nazarenes. Who were these Nazarenes? As we shall see in a future paper, they were the very line continuing the existence of the True Church of God which existed alongside the assemblies which became the Great False Church - Mystery Babylon - mother of many whores which were borne in bloody protest.

II. THE REMNANT CHURCH OF GOD IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

We do not need to re-hash here the history of the sabbatarian community during the last century. Suffice to know that they did, indeed, exist (see the many studies by Richard Nickels on this subject).

Let us now examine what some have taught over the past century and a bit. The Church of God published an article on this subject in *The Hope of Israel* (1865, vol 2 no 10, pages 1-2) "Being Born Again" (no author given). The entire article discusses the new birth occurring in the resurrection. This is the earliest sabbatarian source which I have been able to uncover on this particular doctrine. Note the statement of beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists in 1872:

“The new birth comprises the entire change necessary to fit us for the kingdom of God, and consists of two parts: first, a moral change, wrought by conversion and a Christian life; second, a physical change at the second coming of Christ, whereby, if dead, we are raised incorruptible, and if living, are changed to immortality in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye”.

In the booklet *Membership of the Seventh-day Church*, 1894, only the first aspect is referred to and the other dealing with the resurrection has no mention at all. This may reflect an oversight or the gradual change in doctrine. However, the original position was re-stated by one of the prominent Seventh-day pioneers, Uriah Smith, in the chapter on “Fundamental Principles of Seventh-day Adventists” in the *1912 Yearbook*. It may also be found in the 1914 Statement. But it is omitted from the 1931 and 1980 Statements.

Historian Richard Nickels adds further insight to this understanding:

“William C. Long in April 1893, wrote in the Advocate: “We are begotten of God; we are born of the Spirit. These two events do not occur at the same time. We are begotten at conversion; we are born at the resurrection” .. this ... was defended by the church for many years. In 1955, the Denver Group Ministerial Council identified the new birth and conversion as synonymous terms. The 1974 doctrinal statement finally adopted the position: “Conversion, also called the new birth, is the process by which one is changed from his old, sinful life into a new creature in Christ” (R C Nickels, *Bible Doctrine*, page 11.13).

Indeed, the time of the new birth has been a contentious issue for some time and is mentioned as such, along with other doctrines, at the 1929 General Conference of the Church of God at Stanberry. The time of the new birth was an issue at that conference, at which time it seems to have been ‘dumped’ by the major branch of the Church of God (R C Nickels, *A History of the Seventh Day Church of God*, page 222).

A sabbatarian residing in Melbourne, Australia, has published an interview with an elderly lady who, as a young girl, was once part of a branch of the Church of God in the Brute Shire in Scotland early this century, but now lives in Melbourne. The lady, Margaret McCormack, confirmed several sabbatarian beliefs, including that “it was clearly understood that man’s destiny was to be born into the family of God” (J Morgan, *Church of God in Scotland*, page 1). Whether there was any connection to the other sabbath-keepers around the country we cannot be sure. But we do know that such groups existed according to an interview with another elderly lady in England:

“Seven churches existed: in London (Holborn, Finchley and Forest Gate), Southend and Moorcombe, England, Wales and Scotland” in the early 1900s. “In England the Church kept the Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread and the Sabbath” (J Zhorne, *The Worldwide News*, 4 March 1985, page 7). One wonders if these Churches of God had any connection to that in the Brute Shire in Scotland and perhaps taught the born again in the resurrection doctrine. We cannot know for sure, but if this issue were explored further, the information flowing from the results may be very encouraging.

It should come as no surprise therefore, that the Church of God (Seventh Day) based at Salem, West Virginia, still teaches a future birth at the resurrection. Their general belief is birth in three stages: 1. the natural birth at the time we enter this world; 2. birth at the time of water baptism; 3. the third birth at the time of the resurrection (see their booklet *The Three Births*).

Another group worth mentioning is the Church of God (Abrahamic Faith) which is one of the groups directly emanating out of the Millerite Second Advent Movement. Most of their doctrines appear identical to the Church of God (seventh day) except they observe Sunday and their view of Christology is a form of Unitarianism. In their publication *The Restitution Herald* (Aug/Sept 1997) we find an excellent article by a certain Pastor Sydney A. Hatch, reprinted from the 15 April 1965 edition of that magazine. The article is titled "Vocabulary of the Resurrection". The following quote indicates very clearly that an aspect of the born again doctrine was well understood by many of that church:

"To speak of "regeneration" or "new birth" as referring only to the present robs it of its prophetic splendor. In the Old Testament, resurrection was regarded as a new birth or second creation (Isa. 66:7-9; Ezek. 37). Some early Christian fathers made "regeneration" synonymous with "resurrection". Thoughtful students of the Word will realize Jesus had more in mind than the present when He told Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again" John 3:7".

It is obvious that this church, which dates back to 1888, received this truth from the Millerite movement. It is a pity that it is dieing out in that church and even the various churches of God. However, it may yet see a revival (dare I say "resurrection") over the next few years as news of this much neglected truth is circulated across the globe.

Finally, it may be opportune to mention here that some are reconsidering their position on this doctrine. The Adventist Laymen's Foundation, an SDA spin-off, in a private communication related the following:

"In all honesty, I had not perceived this unique concept previously. I am happy that you have called this to our attention. I shall give it some serious thought, and suggest its incorporation into the Statement of Beliefs on which we are presently working. The more one thinks about it, the more merit it has. It clarifies some questions relative to instantaneous sanctification, and covers very succinctly the whole of the Christian life."

Also, Dr Kai Arasola, Finnish SDA academic, admitted the following in a personal letter:

"Thank you for your letter on the two births. You brought out a concept that I never considered when going through Millerite material ... My first reaction is to consider what effect simple linguistics may have on this issue. Paul uses language which comes close to calling the resurrection a birth. He compares the process to sowing a seed (Gr. *spermaton*) and rising to new life (1Cor 15:20,23)."

Perhaps scholarship will be renewed into this wonderful teaching and that more and more resources will be brought to bear on tracing its origins followed by its resurrection (no pun intended) in various churches.

A SDA offshoot which publishes *The Remnant Herald* newsletter, acknowledges that Christ was 'born' at his resurrection, but do not go the next logical step, to likening the Christian resurrection to a new birth ("Winds of Doctrine", *The Remnant Herald*, April 1997). Their view is similar, if not identical to, Bullinger's, as we shall see in a future chapter.

III. THE RUSSELLITES (EARLY WATCHTOWER OR JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES)

In my paper *Roots of our Beliefs* I discuss the relationship between the sabbatarians, Russellites and Christadelphians. This sub-section will briefly address the born again doctrine as taught by these people.

The Watchtower has a fascinating history with roots in Millerism/Adventism. When the Great Disappointment hit the Millerites after 22 October 1844, they split into two broad groups: one which believed that Christ came invisibly and will yet return visibly (the Russellites) and those that he will return visibly (the Adventists). Charles Taze Russell, while holding to some unfortunate beliefs, certainly had much more truth than the current JW administration. Some of the beliefs were: held to the name Church of God (unofficially), were anti-trinitarian, held Passover on 14 Nisan, baptism by immersion, anointing for healing, mortality of the soul, Christendom is the great Whore with many daughters, Gospel of the future Kingdom of God, second advent and 1,000 year reign of the Messiah. While they believed they were the Church of God, it was only in 1931 that they adopted the name Jehovah's Witnesses. The aforementioned paper discusses how much the JWs have changed the truths that Russell had held to, which has led to numerous spin-offs, accusing them of being Laodicean. There is some talk among these groups to co-operate and to adopt the name Church of God. Some of them are quite aware of their distant relationship to the Church of God (Seventh-Day). Note the following comment from researcher Jerry Bergman:

“When he did die [31 October 1916], the organisation was thrown into a turmoil which resulted in the formation of a number of large splinter groups ... The changes made in policy and doctrine after he died were so drastic that many scholars now consider the Jehovah's Witnesses to be an offshoot of the original movement which Russell started. Today a number of movements claim to be the “faithful” followers of Russell's teachings.” (*Jehovah's Witnesses and Kindred Groups*, page xvii)

Ruth Tucker, author of *Another Gospel*, writes the following:

“... through clever manoeuvring, Rutherford managed to seize control and maintain his position despite the intense opposition from individuals and factions ... Rutherford prevailed and brought a new style to the movement. As a result, many of Russell's Bible Students deserted the organization ... ‘Thus,’ writes Rogerson, ‘modern-day Jehovah's Witnesses are not necessarily direct successors of Pastor Russell ... the evil within the organization [is traceable] to Rutherford, not to Russell, who at times is depicted as a virtual saint in comparison to his successor’ ... in 1931 [Rutherford] began referring to the movement as Jehovah's Witnesses” (pages 125-128).

As we shall shortly see, many of these groups continued his teachings on the born again doctrine. Russell certainly held the view that the new birth occurs in the resurrection, not at baptism. Note the following from Russell's work *Studies in the Scriptures. Series 1. The Plan of the Ages*:

“... after being dead three days, he [Christ] was raised to life - to the perfection of spirit being ... born of the Spirit - “the firstborn from the dead.” “That which is *born* of the Spirit is *spirit*.” Jesus, therefore, at and after his resurrection, was a spirit - a spirit being, and no longer a human being in any sense” (pages 230-31).

“The Greek word *gennao* and its derivatives, sometimes translated *begotten* and sometimes *born*, really contains both ideas, and should be translated by either one of these two English words, according to the sense of the passage in which it occurs. The two ideas, begetting and birth, are always in the word, so that if the one is stated, the other is always implied, as birth is the natural consequence of begetting, and begetting the natural antecedent to birth. When the active agent with which *gennao* is associated is a male, it should be translated *begotten*; when a female, *born*. Thus in 1John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,18, *gennao* should be *begotten*, because God (masculine) is the active agent” (page 278).

“... you will be *begotten* of the Father to a new life and the divine nature, which, if it develop and become quickened, will insure your being *born* a new creature, a spirit being, in the first resurrection; and as such you shall not only see but share the kingdom” (pages 279-80).

The entire book is vitally important in our studying Adventist-Millerite heritage, but I will not belabor the point by quoting any more from it. Another teacher of this doctrine was George W Stetson who was a Second Advent Christian preacher. He died in 1879 and Russell preached at his funeral. In *The Present Truth* (PT!) of Sept-Oct 1991 it is acknowledged that George W Stetson, a minister with the Advent Christian Church, was influential in bringing certain doctrinal understanding to Russell, including the born again in the resurrection doctrine (page 1). Stetson wrote an article in the 13 September 1871 *World's Crisis* on "Infant Salvation" (reprinted in the aforementioned *Present Truth*, pages 72-73). In this remarkable article he argues for the new birth to occur at the resurrection when we shall be full Sons of God. Russell was very frank and honest by indicating that he was indebted to the Adventists and also George Stetson and George Storrs in formulating doctrine (MJ Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed*, page 15). In fact Storrs was involved with the movement led by William Miller since 1842 (ibid, page 16). Russell was also indebted to Storrs for the observance of Passover on 14 Abib, rather than as a weekly or quarterly Lord's Supper (*Apocalypse Delayed*, page 17).

One spin-off from the JWs, protesting at the doctrinal shift away from the teachings of Russell, is the Dawn Bible Students Association. Their booklet, *Born of the Spirit* discusses this subject thoroughly and concurs that "Christians are begotten now by the Spirit and in the resurrection will be born into the heavenly realm to live and reign with Christ" (page 12).

Another spin-off is the Laymen's Home Missionary Movement. Their booklet *Born Again and once in Grace, Always in Grace - Is this Scriptural?*, discusses the born again doctrine within this context. It is clear that they believe that Christians are impregnated with the Holy Spirit at baptism, undergo a gestation Christian life and are finally born into the Kingdom. They maintain that Christ was born from the dead etc. The booklet is remarkably similar to HWA's position.

It is my hope that more information will be forthcoming on the roots of this doctrine. It obviously may be traced back to the sabbatarians and both the early SDAs and Sunday Adventists at the very least. Very likely, as more research is undertaken, we will uncover its Millerite roots. Perhaps we may find evidence for it among certain Seventh-day Baptists and scattered remnants of the non SDB sabbatarian churches c1802-1844.

IV. HERBERT W ARMSTRONG - THE SIFTER

In a my paper *Roots of our Beliefs* (available from www.originofnations.org) I show that Herbert W Armstrong was a sifter who utilised the works of others. It was this garnering and purifying nature of his which led him to scan many works from other groups and to incorporate certain of their teachings into the foundations he had learned from the Church of God (seventh-day).

He looked at material from the SDAs and JWs (he said so himself) and *Judah's Sceptre and Joseph's Birthright* by JH Allen (he said so himself in a taped Bible Study in 1980). Works by other British-Israelites, the Christadelphians, various splinter groups and such like were obviously looked at. As such, Christ used him as a sifter, thereby restoring much lost truth to, or building upon the foundations of, the Church of God this century.

Even the names of publications he used reflected that of Millerites, Second Adventists and Russellites. The aforementioned paper *Roots of our Beliefs* settles once and for all that HWA plagiarised. Instead, he certainly was inspired to sift, but that was from a Higher source. We would have been without these wonderful teachings if it were not for him – his crystal clear teachings certainly were sharper and more accurate than others. God works in mysterious ways.

It must have been sometime in the 1940s that he was led to the truth about the new birth. For, in the June, 1938 *The Bulletin of the Churches of God*, he makes a statement in the fourth paragraph that shows that he believed that one is born again now, rather than at the resurrection.

Finally, what does this all mean? Firstly, HWA was a sifter inspired by God Almighty to uncover truths and to assemble them into a tremendous mosaic not seen since the passing of the original Apostles.

Secondly, as one who grew in grace and knowledge, he built upon the basic foundations of his predecessors, publishing and preaching deep truths which he made plain.

How I miss that man!