

Justified But *Not* “Born Again”

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Can you be justified but not “born again”? Some say it’s possible. Oneness Pentecostals attempt to reconcile their view of Acts 2:38-is-the-New Birth with the traditional understanding of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. To do this they say a person can be justified, *but not yet born again*. Several connected to schools in the UPCI have developed an approach that a person is justified by faith, but still must follow the UPCI Acts 2:38 formula to be born again. For those who believe the traditional view of justification, this is obviously inconceivable. But in some strange way, the UPCI sees this as a solution to the differences between their view of Acts 2:38 and those who believe salvation is by faith alone in Christ.

The Bible teaches that one is born again when the Holy Spirit transforms one’s heart from unbelief to faith. The New Birth is necessary because the unbelieving heart is dead in sin. The heart must be made new to receive and believe the Gospel. The Bible teaches that God gives us a new birth when He alone (unilaterally = from God’s side) revives our dead heart based on His sovereign power and grace. When we are born again we experience a “spiritual resurrection into a new sphere of life.” [T.C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men*, p. 147.] We become alive to God. God plants a “new principle of life” in our souls. This fulfills the ancient promise through the prophet:

I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 19:11 NIV)

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ezekiel 36:26-27 NIV)

God puts his Spirit within us and gives us a new heart when we are born again. This must happen before a person has the power to believe or respond to God. This is what Jesus taught:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:44 NIV)

Why? Those dead in sin cannot respond or believe. If a person is not born again, they cannot be justified because they are dead in sin -- they cannot, and do not, desire to believe:

You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. (Eph. 2:1,2 NIV).

New Birth must come first, because those who are dead in sin don’t have the ability to believe or obey. Dead is dead. To illustrate, how can a body lying face down in the water retrieve a life preserver. You can throw help to a corpse all day, and it will not respond. Dead people don’t usually help save themselves. We were dead in trespasses and sins – not a little ill.

So how is one spiritually enabled to respond to the Gospel without being born again? They can’t. God has to give us a new heart for us to desire the Gospel. He also has to give us a new nature to

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hear the Gospel because the old ears are dead. He has to give us the power of a new life so that we can respond to the Gospel, because we were rotting carcasses of sin until He does:

The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. (John 6:63 NIV)

The Spirit of God gives us life. It gives us life through the word of the Gospel. When we hear the Gospel and believe it, the Spirit has worked through the Word to create new life within us. In Genesis chapter one of God spoke His Word into the chaos. His Word entered the chaos and out came light. This prefigures the Gospel. Now, God speaks the word of the Gospel into our heart and light of new life comes into our minds and hearts. We understand the Gospel. We have the power to receive and trust in it:

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6 NIV)

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He merely spoke his word, “Lazarus, come forth” and he came to life and walked from his grave. Paul taught that it is God who grants to us the ability to believe in Christ: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” (Philippians 1:29)

This is why the classic view is (has always been) that New Birth must precede justification. It could not be any other way. One could never be right with God, yet “none of his” (Romans 8:9) at the same time – anymore than a woman can be half pregnant. Through regeneration, God has already initiated a saving relationship and given us new birth to a living hope. This means, even though it is upon our faith in Christ that we cry Abba! (Gal. 4:6), and we are the confirmed sons of God, it was because of the prior work of the Holy Spirit regenerating our dead hearts that we are enabled to hear and believe the Gospel.

What I am saying is that God has already initiated His saving work in regeneration, prior to justification, so we could never be half saved. God will always complete the good work He has begun in us (Phil. 1:6). New Birth is the sovereign, gracious work of God to vivify our hearts and justification always follows the work of regeneration. [These things are described temporally, but they do not occur that way from God’s side. For us they happen instantaneously. They are only logically sequential.]

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Historical Note: Here is where theological history and discernment is so important. A controversy about how much God must do to save us came up in the form of a man named Pelagius (A.D. 400). Pelagius taught one has enough “power” to respond without God’s help (initiating or other). Pelagius essentially taught only Adam Fell and we are not under the bondage of sin. We can obey God’s will without grace. Both the Catholic and Protestant churches rejected this as a heresy. While Christianity generally rejected Pelagius view, the Roman Church adopted part of his beliefs (A.D. 529). It “asserted that man could of his own free will turn towards God and that God would then grant man the grace to continue in the new life.” (Van Harvey, p. 218). This is called semi-pelagianism. Later on, Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) taught that in some sense sinners must cooperate in their salvation. In an Arminian view of salvation, God’s grace must initiate one’s new life, but then we have the power to cooperate and contribute to our salvation afterward (despite the fact Jesus said “It is finished”). He challenged the classic Protestant view that humans, because of the Fall, are totally unable (depravity) to do anything for their own salvation. Adam’s will was free before the Fall (Genesis 3), but now Humanity is in bondage to sin. This means God alone is able to save us and we are not able to cooperate with God’s grace for our salvation. Historically, Protestants rejected the Arminian view because it gives more credit to fallen human nature than the Bible does. What we have in the New Birth-after-justification view is a form of Arminianism and semi-pelagianism. So, the UPCI in an attempt to protect one unorthodoxy modifies the biblical doctrine of justification and takes on another.

To go further, the UPCI version of the New Birth interprets John 3:5 as fulfilled in Acts 2:38. The “born again of the water and Spirit” is accomplished by obedience in two ways. First, one’s sins are only remitted by water baptism in the Name of Jesus, which is the birth of the water. Second, the birth of the Spirit is the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit evidenced by speaking with tongues. One must have both to be truly born again. A constant dilemma for Oneness Pentecostal has been to classify those who have only experienced one half of this “new birth.” There are those who have spoken with tongues, having received the Pentecostal experience, yet are not baptized in Jesus’ Name (this fits many Trinitarian Pentecostal). Also, there are folks who have been baptized in Jesus’ Name, but have not yet spoken in tongues. What is the state of their souls?

For those only having part of Acts 2:38 their soul hangs in uncertainty and unfinished. Why? The UPCI New Birth teaching fractures salvation. What about the people whose sins are remitted by baptism but doesn’t have the Spirit? They are forgiven, but dead. They are accepted by God, yet “none of his” (Romans 8:9). They are washed from their sins but sadly don’t have eternal life. They are free from sin but still outside the Body of Christ. They have no condemnation but they still are no child of God. Their sins are gone, but they are not going to Heaven.

On the other hand, others have spoken with tongues, but have not been baptized in Jesus’ Name. They are filled with God’s Spirit, but unforgiven. They have a new life, but are dead in sin. They have cried Abba by the Spirit, but are still not children. They can operate the gifts of the Spirit, but they don’t have the gift of salvation. They have the Spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:4), yet they are still covered with their sins. They have the power of God, but are dead in their sins. They have Spirit of eternal life, but they are not going to live forever in Heaven. This is fracturing of the Gospel is not only bizarre, it is damning.

Fracturing the New Birth not only separates the New Birth from justification, it breaks salvation into pieces. It breaks forgiveness from Spirit baptism. It fractures faith into various stages, so that true faith in Christ is broken into initial faith (assent), faith to repent, faith in the Name of Jesus baptism, and faith to receive the Holy Spirit speaking with tongues. It breaks the work of the Spirit from the work of Christ. It breaks the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit from the redeeming blood of Christ. “Therefore what **God** has **joined** together, let man not separate.” (Matthew 19:6, Mark 10:9 NIV)

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In so doing, the UPCI’s Acts 2:38-is-the-New Birth breaks up God. A person can have Jesus’ work of forgiveness through water baptism, while not having the Holy Spirit. Or one can have the Holy Spirit (evidenced by speaking with tongues), but still not have blood of Christ for remission. The Holy Spirit can be in them, but they are not in Christ because they are not baptized. This fracturing of the work of God is the fatal flaw of UPCI salvation. In failing to understand the unity of the work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Scripture, they have become vulnerable to a false understanding of the Gospel. It is a gospel that breaks up the biblical unity of God. It is a gospel that misunderstands Acts 2:38 as the steps we follow rather than the work God does. In so doing, it splits the work of Christ from the work of the Spirit, and leaves the possibility of people trusting in a split or fractured salvation. This leaves them uncertain of the state of their souls. Such is the result of a false gospel.

The true Gospel does not split salvation. It sees the work of Father, Son and Spirit as completely unified. God as Father, Son and Spirit works seamlessly to fulfill the marvelous eternal plan of salvation. The true Gospel sees the work of regeneration and justification as smooth and unbroken. The one who is born again is justified, without steps or stages. The person justified is forgiven and at the same time baptized with the Spirit:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.
(Ephesians 1:13-14 NIV)

It leaves the believer with a clear sense of assurance of their spiritual condition. They can be confident that they are forgiven, pardoned and accepted, Spirit filled, a new creation, a child of God and guaranteed Heaven. The Acts 2:38-is-the-New Birth gospel allows believers to be separated from the love of Christ. But the true Gospel does not: “... neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39 NIV)

The reality is, what the UPCI teaches is not biblical justification by faith. If they claim someone is justified, but not born again, they have neither understood justification, nor the New Birth. They place a justified person in pre-eschatological purgatory (or as a friend stated, they are “maybe babies.”) Thank God there are no Protestant stillbirths. God does not hold the justified in a pre-death purgatory, hanging precariously in the gap of a fractured gospel. There is just one beautiful and powerful Gospel of Jesus, and those who are born again and justified by faith in that Gospel.

NOTE: A more expanded study of this subject can be found in my paper “Can the Gospel Be Fractured?”