

Studies in renewal

Study 2:

Renewal in the light of scripture

By Dr Ulf Metzner, Indooroopilly Qld (1987)

'Renewal', 'charismatic renewal', 'being born again' – these and similar terms have tended to dominate the thinking and speaking of many Christians in our time. All too often the enthusiasm accompanying the various renewal movements has acted like a wedge, driven between those who have experienced 'spiritual rebirth' and others who have not yet had any obvious manifestations of the renewal of their faith.

Biblically speaking, what is renewal?

How are we born again?

Is there such a thing as proof of our renewal?

Must we be baptised a second time in order to become Christians whose faith has been renewed?

We will let Scripture give us the answers.

OLD TESTAMENT

Whenever the Old Testament speaks about changing the old into something new, it is God himself who is responsible for the change, for the act of renewing. This act may refer to a new name which God gives (Isa 62:2), or it may be the transforming of nature (Isa 43:19,20), or in an eschatological sense, it may even refer to heaven and earth (Isa 65:17). When God puts a new song into his people's mouth, it is a song of praise to their God for the work of his salvation (Psalm 40:3; 96:1; 33:3; 149:1).

God also promises to replace the old covenant with a new one (Jer 31:31–33). To make this covenant effective, God will give his people a 'new heart and put a new spirit within them' (Eze 11:19). Meanwhile, God's people can pray for such a renewal of heart and spirit (Psalm 51:10–12) and sincerely repent of all their transgressions (Eze 18:30–31).

For study:

Read Isaiah 62:2; 43:19,20; Psalm 40:3; 51:10–12; Jeremiah 31:31–33

1. List the things mentioned in these passages which fall under God's renewing power.
2. What does this tell us about the scope of God's ability to renew?

NEW TESTAMENT

A.

Renewal is, by definition, 'an act by which a former state is restored' (The Macquarie Dictionary). As the prophet Jeremiah had said, the time of the restoration of God's covenant with his people would come. The New Testament is the fulfilment of God's promise to restore the former state of covenant by making a new covenant with mankind. In this sense the whole of the New Testament is God's renewal plan in action to save mankind.

For study:

3. Discuss the statement: 'The New Testament is God's renewal plan in action to save mankind.'

Passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:25; Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:13 may help you.

B.

Jesus Christ is central to God's renewal of the covenant. Christ is that 'one man' through whom God makes everything new (Rom 5:15; 1 Cor 15:21, 22). Through him we become 'new creation' (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Eph 2:15). With such words Scripture wants us to understand that our renewal through Christ is, quite literally, a new beginning for us. This newness often cannot be reconciled with the old (2 Cor 3:14; Mark 2:22; Matt 5:21–48; 12:6, 41–42; Luke 16:16). As individual people we receive such newness as a gift from Christ (Eph 4:22, 24). And so we now live 'in the new life of the Spirit' (Rom 7:6).

Such passages of Scripture make it clear that renewal is both a renewal of the (spirit of the) mind (Eph 4:23; Rom 12:2), as well as a renewal of our life's actions. We could say that through renewal our whole life receives a new quality. Things do not continue as before; renewal heralds a visible change in our attitude and lifestyle (Col 3:5–25; 1 Cor 5:6–8; Eph 4: 25–32). Our relationships with other people are renewed by the application of Christ's new commandment (John 13:34) as surely as our new nature is 'created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Eph 4:24).

For study:

4. Read Romans 5:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Ephesians 2:15.
What do such references say about Christ's position in God's renewal of the covenant?
5. 'Renewal heralds a visible change in our attitude and life-style.' What changes does the Spirit work in our personal lifestyle and in our relationships with others according to Colossians 3:5–25?

C.

How does such renewal as Christ's gift to us take place? Peter says (1 Pet 1:3, 23) 'We have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'. And 'you have been born anew ... through the living and abiding Word of God...' The evangelist John links our rebirth with our response to God in Baptism and the Holy Spirit who works through Baptism: 'Unless one is born anew... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God' (John 3:3, 5). Titus also connects renewal in the Holy Spirit, justification and grace with our Baptism when he says we are saved by a 'washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that we might be justified by his grace...' (Titus 3:5-7). Clearly, renewal is new man's work as surely as it effects the whole of man. We are born again through the Holy Spirit, who works in us through the proclamation of God's saving Word and the administration of the Sacraments, beginning with the moment of our baptism.

For study:

6. 'Renewal is never man's work ...'
How do the following references make this clear?
1 Peter 1:3 and 23; John 3:3-5; Titus 3:5-7

D.

The New Testament clearly links the gift of the Holy Spirit with our baptism with water and the laying on of hands during such baptism (Acts 8:12-17; 9:17, 18; 19:5, 6). Having received the Spirit, we now are 'in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you' (Rom 8:9). As those who have received the Spirit, we 'walk in the Spirit', bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 22) Just as there is only one Spirit, one Lord, one God, so there can be only one Baptism (Eph 4:4; 1 Cor 12:13). This raises a very important question. If we are renewed in God's sight through the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, why do the lives of so many Christians not reflect that new nature?

It is significant that the public ministry of both John the Baptist (Matt 3:2) and Jesus (Matt 4:17) begin with the call to repentance. This call remains a central part of the whole of our Lord's ministry. In the last instance the real sin of the Pharisees was that they did not want to repent. Hence there was no change in their attitude; their heart and spirit were not renewed.

The New Testament Greek word for repentance (*metanoia*) really means turning back to God. It presupposes that someone who has turned his back on God hears God calling and responds to that call. Repentance is more than just an isolated action; it is an attitude and action that includes all aspect of our life: our thoughts, emotions, wishes and actions. Martin Luther quite rightly says in the first of his 95 theses:

Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying 'Repent!' desired that the whole life of the believers should be nothing but repentance.

When we repent, our life and being are once again made whole, and we are restored in God's sight. We are renewed daily through forgiveness that comes from repentance. How often does such renewal take place? Once in our life? Seven times? Seventy times seven? It can and should occur daily, as surely as repentance ought to be an important part of every day in our life.

The Apostle Paul summarises this: 'So we do not lose heart. Through our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day' (2 Cor 4:16).

Martin Luther, in explaining the significance of Baptism for daily living, also stresses this need for daily renewal through repentance:

Our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and ... day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.
(Small Catechism)

Daily, unspectacular renewal through repentance and forgiveness: this should be as much a part of every Christian's life as breathing in and breathing out.

For study:

Acts 8:12–17; 9:17, 18 and 19:5, 6 all create a close link between three things.

7. What three things are linked in these passages?
8. Why are repentance and forgiveness central to the Spirit's work of renewal?

E.

What should be the most natural reaction of any Christian who experiences the reality of such daily renewal through forgiveness?

In his Gospel, the evangelist Mark closely links Jesus' call to repentance with his call to accept the joy of God's Good News (Mark 1:15). And our Lord himself stressed time and again that there is indeed much joy when the lost is found by God (Luke 15:6; 16:9; 15:23, 24; 15:32; 19:6). The joy of repentance is none other than the joy of renewed acceptance by God, our heavenly Father.

Unfortunately, many devout Christians all too often overlook the joy that accompanies true repentance. Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Christianity's greatest critics, once said that many Christians are so tinder-dry and lacking joy that they would burst into flames were you to get them with a match.

At this particular time we are realising that both in the Scripture and our own confessional writings we are called on to live our faith by being renewed daily through the actualisation of our baptismal grace. And may our joy in a merciful God visibly transform our whole life!

For study:

Discuss the following questions, supporting your answers from Scripture:

9. How are repentance, joy, and renewal related to each other?
10. How often should our renewal in God's sight take place?

F.

There is one final aspect to being renewed. Certainly, renewal is for the present life, for this world and now. But renewal also has something to do with that great future which God has in store for those who love him. According to God's promise, 'we wait for new heavens' and 'a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1). To those who conquer will be given 'a new name' (Rev 2:17; 3:12), and those who have been redeemed will 'sing a new song before the throne' (Rev 14:3; 5:9). It is a mystery to us, but our present renewal is a sign of that greater and final renewal when God will make 'all things new' (Rev 21:5); just as our earthly celebration of Holy Communion is a sign of that eternal celebration (Mark 14:25).

Although God has kept much of all this shrouded in divine mystery, this much we do know: 'We shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on mortality'. When that has happened our final transformation will have taken place (1 Cor 15:51–53).

For study:

11. Read 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 2:17; 3:12 and 21:1,5.
To what extent is our present renewal only a sign of greater and final renewal?

THREE COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT RENEWAL ANSWERED BY SCRIPTURE

Many questions arise in the minds of Christians who come into contact with the various renewal movements of our day. In the following, three frequently asked questions receive an answer from Scripture.

1. **Can we have proof that one person is reborn and another is not?**

Humanly speaking, there is no proof. God alone looks at our hearts, he alone knows what we are doing and why we are doing it. However, wherever there is genuine renewal of the heart and mind there, too, will be fruits of renewal. In his first letter John says that he who is born of God 'does right' (2:29), 'commits no sin' (3:9), 'loves' others (4:7), 'overcomes the world' (5:4), 'believes that Jesus is the Son of God' (5:5). Our Lord himself said that we shall be known by our fruits (Matt 7:16), and the apostle Paul names some of the fruit of the Spirit as being 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; (Gal 5:22). The proof of our renewal is not in an identifiable experience, nor in belonging to a special group, but in being 'transformed by the renewal' (Rom 12:2).

2. **Are special charismatic gifts, such as healing and speaking in tongues, a necessary part of every reborn Christian's life?**

Certainly not! Such gifts are given by the Holy Spirit who chooses to give them to some and not to others (1 Cor 12:7–11). Healing and tongues may be a sign of a renewal of certain gifts, but their absence certainly does not bear witness to an absence of renewal. To insist that all Christians must have the same gifts of the Spirit would amount to a 'de facto manipulation' of the Spirit of God. Scripture clearly states that we have 'gifts that differ according to grace given to us' (Rom 12:6). If you do have the gift of tongues or healing, use it in accordance with Scripture (1 Cor 14:13–19 and 26–33), 'but earnestly desire the higher gifts' (1 Cor 12:31).

3. **Do we have to be baptised a second time, e.g. with the Holy Spirit, in order to be reborn?**

Here too, the answer is emphatically, 'No!' We receive the Holy Spirit in our baptism (Titus 3:5; John 3:5) as surely as our Lord has commanded us to 'baptise in the name of the ... Holy Spirit' (Matt 28:19). Nowhere does Scripture say that the Spirit which we have received at Baptism leaves us. A second baptism would, in effect, be a denial of the gift of the Holy Spirit in our baptism. If we do not 'quench the Spirit' (1 Thess 5:19), he will do God's saving work in us, leading us through daily repentance to a joyful renewal of our faith.

For study:

12. Why must we be careful about judging whether or not a person is re-born?
13. What dangers might lie in over-emphasising the importance of gifts such as healing or tongues?
14. Why should Christians who have been baptised not seek re-baptism?

REMEMBER

- It is always God himself who is responsible for an act of renewal – whether it be a new name that he gives us, a new heart and spirit, a new covenant, or a new heaven and earth that he creates.
- Jesus Christ is central to God's renewal of the covenant.
- We are born again through the Holy Spirit who works in us through the proclamation of God's Word, and the administration of the Sacraments, beginning with our baptism.
- We are renewed daily through forgiveness that comes from repentance, and the joy of our renewal is the joy of renewed acceptance by God, our heavenly Father.