

“Basic Truth” series, #6

Understanding Man’s Inability¹

By Daryl Wingerd

The Bible speaks of two kinds of people: those who have been “born again” (John 3:3, cf. James 1:18), and those who remain in their sinful corruption—the “natural man” (1 Cor. 2:14). Only the person who understands the gospel and believes in Jesus Christ will be saved. But which kind of person truly believes? A better question might be this: Which kind of person is *able* to believe?

God: Life-Preserver or Life-Giver?

The analogy of a drowning person has often been used to describe the spiritual plight of the natural man. The life-preserver of God’s grace is held out to the man who can either grab it and be saved, or ignore it and perish. The person in this analogy is portrayed as having the *ability* to reach out for the life-preserver. It is only his *unwillingness* that restrains him. If he would only reach out in faith and take hold of the offered salvation, then (as it is usually presented) he would be saved and “born again.” As appealing as that analogy seems for the purpose of evangelism, it is fraught with error:

- ♦ It misrepresents the true condition of the natural man, portraying him as *dying*, rather than *dead* (Eph. 2:1,4). It shows him as being *able* to respond positively to God’s offer of salvation, when Scripture repeatedly says he *cannot* do so. The natural man *cannot* perceive the mysteries of the kingdom of God (John 3:3; Mark 4:11-12). He *cannot* submit to Christ or please God in any way (Rom. 8:6-8). He *cannot* even understand the gospel (1 Cor. 2:14).
- ♦ It reverses the biblical order of salvation, indicating that the natural man’s faith *precedes* his new birth, when in the biblical order, God’s work of regeneration *precedes* and *produces* faith. Spiritually dead people cannot believe. “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were [spiritually] dead in trespasses, made us [spiritually] alive together with Christ . . .” (Eph. 2:4-5).
- ♦ It slights the greatness of God’s redemptive work, reducing it to nothing more than an offer of assistance, rather than a complete and unassisted accomplishment of God’s grace and power. The truth is, “Salvation [not merely the offer, but the complete work] is of the Lord” (Jonah 3:9).
- ♦ By making man’s “free will” the final determining factor in salvation, it calls into question the biblical truth that God *has* a chosen people and that *all* of them will be saved. It even opens the possibility that *none* will accept God’s gracious offer in Christ.

¹ This material adapted from the commentary section of the catechism for Christ Fellowship of Kansas City entitled, *Questions and Answers for Learning and Living the Christian Faith*, Copyright © 2004, Christ Fellowship of Kansas City.

Jesus, however, had no worries about His work being wasted, saying with certainty, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me” (John 6:37). “He *will* save *His* people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21, emphasis added). As the prophet Isaiah wrote of Christ, “He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:11).

- ♦ It implies that the natural man who became saved, the one who *received* God’s gracious offer, was equipped, prior to regeneration, with at least some natural wisdom, discernment, perception, or understanding which the others who *refused* and therefore perished did not possess. In other words, his inherent ability to see his need and make a wiser decision, worked in partnership with God’s grace to bring about his salvation and new birth. This not only denies that salvation is the result of God’s grace *alone* by assigning some degree of inherent human ability, it also contradicts Paul who tells us that the natural man is “without strength” (Romans 5:6; lit. “helpless,” “powerless” or “without ability”). Remember that both thieves who were crucified with Christ were reviling Him together until grace made one of them new (Mark 15:32; Luke 23:39-43).

A better analogy shows the natural man in his true condition—dead, and at the bottom of the ocean. No offer of a life preserver will help, because a dead man cannot reach out and take hold of it. What the natural man needs is not the *preservation* of life, but the *creation* of life. He needs to be born *again* before he can believe. God alone is able to *will* and *perform* that work. One corpse is no more capable than the next of hearing someone knocking or opening the door to let Him in. No dead person has ever requested to be brought back to life. No baby has ever asked to be conceived. And no natural man *has* ever, or *will* ever ask to be born again.

When God puts a new heart into man, it is not because man deserves a new heart—[it is not] because there was anything good in his nature that could have prompted God to give him a new spirit. The Lord simply gives a man a new heart because He wishes to do it; that is his only reason. “But,” you say, “suppose a man cries for a new heart?” I answer, no man ever did cry for a new heart until he had got one; for the cry for a new heart proves that there is a new heart there already.

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² C. H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, Vol. 5, “The New Heart,” (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), p. 91.