

THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN BIRTH

*How to Give New Believers
a Proper Start in Life*



DAVID PAWSON

The Normal Christian Birth

J. David Pawson, MA, BSc



<http://www.tppress.com>

Copyright © 1989 by David Pawson

*Published in The United States of America by
True Potential Publishing, Inc.*

PO Box 904 Travelers Rest, SC 29690

<http://tppress.com>

*First published in Great Britain in 1989 by Hodder and
Stoughton.*

*The right of David Pawson to be identified as author of this
work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copy-
right, Design and Patents Act 1988*

All rights reserved.

*No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, in-
cluding photocopy, recording or any information storage and
retrieval system, without permission from the publisher.*

Scripture quotations marked NIV taken from the
HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION,
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.
Used by permission.

The Normal Christian Birth and other True Potential Publish-
ing books can be purchased in bulk by churches, ministries and
other organizations for evangelical, educational or business
promotional use. For information please write Special Markets
Department PO Box 904 Travelers Rest, SC 29690 or send
your request via e-mail to: info@tppress.com.

ISBN 978-0-9823059-2-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009921638

Printed in the USA

‘But the gate is narrow - contracted by pressure - and the way is straitened *and* compressed that leads away to life, and few are they who find it.’

(Matt 7:14, Amplified Bible)

‘Jesus answered, “In truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from water and spirit.”

(John 3:5 New English Bible)

‘Peter said to them, “Each one of you must turn away from his sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God’s gift, the Holy Spirit.”

(Acts 2:38, Good News Bible)

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: A word to the midwife	1
---------------------------------	---

PART ONE: YESTERDAY'S NORMAL DELIVERY

The theological dimension

1. Four spiritual doors	8
2. Repent of your sins towards God	21
3. Believe in the Lord Jesus	30
4. Be baptized in water	44
5. Receive the Holy Spirit	58
6. Born again	82

PART TWO: THE 'WHAT ABOUT ... ?' PASSAGES

The biblical dimension

7. The great commission (Matt 28:19-20)	96
8. The Markan postscript (Mark 16:9-20)	104
9. The dying thief (Luke 23:40-43)	107
10. The second birth (John 3:3-8)	112
11. The living streams (John 7:37-39)	121
12. The known stranger (John 14:17)	126
13. The first eleven (John 20:22)	132
14. The fiftieth day (Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-4)	140
15. The three thousand (Acts 2:38-41)	152
16. The Samaritan converts (Acts 8:4-25)	162
17. The Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:36-39)	170

18. The Roman centurion (Acts 10:44-48; 11:11-18; 15:7-11)	173
19. The whole households (Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31; 18:8)	181
20. The Ephesian disciples (Acts 19:1-6)	190
21. The acid test (Romans 8:9)	203
22. The holy family (I Corinthians 7:14)	212
23. The disjointed body (I Corinthians 12:13)	215
24. The baptized dead (I Corinthians 15:29)	226
25. The new circumcision (Colossians 2:9-12)	230
26. The regenerating bath (Titus 3:5)	238
27. The elementary teaching (Hebrews 6:1-6)	242
28. The working faith James 2:14-26)	250
29. The saving flood (I Peter 3:18-22)	255
30. The shut door (Revelation 3:20)	263

PART THREE: TODAY'S TYPICAL DECISION

The pastoral dimension

31. One standard decision	270
32. Helping disciples to repent	280
33. Helping disciples to believe	291
34. Helping disciples to be baptized	299
35. Helping disciples to receive	306
36. Saved at last	317

EPILOGUE: A word to the family	327
--------------------------------	-----

APPENDICES

1. Infant baptism	332
2. 'Spirit' without the definite article	346
3. Trinity or tritheism?	352

Prologue:

A WORD TO THE MIDWIVES

This is a handbook on spiritual obstetrics. It is not just for evangelists, though it is particularly relevant to their ministry. It is for pastors, youth leaders, church workers and, indeed, all Christians who have a heart to win others for Christ, all who at some time find themselves ‘assisting’ when a person is ‘born again’.

Basically, this book is about how to become a ‘Christian’. It is written out of a burden for a better quality of ‘conversion’ (as well as a bigger quantity, which all long to see).

Birth affects life. This is true of physical birth. A good ‘delivery’, quick, clean and free from complications, produces a healthy baby. A protracted, painful and complicated birth can have a damaging effect, both physiological and psychological, leading to poor health and slow development.

This is just as true of spiritual birth. Many ‘Christians’, including myself, were badly delivered. Initiation either took years to be completed or has, remained incomplete. In many cases an umbilical cord to the past has never been cut and tied off. Some have never been washed. Others never had hands laid on them in order to breathe in and cry out! Some are barely alive or soon abandoned (as was the people Israel, according to Ezekiel 15:4-5).

THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN BIRTH

There is a noticeable gap in the literature on this subject. On the one hand, there are many small booklets to give to ‘enquirers’, explaining how they can respond to the gospel. Most, as we shall see, have over-simplified the procedure to the point of distortion and misdirection, usually based on a misinterpretation of two solitary texts: John 1:12 and Revelation 3:20 (see chapters 5 and 30). The typical ‘sinner’s prayer’ is seriously inadequate (see chapter 31).

On the other hand, recent years have seen a spate of erudite tomes on the ‘initiation-complex’, written by scholars for scholars (the names of Frederick Dale Bruner, James D. G. Dunn and George R. Beasley-Murray spring to mind). The challenge to integrate sacramental or Pentecostal insights with the traditional evangelical outlook has stimulated these publications. The objective is one I share, though I have reached my own conclusions about the blend!

Between the needs of the enquirer and the scholar there is a void which this book seeks to fill. It is a serious study for those who are prepared to sit down with an open Bible and an open mind, who are not afraid to enter unexplored territory and love God with all their mind. It is not an academic treatise, requires no knowledge of Greek or Hebrew (though some points will be mentioned and explained), contains few references to other works (though a discerning reader will realize many have been studied in the preparation of this volume), and requires average intelligence to grasp the real issues. However, a willingness to *unlearn* will be essential, since many traditional assumptions will be questioned.

I have a particular concern to see the ‘evangelical’ and ‘Pentecostal’ streams flowing together. These are the two major growing-points on the Christian scene, and (according to some statistical surveys) their integration usually quintuples evangelistic effectiveness. Yet present relationships between the two seem to be based on sympathetic tolerance rather than shared

PROLOGUE

truth. Though there is now much less disagreement or disturbance over ‘gifts of the Spirit’, there is still a deep gulf over ‘baptism in the Spirit’, the latter being more directly relevant to our subject.

Readers who like to know the worst quickly may be helped by a summary of the primary challenges in these pages (though they are urged not to dismiss the whole because they disagree with parts!).

Evangelical tradition is asked to reconsider its assumption that ‘believing in Jesus’ and ‘receiving the Spirit’ are synonymous and simultaneous (usually lumped together in the phrase ‘receiving Jesus’). Pentecostal tradition is asked to reconsider its assumption that ‘receiving the Spirit’ and being ‘baptized in the Spirit’ are *not* synonymous or simultaneous (the latter usually being regarded as some kind of ‘second’ stage or blessing). Both streams are asked to reconsider their assumption that baptism in water is a symbolic rather than a sacramental act (the fear of ‘baptismal regeneration’ can become irrational and unscriptural).

The position I have taken is midway between the evangelical and the Pentecostal. This could simply upset both and finish up in no man’s land! Or it could be seen as a genuine meeting-point where a truly biblical amalgamation can take place.

In a nutshell, I believe that the ‘normal Christian birth’ consists of true repentance and genuine faith, expressed and effected in water-baptism, with a conscious reception of the person of the Spirit with power. This understanding of ‘initiation’ is developed in three dimensions:

Theological. The first section comprised a statement about the whole process, followed by an examination of its four elements, and concludes with a chapter relating it all to the doctrine of regeneration.

THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN BIRTH

Biblical. Normally, a study of the relevant scriptures should precede any statement of conclusions. Though this section of the book was actually written first (and some keen Bible students might well begin here), it has been placed second so that readers may see the wood before examining the trees! The passages have been chosen for detailed study because they are crucial or controversial. It is not necessary (and may not be helpful) to work through all of them at the first reading. However, the reader is encouraged to look at chapters 9, 10, 13, 16, 20, 21, 23, 27 and 30, which are fundamental to the whole presentation. No doubt each reader will have his or her own favorite test-text as well!

Pastoral. The temptation to rush on to the practical application must be resisted! To attempt to apply this teaching before being convinced by the Spirit that it is true to scripture could be disastrous. Unfortunately, a pragmatic age is more interested in the question 'Does it work?' than the more important question 'Is it right?' Pragmatic Christians ask 'Is it blessed?' rather than 'Is it biblical?' A true disciple learns to grasp principles first, before putting them into practice. It is morally wrong to use human beings as guinea-pigs! Nevertheless, I hope this study will do more than change opinions - hence this last section is full of practical hints and tips for the 'soul-winner'.

The Appendices cover some specialized topics not essential to the main argument, but of interest and concern to some readers. I have had to be totally honest in stating my conviction that infant baptism cannot be integrated into the understanding of spiritual birth presented here. My hope is that those who find this offensive will not dismiss the whole book on that ground, but will still find much to help them in their ministry. Regarding the definite article ('the'), I am not the first to notice its conspicuous absence from many N.T. statements about the Holy Spirit (as in 'baptized in Holy Spirit', 'filled with Spirit' and 'Did you receive Spirit?'), While, with others, I find this usage has theological as well as grammatical significance, my main

PROLOGUE

argument does not rest on this point - hence its relegation to an appendix. Yet it provides an interesting confirmation of my thesis that receiving (the) Spirit is a conscious experience with audible evidence.

As with any serious writing, this book has been many years in the making. It was hammered out on the twin anvils of biblical study and pastoral care. The basic thesis was first published in 1977 in my *Truth to Tell* (Now *Christianity Explained*), chapter 9 of which ('Got a conversion complex?') contains the essence of this book. A promise was made then to provide a 'deeper and more detailed treatment later'. That pledge, recalled by my wife, is now fulfilled in this book. The material presented here has been refined by use in seminars for church leaders of many denominations in this and other countries.

I want to dedicate this book to a host of friends who share my conviction that 'evangelical' and 'charismatic' belong together. To Gordon Bailey, John Barr, Alex Buchanan, Clive Calver (who invited me to proclaim this message on a Youth for Christ tour of twenty-one cities entitled 'Let God speak'), Michael Cassidy, Gerald Coates, Michael Cole, Barney Coombs, Derek Copley, Nick Cuthbert, Don Double, Bryan Gilbert, Bob Gordon, Jim Graham (my successor at Gold Hill, Chalfont St Peter), Ian Grant, Lynn Green, Michael Green, Michael Griffiths, Chris Hill, Graham Kendrick, Cecil Kerr, Gilbert Kirby, Douglas McBain, David McInnes, Brian Mills, John Noble, Ian Petit, Derek Prince, Ian Smale ('Ishmael'), Cohn Urquhart, Terry Virgo, Philip Vogel, Rob White and so many more who have sought in their own ways a synthesis of charismatic experience of the Spirit with evangelical exegesis of scripture and by their personal affection have stimulated me to 'go and do likewise'. It need hardly be added that none of them must be held responsible for the views expressed here (I want to keep their friendship!).

Last, but by no means least, I want to mention my wife, who gave me the courage and the coffee to keep at it, believing it to

THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN BIRTH

be the most important thing I may ever do in my ministry. She has humbly taken the role of ‘your average reader’ and carefully studied each chapter from that perspective. Without her support it would not have been written.

Sherborne St. John

Part One

YESTERDAY'S NORMAL DELIVERY

The theological dimension

Chapter One

FOUR SPIRITUAL DOORS

The thesis offered in this book can be simply stated: *Christian initiation is a complex of four elements - repenting towards God, believing in the Lord Jesus, being baptized in water and receiving the Holy Spirit*. Each of these is quite distinct from the others. All of them are essential to entering the kingdom of God. They are not mutually exclusive, but are fully complementary and together constitute the process of ‘becoming a Christian’. They may occur very close together or over a period of time. The important thing is their completion rather than their coincidence.

A BALANCED APPROACH

Since all four elements are necessary, it is a futile exercise to grade them in importance. Yet different streams of church life have tended to emphasize one, sometimes at the expense of others. *Liberal* thought has concentrated on repentance, especially in terms of radically changed attitudes and lifestyles, though in recent years the emphasis has been on social injustice rather than personal immorality. *Evangelical* thought has focused most attention on faith, particularly its individual and inward aspects, though sometimes stressing doctrinal truth rather than personal trust. *Sacramental* thought has emphasized water-baptism, though it has usually felt the need to add a rite of ‘confirmation’ where the subjects have been babies (rather than believers).

FOUR SPIRITUAL DOORS

Pentecostal thought has rediscovered Spirit-baptism, though it has seen this as a subsequent experience rather than an integral part of initiation.

I believe these four streams are right in what they affirm but wrong in what they tend to undervalue, ignore or even deny. We shall attempt a synthesis of all that is best in each view. Yet this is not undertaken as an ecumenical enterprise: it is more a biblical exegesis that could provide a base for true integration, based on honest correction rather than dishonest compromise.

All four strands are woven together in the New Testament: Christian initiation is there understood as a combination of ethical reform, eternal relationship, external rite and existential renewal.

It is the essence of heresy to take part of the truth and make it the whole. So often the whole biblical truth on a subject is only understood when different, even disparate, aspects are held together in proper tension. For example, this book must inevitably major on the *human* aspects of the new birth - on the need to repent, be baptized and receive the Spirit, as well as on the need to 'believe in the Lord Jesus' - which may cause some readers to wonder if this is compatible with the Reformation principle of 'justification by faith alone'.

Two convictions which underlie every statement in this book must therefore be categorically stated at the outset:

First, Christ's finished work on the cross is *objectively sufficient*, in and of itself, to save the *world* from sin. Nothing can, much less need, be added to it. Through his death, burial and resurrection, he has accomplished everything that needed to be done 'for us men and our salvation'. He has made atonement for sin and reconciled us to the Father. We are assuming that all this has already been made perfectly clear to the one who wants to be saved.

Second, his completed work is not *subjectively efficient*, in the sense of saving any particular *individual* from their sins. It must be personally appropriated and applied. The recipient of these ‘benefits of his passion’ is active rather than passive. The gospel demands a response. A person may be entitled to an inheritance but will not possess it until it is claimed; their active appropriation of it in no way implies that it has been earned.

The controversy is not therefore over anything that needs to be *added* to faith but how faith is to be *exercised* in order to appropriate what grace is offering. To see water-baptism, for example, as an addition to faith whereby people make themselves more worthy or deserving of salvation- is a dreadful travesty. To see it as an expression and consummation of faith whereby the penitent believer is identified with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection is a totally different approach. Baptism is then seen as the means of *experiencing*, not earning, the deliverance those events achieved.

From this point of view, faith is the most fundamental of the four elements and actually underlies the other three. Repentance is linked to faith from the beginning of Mark’s gospel (Mark 1:15). Baptism is linked to faith at the end of the same gospel (Mark 16:16). The Spirit is received by faith, not works (Gal 3:2). In a real sense, therefore, to have faith is to repent, be baptized and receive the Spirit (Acts 2:38; see chapter 15).

A SCRIPTURAL APPROACH

We have already begun to include scripture references. Yet stating a thesis and supporting it with proof-texts collected at random is not a valid procedure for establishing biblical truth. A proper overall study strategy needs to be matched with a contextual analysis of particular passages. Conclusions should be reached *after* this process, even though they may be stated at the beginning of a full presentation.

FOUR SPIRITUAL DOORS

The subject of *Christian* initiation itself dictated some of the basic guidelines. In particular, the starting-point of biblical investigation was indicated. Obviously, this meant concentrating on the *New Testament*, even if there were some ‘foreshadowing’ references in the Old. But where to start in the New Testament?

Unsuitable candidates

Surprisingly, the events related in the gospels are too *early* for our purpose. Covering the period between the advent and ascension of Jesus, the gospels cannot give us a full picture of the normal pattern of initiation as understood by the post-Pentecost church (which is the precedent for the ‘age’ in which we also live). Though repentance, faith, baptism and the Spirit are all mentioned, with some helpful insights into their meaning, none of them could take on that full ‘Christian’ significance they acquired after the events of Easter and Pentecost. For example, the baptism practiced by John (and by Jesus’ disciples) was so different from later baptism into the name of Jesus that re-baptism would be necessary (Acts 19:1-6; see chapter 20). Again, the Holy Spirit had been ‘with’ the disciples during the gospel period, but could only be ‘in’ them after Pentecost (when they ‘received’ him), which could only happen after Jesus was ‘glorified’ (John 7:39; 14:17; see chapters 11 and 12). Even faith could only center in the ability of Jesus to heal and deliver as the Messiah; it could not yet encompass him as the Savior of the world (delivered by his death) or the Son of God (declared by his resurrection), much less Lord of all. This is one reason why the dying thief should not be regarded as a model of Christian conversion (see chapter 9). Paradoxically, the full gospel cannot be found in the four gospels! While all the elements are present in embryo, their gestation is far from complete (which, presumably, is why God gave us the rest of the New Testament!).

But the epistles and Revelation are too *late* for our purpose. All of these writings were addressed to believers, who had al-

ready been initiated! There is therefore no direct or systematic treatment of our subject. Failure to realize this has led to the misuse of texts. (Revelation 3:20 is a classic example. A rebuke to believers, it has been used almost universally as an invitation to unbelievers; see chapter 30) However, there are frequent reminders in the epistles and Revelation of the different facets of initiation, the selection depending on their relevance to the immediate needs of the believers being addressed (see below for some examples); but it is almost impossible to reconstruct an adequate survey from these incidental references. As we shall see, the writers of the epistles everywhere take the water-baptism and Spirit-baptism of their readers for granted - but nowhere do they describe or define either event! Only their effects or implications are mentioned.

A good starting-point

So, if the gospels are too early and the epistles too late for our starting-point, what are we left with? The book of Acts! It is the only book in the New Testament to major on post-Pentecost evangelism. It is full of detail about how unbelievers became believers, how sinners became saints. It is a record of the divine and human aspects of salvation, telling us about the acts of the apostles in bringing Christ to people and the acts of the Spirit in bringing people to Christ. Most of the teaching transcribed by Luke is addressed to the unsaved: Not only do we gain valuable insights into how the message was communicated; we are shown the response that was expected and obtained. Only here can we study Peter, John and Paul actually engaged in evangelism. In the examples of counseling enquirers we can discern their understanding of initiation.

Some objections to using Acts

Some Bible scholars would, however, take strong exception to the use of Acts as a source of doctrine. Their objection has taken two forms. The *general* criticism is that doctrine can only

FOUR SPIRITUAL DOORS

be based on the didactic (teaching) portions of scripture (like the epistles) and must not be built on narratives (like Acts). The *particular* criticism is that Luke was a historian, but not a theologian. For both these reasons, it is said that we must begin with the epistles, particularly those of Paul (who *was* a theologian!) and read Acts in the light of his theology. Apart from the difficulties of this approach in relation to initiation (outlined above), there are serious flaws in both objections.

It is the ‘genius’ of revelation in scripture that truth is embodied in concrete situations rather than abstract propositions. The whole Bible is a narrative - from the garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem. The great truths of creation and redemption are wrapped up in the recital of events. Most of the Old Testament and much of the New is in narrative form. The Bible is not so much a book of systematic theology as a history of situational theism. And all this ‘narrative’ was written so we could ‘learn’ from it (Rom 15:4; I Cor 10:6). All scripture is useful for teaching, because it is all inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16). We can learn as much from God’s deeds as his words; indeed, they belong together and illuminate each other. The record of happenings is for instruction as well as information. The Bible does not present a comprehensive history of the world, the nation of Israel or the church. It is a *selection* of significant events accompanied by a prophetic *interpretation* of those events, both being the work of the Spirit of God. (Acts 15 itself contains a perfect example of resolving a doctrinal dispute by the narrative of divine activity, confirmed by scripture.)

Luke is not just a historian, though he claims the integrity of accurate reporting in the first volume of his works (Luke 1:1-4). He selects the events he records and the details within those events. Then he weaves them into an overall pattern based on his profound insights. If theology means understanding God, Luke was quite a theologian! The idea that it is impossible to extract a ‘theology of Luke’ from his writings as one can with Paul is a myth that needs exploding. (On the issue of Luke as a *theo-*

We hope you've enjoyed this free sample of *The Normal Christian Birth*. For more information on purchasing *The Normal Christian Birth*, please visit

<http://www.truepotentialmedia.com/product/the-normal-christian-birth/>

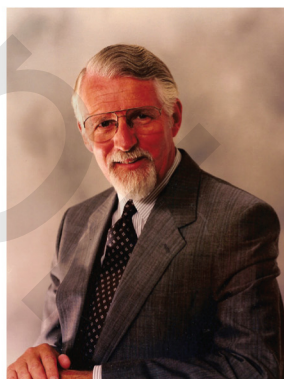


‘This is a handbook on spiritual obstetrics, written out of deep concern that so many Christians have been badly “delivered”. So often, later spiritual disease can be traced back to an inadequate initiation into the Kingdom. A better birth means greater growth in a healthy Christian life.’

Basing his study on the New Testament, David Pawson advocates a synthesis of the ‘liberal’ emphasis on repentance, the ‘evangelical’ on faith, the ‘sacramental’ on baptism and the ‘pentecostal’ on the Spirit. He then relates these ‘spiritual doors’ to the concepts of conversion and regeneration.

THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN BIRTH looks at crucial and controversial texts, challenging traditional interpretations. The final section on evangelistic counseling questions the adequacy of the typical ‘sinner’s prayer’ approach. Drawing from scripture and experience, David Pawson gives many practical tips on helping potential disciples to repent, believe, be baptized and receive the Spirit.

David Pawson occupies a key position among British Christian writers. His best known work, *Unlocking the Bible*, continues to be a worldwide best seller in print, audio and video formats. *Unlocking the Bible* and *The Normal Christian Birth* have been called Pawson’s legacy to the church. Pawson is known for accepting biblical text as the authoritative word of God while explaining its meaning and context in a practical and understandable language. Because he follows the teaching of Scripture where it clashes with church tradition, his books are often controversial.



Snap this QR Code with your smart phone reader for a personal message from David Pawson

The Normal Christian Birth

US \$15.99

ISBN 13: 978-0-9623059-2-8

51599>



9 780982 305928