

New Life in Christ: What Really Happens When You're Born Again and Why It Matters, by Steven J. Lawson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020. 216 pp. \$15.99.

With the heart of a pastor, the mind of a theologian, and the passion of an evangelist, Steve Lawson gives the reader a bird's eye view of the *new birth*, the greatest demonstration of the power of God (135). Lawson is founder and president of OnePassion Ministries and Executive Editor for *Expositor Magazine*. He is Dean of Doctor of Ministry studies and Professor of Preaching at The Master's Seminary, and host of the Institute for Expository Preaching. He is the author of over twenty-eight books and served as a pastor for thirty-four years.

The work consists of sixteen chapters, the first examining John 1:12–13 and the latter fifteen John 3:1–21. Lawson states his reasoning for this book, “Because of muddled teaching, few doctrines are less understood by believers—and even much less understood by unbelievers. Yet no truth is more important in order to understand what God does when someone enters His kingdom” (15). Lawson believes that to truly value God's redeeming power, it is essential for believers to grasp the new birth (24).

Lawson's approach is strictly Reformed. His *ordo salutis* is clear, with regeneration preceding conversion. He asserts “When the living word is planted like seed in the human soul, the Holy Spirit acts by the sovereign will of the Father and creates new life in the spiritually dead” (110). John 1:12 reveals man's responsibility to believe, while the next verse confirms that God is the initiator of the new birth (17). The divine appointment to the new birth is never random, never haphazard, never by mere chance or blind fate (53). God scripted it long ago and brought it to pass by the hand of providence (54).

While one may not agree with all points of Calvinism, one cannot argue with Lawson's cordiality and honor of the Scriptures. He upholds: (1) *Total depravity*—all are born estranged from God and are predisposed to rebel against him (70). The new birth is essential because of the extensive effects of original sin (sin darkens the *intellect*, sin defiles the *heart*, and sin deadens the *will*) (113). (2) *Unconditional election*—sovereign election and effectual calling are part of those lofty, complex, and mysterious “heavenly things” (John 3:12; 6:44) (173). (3) *Limited atonement*—for Lawson, Christ was “to die in the place of all who would put their trust in Him” (194). Some may be more comfortable with the thought that Christ's death was *sufficient* to save the entire world, but only *efficient* enough to those who come to him. (4) *Irresistible grace*—in regeneration, God intervenes and conquers the heart of unbelief (73). Lawson uses Jesus's teaching about the wind (John 3:8) to prove this. The wind: (a) cannot be directed by anyone, (b) is irresistible, (c) cannot be seen by the human eye, and (d) is incomprehensible (137–40). To use Jesus's illustration of the wind to prove irresistible grace seems to be stretching the text. (5) *Perseverance of the saints*—regeneration is permanent and perseveres. Believers are never born again, *again* (186–87).

Two notable chapters are the following. The first chapter is *Soul Cleansing* (chap. 8). The cleansing water of John 3:5 reminds us that God must cleanse the sinner's depraved soul before placing a new heart within—God will not allow a clean heart to live in a filthy soul (98). Lawson shows what God alone does in salvation, washing (1) away idolatry, (2) away all uncleanness, (3) away our sins, and (4) us in the Spirit (100–101). The other noteworthy chapter is *Divine Mandate* (chap. 10). The divine *must* (you *must* be born again) stresses that the new birth is absolutely necessary and non-negotiable because (1) a person living outside the kingdom of God is morally defiled, being inwardly polluted by sin; (2) the spiritually blind cannot see the kingdom of God; (3) persons outside the kingdom of God are stubborn and will not submit to the authority of God; and (4) any person outside the kingdom of God is a spiritual corpse and cannot believe in Christ (126–31).

There are several positives worth noting. First, this work is *theologically deep*. For instance, Lawson asserts regeneration is not good people becoming better or the sick becoming well; more precisely, it is dead people coming to life (94). Second, this work is *exegetically insightful*. He answers “Why did Nicodemus meet Jesus at night? For several reasons: (1) to conceal this private meeting from others who knew him; (2) openly meeting with Jesus would have tarnished the reputation of the entire body of the Pharisees; and (3) darkness characterizes humanity's spiritual ignorance of God as represented in the writings of John (56). Third, this book is *evangelistically challenging* to the lost. There are fifty-plus gospel statements and/or questions, prompting thoughts about where one is with the Lord: “There are two paths before you: one path is the way of self-righteousness, and it leads to eternal destruction. The other path is the new birth, and it leads to eternal life. You must decide which way you will travel” (175). Finally, this book is *evangelistically instructive* to the saved. We can find encouragement when we share the gospel because God is sovereign, and the Spirit can quickly soften even the most hardened and resistant heart (145–46).

It seems this book may have derived from a preaching or teaching series (each chapter has a sermon-like feel), but it goes well beyond a simple homiletical work. Lawson understands that the workings of God intersect far above our heads and are beyond our understanding (54). For a deeper look at regeneration, read Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* (Zondervan, 2009) or Matthew Barrett, *What Is Regeneration?* (P&R, 2013). I would recommend this book to the devoted layman or the beginning preacher. As for an academic, I would only recommend this on an undergraduate level. Lawson presents the marvels of being born again and reminds us that rather than justly destroying this sinful world in righteous anger, God chose instead to pour out his wrath on Christ, so that we might be born again (189).

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