
God Has No Grandchildren

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Abstract

Biological births create second and third generations. A spiritual birth creates a child of God regardless of that person's age or relationship to other biological generations. That's why God has no grandchildren; only children. The second birth may lack obvious, tangible markers. Those who grow up with religious parents might not be able to name a date or place for their own spiritual re-birth. New environments seem more conducive for new-birth experiences. We need additional markers. Complications, misunderstanding, and power plays may arise when the first, second and third generations flatten into one generation called "Children of God."

Children

The Bible claims that God has children, but does God have grandchildren? "Consider the incredible love that the Father has shown us in allowing us to be called 'children of God'—and that is not just what we are called, but what we are" 1 John 3:1 (Phillips). John doesn't speak in terms of a futuristic hope but a present reality: "Here and now we are God's children" 1 John 3:2 (Phillips). God's overwhelming love places us within his family as his children!

But what about our own children? If I am a child of God, then biologically my children would be God's grandchildren. Yet Scripture never mentions God having any grandchildren; only children. "All who did accept him and believe in him he gave the right to become children of God" John 1:12 (NCV). "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" Gal 3:26-27 (NIV).

While Christians might be agreeable to such theological statements, actually living as siblings becomes challenging when several biological generations collapse into one spiritual generation. If God has no grandchildren, then either a Christian's children are not automatically in the family of God or else a Christian's child becomes a brother or sister. A father's son is now

his brother. A mother's daughter suddenly is her sister. That can seem downright weird!

Becoming a "Child of God"

At what point does a person become a "child of God"? In Old Testament times, birth into a Jewish family made a person a child of Abraham, which included the covenant and its blessings (Isa 41:8; Ps 105:6; 1 Chr 16:16; Exod 3:6). Matthew traced the Messiah's lineage from Abraham (Matt 1:1-16). But John the Baptist questioned biological bloodlines. "Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones" Luke 3:8 (NLT). Jesus accused the Jewish leaders of acting more like children of the Devil than children of Abraham. The Jewish leaders questioned Christ's lineage and labeled him a Samaritan devil (John 8:31-59). Biological birth doesn't always determine family.

After Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again, Nicodemus focused on the biological realm by asking if Christ meant a grown man must enter his mother's womb in order to be "born again" (John 3:4). Our eagerness to emphasize baptism for salvation ignores the context and parallelism of Jesus' response. "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" John 3:5-6 (NASB).

“Born of water and the Spirit” (vs. 5) finds its parallel in “born of the flesh” and “born of the Spirit” (vs. 6). Born of water/flesh indicates biological birth when a woman’s water breaks, which signifies the beginning of the birth process—a child will now be born. Born of the Spirit/breath/wind isn’t as tangible, yet a necessity for entrance into God’s kingdom according to Jesus. Born again biologically misses the point. To enter God’s kingdom, an individual must be born physically (birth, water, flesh) and then be born again (new birth, Spirit, spiritually).

Physical birth has a somewhat predictable gestation and an obvious moment of birth, even though the event can vary tremendously—hours in a hospital or minutes in a car? Naturally or with medication? Birth canal or C-section? Physician-assisted or midwife or on your own? Could spiritual re-birth have at least as many variables rather than one predictable way?

Paul contrasted the same two words, flesh and spirit, in Romans 8. “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom 8:5-6 NIV). Born of the flesh means a sinful nature. Born of the Spirit makes us children of God, free of the slavery from the sinful nature by adoption into the family of God (Gal 4:6-7). As a result, we can now reference God the Father as “Daddy” and Jesus as “Brother” (Rom 8:13-17).

Becoming a child of God involves God’s creative act and action, beyond male and female union and procreation (Hos 1:10; 2:23; Eph 1:4-5; 13-14; 1 Cor 15:44-49; 2 Cor 5:17; 1 Pet 2:10). Everyone on the planet has experienced biological birth. Those who have been born spiritually are children of God no matter what their genealogy or age. The personal and sociological ramifications of this revelation from Scripture are truly earth-shaking!

Growing Up Christian

When does spiritual “new birth” take place for a child who grows up in a Christian home? When *can* it occur? Those who emphasize an age of accountability for baptism or church membership typically place this in the second decade of life—some as early as 10 or 11 years of age and others later in the teen years. Assessing spiritual realities can be tricky! With the many changes at the onset of puberty, some consider this the first time

a person can make a personal decision for Jesus Christ. Worried adults prefer an early commitment, hoping it will ground the person through potentially turbulent times. Those who commit to Christ before their identify forms or changes in adolescence need to be “re-treaded” with new applications of what it means to live as a child of God once one has forged a new identify (Case, 1996). Otherwise Christ will be anchored in one’s past childhood but not integrated into one’s present reality.

Young people can easily learn the accepted terminology and actions in order to be considered “spiritual.” Playing the game might shape one’s experience towards Christ or merely develop into an act (Dean, 2010). In some faith communities and with certain individuals, it seems that reciting the correct terminology or repeating a pre-approved prayer determines whether or not one actually enters the kingdom of God (Bell, 2011).

Only 12 percent of Seventh-day Adventist young people in the United States can identify a specific “Damascus road experience” of commitment to Christ (Case, 1996). Twice as many have maintained a commitment from their earliest memory, and three times as many experienced a developing commitment over time. Valuegenesis data shows very similar numbers (Gillespie & Donahue, 2004). The change might be imperceptible even though it’s real (Case, 2009 paraphrasing White, 2000). If conversion signifies a complete turn around, should that be encouraged if a young person already seems to be heading towards Christ?

Baptism signifies the second birth for some, but not all. Congregations, families and individuals celebrate baptisms for obvious reasons, but that doesn’t guarantee that the water baptism coincided with the baptism of the Spirit. John the Baptist said that he baptized people with water, but the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (see Luke 3:16). While the supernatural element can come only from God, being “born again” also involves some type of awareness and personal choice for the human being, and making that choice for God.

If a marker can’t be identified, how can a person know whether or not they have been born again—born of the Spirit? The previous president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church testified, “Yes, I was born an Adventist, but it wasn’t until I was fourteen years old that faith became something special to me, something I ‘owned’” (Paulsen, 2011, p. 19). I echo his experience. My second

birth also came at the age of 14 at an impromptu youth prayer and praise session in a park. Spiritual re-birth might be elusive rather than tangible or programmable.

For those steeped in cognitive religion, something affective might be considered a new birth, like John Wesley's Aldersgate experience of feeling his heart "strangely warmed" (Wesley, 1738). The new feelings that begin in adolescence can prime the pump for supernatural sensations. Retreats, pilgrimages, religious conventions, gatherings like *GODEncounters* (Martin, Bailey, and LaMountain, 2009), short-term mission trips—anything that takes a person out of their routine environment can be the catalyst for a new awakening. Inspiring speakers and music, testimonies, prayer experiences, and a core group setting the tone towards God contribute to a born-again experience that can be put on a calendar and referenced if needed. I've seen short-term mission experiences yield many such mileposts. Those already baptized ask for re-baptism, and I've had some ask to be re-re-baptized. It seems that when young people experience something new or greater than their past, they want to cement it as their new reality.

Doing this apart from parents and other regular authority figures seems to open the door for a new experience (Smith & Snell, 2009). Otherwise, it seems a bit like an arranged marriage by well-meaning but controlling figures who predetermine your life. In contrast, eloping seems so much more spontaneous and empowering and could be attributed as a divine intervention. At times it seems that being born again happens more easily with new people in a new environment. While such experiences attain significance more easily, they often fail to be sustained.

Some need this type of rebirth only once. Others must return again and again, like an addict seeking another fix. Frustrated from living in the valley after being on the mountaintop, maintaining a 24/7 experience of this intensity usually proves to be elusive or exhausting. Some give up. Others go in search, traveling long distances if need be, volunteering to set up candles in a prayer room for the next gathering or finding another short-term mission trip to feel God again. Young people want God, and want Him badly (Willard & Locy, 2011).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church endorses a paltry number of symbols to symbolize spiritual rebirth. The catch-all is baptism (and re-baptism). But with the majority getting baptized before their teen years,

what's left for youth and young adults who experience re-birth? Foot-washing can serve as a re-baptism. Our aversion to icons and other theologies prevent us from deep engagement with the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper/Communion). Weeks of Prayer at Adventist schools occasionally provide (re)commitments. Dedicating one's baby might do the same for young parents.

Seventh-day Adventist young people need more markers to symbolize, spur, and make tangible their spiritual re-birth. It's already happening (Kirstein, 2011), even while institutional administrators warn against prayer experiences and spiritual pilgrimages. In reality, we need to share and endorse more of them.

Yo Dad, I'm Your Brother!

Because God has no grandchildren, only children, a biological son who is spiritually born again becomes a brother! How will father and son relate to each other as brothers? How will other, older adults relate to "little brothers and sisters" who seem so young? And what will happen if the younger generations start to relate to the older generations as siblings?

The more the young brothers and sisters resemble or copy their older "siblings," the easier the adjustment. Indeed, this is the very thing most adults pray will happen. However, Jesus expected a difference—new wineskins for new wine (Ward, 2002). Searching for something new, some actually go retro or ancient (Yaconelli, 2006; Campolo & Darling, 2007). You can also be intentional in seeking Jesus here and now, miraculously and beyond your human limitations (Willard, 2009). But just like in Jesus' day, those entrenched in power positions won't simply hand things over, and they might not share them either. The typical message is to march in formation patiently until the day comes for your opportunity. This could continue until those in power die. Going through the motions fosters security, but it rarely has vitality or significance. No wonder so many young people disappear from church. Tired of marching in place, they come to view church as optional rather than essential (Rainer & Rainer, 2008).

Parents who gave physical birth and have nurtured their kids may have neglected their own spiritual connection. As a result, they feel inadequate to draw their children to greater spiritual awareness, commitment, or maturity. They pray that a new school year or new coach or Christian teacher or hip youth pastor might make the difference for

their kid. Some hope a church that served their children well in the early years will anchor a loyalty during the teen years and beyond. Few congregations challenge the status quo and actually target collegiates or young adults in appropriate ways for their spiritual development (Joiner, Bomar & Smith, 2010). Instead they wring their hands in helpless and unchallenged resignation.

What young people need for rebirth is for something to be real and experiential. As John described it, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life” 1 John 1:1 (NIV). Young people need to see God as huge and transcendent, as well as close and intimate. They need to sense God’s holiness and respond with repentance. They need to see death from sin in order to be resurrected to new life. They need to experience loss to fully accept all God has for them. No wonder thousands of young people pilgrimage to Taize each year, wanting to experience God. No wonder so many try ancient personal prayer practices rather than sitting in a pew to commune with God. They take Jer 29:13 (NIV) seriously, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

To a large extent, many Seventh-day Adventists have come to rely on the Adventist school system for both a spiritual commitment to Christ and on-going spiritual growth. This can be helpful for the minority of Seventh-day Adventist young people who attend, but it also fails to bring the generations together. It fosters the spiritual growth of the second or third generation apart from the first generation. Instead of maintaining separate worlds, the generations need to come together and make God their collective Father rather than abdicating spiritual growth to the school or clinging to authoritarian family structures that may have functioned earlier in life.

Fight or flight are not the only two options. Birth families find ways to work this out. Spiritual brothers and sisters can access supernatural power, love, grace, forgiveness, hope, and imagination. The passion of young people must be tapped into rather than snuffed out (Dean, 2004). They want to experience God and they want others to experience Him as well. Second and third generations had no voice in whether or not they were born the first time. They must have a voice in their re-birth. Instead of imagining them perpetually in diapers, welcome them as brothers and sisters regardless of age. Take the focus off of ourselves and put it on Christ.

“Dear friends, we are already God’s children, though what we will be hasn’t yet been seen. But we do know that when Christ returns, we will be like him, because we will see him as he truly is. This hope makes us keep ourselves holy, just as Christ is holy” 1 John 3:2-3 (CEV).

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