

“‘Born again’ is a common expression that few people understand. In a compelling way Stephen Smallman helps us understand that it is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. This book will prove profitable to all who read it.”

—JERRY BRIDGES, author, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

“Steve Smallman’s stories of how God brings people to new life in Christ are exhilarating—and his refreshing insights into the process of conversion are also immensely encouraging to anyone who wants to share his or her faith.”

—ELLEN VAUGHN, author of *Radical Gratitude*, *The Strand*,
and, with Chuck Colson, *Being the Body*, *The Body*,
Kingdoms in Conflict, *Gideon’s Torch*, *Against the Night*,
and other books

“I believe this book will be profoundly helpful for youth workers or anyone sharing the gospel. Becoming a Christian is a process, not just a one-time conversion event. Steve Smallman biblically maps out this spiritual birth process. Too often Christian workers are frustrated with ‘new converts’ because they do not seem to be growing fast enough. The truth is that many ‘new converts’ may profess with their mouth that they are believers in Jesus Christ, but their heart and mind are still trying to process the gospel. Smallman helps us understand the process of this miraculous and mysterious work of the Holy Spirit of bringing people into the Kingdom of God. Steve Smallman makes it very clear that in order for the gospel message to be believed ‘it requires a powerful moving of God to make the gospel message come alive to a listener.’ *Spiritual Birthline* is a biblically based work on understanding the process of becoming a Christian. I will highly recommend this book to Young Life staff and volunteers.”

—BRIAN FLETCHER, Area Director, Young Life,
Chesterfield, Virginia

“Any campus ministry passionate about students’ lives being transformed will want this book in the hands of their front-line campus staff. Steve Smallman has renewed my own biblical understanding of God’s prior work in the hearts of ‘not yet believers’ while inspiring me to embrace my role as a spiritual midwife in the lives of college students.”

—BRUCE ALWOOD, Southeast Regional Director,
InterVarsity Christian

“*Spiritual Birthline* transforms that most dangerous journey—one’s spiritual pilgrimage—into safe, known territory. By applying a pastor’s heart and a willing ear to hundreds of testimonies heard over decades of ministry, Stephen Smallman has distilled the work of God in the soul: ‘When God calls, we come.’ In place of our too-often clichéd born-again narratives, he guides us to a richer understanding that is wonderfully profound and reassuringly practical.”

—MINDY BELZ, editor, *World Magazine*

SPIRITUAL BIRTHLINE



UNDERSTANDING HOW WE
EXPERIENCE THE NEW BIRTH

STEPHEN E. SMALLMAN

CROSSWAY BOOKS

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Foreword

Charles W. Colson

One of the most crucial challenges facing the evangelical church today is that so many of those who fill our churches and profess to follow Christ have not truly experienced the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in new birth.

In my book *Being the Body*, I devote a chapter to explaining this phenomenon, which I refer to as “The Sin of Presumption.” The presumption is that leading someone to pray a prayer or come forward in a revival meeting transforms him into a “born-again Christian.” (Conversely, there are people whose lives give clear evidence of their love for Christ and devoted service to him but who haven’t undergone the classic conversion experience that is the stuff of testimonies. Because they lack this experience, others question the genuineness of their salvation. This, too, is presumption.)

Unless we understand true conversion in terms of the work of the Spirit, we will continue this sin of presumption, and nominal Christians will continue to fill our pews. As I wrote in *Being the Body*:

New life in the Spirit is conceived in the secret place of the soul, hidden from human eyes. This is the wonder and mystery of God’s regeneration of men and women. And never in this life will we quite know how God calls His people to Himself. What we do know is that *the wind of the Spirit blows where He wills*. We hear the sound, we see the evidence, but we cannot comprehend fully how this mysterious breath of God touches human hearts. God builds His church in the most unlikely ways and places, stirring the convictions of the heart, bringing men and women to the knowledge of sin, to repentance, to the Savior Himself—and knitting them together in His body.¹

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My friend Steve Smallman has written an important book that explains the link between the work of the Spirit and the conversion experience. The book contains substantial theological and biblical understanding, but Steve has written as a pastor with years of experience in working with people. His goal is to help Christians understand their own experience and in turn become spiritual midwives, helping others come to Christ in a way that is sensitive to the mysterious working of the Spirit.

Steve was serving as the pastor of McLean (Virginia) Presbyterian Church during the time of my own conversion. Because Patty and I were living in McLean and the offices of Prison Fellowship were first located there, a substantial number of our staff attended Steve's church. Thus it's not surprising that a great deal of the material for this book grew out of Steve's involvement with us in those early days of our ministry. He was one of our first seminar leaders, and he used his *Birthline* teaching both in prisons and during his ministry with prisoners we brought to Washington. I have appreciated Steve's teaching, preaching, and leadership and value his insights into my own experience.

The Spirit is still moving, like the blowing of the wind, in the hearts of men, women, and children all over the world. We humans enjoy the extraordinary privilege of playing a part in what the Spirit is doing. May the Lord help us to be involved in this great work, but never presume that we can accomplish what only the Spirit is capable of.

March 2005

Preface

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (Jesus, in John 3:8)

This is a book about people personally experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit in spiritual birth. I readily acknowledge that this is not an easy topic to write about accurately. Jesus described the new birth as mysterious as the coming and going of the wind. On the one hand there are biblical and theological studies about the work of the Holy Spirit; on the other hand are discussions of conversion and conversion experiences. But can the two themes be brought together in a way that is of practical value to multitudes of people who are on the “front lines” encountering the mysterious work of God every day in the lives of ordinary people—themselves and others? That is what I have attempted to do in this book. Whether or not I succeed I will leave up to you, the reader.

This is a very personal book. I include a number of stories, and some have asked why I didn’t include my own. This whole book is my story. It is a result of my quest to understand how God called me to himself as a teenager with no church or religious background. I experienced a dramatic conversion when I walked the “sawdust trail” at a revival meeting. I assumed, as do so many, that my experience was the norm. But then I began to raise children in a very different environment than I had known. I was also a pastor of the same congregation for thirty years and watched many whose struggle to believe was not the same as mine. For a season I was very involved with men and women in prisons and regularly heard and evaluated their stories.

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Just as important as those observations has been the extraordinary privilege of intensely studying Scripture to prepare for sermons and lessons over decades of ministry. Scripture is the “double-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12) that cuts into the very core of a person and lays bare the soul. It has done that to me, but I have also seen how others were changed by the Word of God.

The stories I include are personal. In almost every instance they are about people I know or have come from people I know. As I say in the book, every person who has been born again has a story to tell. So there is no end to the resource material available. But I wanted to pass along stories that I knew to be authentic. In most instances these are people I still know and who verified the information and gave permission to include their stories, including their names. In a few instances it has been appropriate to change the names or some of the circumstances, but it was still information that I could confirm as factual. I think I have asked people on every continent and from all sorts of backgrounds to tell me the stories of God’s work in their new birth. In addition I have received dozens of case studies from students. Even though just a fraction of these stories are told, I hope they represent a fair sampling of the gracious work of God in all kinds of people, in all kinds of circumstances.

In God’s kind providence, my wife, Sandy, and I were able to get away to Spain for two months in early 2004 to write the first draft of this book. Several of the anecdotes I will relate took place during this time and served as an encouragement to press forward with the work on the book.

Kathy's Story

Kathy was a young woman who lived the good life that the Washington, D.C. of the 1990s offered an upwardly mobile woman who was attractive and well-educated. She was a successful stock broker who dressed well, drove a good car, and kept herself in excellent shape for running marathons. Kathy was also living with a man who had promised to marry her when the time was right.

This beautiful life started to crumble when her fiancé announced that he was gay and decided to stop trying to live a straight life. It took a further hit when several months later he called Kathy to tell her that he had just been diagnosed with the HIV virus and urged her to get herself checked. At that early point AIDS was considered to be exclusively a disease of gay men and drug addicts; so Kathy ignored his warnings. However, after several more months she began to notice that she was finding it difficult to get into shape for her next marathon, and she was having a harder and harder time concentrating at work. This went on until she could no longer put off a visit to the doctor. It was then that she found out that not only did she have the HIV virus, but it had grown into full-blown AIDS. She walked out of the doctor's office having heard her death sentence.

One of the first things Kathy determined she needed to do was to talk to her boss. He was a man she respected; so she was comfortable telling him her exact situation. On hearing her story Carl asked if she would be offended if he set aside business for a moment and talked to her personally. When she expressed her willingness to do this, Carl

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asked how this was affecting her spiritually. Kathy spoke of a Roman Catholic upbringing from which she had turned away as an adult. She then listened as Carl spoke briefly of his own spiritual journey and the church he and his wife had recently found. He invited Kathy to attend with him and his wife.

A few weeks later Kathy accepted Carl's invitation and met him and his family at the church, where she insisted on sitting in the back row. But she came back the next week and the next, and even accepted an invitation to attend a Sunday evening gathering of singles. She decided to be frank with them about her situation just as she had been with Carl, and to her surprise and delight they accepted and loved her. Kathy became a regular both Sunday morning and evening, even though she still didn't think of herself as religious.

I became involved in Kathy's story in September 1991. I was returning from a nine-month sabbatical and decided to resume my preaching ministry with a series of messages entitled "Meet Your New Pastor." This seemed to fit because I was personally renewed by my time away (my first significant break after more than twenty years of pastoring the church), and I also knew that a number of people had started attending since I left. For the first message I told the story of my coming to faith as a teenager with no church background at all. At the end of the message I spoke of coming to Christ in very much the same way that a baby is born. A seed of life is planted by God, but it has to grow, very much like a pregnancy. Finally that new life "goes public," and just like a newborn baby, there is a cry as we confess Christ. I described how I had done that in my conversion experience. I then explained that while not everyone has the same experience, when the time is right to give ourselves to Christ we know it. I had no idea at the time that Kathy was sitting in her familiar seat in the back row of the church that morning, knowing in her heart that this was her time. That evening she told her singles fellowship that their prayers were answered, and she was now trusting in Christ as her Lord and Savior.

Within a week as I was settling back into the routine of serving the church, I had a call from Kathy asking for an appointment, and I began

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to hear her story. Kathy and I had many conversations over the next two years. She grew spiritually and gave clear evidence by her life and witness that she was “born again.” I still treasure a picture of her taken the day she joined the church, joyfully smiling, with her arms around Carl and me, who she called her “favorite men in the world.” Following the service she gave a big party as an incentive to get all of her old friends (including her former lover) to come to church. The disease took its toll, and eventually her body wasted away. In her final days she was lovingly cared for by members of her Sunday evening fellowship group. I served her Communion during the week, and that weekend, while I was away leading a seminar explaining spiritual birth, Kathy peacefully went home to heaven. It was my privilege to conduct Kathy’s funeral and to tell her story to a large gathering that filled our church.

The simple analogy of comparing spiritual birth to physical birth is one I have been using in preaching, teaching, and personal conversation for over twenty years. It originally came together after a sermon I preached from John 3 (Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus), in which I tried to think through with the congregation what it means to actually *experience* the new birth Jesus talked about. In the congregation that morning were two members of the new ministry Prison Fellowship, which grew out of Charles Colson’s highly publicized conversion (more about that later in the book). After the service they approached me and asked if I would give that same message to a group of inmates who would be coming to town. I still remember how they expressed their request. “There is no group of people who are more evangelized than those in prison. They are exhorted over and over to ‘get saved’ or ‘give their hearts to Jesus.’ But no one explains God’s part in their getting saved. You just did, and we would like you to tell that to the inmates.”

When I prepared to talk to the Prison Fellowship group, I illustrated my teaching by drawing a simple diagram that drew a parallel between physical and spiritual birth, which I believe was Jesus’ intention in John 3. Little did I know it then, but that diagram (what I came to call *the birthline*) marked a turning point in the way I have done min-

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istry ever since. It is not the diagram itself as much as the ideas it suggests that have had such an impact on my ministry.

My intention in writing this book is still the one I started with many years ago—to help understand in practical terms how people actually experience the new birth. We can study it biblically and theologically, but what does it look like in the lives of real people? This is the question that has faced me as a pastor and that those of you who are serving in prison ministries, youth work, as Bible study leaders, missionaries, and parents are dealing with every day. I have presented these ideas in many settings and have received insights and suggestions from people of all different backgrounds. What I am going to present in this book is the result of contributions from many, many people.

I believe the place to start in helping others is to try and understand as best we can just how the Spirit worked in *our* hearts. That is where I will begin. We will do some study of key Scripture passages, so that our experience is put into a biblical setting, and then I will ask you to reflect on how this has worked in your own experience.

For some of you, reading this may be your opportunity to consider whether or not *you* have been born again. Perhaps you have heard that phrase but are not quite sure what it means. Today people often make a distinction between Christians and “born again” Christians. What is the difference? Or is there a difference? I hope what I write will be helpful to you personally, even if you feel you are very much a beginner in the Christian walk.

The second part of the book will be an application to ministry. By *ministry* I don’t necessarily mean the formal or ordained ministry. I mean those of you who are involved with people in a setting where you are discussing matters involving their spiritual standing before God. That applies to everyone who has experienced the new birth. God used others to bring you to faith, and you need to be available to be used in passing the faith along to yet others. In one chapter I want to speak particularly to parents and those involved with ministry to children from Christian homes about of the spiritual birth of our children. The phrase I use to describe our involvement with the new birth of others is *spiri-*

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tual midwives. It is God who causes the birth, but we can be there to help the process along.

This book will be full of personal stories like the one I just told about Kathy. We all love to hear stories, and it could be tempting to skip the substance of the book and just read the stories. But every story I will relate is included to serve as a case study of the basic principles of the biblical teaching about the new birth. In particular I want to show how the Holy Spirit works *before* people actually exercise faith in Jesus, in what we usually call conversion. In the hundreds of settings where I have presented this idea it has seldom failed to be immediately recognized as true to people's personal experience. But what that actually looks like is as varied as the people themselves. As we will see, factors such as family, personal circumstances, and temperaments are all part of how the Spirit works. A variety of stories will make this truth clear, but they will also remind us that we should not expect particular experiences to be duplicated. I will offer an analysis of many of the stories, and I hope this will encourage you to begin thinking in the same way about your own story and those of people you are encountering in ministry or everyday life.

In the case of Kathy, for example, consider all the elements that led to her coming to faith in Christ. She was shocked into an awareness of her need for help (but not necessarily her need for a Savior), but she was able to express that to a Christian supervisor who was willing to share his faith. Kathy also experienced the reality of Christ's love and acceptance in a welcoming community even as she began to hear about it in preaching and teaching. And then, at just the right time, my story and the idea of the baby calling out gave her the nudge she needed to surrender her life to Christ and confess him to others. We can observe all of these pieces, but at the root of it all we also see the gracious working of God directing the whole process. Not many stories will be as dramatic as Kathy's, and not everyone has such a specific point of conversion as she did. But what will be common to all authentic experiences of the new birth is the inward work of the Holy Spirit bringing us to a simple but genuine faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

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In the end, we have to step back in amazement at the gracious work of God who finds us wandering and lost and brings us to himself. Reflect on the first three verses of John Newton's famous hymn, which is a testimony in song of his experience of the new birth. Notice in particular the words of the second verse, which is a recollection of God's grace *before* his conversion ("’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved"). But it is only *after* conversion ("the hour I first believed") that he began to appreciate that God had been seeking him before he was seeking God.

*Amazing grace!—how sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

*’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.*

*Thro’ many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

Notes

Foreword

1. Charles Colson and Ellen Vaughn, *Being The Body* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2003), 58.

Chapter 2

1. I explain this in a booklet, *What Is True Conversion?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing), 2005. I make the point that experientially we encounter God in the reverse order that we usually discuss him. Our first encounter with God is the Holy Spirit (even though we don't know it at the time), who leads us to the Son; and through the Son we come to know God as Father.

Chapter 3

1. Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 169-170.

Chapter 4

1. Lauren F. Winner, *Girl Meets God* (New York: Random House, 2003), 55.
2. *Ibid.*, 7-8.
3. *Ibid.*, 60.
4. *Ibid.*, 57.

Chapter 6

1. Charles W. Colson, *Born Again* (Old Tappan, NJ: Chosen Books, 1976), 110.
2. *Ibid.*, 115.
3. *Ibid.*, 116-117.
4. *Ibid.*, 129-130.
5. *Ibid.*, 129.
6. Charles Colson and Ellen Vaughn, *Being the Body* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2003), 60.
7. *Ibid.*, 62.

Chapter 7

1. Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (first published in 1844, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967).