

"BEGOTTEN BY THE GOSPEL"

What Does This Mean? A Study on 1 Corinthians 4:15 by Elder Zack M. Guess (Memphis, TN)

Many well-meaning and honest Christians have the wrong notion of the purpose of the gospel. Many of them think that the gospel is the means that God uses to bring about the new birth in people. But an examination of the Scriptures shows that this is not true. The new birth is exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:8). **The purpose of the gospel is to bring life and immortality to light (2 Tim 1:10). This means that the gospel simply manifests or reveals spiritual life that had previously been placed in the heart by the Holy Spirit.**

Now the gospel is a very wonderful and a very powerful gift of God. The Scriptures attribute great power to the gospel. For this reason, many people have mis-interpreted many of the passages of Scripture which deal with the function of the gospel. One of these commonly mis-interpreted Scriptures is 1 Corinthians 4:15, which reads, "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for, in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." The Apostle Paul is saying here that in some sense he is the father of these Corinthians and they were his children. The instrument by which they were born was the gospel. Many people interpret this to mean that Paul was the father of the Corinthians in the sense that he had caused them to be born again when he

preached the gospel to them. But that this is exactly not what the text is teaching can be shown by the following considerations.

In the first place, it would have been blasphemy for the Corinthians to refer to Paul as a father in the sense that He was the means of bringing eternal life to them. No man can receive this honor because God alone is to receive the credit and glory for the salvation of His people. Christ instructed us, "And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven" (Matt 23:9). This is one of the gross errors of the Roman Catholic Church by having the priests addressed as "father." So it is certain that Paul was not the father of the Corinthians in the sense that he, by preaching the gospel to them, had had a part in their spiritual birth.

In the second place, this interpretation of the passage betrays an ignorance of how "father," "children," and "begotten" were commonly used in the day in which Paul was writing. Let us study together for a moment and see how these terms were then used. Such study will throw great light on this passage.

The Meaning of Begotten

First, let us see how this word "begotten" was commonly used at the time of the writing of the New Testament. J. H. Thayer, in his Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament Words, p. 113 says, "In a Jewish sense, of one who brings others over to his way of life." Commenting on the same word in the same passage, John Gill, in his Commentary On The New Testament quotes the Jerusalem Talmud as follows: "If one teaches the son of his neighbor the Law, the Scripture reckons this the same as if he had begotten him."

Arndt and Gingrich, in their Greek-English Lexicon, p. 154 say of the same word, "Figuratively of the influence exerted by one person on

another...of a teacher on pupils." H. Cremer, in his Biblical-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek, p. 146, says of this word, "Peculiar is the use made by Paul in some passages of the word to denote an influence exerted on some one, moulding his life, as in Galatians 4:24; 1 Corinthians 4:15; Philemon 10." If we put all this together and sum it up, it becomes immediately apparent that Paul was not even hinting to these Corinthians that he had preached the gospel to them and that they had thereby been born again.

Paul is rather saying this, "By my use of the gospel I have brought you over to my way of life: I have taught you the Scriptures; I have exerted an influence on you as a teacher on his pupils; I have helped to mold your life." This, and only this, is what Paul had done to those Corinthians by preaching the gospel to them. And he had this influence only on those who had previously been born again by the direct and immediate operation of the Holy Spirit and who were thus receptive to his gospel. This can easily be seen by a study of Acts 18:1-17 which records the founding of the church at Corinth. That the word begotten" bears this meaning will not be disputed by an honest and open-minded student.

A look at the Word "Father" Now let us briefly examine a very common way in which the word "father" was used in New Testament times. Thayer says, p. 495, "Metaphorically...one who stands in a father's place, and looks after another in a pastoral way: 1 Corinthians 4:15." W. E. Vine in his Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, Vol. II, p. 82 says-"...of one who, as a preacher of the Gospel and a teacher, stands in a father's place, caring for his spiritual children, 1 Corinthians 4:15." So, here again, Paul is not saying that he was an instrument in giving spiritual life, but his responsibility was to help the life that had already been implanted by the Holy Spirit to develop. There is not even a hint of the new birth here.

What About "Sons"?

To see the New Testament concept of the beautiful relationship that should exist between a true minister of the gospel and those placed under his care we quote from Thayer's comments on the word "sons" or children used in 1 Corinthians 4;14, which passage has a direct bearing on the verse we are studying: "Metaphorically, the name is transferred to that intimate and reciprocal relationship formed between men by the bonds of love, friendship, trust, just as between parents and children...just as in Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, Persian, so in the New Testament, pupils or disciples are called children of their teachers, because the latter by their instruction nourish the minds of their pupils and mold their characters" P. 617.

In line with this, Kittel, in his Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words, Vol. I, pp. 665-667, in an article entitled "Begetting as Image of the relationship of Master and Disciple" says, "The use of the terms father and son with reference to the master and disciple may be seen already in 2 Kings 2:12. At the time of Jesus it was customary for the rabbi to call his pupil and the ordinary member of the community 'my son.'"

Summation

To sum it all up, what is Paul saying in this passage? He is saying that there were plenty of self-appointed preachers around who didn't really have a deep concern for the flock of God (the ten thousand instructors in Christ). But, says Paul, there are only a few men who are truly called of God and who are vitally concerned with the spiritual welfare of God's children (the "not many fathers"). Paul is saying further that he is a father to these Corinthians. By this he means that he preached the gospel to them and turned them from error to truth.

He thus became their spiritual teacher and they became learners or disciples. By his teaching he had great influence on them and helped to mold their lives. In this sense he was their father and they were his children. But only in this sense. If they had not previously been born again his teaching would have had no effect on them in a positive way.

Paul takes no credit for giving them spiritual life. He gives God all the credit for that. Would that men today would do the same!

Note:

We are begotten from above, "born again or born from above" (John 3). Then, he that is "born from above" has a Father above, but he that is born of man or means only has an earthly birth with an earthly "father!" Say that the regeneration of a sinner, the new heart given (Ezek 26:26) to lost man, is the work of God exclusively and you have the truth-but put fleshly effort or the preacher or some "gospel means" or some Bible study program and "church work" into the work, and you have the heresy of humanism, man's self-salvation. **God deliver us from all this and grant the new heart and the new spirit that can worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), for His name's sake. Amen.**