

The New Birth in Christ: A Neoevangelical Approach

Nowe narodziny w Chrystusie. Ujęcie neoewangelikalne

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Abstract: The call to conversion has its roots in the Gospel. On this basis, evangelical preachers call on their listeners to turn from sin, repent of it, and believe in Jesus Christ. Preaching without this message is meaningless. It deprives the listener of the opportunity to awaken to Christian life and grow in faith. Conversionism is the belief that every person's life needs to change, to be given a new direction. One of the essential elements of conversionism is the new birth in Christ.

Keywords: Billy Graham; ecumenism; the new birth; awakening; regeneration; repentance; the neoevangelical theology; regret

Abstrakt: Wezwanie do nawrócenia ma swoje korzenie w Ewangelii. Na tej podstawie kaznodzieje ewangelikalni wzywają swoich słuchaczy, aby ci odwrócili się od grzechów, żalowali za nie oraz uwierzyli w Jezusa Chrystusa. Przepowiadanie pozbawione tego orędzia nie ma sensu. Odbiera słuchaczowi możliwość przebudzenia do chrześcijańskiego życia oraz wrastania w wiarę. Konwertyzm to przekonanie, że życie każdego człowieka potrzebuje zmiany, nadania mu nowego kierunku. Jednym z istotnych elementów konwertyzmu są nowe narodziny w Chrystusie.

Słowa kluczowe: Billy Graham; ekumenizm; nowe narodziny; przebudzenie; regeneracja; skrucha; teologia neoewangelikalna; żal

For neoevangelical theology, the new birth (regeneration) is the recreation of fallen human nature by the gracious, sovereign action of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 3:5–8) (cf. Packer 1000). It is the creation of a new heart in man, which requires new goals, new aspirations, new power for service (cf. Ez 36:26; cf. Jer 31:33; Ps 51:10–12). Neoevangelicals identify the new birth with the first intervention of God's grace in human life. The old man was crucified and buried in the decision of faith, but he reappears as a dead man coming back to life (cf. Rom 6:3–11; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:9–11). The New Testament pic-

tures it as a beginning and at the same time a continuation (cf. 1 Pet 1:3,23). The new birth is both an event and an experience. It is not accompanied by a rational guarantor, but by signs of faith. It is assisted by sincere sorrow for sins, a sense of God's love, and the security of salvation, which enables one to praise God and pray to Him (cf. Rom 5:5; 8:14). The new birth is also evidenced by a new strength over temptations and a new love for one's neighbors (cf. 1 Jn 3:9–14; 4:7; 5:4). There are also the fruits of the Spirit, which confirm His presence (cf. Gal 5:22–23; 1 Jn 3:7) (Bloesch 11). According to Donald G. Bloesch, they are not only a spiritual reality, but a moral action that gives rise to deeds in the service of love (Bloesch 11).

In this article, attention will be paid to the issue of the new birth in the perspective of neoevangelical theology. The issues of regeneration, awakening, and repentance (sorrow) will be present. An important support in the path of exploration will be the preaching of the American preacher Billy Graham, a leading representative of the new evangelical movement. All elements will be provided with an assessment from the perspective of Catholic homiletics.

Regeneration

(1) The new birth takes place only once. The New Testament describes it as something begun, but also something continued. However, the renovation of human nature must continue (1 Pet 1:3; 1:23) (cf. Bloesch 15). That is why Bloesch claims that becoming a Christian is not a sudden transformation, but a long-term decision (cf. Bloesch 17). Regeneration ends with sanctification. This is the moment when a person takes up the cross and follows Christ. However, it must be remembered that renewal culminates in glorification. Then a person is completely transformed into the image of Jesus Christ (cf. Bloesch 18).

Graham, citing the Bible, states that new life is the life of Christ himself (cf. Graham, "True..." 2). It is much more than "making a decision", "a fresh start" or "a new page of life". It is the work of the Holy Spirit forged in Christianity by the power of God (cf. Graham, "Confrontation" 12). Graham reminds that new birth is an act in which a person becomes a participant in the divine nature. When a person, through faith, accepts Christ as Savior, God places in him a completely new nature (cf. Graham, "True..." 2). It is spiritual, distinct from the old. Therefore, as the famous evangelist points out, the new birth is an infusion of the Divine life, an implantation of the Divine nature in the human soul. Thanks to them, a person becomes a child of God.

He receives His breath. And Christ, through the Holy Spirit, takes a place in his heart (cf. Graham, “A Fresh...” 2–3; see Barth 216–217).

(2) Although the term “born again” has a significant meaning for evangelicals, it does not seem to play an essential role in Catholic theology (cf. Canales 99). For evangelicals, it is an integral and essential stage in the process of Christian conversion and a significant attribute of a personal encounter with God (cf. Canales 99). It is a passage from death to life, which generates within the person. For evangelicals, new birth is necessary for eternal salvation. No one is exempt from the call to rebirth. Evangelical theology of rebirth does not always associate baptism with the rite of immersion in water. More important seems to be the call to accept true faith in Jesus Christ, which leads to obedience. Regeneration is an effect of the kerygma of the Gospel, which is firmly rooted in a personal response to Jesus. Hence, salvation is impossible outside a divinely shaped rebirth (cf. Canales 107).

In the Catholic view, regeneration is the effect of the celebration of the sacrament of baptism. It is part of God’s grace (see Simon 12). The Holy Spirit renews the person through the process of regeneration. According to the Catholic understanding, then, through baptism the neophyte receives the gift of sanctifying grace, is filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:13; see Gal 3:27), and is accepted into the family of God (cf. Rom 8:15–17) (cf. Canales 106–107). Pastorally, for Catholics, “new birth” is a post-baptismal, sacramental experience. The Catholic who experiences “new birth” gains spiritual freshness, excitement, and the intense stirrings of the Holy Spirit (cf. Schneider 168–169). Therefore, his life gains a new direction on the path to God (Prado Flores, *Idźcie i...* 76). Through the “new birth,” the believer opens himself to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, corrects his relationships with his brothers in the community, and becomes convinced of the need for evangelization to lead to the transformation of the social infrastructure that is the source of oppression and creates discord in the world (cf. Canales 116). Thus, in the Catholic understanding, the term “new birth” serves primarily as a pastoral tool that helps people experience God (see Siemieniowski). The new birth comes from a new (conscious faith) openness to God.

Awakening

(1) The American preacher describes how the new birth takes place. According to him, at first a person hears the Word of God. The Word penetrates human hearts and changes them. Then the Holy Spirit enters and transforms the will, feelings, life goals and disposition in a person. At the same time, he

gives a new destiny (cf. Graham, “Forgiveness...” 2). For them to come into being, the Creator’s plans must be fulfilled. God expects a person to first confess his spiritual poverty, that is, repent of sins; then accept Christ as Savior through faith, and finally follow Him in obedience (cf. Graham, “Words...” 2; see Fulton 158).

Through the new birth, man gains contentment, peace and happiness (Graham, “Thankful...” 11). But not only that. According to Graham, they influence the vision and perception of the world, and the will of man also changes (cf. Graham, “A Fresh...” 3). Christ corrects the past and repairs the relationship with God. He forgives the past, provides companionship and gives absolute certainty for the future (cf. Graham, “A Fresh...” 3). In the heart, a revolution takes place. Therefore, a newly born man changes his attitude towards sin. Like God, he hates it, detests it and is disgusted by it (cf. Graham, “A Fresh...” 3). The famous evangelist emphasizes that a man who is born again is justified in the eyes of God. God perceives him in a new way, as if he had never sinned (cf. Graham, “A Fresh...” 3). Thanks to this, man is eternally bound to God. Once born again, he will live as long as God lives, because he shares in His life (cf. Graham, “Confrontation” 12). He is included in the communion that Adam and Eve experienced with God in the Garden of Eden (cf. Graham, “A Fresh...” 2–3).

Referring to the tradition of revival, the famous evangelist calls for a spiritual awakening. In his opinion, more than ever before in history, there is a danger of temptation to carry out the works of the Kingdom of God in one’s own strength. The “revival” that the Church longs for cannot be organized and promoted by human reason. It cannot be mechanically called into existence (cf. Graham, “Words...” 2; see Orr 705–709). For it to “exist” in the personal lives of followers of Christ, according to Graham, three steps must be taken. First, to admit spiritual poverty. Second, to confess sins and fulfill penance. Third, to renew the commitment to seek God and to do His will (cf. Graham, “You Can Bring...” 2). One must also pray and make God a real reality (cf. Graham, “Needed...” 2). It is worth making the effort, because “revival” renews Christian faithfulness. It generates loyalty in action, not just words. It also enables Christians to stand for Christ, His Word and the Gospel, regardless of the cost. Finally, it strengthens moral convictions on the path (cf. Graham, “What Kept...” 2).

Graham emphasizes that the new birth is not hereditary (see Nichols 245). He criticizes all those who think that being raised in a Christian home confers the status of a disciple of Christ. This is not the case. Everyone has their own individual path to God (Graham, “Forgiveness...” 2). For this reason, Christ calls everyone to rise from their “deadness” and respond to His offer of life.

He wants to involve everyone so that their existence may gain the power of resurrection given by the Holy Spirit (cf. Graham, “You Can Have Resurrection...” 2). The American preacher also separates religiosity from salvation. In his opinion, religion does not save. It is rather an attempt by man to contact God (cf. Graham, “Who Is...” 3). Here he refers to the words of Jesus: “You justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is of human esteem is an abomination in the sight of God” (Lk 16:15). Then he draws the conclusion: “You can be baptized, you can be confirmed, but you may not be certain that Christ lives in your heart and is the Lord of your life” (Graham, “Where Will You...” 3). Ignoring the message of the Gospel causes a person’s heart to become increasingly hardened (cf. Graham, “Searching...” 5).

(2) The Catholic theology does not use the term “revival”. Revival is a supernatural action of God in a person’s life that leads to conversion (see Piggin 11; Armstrong 11). According to Graham, revival frees a person from the belief that they can perform the works of the kingdom of God on their own. He emphasizes the role of revival in the renewal of Christian faithfulness, and through this life in Christ and His Word, and strengthening on the path of moral convictions. Andrzej Siemieniewski notes that the passive role of man in the work of spiritual revival should be linked to mysticism. Therefore, he proposes to call the piety of the revival movement “popular mysticism of conversion” (Siemieniewski). Therefore, this concept of revival also seems appropriate for Catholic homiletics. Especially through the homily, which, with the correctly extracted mystery of Christ, affects the faithful with all its saving power (cf. Dyk, *Homilia...* 10–11). Then a specific awakening can occur, especially on an individual level (see Dolan 39–57).

The issues of the new birth and revival, which are important for neoevangelical theology, do not find an equivalent in Catholic theology. However, by analogy, references can be found in Catholic thought. It turns out that drawing from neoevangelical content is not only possible but allows for the discovery of new inspirations in Catholic preaching.

Repentance (regret)

It is necessary for every person to see the need for change. To convert (Bloesch 7). The only person who is not subject to change is God (Graham, “God...” 3). Although people were created for God, to walk in perfect harmony with Him, they turned away from Him. They chose their own way. In their pride they think that their solutions are better than those proposed by

God. Consequently, they need a new heart. This is what God offers in Jesus Christ (cf. Graham 1987, 2). When the heart is changed by Christ, man can help change the world (cf. Graham 1987, 3). Although God gives freedom of choice, he nevertheless arouses a longing for himself and a desire for change. Only one thing is needed – a response. Then God changes man. There is, however, a certain consequence. “When you make this choice for Christ, you will pay the price,” says Graham. The cost is the renunciation of sin. In addition, the whole of life must be marked by change. One must repent, because repentance means changing one’s way of life (cf. Graham, “You Have...” 2).

The American preacher, citing the Bible, reminds us that the sinner’s sorrow for the sins he has committed is the source of joy in heaven and his personal satisfaction: “Jesus can become the Source of your joy. When you come to know Christ, the Holy Spirit produces joy in your heart; a joy that the world knows nothing about” (Graham, “The Man...” 2). On this basis, he indicates the uniqueness of Jesus’ message. It leads to true happiness, which is within the reach of every person (cf. Graham, “Are You...” 2). It is enough to listen to Christ, who calls by name. In return, he offers a guarantee of salvation, that is, absolute security. At the same time, he connects the guarantee of salvation with the fact of resurrection.

That is why Graham addresses his listeners: “Are you destroying your heart by saying ‘no’ to Jesus Christ? Or are you going to say ‘yes’ to him today? ‘Today is the day of salvation, today is the expected time’ (cf. 2 Cor 6:2). Now is your moment. Right now. Come now” (Graham, “We Want...” 2). The famous evangelist advises against fear of risk: “Do not say, ‘I will try’. You have an eternal soul, and you are responsible for it. If you have not yet accepted Christ, do not delay. Today is the day of salvation” (Graham, “Where Are...” 12). The decision to accept Jesus into your life is not easy. The actualization of this decision is not. It is enough to say, ‘I am yours, Lord’ or ‘Lord, I am ready to pay the price’”. Then Christ will become the ‘helmsman’ of human life. From that moment on, only He will plan and direct man’s path (Graham, “More Than...” 12). To actualize one’s choice, one must first recognize what God does for man. Then perceive His love, which is especially revealed in the sign of the cross. Then repent of sins. Finally, accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and follow Him regardless of the cost (Graham, “What Is...” 2).

(2) The Catholic theology can successfully apply the reality of being “born again” as a call to repentance and discipleship (cf. Canales 101; see Prado Flores, *Jak ewangelizować...* 26–27). Repentance is a positive response to Jesus’ call: “you must be born again”. In Greek, repentance is expressed by the word *metanoia*, which in the classical sense means a change

of mind or a change of way of thinking. For Canales, *metanoia* also refers to a complete turning away from sin and adherence to God. *Metanoia* is a transformation of the whole person (cf. Canales 101–102; see Szymik 28). The main goal of *metanoia* is conversion, that is, a fundamental process that takes place in human life before, during, and after seeking God as a response to the gifts of God's grace (cf. John Paul II 93; see Frąszczak 93). In the biblical understanding, conversion is a continuous progress in the spiritual development of a person (cf. Frąszczak 92; see Griffin). It is not a one-time process, accomplished once and for all. It lasts throughout life and consists in a constant return to God (Bejda 9). It consists in permanent Christian formation, which cannot be separated from sacramental life. Conversion relates to faith (cf. Acts 20:21) (cf. Dyk, "Przepowiadanie..." 48). It is not only a pang of conscience, but a change of mind that allows for the evaluation of one's own life in the light of the Gospel (cf. Eph 4:22–24) (cf. Lonergan 237–244). According to the Second Vatican Council, the sinner, inspired by God's grace, enters the path of conversion, putting on the new man, whose model is Christ. This process often brings with it a sense of loneliness, spiritual division, but also an authentic joy given to him by God (cf. DiM 13). Therefore, we can say that a converted person is one in whom Christ is born and lives (cf. Gal 4:19) (see Braxton 112–113).

Therefore, as Alessandro D. Canales claims, Christian conversion is the Christological reality of "the new birth". The Catholic understanding of conversion is a life journey, a relationship and companionship with God who expects a daily response and a desire to change one's life, a universal call to holiness and a call to be a disciple of Christ (cf. Canales 104). The first phase of conversion, as Stanisław Dyk states, is the first conversion associated with the words of Jesus: "Repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). It is a conversion from unbelief to faith in God, to recognizing God and trusting Him. The second is of a Christian nature. It consists in faith and absolute trust in God, who revealed himself in Jesus Christ (cf. Dyk, *Nowa...* 109–111). The kerygma leads to radical conversion (Argüello 120). This conversion here has not so much a moral, ascetic or penitential dimension, but rather a religious and Christian one. It is a conversion to faith (Mk 1:15). "Jesus does not bind but sets man free and allows him to respond freely to his love" (Fausti 54). Hence, in Catholic preaching it is important to call the listeners to return to God and to reject that which separates them from him, that is, sin.

The longing for the new life in Christ is rooted in the biblical faith of various trends. This is also an important part of the neoevangelical theology. However, it is difficult to point out the original approach of new evangelicalism. It fits into the general thought. It repeats the solutions developed.

However, it should be noted that neo-evangelicalism has restored the longing for the revival of faith that had been forgotten (especially in the context of supernatural “revival”), and with it has resurrected theological aspects. In neo-evangelical theology, the tension of waiting for the miraculous action of God (“revival”) plays an important role. This leads to the need for conversion (repentance) and is associated with the guarantee of salvation. In this way, there appears a motivation to live by faith and a need to bear witness. This in turn leads to maturity in Christian life.

Wykaz skrótów

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