

What Does It Mean To Be Born Again?

Bible Answers About Salvation

This is essentially the same question that Nicodemus asked of Jesus after Jesus had told him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3 NAS). Nicodemus replied: "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" (vs. 4). Jesus then explained, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (vs. 5).

Jesus explained that to enter the kingdom of God one must be "born again." Notice very carefully what was said in this conversation: (1) one must be born anew before he can enter the kingdom; (2) this new birth is not physical, but spiritual (because one cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born; and (3) this spiritual birth involves two elements "water and the Spirit." What is the significance of "water" and "the Spirit" in this connection?

Although some have vainly tried to argue otherwise, the "water" involved in the new birth spoken of by Jesus to Nicodemus refers to baptism. Some have contended that the word "water" was used in a figurative sense in this text, but why should anyone assume that? There is nothing in the text to cause one to think that it is figurative. Besides, what would the word "water" refer to if it were figurative? It is much more reasonable to take the word at its face value. And if one does that, to what could it possibly refer other than baptism? Baptism is the only act or duty related to the Christian religion which in any way involves water.

The "Spirit" involved in the new birth is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, the third person in the Godhead. But what does the Holy Spirit do in the process of salvation and entrance into the church (kingdom)? Does He call one miraculously and give him a mysterious sign of salvation and acceptance into the kingdom? Not at all. The New Testament makes it very clear that the power of the Holy Spirit in conversion is exercised in only one way. He acts only through the Word of God to convict and convert sinners (John 16:8). Notice three passages of scripture that confirm the fact that the Holy Spirit begets Christians through the Word of God: "For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, {that is,} through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:23 NAS). "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created" (James 1:18 NIV). "For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15 NKJ).

Notice how perfectly logical this explanation is. Every birth involves a begetting and a coming forth, and so it is with the new birth which is necessary for entrance into the family of God (church, kingdom). The Holy Spirit, by means of the Word of God, begets. Then, after a time, the actual coming forth takes place when one who has heard and believed the Word of God actually obeys that

word in being baptized! The second chapter of Acts gives us an illustration of this truth. Peter and the other apostles spoke as they were guided by the Holy Spirit. The multitude heard their message; many believed it and 3000 were baptized! Those 3000 persons were thus born anew of water and the Spirit on that day. They were saved, received the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38). They were also added to the church. (Acts 2:47)

When one allows himself to be instructed and led by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, he has been divinely begotten! When he ultimately submits to the Lord's will and is immersed in water for the remission of his sins, the birth process is completed and he is a child of God!

Another verse that teaches the same truth as John 3:3-5 is 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (NAS). Notice that Paul is dealing with the matter of entrance "into one body," and that body is the church (Ephesians 1:22-23). He points out that it is "by or in one Spirit" that man is "baptized into one body." This does not mean that men must receive the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit in order to enter the body, for not all of the Corinthian Christians had received such a baptism. In fact, there is no evidence that any of them had been baptized in the Holy Spirit! The baptism must therefore be immersion in water, the only other type of baptism associated with the New Testament church (kingdom). But what is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to this immersion in water? Exactly the same as His relationship to the new birth. He instructs and guides men, through the Word of God, so as to cause them to submit to immersion in water. The account given in the book of Acts of the conversion of the people of Corinth confirms this view. "And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized" (Acts 18:8 NAS). What did they hear and believe? The gospel as preached by Paul, the gospel which he received by inspiration from the Holy Spirit. And what did that gospel require of them? That they be baptized into Christ for the remission of their sins. Thus the Holy Spirit led those who heard and believed Paul's message to be baptized and, as a result of their being baptized, these people entered the body of Christ, the church, kingdom.

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