

Born Again Or Begotten? (Part One)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Personal," May-June 2010

For fifty years, I believed what I had originally been taught in preparation for baptism regarding the "Born Again" doctrine. What I learned then had been reshaped somewhat from what was normally taught in most churches, and it had been renamed as "Begotten Again" because church doctrine insisted that "Born Again" was a false title and teaching. Through the years, I was constantly exposed to this teaching, and on becoming a minister, taught it repeatedly to others. I never really considered that it might be wrong; thus, I never sought to correct my own misunderstanding of it.

I do not believe that thoroughly understanding the born-again doctrine is absolutely vital to one's salvation. However, only born-again persons will be in God's Kingdom; in terms of salvation, it is an *absolute* necessity to have occurred. Understanding it clearly is helpful for fully appreciating what an awesome, divinely given gift we have received. It helps us to establish more firmly our conversion and our faith in God.

This doctrine fleshes out how we come to know God, how God perceives us, and therefore how we should perceive ourselves following our conversion. It clarifies how we should perceive our responsibilities before God after we have been set free from our bondage to Satan, sin, and death. It should clarify that being born again is *entirely* a spiritual matter and that, following the born-again event, an entirely new chapter of life has opened before us. This new chapter emphasizes being spiritually minded, growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, and maturing to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

All analogies eventually break down, but some are distinctly better in fitting a given context. In the biblical context, is the better one "begotten again" or "born again"? This article will consider only these two possible analogies. Does God perceive us as conceived by His Holy Spirit but unborn, growing but still in the womb of a mother? If so, a question must be asked: Is the fetus-in-a-womb analogy capable of portraying any practical works God commonly commands us to do as Christians? Or, does God perceive us, after receiving His Holy Spirit and despite being young in the faith, as fully functioning adults?

An Easily Understood Book?

We can understand some individual doctrines by putting together a number of scriptures gathered from several places in the Bible. However, achieving complete truth on any given doctrine is not always so easy. Several times, the apostle Paul writes of doctrinal matters that he terms "mysteries" (Colossians 1:26-27). In addition, some mistakenly believe that Jesus spoke in parables in order to make His teaching plain, but Jesus Himself clearly denied this. Matthew 13:10-13 provides a proof of this assertion:

And His disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more

will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."

The parables are no doubt picturesque and entertaining, but they can also be ambiguous, indistinct, mysterious, and easily misunderstood. Unless God provides revelation of their true meaning, the truths in them are left undiscovered. Jesus often had to take His apostles aside to explain what He meant by His teaching (Matthew 13:16-23).

Besides parables, the Bible is filled with metaphors, similes, analogies, and other figures of speech that convey truths vital to a fuller understanding of its doctrines. If one does not understand what the imagery means, gaining correct understanding of the Bible's truths becomes more difficult and time-consuming. Certainly, without them the Bible would be a great deal longer because many details would have to be supplied by more extensive writing.

The Bible's images and symbols exist to give us pictorial illustrations of godly life and/or evil, and they do this very well. Any object or action we can picture in our mind's eye is an image. Thus, with biblical imagery, the mental picture provides specific details without the writer having to write down every one. Briefly, a symbol is an image that stands for something in addition to its literal meaning. It is often laden with more specific meaning than many paragraphs of writing would contain. The reader must pay attention because such symbols are used frequently in meaningful circumstances.

The root and trunk of the born-again doctrine is found within John 3. Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not speak directly of it at all, though without directly naming it, they supply supporting information. It is not until the epistles of Paul, Peter, and especially John that main branches of this doctrine make appearances. Thus, as we begin, it is helpful for us to perceive the wide treatment of figures John uses to prepare us for how he uses them to support the various elements of this important, foundational doctrine.

He begins using symbolism immediately in John 1, identifying Jesus as the Word, the central Figure in God's spiritual work in men's behalf. He continues, speaking of light, darkness, baptism, the Lamb of God, and the Temple, among others, before the reader arrives at John 3.

The imagery regarding the Temple (John 2:18-22) is especially interesting because it immediately precedes Jesus' teaching on born again in John 3. The Jews listening to Jesus immediately reject what He teaches based on what He says being a physical impossibility. Indeed, it is physically impossible, but note that this is the same reason Nicodemus rejects Jesus' teaching on born again. Similarly, in John 4:7-15, the woman at the well immediately jumps to the conclusion that Jesus speaks of natural water, and in John 4:31-38, even Jesus' disciples fail to grasp the spiritual significance of food.

In John 6:32-63, those who listen to His manna discourse follow the same pattern. In fact, His "eat My flesh and drink My blood" imagery so offends many of His disciples that they stop following Him! This consistent failure to grasp the meaning of His imagery continues through the entire book. If, in studying John 3, we follow the same pattern of misunderstanding His spiritual imagery, like Nicodemus, we will also misunderstand being born again.

We must recognize that this spiritualizing continues in John 3. In fact, for the children of God, it not only continues, but it also increases exponentially in terms of its importance to their spiritual lives! It is an unvarnished truth that only those who are born again will see and enter the Kingdom of God

(John 3:5). Jesus is teaching that, besides one's biological birth, one must also experience a supernatural, spiritual birth. Just as surely as a Christian is not merely biologically begotten but born, there is no such thing as a non-born-again Christian.

Why a Spiritual Birth Is Necessary

The apostle records in John 3:1-3:

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God: for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

John 3:3 begins to show the profound importance of the born-again instruction by the fact that this doctrine is the subject of the very first of Jesus' discourses recorded by John. It is as if everything regarding our spiritual future begins and proceeds from this point. Interestingly, this discourse does not cover how men should *live* but how men *are made alive* spiritually.

In Ephesians 2:1-6, the apostle Paul reveals a major detail of why a spiritual birth is necessary:

And You He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

Twice, Paul says in these six verses that we "were dead"—not physically dead but spiritually dead. An individual cannot conduct his life before he is born, nor can a dead person direct his steps and regulate his life. Clearly, God perceives a person as spiritually dead before he is born again. Being born again thus begins a convert's progress toward his transformation into Christ's image and living in the Kingdom of God for all eternity.

Interestingly, Romans 4:17 states that "God . . . gives life to the dead." Being born again is also likened to a resurrection, but nowhere does the Bible show resurrected people as begotten as a fetus confined to a womb. Rather, Scripture shows the converted as adults freed from spiritual death and at liberty to move about, live life, make choices, and interact with others, putting their new spiritual life to practical use.

Luke 9:60 confirms Paul's declaration in a statement by Jesus that illustrates how God perceives the overwhelming majority of people on earth. Jesus commands the man who said he would follow Him but first wanted to bury his dead father, "Let the dead bury the dead." He obviously means, "Let those yet physically alive but spiritually dead bury one of their spiritually—and now physically—dead companions." Jesus thus confirms that God perceives those not yet truly Christian as spiritually dead and in need of spiritual resurrection to spiritual life.

Psalm 115:17 adds to this: "The dead do not praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence." Though this statement obviously applies primarily to the physically dead, it also suggests that the spiritually dead cannot praise God with true spirituality. Jesus' teaching on being born again speaks of a new birth, a new beginning from a state of spiritual death imposed on us because of our sins. Thus, a person cannot begin spiritual life and truly praise God as a Christian until he is first born spiritually. Plainly, discerning figurative language is vital to understanding this doctrine.

Spiritual or Physical Birth?

The born-again teaching's importance is also emphasized by Jesus' introduction of the doctrine by proclaiming, "Verily, verily"—or "Truly, truly," "Most assuredly," or "Amen, amen," depending on the translation. All of His "Verily, verily" statements appear in the book of John, and they are used by Christ only when He is about to teach on a profound matter. The doubled "verily" denotes that what follows is of especially weighty and solemn significance, so we are to pay special attention.

It is evident from Nicodemus' words as he approaches Jesus that he desires to be taught and has a readiness to hear. He acknowledges that Jesus has been sent by God and offers that His miracles are evidence that God is with Him. Even so, it seems to him as if Jesus speaks to him in a foreign language.

The Jews call Jesus' statement in John 3:3 a *marshal*, a difficult saying. Nicodemus is obviously puzzled by its intent. The interesting thing is what triggers Nicodemus' response. If he understood some of the ramifications of Jesus' statement that "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," he would realize that even he, a Jew of high position, was already disqualified unless he met the requirement of being born again! That would have been shocking to one so highly placed and regarded.

He grasps that Jesus is speaking of a birth. The Greek word following "born," *anōthen*—translated in our Bibles as "again," "anew," or "from above"—magnifies his puzzlement. It is this word that he questions when he asks, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (John 3:4).

As an adult man, he is perplexed by the second occasion of being born. His reply indicates, not that he is contemplating being conceived again and entering his mother's womb, but that he is thinking of the end of the pregnancy, departing the womb in birth. He obviously does not understand that, in God's view, despite being physically alive, he is a spiritually dead man who needs God to resurrect him and give him the spiritual life that he lacks.

He immediately relates Jesus' words to a literal, physical, fleshly birth, thus his thoughts take him in the wrong direction. Jesus' spiritual intent has nothing to do with a second *physical* birth of a human being. Commentator Albert Barnes suggests that Nicodemus' spiritual prejudices turn Jesus' words into an absurdity, illustrating how disconnected he is from Jesus' spiritual intent.

The Greek term *gennaō* (*Strong's Concordance* #1080) underlying "born" can be confusing because it broadly means "to procreate" or "to father," and figuratively, to regenerate." It can also be used as "to bear," "to beget," "to be born," "to bring forth," "to conceive," "to be delivered of," "to engender," and "to make." The Greeks used the term for both conception and birth, for the entire gestation process. Therefore other parts of Jesus' and the apostle's instruction must be sought to reveal more clearly which Jesus means.

In his *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, p. 313, Spiros Zodhiates reveals that *gennao* in this verse is aorist subjunctive and in the passive voice. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, "John," p. 44, confirms that *gennao* is "aorist passive subjunctive" here. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, p. 104, relates that, in the passive voice, *gennao* means "to be born." In addition, the *Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8, p. 505, states, "Birth can be considered either from the father's side, in which the verb is to 'beget,' or from the mother's side, in which the verb is to 'bear.' The Johannine metaphor uses the former verb, with the meaning 'beget' (verses 3, 5, 6, 8)." Thus, it is translated grammatically correct in English Bibles as "born," not "begotten."

The *American Heritage College Dictionary* defines the English word *born* as "brought into life; brought into existence; created and resulting or arising." In brief, it indicates a beginning, whether that beginning is an actual birth of a human, animal, concept, circumstance, process, or organization.

When *anōthen* (*Strong's* #509) is combined with *gennao*, the phrase most strongly indicates a second *birth*, not a conception. This is why Nicodemus responds by saying in verse 4, "How . . . can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born [also in the passive voice]?" He does not say, "How can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be begotten?"

Spiritual Birth and Regeneration

Another term that needs further thought is "regeneration," Greek *paliggenesia* (*Strong's* #3824). As seen above, it is a synonym for *gennao anōthen*. The prefix *palin* means "again," while the root is *genesis*, meaning "beginning" or "start." In this context, it means "spiritual rebirth" or "spiritual renovation." It is used twice in the New Testament, once by Jesus in Matthew 19:28 and once by Paul in Titus 3:5. Regeneration stresses the inception of a new state of things in contrast with the old.

When Jesus uses it, the setting is when He "sits on the throne of His glory." In Paul's usage, the occasion is the beginning of a person's salvation. Both settings indicate new beginnings. The *American Heritage College Dictionary* states the English meaning of *regeneration* as "to reform spiritually or morally; to form, construct, or create anew, especially in an improved state; to give new life or energy to; revitalize"—which is almost perfectly synonymous with *paliggenesia*. It describes a new beginning, a new birth.

Seeing the Kingdom of God

At the end of John 3:3, Jesus makes a revealing statement that contains a significant term: "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." "See" is the significant word. One's first reaction to the word "see" is to assume a literal, visual observation. However, the Greek word here is *eidon* (*Strong's* #1492), which means "to know, be aware, consider, perceive, be sure, and understand." Its usage also includes "behold," "look on," and "see." The Bible frequently uses it in the sense of mental apprehension rather than visual sight, that is, as "I get it," "I understand," or "now I see it."

The apostle Paul is a dramatic example of a man who made a sudden sharp turn in conduct and attitude when he "saw" that he was in reality a hardened sinner and not headed into the Kingdom of God. Here in John 3:3, then, Jesus' emphasis is on the Kingdom of God being something to be understood or comprehended rather than visually observed.

His remark has this sense: "Except a man be born again, he cannot come to know the things of God; he cannot be fitted for it or enjoy its benefits." In this context, He teaches the Kingdom of God as an entity of valuable spiritual and moral force. *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 91, explains its intent in this context: "The things of God's kingdom are not apparent to the natural vision. A new power of sight is required, which attaches only to the new man."

Is the Kingdom a Present Reality?

After hearing Nicodemus' query, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can He enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus responds, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). In this verse, He introduces a second facet of the Kingdom of God, teaching that a person can enter into it, as well as that one must be "born again" to bring about the entrance. The question arises, "How long must one wait before entering it?"

Jesus preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God, as did Paul. Mark 1:14-15 proclaims: "Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.'" Acts 28:30-31 records, "Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him."

The Bible states plainly that the Kingdom is an entity that one can enter into even before Jesus' return. Note Matthew 5:20, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus adds in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." Moreover, Jesus declares in Matthew 18:3, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." Clearly, a person can enter into God's Kingdom, but there are also requirements. Can one meet the requirements now?

In Mark 1:15, Jesus dogmatically states, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." "The time is fulfilled" implies that nothing can be added to it, that time will be extended no longer. That the Kingdom is "at hand" means that it is near or close. It does not suggest distance in either space or time. By using these phrases together, Jesus indicates that it can be entered into *at once* when God's basic requirements are met. The most basic requirement is taught in John 3—to be born again. Jesus thus announces when the Kingdom could be entered—immediately.

A Spiritual Entity

Luke 17:20-21 finds Jesus speaking to a group of Pharisees:

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."

It is evident that the Pharisees' conception of the Kingdom of God differs from that of Jesus. They believed in a spectacular, visible establishment of the Kingdom, even as we look forward to its

fulfillment in the near future. However, in Luke 10:9, 11 and again in Luke 11:20, Jesus plainly says that it was already present, whether in the persons of the apostles or Himself, as exhibited in their acts. Acts can include miracles, conduct, and their messages. His statement in Luke 17:20-21 explains that they should not expect a visible manifestation of the Kingdom as they perceived it at that time.

Theologians may argue over the interpretation of words, but Jesus' own testimony undoubtedly implies that the Kingdom of God was in their presence in His Person and ministry. Therefore, the last phrase of Luke 17:21 should be translated as, "The kingdom of God is among you." *Barnes' Notes, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, Expositor's Bible Commentary, The New International Biblical Commentary, and The Interpreter's Bible* all agree on this conclusion. He was in their midst, and He was within the Kingdom of God.

When this is combined with John 18:36 (where Jesus declares that His Kingdom "is not from here") and many other scriptures pointing to the establishment of God's Kingdom with power at Christ's return, we can understand that it is both a present and a future reality. In addition, it has both heavenly and earthly aspects. On one hand, it is present and near in the people to whom God has given His Spirit and has chosen to represent Him. On the other, it is distant in terms of time and as a geographical and governing reality. As a present reality, it is small, goes virtually unnoticed, and rules over little. Yet, in the future, at Christ's return, it will dominate and rule the earth. It is certainly not established in its fullness on earth now. Nonetheless, Scripture also proves that it is a present, earthy reality having earth-bound, flesh-and-blood citizens who are, in the Bible's terms, "spiritually minded" or "in the Spirit."

We are all familiar with Matthew 13, in which almost every parable begins, "The kingdom of heaven is like" (verses 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52). Jesus then illustrates a matter that directly involves instruction for the church and its membership. In doing this, He is using the term "kingdom of heaven" in place of "the church"—He is virtually equating them. Why? Because church members are citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Notice especially verse 41. How can angels gather tares, not just from any old place, but from out of Jesus' Kingdom on earth, if it does not yet exist on earth? Christians are not only presently God's children in the Kingdom, but tares fellowship with them in the church! Again, in Mark 12:28-34, Jesus converses with a scribe whom He had complimented after seeing the man respond wisely, saying, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." He means that the scribe is not far from being converted and entering the Family of God.

When Jesus and the apostles preached the gospel, they were inviting people to become part of that Kingdom immediately without having to wait for the resurrection at Christ's return. The Kingdom of God is a spiritual entity. Its headquarters is in heaven, but at the same time its agents—initially Jesus of Nazareth then later the apostles and the church—were, as children of God, laboring on earth to make it better known and expand its citizenry.

Sons of the Kingdom

The Kingdom of God is that entity in which those who are part of it recognize and submit to the rule of the Father and Son. A person becomes part of it by being born again, and those who are born again

become sons of God. God's Kingdom as presently configured consists of God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and all the children of God who have entered the Family of God by means of God's calling, being born again, and receiving God's Holy Spirit.

God considers these sons as "in Christ," and surely, Jesus Christ is in the Kingdom of God! Paul eloquently writes in Ephesians 1:3-5, 7, 11 13:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will. . . . In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace. . . . In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will. . . . In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.

The apostle also declares in Colossians 1:13, "He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." In terms of our responsibilities to God, the implications of this verse are tremendous. It dogmatically informs us that we have already been conveyed, translated, or transferred into His beloved Son's Kingdom. How can some say we are not already in God's Kingdom? We absolutely do not have to wait for the resurrection at Christ's return to be considered by God as part of His Kingdom. Are we who call Him "Abba, Father" not already His children? Is not His Family His Kingdom?

Philippians 3:20 further informs us of our status before God: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Our citizenship is already registered in heaven, the headquarters of the Kingdom of God. Does any nation confer citizenship on the unborn, those merely conceived? Nations register children *after* they are born, not while still in the womb.

II Corinthians 5:20 carries yet further our present assignment into the Kingdom of God: "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us; we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God." Though this assignment applies primarily to the ministry, it nonetheless applies to all who are part of the brotherhood and are sons of God because they all represent Christ and His Kingdom in every circumstance. If this is not so, why is God concerned about our witness before men? Can the unborn be representatives of Christ when they have not even left the womb?

The church is God's Kingdom on earth, but it is not yet manifest in its fullness. The Scriptures clearly show that God perceives us, those having His Spirit, who are thus His children, as already part of His Kingdom. Scripture clearly states that we are "in Christ." Jesus Christ is definitely in God's Kingdom, and because we are perceived by God as "in Him," we are too! The Kingdom of God is both a present and future reality. We can both see it and enter into it in the here and now.

[to be continued]