

Born Again Or Begotten? (Part Two)

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As Part One explained, the teaching on the born-again doctrine—found primarily in John 3 but expanded by Paul, Peter, and John in later writings—has been prone to misunderstanding since Jesus Christ spoke to Nicodemus about it nearly two thousand years ago. In fact, Nicodemus immediately misconstrued what Christ meant, understanding His analogy on a purely physical level, as another literal birth. He was not alone in this. A study of Jesus' discourses throughout the book of John shows that people frequently interpreted His entirely spiritual instruction in a physical manner, and thus failed to grasp the truth He taught.

That Christ's teaching on being born again is pivotal is revealed in the fact that it is the first major discourse that John records. In addition, it is introduced with the words, "Most assuredly, I say to you" (NKJV) or "Verily, verily, I say unto thee" (KJV), a construction that announces that what follows is significant and weighty, urging us to pay close attention.

Even so, it is not necessary for us to understand all the particulars of the born-again doctrine to be saved, although a deeper understanding of it helps us to grasp how God perceives us once we experience the born-again event. This teaching reveals that God sees us as His children, already part of His Family Kingdom, and able to function as adults before Him in this world. Further, it shows that, to Him, we are a new creation embarking on a spiritual journey, in which we will grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ and transform into His image.

In turn, this doctrine should also teach us how to perceive ourselves once we are converted. We are not what we once were—spiritually dead to God and His way of life—but now we are alive in Christ, heirs of salvation, and free from spiritual bondage, able to pursue the holy, righteous character of our Savior. Jesus' teaching reveals that we are special to God, and at the same time, that we are responsible for what we have been given and under judgment, unlike the rest of the world.

The Instrument of the New Birth

Jesus says in John 3:5, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Because this is said as an explanation of Jesus' initial statement, being "born of water and the Spirit" is the same as being "born again" or "born from above." In that sense, as used here by Jesus, both "water" and "spirit" are *spiritual* entities.

It is easy to jump to the conclusion that Jesus' mention of water refers to baptism. However, as a figure, the part water plays is more complex than is commonly assigned in this context. Consider this: From righteous Abel on, all have been and are being saved by the same process encompassed by the grace of God. All must be called by God, all must repent and receive forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ, and all must be given God's Spirit. Note, however, that there is no mention in Scripture of any of the saints who lived before John the Baptist being baptized. This includes those who were under the Old Covenant. If all are to receive salvation by the same means, why does the Bible fail to show any of them being baptized?

It is more likely that the "water" and "spirit" Jesus refers to are those mentioned in Ezekiel 36:25-27:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

In this prophecy, Ezekiel indicates a cleansing from spiritual filth and a change of heart, from which spring obedience to God's commands. As the prophecy clearly says, both the water and the Spirit are from God above and precipitate the cleansing and birth that Jesus teaches in John 3. God says He will "sprinkle clean water," but as we know, that does not indicate the waters of baptism, since true Christian baptism is an immersion. Notice what John the Baptist says in John 1:33: "I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" This suggests that a baptism of the Holy Spirit is also needed, which Acts 19:1-6 confirms.

As we have seen as a pattern throughout these articles, we need to consider that Jesus also uses water in a figurative sense in John 3:5. To what, then, does He refer? John 4:13-14 gives us a clue. Jesus says to the woman at the well: "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." This water that Jesus speaks of can in no way be literal water.

John 7:37-39 expands on this:

On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

These verses clarify that the Bible uses water as a figure of the Holy Spirit both in terms of its cleansing properties and as a source of power. Could Jesus be using water in this way in John 3:5?

The Bible frequently mentions the Word of God in conjunction with birth and life. Psalm 119:50 reads, "This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life." Paul adds in I Corinthians 4:15, "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." The gospel is composed of words. We are instructed in James 1:18, "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth."

Peter makes a remarkable declaration in I Peter 1:22-23:

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the word of God, which lives and abides forever.

The imagery of God's Word also includes the idea of cleansing power. It is likened to water because water cleanses, as Psalm 119:9 shows: "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word." Jesus adds in John 15:3, "You are already clean because of the word which

I have spoken to you." Paul says in Ephesians 5:26, ". . . that He might sanctify and cleanse [the church] with the washing of water by the word."

With all of these references feeding into Jesus' teaching in John 3:5, we can be confident that the water He refers to includes all three of these figures—that it quenches a person's spiritual thirst, facilitates his spiritual birth, and cleanses him from his spiritual filth. We can conclude that Jesus' reference to "water" in John 3:5 should be understood as closely attached to "Spirit."

E.W. Bullinger, in *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, p. 664, says that in this context we are dealing with a figure of speech called *hendiadys*, which literally indicates "one by means of two." In a hendiadys, two words—in this case, "water" and "spirit"—are employed to get the point across, but only one idea is intended. One of the words, "Spirit," expresses the point, but the other word, "water," intensifies "Spirit" to the superlative degree.

It is God's Holy Spirit that is the instrument of both the cleansing and the birth of the divine nature in us. "Water" intensifies and magnifies "Spirit" by means of the many figurative ways God's Holy Spirit is shown working: as a means of God's light- and life-giving Word, of spiritual power, and of cleansing.

Jesus says in John 6:63, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." This statement clarifies matters: The water, the Word, and the Holy Spirit must be considered together—as one element—that precipitate the new birth, all being given from above. Considering them as one makes Jesus' declaration stronger.

The Spirit Gives Life

It is God's Holy Spirit by which we are made alive and birthed from our spiritual deadness in sin. God the Father opens a person's mind by His Spirit, giving the newly called individual insight into and understanding of His Word and an awareness and appreciation of God and His purpose, the importance of Jesus Christ, and a sense of guilt regarding sin to a degree he never had before. God's Holy Spirit cleanses us from the effects of our dreadful past.

Paul writes of the unconverted in Ephesians 4:18, "Having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart." That ignorance and blindness begins to be lifted by means of the new birth through God's miraculous infusion of His Holy Spirit, not by the waters of baptism.

This new creation follows the same pattern as shown in Genesis 1:2-3: "The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light." In the new creation, the spiritual creation, the sinner is perceived by God as dead and in spiritual darkness, then God sends forth His Spirit to draw the sinner to Christ and into spiritual life and light (John 1:4; 6:44; 8:12), making the sinner His child. It is God, by means of His Holy Spirit, who produces the new birth.

Consider water in terms of baptism. Even in baptismal contexts, water is used figuratively. Water is shown, not as a cleansing agent, but as a type of death, burial, and resurrection. In baptism, water becomes a grave from which we must be spiritually resurrected, not a symbol of life and regeneration. Paul makes this clear in Romans 6:1-8:

What shall we say then? Shall we continue to sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.

In these verses, we see pictured the figurative burial of the old "dead" man living in trespasses and sin (Ephesians 2:1-2) in preparation for the birth of the new man in Christ. Jesus permitted John the Baptist to baptize Him as an example for our benefit, though He had committed no sin:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him. Then Jesus, when He had been baptized, came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. (Matthew 3:13-16)

John 1:32-34 adds to this account, helping to pinpoint the time of our receipt of God's gift of His Holy Spirit:

And John bore witness saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

Our receipt of God's Holy Spirit occurs when we are spiritually resurrected from our watery grave and by God's grace cleansed through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ. God's Spirit gives birth to the new man as a child of God. It is not the waters of baptism that cleanse us but Christ's blood and the receipt of God's Holy Spirit.

What Is the New Birth?

Jesus proclaimed to Nicodemus that one *must* be born again to enter the Kingdom of God. Since Adam and Eve, mankind has been cut off from God. The design of the Tabernacle, the Temple, and the worship system under the Old Covenant pictures God as distant and virtually unapproachable. Man in his natural condition, having a carnal mind and dead in his sin, is certainly shown as *away from* God. Though it is necessary for an individual to be born again to enter God's Kingdom, it takes a gracious and miraculous act—completely on God's part—to close the gap between Him and those He calls (John 6:44).

No one can arbitrarily volunteer for entry and be accepted; a person cannot cause himself to be born again. Flesh does not produce redemption. Unless one is born of the Holy Spirit, whatever one does

in the flesh will not make him spiritual in the biblical sense. The Bible shows that the natural mind of man is at war against God and that it is not subject to God's law and cannot be (Romans 8:7), expressing the harsh reality of the carnal heart of mankind.

When Paul writes that the unconverted are dead in trespasses and sin, he means exactly that. Regardless of how sincere or religious they might be, such people are lifeless in terms of true spiritual life that is given by God. They are part of the old, natural creation and are spiritually lifeless unless and until—and completely at His discretion—God graciously gives life by His Spirit. Paul writes, "For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.' So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (Romans 9:15-16).

What, then, is the new birth? It is not the removal of anything from the sinner, nor the changing of anything within or without the sinner's body. It is, instead, the communication of a precious gift to the sinner. It is forgiveness and the imparting of the new nature. When we were born from our mothers, we received from our parents their nature, what Paul calls the "carnal" or "fleshly" nature. When one is born again, he receives from God *His* nature, as II Peter 1:4 relates, ". . . by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature."

As early as Genesis 1, the Bible shows that a fundamental law of nature is that every living thing brings forth its own kind. What is produced by a vegetable is vegetable; what is born of animal is animal. What is born of sinful man and woman is a sinful child, which Paul designates in Romans 8:8 as being "in the flesh." It cannot be anything else. We may educate and cultivate it all we please, but human nature remains "in the flesh." It may be refined flesh, beautiful flesh, or religious flesh, but it is still "in the flesh."

On the other hand, what is born or brought forth by the impartation of God's Spirit is spirit. To use Paul's term, such a person is "in the Spirit" (Romans 8:9). The child always partakes of the nature of its parents. What is born of man is carnal and sinful; what is born of God is spiritual.

Being born again is the creation of a new man in Christ Jesus. It is the birth of a new spiritual man within the physical. The new birth is the imparting of the mind, the nature, of Jesus Christ. Paul explains in I Corinthians 2:9-16:

But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.

Every born-again person is automatically and instantaneously a child of God, a member of the Family of God, and being part of that Family, he becomes a citizen of the Kingdom of God. In every case in which God commands or exhorts His children, He does so as to an adult who is fully capable of carrying out what He says. A command may be said to one young in the faith, even one called a "babe" due to his spiritual immaturity, but he is not a spiritual fetus. He is physically an adult with a great deal of experience from which he can draw for decision making, along with his growing knowledge of God.

There is no gestation period, just as there was no gestation period when God created Adam and Eve as the culmination of the physical creation. In Genesis 2:7, God breathed into Adam the breath (*ruach*, a type of the Holy Spirit) of life, and he immediately became a living soul, not a fetus in a womb. Paul calls us "a new creation" (II Corinthians 5:17). However, the spiritual creation is not fully complete, in the same way as the development of a newly born human child is incomplete. Much growth remains to be done.

The New Man Must Choose

The new spiritual child now possesses two natures because the old carnal nature remains. These two natures are at war with each other, striving for dominance of the born-again person's conduct and life: "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Galatians 5:17).

The born-again person must choose to overcome the old nature that is making war against the new nature born within him. Revelation 2 states this charge in a variety of ways four times in just one chapter: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7; see verses 11, 17, 26). Revelation 3:5, 12, and 21 proceed to say this three more times.

Peter writes in II Peter 3:17-18: "You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." In Ephesians 4:13, Paul tells us what we are to grow into: ". . . till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Overcoming and growing are major undertakings. Do we honestly think that this can be accomplished by one still in the womb?

Why Is the New Birth Necessary?

Jesus instructs us in John 3:6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Some have mistakenly used this verse as proof that an individual is not born again until he is composed of spirit. However, Jesus is not considering a person's bodily composition at all. A Bible student can be misled by abruptly abandoning Jesus' use of spiritual imagery and returning to a literal interpretation. Like the rest of the context, verse 6 must be understood spiritually and figuratively.

The verse states why the new birth is necessary. Flesh can continue to give birth only to what it has always produced: flesh. Yet, Jesus states clearly in John 6:63, "The flesh profits nothing." In John 8:15, He accuses the Jews of judging Him according to the flesh rather than using God's Word—which is Spirit—as their evidence. In both of these cases, Jesus is also speaking figuratively.

In Greek, "flesh" is *sarx* (*Strong's* #4561). Jesus and Paul commonly use the term as a metaphor for sinful man's nature, sometimes also described as "carnal." Used in this way, *sarx* is morally negative, even though by creation a person's flesh is not intrinsically negative. Figuratively, it symbolizes the unregenerate moral and spiritual state of man that almost continuously generates sinful acts. "Flesh," then, represents the inward, carnal inclination rather than muscle, skin, and bones—disposition rather than composition.

Paul writes in Romans 7:18, "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells," meaning nothing good spiritually. Later, in verse 25, he admits that his "flesh [serves] the law of sin." In Galatians 5:15-17, he positions the Holy Spirit as the opposite of the flesh, declaring that these two are at war:

But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.

Biblically, the term "born" or "birth" is used, not only to indicate coming from the womb as in mammalian birth, but also to describe the source or beginning of a thing, an event, or series of events. For example, we speak of the birth of a nation, an institution, or a concept. The "womb" of those births was an event or series of events that triggered the inception of a new direction, manner of life, activity, or thought.

This is how Jesus is using "born" or "birth" in John 3. He is not speaking of the birth of a human child but the birth of a new nature. The events triggering this birth are the calling of God, repentance from sin, justification through faith in Christ's death, and the receipt of God's Holy Spirit. All of these are effects of the acts of the spiritual God.

Conversely, human nature gives birth to more human nature and thus more of human nature's sinful works. It cannot do otherwise. As Job 14:4 says, "Who can bring a clean thing out of any unclean? No one!" Paul makes the same point theologically:

For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:6-8)

The flesh expresses itself, produces, and gives birth to the works of the flesh and thus to immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, and other evils, as Galatians 5:19-21 details. Though the flesh is capable of doing some good things (Matthew 7:11), in relation to God and His way, the evil will always dominate. The natural, fleshly condition of man will always exhibit the same propensities. In contrast, the Holy Spirit gives birth to and is expressed by the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, etc. (Galatians 5:22-23). Therefore, a change must take place from a life dominated by the natural human heart to one motivated by God's Spirit—or a person will never be prepared for the Kingdom of God.

In the context of His instruction, Jesus gives not one indication that, when He refers to being "born of the Spirit," He intends us to think of a post-resurrection event. The context is strictly one of birth and its products. In addition, He is not even speaking of being composed of spirit. He is describing the present and near future of the born-again person while he is still flesh and blood as well as what he produces or gives birth to in his life—especially his new spiritual life. Thus, the so-called "hatpin test" does not apply here at all. It entirely misses the point Jesus is making!

Barnes' Notes ("John," p. 203) comments regarding John 3:6: "*Is Spirit*. Is spiritual, *like* the spirit, that is, holy, pure." It is the birth of the spiritual heart and mind that enables a person to be spiritual in his attitudes, conduct, and perspective. Barnes goes on to say, "Here we learn, first, that all men are by nature sinful. Second, that none are renewed but by the Spirit of God. . . . Third, that the effect of the new birth is to make men holy."

Being "born of the Spirit" is not a "pregnancy" produced by God's gracious act of imparting His Spirit, but the birth—beginning—of a holy, spiritual mind, the mind of Christ. That the person is "seeing" the Kingdom of God, has "entered" into it, and is producing the fruits of the Spirit are evidence that he is already born of the Spirit.

[to be continued]