

Born Again (Part 2)

Clarifying Some Issues

John W. Ritenbaugh

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My sermon on the day of Pentecost concentrated on the most important aspects of the "Born Again" doctrine. However, there are a number of general overviews, and a few specific scriptures that I believe further explanation would be helpful toward clarifying one's understanding. I am sure, if you are thinking at all about the sermon, that questions will arise, so hopefully I will touch on an area that you have been thinking about and maybe have a question or two about.

Any points that I am going to make here are not given in any order of importance, but hopefully I will clarify where the doctrine fits into the grand scheme of God's overall purpose, and address some particular scriptures that you might have been wondering about. How does one explain this or that regarding this "born again" question? It is *very* helpful to know that being "born again" is an entirely *spiritual* operation.

John 8:31-36 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

The first point is that the born again doctrine all by itself is not a salvation issue. It *is* very, very helpful to understand it, but whether one believes this way or that about this particular doctrine is not anywhere near as important as issues such as faith and law. It is not even close to the importance of understanding sin, nor is it anywhere near as important as understanding justification by faith in Jesus Christ. It is not as important as understanding sanctification through the experiences of life within a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The born again doctrine flushes out how God perceives us, and therefore how *we* should perceive ourselves. It should clarify how we should perceive our responsibility before God *after* we have been set free from our bondage to Satan, to sin, and death. It should also clarify what we are to be preparing for when Christ returns.

In the context of John 8, Jesus is giving an overview of what this responsibility is. Notice that in verse 31 Jesus draws attention to, first of all, "abiding." The word "abiding" can mean "living," or "live," but the best way to apply it is in "continuing"—in other words, continuing in His Word. Jesus also mentions, in verse 32, knowing truth, and becoming ever more free. Now mark this: One abides in Christ's Word by making His Word the rule of one's life and obeying it.

In verse 34 He then warns about becoming a slave of sin, and then He gives us a somewhat mysterious mention of "remaining in the house." Well, that is not so mysterious now. Recall though, that after His resurrection *He* became the house of God, and we become a part of Him. It is union with Him in which one must remain. He does advise us that to remain in the house, one must do the work of our spiritual "father of the faithful" Abraham. What did Abraham do? Genesis 26 says that

he obeyed God's commandments, His statutes, and His ordinances. Abraham made the Word of God the rule of his life, and we must follow the example of the father of the faithful. Jesus makes that point very clear.

It is this teaching the born again doctrine helps to flush out, and when that liberty Jesus speaks of is conferred on us, it is spiritually similar to the Israelites following their release from Egypt, crossing the Red Sea and into the wilderness, and beginning their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. Their physical liberty is a symbol of our spiritual liberty.

Israel's pilgrimage is a parallel to the sanctification period under the New Covenant, and it is during this time that the law of God is written on our hearts. It is during this period that we must do the works of Abraham, and thus remaining free to continue on to our inheritance as co-heirs with Jesus Christ. The born again doctrine helps us to understand, that upon conversion, it is as though we are starting out life anew. This puts emphasis on growing in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and maturing to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Hebrews 8:6-10 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

You can see very plainly that when you compare the wording of John 8 with what we are reading here, you can see why Israel failed. They did not continue in the works of Abraham.

Hebrews 8:13 In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

A second major area impacting on our understanding of this doctrine is that there are significant differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, because the New Covenant is established, as we just read, upon better promises; but unsaid is that it also has much stiffer requirements, conditions that must be met. These differences are quite important to understanding the born again doctrine.

I will not go into great detail here on the Old Covenant especially, because the general differences are well-known to you. I will just give you an overview.

The Old Covenant was largely a physical covenant that had some spiritual overtones involved within it. The New Covenant is a spiritual covenant containing some physical *undertones* within it. "Overtones" means "the implication of a hint." It is something implied, but not clearly stated.

The Old Covenant had promises of physical prosperity, good health, good soil, abundant crops, the inheritance of land, and good weather. Now spiritual things, like the forgiveness of sin, justification by grace through faith, and eternal life are present, but only by implication. They are not completely

missing because there were some people that God, during Old Covenant times, was dealing with of a spiritual nature. We see senses of those spiritual things come through because of people like David.

The New Covenant is just the opposite. It is very strong spiritually in nature. Things like justification by grace through faith, the forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life in the Kingdom of God, receiving God's Spirit, and having direct contact with God are the central issues. Things like physical prosperity are quite understated, and to my thinking, given with a great deal of restraint. The focus is very much on keeping God's law, not merely in the letter, but in their spirit as well.

One's attitudes are very important under the New Covenant. One's perspective—that is, the way people look at things—is very important under the New Covenant. We are to come to look at things the way God does, to see things the way *He* does, and if we have the mind of Christ that is the direction in which our mind is developing so that we look at and think like Christ. The emphasis in the New Covenant is *very* strong on spiritual elements.

The word "spirit" is used virtually in all languages in pretty much the same way. Now apart from beings—by that I mean angelic beings and God, who are composed of spirit—the word spirit has to do with that part of a human associated with mind, will, and feelings. Spirit is associated with immaterial, invisible power. Mind, will, and feelings are all internal things not visible on the outside unless they are activated.

Incidentally, here is a little bit of an aside, but it might be helpful if any of you have seen the new television program called "Lie to Me." The theme in the program is that of a group of people who are experts at looking at people and discerning from the expressions on the face, the gestures in the hand, the quiver in the voice as to whether those people are lying or not. All kinds of things are internally being driven to make these things come out. These people actually discern spiritual elements that are visible only on the outside because they are activated from the inside, and the person cannot hide them.

In the program they do not make it look easy, and often their perceptions are proved to be wrong, but they keep doggedly at it, and thereby come to eventually putting the dirty deed on the person through the discernment of what is really internal elements to the people that give themselves away to the outside. This will become important in just a little bit.

We use the term "spirit" as part of the essential nature of a person. We might say that a person has a *zealous* spirit, a *proud* spirit, a *generous* spirit, a *joyous* spirit, or a *quiet* spirit; and then, brethren, there is *God's* Spirit. Now whether it is God's Spirit, or man's spirit, spirit is an invisible, internal perspective and attitude. It is a causative force that motivates and activates one. As the television program shows, they cannot be hidden, because they even show on that program of people doing their very best to hide it. Every once in awhile they show pictures of Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan, and the expressions that they had on their faces, or the gestures, which showed they were lying.

Perhaps the most important thing I have said so far is that the New Covenant is a spiritual covenant.

John 3:3-12 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to Him, "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 answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the

Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

As we begin here in this context, please understand that what Jesus teaches here is still within the same subject-context of what is taught in the latter part of John 2. Recall that in chapter 2, in Jesus' action and declaration about the Temple and the people there, Jesus was reconstituting the worship of God's people from focus on or centralized on something physical—the Temple—to something living and spiritual—Himself. He cautioned, in what He said there, that this would not take place until He had died for the sins of mankind and was subsequently resurrected. What He was doing here was declaring that the physical Temple, just like the Old Covenant, is spiritually obsolete and vanishing away.

What the Jews were doing in the Temple ground is clear evidence of what a physically-oriented religion will ultimately produce. The Jews' reverence, respect, and love for God had been reduced to irreverence, disrespect, and mere words and sacrifices without faithful obedience or with understanding. Jesus' concern for God's honor is expressed in what He did by chasing those disrespectful people from the area.

When the apostle John wrote this book he purposely inserted this episode between Jesus and Nicodemus right on the heels of that Temple example in order to show us how what Jesus taught in the Temple incident is being accomplished. It is being accomplished by a God-given engineered miraculous *spiritual* transformation. It has to be spiritual in order to match the New Covenant. It is a spiritual transformation within those who are called by God. Jesus did not give the whole story here, but He did give what begins the process of salvation. Jesus proclaimed to Nicodemus, "You must be born from above." A couple of verses later He even mentioned "heavenly."

It should be easy to understand why there can be confusion over the words. We can interpret it only by what they can legitimately be translated into. They can be translated as "begotten again," "born again," "born anew," or "born from above." And this may seem a little bit wild, but it is true. It can even be understood as "from a beginning" or "at a beginning."

On the basis of how God deals with us in the rest of the New Testament, and after John 2 and 3, it must be understood as "born again," and not "begotten again." God never even one time speaks of us as being in a womb as an embryo or a fetus. The analogy used to teach must fit a spiritual reality and not a physical reality. Above all, the New Covenant is dominantly spiritual, not physical, and the Temple transition Jesus spoke of in chapter 2 is from physical to spiritual.

Everything is beginning to line up so that we understand that the New Covenant is a spiritual covenant, and even the *Temple* is going to be spiritual. The *church* is a spiritual organization. We are saved by grace through faith, which is spiritual. Everything is moving in that direction.

Converts in the New Testament are always dealt with as fully grown adults, who at times may be perceived as "young in the faith" and in need of growing in maturity, but always as an adult-child or son of God. We are always perceived as being already in the family, in *His* house, and in His Kingdom, but not in its fullness.

Nicodemus' error was sincere, and Herbert Armstrong's error was sincere. Herbert Armstrong made the same basic mistake in his analogy that Nicodemus did. He was attempting to force a truthful and logical spiritual reality into an illogical physical reality. That is why Nicodemus answered using a physical mother and a second birth from her womb.

Why did Nicodemus answer this way? It was because he did not yet have a spiritual mind. In fact, Herbert Armstrong did, and so even though he used the physical analogy, the lesson gotten out of it was dominantly spiritual. So the lesson was good. The end that he approached was okay.

We noted in John 3:5 that Jesus made a reference to water and spirit. Jesus undoubtedly referenced Ezekiel 36. Jesus always used the Old Testament as a basis for His operation.

Ezekiel 36:24-27 For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. 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.

Now in so doing, He is also implying baptism in water, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He is giving two things at the same time. He is referencing Ezekiel in the Old Testament as a foundation, but He is also referencing baptism in water and baptism in the spirit. What He is referencing here has double strength to it. This is how entrance into God's family and kingdom as a son of God is accomplished. It is accomplished through a spiritually cleansed heart and mind.

It is the converted spiritual mind that is enabled to see God. I began my ministry in the Church of the Great God with the sermon—"Do You See God?" The way we are using the word "see" is an absolute necessity for a son of God. Nicodemus did not see it. Herbert Armstrong did. It was just the analogy was weak. Herbert Armstrong saw God in this. It is the converted spiritual mind that is enabled to see, meaning to grasp or comprehend, and enter the Kingdom of God.

I am going to read verse 6 from three different Bibles in order to show that the so-called "hat-pin test" used in the Worldwide Church of God does not fit what Jesus is teaching Nicodemus here.

The Living Bible says: "Men can only reproduce human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven." Very interesting, very clear. Jesus said you must be born from above.

The Revised English Bible says: "Flesh can give birth only to flesh. It is spirit that gives birth to spirit."

The Philips Translation says the same as the *Revised English Version*.

I do not know whether you picked up on it there, but what Jesus is showing here is that kind reproduces after its kind. You cannot take something human and physical and have it reproduce a son of God. It takes spirit to produce spirit life. It takes spirit from God for Him to reproduce Himself in us. So again, the birth must be from above, and it is, as I mentioned in that last sermon, always handled in the male gender.

What is Jesus teaching us? He is teaching us that in order to understand this correctly we have got to think spiritually, not physically, or we will greatly reduce the miraculous element of what has happened as a result of God's merciful calling.

Let me just make a little side note here of God's merciful calling. I say this, because just this week I got a letter from a man from Cape Town, South Africa, and he wanted to know why, no matter whom he talked to— (By "talk to," he meant "try to convert to Christianity.")—he did not succeed in converting anyone. He said, "I have not had one success yet." Unless God is involved, he never will, because God has to produce this change. I hope that *thrills* you because of the change that has taken place in *your* mind. God Himself did that. So in order to understand this correctly, we have got to think spiritually, not physically, or we will reduce the miraculous element of what has happened to us as a result of God's merciful calling.

Verses 7 and 8 focus on this miraculous element. He compares the invisibility of being "born from above" with the invisibility of the wind. We cannot see the wind, but we *can* see the wind's effects. We cannot see being "born from above," and so it can be compared to the invisible wind. Now what is the effect of being born from above that we *can* see? We begin to see the fruit of the new creation being produced in the person's life. The convert *sees* God with far greater respect than ever before. He begins to *fear* God. He begins to bow before God's will. The person begins to seriously seek God, and he begins literally obeying God.

In the context of John 3, we are witnessing Nicodemus as the process is beginning. By the end of Jesus' ministry he was converted. He *saw* Jesus Christ as Messiah. He was born again. He was a convert. He was a son of God.

Let us take a look at some confirming scriptures that the apostle Paul wrote in II Corinthians 3.

II Corinthians 3:1-8 Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart. And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?

Of most interest to us for the purpose of this sermon are verses 2, 3, and 6. What Paul is saying in verses 2 and 3 is that the evidence that something spiritual and miraculous had occurred in the lives

of the members of the Corinthian congregation was their changed lives, and their lives, their conduct was as if they were reading a letter from the apostle Paul.

II Corinthians 3:9-11 For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

The lives of the Corinthian church members was showing, by their obedience and by their attitudes and by their perspective, that they now loved Christ, loved God's Word, loved one another, and even loved their enemy. This does not mean that they expressed those things perfectly, but Paul was describing what was literally happening. It was happening in the way they lived their lives.

Now back to verse 6 again. It was happening by means of a miraculous significant spiritual intervention in each of these people's lives because of what God initiated in them. They were born to a new and vastly different way of life, and it was not hidden as in a womb. You will notice that the word "Spirit" in verse 6 is capitalized because the translators understood that it was referring to the *Holy Spirit*. Notice what it does. **It gives life.** That perfectly coordinates with what Jesus said in John 3.

In verse 3 there is an interesting contrast between "stone" and "heart," or "hearts." In order to understand this you have got to think of born again in spiritual terms once again. It is because this born again event is of the *Holy Spirit*, not the human spirit. It is a miraculous operation engineered from heaven. Now a physical analogy will not fit for very long in this operation.

We are going to go back to the book of Ezekiel. Compare this in your mind with the verses we read in Ezekiel 36.

Ezekiel 11:19 Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh.

I want you to think of what we just read in II Corinthians 3 where Paul made a comparison between "stone" and "heart." What was Paul referring to? There are two possibilities, and he may have intended both of them.

What happens whenever a person is born again? I will tell you what happens. God begins to change that heart of stone to flesh. Just as a reminder, let us go back to Ezekiel 36 again.

Ezekiel 36:26 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.

This is the only thing, brethren, that enables us to understand the way God intends that we understand. He engineered a miraculous change, and it happened—*Bang!* Just like that, He begins to take away the heart of stone that is resistant to God.

When Paul was writing here in II Corinthians 3, it is hard to tell whether his primary focus was the stony heart of man Ezekiel is talking about that God will take away, or the stone that the Ten Commandments was written on. My own personal feeling is that his primary focus was on the heart and not on the stone on which the Ten Commandments were written.

What Paul was doing—and you have to kind of look at it through spiritual eyes—was emphasizing the internal/external, physical/spiritual contrast between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The difference is that God, by means of His personal calling and by His Spirit, is directly and personally involved in the New Covenant conversion—the new creation, a *spiritual* creation. Paul's contrasting of the terms "stone" and "heart" emphasize that factor, such as forgiveness of sins, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, access to God Himself, and the keeping of the commandments, which become part of the converted person's inner being under the New Covenant.

Let us go back to the New Testament to Romans 7. Notice what Paul said. Maybe this will mean a little bit more to you now. He is writing this to Christians. He is writing this to people who might be tempted to think that the law is done away. No it is not.

Romans 7:12 Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

Romans 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual.

In order to truly understand the law of God—which is spiritual—it takes a spiritual mind to truly understand it and to put it to use. Let me remind you again that things pertaining to the New Covenant have to be understood *spiritually*. They have to be thought of *spiritually*, and Jesus signaled that when He said, "*I* will become the Temple." He would not become the Temple until He was a spirit being. Everything about the New Covenant revolves around Him and the Temple, and *He* is the Temple.

II Corinthians 3:6 Who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant [God did this as part of His new creation.], not of the letter [referring to the Old Covenant] but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Under the Old Covenant, eternal life was not a reality that one could look forward to. That is a spiritual thing. When a person is born again, the seed of eternal life is already there, and it will grow, and in the end it will be part of that which enables us to be given *eternal* spiritual life.

Romans 2:27-29 And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Now what did Paul say there? In the Old Testament, God says, "I will circumcise your heart." The circumcision of the heart *is* being "born again." They are one and the same thing. It is completely a spiritual operation having nothing to do with anything that is on the outside, on nothing that is external. It is the circumcision of the heart that matters, and it matters if one is going to make the New Covenant with God.

Everything in this making the New Covenant with God from beginning to end is spiritual in nature. So you begin to see that a physical analogy of being in the womb does not fit. This is a spiritual operation. It is something that takes place in the mind, in the heart, in the attitude, in the perspective, in the obedience. That is the fruit.

One of the more vivid illustrations of the difference between the two covenants that you might want to consider is what happened at Mount Sinai. Moses had a spiritual mind. Joshua had a spiritual mind. It even says he had a different spirit from the other Israelites. He was converted. As they were up on the mount, in God's presence, and God was giving them the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone, what were the unconverted Israelites doing at the base of the mount? They were bowing down before the idol. They still had hearts of stone.

The life given by the Holy Spirit is spiritual life given to one already physically living. This miraculous intervention from God is evidenced by the person beginning to see, grasp, and understand the true intent of God, His purposes, and operations. The convert also begins to voluntarily give his cooperation as a co-worker in God's new creation. This the Israelites steadfastly resisted from the beginning to the end of their relationship with God except those God was truly converting.

II Corinthians 3:12-18 Therefore, since we have such hope [hope of eternal life. God is in us. His Spirit is there. We can see what He is doing.], we use great boldness of speech [He is referring primarily to himself and his fellow ministers.]—unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. [We can see. They cannot.] But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord [when God calls and grants repentance and the person accepts that and repents], the veil is taken away. [He begins to be able to see God.] Now the Lord is the Spirit [The Spirit that gives life is the Lord.]; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty [John 8]. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed [not born as in a resurrection] into the same image from glory to glory [from the glory we had before we were converted to the glory of the new], just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Everything in our conversion has to do with whether or not God engineered it. So when God begins to reveal Himself, the veil is taken away, and however vaguely we are seen at the beginning, it nonetheless leads to and produces our conversion.

Now because God is, by His Spirit, actually in us, that transformation from spiritual blindness to the glory of spiritual sight and being in the image of Jesus Christ becomes a reality. Now answer this. Is being born again a significant spiritual change, or what?

Let us look at this operation from another perspective that shows that being born again is a birth and not a begetting. We are going to go to the book of Romans.

Romans 6:1-14 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in 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, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Is it possible for a fetus to have a relationship with *anybody*? Think on that.

There is a change of subject material between Romans 5 and Romans 6. In chapter 5, the subject is justification and its fruit. The fruit of justification is peace with God. In chapter 6, the subject is holiness, or sanctification. Now sanctification requires actual real life experiences, and those actual and real life experiences are within a relationship with Jesus Christ and other people; primarily with Christ, but also with other people.

Now does a fetus have a relationship with anybody? How does a fetus in a womb have actual living experiences? Can a fetus come out of sin? Can a fetus repent? Can a fetus give love? Can a fetus accept teaching? It cannot. Those are things that happen after a person is born.

The teaching in Romans 6 primarily applies to a new convert, but it is a new *adult* convert—one who is free to live his life making choices. So the subject is, "How should the newly converted person live his life?" That is what Paul is answering in Romans 6, and what is the answer? The convert is to quit sinning.

Paul first reminds all that are "in Christ" (you and me), that they spiritually died to sin. It is a spiritual death, and we showed this by being baptized—a symbol of being buried in water. Why? So that when we came up out of the water we might walk in newness of life. Fetuses do not walk. It is not a begettal. It is a birth, a new beginning. We are beginning to see now one of those possibilities of interpreting John 3:3 as "a new beginning." Fetuses do not conduct their life (that is, walk), making choices. Adults do.

Here is the picture. The wages of sin is death, and when one dies the law has claimed its penalty, and they are buried. The sins are forgiven upon death. Now Christ *literally* died, was buried, and rose again a new spiritual being. He was not born. He was a new spiritual being "transformed," as I Corinthians said. We will get back to that a little bit later if I have the time.

In order to make a lasting impression on us, God requires that we act this out with water as the means of burial. Since we died in Christ, our sins are forgiven, and when we rise from the water we are an entirely new person ready to receive God's Holy Spirit; but physically, brethren, nothing has changed. It is all a spiritual operation. The old self is buried, and our new self—the new creation—rises from the water as a type of Christ's resurrection from death. He was resurrected a whole adult being. Now the entire idea is that we come up out of the water in order to live *with* Christ as His brother in the same family, and not as a fetus; thus, we are not merely begotten, we are *born* from above.

We are going to go from here to something that is related and take a look at how the Bible uses the term "firstborn," and it may not be what you thought in the past, because, depending on the context, "firstborn" may not be indicating a literal birth at all.

Turn with me to Colossians 1:15. To me, this one is really exciting. This is describing Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:15-20 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

This context demonstrates actually very clearly that just because the term "firstborn" is used does not mean that one is literally born as happens physically to all mammals. Verse 15 especially makes this clear. How can the Creator possibly have been born before all things? He *created* them! How is this using the term "firstborn"? It is using it to indicate preeminence. He is preeminent because He made them. They did not have any term for that, so they used the term "firstborn." He had preeminence.

In verse 18 it uses the term again, but it supplies the answer as to why the Greeks used the term in this manner. They used the term to indicate preeminence, priority. It means "first in rank." It means "from a beginning."

In verses 15-17, Paul shows Christ is preeminent over the physical creation by virtue of Him being the Creator. In verses 18-20, Paul shows Christ as being preeminent in God's plan of redemption by virtue of Him being the Savior-Redeemer.

Christ was *transformed* in His resurrection, as in I Corinthians 15 where it clearly says "from being physically dead to the fullness of spiritual right and body." He was transformed. That is exactly the word Paul used. He was not "born" into the Kingdom of God as humans are born in this life.

Jesus indeed was Mary's firstborn, but there the situation was entirely physical, and it was human in nature. The baby Jesus literally was born into this world from Mary's womb. It is when we move into the spiritual reality that the use of the term "firstborn" changes. Spirit beings are not born. They are created. Angels are created, and neither marry nor are given in marriage. Spirit beings are created, transformed. They come into existence. You know that is true from the angels. They are spirit beings. Have you ever read of any of them being born? No. They are created. "Born" simply means "to come into existence." It means "to be delivered from a beginning."

Let us go back to I Corinthians 15. It is interesting the way this is worded.

I Corinthians 15:42-44 So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised [not born; raised] in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. . . .

Paul could have very easily used the term "born," but he did not. He specifically avoided it, and we are going to see why in just a second.

I Corinthians 15:44-45 . . . There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being [a living spirit]." . . .

Brethren, was Adam born? He was not born.

I Corinthians 15:45 . . . The last Adam [Jesus Christ] became a life-giving spirit.

Jesus Christ, like Adam, was not born. He was transformed when He was resurrected from physical to spiritual. He was *raised*. He was not born. But "firstborn" is used in relation to Him in His resurrected state. It is referring to His preeminence. He is first, from a beginning, before anybody else.

Turn to Romans 8:29-30. Again, "firstborn" is not indicating literal birth. It is being used to show Jesus Christ's preeminence over all who follow Him into the family of God, and there are many who are going to be added.

Romans 8:29-30 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

I said that this was kind of exciting. Let us go to Hebrews 12. I told you right at the beginning of this sermon what the born again experience looked like from God's point of view. We are to look at it from God's point of view. How does *He* look at us?

Hebrews 12:22-23 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect.

It means the church of God—the church as the assembly of the Firstborn. How could the author of Hebrews, who was possibly the apostle Paul, write that? Well, the answer to this is given to us in Ephesians 1. He is talking about Jesus Christ here.

Ephesians 1:21-23 Far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

What is this teaching us? It is teaching us that when we are part of the church, the next step is that we become part of Christ's body. In fact, as it says here, we fill Him to the full. He is the Head, and then His body is put together with all of us as being a part of it, and if you get what Peter taught about us being part of the Temple as well—we are a part of it—we fill Jesus Christ out, making Him full. But in Hebrews 12:22-23, since we are all part of the body of Jesus Christ, the entire church is considered the firstborn, because that is what Christ is.

What preeminence that gives us, that we become part of *Him* who is preeminent over everything! We are preeminent right along side of Him, and that we are given the right of inheritance of the Firstborn, and we share with Him the double honor that is going to come to Him. Boy! That is exciting that God thinks of us in that way. Can anything more be given to a human being?

You can chase this out in Revelation 14.

Revelation 14:1-4 Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.

Everywhere Christ goes, we go. We are part of it forever, and ever, and ever, and ever. That is how closely we are associated with Him because we are part of the Firstborn. That is the way God looks at us, and this is why we have to face stiffer tests than anybody else who will ever come along. We are having the honor of being part of the Firstborn, and we will always have that preeminence.

The best way I think to just summarize this "born again" doctrine is; first of all, completely detach it from anything physical. Being "born from above" is the best understanding of John 3:3. It represents a real significant spiritual change in a person's heart, engineered by God in His calling of the person. It represents a new beginning. A new person, a new creation is underway.

Being born again involves nothing physical; therefore, a begettal-womb-birth analogy breaks down, and it creates misunderstanding. Actually, brethren, it holds us back. God speaks to us in His Word as adult children capable of making adult choices through education in His Word and by the power of His Spirit.

And since we are perceived as adults, this places the major responsibility for obedience on us. It tends to give us no excuse for blaming the church, because we are part of Christ *far more* than we are part of the church. We must answer to Him because *He* is our Savior, He is our government, and we are individually, personally directly responsible to Him.