

How does one become a "Born Again Christian?"

## Just What Is "Born Again"?

1. If you watch the speakers on Trinity Broadcasting Network, you will hear most of the speakers urge their listeners to be born again. If you have any knowledge of the scriptures, you know the speakers are referring to our Lord's conversation with Nicodemus. Will you please listen to the incident as recorded by the apostle John? "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verify, verily, I say unto you, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus says unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a man be born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto you, You must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you can hear the sound thereof, but cannot tell where it comes from nor where it goes; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:1-8).

Theologians and preachers-except modern liberals-generally agree that men must be born again to enter the kingdom of God. Most of them preach that biblical truth with great conviction. But in many cases, they do not bother to explain how the new birth takes place. Or if they do explain, they give the wrong explanation. For example, Dr. Dallas Willard's book, Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), says "Human beings, 'born of water' (John 3:5)-that is, through natural birth-are alive in the flesh, in the biological and psychological realm of nature... They can however be born a second time" (p. 149). I am not questioning Dr. Willard's use of the term "a second time." But was Jesus speaking of the "natural birth" when he used the term "born of water"? If that is what he meant, then his teaching is very confusing. Jesus was talking with a man who had already experienced the natural birth. Yet Jesus informed him, "Except a man be born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Being born of water was something Nicodemus had to do-not something he had already done.

On Sunday, May 21, 2000, Ray Waddle wrote an article for The Tennessean on the topic I am discussing with you today, "Just What Is 'Born Again?'" It is my judgment that Ray Waddle, Religion Editor of The Tennessean was not attempting to resolve the differences over the meaning of the term "born again." He may know the differences that exist in the religious world, but I doubt if he was trying to convince anyone of the significance of the term. Waddle mentions the fact that Billy Graham preacher "born-again salvation" (p. 19-A). Waddle then proceeds to record conversations he has had with various religious leaders in the city of Nashville. I shall not attempt to review all of these conversations, but I do want to mention a few.

One Baptist preacher said "born again" means "changing the way you think about the physical and spiritual world." He explains further: "The spiritual world calls us to love everybody. You can't see or taste the born-again experience, but you know it is happening by the way you love other people" (p. 19-A). I am not for one moment questioning the sincerity of that preacher's beliefs, but is that a legitimate definition of what it means to be born again? If it is, then cultic groups qualify as being born again. Many cultic members have had life-changing experience. Through their beliefs they have come to love everybody. I would say the same is true of many of the adherents of the great eastern religions. Does that mean the members of cultic groups and of the eastern religions are born again or even claim to be born again? If we are truly born again, we will love all people and seek to bring them into the kingdom of Christ. But just because a person loves everybody does not mean he is born again.

Waddle provides the following quote from a woman who attended Billy Graham's 1954 crusade in Nashville: "I knew I was born again because I wanted to tell everybody I saw about the power of Jesus

Christ" (p. 19-A). There are people in our world who make no claims about being born again but who want to tell others about the power of Jesus Christ. I remember from my childhood a man who loved to talk about Jesus Christ and his church, but was not a member of any church. If you had asked him if he had been born again, he would have answered in the negative. He did not obey the gospel until the latter part of his life. Was he born again just because he wanted to tell others about the power of Jesus Christ? The woman's view of what it means to be born again is an emotional response-not a biblical one.

Waddle says most evangelicals rely on a prayer to express their desire to change and to acknowledge Jesus as their Savior. He says the genius of the prayer lies in its simplicity. There is a serious problem with the so-called "sinner's prayer": It has absolutely no scriptural basis. Nobody can turn to the great book of conversions-the book of Acts-and find one example of anyone's uttering the sinner's prayer. But does not calling on the name of the Lord justify men's using the sinner's prayer? It does not if Jesus meant what he said in Matthew 7:21. "Not everyone who says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Confessing the name of Jesus is not enough. You must do the will of the Father who is in heaven. You are not born again just by believing or just by expressing your faith; you must obey the gospel to be saved. Faith alone is a dead faith (Jas. 2:17). Can dead faith save a person?

In John 3, Jesus does not tell us exactly what is involved in being born again. He does say, "Except a man be born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). He does not explain what being born of the water and the Spirit means. So where do we go in the scriptures to learn the meaning of being born again? Since Acts of the Apostles was written specifically to provide men with God's plan for saving man, then we must examine the examples of conversions in that book. Act 2, as every serious Bible student knows, records the events on the day of Pentecost-the birthday of the church. The apostle Peter preached a powerful sermon that concluded with these words: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God has made this same Jesus whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). The Jews realized that they had killed the Messiah for whom they had been waiting so long. So they said to Peter and to the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" By divine inspiration Peter commanded them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

The response of the Jews was overwhelming. "Then they who gladly received the word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:26-41). When the Jews believed in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, repented of their sins and were baptized for the remission of their sins, were they born again? I am fully aware that Peter did not use the expression "born again" in his speech to the Jews in Jerusalem, but is there any possibility he was not telling the Jews on Pentecost what they had to do to be born again? Jesus used highly figurative speech in his discussion with Nicodemus, but Peter used ordinary language. Was he not explaining what the Jews had to do to be born again? Surely no one would argue that Jesus gave one way for men to be saved and Peter gave another. The apostle Peter was making an application of what it means to be born again.

Acts 8 contains the record of three conversions-the Samaritans, Simon the sorcerer and the Ethiopian eunuch. I shall look briefly at the conversion of the Samaritans and of the Ethiopian eunuch. The persecution that arose around the martyrdom of Stephen drove the disciples to many distant places. Philip who is later called "Philip the evangelist" "went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them." Philip did not tell the Samaritans to be born again. He spoke to them about the kingdom of God, about the name of Christ and about baptism. Did Philip tell the Samaritans to believe and be baptized and that would mean they were born again? If he mentioned being born again, we have no record of it. But the word of God says, "When they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:4-5, 12). When the Samaritans believed and were baptized, were they born again? If they were not, had Philip failed in his duty to tell them how to be born again?

The Ethiopian eunuch was riding along in his chariot reading the great book of Isaiah. The place in the scriptures he was reading was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: in his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? For his life is taken from the land of the living" (Acts 8:33-34). The eunuch did not

know the meaning of what he was reading. So he asked the preacher: "Of whom is the prophet speaking? Is he speaking of himself, or of some other man?" "Then Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:28-35). As the two of them rode along in the eunuch's chariot, they came to water. The eunuch said to the preacher, "Here is water: what hinders me from being baptized?" The preacher responded: "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The preacher and the alien sinner went down into the water. The preacher baptized the eunuch. The eunuch had the assurance that his sins had been forgiven. He went on his way rejoicing.

On the basis of this brief recitation of the facts in these two conversions, do you believe the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch were born again? Philip did not say, either to the Samaritans or to the eunuch, "You must be born again." So far as we know, he did not mention the water and the Spirit. He must have told them to be baptized in the name of Jesus for the remission of their sins. When they had responded by obeying the Lord in baptism, they were born again. Their sins were remitted; they were added to the church of the living God (1 Cor. 12:13); they put on Christ (Gal. 3:26-27) and they were saved (1 Pet. 3:21). How much simpler can the truth be?

The Greek word (*gennao*) translated "born" appears ninety-seven times in the New Testament. Forty times the word is used in Christ's genealogy (Mt. 1:2-16). In Matthew 1, the word is used in a literal sense. I want to emphasize its use in a figurative sense. Paul told the Corinthians: "For though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you have not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel" (1 Cor. 4:15). Only when the gospel is planted in the hearts of men and women can it bring about the new birth. Peter uses the Greek word *anagennao* (which means to be born again) in the following verses: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection from the dead... Seeing you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that you love one another with a pure heart fervently: being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which lives and abides forever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you" (1 Pet. 1:3, 22-23, 25).

A summary of what we have learned today about being born again should be helpful. Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Marvel not that I said unto you, You must be born again" (John 3:7). Being born again is not one option among many for those who want to enter into the kingdom of heaven. If it were one alternative among many, Jesus would not have used the word "must." That word in the Greek means "it is necessary." There is simply no way to go to heaven without being born again. But what does that mean? Is one born again when he prays, "Lord, I know I am a sinner. I know you died for my sins. I now confess my sins and ask you to forgive me. I know you have forgiven my sins because I asked you to do so?" Those who utter the sinner's prayer may be as honest as the day is long, but no one can find such teaching in scripture. The sinner's prayer is man's invention-not God's. Do you want to depend on man's way or God's?

Several of the passages I have read to you today strongly emphasize the place of the word in the new birth. According to Paul, those who desire to experience the new birth are begotten by the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15). Peter says we are born again, not by corruptible seed, but by incorruptible, by the word of God, which lives and abides forever. He then explains that the word he had in mind was the gospel (1 Pet. 1:23, 25). Where the gospel is not preached, men and women cannot be born again. That rules out the religious pluralism that is sweeping many modern churches, including some churches of Christ. Please listen carefully as I outline the steps that lead to the new birth.

It ought to be evident from the passages that I have just read to you that the alien sinner must hear the word of almighty God. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Is it significant that every case of conversion in the book of Acts involved the preaching of the word. Luke records this information about the conversion of the Corinthians. "And when Silas and Timothy were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ... And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized" (Acts 18:5, 8). How could the Corinthians or anyone else obey a gospel they never had heard?

As essential as hearing is to the new birth, it is not adequate. James tells us very plainly: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any man be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholds himself, and goes his own way, and forgets what manner of man he was. But whoso looks into the perfect law of liberty, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the word, this man shall be blessed in his deed" (Jas. 1:22-25).

When honest people hear the word, they will believe. All Bible readers know about the necessity of believing. "Without faith it is impossible to please him; for he who comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them who diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). There is no possibility of anyone's being saved if he does not believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (John 8:24). The alien sinner must repent or he will perish (Lk. 13:3, 5).

The scriptures repeatedly emphasize the essentiality of baptism. Contrary to what some have implied, baptism is not the new birth. But there can be no new birth without it, unless a man can be born again while he remains in his old sins. Baptism is that final step that wipes our alien sins away and makes us members of the body of Jesus Christ. Jesus made that truth too plain for anyone to dispute. "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved; but he who does not believe shall be condemned" (Mk. 16:16). Ananias, a God-sent preacher, said to Saul of Tarsus: "Why are you waiting? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). Saul was not born again until he had been baptized. The same applies to all who would come to Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.