

December 5, 2021

The New Birth

*“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, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be **born again** he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith 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 thee, Except a man be born of **water** and of the **Spirit**, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:1-5).*

Surely, in view of that which is taught in the preceding Scriptures, no one can question the importance of the new birth. Jesus plainly said, *“except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God”* (John 3:5). And, for that matter, the subject of the new birth, by multitudes, is regarded as an item of great importance, with the term *“born again”* being widely used. Charles Colson, the self-acknowledged “White House Hatchet Man,” supposedly experienced the *“new birth”* following the Watergate episode, and then wrote a book entitled **“Born Again.”** Different ones describe themselves as “born again Christians.” Incidentally, “born again Christian” is redundant. After all, what does one become when he is *“born again,”* and what other kind of *“Christian”* exists than the *“born again”* kind?

However, though we hear repeated mention of the “new birth” and its importance emphasized, it is a sad but true fact that but few people understand what it is, or how to experience the new birth. Obviously, this is a subject that merits our diligent study.

Nicodemus Had Difficulty

Many acknowledge difficulty in understanding the new birth. They are not alone. Nicodemus, to whom these truths were first preached, had difficulty. There are several probable reasons for his difficulty, such as:

1. the problem of distinguishing between the “inward man” and the “outward man” (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16). Man has a dual nature which is clearly indicated by what takes place at death, at which time the body *“formed by the dust of the ground”* (Gen. 2:7) returns *“to the earth,”* and the spirit returns *“unto God who gave it”* (Eccl. 12:7). That Nicodemus was merely thinking about the *“outward man”* is implied by his question, *“how can a **man** be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb and be born”* (v. 4)?.

2. The problem of making a literal application of a word which the Lord used figuratively. Herein the Lord presented the plan of salvation under the figure of a birth. Many ridicule the idea of the Lord using figurative language. Yet we used figures of speech all the time. For example, have you ever heard people referred to as “foxy,” “a pain in the neck,” or “bull headed?” These are simply figures of speech coined for the purpose of conveying a message. And what more appropriate description could be given of one being **saved** than that of being *“born again,”* a term signifying a new beginning, a spiritual birth?

3. Then, too, it is probable that Nicodemus had difficulty understanding the nature of the birth that admits one into the “kingdom of God” because he misunderstood the

nature of the kingdom itself. It is a fact that the average Jew in the first century believed the Messiah would set up an earthly kingdom. In fact, on one occasion, they even sought to take Jesus “*by force to make him a king*” (John 6:15). They had anticipated a physical kingdom which would be ruled by force, and they desired a king who would deliver them from their Roman oppressors. Their preconceived ideas of the Messiah to come ill prepared them to accept a babe in a manger, Who would die on a cross in order to make possible their deliverance from **sin!**

People Today Have Difficulty.

Why? For the same reasons as did Nicodemus, as well as for the additional problem of believing that the whole process is incomprehensible. Of course, if it is incomprehensible, then human responsibility is eliminated — eliminated on the basis of “if you can’t understand it, you can’t do anything about it!” However, as we shall note, the new birth (or what is involved in being “*born again*”) can be understood!

What We Are Discussing:

In substance, we are discussing **one birth**, which consists of **two elements**, “*water*” and “*Spirit*.” Hence, in order to know what is involved in the new birth, we need to know the significance of the two elements. We shall discuss “*Spirit*” first.

1. “*Spirit*.” The article “*the*” which modifies “*Spirit*” in John 3:5 identifies “*the Spirit*” as the Spirit; specifically, the Holy Spirit. Our Lord, prior to His departure, promised the apostles that upon His return to the Father He would send the Comforter or the “*Spirit of truth*.” This “*Comforter*” would teach them “*all things*,” bring to their “*remembrance*” what Jesus had taught them, “*testify*” of Jesus, and guide the apostles “*into all truth*” (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). Briefly, we can say of a certainty that the work of the **Holy Spirit** was to reveal and to confirm the truth.

But, we ask, what is the function of the truth revealed? It is that of **begetting!** Hence, Paul could say to the saints at Corinth, “*I have begotten you through the gospel*” (I Cor. 4:15), and James could write of having been **begotten** “*with the word of truth*” (Jas. 1:18). The “*word of truth*,” then, is the instrument the Holy Spirit uses to penetrate, prick, and to change the human heart.

2. “*Water*.” To what does “*water*” refer in John 3:5? Well, what do you think it means when you see it written on a piece of paper, or when you pay your water bill? And what does it mean in verse 23 of this same chapter wherein we read that “*John also was baptizing in Enon near to Salem, because there was much water there?*”

“But,” some asks, “isn’t ‘water’ used figuratively at times?” Yes, in John 4:6-14 “*water*” is used both literally and figuratively. Jesus asked to drink of the literal water from Jacob’s well, and He informed the woman at the well of the “*living water*” of which one may drink and “*never thirst*.” However, in this incident we observe that when “*water*” is used in some way other than in its literal sense, it is clearly indicated by the context wherein it occurs. But nothing is said in the context of John 3:5 to even remotely suggest that “*water*” means anything other than just plain **water!**

Why Change the Meaning of ‘Water?’

From reading the writings of modern religionists, it is evident that many are trying to “explain away” the meaning of “*water*” in John 3:5. Some say “*born of water*” just refers to one’s fleshly birth. However, Nicodemus knew better than that, for he asked “*how can a man be*

born when he is old? Also Jesus said, “Except a **man** be born of water and...” Surely Jesus was not saying, “Except you have been **born** you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” No one can be “**born again**” (John 3:5) who has not been born once! Others say “*born of water*” means to have been born of the word, but this is not what the passage says. Then, too, if that is true, one is made to wonder if “*water*” also means “**word**” in verse 23, meaning that John baptized in Enon because there was much **word** there! That does not make even good nonsense!

But **why** do people try to change the meaning of “*water*?” I think the reason is inadvertently given on page 137 of **the Pulpit Commentary** of the gospel of John. Concerning this verse, the water said, “**if** ‘*water*’ in this text means baptism, **then** baptism is **necessary** to salvation.”

In this statement, you find the reason for much of the confusion on John 3:5. These people know that “*water*” in the New Testament is connected with baptism (cf. Acts 8:39; 10:47). So if “*water*” in John 3:5 actually means **water**, then that means that one can’t be saved unless he is baptized! They agree one must be born again to be saved, but they have already decided that baptism is not essential to salvation. Perhaps this is the reason why Billy Graham, in his book, **Peace With God**, wrote an entire chapter on “**The New Birth**,” and did not even once use the word “*water*” with reference to the New Birth! How can one teach what **Jesus** taught on the new birth if he refuses to use the **words** Jesus used?

How Is Baptism Connected With a Birth?

In any birth there are two elements: a begetting and a delivery. Through the word of truth revealed by “*the Spirit*,” we are begotten (Jas. 1:18). But there has to be a delivery, a coming forth. And this is accomplished when a person whose “*inward man*” is changed by the preaching of the gospel, comes from the watery grave of baptism to walk “*in newness of life*” (Rom. 6:3-4).

There is an analogy between Col. 1:18 and Rom.6:4. In the former we learn that Jesus is called “*the firstborn from the grave*.” His resurrection is likened to a birth from the grave. And in Rom. 6:4 we learn that one is “*raised*” from the watery grave wherein he had been “*buried...in baptism*.” This is why there is so much emphasis on baptism in the New Testament. It is part of the new birth, without which there can be no entrance into the kingdom of God!

Friend, we sincerely ask, have **you** been “*born again*?”

—B. Witherington