

## **“Are You Born Again?”: A Doctrine of Regeneration**

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Today is my birthday. My fifth birthday. Five years ago today (as I begin this essay), after growing up a preacher’s kid in a loving Christian home, after eighteen years of Christian education, after ten years when I didn’t attend church and lived the secular lifestyle, after ten years of marriage when I attended church faithfully, prayed and preached, talked a lot about religion and church affairs, but struggled with anger, fear, hatred, lust, ambition, greed, doubt, and depression—five years ago today, at the age of forty, I finally surrendered. I surrendered to God, surrendered both everything bad about me and everything good. I put everything into His hands and asked to receive everything from His hands. I renounced my citizenship in this world. I surrendered all. I accepted salvation. I accepted Christ as my substitute. I asked Him to live out *His* life within *me*. I joined God’s resistance movement, taking up spiritual arms against both Satan’s occupying forces and those in rebellion who are collaborators with the enemy.

At that moment I was born again.<sup>1</sup> Or at least that’s the way it seems to me. My anger and fear, my hatred and lust and ambition, my greed and doubt and

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<sup>1</sup> March 1993. Ellen G. White uses virtually the same definition. “When we submit ourselves to Christ, the heart is united with His heart, the will is merged in His will, the mind becomes one with His mind, the thoughts are brought into captivity to Him; we live His life. This is what it means to be clothed with the garment of His righteousness. . . . It is not enough for us to believe that Jesus is not an impostor, and that the religion of the Bible is no cunningly devised fable. We may believe that the name of Jesus is the only name under heaven whereby man may be saved, and yet we may not through faith make Him our personal Saviour. It is not enough to believe the theory of truth. It is not enough to make a profession of faith in Christ and have our names registered on the church roll. ‘He that keepeth His commandments dwelleth in Him, and He in him. And hereby we know that He abideth in us, by the Spirit which He hath given us.’ ‘Hereby we do know that we know Him if we keep His commandments.’ I John 3:24; 2:3. This is the genuine evidence of conversion. Whatever our profession, it amounts to nothing unless Christ is revealed in works of righteousness.” *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, [1900] 1941), 312–13.

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depression, were washed away in a moment. For the first time in years I felt peace and joy flow over me, around me. They've never left. Sure, there have been moments when I've fallen short, many times when I've had to repent. Sure, there have been times when I've neglected prayer and Bible study and felt less than Spirit-filled. But I've always come to my senses and hurried back home.

After all, I'm an adopted child of the King! I'm a prince! I'm no longer a citizen of earth, but an alien, a stranger. The world and I have different cultures, different customs. To me, earthlings often seem odd and perverse. I'm sure I sometimes seem the same to them. But I'm an ambassador, here on a mission with a message to deliver. And now that I've been born again, I have a story to tell and a burning desire to tell it, to bear witness. (Just fifteen minutes ago, as I write this sentence, I led a woman to surrender and rebirth and prayed with her in the hallway after New Testament class. What a thrill!)

**Are You "Born Again"?**

"Are you 'born again'?" When someone asks you that, what do you say? On what biblical basis? And how do you prove it?

I've been asked that question a few times, and for a long time it puzzled me, and I wasn't sure what to say.

When people ask us if we are "born again," they are really asking us either or both of two questions. Question one: "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" Question two: "Are you a part of the Evangelical/Fundamentalist subculture?"

We are all familiar with the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus recorded in John 3. We know we can't enter the kingdom of God unless we're born again (without quotes). Some of us have experienced a wonderful, emotional turning point that leads us to think we've been born again. Others of us assume we must have been born again at some point, as we're baptized church members. Many of us are very comfortable with the term "born again," and it may even be a common expression in our daily conversation. We may see it as a sort of "sheep vs. goats thing." Others of us feel a bit uncomfortable with the term, and we're not quite sure how to answer when we're asked if we're "born again."

Evangelicals and fundamentalists of many denominations, as I've said, often identify themselves as "born again Christians" as a way of distinguishing themselves, evidently, from other "so-called" Christians who have not been "born again" and so "cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Like me (five years old today), they can often recount the very minute they were suddenly "born again," and if this rebirth was not a powerful emotional experience, it is sometimes doubted by their peers. Journalists tend to associate being "born again" with certain political and social issues: Republican flag wavers against abortion and gun control and for prayer in public schools and capital punishment.

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**What Does It Mean?** When the Christian polltaker George Barna asks people if they are "born again," he says he is asking if they have accepted Christ as their Savior and as Lord of their lives and believe they will someday go to heaven. Is that what it means to be "born again"? Is that what the verse says? Isn't that what all Christians of all denominations believe (or should believe), even the ones who don't identify themselves as "born again"?

What does the Bible say? The best way of understanding God's Word is to let it interpret itself. Is there anything else in the Bible that will help us understand these important words of Jesus? Yes, there is!

Given the emphasis evangelicals place on being "born again," you would think the term is common in the Bible. Actually, it isn't. Both the King James Version (KJV) and the New International Version (NIV) use it only three times: twice when Nicodemus visits Jesus and once in 1 Peter 1:23. However, the words "regeneration," "renewal," "rebirth," and "born of God" are used as synonyms of "born again," so it is an important Bible teaching, and there are plenty of texts and contexts to guide us, with the help of the Holy Spirit. (When was the last time someone asked you, "Have you been regenerated?")

**A Key Text.** The most important text, of course, the one people are most likely to memorize, the one that makes them talk about being "born again," is Jesus' statement to Nicodemus in John 3:3, "Except a man be *born again*, he cannot see the kingdom of God." In the Greek, the "born again" used here is literally "born from above," but "born again" is an idiomatic meaning, and so well translated.<sup>2</sup> (In 1 Pet 1:3 and 23 the exact word meaning "born again" is used.)

Nicodemus chose to quibble with Jesus about a man entering his mother's womb a second time (v. 4). This is odd, as the rabbis considered Gentile converts to Judaism to have been reborn,<sup>3</sup> so the idea should have been familiar. He should have understood Jesus. At the least, he should have thought Jesus meant "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22).

When Jesus talks about "the kingdom of God," sometimes He means Himself, representing God's kingdom, or God's invasion of a fallen planet through Him to bring it to righteousness (Matt 12:28), what we could call the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Sometimes He means the body of believers who have accepted Him (Matt 21:31), what we could call the appropriation of the kingdom of God. Sometimes He means heaven, or the earth made new (Luke 13:28), what we could call the consummation of the kingdom of God. Sometimes Jesus seems to have more than one meaning in mind at once. We have to figure out what He means by the context.

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<sup>2</sup> See A. Ringwald's article on "Birth," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 1:179.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

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When Jesus said, “no one can *see* the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (NIV), He left the way open to think He meant, “You can’t see (understand) my teachings or my purpose here unless you have been born from above.” But that’s not what He meant. How do we know? Because Jesus then explained his terms, using a parallel expression: “Except a man be *born of water and of the Spirit*, he cannot *enter into* the kingdom of God” (v. 5). The words “enter into” makes it seem that He is talking about heaven. However, Jesus means all three aspects of the kingdom of God: entering *into Christ*, entering the resistance movement He was starting on earth, and entering into heaven.

**Born of Water.** The parallel terms “born again” and “born of water and of the Spirit” help us understand the meaning of “born again.” Some people have suggested that “born of water” refers to human birth, being born after “the water has broken,” but this is unlikely. It is much more likely that Jesus is talking about baptism, but to think He is saying “You can’t go to heaven unless you are baptized” would be superficial and legalistic.<sup>4</sup> What does the Bible say?

Baptism reminds us of John the Baptist, of course. Paul says, “John’s baptism was a baptism of *repentance*” (Acts 19:4). Mark 1:4 says that John came “preaching a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins.”

John was not the originator of baptism. Baptism was a frequent and important Jewish ceremony. Leviticus 15 specifies immersion in water for purification from physical ritual impurity. Ceremonial immersion symbolized the washing away of ritual uncleanness or sin. Such uncleanness as a woman’s menstruation was not always sin. If sin was involved, though, the *mikvah* (the word for both the bath and the bathtub) was supposed to be accompanied by repentance. It also symbolized a rebirth into a clean relationship with God. From here to John’s using baptism to symbolize repentance and a return to spiritual purity is only a short step.

Many large homes in Jerusalem had private pools for baptism by immersion for ceremonial purification. There were similar pools under the temple for the priests, and enough pools outside the temple gates to baptize a hundred people at once.<sup>5</sup> Baptism by immersion was also part of a ceremony recognizing the conversion of gentiles and their rebirth into the Jewish faith, though the Bible does not mention this.

Observant Jews in Jesus’ day usually baptized themselves, ducking under the water. Some people think that’s how John’s baptism was done, too, but Matt 3:13–14 teaches otherwise. Also, Acts 8:38 tells us that “Philip and the eunuch went down into the water” of a pool or stream beside the road when the Eunuch accepted Christ and requested baptism.

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<sup>4</sup> Ringwald says, “It is only with Justin and Irenaeus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. that rebirth became a synonym for baptism” (180).

<sup>5</sup> This is the most likely spot for the baptisms on the Day of Pentecost.

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John preached that those who had truly repented should “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:8), and Jesus too called for such fruit. By “born of water,” thus, Jesus meant a profound repentance, conversion, a sincere turning away from sin. (One of the two Greek words translated “repentance” [*metanpeō*] means “turning away,” and one of the two Hebrew words [*çûl*] means “turn,” although the Latin root of our word repentance [*repenitere*] is related to “penitence” and “penitentiary” and suggests change as a result of punishment—quite different from the freely-chosen turning away of the Hebrew and Greek.) *The continual turning away from whatever separates us from God is a crucial aspect of true faith.*<sup>6</sup> Such turning away, however, is in itself a gift from God, possible only through the Holy Spirit.

Paul defines the effects of this deep repentance when he rejoices that the letter he wrote rebuking the Corinthians led them to turn away from sin and toward God. He writes:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. (2 Cor 7:10–11, NIV)

Paul writes that “without holiness no-one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). True repentance turns from sin with loathing and gratefully embraces this holiness, rather than recoiling from it. With many of us, until we sink so low that we truly loathe ourselves and our sin and despair of doing anything about it, God can’t bring us to the point of full surrender to Him, full reliance on Him.

**Born of Spirit.** This leads to the second part of Christ’s statement. What about being born “of the Spirit”? John the Baptist said, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16, NIV). The most important manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers is the fiery boldness in bearing witness to Christ that follows true repentance and conversion (Acts 4:29–31). Those who are truly born again are consumed by the love of God and eager to turn away from anything that separates them from Him. The love of God (both His love for them and their love for Him) fills their minds and their thoughts, and they long to share it with others. This is a fruit of discipleship and a sign that one has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Thus, repentance, faith, and discipleship are closely connected.

There is, however, much more the Bible can teach us about being born again, other meanings to help us understand Christ’s words in John 3:3 and help

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<sup>6</sup> “As with John’s baptism, so earliest Christian baptism was an expression of *repentance and faith* (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12f.; 16:14f., 33f.; 18:8; 19:2f., cf. Heb. 6:1f.)” J. D. Douglas, et al, *New Bible Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), article on “Baptism,” 122.

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us decide if we have in fact been born again. Sometimes the term refers to the resurrection of the righteous when Christ returns. Matt. 19:28 says, “And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, that ye which have followed me, in the *regeneration* when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” The Greek word translated “regeneration” in this verse [*palingenesia*] does literally mean “the being born again” or “the rebirth.” Yet Jesus is talking about the resurrection of the dead when he returns, when we will be “born again” into immortal life (see 1 Cor 15:54). He is also talking about the “rebirth” of this world as a place of beauty and peace and holiness, “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1).

If this is what Jesus means when he speaks with Nicodemus, then He is reading Nicodemus’s mind, sensing that when Nicodemus confesses Him to be “a teacher come from God” (John 3:2), he is really asking Jesus if He is about to set up His messianic kingdom on earth. Jesus, thus, would be telling Nicodemus that he will only “see” and “enter into the kingdom of God” if he is resurrected. Could this be part of what Jesus means by “born again”? There are other clues to guide us.

**Reborn as Heirs of God.** “Born again” also means being reborn as heirs of God.

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. *He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life* (Titus 3:4–7 NIV).

This little passage offers us a good opportunity for what English teachers call a “close reading.” By reading it very carefully we will find eight important lessons on what Christ meant by being “born again.”

1. Salvation comes *by* God’s mercy, but it comes *through* being born again. Evidently, unless we are reborn, it is presumptuous to believe we are saved.

2. Being reborn is a sort of “*washing*,” like baptism, and in the Bible washing suggests being *cleansed* from something, primarily sin or defilement. So, we can’t be born again unless we are sinners, born wrong the first time—born with spiritual “birth defects”—and need cleansing. (Jesus was baptized at the Jordan, but He was not born again in this sense, as He was without sin.)

3. “*Rebirth*” and “*renewal*” are related concepts. On one hand, those who are truly reborn are also renewed, at once. As Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation*; the old has gone, the new has come!” On the other hand, the evidence of that instant renewal becomes more obvious as we mature in Christ, trust God more and more, and walk where He leads us. Paul is also talking about one of the purposes of being born again when he writes, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be

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*transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will”* (Rom 12:2 NIV). Until we are reborn, we can't understand God's will for us, and we certainly can't assent to it and approve of it. Being born again is the means by which our spiritual faculties are enabled to understand, accept, and do God's will.

4. This “rebirth” and “renewal” is worked out in us “by the Holy Spirit”—it is not our own work, not something we try to do so we will be acceptable, but something done in us and to us, if we are truly reborn. It changes us, though, makes us different. As Paul writes in Col 3:9b–10, “you have *taken off your old self with its practices* and have *put on the new self*, which is being *renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*”

5. This “rebirth” and “renewal” comes to us “through Jesus Christ our Savior”—it is because of Him that the Holy Spirit is able to renew us.

6. Through God's “grace,” or favor, because of His “kindness and love,” we *have been justified*, not only *declared* “righteous” but *made* “righteous,” but it was done for a reason, “so that . . .”

7. Because we are now righteous before God, in Christ, and because through Christ the Holy Spirit is available to “regenerate” and “renew” us, we can now, by accepting salvation, become “*heirs*” of God, *children* of God, who may rightly look forward to receiving *an inheritance*. John writes, in 1 John 5:19, “We *know* that we are *children of God*, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one,” or, as Acts 10:38 says, “under the power of the devil.” However, as “children of God,” *we don't have to obey* “the prince of this world.” We are under the law of our new country, our heavenly country, the law of grace. As Paul writes in Romans 6:14, “For *sin shall not be your master*, because you are not under law, but under grace.” If we are “born again” as spiritual heirs of God, we are able to say no to this world's temptations.

8. That inheritance as heirs is “*the hope of eternal life.*” In a very real sense, we *have eternal life now* by faith and hope, because we are *heirs* of eternal life, looking forward to our inheritance—but we are *not yet immortal* (1 Tim 6:16). However, because we have been adopted as children of God and are brothers and sisters of Christ, we are confident that *we will inherit immortality* (again, see 1 Cor. 15:54).

**Reborn as Children of God.** Yes, being “born again” means rebirth as “children of God.” What a wonderful thought! If we are “children of God,” then some of the Bible's counsel on children may prove useful in understanding what it means to be “born again.” Jesus said, “Except ye be *converted* [from a Latin word meaning “to turn thoroughly”; the Greek word, *straphēte* (from *strephomai*), means “turn yourself back”] and *become as little children*, ye shall *not enter* into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3 KJV). Conversion is the means by which we “become as little children.” Note that here is another thing Jesus says we must do to “enter the kingdom of heaven.” We must be “born again” and we

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must “become as little children.” What does this mean? While the text does not explain, I’ve noticed that little children have open, loving hearts. They respond to love and accept it without question. So should we. What else do they do?

Peter writes, “As *obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires* you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so *be holy in all you do*; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’ Since you call on a *Father* who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as *strangers* here in reverent fear” (1 Pet 1:14–17). We are to live as “strangers” because we don’t belong in this world. It’s not our home, and we should not be seduced by its customs. After all, we are children of the King! We are also called to be “*obedient children.*” We’re not called to be prodigal children, feeding swine in an unfriendly town far from our Father, but heirs and ambassadors.

The “humanists” of this world celebrate their ability to make their own decisions, to be kings in their castles, to decide for themselves whether what God asks makes sense. In the kingdom of God, this is treason, rebellion. Such rebellion seems to be what led to Lucifer’s downfall. In the Torah, the “laws of Moses,” rebellion against God is one of the most serious of offenses. Some of us act as if the fifth commandment were “*Humor thy father and thy mother,*” but God commands us to “honor,” and when we are “little children” that includes obedience. If children are to obey their earthly parents, what do we owe our heavenly Father? If we are truly “born again,” truly “children of God,” then we will obey. If Christ is truly our Lord, our Master, then we are His servants and slaves, as well as His children, and so doubly called to obey.

If we are truly “born again” “of the Spirit,” then we are no longer “worldly,” but “spiritual.” If we are still slaves to worldly things, perhaps we should reevaluate whether we are indeed “born again” and seek God’s grace with all our hearts and ask Him to convert and transform us. Paul writes, in Romans 7:24, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from *this body of death*? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, *I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.*” Paul is saying here that there is only one way to escape slavery “to the law of sin,” which leads to death, and that is to be “a slave to God’s law” by being “born again.” This does not mean becoming a legalist. It means being willing to be led “in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Ps 23:3). That is the direction in which true freedom in this world lies.

**How We Know.** John writes, “*This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did*” (1 John 2:5b–6 NIV). In a sense, thus, the purpose of taking up our cross and walking as Jesus walked is so we will *know* that we have indeed been “born again.” A feeling of overwhelming spiritual excitement sometimes comes with surrender to God, but such excitement is easily counterfeited by the evil one. However, when we find ourselves filled with compassion for others or overwhelmed by the desire to share the good news of salvation, when we find in our lives the evidence of victory

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over the addictions and bad habits which have made us stumble while walking with God, we find evidence that we have been “born again” and are now “spiritual.” As Paul writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to *offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship*” (Rom 12:1 NIV). When we offer up our bodies to God, imperfect though they be, when we surrender ourselves to God as living sacrifices, as an act of worship, He will transform us, making us “holy and pleasing,” both spiritually and physically. Paul writes to Timothy, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (1 Tim 3:12). Most Christians today face little persecution from family, acquaintances, or government. Those who are truly “born again,” completely submitted to Christ, are more likely to experience persecution, though, because they are more of a threat to the world and its ways.

**What It Is and What It Isn’t.** Regarding the battle between the world and the Spirit, Paul writes:

Since, then, you have been *raised with Christ* [i.e., “born again” according to the Spirit—not according to Adam’s seed, but Christ’s seed], set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. *Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life [reborn in Christ] is now hidden with Christ in God.* When Christ, who *is your life*, appears, *then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry* (Col 3:1–5 NIV).

If you are “born again,” you are born according to the Spirit, so you should consider yourself dead to the temptations of this world and allow God to work in you the victory which glorifies His name. If you find video games or sports or television or making money or possessing things more interesting than spending time with God and talking with Him and about Him, perhaps you should reconsider your path, ask yourself what you want from your relationship with your heavenly Father. If you say you’re “born again,” but you aren’t putting to death your earthly nature—or rather letting God by His grace put it to death for you—the Bible says you are not really “born again.” If you say you’re “born again” but you aren’t walking after the Spirit, if you are not turning away from the world, you are not “born again.”

On the other hand, you *are* “born again” if you are walking with God, having repented and turned away from the world—even if you don’t claim to be. Everyone who has truly accepted Christ, everyone who has enough faith to walk the way He asks us to walk, is “born again.” Whether or not they have experienced a sense of overwhelming emotion or can specify an exact time when this occurred doesn’t matter. What matters is that they walk with God through the Holy Spirit and not by their own power, which is impossible.

Anyone who claims to be “born again” but doesn’t walk in the Spirit, doesn’t submit to the Word and obey it to the extent the Spirit has led, isn’t

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“born again.” (As 1 John 2:29 says, “If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who *does what is right* has been born of him.”) Bear in mind, though, that surrender to God’s will leads to victory, leads to transformation, but not all at once. Paul writes in Heb 10:14, “by one sacrifice he has *made perfect for ever* those who are *being made holy*.” Those who are “born again” are “being made holy” in this life, a bit at a time, as they are willing to be led, but they can be confident of salvation, because in God’s eyes they are already “made perfect for ever” by Christ’s sacrifice.

**Living for Righteousness.** Being “born again” means “living for righteousness.” Why did Christ die for us? Peter tells us: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might *die to sins* and *live for righteousness*; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet 2:24–25 NIV). Literally, in the Greek, “so that we might die to sins” reads “that we *having died to sin* might *live for righteousness*.” If we are “born again” in the Spirit, then we are *already* dead to this world and strangers here, and we are called to *live* as if we were dead to sin, not responding to it. Through His death, Christ not only saved us but made it possible for us to “live for righteousness” now, thus experiencing salvation in this life, before the consummation of salvation when Christ returns. Note that Peter does not say that Christ saved us so we could go astray, but so that we could return to the flock and its Shepherd.

Paul writes to Titus:

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, *denying ungodliness and worldly lusts*, we should *live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world*; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself *a peculiar people, zealous of good works*” (Titus 2:11–14 KJV).

Not everyone who tries to live this way is “born again.” It’s possible for people to think they can “earn” salvation by living this way, and such people have not yet, perhaps, met their Savior and understood the gravity of their sin. However, this *is* the road those who are “born again” will be walking, according to God’s Word. Jesus said, “By their fruit you will know them” (Matt 7:16 NIV). “But *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. Against such things there is no law. *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires*. Since we *live by the Spirit*, let us *keep in step with the Spirit*” (Gal 5:22–25 NIV). “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. *Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them*” (Eph 5:8–11 NIV).

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For many years, even while attending church every week, I read the Bible only to criticize it, only to find errors, reasons to disbelieve. I also loved to criticize the church and its leaders and their motives. Being "born again," though, means accepting the Word of God as truth, as truth meant for *us*, not just for people long ago. (Paul writes, in 1 Cor 10:11 KJV, "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are *written for our admonition*, upon whom the ends of the world are come." That means they were written for *us* and can be applied to our lives today!)

**The Spirit and the Word.** How does the Holy Spirit reveal to us this rebirth which leads to seeing and entering the kingdom of God? How does He guide us in our "walk in the light" (1 John 1:17)? Some Christians assume that if God has something to say to them, He will impress His will on them and they will feel it. Perhaps they will hear a voice. Perhaps they will simply feel that a decision is right. However, this approach is highly unreliable, especially when people place these feelings above the Scriptures. The Bible offers a better way.

James writes, "He chose to *give us birth* [i.e., *born again*] through the *word of truth*, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created" (James 1:18 NIV). What does it mean to be reborn of God through "the word of truth"? The Bible tells us. Jesus said, "But when he, *the Spirit of truth*, comes, *he will guide you into all truth*. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13 NIV). What is that truth into which He will guide us? Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them [i.e., "make them holy"] through thy truth: *thy word is truth*" (John 17:17). Peter writes, "For you have been *born again*, not of *perishable seed*, but of *imperishable*, through the *living and enduring word of God* [Both Christ and the Bible] (1 Pet 1:23).

Thus, Jesus pleaded for the Father to show us the truth in the Scriptures, and He promised the Holy Spirit would lead us to that truth. The purpose of the Holy Spirit's leading is to *make us holy* by convincing us to follow the teachings of the Word, submit to God, and fully accept Salvation. Note that *the Spirit must guide according to the Word, or it's not the Holy Spirit, but another spirit*. (As I said earlier, a lot of people assume that being born again is always accompanied by powerful emotion. Often it is, but not always. You can't trust your emotions, but you can trust God's Word.)

**Born of God.** Being "born again" also means being "born of God." The apostle John speaks often of what it means to be "born of God," and by studying these verses, we can learn what it is to be "born again." John writes, at the beginning of his gospel, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become *children of God*—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but *born of God*" (John 1:12–13 NIV). Thus, rebirth comes of truly believing in Christ's name—believing enough to be willing to take up our cross and follow Him.

In 1 John especially John teaches what it means to be "born again" or "born of God." "If you know that he is righteous, you know that *everyone who does*

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*what is right has been born of him*" (2:29). This text specifies that it is those who do what is right—according to the light they have been given—who have been born again (see also Rom. 1:18–20). It does not say you are born again *by* doing what is right. If we compare the verse with others we have already discussed, we understand that doing what is right is part of how we *recognize* that we have in fact been "born of him."

John continues, "*No-one who is born of God will continue to sin*, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God" (3:9). This verse doesn't mean that Christians are incapable of sinning. Rather, John is saying, again, "by their fruits shall ye know them"—those who continue to live willingly in sin after realizing it is sin have not been "born of God." To persistently thwart the will of God is evidence that He is not truly your Father, even though you may claim that He is.

John writes, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. *Everyone who loves has been born of God* and knows God" (4:7). Thus, if we do not love others, we have evidence that we have not yet been born again. "*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God*, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well" (5:1). Here John is talking about *true* belief that results in fruit, as the next verse proves: ". . . for *everyone born of God overcomes the world*. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (5:4). By faith, John says, we *have* overcome the world. It's so certain that those who have been reborn can overcome the world that John writes it in both past tense and present. This overcoming is characterized by obeying God's commandments (vs. 3: "This is love for God: to obey his commands."). In Christ's letters to the seven churches in Revelation, all are urged to "overcome," so evidently overcoming is also something we must *continue* to do.

Finally, a wonderful promise: "We know that *anyone born of God does not continue to sin*; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him" (5:18). If we are truly born again, God gives us the power to say no to sin and its harm. We may still choose to turn away from God, we may all choose to return to sin, and all of us do, but not because we have to. Being born again *frees us* to walk with God without the evil one baying at our heels, if only we're willing to say no to his tempting, using the power to say no given us by the Spirit. The enemy may prowl "like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8); he may accuse us before our God day and night (Rev 12:10 NIV); and temptations will continue. Those who are born again, however, are freed of the constant, nagging temptation that often plagues those who have not yet surrendered to God and become His servants, under His protection.

In the Old Testament there is even a reference to *gentile nations* being reborn, reborn "in Zion," which is to say, reborn righteous, as sons and daughters of God. This ties in with Paul's teaching about "spiritual Israel" in Romans 11, where the *true* "Israel" is God's faithful ones around the world, whether Jew or Gentile. We find these words in Psalm 87:4–6 (NIV): "I will record Rahab and

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Babylon among those who acknowledge me—Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—and will say, 'This one was *born in Zion*.' Indeed, of Zion it will be said, 'This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.' The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: 'This one was born in Zion.' Selah." This is good news for the world. It is less good news for "Zion," except for "this one and that one." The "chosen people" who are not faithful will be "cut off," their places taken by the faithful Gentiles counted as having been "born in Zion" (see Rom 9:6, 11:17–24; Isa 19:19–25).

**When Are We Born Again?**

In summary, the Bible teaches that to be "born again" is to accept the heirship Christ offers and become children of God and citizens of a heavenly kingdom, then live in *this* world according to the rules and customs of *that* heavenly kingdom. This is done "by the Spirit." Being "born again" is not only something we *claim*, but something we *live*.

When does this happen? This is a hard question. Jesus defined being born again as being "born of water and of the Spirit" (John 3:5). As we have seen earlier, by "born of water" He meant baptism, but only in that it *symbolized* a profound repentance, turning away from the old life. Ideally, one should be baptized as soon as one has repented in this way, and one should receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit immediately afterward. I've seen this happen with people during evangelistic campaigns, and it often happens this way in third world countries, which is why their church membership is growing so fast. They've surrendered, they've been born again, they've caught fire, they've been disciplined, and they've gone out to make more disciples.

But it doesn't *always* work that way. If we make being born again and receiving the Holy Spirit synonymous with baptism, saying, "She's been baptized into the church, so she must be born again," then we have to ignore the many definitions of rebirth the Bible gives us. Also, we doom our church to life without the Spirit—the equivalent of death. No one wants to worship in a mausoleum among dead Christians.

When John baptized in the Jordan, baptism immediately followed repentance. Likewise with the Ethiopian eunuch baptized by Philip (Acts 8). Today, though, months often pass between repentance and baptism. It is also possible that baptism sometimes happens years before true repentance occurs. (This was my experience, even though for a decade before I was born again I saw growing evidence of God's work in my life. I loved God and believed in Him, and He gave me several notable victories—He freed me from rock music, from swearing, from alcohol—despite my failure to let Him entirely have His will with me. Was I "saved" then? I don't think I was born again, because when I truly surrendered to God, the results were breathtaking, in line with the New Testament evidence. But I was on the road, at least now and then.)

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What about the Spirit? When Paul went to Ephesus, he found there people who had been baptized with water but hadn't yet received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19). Peter and John also found this situation in Samaria (Acts 8:14–17).

What makes us fit for baptism? In many churches, in much evangelistic work, repentance has been replaced by acceptance of a set of propositional truths, and baptism is merely a graduation ceremony.<sup>7</sup> Many seem to think we are baptized into a denomination, rather than baptized into Christ, into the body of Christ, into His death and resurrection, and into rebirth as citizens of a heavenly kingdom and strangers in this strange land.

This is a terrible thing to say, but my impression is that based on the definitions given in the Bible, the great majority of Christians, including Evangelicals who proudly call themselves “born again,” have never truly understood the enormity of the gulf separating them from God. They have never truly repented, never fully surrendered themselves to God, and never been born again. For many, we see no evidence in their lives that they have been born again and received salvation. We don't find the fruits of the Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

**Accepting Jesus as Lord.** Recall George Barna's definition of being “born again”: people who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. A savior is a redeemer or rescuer. People in a tough situation are happy to be rescued, and accepting Christ as Savior sounds quite undemanding, unlikely to interfere with our lives. We cling to John 3:16 because it makes salvation seem so easy: just believe. (And we define belief, essentially, as a willingness to receive eternal life so long as nothing is asked of us or mere assent to the idea that Jesus is Christ.)

But what does it mean to accept Jesus as our Lord? In our free, democratic society, the word “Lord” has lost its meaning. In a quasi-feudal society, such as existed in most cultures in Christ's time, your lord was the person you served, the person you were duty bound to obey. If your lord said “Come,” you came. If

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<sup>7</sup> This choice sentence was given to me by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim as an annotation on an early draft of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> The following comment by Ellen White is from the *General Conference Bulletin* of 1893 (132): “It is a solemn statement that I make to the church, that not one in twenty whose names are registered upon the church books are prepared to close their earthly history, and would be as verily without God and without hope in the world as the common sinner. These are professedly serving God, but they are more earnestly serving mammon. This half-and-half work is a constant denying of Christ, rather than a confessing of Christ. So many have brought into the church their own unsubdued spirit, unrefined; their spiritual taste is perverted by their own immoral, debasing corruptions, symbolizing the world in spirit, in heart, in purpose, confirming themselves in lustful practices, and are full of deception through and through in their professed Christian life. Living as sinners, claiming to be Christians! Those who claim to be Christians and will confess Christ should come out from among them and touch not the unclean thing, and be separate.” In Ellen G. White, *Christian Service* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press), 41. We dare not imagine that the ratio today is any more favorable.

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your lord said "Follow me," you followed. If your lord said "Go," you went. If you wanted to rest but your lord said "Work in my vineyard," you worked.

Today, our Lord bids us "Come" to Him. Then He tells us to "Go" to the world. He says, "Follow Me." He says, "Work in my vineyard." If Christ is our Lord, we do what He asks of us. If we don't, someone else must be our lord. If we don't, we haven't been born again.<sup>9</sup>

We know from experience that giving birth takes time, and the moment of birth usually follows a good deal of pain. But the baby isn't born *while* it's coming out—it's not born *until* it's out. That's the way it is with being born again, too, though the pain is often spiritual rather than physical. Those of us who are married know that there has to be a lot of wooing before there can be a wedding. Being born again is a sort of marriage—the church's marriage to the Bridegroom, if seen in a personal sense, is a related metaphor—and sometimes Christ must spend decades wooing us before we finally give in and agree to belong to Him forevermore.

God knows our hearts. God looks at us sitting in our pews and knows if we are being drawn to Him. I can easily look at my own life and see how God won me to Him, step by step. (And on many of those steps I thought I had no further to go in this world.) I also know, though, that finally He led me to the edge of a figurative cliff and asked me to step off into His arms, and I did it.

But what of those who never take that step? What of those who come to church but are dead to the Word? What of those who preach the Word but live a lie?

God knows hearts, but we don't. We can be *certain* that if we have truly repented, if we have fully surrendered ourselves to God, if we see the fruits of the Spirit in our lives, if we are walking in the light, we have been born again and become heirs of salvation and sons and daughters of God. We have inherited eternal life.

If we do not have that evidence in our lives, but sense that we are being drawn closer, led step by step up the path of righteousness, we can pray that God knows we are approaching Him and will have mercy if we should die before we fall into God's arms. (I suspect that many people, like the thief on the cross, take that final leap in the last hours or moments before death, leaping in faith into the Heart of Love.)

If we are spiritually dead, even if we are baptized and pay a faithful tithe, even if we attend church weekly and are leaders, elders, deacons, our only hope of salvation is to fall on the Rock and be broken.

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<sup>9</sup> Ellen White writes, in her book *Faith and Works* (16), "Let this point be fully settled in every mind: If we accept Christ as a Redeemer, we must accept Him as a Ruler. We cannot have the assurance and perfect confiding trust in Christ as our Saviour until we acknowledge Him as our King and are obedient to His commandments. Thus we evidence our allegiance to God. We have the genuine ring of faith, for it is a working faith. It works by love."

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Salvation is as easy as falling off a log. But who wants to fall off a log? Salvation is as easy as skydiving for the first time. But we've always heard not to trust a parachute we haven't packed ourselves, and we can't pack this parachute—God packed it. Salvation is like winning a free vacation to Tahiti. But the tickets we're handed do us no good unless we're willing to go there and enjoy it.

Before we are born again we walk in darkness penetrated here and there by flashes of lightning and shafts of light. After we are born again we walk in a light sometimes obscured by clouds—clouds which are sometimes large and sometimes small, sometimes low and foggy and sometimes fleecy. But even if we are under a large and threatening cloud, in the distance, radiant, still we see the light, and we know by faith that in a little while we shall be out from under the shadow and back in the warm sun, if only we walk back toward the light.

When I visit the southern United States I sometimes find myself among people who speak with a southern accent. I pick up accents quite easily, and sometimes—especially when I'm under stress—I'll find myself speaking with a southern accent, too. I'm not trying to do it; I'm not trying to make fun of the accent; it simply happens, an influence of the environment.

Likewise, children of God—aliens and strangers in this world—sometimes find themselves speaking with a worldly accent, especially when they're under stress or temptation, even when they don't want to. This can sometimes help them fit it. But it's not really who they are.

When Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping visited Texas, he was delighted to be presented with and photographed in a cowboy hat. But that made him neither a cowboy nor a Texan. Likewise, children of God live in this world and make use of the tools and garments of this world as necessary, but that doesn't mean they are children of the devil again. However, frankly, Premier Deng looked pretty silly in that cowboy hat, and God's children also don't look quite right when they are in the world. They don't quite fit it. Aliens and strangers are easily spotted.

### **A Helpful Allegory: Faith of Jesus.**

Paul writes, in Galatians 2:16, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the *faith of Jesus Christ*, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the *faith of Christ*, and not by the works of the law" (KJV). The Greek word translated faith, *pistis*, also means faithfulness. The text in the original language does *not* say faith *in* Christ, but the *faith of* Christ. What does that mean?

It seems likely that Paul deliberately used this "faith [faithfulness] of Jesus Christ" phrase expecting his readers to catch an allusion to a ceremony which some of them would have experienced and many would know about, even though it is almost unknown today. It provides a useful metaphor or allegory of what Christ has done for us. Paul was referring to a Roman law known as *fidei*

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*commissum*, “the faithful commission” or “the commission of faith.”<sup>10</sup> The “faith of \_\_\_\_\_” formula was standard legal language found in *fidea commissum* contracts.

If this *fidei commissum* is in fact what Paul had in mind, it’s worth studying. Here’s how it worked. In Paul’s day there were a number of rich old Romans whose wives and children were dead. The state would inherit their money when they died unless they had an heir. Many of these men had faithful servants or friends whom they would like to adopt and name as their heirs, but the law said that a Roman citizen could only adopt another Roman citizen, and sometimes these servants or friends were not citizens.

So the Romans made a law which would help a citizen adopt a non-citizen. A Roman could now adopt a non-citizen if he would first give his inheritance to another Roman citizen, who would *faithfully* pass it on to the non-citizen the first man wanted to adopt. There was a risk, though. If the citizen made the second citizen his heir, with the understanding that the second citizen would faithfully pass on the inheritance, but the second citizen was not faithful and decided to keep the money himself, there was nothing the first citizen could do about it. This is why it was called the “commission of faith.” The rich man had to choose his faithful commissioner wisely.

However, even if the second citizen was faithful, there was more to the bargain. The person being adopted had to do three things to become the heir. First, he had to agree to take the first citizen’s name as his own. Second, he had to allow the first citizen to pay all of his debts. Third, he had to reach out his hand and accept the inheritance.

Paul’s argument in Galatians is that Jesus faithfully received the promise made to Abraham and passed it on to the Gentiles, allowing them (us) to become “heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29), but consider the implications for salvation. The Father wants to adopt us and make us His heirs, but the law says that only perfect citizens of heaven can inherit. The Father passes the inheritance on to Jesus, hoping that Jesus will be faithful and pass it on to us. Because Jesus is “faithful unto death,” He can pass on the inheritance to us, if we’re willing. But in order to receive that inheritance, we have to give up our own names (sons of the evil one) and accept God’s name (sons of God); we have to let God pay all our debts (Satan the accuser says we owe many debts, and he is right); and we have to accept the inheritance.

That’s what being born again is about. We are reborn as adopted children of God, our debts paid by Christ at Calvary. A lot of us don’t like the idea of someone else paying our debts. A debt reduction might be okay, but we want to

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Weber wrote about this in an appendix to his interesting book *Who’s Got the Truth* (Silver Spring: Home Study Institute, 1994). He got it from a scholarly article by Greer M. Taylor, called “The Function of ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ [PISTIS CHRISTOU] in Galatians” (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXXV [March 1966], pp. 58–76.)

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do our fair share. But that's not allowed. We have to let God pay it all, or the adoption cannot be completed.

Living like people who are born again is not what makes us born again. In fact, we can't successfully live that way *until* we are born again. But once we are adopted, once we are princes and princesses, we ought to start acting the part, acting like children of the King, dressing like children of the King, talking like children of the King, doing the princely work expected of children of the King.

Prince Charles didn't marry Lady Diana because she traveled around the world helping people, visiting the sick, and cutting ribbons. Those are things she began doing after she became a princess, because that's what princesses are supposed to do. Likewise, God wants to adopt us, at no charge to us, and then He wants to assign us some errands of mercy to a lost world. If we are truly born again, we will be happy to do them, and with practice we'll get better at it. It's not salvation by works. It's the difference between saying the word thanks and acting it out—one sounds grateful, but one *shows* grateful.

In Deut 30:19 Moses says, speaking for God, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore *choose life*." If I offered an extra ten good years of life, would you take it? What if I said to have it you have to walk down a path that will lead to giving up tobacco and alcohol, fat and sugar and meat, walking ten miles a day, and giving up your stressful job? Most people aren't willing to give up all that for ten years, even though the extra years of life are free. They'd be willing to have the ten years if they could stay as they are, but they aren't willing to be transformed.

Jesus says, "Follow Me," and He offers eternal life. We say we want eternal life, but are we willing to follow Him to where the eternal life is? He tells us it will lead to our being born again, being transformed into His image, and we may lose our love for the things we loved before. You now know what it means to be born again, and you know what it will do to your life, and you know it is the only way you can be sure of salvation.

So, are you born again? Are you willing to "choose life"?

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