

What Does It Mean To Be a Born Again Christian?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Hebrew people, once sought a night time interview with Jesus. He had been impressed with the Lord, hence declared:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (Jn. 3:2).

Christ never acknowledged the compliment. Rather, he went right to the heart of the matter and admonished the Jewish dignitary:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born again** he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (Jn. 3:3).

Nicodemus did not understand the nature of the Lord’s symbolic language, and so inquired:

“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (Jn. 3:4).

Jesus pointed out that the birth of which he spoke was of a spiritual nature. He announced:

“Except one be **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5).

Within the world of “Christendom” it is generally conceded that one must experience the **new birth** or **be born again** if he is to be saved. Our Lord certainly left no doubt about it when he emphasized:

“You [plural] **must be born again**” (Jn. 3:7; emphasis added).

But what does it mean to be born again? What constitutes the new birth?

What Does It Mean To Be Born Again?

There are three important phases connected with a birth experience:

- a begetting,
- a bringing forth, and
- the state into which one enters as a result of that process.

In the human arrangement, for example, there is the **implantation of seed** by the father, a **delivery** from the mother, and a **family relationship** subsequently enjoyed (with inheritance privileges).

Within this context Christ suggests each of these components. There is mention of: the Spirit, water, and the kingdom.

We confidently argue that the Lord here affirms the following:

1. One must be **begotten by the Spirit**, and that such is effected by the Word of God as the sacred message produces belief in a sincere heart.
2. Penitent faith, generated by the gospel, will lead one to **obey** the New Testament command to be **immersed in water**, thus identifying with Jesus’ birth from the dead (i.e. his resurrection — Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5).

3. All who yield to this divine plan become **citizens of the kingdom of Christ** (Col. 1:13), or members of his church (Mt. 16:18-19).

Let's address each of these matters.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The New Testament makes it clear that the Holy Spirit, operating through the medium of the Word of God, “begets” (in a manner of speaking) the individual who gladly receives that truth.

For example, James declares:

“Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures” (Jas. 1:18).

Further, note Peter's comment:

“[H]aving been begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the word of God, which lives and abides” (1 Pet. 1:23).

In one of his epistles to Corinth, Paul observes:

“For though you have ten thousand tutors in Christ, yet have you not many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I begat you through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15).

To these plain passages add this fact: the Scriptures clearly affirm that the Holy Spirit uses the **Word of truth** as his **instrument of operation** upon the human heart (cf. Eph. 6:17).

It thus becomes apparent that the term “Spirit” in John 3:5 is an allusion to the source of the spiritual seed that impacts the human heart by means of the gospel. This represents the initial phase of the conversion process.

NOTE: An accurate analysis of John 3:3ff will not allow the view—becoming increasingly popular with some—that “Spirit” in John 3:5 refers to a kind of “baptism in the Holy Spirit” (cf. Gibson 1988). The birth from the water is distinct from the implantation of the seed.

What is the Water of the New Birth?

To what does the word “water” refer in John 3:5? For many centuries following the apostolic age, there was no controversy concerning the significance of water in this passage.

The “church fathers” clearly understood it to denote baptism. The testimony of Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian, etc., could be cited to establish this point.

In his monumental work, *History of Infant Baptism*, William Wall, a leading scholar in the Church of England, asserted that not a single writer of antiquity denied the identification of the “water” of John 3:5 with baptism. He suggested that John Calvin was the first to disassociate the two items, and that Calvin even conceded that his interpretation was “new” (1862, 443).

Of course, subsequent to Calvin, numerous denominational clergymen have denied that baptism is an element of the new birth. This due, of course, to their doctrinal bias against the necessity of immersion for the remission of sins.

On the other hand, many scholars concede that the water of this passage is an allusion to baptism—though they would deny that baptism is an essential condition for salvation.

Under the term *hudos* (“water”), William Arndt and F. W. Gingrich note: “Of Christian baptism, the new birth . . . Jn. 3:5” (1967, 840).

It is interesting to reflect upon some of the bizarre speculations that have been offered in order to eliminate water baptism from this context. Here are a few of the novel ideas which attempt to identify the water as something other than baptism.

Water: A Symbol for the Holy Spirit

Some have suggested that water is but a symbol for the Spirit himself (cf. Bogard 1938, 138).

That would hardly be the case, since the Spirit is already mentioned in the passage. The Lord was not arguing that unless one “be born of Spirit and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

Water: A Symbol of the Blood of Christ

Others have contended that the water of John 3:5 is a figure for the blood of Christ (cf. Carroll 1978, 292).

There is no basis for such a theory. The apostle John, in one of his later writings, clearly distinguishes between water and blood (cf. 1 Jn. 5:8).

Water: The Literal Amniotic Fluid of Childbirth

Occasionally, it is asserted that the “water” of John 3:5 is a reference to the amniotic fluid that flows from the mother’s body prior to birth.

Such a wild view is easily refuted by the fact that whatever the **new birth process** was, the Jewish ruler had **not yet experienced it**. Obviously, however, he had been born of his mother already!

Moreover, such a theory would suggest that anyone delivered by cesarean section (no water in that procedure) would be ineligible to enter the kingdom of God!

Water: Literal Male Seminal Fluid

Equally absurd is the view, once advocated by D. A. Carson, which theorizes that the water of this passage was a reference to “male semen.”

This would have the Lord suggesting that unless one is conceived he cannot enter the kingdom. Is there any un-conceived person on earth?

It scarcely needs to be pointed out that such a ridiculous statement would be unworthy of the Son of God. To his credit Carson abandoned that position, though still resisting the correct interpretation (1984, 41-42).

Water Refers to Immersion

The simple truth of the matter is this. The water alluded to in this context is a reference to the water of baptism, which is a necessary act of obedience for those who aspire to enter into the kingdom of heaven. This fact is evidenced by the following considerations.

It is a recognized principle of biblical exegesis that words are to be viewed **literally** unless there are demands within the immediate or remote context which call for a **figurative** meaning.

There is nothing here or elsewhere that would require a symbolic interpretation of “water” in this passage. Hence, there is no necessity to attach an **unusual meaning** to the term in John 3:5.

The expression “born of water” is certainly consistent with language employed of baptism in other portions of the New Testament. For example, just as Christ’s resurrection from the dead is declared to be a birth from death (cf. Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5), even so, when one is born of water he is “raised to walk in **newness of life**” (cf. Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12).

The Kingdom, Christ’s Body and the Church

According to the Lord’s declaration in John 3, the goal of the new birth is **entrance into the kingdom**. This is the same “kingdom of heaven” Christ refers to in Matthew 16:18.

Consider the following logical arguments:

1. The new birth introduces one into the kingdom (John 3:5). # But the kingdom is the church (Matthew 16:18-19).
2. Therefore, the new birth introduces one into the church.

It is also clear that the church of the New Testament is likewise clearly identified as the body of Christ. Since the body is the church and the church is the body, we are forced to conclude that the new birth introduces one into the body of Christ.

1. The new birth introduces one into the church (conclusion above).
2. But the church is the body (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18, 24). # Thus, the new birth introduces one into the body.

The New Testament further describes the body, which is the church, as the group of saved individuals.

1. The new birth introduces one into the body (above).
2. But the body is the saved (Eph. 5:23).
3. Therefore, the new birth introduces one into the realm of salvation.

Without the new birth, therefore, one cannot be in the kingdom, the church, the body, or the state of salvation.

Some Summary Considerations

Let's now begin to tie our related passages together—with a return to a consideration of the “water” of John 3:5 as the equivalent of baptism.

A comparison of John 3:5 with a parallel passage, 1 Corinthians 12:13, makes it certain that the water of the former verse is equivalent to the “baptism” of the latter.

John 3:5 – “Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God!”

1 Corinthians 12:13 – “For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body.”

First, note that both passages mention the role of the Holy Spirit in the conversion process. Second, observe that both verses state the same result that occurs with the completion of the new birth. John records that the goal is entrance into the kingdom, while Paul affirms that the convert is introduced into the one body.

That the “kingdom” and the “body” refer to the same entity is demonstrated by the following logical argument:

- (1) The body of Christ is the church (Colossians 1:18, 24). (2) But, the church is the kingdom (Matthew 16:18-19). (3)
Thus, the body of Christ is the kingdom.

In the remaining portion of the equation, we need only compare the word “water” in John 3:5 with Paul's use of “baptism” in the Corinthian passage. Note, therefore, how the verses line up:

John 3:5 – Spirit, water, kingdom

1 Corinthians 12:13 – Spirit, baptism, body

Plainly, “water,” in John 3:5, refers to baptism.

Moreover, a comparison of two other New Testament passages will reveal additional interesting similarities. In Ephesians 5:26 Paul writes: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word.”

Note these three elements:

1. the Word;
2. the washing of water;
3. cleansed.

Observe how these correspond with the two verses just considered.

John 3:5 – Spirit, water, kingdom

1 Corinthians 12:13 – Spirit, baptism, body

Ephesians 5:26 – Word, water, cleansed

First, it is revealed how the Spirit operates in conversion: through the Word (cf. Ephesians 6:17). Secondly, the water is identified as baptism. Third, it is demonstrated that those cleansed by their obedience have entered into the body, the kingdom.

Finally, there is yet another passage which complements this study. In Titus 3:5, the apostle Paul declares: “[A]ccording to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit.”

Again, there is mention of:

1. the Spirit;
2. the washing of regeneration;
3. saved.

Observe the comparison:

John 3:5 – Spirit, water, kingdom

1 Corinthians 12:13 – Spirit, baptism, body

Ephesians 5:26 – Word, water, cleansed

Titus 3:5 – Holy Spirit, washing, saved


Clearly these various biblical passages wonderfully explain one another.

The sincere person, who believes the testimony of the Holy Spirit, as conveyed through the Word of God, will yield to the Lord’s command to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16). He thus will be cleansed (or saved) from his past transgressions, and subsequently translated into the kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13), which is the body, or the church (Colossians 1:18, 24).

There is no difficulty in understanding the clear teaching of Scripture when such is distanced from the biased speculations of men.

One must be born anew!

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Scripture References

John 3:2; John 3:3; John 3:4; John 3:5; John 3:7; Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5; Colossians 1:13; Matthew 16:18-19; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23; 1 Corinthians 4:15; Ephesians 6:17; John 5:8; Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12; John 3; Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18, 24; Ephesians 5:23; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5; Acts 2:38, 22:16

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Fortify Your Faith
P.O. Box 11746
Jackson, Tennessee 38308
Phone: (731) 256-7280 – Fax: (731) 256-5152