

Baptism and the New Birth

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

A major cleavage within Christendom pertains to the point at which the “new birth” occurs. Most of Christendom maintains that a person is born again, and thus has sin washed away by the blood of Christ, when that person “accepts Jesus Christ as his personal savior.” By this expression, it is meant that a person must mentally and/or orally decide to embrace Christ as the Lord of his life. Hence, the new birth is seen simply as a determination of the will—a moment in time when the person accepts Christ in his mind and couples that decision with an oral confession.

The passage in the New Testament that alludes specifically to being born again pertains to a conversation that Jesus had with a high-ranking Jewish official:

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “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.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is **born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, **unless one is born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be **born again**’ ” (John 3:1-7, emp. added).

In an effort to avoid identifying “water” (vs. 5) as water baptism, many within Christendom in the last half century have proposed a variety of novel interpretations. For example, some have proposed that “water” is a reference to the Holy Spirit. While it certainly is true that John uses the word “water” symbolically to represent the Spirit later in his book (7:38-39), that fact had to be explained by the inspired writer. However, in chapter three, the normal, literal meaning is clearly in view, not only because water baptism throughout the New Testament is consistently associated with the salvation event (e.g., Acts 2:38; 8:12-13,36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15,33; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12; Hebrews 10:22; 1 Peter 3:21), but even in this context, eighteen verses later, the term clearly has a literal meaning: “Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much **water** there” (John 3:23). Additionally, if “water” in John 3:5 is an allusion to the Holy Spirit, the result would be nonsensical: “unless one is born of the Spirit and the Spirit.”

Another quibble offered in an effort to avoid the clear import of John 3:5 is that “water” is a symbol for the blood of Jesus. Of course, no rationale exists for making such a connection. Elsewhere John refers explicitly to water and blood, but clearly distinguishes them from each other in their import (1 John 5:6).

Perhaps the most popular notion, advanced only in recent years, is that “water” is a reference to a pregnant woman’s “water”—i.e., the amniotic fluid that accompanies the physical birth of a child. However, this suggestion likewise fails to fit the context of Jesus’ remarks. In fact, Nicodemus himself thought that Jesus was referring to physical birth (“mother’s womb”). But Jesus corrected his misconception, and contrasted such thinking with the intended meaning of “water and Spirit.” Indeed, Jesus would not have told Nicodemus that he needed to be born physically (“water”). He would not have included the act of physical birth in His listing of prerequisites to entering the kingdom. That would make Jesus say that before a person can enter the kingdom he or she must first be a person! What would be the point of stating such a thing? [Would it perhaps be to ensure that everyone understands that non-humans (i.e., animals) cannot enter the kingdom?!] Later in the same chapter, did John baptize near Salim “because there was much amniotic fluid there”?

If one cares to consult the rest of the New Testament in order to allow the Bible to be its own best interpreter, and in order to allow the Bible to harmonize with itself, additional passages shed light on the meaning of John 3:5. According to the rest of the New Testament, spiritual **conception** occurs when the Gospel (i.e., the seed of the Holy Spirit—Luke 8:11) is implanted in the human heart and mind (James 1:18; 1 Corinthians 4:15; Ephesians 6:17; 1 Peter 1:23). The Word of God, in turn, generates penitent faith in the human heart (Romans 10:17) that leads the individual to obey the Gospel by being baptized in water (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Hebrews 10:22). The resulting condition of the individual is that he or she is now a child of God, a citizen of the kingdom, and member of the church of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20; Galatians 3:26-27; Romans 6:4).

Additional verses in the New Testament clarify and cinch this meaning of John 3:5, pinpointing the “new birth,” while also allowing us to understand the activity of the Holy Spirit in the act of conversion. Consider the following chart (Jackson, 1988):

John 3:5	Spirit	Water	Kingdom
1 Corinthians 12:13	Spirit	Baptized	Body
Ephesians 5:26	Word	Washing/Water	Cleansed Church
Titus 3:5	Renewal of Spirit	Washing of Regeneration	Saved by Mercy

These verses demonstrate that God achieves conversion through the Gospel message authored by the Holy Spirit. When a person comes to an understanding (Acts 8:30) of the that inspired message, his penitent faith leads him to submit to water immersion for the remission of sins (Acts 8:36,38; 10:47). The result of his obedient response to the Gospel is that he is saved and cleansed from past sin and instantaneously placed into the kingdom of Christ.

Notice that submission to the divine plan of salvation does not mean that humans save themselves by effecting their own salvation. Their obedience does not earn or merit their forgiveness. Rather, the terms or conditions of salvation are stipulated **by God**—not by humans—and are a manifestation of **His** mercy! When people submit to the terms of entrance into the kingdom of Christ, they are saved by the blood of Jesus and the grace of God—not their own effort! Water immersion is not to be viewed as a “work of righteousness which we have done” (Titus 3:5). When we submit to baptism, we are being saved by “the kindness and love of God our Savior” (Titus 3:4). We are being saved “according to His mercy” (Titus 3:5).

REFERENCES

Jackson, Wayne (1988), “The New Birth: What is It?,” *Christian Courier*, 24:14, August.

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