

**Cliff Sabroe****What does it mean to be Born Again?**

“Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3 ASV). What did Jesus mean by this statement? If interpreted in the literal sense it would bring about much confusion. Nicodemus to whom this statement was made, did not comprehend its teaching, for even he said in John 3:4 “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?” This verse has been the grounds for much debate over the centuries. There have been those who have based false doctrines off of it, also there have been many who refuse to address it because of the controversy involved in the passage. This passage is important for two key reasons: first off it is a teaching from our Lord; second it is addressed to a man with a wise heart who came to Jesus because he recognized Him as being one who is from God. Throughout the gospel of John it is seen that believing means coming to Jesus, in John 6:35 Jesus says “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall not hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.” Nicodemus was one who came to Jesus, and it can be asserted that because of his truth seeking heart Jesus would reveal an important teaching to him. It behooves the student of God’s Word to seek out the meaning of this teaching in the hopes of finding out what it means to be “born again”.

In this study we will approach this passage in two different ways. We will first examine the many different interpretations that are in the religious world and the proofs presented for them. Second, after examining the many different interpretations for the passage we will determine the best one in light of the immediate context of the book and in correspondence with other New Testament teachings.

When one looks at the phrase “except one be born again” he or she must parallel it with John 3:5 when Jesus says “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” One of the most popular interpretations in the religious world concerning being born again is as proposed by Scofield when he states:

The necessity of the new birth grows out of the incapacity of the natural man to "see" or "enter into" the kingdom of God. However gifted, moral, or refined, the natural man is absolutely blind to spiritual truth, and impotent to enter the kingdom; for he can neither obey, understand, nor please God... The new birth is not a reformation of the old nature, but a creative act of the holy Spirit. The condition of the new birth is faith in Christ crucified. Through the new birth the believer becomes a partaker of the divine nature and of the life of Christ Himself.

(Scofield 1126)

The position taken by Scofield is supported by many evangelicals such as Adam Clarke.

Although Adam Clarke does believe that water baptism is necessary for entrance into the Messiah’s kingdom, he asserts that “(in this place) we should understand two different things: it is probably only an elliptical form of speech, for the Holy Spirit under the similitude of water; as, in Mat 3:3, the Holy Ghost and fire, do not mean two things, but one, viz. the Holy Ghost under the similitude of fire - pervading every part, refining and purifying the whole” (Clarke 530).

Albert Barnes takes a similar position, he believes however “being born of water” is in reference to baptism, but he does assert “...though it cannot be said that none who are not baptized can be saved, yet Jesus meant, undoubtedly, to be understood as affirming that this was to be the regular and uniform way of entering into his church” (Barnes 201-02). When discussing what the “being born of the spirit” phrase is in reference to he follows Adam Clarke in saying that:

This was predicted of the Saviour, that he should “baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire,” Mat 3:11. By this is clearly intended that the heart must be changed by the agency of the Holy Spirit; that the love of sin must be abandoned; that man must repent of crime and turn to God; that he must renounce all his evil propensities, and give himself to a life of prayer and holiness, of meekness, purity, and benevolence (Barnes 201-02).

The problem with this position is that it is based upon a poor interpretation of Mathew 3:11, and the belief that it is parallel to John 3. Although this paper is on this passage in the gospel of John, it is necessary at this time to note the meaning of Mathew 3:11. The previously noted commentators believe being baptized with the Holy Spirit is the same as being baptized with fire. Dr. Dennis Petrillo notes in his class on Mathew that the phrase “in fire” cannot be in reference to a pleasant event or life changing experience by the Holy Spirit. “In vs11, we have to assume that the fire is a bad, because of basic exegetical procedures. In vs10 fire is bad, in vs12 fire is bad, therefore we must conclude that the fire mentioned in vs11 is in reference to a bad event such as the fires of judgment.” As can be seen the interpretation of “being born of the water and spirit” in John 3:5 being parallel to Mathew 3:11 is based on a poor interpretation on the passage in Mathew 3 and therefore cannot be upheld by honest exegetes.

There are other positions taken when approaching the topic of being born again. Most of the positions taken by scholars in the religious world mirror or at least partially agree with the aforementioned positions. It is because of this that we will not address them in this writing. This author does want to mention at this time most scholars and early church writers almost all unanimously agree that “being born of the water” is referring to water baptism, even though there are many in the religious community today that believe it is referring to the waters of a

physical birth. “Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Cyril, Beda, Theophylact. Eutymius, in the commentaries on this place (3:5), along with Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Ambrose, Hierome, Basil, Gregory, Nyssan, and many more, yea most of the fathers... have constructed this text as our church doth, of an outward baptism” (Coffman 81). On the same topic Henry Alford although influenced by his personal religious beliefs in his quotation he does assert that “born of water” must be in reference to baptism when he says that it is “... the honest interpretation of these words” (Alford 468). Then he goes on to add that “born of water refers to the token or outward sign of baptism” (Alford 469).

A prominent position in the brotherhood concerning what is taught when Jesus refers to being “born of the water and the spirit” is that it is parallel to Acts 2:38. The problem with this position is that in John 3:5 it says you are “born of the water and the spirit” to enter the kingdom. Acts 2:38, however, shows that you receive the spirit as a result of being born into the kingdom. Therefore it can be assumed that it would be incorrect to try to parallel two passages that are not in relation to one another.

Since we have examined several positions concerning the topic of being born again and none of them fit with the context and purpose of John, it now benefits us to examine the position that best fits the text. When looking at John 3:5 there are three components that must be examined, 1. The Water 2. The Spirit 3. The Kingdom.

As noted earlier the term being born of the water is most likely in reference to baptism. Wayne Jackson notes two reasons for holding to this position.

1. 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.

2. 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). (Jackson)

For further validation of brother Jackson’s arguments it benefits one to note the greater context. For as soon as the discourse with Nicodemus is over the Apostle John immediately begins to make reference to the baptism of John in the beginning of chapter 4.

It is not usually debated whether the water is in reference to baptism, but the main controversy is concerning the second part of the verse where it mentions “being born of the Spirit”. Dan Owen eloquently explains the role of the Spirit in being born again in his commentary on the gospel of John. “The Spirit is the source of new birth. Jesus explained ‘That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit,’ (John 3:6). Just as physical seed produces a physical child, it takes spiritual seed to produce a spiritual child. The seed of the Holy Spirit, the word of God, produces spiritual children (1 Peter 1:23)” (Owen 29-30). After one accepts and submits to God’s word it is at that point the rebirth of the Holy Spirit occurs. Jesus is making a strong point in his discourse with Nicodemus, by saying “one must be born of the Spirit” he is saying unless you follow the spiritual directives as outlined in the Bible you cannot enter the kingdom of God.

The last part of John 3:5 says if one is “not born of the water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God”. The question at hand is what is the kingdom Jesus is referring to?

“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 (Col. 1:13), which is the body, or the church (Col. 1:18,24)” (Jackson).

The point of the passage for the reader is simple. Unless one is baptized in water in accordance with the Spirit inspired word of God you cannot enter the church and be saved. Belief throughout the book of John represents obedience. If one believes in Christ he or she will obey the Spirit/word and choose to be immersed and then be added by God to the body of Christ. When one is born again there is an observable change in that person’s life. Dan Owen points out: “When a person has truly been ‘born of God’ the effects of this new birth can be seen in his new life” (Owen 30).

This passage should not be one we avoid because of the controversy and misapplication that have been applied to it by the religious world. The gospel of John is an evangelistic book designed to convict the hearts of the readers and cause belief in their lives. That belief will ultimately lead them to obedience and the new birth that is found when one submits to God’s will and is baptized for the remission of sins. The discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus is one that should be preached and taught in the churches. Nicodemus was truth seeker and he was rewarded with the message of salvation, a new birth, that can only be found when one is “born of the water and of the spirit.” John 3:3-5 is not a passage to be avoided but embraced, for within the sacred writ is the path of entrance into the kingdom of God.

“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 again” (Jackson).

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