

# Born of Water and Spirit

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(John 3:3-8)

## I. Introduction

- A. Probably no Bible term is any more widely used (and abused) than “born again”
1. The term is often used in the vernacular for things not connected to Bible
    - a. For example, notice these web sites with “born again” in their title
      - 1) [www.bornagainblessings.com](http://www.bornagainblessings.com) (*consignment shop for used clothing*)
      - 2) [www.bornagainbirdwatcher.com](http://www.bornagainbirdwatcher.com) (*a blog dedicated to bird-watching*)
      - 3) [www.bornagainfloozyies.com](http://www.bornagainfloozyies.com) (*a trombone and tap-dancing troupe*)
      - 4) [www.bornagainboards.com](http://www.bornagainboards.com) (*handmade redwood surfboards*)
      - 5) [www.bornagainamerican.org](http://www.bornagainamerican.org) (*promotes volunteerism... catchy song*)
    - b. People are so familiar with “born again” that they use it for anything new
  2. For Christians, the new birth is much more than just something new
    - a. This new birth is the basis of our all of our hope in Christ (**1 Peter 1:3**)  
*In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...*
    - b. This new birth is based on the living and active word of God (**1 Pt 1:23**)  
*For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*
  3. The most familiar verse on new birth is from **John 3**, Wednesday’s reading
- B. In **John 3**, a Pharisee named Nicodemus gets a lesson on being born again
1. Nicodemus was evidently a secret disciple (*was accused of that in **Jn 7:50***)
    - a. He comes to at night, although we don’t really know if that is important.
      - 1) It is often assumed that he was coming secretly and incognito.
      - 2) May have been the reason some go WalMart at midnight... *crowds!*
    - b. In fact, we don’t even really know why it was that Nicodemus came!
      - 1) May assume that he came to ask Jesus a question, but he never does
      - 2) Jesus doesn’t let him get started before he brings us the new birth
  2. What we do know is that Nicodemus doesn’t have a clue what Jesus means
    - a. That’s a good thing; Jesus explains it to him and also explains it to us.
    - b. Let’s try look at what Jesus is saying and then make some applications.

## II. Being Born Again: Background (Reading: [John 3:3-8](#))

- A. Jesus says, “*No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again*” ([3:3](#))
1. This phrase can be rendered either “*born anew*” or “*born from above*.”
    - a. NIV and NAS have “*Born again*” with “*born from above*” in footnote.
    - b. NRSV has “*born from above*” with “*born anew*” in the footnote.
  2. Either translation is OK as long as we realize that “*again*” isn’t just “*again*”
    - a. This isn’t “*again*” as in repeat but “*again*” as in totally different.
    - b. That’s what stumped Nicodemus, “*Can I re-enter the womb to born...*”
  3. This birth is “*anew*” or “*from above*”— a totally different kind of birth.
- B. “*No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and Spirit*” ([3:5](#))
1. It is easy to assume that Jesus is talking about two births—water and Spirit.
    - a. But Jesus literally says here, “*Unless a man is born from water and spirit*”
    - b. This is grammatically one birth with two elements, not two types of birth
  2. As you’d expect, the meaning of “*water and spirit*” here is hotly disputed.
    - a. **Calvin** translated the text so water = spirit (“*water, even the holy Spirit*”)
    - b. **Scofield** saw “*water*” as somehow referring to “*word of God*” ([1 Pt 1:23](#))
    - c. Popular view is water is physical birth (*amniotic*) and Spirit is salvation.
      - 1) Of course, that demands two different births— “*First, be a baby...*”
      - 2) **Pointless!** Like the old sermon line, “*If you are here this evening...*”
      - 3) Again, the language here points to one birth, “*born of water and spirit*”
  3. In the context of John’s gospel here, water can only refer to baptism
    - a. John the Baptist’s task was to point people to Jesus ([John 1:32-33](#))
      - 1) This text contrasts John’s baptism in water with Jesus’ in the Spirit.
      - 2) Jesus mentions both here—we must be born of water and Spirit.
    - b. Later in our chapter, there is a clear reference to baptism ([John 3:22-23](#))
    - c. The same thing happens at the beginning of the next chapter ([John 4:1](#))
    - d. Both **before** and **after** our text, water refers to baptism. *Same in our text.*
  4. R.V.G. Tasker (*Tyndale series*) sums up the conclusion of many scholars  
*It is difficult to avoid construing the words of water and of the Spirit conjunctively, and regarding them as a description of Christian baptism, in which cleansing and endowment are both essential elements.*

### III. So What Does It Mean to Be Born Again? What it is Not—

#### A. **First**, being born again is not **RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**.

1. Some suggest a “*born again experience*” to accompany the new birth.
  - a. They feel extreme calm or hyper-excitement or even tongues.
  - b. But there is some born again experience that confirms salvation.
2. Emotions will accompany our decision; “*he went on his way rejoicing*”
  - a. But that emotional experience, no matter how real, is not new birth.
  - b. Teen opened eyes underwater—not Spirit, whacked her head on steps!

#### B. **Second**, being born again is not a **SECTARIAN DISTINCTION**.

1. We hear a lot about “*Born Again Christians*,” which implies other kinds!
  - a. Some use the term “*born again*” as if saying, “*I’m a real Christian.*”
  - b. Of course, that’s what we sometimes mean by “*New Testament Christian*”
2. All Christians are born again Christians; that is precisely Jesus’ point here!
  - a. Saying “*Born-again Christian*” is like “*unmarried bachelor*” Pointless
  - b. It becomes worse than pointless when used in this sectarian sense!

#### C. **Third**, being born again is not just **BEING BAPTIZED** (*in the right way*)

1. There are many reasons why we should connect baptism with the new birth
  - a. Every case of conversion in the book of Acts ends with a baptism.
  - b. Theological points on baptism (*holiness* in **Rom 6**, *unity* in **Gal 3**)
  - c. Great commission commands baptism (*not building churches or worship*)
  - d. As said earlier, the context of **John 3** also connects water and baptism!
2. But I fear we have stressed baptism as if it were essence of the new birth?
  - a. The modern “*Sinner’s Prayer*” usually goes something like this—  
*“Father, my sins have separated us. I am truly sorry; please forgive me, and help me avoid sin. I believe Jesus died and was raised. I accept Jesus and I invite Him into my heart to save me.”*
  - b. I can do nothing but applaud a heart that humbles itself like that.
  - c. **Point:** Can we argue baptism without humble response of Sinner’s Prayer.
    - 1) Are some baptized after changing a doctrinal position... not heart?
    - 2) Can surrender objections to immersion and never surrender to Jesus!
  - d. Maybe we need people to pray the sinner’s prayer **AND** be baptized!
3. If you have never submitted to Jesus in immersion, then why not do so?

## IV. What Does It Mean To Be Born Again?

A. **First**, it is a decision made by a person to accept Christ.

1. New birth has been cheapened by being seen as only a momentary decision.  
*“Put your hand on the radio and pray with me...and send me all your money!”*
2. But being born again does begin with a decision of faith (**1 John 5:1**)
  - a. It’s deciding to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord (*two different things*)
  - b. Something will follow, but the new birth begins with a decision!

B. **Second**, the new birth is willingness to act on that decision of belief.

1. John stresses the action that must follow new birth in **1 John**.  
**1 Jn 2:29**- *You know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.*  
**1 Jn 3:9**- *No one who is born of God will continue to sin...*  
**1 Jn 4:7**- *Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.*
2. That’s not to say we must achieve sinless perfection before born again.
  - a. After all, John says that if we claim that perfection, we lie (**1 John 1:8**)
  - b. But new birth is a decision that translates into a life lived for God.
3. It is more than a prayer prayed or the act of baptism—it is a change.

C. **Third**, it is accepting that the power of that change is God’s.

1. Discussion of new birth often become arguments over what we must do.
  - a. *“How much must one know before they are baptized?”*
  - b. *“What if one doesn’t understand that baptism as part of new birth?”*
2. Understand that the power of new birth is God’s alone (**John 1:13**)  
*children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.*
  - a. Detailed explanations of God’s act in new birth are presumptuous at best.
    - 1) To say when it begins or when it becomes invalid is not our call
    - 2) We see the results of God’s action, but never understand it (**John 3:8**)  
*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit*
  - b. Ultimately, it remains mystery (Dale Ostrander, *“Waters of Blessing”*)  
*Do persons find forgiveness and spiritual rebirth in such an act of baptism? Perhaps, but that is part of the mystery, power and grace one might personally experience participating in the sacrament. When baptized we do not accept a creed or come to utter certitude about things. Rather, we become part of a journey that began before we got here and shall continue after we are gone. We’re part of an adventure that we believe is God’s purpose for us. It’s being in a community that sustains and nurtures us, and trains us to fashion our lives as the people of God, sharing in Christ’s work in the world, and like Jesus, the Word becoming flesh in us.*
3. New birth is a process beginning with faith and then transforming us.