



*1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 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." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 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?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

Eight more days. That's all the longer we have to wait until...the Iowa Caucus. If you thought you were already tired of politics, the pundits are just warming up. And of course all of the Republican candidates are fighting to gain the allegiance of born-again voters. "That's a big deal in a state in which 57 percent of caucus-goers identified as born-again or evangelical Christians."<sup>1</sup>

For some crazy reason, Donald Trump seems to winning over born-again voters. Last week he appeared at Liberty University where Jerry Falwell Jr. had compared Trump to Jesus and his



father. “Matthew 7:16 tells us that by their fruits you shall know them. Donald Trump's life has borne fruit, fruit that has provided jobs to multitudes of people in addition to the many he has helped with his generosity.”<sup>2</sup>

Generally, you only hear the phrase “born again” either in a political conversation when politicians want your vote or you hear it in a very negative way. “Oh, not those born-again types. They’re so judgmental.”

But it’s no surprise that most people who use the phrase are clueless as to its true meaning. According to George Barna, 25% of people who call themselves born-again Christians believe in Universalism—that all people will eventually be saved. “And an even higher proportion, 40 percent, of born-again Christians said they believe Christians and Muslims worship the same God.”<sup>3</sup> Even stranger still, 58% of those who call themselves Christians say that the Holy Spirit is “a symbol of God’s power or presence but is not a living entity.”<sup>4</sup>

This is a huge problem with our Christian faith. People are constantly taking our terms and applying completely different definitions to them. If you saw my letter to the editor in the Broadcaster after Christmas and the two responses which followed, it was clear that Christian Science uses our terms but packs them with different meaning. They use the words Jesus, resurrection, God and sin and say they believe these things. They do believe them but they don’t mean what the Bible says they mean. So when it comes to something important as being born-again, we must make sure we get our facts straight from Scripture.

As Albert Mohler said, “We will not believe more than we know, and we will not live higher than our beliefs.”<sup>5</sup> If we don’t understand these truths, we will never live them out.

### **1. It is necessary for conversion.**

Whatever being born again means, Jesus is clear that it is absolutely necessary for conversion.

3—*unless* one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God

5—*unless* one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God

7—You *must* be born again

When I was a fairly new Christian someone made a disparaging comment about being “born again.” In response I said, “Well if Jesus said you must be born again, then it is something that we must do.” I don’t think I made any headway that day, but at least I tried.

### **2. It is supernatural and miraculous.**

Nicodemus had a really hard time understanding what Jesus meant. “*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?*” The problem that Nicodemus had is that he was looking for the natural instead of the supernatural. Jesus was not talking about a natural, physical but rather a supernatural, spiritual birth.

Jesus replied, *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* If you substitute the natural for the supernatural, you will always go astray. Years ago I was talking with one of Karen's uncles during a visit to Cleveland. He was a retired NASA engineer and so was steeped in the natural realm and science. He told me evolution was the best answer to explain the existence of all life. I said, "You know, you are actually right. It's not only the best answer, it is the only answer. If you remove any supernatural explanations, then evolution is the only possible answer. But if you allow for a supernatural explanation, then it's a horrible answer." Being born again is a supernatural and miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.

### **3. Baptism is a symbol of, not a means to new birth.**

A lot of Christians get confused by verse 5. "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*" Many Christians use this a proof-text to say that baptism is necessary for salvation.

I had this happen to me before I was saved. I was about fifteen and a friend was witnessing to me. She gave me a small New Testament that had all of the verses on baptism underlined. It was printed this way. It told you where to start. It had you read a verse on baptism underlined in red and then it would instruct you to turn to a certain page and read the next verse on baptism, and so forth. I give her credit for wanting to witness to me but even as an unbeliever, the necessity of being baptized for salvation did not sit quite right with me. And of course I thought I was already saved.

One day she asked if her and her pastor could visit me at our house. I reluctantly agreed knowing that the pastor was going to give me all of the same verses on baptism. I also knew that I did not know the Bible at all and would not know how to answer him. It just so happened that the youth pastor at the United Church of Christ where we attended wanted to stop in and see me. So here's where I got really sneaky. I purposefully scheduled both appointments on the same day at the exact same time. I sat back and marveled at my awesome plan. I would just have these two duke it out while I sat there and watched. Now of course the crazy irony of all of this was that the pastor who believed baptism was necessary for salvation was probably saved and just mistaken about this belief. The UCC pastor was probably not saved and I was not saved.

Do you want to know what happened? The baptism pastor came and shared his thing and while he was getting in his car, the UCC pastor showed up and I introduced them to each other as we all stood in the driveway. Major fail.

But baptism is completely foreign to this passage. Nicodemus would not have understood it that way. Baptism does not fit into the mysterious, unseen work of the Spirit blowing like a wind. If baptism was meant, it should have been much more clear.

Others say that the water represents the amniotic fluid of baby's birth. There is nothing harmful about this interpretation but it just doesn't make sense to me. This would mean that in order to get into the kingdom of God, you had to be born and you had to be born again. It seems redundant to say that you first had to be born because that necessity would apply to every command and principle in the whole Bible. It's a bit like saying in order to for husbands to really love their wives they have to get married. It's just redundant.

It helps to place verses three and five together.

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

5—*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*

These two verses are virtually identical except for the addition of the word water. Therefore, whatever water and spirit means must be identical to what being “born again” means. Jesus would not have added a second layer of meaning or a second requirement for salvation. Being born of water and the Spirit is the same thing as being born again. But water does have some meaning and for that, we turn back to Nicodemus.

#### **4. Its truth is found in the Old Testament.**

Jesus said to Nicodemus, *“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”* This is like a math teacher who doesn’t understand simple fractions or an English teacher who could not see a split infinitive if it knocked them on the head. As the teacher of Israel, Jesus assumed that Nicodemus should have understood this truth which means that the same truth was clearly taught in the Old Testament. Now you won’t find the phrase “born again” in the Old Testament but you will find its meaning. Maybe the clearest text is Ezekiel 36:25-27.

*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

This passage has both the cleansing of water and being born anew by the Spirit. Cleaning is part of the new birth and inseparable from it. It is not something in addition to being born again, it is just another symbolic way to describe what happens in the inner nature. In our sinful nature, we all had a heart of stone and were filthy in our sin. But the Holy Spirit washed us and gives us a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone. This may not be exactly what Jesus meant but it certainly matches what he was saying to Nicodemus.

#### **5. It is an invisible act of the Holy Spirit.**

Jesus described this work of the Spirit in verse eight. *The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

Normally when we think of salvation, right away we think of what Jesus did, his death on the cross, his ultimate sacrifice. Of course that makes sense to think that way but the Holy Spirit is the forgotten member of the trinity in many ways and that’s especially true in salvation. Other than John chapter three, probably the best passage is Titus 3 where this invisible work of the Holy Spirit is on display.

*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of*

*regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7).*

This passage is the core of the doctrine of regeneration. This describes how a person becomes born again. It's interesting that the word washing is applied to regeneration. This matches well with what Jesus said about being "born of water and the Spirit." The sacrificial work of Jesus is also on display here, just as it is in 1 Peter 1:3. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*

D.L. Moody had a helpful quote about the invisible work of the Holy Spirit. "Never tell a man he is converted. Never tell him he is saved. Let the Holy Spirit reveal that to him. You can shoot a man and see that he is dead, but you can not see when a man receives eternal life.."6

This is especially noteworthy given that Moody was a powerful and committed evangelist. What do most evangelists do when they have an altar call? They count the raised hands, right? "I see that hand. Thank you, I see your hand young lady." They count the raised hands and then proclaim each one of them to be saved. Now there's absolutely nothing wrong with an altar call but clearly Moody was not in the business of counting conversions like notches on a belt. Nor was he saying that a Christian does not need assurance of salvation.

### **6. You cannot understand Scripture unless you are born again.**

This entire conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is one misunderstanding after another. Nicodemus seems to have some interest in learning, otherwise, he wouldn't have come in the first place. But he can't seem to understand anything Jesus told him.

*Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*

Earthy things = being born again, that which happens on the earth in the here and now.

Heavenly things = the full kingdom of heaven which is yet future and invisible

In other words, if you cannot grasp the basic entrance into the kingdom of heaven, you will never understand the fuller descriptions and glories of what is yet to come. This is what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians.

*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14).*

This is one reason why we are always running into brick walls when we talk with unbelievers. This is why people teach evolution in the absence of real evidence. This is why people reject the idea of God's eternal judgment. They reject the truth. Romans says that but they are also incapable of understanding the Bible. If it were not for the Holy Spirit, none of us would have ever understood salvation. We would still be lost in our sins.

### **7. It is based on the death, resurrection and exultation of Jesus.**

This is an obvious point but Jesus made it very explicit in his conversation with Nicodemus. *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.* Most of us know the story about Moses and the bronze serpent on a pole. The Lord sent poisonous snakes as a judgment on Israel but he also provided a way of healing by looking at the bronze snake on a pole. This was meant to be an act of faith for the Israelites. The bronze snake was never intended to be some kind of magical object but rather just a way for the Jews to “look to God” for their salvation from certain death.



Unfortunately, five hundred years later this bronze snake was still around and they had turned it into an idol, a magical talisman of sorts. *He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it* (2 Kings 18:4).

But Jesus said the Son of Man also needed to be “lifted up.” This was obviously referring to his being lifted up on the cross but it also refers to his being lifted up as the exalted savior of the world. In order to be born again, you have to look to Christ and only to Christ. The Catholic Church and to a lesser extent, Lutherans, have taken something like baptism and turned it into a sort of magical rite into the Christian faith. Being born again is invisible and there is mystery to the working of the Spirit, as Jesus said, but there’s nothing magical about it. We look to Christ as an act of faith. He alone can save us. No one or nothing else can.

### **8. Belief is necessary for the new birth.**

And of course this was nailed home by Jesus in verse 15: *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* Jesus had to be lifted up so that anyone could look to him, believe in him and have eternal life. Nowhere is this better seen than in Nicodemus. Here in chapter three I don’t see that Nicodemus had any faith. In fact, all of his questions lack any faith at all.

In chapter seven we see what might be the beginning of faith. Here he is speaking to his fellow Pharisees.

*Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee (John 7:50-52).*

By the time you get to chapter nineteen we see full blown faith flowing from Nicodemus *After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there (John 19:38-52).*

What do you think Nicodemus thought about when he looked up and saw Jesus dying on the cross? *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* Nicodemus finally believed. Nicodemus was born again. He was washed and regenerated by the Holy Spirit and he placed his faith in Christ alone.

What about you? Have you been born again? Jesus said you must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit may be working on your heart even now. Remember the story of the girl who witnessed to me? God used even that misguided theology to begin to quicken my heart. I didn't think that baptism was the answer but I began to feel that something was still missing. The Holy Spirit began to burn in my heart, slowly but surely. If you are feeling the same work of the Holy Spirit, I beg you to not resist it. Receive the Holy Spirit. Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be born again.

**Rich Maurer**  
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<sup>1</sup> [http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-gop-establishment-may-need-religious-voters-to-stop-donald-trump/?utm\\_content=buffer5dac&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer](http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-gop-establishment-may-need-religious-voters-to-stop-donald-trump/?utm_content=buffer5dac&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/news/liberty-jerry-falwell-jr-jesus-follower-trump-mlk-155258/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/news/many-born-again-christians-hold-universalist-view-barna-finds-49883/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/260-most-american-christians-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exist#.Vp6-1\\_krK00](https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/260-most-american-christians-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exist#.Vp6-1_krK00)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4/?utm\\_content=buffer6ea97&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer-](http://www.albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4/?utm_content=buffer6ea97&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer-)

<sup>6</sup> D.L. Moody, *Pleasure and Profit in Bible Study*, Fleming H. Revell, © 1895, pp. 133-134.