

What Does It Mean to Be “Born Again”?

Are Christians really “born again” at conversion and baptism?

According to Protestantism, one is “born again” at conversion, typically in conjunction with baptism, when one has “received Christ.” Catholic theology is similar, even extending the experience infants via its practice of “infant baptism.”

Yet, most Christians have great difficulty explaining from Scripture what it means to be “born again” or “born of God.” Indeed, there is great confusion on this subject. The Scriptures are, however, straightforward. In John 3:2-12, Jesus taught that to be “born again” literally means to be born of the Spirit—to *become* a spirit being. As we will see, other passages show that this “new birth” to spirit life will take place at the first resurrection when Christ returns. According to the Bible, Jesus Himself is the *firstborn from the dead*. No one else has been resurrected from the dead to eternal life—no one else has been “born again” or “born of God.”

Pagan Origin of the Popular “Born Again” Doctrine

It may come as a surprise to many that the idea of a “second birth” as a religious experience is not unique to Christianity. In fact, the concept is quite ancient. In his epochal book, *The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop conclusively demonstrates that pagan religions, which had their roots in ancient Babylon, had a belief and practice of being “born again” or “twice born.” For example, Hislop wrote: “The Brahmins make it their distinguishing boast that they are ‘twice-born’ men, and that, as such, they are sure of eternal happiness. Now, the same was the case in [ancient] Babylon, and there **the new birth was conferred by baptism**. In the Chaldean [Babylonian] mysteries, before any instruction could be received, it was required first of all that **the person to be initiated** [into the mysteries of the religion] **submit to baptism** [as a] **token of blind and implicit obedience**” (p. 132, emphasis added). Note that the pagan teaching of being “born again” or “twice born” had nothing to do with being raised from the dead, and that it was linked to the rite of *baptism*.

But how did this false teaching find its way into nominal Christianity?

False Teachers and Apostasy

Jesus Christ repeatedly warned the apostles and believers about false christs, false apostles and false teachers who would come and, if possible, deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:5, 11, 15, 24; see parallel accounts in Mark and Luke). The apostles likewise warned the brethren to be on guard against false apostles and teachers (II Cor. 4:11; I and II Timothy; Titus 1; II Pet. 2; I, II and III John; Jude; Rev. 2, 3, 13 and 17). The New Testament is replete with warnings against false apostles and teachers who would come in “sheep’s clothing” but inwardly would be “ravening wolves,” seeking to pervert and destroy the truth.

The apostle Paul warned the Thessalonians in 51 AD that this apostate religious system, which he called the “mystery of lawlessness,” was beginning to penetrate the Church (II Thess 2:1-12). He warned, “Do not let anyone deceive you by any means because *that day* [of Christ’s return] *will not* come unless **the apostasy shall come first**, and the man of sin [the final anti-Christ] shall be revealed.... **For the mystery of lawlessness is already working**” (verses 2, 7).

Over time, this “mystery religion,” modeled after the ancient Babylonian “mysteries,” has developed into a great apostate “Christianity”—which Christ has identified in Scripture as “**Babylon the Great, the mother of the harlots and of the abominations of the earth**” (Rev. 17:5). The early leaders of this religious system established numerous false teachings, among

them the doctrine that one is “born again” at conversion (or, in Protestant-speak, when one has “accepted Jesus”). Just as in ancient Babylon, this “new birth” is associated with baptism, but has nothing to do with being raised from the dead to spirit life.

Compounding this doctrinal error is the unscriptural belief that humans possess an immortal soul. While rejecting the truth of the resurrection of the dead, false teachers adopted this teaching from the Babylonian “mysteries.” To this day, within Christendom most people are taught that at death the soul goes to heaven for doing good, or to purgatory or hell for committing various degrees of evil.

Yet, the Bible does not teach the immortality of the soul; rather, it reveals, “The soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4, 20). Neither does the Bible teach that when one dies, the soul goes to heaven or hell. Rather, it clearly shows that when one dies, he or she awaits the resurrection of the dead—both of the righteous and the wicked (Dan. 12:2; John 5:25-29; I Cor. 15; Rev. 20:14-15; 21:8). The apostles were witnesses that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead, a fact that is vital to a Christian being raised from the dead (Rom. 8:11).

The belief in the immortality of the soul fueled the doctrine of infant baptism, for if an infant were to die, what would happen to its soul? Therefore, this belief necessitated baptism or christening to remove the “stain of original sin” so that if the infant died, its soul would go to heaven; if the infant lived to adulthood, salvation and heaven was assured. This baptism was also the rite by which the infant was “born again” of water, showing a gross misapplication of John three.

There is no scriptural example of infants or children being baptized. Jesus Himself was not baptized until He was thirty years old. From *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, there is the following entry on infant baptism: “Although from the first, baptism was the universal means of entry into the Christian community, the NT contains no specific authority for its administration to infants. But by a tradition at least as old as the 3rd century, and virtually universal until the Reformation, children born to Christian parents have been baptized in infancy. In the 16th century this practice (pseudo-baptism) was rejected by the Anabaptists and since the early 17th century also by the Baptists and later by the Disciples of Christ” (Infant Baptism).

The Catholic sacrament of infant baptism evolved into a religious “work,” and was rejected by Protestants during the Reformation. Subsequently, Protestantism developed a slightly different doctrine regarding being “born again”—based on a “no works” perversion of grace—that essentially teaches that all one has to do is “profess Christ” and they are then “born again.”

Quotations from the Early Latin Church Fathers

Rejecting the biblical teaching that being born again occurs at the resurrection from the dead—and accepting the pagan teaching of the immortality of the soul—early Latin church fathers adopted the Babylonia idea that one is “born again” through baptism. The following statements reveal that this false doctrine was formalized soon after the apostolic age ended.

St. Justin Martyr taught that converts to Christianity are to be “led by us to a place where there is **water**; and **there they are reborn** in the same kind of rebirth in which we ourselves were reborn” (*The First Apology* 61).

St. Irenaeus taught that Christians “are made clean, by means of the **sacred water** and the invocation of the Lord, from [their] old transgressions, being spiritually **regenerated as new-born babes...**” (*Fragment* 34).

Clement wrote that, in this present life, Christians “are **regenerated and born again of water**” (*Recognitions* 6:9).

From these quotes, it is evident that the early church fathers believed that being “born

again” was a religious “experience” of sorts tied to the rite of baptism.

The Latin Vulgate

One of the contributing factors which has obscured the true meaning of the phrase “born again” is the mistranslation of John 3:5 in the *Latin Vulgate*. Originally translated by Jerome in 383 AD, the *Vulgate* inserts the word “again” into verse five, making it read “born **again** of water.” Yet, no Greek manuscript has the word “again” added to the phrase “born of water.” By contrast, Erasmus’ Latin translation from the Greek is correct. In verse five, he translated the Greek as “born of water,” without the word “again.”

Is highly probable that the Latin church leaders—such as those quoted above—were influenced by an early, pre-*Vulgate* translation of the Scriptures with a corrupt rendering of John 3:5. At the very least, Jerome’s translation perpetuated the false “born again” teaching with its corruption of John 3:5. The faulty rendering has remained a part of the *Latin Vulgate* and is the basis of the Catholic “sacrament of baptism”—typically given to infants or children.

Biblical scholar William Tyndale, the first to translate the New Testament from the Greek into English, translated John 3:3, 5 correctly. However, in other writings he taught that when one is converted and receives the Holy Spirit one has already been “born again.” It is likely that Tyndale’s theology contributed to the Protestant “born again” teaching.

The True Meaning of “Born Again”

In order to fully comprehend the scriptural meaning of when one is born again, Jesus’ teachings in John 3:1-12 must be examined. The context of these verses proves that being born again does not mean a conversion or baptismal experience. Rather, it means a literal transformation from flesh to spirit: “Now there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus by name, a ruler of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher *Who* has come from God; because no one is able to do the miracles that You are doing, unless God is with him.’

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, **unless anyone is born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man who is old be born? Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, **unless anyone has been born of water and of Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which has been **born of the flesh is flesh**; and that which has been **born of the Spirit is spirit**. Do not be amazed that I said to you, “It is necessary for you to be born again.” **The wind blows where it will**, and you hear its sound, but you do not know *the place* from which it comes and *the place* to which it goes; **so also is everyone who has been born of the Spirit.**’

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘You are a teacher of Israel, and you do not know these things? Truly, truly I say to you, We speak that which We know, and We testify of that which We have seen; but you do not receive Our testimony. If I have told you earthly things, and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?’ ” (John 3:1-12).

It is clear that Jesus was not talking about a conversion or baptismal experience in this dialogue. Rather, he was comparing one’s physical birth—a fleshly existence—to that of being born anew or born again—to an actual spiritual existence. Jesus describes two births: one of water and one of the spirit—“unless anyone has been **born of water and of Spirit**” (John 3:5). In verse six, Jesus shows the comparison between a birth of flesh and a birth of the spirit: “That which has been **born of the flesh is flesh**; and that which has been **born of the Spirit is spirit.**”

When a human being is born, he or she is born of flesh—a physical being. Further, every human being has been “born of water” from the womb. One who has been *born of water* (via the womb) **has been born of the flesh—and is flesh** (John 3:5-6).

But Nicodemus missed the point when Jesus referred to a new or second birth of the Spirit—“**unless anyone has been born ... of Spirit.**” What kind of existence does one have who has been born of the Spirit? Jesus answered that question when He said “that which has been **born of the Spirit is spirit.**” Jesus clearly meant that anyone who has been born of the Spirit is, in fact, a spirit being. The new, spiritual birth means that one who has been “born again” is a spirit being, no longer composed of human flesh. Since one who has been “born of the flesh is flesh,” it follows, as Jesus said, that one who has been “born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

Every human is limited by fleshly existence and physical environment. However, as a spirit being, one is not bound by the flesh or limited by the physical realm. Jesus stated that one who has been born of the Spirit cannot necessarily be seen, just as the wind cannot be seen: “**The wind blows where it wills**, and you hear its sound, but you do not know *the place* from which it comes and *the place* to which it goes; **so also is everyone who has been born of the Spirit**” (verse 8). Therefore, one who has been “born again,” “born of the Spirit,” must be invisible to the human eye, having the ability to come and go as the wind. That is hardly the case of one who has been baptized and converted; he or she is still in the flesh and is limited by the flesh—subject to death. Jesus said that a fleshly human being “cannot see” or “enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, 5). Paul reiterated this when he emphatically stated: “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit *the kingdom of God*” (I Cor. 15:50).

When is One Actually Born Again? Since one is not born again at baptism or conversion, when is one literally “born again” or “born anew”? It is through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the New Testament reveals when a person is born again. Matthew wrote that Jesus was the “firstborn” of the Virgin Mary (Matt. 1:25). Jesus’ human birth was by water. He was flesh (I John 4:1-2), as any other human being, but He was “God manifested in *the flesh*” (I Tim. 3:16).

When Jesus was resurrected from the dead by the glory of the Father, He was the “first-born from the dead.” Therefore, Jesus was “born again”—born of the Spirit—at the time He was resurrected from the dead, exactly as He told Nicodemus, “That which has been born of the Spirit is spirit.”

The apostle Paul clearly showed that Jesus was born again when he wrote: “Because by Him were all things created, the things in heaven and the things on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether *they be* thrones, or lordships, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him and for Him. And He is before all, and by Him all things subsist. And He is the Head of the body, the church; **Who is the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead**, so that in all things He Himself might hold the preeminence. For it pleased *the Father* that in Him all the fullness should dwell” (Col. 1:16-19). The apostle John also verified this when he wrote that **Jesus was “the Firstborn from the dead”** (Rev. 1:5).

After His resurrection and ascension to heaven to be accepted by God the Father as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, Jesus returned to the earth and appeared to the apostles who were assembled together in a room behind closed doors. Since a spirit being is not limited by the physical realm, the resurrected Jesus walked through doors and walls, suddenly appearing to the apostles and disciples: “Now as they were telling these things, **Jesus Himself** [suddenly appearing] **stood in their midst** and said to them, ‘Peace *be* to you.’ But they were terrified and filled with fear, thinking *that* they beheld a spirit [a demon]. Then He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled? And why do doubts come up in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I. Touch Me and see *for yourselves*; for a spirit [a demon] does not have flesh and bones, as you see Me having.’ And after saying this, He showed them *His* hands and *His* feet. But while they

were still disbelieving and wondering for joy, He said to them, ‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ Then they gave Him part of a broiled fish and a *piece* of honeycomb. And He took these *and* ate in their presence” (Luke 24:33-43).

As a divine spirit being, the firstborn from the dead, Jesus was able to manifest Himself as a man, with an appearance that looked like flesh and bone.

Christ is the Firstborn Among Many

Not only is Jesus Christ the firstborn from the dead, He is also the “firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29). The true body of believers is called “the church of the firstborn,” as Paul wrote: “But you have come to Mount Zion, and to *the* city of *the* living God, heavenly Jerusalem; and to an innumerable company of angels; *to the* joyous festival gathering; and to **the church of the firstborn**, registered in *the book of life* in heaven; and to God, *the* Judge of all” (Heb. 12:22-23). It is called the church of the firstborn because believers will be resurrected, or born again—born of the Spirit—in the first resurrection when Jesus returns (Rev. 20:4-6).

Paul wrote that the resurrected Jesus is also called “the firstfruit” of those raised from the dead. Furthermore, he explained that true Christians would be resurrected at Jesus’ second coming: “But now Christ has been raised from *the* dead; He has become **the firstfruit** of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man *came* death, by man also *came the* resurrection of *the* dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: **Christ the firstfruit; then, those who are Christ’s at His coming**” (I Cor. 15:20-23).

The apostle James, the brother of the Lord, referred to true Christians as “firstfruits” unto God: “Do not deceive yourselves, my beloved brethren. Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with Whom there is no variation, nor shadow of turning. According to His own will, He begat us by *the* Word of truth, that **we might be a kind of firstfruits** of all His created beings” (James 1:16-18).

Paul continues in First Corinthians: “It is sown a **natural body** [that which has been born of the flesh is flesh]; it is raised a **spiritual body** [that which has been born of the spirit is spirit]. **There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body**; accordingly, it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul; the last Adam *became* an ever-living Spirit.’ However, **the spiritual was not first, but the natural—then the spiritual**” (I Cor. 15:35-46).

These Scriptures reveal that at the resurrection one will be born again of the Spirit and receive a glorious spirit body, shining as the sun. Paul continued his explanation of the resurrection of the dead in verses 47-55: “The first man *is* of the earth—made of dust. The second man *is* the Lord from heaven. As *is* the one made of dust, so also *are all* those who are made of dust; and as *is* the heavenly *one*, so also *are all* those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the *one* made of dust, **we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one** [at the resurrection].

“Now this I say, brethren, that **flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God**, nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I show you a mystery: we shall not all fall asleep, but **we shall all be changed** [born again of the Spirit], in an instant, in *the* twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for *the* trumpet shall sound, and **the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed**. For this corruptible must put on incorruptibility, and this mortal must put on immortality. Now when this **corruptible shall have put on incorruptibility**, and this **mortal shall have put on immortality**, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ”

In his First Epistle to the Thessalonians in 50 AD, Paul explained that the resurrection of the saints would not take place until the return of Jesus Christ to the earth: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in exactly the same way also, those who have fallen asleep in Jesus

will God bring with Him [because they will ascend into the air to meet Him in the clouds]. For this we say to you by *the* Word of *the* Lord, that we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall in no wise precede those who have fallen asleep; because the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with *a* shout of command, with *the* voice of an archangel and with *the* trumpet of God; and **the dead in Christ shall rise first** [born again of the Spirit]; **then we who are alive and remain** [will be changed and] **shall be caught up together with them in the clouds for the meeting with the Lord in the air**; and so shall we always be with *the* Lord” (I Thess. 4:14-18).

In summary, the scriptural evidence clearly reveals that one is not “born again” or “born of the Spirit” until the resurrection at the return of Jesus Christ. Being born again has nothing to do with baptism or conversion. When one has been born again, he or she will be a spirit being—composed of spirit. The resurrected saints will inherit the glory of Jesus Christ, Who will transform their bodies to be like His glorified body: “But for us, the commonwealth *of God* exists in *the* heavens, from where also we are waiting for *the* Savior, *the* Lord Jesus Christ; **Who will transform our vile bodies, that they may be conformed to His glorious body**, according to the inner working of His own power, *whereby He is able* to subdue all things to Himself” (Phil. 3:20-21).

This is the true meaning of “born again.”