

Born Again

BORN AGAIN

The term “born again” moved beyond its use and biblical meaning in John 3:3 because of Chuck Colson’s book, Jimmy Carter’s Playboy interview, and the televangelists’ abuses of it. The secular world grabbed it and redefined it to mean a narrow-minded hard core religious bigot. The image has been painted of “born again” people who make far fetched claims of changed lives. Wild testimonies of felons and drug addicts who overnight become saints come to mind.

Everything You’ve Heard is Wrong

This phrase was coined originally by Jesus Himself and has great significance and meaning. Nicodemus came to see Jesus on a fact finding mission in John 3. He was a powerful member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council that ruled Jerusalem under the authority of the Roman Empire. He was a Pharisee and therefore regarded himself as superior in knowledge and application of the Law of Moses. Amazingly, Nicodemus addressed Jesus respectfully as “Rabbi”(teacher), and admitted that Jesus must be from God because of the amazing miracles He was doing. We aren’t given the details in the story but I believe Nicodemus came with the intention to ask the same question so many others were asking Jesus—How do we get into the Kingdom of God? The Pharisees had been teaching that you needed to keep an exhaustive body of laws and traditions. Jesus’ teaching was different, and this difference between His teaching and the Pharisees’ was well noted in the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus’ use of “you have heard that it was said... but I say to you...”. I’m sure Nicodemus came “by night” so that he would not be seen by his peers who were critics of Jesus. I think Jesus sensed emptiness and a search for the truth by Nicodemus so he wasted no time in laying out what was really necessary. You can’t earn the right to see the Kingdom of God, “you must be born again”.

John Wesley’s Favorite Passage

Wesley preached thousands of sermons and always quoted from John 3:7. Someone asked him once, “Why do you always preach that you must be born again?” Wesley answered, “because you must be born again”.

Spiritual Birth

Interpreters have disagreed whether the Greek phrase that Jesus used means born again or born from above. Nicodemus’ response tells us that he took it as born again, but either translation fits Jesus’ teaching of our need for a new spiritual birth or regeneration. The Bible teaches that without Christ we are spiritually dead (Eph.2:1), but when Christ comes into our life as our Savior He makes us “alive”(Eph.2:5). Therefore this statement of Jesus that you must be born again is a gospel presentation to Nicodemus that because you are spiritually dead, you must become spiritually alive by believing in Jesus as your Savior. This is reinforced by the classic passage from the same story, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn.3:16).

The implications of Jesus’ words to Nick must have been staggering. He spent his whole life being educated and trained in law and religion. He had diligently obeyed and practiced both. His achievements were high enough to qualify him to be amongst an elite group called the Pharisees, and he was serving as a member of the ruling body of his nation. Now he is told that eternal life is not about what he has achieved. It is about what is not humanly possible, yet God had promised to do in Ezekiel 36:24-27, “I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will observe My ordinances”

The Rest of the Story

What became of Nicodemus? Did Jesus' teaching affect him? Apparently it did because later in John 7:50-51 he defended Jesus, and after the crucifixion he and Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body. They carefully prepared him for burial in a 100 lbs. of myrrh and aloes, and buried Him in a rich man's tomb (Jn.19:38-42). Traditionally we believe Nicodemus was 'born again'.

Wide Biblical Support

I have been told more than once that this is the only place in Scripture that this phrase is used, and so we shouldn't emphasize it. I beg to differ. This phrase and certainly this idea of spiritual rebirth is used throughout the New Testament. Peter said, God has caused us "to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:3); and "you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable" (1 Peter 3:23). In John's epistles he wrote, "Jesus is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him" and "whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 Jn.2:29;5:1). Paul wrote often of being "new men", "new creatures", and having "newness of life" (Rom.6:4, 2 Cor.5:17). James said "God regenerated us by the word of truth so that we might be the first fruits among His creatures" (James 1:18).

What Does it Mean to be a New Person ?

1. We have a new Lord of our life, we are under new management
2. We have a new Savior, instead of saving ourselves-Jesus saves us
3. We have new Light, new Truth. God has revealed to our heart His truth in His Word
4. We have a new heart. God has changed our heart. What man couldn't do, God did
5. We have a new Guide, new power of the Holy Spirit leading and directing us
6. We have new gifts, each has been gifted by the Holy Spirit to edify the church