

This subject is in answer to the question, Does the "born again" experience take place at conversion or is it related to the resurrection?

Are Christians

Begotten or Born?

by Ray L. Straub

Almost everyone who has attended church for any length of time has heard of Nicodemus. This is interesting in view of the fact that he is mentioned briefly only three times in the New Testament—each time in John's gospel.

In John 19:39, 40, there is mention of Nicodemus' involvement in placing Jesus into the tomb. In John 7:50, 51, he is reported to have made a statement of defense in behalf of Jesus. Even though the name, Nicodemus, is familiar to churchgoers, it is probable that many did not know of these instances. It is his conversation with Jesus, found at the beginning of John 3, that makes him so well known.

Nicodemus was a member of the prestigious Sanhedrin. This was a position of prominence in the Jewish community. He had heard about Jesus. He wanted to know more. He came to Jesus by night.

Nicodemus' inquiry took the form of a statement. He acknowledged that Jesus was a teacher sent from God. No one could perform those miracles unless God were with him. The statement reflected unusual re-

spect on the part of Nicodemus for Jesus' work.

The Teacher's response was profound. "Unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." This confused Nicodemus—which is understandable! He asked the automatic questions, "How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb the second time and be born?"

Good question! How can a man be born again?

Jesus explained, "Except a man is born of the water and of the Spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God." This is a birth of the water and of the Spirit. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Flesh can produce only flesh.

The second birth involves that of a spiritual being. He cannot be created by flesh. He comes into being by the Spirit of God.

Jesus compared this spiritual being to the wind. One sees the effects of a wind on the leaves of a tree, but he cannot see the wind itself. It is that way with the new spiritual creature. You cannot see him, but you can observe his results.

There is considerable differ-

ence of opinion when it comes to explaining the new birth. Some consider that we are born again when we receive Christ as our Saviour. This is the most common viewpoint. Another school of thought has it that the new birth refers to our change to immortality; that one is born again when he receives his immortal, incorruptible, heavenly, spiritual body.

This theory teaches that the saints are not born again in this life. The righteous dead receive their new birth when resurrected. The righteous living will be born again when they are translated from corruption to incorruption.

So, we have an interesting question to answer. When are we born again? at our conversion? or at the resurrection?

I am going to state my belief simply so that there will be no confusion about where I stand on this issue. I am convinced that the new birth experience refers to our conversion. I believe we are born again when we receive Jesus Christ as our Saviour. There is no question in my mind but what the Bible teaches this emphatically and clearly.

Since the much larger percentage of fundamentalist Christianity believes the teaching this way, it is probable that most readers will find little to dispute. That is good. At the same time, I assure that there is considerable value in reviewing this teaching carefully. It is important. Otherwise, Jesus would not have taught it to a man of Nicodemus' caliber when the circumstances demanded that the teaching had to be explicit and brief.

Consider the question Nicodemus asked in response to Jesus' pronouncement that a man had to be born again. Nicodemus thought that Jesus must be referring to his physical body. He wondered how he could be re-born when he was old.

Jesus clarified the fact that the new birth did not refer to the physical body. It speaks of the water and of the spirit; not a birth that involves the flesh.

Does our translation from mortality to immortality have to do with the flesh? Yes it does. The body we now have is mortal, corruptible, of the earth. When Jesus comes we will receive a new body; not of flesh as we have now, but one that is incorruptible, immortal, incapable of dying. Our change to immortality has everything to do with our *physical* body. Jesus made it clear to Nicodemus that the new birth had *no reference* to the physical body. So, it must refer to some experience *other than* our translation to immortality.

Does our conversion, our decision to live for Christ, have anything to do with our physical body? The answer is "No." When we are converted, our physical body is not converted. It remains the same. The conversion is that of spirit, attitude, outlook, discipline. One needs to take care not to experience the same confusion Nicodemus did, thinking in terms of change for the physical body.

"He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But

as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:11-13). Those who are born of God become His sons.

The fact that we are children of God is not an obscure nor subtle concept in Scripture. This leaves little question but what the new birth refers to our conversion; the time we determined by the power of God to repent of our sinfulness, our participation in worldliness, and to turn to worship and serve the living God as His sons.

A second important consideration must be kept in mind. Jesus said, "EXCEPT a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God!" The New English Bible and the Berkeley Version of the New Testament say, "UNLESS a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." This language communicates that the new birth is not a DESCRIPTION of our entry into God's kingdom; it is a CONDITION to getting there.

It does not suggest that the new birth is the *physical process* by which we get there, it teaches that it is a *spiritual requirement* before we are qualified to get there. It does not suggest that being born again is getting there. It says, "Be born again, or you will not get there!"

Some insist that entry into the kingdom of God does not refer to our conversion. The kingdom of God comes when Jesus comes to rule as king. It is Christ's 1,000-year reign on earth that constitutes the message of the kingdom.

That is a phase of the kingdom message, but it does not begin with the teaching of the millennial reign of Christ. When both John the Baptist and Jesus taught repentance because the kingdom of heaven was at hand, they spoke of a kingdom that preceded the 1,000-year reign. They spoke of a kingdom of the

Spirit that began with the preaching of the gospel.

"Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Colossians 1:12, 13). One becomes part of the kingdom of God upon experiencing the spiritual new birth.

Please note a series of verses from the first general letter of John. "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him" (I John 2:29).

I John 3:9, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."

I John 4:7, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God."

I John 5:1, "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God..."

I John 5:4, "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world..."

I John 5:18, "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not."

These several references indicate conclusively that when we come to know Christ as our Saviour, God becomes our heavenly Father, because we are born into His family. We experience a spiritual birth; a spiritual awareness; an awareness of the goodness and presence of God.

One wonders how anyone could question such a clear, Biblical teaching. It is done. In an instance such as this, the doctrine is usually challenged by casting suspicion on the language of the text.

In this case, the accuracy of the use of the verb, "born" is under indictment. It is suggested that the word used in

these references should not be "born" but "begotten." For instance, I Peter 1:3 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath **BEGOTTEN** us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Here the word "begotten" is used instead of "born."

It is urgent that we remain aware of certain gimmickry—a certain subtle scheme—in the

use of logic that may easily find us accepting unwarranted conclusions. Here one sets forth a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a tentative assumption awaiting evidence to establish its validity. He proceeds to build logically onto this hypothesis, softly luring people into accepting succeeding logic without examining the validity of the hypothesis!

For example, I might suggest that "Straub" is an Irish name. My last name is Straub, and so I

conclude that my last name is Irish. This logic is flawless, but the conclusion is in error. How can one present unquestioned logic and still arrive at a wrong conclusion? Simply because the opening statement is untrue. Consequently, the conclusion is untrue, no matter how excellent the logic upon which it is constructed.

Now back to our discussion about the words "born" and "begotten." The suggestion is that the Bible does not really intend to convey the message in I John that we are **BORN** again. If it meant that, one would have to conclude that we are born again in this life, because it is those who believe Jesus and who love one another that are born again. They say that instead of being born again, we are "begotten."

Here is where the gimmickry is displayed: there is the subtle suggestion that begotten has to do with conception; that man is in his "begettal" stage during gestation—the time from conception to birth. They advise that the embryo, then the fetus is "begotten." This lends itself to the concept that Christians remain in this state of gestation, spiritually, until Jesus returns. Then we are born again to immortality.

The proposal is clever and logical. What is important here is whether the hypothesis (that "begotten" refers to conception and gestation) is accurate. When the Bible uses the word, "begotten," "beget," or "begat," does this refer to gestation rather than birth? One needs to research this matter for himself! I can tell you what you will find.

The word "begotten" refers generally to the father's role in **PROCREATION**. Procreation refers to producing offspring.

It is seriously misleading to try to label the gestation period as the "begettal"; that one is "begotten" when he is conceived. No dictionary will give that definition, and I have

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KINDNESS IN ACTION

When judging someone else, my friend,
You never should forget
That there's, no doubt, at least one thing
Not known to you as yet,
'Bout circumstances of that one,
Which known, would temper you,
And make you ask: If in his place,
I wonder what I'd do.

It may be someone crossed his path
And ruffled up his day,
And that is why he spoke those words
He'd never planned to say,
And you, because you did not know,
A judgment harsh did make,
If you'd but known, perchance a prayer
You'd offered for his sake.

And he, no doubt, would then have felt
A strange, and pleasant glow,
Think how it might have changed his day
Tho you might never know,
Nor pat yourself upon the back
That something great you'd done,
Yet your regard for someone else
Had turned him to the sun.

This world, no doubt, would sweeter be
And we'd be more relaxed
If we'd remember that each man
With problems great is taxed,
And so he often says the things
He later does regret,
But if our heart is filled with love,
Those words we'll just forget.

—Tom Olson in *Now*.

ARE CHRISTIANS BEGOTTEN OR BORN?

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checked several, both abridged and unabridged.

The fact is that the word from which born is translated is the same word from which "begotten" is translated. They mean the same; the only difference being that the word begotten identifies the male who was involved with the production of the offspring. My suggestion is that if an offspring is not born, he is not begotten. These terms have reference to procreation; not conception and/or gestation. There is a vast difference. With this gimmickry exposed it leaves the "New Birth at the Coming of Christ" theory without an argument.

There is more. The Greek word from which "born" is translated in the references that are listed from I John is the very same word from which born is translated when it was used in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus as recorded in St. John 3. The same "born again" Jesus talked about with Nicodemus is the "born again" that people who believe in Jesus and love their brother have experienced.

There is no reason whatever to insist that Jesus talked to Nicodemus about being BORN into immortality; then to insist that in his first letter, John wrote about being *conceived* and *remaining a fetus* until the resurrection. Nothing in these texts calls for such varying interpretations.

Further, in John 9:2, 19, 20, 32, we read about one who was born blind. Verse 1 says he was blind from birth. The word "born" used in this chapter is the same as that used in John 3 and in each of the references of I John about being born again.

The same word is used in Acts 22:3 where Paul states that he was BORN in Tarsus. Obviously, these verses have no refer-

ence to conception or gestation.

When one reads about or hears about the suggestion that the word "begotten," with its various forms, refers to conception and/or gestation, he should demand authoritative proof. He will receive none, because "begotten" has to do with the production of offspring, just as does the word "born."

Notice how Romans 8:1, 14, 16, 17 refer to a spiritual awareness and to the fact that we ARE children of God. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. . . . For as many as are led by the spirit of God, THEY ARE THE SONS OF GOD. . . . The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that WE ARE THE CHILDREN OF GOD: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together."

How interesting! We are the sons of God, and heirs. If we suffer with him, we will be glorified together. This does not suggest that we become sons when we are glorified. We become sons and then are glorified.

There is much evidence in the Bible that our Christian experience, our life in Christ, begins with the new birth. This is how we become new creatures in Christ, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he IS A NEW CREATURE: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (II Corinthians 5:17). "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Galatians 6:15).

"Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). It is the new creature who is expected to walk in newness of life. Old

things are passed away. Everything becomes new.

Note the similar language in Ephesians 4:22-24: "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness."

Colossians 3:9, 10, is much like it: "Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him."

Surely this series of three passages establishes an irrefutable case of defense for the truth that we are born again in this life when we repent of our sinfulness and when we turn to God seeking help to live righteously. The new birth refers to that new, spiritual creation within us that makes us part of God's family.

It is this application of the new birth that establishes the meaning and importance of baptism for there are significant spiritual changes in the man who converts from the world to the family of God.

Those who are baptized by immersion give testimony to the world that there has been a death of the man of sin. This refers to that part of us which was controlled by the devil without, abetted by weakness within. If we did not believe that this "man of sin" was put to death, there would be no point in burying him in the watery grave. Our baptism without this "death" would not actually offer the answer of a clear conscience toward God.

Believing that there is a man of sin who dies and is buried, we ought to be able to accept the completed concept of baptism which tells us that we rise to walk in NEWNESS OF LIFE. Who does this walking in new-

ness of life? It would surely be difficult to accept the proposal that this is done by some unborn creature!

There is a carnal way of life that dies, and there is a spiritual quality that comes to life. The old man dies; the new man comes to life. It is no more difficult to believe that a new spiritual creature with godly qualities comes to life than it is to believe that a creature with natural worldly characteristics died and is buried.

To be consistent, one who believes in baptism by immersion, ought to believe that the new creature, who walks in newness of life, is the result of the new birth. He is a viable, functioning, responsible being.

Part of the explanation of the new birth given by Jesus to Nicodemus goes this way: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6).

It is suggested that this product of the Spirit cannot be manifest until the righteous become spirit beings after their resurrection or translation.

To the contrary, the members of the family of God are spiritual. Note the mention of this in Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are SPIRITUAL, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." How can one be spiritual? Cannot this spiritual quality be the birth of a spiritual consciousness?

Note the interesting wording of I Corinthians 2:12-14, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto

him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that IS SPIRITUAL judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man."

The Bible teaches that children of God reflect a spiritual quality in this life. They enjoy understanding, insight, and strength that the natural man cannot grasp. Question: "From where does this spiritual quality come?" Answer: "From the new birth." That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

THE JEWISH NATION IN PROPHECY

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Speaking of these people, the Almighty has said, "... he that toucheth you, toucheth the apple of his eye" (Zechariah 2:8).

God is still dealing with the nations of this planet. And He has His "called out ones" carrying the gospel near and far.

"And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed [note Galatians 3:9], and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29).

AMAZING GRACE

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and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (ASV). God centers our hope in a Person—Jesus Christ.

As Paul says when writing his first letter to Timothy (1:1) the "Lord Jesus Christ, ... is our hope." He will appear to those who look to Him for salvation (Hebrews 9:28). Then our salvation will be completed. We shall be redeemed in body as well as in soul and spirit. He will "... change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body ..." (Philippians 3:21). Just now, the hope "... is laid up for you in heaven ..." (Colossians 1:5).

Our hope rests in the fact that the One we trust for salvation is the Omnipotent God. Jesus is coming again to receive us unto Himself. Ours is a magnificent hope.

Our past was changed when our guilt was removed and our sin was pardoned. Our present is changed because the GRACE OF GOD enables us to have renewed lives. Our future is changed from eternal loss to a glorious hope.

The Message With Power

"But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will, and will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, BUT THE POWER. For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power" (I Corinthians 4:19, 20).

We may admire the eloquent speech, the convincing manner, and the strong organization supporting the speaker, but the real value of a message depends on whether it is given by the power of God. Too often eloquence is mistaken for God's power.

The kingdom message is God's message and is a message of truth and hope for God's people. There are those who attempt to take advantage of the Christian faith and substitute other teachings. They may have various reasons ranging from ignorance or financial gain to making a name for themselves, but the real proof is the stamp of God's approval.

Many strong words, eloquence, or other convincing methods are no substitute for God's power. May we recognize His power and know His Kingdom message when it is given.