

“The Necessity of the Spiritual Rebirth”

This passage of scripture can be one of the most confusing passages for people in all the Bible.

Our understanding of it has been somewhat skewed because of the pervasive influence that evangelical revivals have had in America.

In the 18th and 19th centuries America experienced two great revivals called the Great Awakenings. During those times there was strong evangelical preaching, calling people to repent of their sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ so they could be saved. Many people came to believe that if a person had not experienced such a conversion that they were not “born again.”

In the Presbyterian Church both Great Awakenings led to splits in the church. The denomination divided and split into the Old Side/New Side wing in the 1700’s and the Old School/ New School wing in the 1800’s. The Old Side/Old School groups were, ironically, more theologically conservative and they frowned upon the revivals. But the New Side/New School folks were more liberal and they embraced them.

I say this is ironic because it is people who are generally conservative today that embrace evangelical revivalism, while it is the theological liberals who sometimes don’t even think it is necessary for a person to be converted to faith in Jesus Christ. When your God is turned into a Universalist and your theology writes off sin, human depravity, the judgment of God, and hell then what is left for a person to be saved from?

Another ironic thing about this divide in the Presbyterian Church was that the Old Side/Old School folks were primarily in the south, and the New Side/New school folks were located mainly in the north. That meant that revivals caught on more in New York and Massachusetts than they did in North Carolina and Virginia, at least as it concerned the Presbyterians. Today it would be the opposite.

In the 20th century we can not help but think of our own home state hero, Dr. Billy Graham. Did you know that Billy was born and reared in an ARP church in Charlotte, but when God called him to the ministry he left the Presbyterian Church and became a Baptist so he could go ahead and get ordained without having to go to seminary? Later he married the daughter of a Presbyterian missionary and came back to the Presbyterian Church. He and Ruth were members of Montreat Presbyterian Church and when I was in school at Montreat I would occasionally see him there at worship when he was at home from one of his crusades.

Billy Graham is by far the most influential Christian in the 20th century, having personally counseled every president since Harry Truman, plus scores of other world leaders. He was an evangelist, par excellence, and he staked his whole ministry on calling people to repent of their sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ so they could be “born again.” If you eat, sleep, and breathe and have a television in your home then you have seen a Billy Graham crusade on TV, where thousands of people are pouring out from the stands to be “born again” while the choir sings “Just as I Am.” It is as American as apple pie, hotdogs, and baseball.

So why all of the confusion? There are many reasons. Some of us have never been to a crusade or a revival. Some of us can not recall a certain time, date, or place when we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Does this mean we are not born again? According to some people, just like in the days of the revivals, if you can't name the time, date, and place then you have not been "born again." Are they right?

There is also much confusion because some people have been "born again" a thousand times. They've spent their lives going down to the altar to get saved, or re-saved. How many times must a person pray "The Sinners Prayer" in order to be saved?

There is also confusion because some people who have been "born again" never got around to darkening the doors of a church. Are they really born again?

Then there are all of the stereotypes that Hollywood likes to make about "born again Christians." You know, narrow minded, uneducated, right-wing fundamentalist fruit-cakes who are out to spoil everybody's fun and are obsessed with telling the whole world how it is going to hell.

Today what I want to do in my message is to help bring some clarity to the subject, using the story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus as our Biblical basis for understanding the necessity of the spiritual rebirth.

Being Born Again is Biblical

The first thing that I want to say this morning is that being born again is a Biblical doctrine.

When Dr. RC Sproul, a famous conservative Presbyterian Bible teacher, is asked by someone if he is a "born again" Christian, he always replies, "Yes, I am a born again Christian. What other kind of Christian is there?" I like his answer.

In the text today Jesus tells Nicodemus that "no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again." (v.3)

There is your Biblical basis for being born again. Jesus, of course, is talking about a spiritual rebirth, something that Nicodemus totally missed, but why did Jesus say that? He said it because nobody is born a Christian. You might have been born into a Christian home. You might have been raised in the church since you were an infant, but nobody is born a Christian. If you were born a Christian then why would you need to have faith?

To the contrary, all human beings are born as fallen sinners, who are in rebellion against God and in love with themselves, and what their wills desire. This is our state at birth. Obviously, this is not evident in a two-day old baby, but that selfish, rebellious seed is there and it will soon come into fruition.

David said in his prayer of confession in Psalm 51 that "he was sinful at birth, sinful from the time his mother conceived him." It has always been that way for all of us since the sin of Adam

in the garden. We have all inherited that sinful nature from our first parents. If we have not then show me one person who has broken that cycle?

The apostle Paul says that all of us are “spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins and that we all followed the ways of the world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air.” (Eph. 2:1) He also says in Romans that we are “slaves to sin.” (Rom. 7:14)

Because this is our nature it means that we are not born into this world as God’s reconciled children, but rather as children who are in rebellion against God. And because of that we are all in need of being born again spiritually. We all need our relationship with God to be put back together again. That is why Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again and that is why he said that unless one is born again he/we will not see the Kingdom of God. This is a Biblical doctrine.

Without the Work of the Spirit in Our Lives We Will Not be Born Again

The second thing I want to say this morning that apart from the grace of God in our lives we can not be born again.

The word grace is often misunderstood in our culture today. Many people use the word to describe someone who is elegant, dignified, and pleasant. That person is graceful, we might say. But the proper definition of the word is “gift.” Grace means “gift.” Gifts are unearned and unmerited. When you receive a gift you have received something that you did not ask for, earn, or deserve. Otherwise it is not a gift. The person who gave it to you did it just because they wanted to give it to you, and not because you earned it, or deserved it.

It is that way with God and our salvation. We can not earn our relationship with God. We can not do enough good things to make God save us in Jesus Christ. God does not require that we complete a checklist of things before he will save us. If he required that we would not be able to meet the demands. It would be too long, too high, and too holy for fallen sinners to complete. This why our being born again must be a work of God’s grace in our lives in order for it to happen.

That is why when Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about being born again he says that one must be “born of the water and the Spirit.” (v.5) Just as a baby can’t conceive himself, (v.6) for flesh must give birth to flesh, so too can we not, nor anyone else, cause ourselves to be born again! The Spirit must give birth to spirit. So unless the Holy Spirit convicts our hearts of our sin and our need for a Savior then we will not be born again, we will not trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. But if the Spirit does do this in our lives then we will be born again and we will be led to trust in Jesus Christ for life with God. This is why it is grace. The Spirit of God must chose to give us the gift of salvation. The Holy Spirit must regenerate our dead hearts, and only then we will be born again and believe.

In short, this means our believing does not lead us, or make us, to be born again; it is our being born again by the Holy Spirit of God that leads us to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

This makes salvation a gift and it means that God is sovereign over the affairs of all those who are saved. That is why Jesus, when he talks about being born again, says that just as “the wind blows where it pleases, you don’t know where it is coming or is going,” so too is it for those who are “born of the Spirit.” Salvation is God’s gift. (v.8) The wind will blow where it pleases, and the Holy Spirit will open the eyes of those whom He desires to open so that they/we may believe on Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

This understanding of being born again is Biblical, and it takes the pressure off of evangelists and all of us who are called to witness for Christ, from having to beg, manipulate, or put pressure on people to come into the Kingdom. Share Christ, extend the invitation, call people to put their faith in him, but let the Spirit do the converting. Only God can bring dead bones back to life.

The Ways in Which Christians Are Born Again Vary

Thus far we have talked about how being born again is a biblical doctrine. We have also learned that spiritual rebirth is a gift from God. We can’t do it in our own strength. The Holy Spirit must lead us to faith in Jesus Christ. The final point that I want to make this morning is that people experience “the spiritual rebirth” in different ways. I hope this point will clear up the confusion that so many folks have when it comes to being “born again.”

Remember when I said earlier how some people say that unless you can name the time, date, and place of your conversion then you haven’t been born again? This is not true.

It is interesting to study Nicodemus in the gospel of John. He appears only two more times in the gospel and it seems that each time his faith grows little by little. The story this morning ends with no response. Nicodemus just silently disappears. Later, in John 7, he appears defending Jesus against the criticisms of the Pharisees, by saying that Jesus deserves a fair hearing. Has Nicodemus considered the words of Jesus in John 3 and started to believe them? Is the Holy Spirit working on his dead heart? The last time Nicodemus appears is at the death of Jesus in John 19. The disciples have scattered in fear, but there is Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea preparing Jesus’ body for burial. Why would Nicodemus, a Pharisee, do that if he did not believe? Maybe the Spirit has cracked his cold, dead heart.

My point is that though John doesn’t say it, it seems that Nicodemus came to believe in Jesus slowly, but surely, and gradually. Wouldn’t that be ironic that the man whom Jesus told he must be born again, gradually caught the faith, or the faith gradually caught him. If so, that would mean that Nicodemus could not name an exact date of his conversion.

Then there is the story of Timothy, the Apostle Paul’s young protégé. In II Timothy chapter one Paul commends Timothy for his Christian faith and he talks about how that faith had been passed down to him from his grandmother Lois and then his mother Eunice. This seems to imply a nurtured faith experience. Could it be that Timothy’s conversion was gradual and that he knew not a time when he did not believe in Jesus? I think this was probably the case. This type of conversion really resonates with Presbyterians because we put so much emphasis on raising our kids in the faith. This is most strongly symbolized in the promises that we as parents and a church make to our children at baptism.

Of course, we all well know of sudden, dramatic conversion stories in the Bible.

Many of the first disciples of Jesus heard his call to follow him and immediately they left everything they had to follow him. The Spirit worked a dramatic conversion. Then there is the conversion of the apostle Paul. As he was walking down Damascus Road, in order to persecute Christians, God stopped him dead in his path. The Holy Spirit brought him to his knees and blinded him with a vision of the risen Jesus, and he was dramatically and suddenly born again. In one instant God converted his cold, dead heart. He went from being a persecutor of the church to a follower of Christ.

What I am trying to say here is that there is only one way to God- Jesus Christ. But there are many different ways that we can come to Jesus. Some of us come suddenly, others gradually. Some of us can name the time, others can't. Our conversion stories are all different. Both ways are Biblical because both ways are in the Bible. The spiritual rebirth is an absolute necessity and there is no such thing as a Christian who is not born again, but the ways that Christians are born again can be different.

I hope this message helps clear up some of the confusion that exists on this matter and I hope that it gets us all thinking more seriously about our own conversion experience.

Conclusion and Application

One final word on the matter. How do we really know that we are saved? How do we know that we have truly been born again by the Spirit of God?

First, there must be within you some basic self-understanding that you are a sinner, you have sinful nature, and your sins and sinful nature has alienated you from God because God is holy. You must know within yourself that there is some kind of need to be reconciled to God and that there is a need for your guilt to be absolved by God. This is why you need to be born again.

There must also be some kind of inner awareness that you can't do this on your own. You can not get rid of your guilt or make up for it with your good works.

Knowing this must cause you to cast your life upon Jesus Christ, who takes away your sins and guilt by his death on the cross, and who lives a holy, sinless life for you, on your behalf, so that you might be accounted righteous before God.

You must accept this by faith, not intellectual head knowledge, but a living/trusting kind of faith.

Then this faith must produce evidence. The evidence will not be a perfect life, but a love for God and neighbor, a love for the things of Christ, a love for his Word, as evidenced by a desire to study it, a love for prayer and Christian discipleship, a love for the church, as evidenced by your participation in it, and a growth in repentance and holiness. These are the marks, or the fruit of a born again heart.

There are many in our world today who have gone down to the altar to be born again, but who do not exhibit such fruit. And there are many people who grew up in the church all of their lives who do not either. Neither experience will save a person.

What saves you is the cross of Jesus Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit working the miracle of the spiritual rebirth in your heart. This grace produces genuine faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior and a desire to follow him with your life, whether you come to Christ gradually or suddenly.

Are you born again? Unless you are, you will not see the Kingdom of God. This is what the Bible teaches. I invite you to trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness your sins and real life with God today.

Amen.