

WHEN AND HOW IS ONE BORN AGAIN?

In the original Worldwide Church of God under the leadership of Herbert Armstrong it was taught that the term born-again was to be taken in an entirely physical sense so that one would only be born-again when one was raised from the dead in the first resurrection. However, this is not the way that most of the Christian denominations have understood this subject. So what are the biblical facts?

Generally people think that this is a subject that is spoken of only in the Gospel of John when Jesus spoke to Nicodemus and where the Greek phrase *gennethe anothen* usually translated “born again” can also be translated as “**born from above.**” However, it is a subject that **most of the Christian Scripture writers comment on**, although some use different terms. Furthermore, Matthew, Mark and Luke’s contribution to this subject of being born again is by their recording of Jesus’ parable of the Sower which we will look at later. So if we simply use the statements to Nicodemus in John’s Gospel regarding being born-again we will only have part of the picture and so perhaps get a faulty understanding.

JESUS’ ENCOURAGES NICODEMUS TO BE “BORN AGAIN/FROM ABOVE”

- ❖ “Jesus answered and said to him [*Nicodemus*], ‘Amen, amen I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being *born from above*...I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being **born of water and Spirit**’” (*John 3:3, 5 NAB*).

If we simple took the phrase “*no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again/from above*” then the approach taken by Armstrong of a physical rebirth at the first resurrection could have some merit. However, Jesus also speaks of “*being born of water*” which likely refers to the time of one’s baptism. Additionally, he speaks about “*being born of...Spirit*” which, based on Armstrong’s theory, would mean that one does not have God’s spirit until the Kingdom arrives. Yet the Scriptures are packed with statements to show that Christians have God’s spirit from the moment they are convicted about Jesus.

So how are we to understand Jesus’ words to Nicodemus? Clearly one is not physically born again at the time one believes, receives the spirit, and is baptized and so it must be in a metaphorical and spiritual sense i.e. one is **born-again spiritually**. This is what is demonstrated by the apostle Peter when he says:

- ❖ “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy **caused us to be born again** to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”
(*1 Peter 1:3 NASB*).
- ❖ “...for you **have been born again** not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God.” (*1 Peter 1:23 NASB*).

Notice here that in both these verses Peter informs us that Christians have already been born again so it must be in the spiritual sense that they are born again in harmony with Jesus’ words to Nicodemus. Also notice that what causes one to be born again is “the living and enduring **word of God.**”

Furthermore, the apostle John confirms what is said by Jesus and Peter in his letter of 1 John 3:9 and 5:18 where he speaks of Christians as being “*born (begotten) of God.*” So clearly this did not mean any kind of literal birth as Nicodemus mistakenly thought.

“REGENERATION” IS ANOTHER TERM FOR BEING “BORN AGAIN”

Other Bible writers describe the same process as being “born again” in other terms, one of which uses the Greek word *palingenesia* meaning “regeneration.” It is a term that is used in two senses:

- (1) First in time is the **personal spiritual regeneration** of individuals (Titus 3:5)—those who are born again.
- (2) Secondly the concept applies to the **physical regeneration of the whole world**—the renovation of all visible things (Matt. 19:28).

Because our subject is that of being “born again” we need only consider the first of these uses of the word “**regeneration**” i.e. one’s spiritual regeneration.

On the personal level regeneration denotes a spiritual change – **a change of disposition** toward God so that one is no longer estranged from Him. It **is the work of God**. Nevertheless, personal regeneration involves the response of the individual as we shall see in a moment. Although there are these two different aspects to regeneration, namely the cosmic/universal and the personal, the Scriptures present **personal renewal as really an early part of the cosmic renewal**. This means that the regenerated person has not yet reached the goal but moves forward toward it. So Paul describes being born again in the following terms:

- ❖ “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the *washing of regeneration (palingenesia)* and renewing by the Holy Spirit”
(Titus 3:5).

This second of the two times that *palingenesia* is used in the NT concerns individuals and so is personal and spiritual. It results in such radical changes in the person that he has become a new person as Paul described:

- ❖ “...if anyone is in Christ, he is **a new creature...**” (2 Cor. 5:17).
- ❖ “For we are His workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus for good works**” (Eph. 2:10).

“THE WORD” IS THE MEANS FOR ONE TO BE BORN AGAIN

The Christian leader James tells us how one is spiritually reborn when he says:

- ❖ “In the exercise of His will He *brought us forth by the word*” (James 1:18).

This is the same as we saw earlier when Peter informed us of the means that Christians are born-again when he says: “*You have been born again, not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, **through the living and enduring word of God**” (1 Peter 1:23). Not only are we told that “the word of truth” is the means that brings us forth as spiritually “born-again” individuals but that “the living and enduring word of God” is a “seed” according to Peter’s words. So this draws our attention to Jesus’ parable of the seed sower contained in the three gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.*

THE PARABLE OF THE SEED SOWER

After giving the parable concerning the four kinds of soil that seed was scattered on, Jesus continued on to give an explanation of the parable in Matthew 13:18-23. He explained that:

- The sower = Jesus
- The seed = the word of the kingdom
- The four kinds of soil represent four basically different responses from people to whom the seed is presented.

So “the seed” is “*the word of the kingdom*” which the Apostle Peter tells us “is ***the word which was preached to you***” (1Pet. 1:25). So “the word” is the specific message that Jesus preached i.e. the good news of the coming kingdom of God (Mark 1:15, Luke 4:43). The following is Jesus explanation: “Hear then the parable of the sower:

1. “When anyone hears ***the word of the kingdom*** and does **not understand it**, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside **the road.**”

Such understanding is not based on intelligence or lack of it. Nevertheless this type of person rejects the Kingdom message and never becomes a Christian.

2. “The one on whom **seed** was sown on the **rocky places**, this is the man who hears the word and immediately **receives it** with joy; yet he **has no firm root** in himself, but is only temporary, and when **affliction or persecution arises** because of the word, immediately *he falls away.*”

This type of person becomes a Christian for a short while, but when problems or persecution begin, he stops believing and ceases to be a Christian any longer.

3. “And the one on whom seed was sown among **the thorns**, this is the man who hears the word, and **the worry of the world** and the deceitfulness of wealth **choke** the word, and *it becomes unfruitful.*”

This type of person becomes a Christian but later becomes anxious over material things, and so loses spirituality and becomes a Christian in name only i.e. a carnal Christian.

4. “And the one on whom seed was sown on **the good soil**, this is the man who hears the word and **understands it**; who indeed *bears fruit* and brings forth, some a hundred fold, some sixty, and some thirty.”

Only this type of person remains a Christian permanently.

So the parable of the soils is an additional demonstration that there is a calling or invitation made to all people. Yet the majority fail, over the long term, to become or remain as “the chosen.”

RECEIVING THE SEED

The scattering of the seed refers to Jesus’ work with those who are spiritually dormant, so that they are first of all *awakened* when, through various means, they come to hear the message of the kingdom and “the name of Jesus Christ.” Then the people of categories 2, 3, and 4 are *enlightened* by this message. And finally they are *persuaded* by it. So for one to be born again involves the willing reception of this seed “*word of the kingdom,*” and **the understanding of it**. It is this receiving that causes a person to be “*born again,*” which means being “*born from above,*” “*born of God*” or “*regenerated.*” Such a born again Christian has become a “**Son of the kingdom**” (Matt. 13:38), “**a new creature...**” and then he begins to bear fruit “*and brings forth, some a hundred fold, some sixty, and some thirty*” according to their varying circumstances. So the received word or message is the means of one’s rebirth and shows that the person has become spiritually alive i.e. reborn:

- ❖ “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who **hears my word**, and **believes** Him who sent me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgement, but has **passed out of death into life**” (John 5:24).

MORE DETAILS FROM LUKE’S VERSION OF THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Luke 8:10-15 ESV:

- ❖ “To you it has been given to know the **secrets of the kingdom of God** ... Now the parable is this: the **seed** is **the word of God** [*the message of the kingdom*].

1. The ones along **the path** are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may *not believe* and *be saved*.
2. And the ones on **the rock** are those who, when they hear the word, *receive it with joy*. But these have no root; they *believe for a while*, and in time of testing *fall away*.
3. And as for what fell among **the thorns**, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and *their fruit does not mature*.
4. As for **the good soil**, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good **heart**, and bear fruit with patience.”

In Matthew’s version of the parable we notice that it is only the first [*the road*] that did “**not understand it**.” This type of person is never a believer – is never born again. Similarly in Luke’s version the first [*the path*] “may *not believe* and *be saved*.” However, **the 2nd** type [*the rock or rocky soil*] in both Matthew and Luke **received the word of the kingdom** with joy, **but they “believe for a while**, and in time of testing (i.e. affliction /persecution) *fall away*.” *Being no longer believers they are no longer “born again.”*

NOTE: the phrase “born again” is metaphorical, and so that in that sense someone can become unborn.

If we look at the details of **the 3rd** type [*the thorns*] in both Matthew and Luke we see *that the seed word of the kingdom “becomes unfruitful”* i.e. “*their fruit does not mature.*”

All this indicates that the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th soils were all initially responsive. So categories 2 and 3 had become genuine Christians and were saved and had become born again – born from above; yet group 2 falls away and is no longer saved. This shows that the concept of once saved always saved is not biblical. Yet, group 3 seems to remain saved but does not allow its fruit to mature.

A POSITIVE RESPONSE TO “THE WORD OF THE KINGDOM” IS ESSENTIAL

❖ “...Jesus came...proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the **kingdom** of God is at hand; **repent** and **believe in the gospel**”” (*Mark 1:15*).

To “repent” means to change one’s mind because of new knowledge that one has received or to have a change of disposition, often including a changing of one’s loyalties and allegiances.

EVERYONE IS BEING CALLED TO REPENT NOW SO THAT THEY MAY BE BORN AGAIN

Acts 17:30

❖ “...but **now** he [*God*] commands **all people everywhere to repent**”

So as with Jesus’ parable of the sower and the 4 kinds of soil encompassing all people who come into contact with “the word of the kingdom” so, too, Acts 17 shows that **all people** are now invited to repent and become born again spiritually as part of the Christian community. Yet, also in harmony with the parable not all give a positive or long-lasting response.

MANY ARE CALLED BUT FEW ARE CHOSEN

So Jesus says “**many are called** (*invited*) but **few are chosen**” (Matt. 22:14) he is making a contrast and *so means that everyone is called*.

SUMMARY OF HOW ONE IS BORN AGAIN

1. **The invitation.** God is calling/inviting everyone by means of the proclamation of the word of the Kingdom – the seed.

2. **Positive Response.** This involves repentance when one believes the good news of the Kingdom and the name of Jesus. This repentance and belief immediately brings:

- Holy spirit
- Being forgiven of one's sins
- Being counted as righteous
- The need to decide to get baptized (full immersion in water) as soon as practicably possible.
- Inclusion in "the body of Christ"
- Initial salvation

All of this means that one is **now a born from above** child of God and therefore a Christian.

THE FRUITAGE OF BEING BORN AGAIN AS A CHRISTIAN

- ❖ "No one who is *born of God* practices sin, because **his seed** abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9).

According to the NIV notes this does not mean: "a complete cessation of sin, but of a life that is not characterised by sin."

- ❖ "We know that no one who is *born of God* sins; but he [*Jesus*] who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him" (1 John 5:18).

"FRUITAGE OF THE SPIRIT" RATHER THAN "WORKS OF THE FLESH"

- ❖ "When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissention, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties and other sins like these... anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:19-23 NLT).

So to be born again means an absolute revolution/transformation in us as people. The whole person is being changed from his worldly way of feeling and thinking to God's way of feeling and thinking, so that now he has God's mind on things. Our on-going fight against "the desires of (our) sinful nature" and our bearing the good fruit as above will complete us as people who will be used by Jesus in the furtherance of God's kingdom purpose both before and after the time it arrives.

CONCLUSION

So contrary to Herbert Armstrong's teaching that being born again is a physical phenomenon to occur at the first resurrection, it clearly and scripturally is a spiritual rebirth caused by our positive response to the good news message of "the Kingdom of God" as demonstrated by the apostles and in Jesus' parable of the sower.

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