

John 3:5

Baptism and the New Birth

by Danny Brown

“Verily, Verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” – John 3:5

This is a declaration made by our Lord during his conversation with Nicodemus. This statement presents us with a view of the new birth, informing us of what it consists and its importance.

Nicodemus opened the conversation, *“Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.”* (Jno 3:2) Jesus ignored the complement and replied, *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* (Jno 3:3) Since the word again is translated from the Greek word *anōthen*, which is translated “from above” in some other passages it is suggested that it should be so translated here to read “born from above.” Then, we are told, that Jesus was referring to the origin and source of the new birth and in many cases leaving the impression that there is something mysterious or that there is some action direct from heaven to bring about the new birth. However, “born again” and not “born from above” is evidently the correct translation. The experts in translation, the world’s Greek scholars, all translated *anōthen* by “born again” in John 3:3,5 in the King James Version, New King James Version, New International Version, American Standard Version, New American Standard Version, etc. and by *born anew* in the Revised Standard Version. W. E. Vine comments, “Nicodemus was not puzzled about birth from Heaven, what perplexed him was that a person must be born a second time.”

Under the old law all the Jewish people were included as members of the old covenant by virtue of their natural birth. However, Jesus was shortly to establish a new kingdom, a spiritual kingdom. (Dan 2:44-45; John 18:36) Nicodemus, as well as other Israelites, were wrong if they thought that being a fleshly descendent of Abraham entitled them to a place in the kingdom of God when it was established. A physical birth put a Jew into the earthly kingdom of Israel, but it will take a new birth, a spiritual birth to put one into the kingdom of God. Indeed, no one, whether Jew or Gentile, can enter the kingdom of God except he be born again. Therefore Jesus was speaking of a second birth, a spiritual birth, and not the source of the new birth.

Except

“Except a man be born of the water and of the Spirit . . .” (John 3:4)
The word except has the effect of “if and only if.” Jesus was saying that one enters the kingdom if and only if he is born of the water and of the Spirit. Therefore being born of the water and of the Spirit is the only entrance into the kingdom. If one does not enter through this gate he doesn’t enter the kingdom of God. This is the only gate, an exclusive gate. If one expects to enter the kingdom he MUST be born again. There is no other way.

“Born”

The word born as used in born again and born of water and of the Spirit is metaphorical; yet it must signify something that, in one or more aspects, resembles its literal meaning. The natural birth contemplates the beginning of a new life in a new environment. It is a transition or passing from one state or relationship to another state or relationship. Now like the natural birth the person that is born again enters a new spiritual life with a changed state or relationship. There is a transition from the old man with the guilt and condemnation of sin to being a new creature having been forgiven of past sins. There is also the transition from being outside the kingdom of God to being a citizen in the kingdom of God with hope of heaven. (Col 1:13; Titus 1:2) “A change of state and the beginning of a new life is the thought conveyed by the expression “born again.” We have the same thought presented by Paul in his epistles in other figures, varied to suit the circumstances under which he wrote. He expresses it by the figure of marriage, Rom. 7:4; by the figure of grafting, Rom. 9:24; by the figure of adoption, Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5; and by the figure of translation from one government to another, Col 1:13. If an individual is married to Christ, his state is changed – he is born again. If he is taken from the wild olive-tree and grafted into the tame olive-tree, or from the world and grafted into Christ, the true Vine, his state is changed – he is born again. If he is taken – as a child – from one family and adopted into another, the family of God, his state is changed – he is born again. If he renounces his allegiance to one government, the devil’s and is legally translated into another, the kingdom of God’s dear Son, his state is changed – he is born again.” (T. W. Brents, Gospel Plan of Salvation, p. 196)

Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God and church refer to the same body of people. The term kingdom of God refers to a body of people who are citizens in the kingdom under the rule of the king, Jesus Christ. The term church refers to the same

body of people, but from the view that they have been called out of the world by the gospel of Christ to live righteously.

There are a number of good arguments showing that the church and kingdom refer to the same group of people. We here notice two of them:

1. The church and the kingdom were established on the same day at the same time with the same body of people. The evidence reveals that there was only one body established on the day of Pentecost: There was just one gospel preached by Peter. (Acts 2:22-38) There was just one Lord, Jesus Christ as lawgiver or ruler. (Acts 2:36) There was just one law of admission: Faith, Repentance and Baptism for remission of sins, (Acts 2:37-38) All who became obedient to the one gospel were added to only one body, the church. (Acts 2:47) However obedience to the same truth puts one into the kingdom. (John 3:5) The church and the kingdom that was established on the day of Pentecost have: 1) the same gospel or laws, 2) the same Lord, lawgiver or ruler, 3) the same terms of salvation or admission and 4) the same subjects or territory. Therefore, the kingdom and church are different terms that refer to the same body of people. It is interesting to notice that the kingdom of Christ did not exist prior to Pentecost and nowhere is this same kingdom contemplated as existing with these same elements following the second coming of Christ.

2. The church and kingdom at Colosse. Paul wrote, *“Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of his dear son.”* (Col 1:13) Who are the “us” of this passage? It evidently includes Paul who was a member of the church and the letter was addressed to faithful brethren in Christ, evidently to members of the church in Colosse. Those who were in Christ are spoken of as having been translated into the kingdom. Obviously the kingdom was in existence and the brethren (members of the church at Colosse) were citizens of that kingdom.

The kingdom under consideration was established by Jesus on the day of Pentecost following His death, burial, resurrection and ascension into heaven. Its establishment was prophesied in Isaiah 2, Daniel 2, Joel 2 and fulfilled in Acts 2. This kingdom is not like the kingdoms of the world but is a spiritual kingdom. Jesus said, *“My kingdom is not of this world.”* (John 18:36) Again, *“The kingdom of God cometh not with observation. Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or lo there! For, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.”* (Luke 17:20-21) This kingdom would begin small and be a growing kingdom that would fill the whole world. (see Daniel 2 concerning the little stone) It presently exists: *“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”* (Heb 12:28) The word “receiving” is a present tense verb indicating that at the time of writing the kingdom was in existence and since it is

everlasting it still exists and is not something we are to look for after the return of Christ. This kingdom has a destiny. It is to be delivered up to God the Father when Jesus has overcome His last enemy, death, by the resurrection of all the dead. (1 Cor 15:24) John said you can see, that is, have part in or enjoy the blessings of this kingdom by being born again, that is, being born of water and of the Spirit.

Born of Water

The conflict over the interpretation of the declaration of Jesus that "*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*" centers on the use of the word "water." Suppose we consider several interpretations of the meaning of water in the passage.

1. There are some who believe that water refers to the natural birth. This is not so for a number of reasons: 1. It is a misuse of the word "water." Water is made to refer to the sac of amniotic fluid that surrounds the infant before birth, which is not really water at all. 2) Jesus specifically informed Nicodemus that the new birth was a birth of water and the Spirit, not a natural birth. Being born again consist of two elements – water and Spirit – but one birth. It is not two births – one natural and one spiritual. 3) It is "a man," one that has already experienced the natural birth, that is to be born again, of water and the Spirit. 4) If "birth of water" means natural birth, then Jesus either told Nicodemus to do something he had already done or to do a physical impossibility. If this had been the case, Nicodemus' questions would have been valid and Jesus would not have rebuked him.

2. Others teach that the word water refers to the Word of God. There are serious objections to this view. 1) It ignores the literal meaning of water and chooses a symbolic meaning with no support from the context. 2) The proof text usually referred to is Eph 5:26, where Paul said, "*That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.*" The actual parallel between John 3:5 and Eph 5:26 is missed: actually "born of Water" and "washing of water" parallel and "born of Spirit" and "by the Word" parallel. Thus water is parallel to water and the Spirit is parallel to "by the word." 3) It should be obvious that "water" is not the "Word" for Paul said, "washing of water by the word."

3. Yet others teach that the water of John 3:5 is identical with the Spirit. "The word "water" here was used by Jesus as a symbol of the Holy Spirit." (Wuest, Great Truths to Live by from the Greek New Testament, pg. 56) He argues, "The Greek word translated "and" has other uses than merely that of a connective. It has an emphatic or ascensive use, and is at that time translated by the word "even." Thus, the translation here could read, "Except a man be born of water,

even of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (Ibid, pg. 57) First, the 57 translators of the King James version and the 101 translators of the English Revised and American Standard Versions, also the translators of the Revised Standard version, the New King James Version, the New American Standard Version and the New International Version all translated the Greek word "kai" in John 3:5 by the English word "and" as a connective. These are the greatest Greek scholars in the world and I am willing to take their word for this translation. "The Analytical Greek New Testament was published in 1981 by Baker Book House. It was compiled by Timothy and Barbara Friberg. To explain it simply, they put the Greek text of our New Testament into a computer and asked it to do a grammatical analysis. The entire Greek text was then printed out and a grammatical tag was placed under each word to show what part of speech it was. Not only were nouns, verbs and prepositions indicated, but also case, gender, person and number. The tag under the word "kai" in John 3:5 shows it to be a connective conjunction, not an adverb as some Baptist preachers wish, and should be translated as "and." (David Padfield, "Reflections On Truth, Vol VIII, Number 5, pg. 2)

4. To be born of water can only refer to water baptism. Even though the term "born" is a figurative expression the word "water" is to be understood literally. Water is water and does not mean something else.

"Water is never present in any act connected with the kingdom of Christ except one. But in that one it is always present, and from it never absent. That act is baptism. But in the expression "born of water" water is present. Hence, it must be in baptism, since water can be present in nothing else. Baptism, therefore must be the thing denoted by the expression born of water.

"The term born is metaphorical; yet it must signify something which, in one or more respects, resembles its literal meaning. This something, moreover, must be connected with water. Now, in all Christianity, what is there which, even in one respect, bears the slightest resemblance to the literal meaning of "born," except baptism! In baptism one comes out of the water, and that to live a new life. Is not this being born of water?

"If the expression "born of water" does not signify baptism, then its meaning is wholly indeterminate. Hence, no living man can say whether he is or is not in the kingdom of God. But the Savior never intended to leave man in doubt on so vital a question. We hence infer that the expression is determinate, and signifies baptism.

"There are but two kingdoms on earth in which men exist, -- the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. These two kingdoms are

separated from each other by one and the same line. All on this side are saints, all on that side sinners, and all are on that side until born of water and of the Spirit: then, all thus born are on this side. . . . The instant in which a man's sins are forgiven he passes from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God. But he passes from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God the instant in which he is born of water and of the Spirit. Hence in that instance his sins are forgiven. (Thus being born of water and of the Spirit is equal to having one's sins forgiven." (Moses E. Lard, "A Review of Campbellism Examined" pg 230, 231)

There is an axiom that says: Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. For example: $2 + 2 = 4$ and $3 + 1 = 4$. Therefore $2 + 2 = 3 + 1$. To make application to the statement "born of water," please note: 1. To be born of water and of the Spirit is to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5). 2. To enter the kingdom is to be saved. (see above) 3. *"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. (Mark 16:16)*. 4. Conclusion: He that believeth and is baptized and entering the kingdom of God are both equal to being saved, therefore they are equal to each other. That is, He that believeth and is baptized = entering the kingdom of God. Now the conclusion can be drawn that He that believeth and is baptized is equal to or the same as being born of the water and of the Spirit. If we remove believeth from one side of the equation and Spirit from the other side, what we have left is "born of water = baptism."

When we look at parallel passages we see that "born of water" equals "baptism." The Bible says, *"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." (1 Cor 12:13)* This passage is not speaking of Holy Spirit baptism but of the instrumentality of the Spirit, that is, by the teaching of the Spirit are we all baptized (water baptism) into one body (the church which is the kingdom). Thus those born of water and the Spirit enter the kingdom and those who by the Spirit are baptized enter into the kingdom. Hence those born of water and the Spirit are the same as those who by the teaching of the Spirit are baptized. We conclude that "born of water" is the same as being baptized.

The New Testament teaches that in baptism one is immersed in water and then comes forth from that watery grave a new creature. *"Know ye not, that as many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? 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." (Rom 6:3-4)* To be born of water" and to be "raised to walk in newness of life" are identical. There is nothing else in God's word that corresponds to being born of water except baptism. Paul refers to the resurrection of Jesus by saying He was the first born from the dead. (Col 1:18) If the Lord's coming out of the tomb in which he was buried is spoken of

as being born from the dead, then, coming out of the waters of baptism means to be born of water.

The Spirit's Part

"Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." This second birth is a spiritual birth that translates one into a new spiritual relationship with the God of Heaven. From outside to within His spiritual kingdom. It has two elements, water and Spirit, but it is one birth not two. It is not one of water and one of Spirit. The two elements work together to form one birth that delivers one out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God.

We are now interested in the Spirit's part in the new birth. We have seen that born of water, baptism, is the final point at which one leaves Satan's kingdom and enters the kingdom of God. But baptism is not just an immersion in water or getting wet. It must be preceded by a number of things, such as: faith, repentance, confession of faith in Jesus, conviction that baptism is for remission of sins, etc. John tells us that the Comforter, the Spirit is to *"reprove the world of sin and of righteousness, and of judgment."* (John 16:8). Every conversion to Christ which has occurred from the beginning of the Lord's church, until this present hour has been begun, carried on, and consummated as a result of the work of the Spirit upon the sinners' heart. Perhaps the easiest way to see the Spirit's part and how the Spirit works in conversion is to look at a case of conversion. Suppose we look at the conversion of the three thousand on the day of Pentecost recorded in acts two.

On that day Peter stood up with the other apostles and preached the gospel in fact for the first time in the history of the world. He revealed the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy as recorded in Joel 2:28. He took his subject from Joel's statement that *"whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved."* He answered the question: Who is the Lord on whom we should call? He taught that Jesus was approved of God by many miracles. That Jesus was crucified, buried and had been raised from the dead in fulfillment of David's prophecy in Psalm 16:11. That Jesus had ascended on high and was now at the right hand of the Father sitting on David's throne. He ended with the statement, *"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly (believe confidently DB), that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye crucified both Lord and Christ."* (Acts 2:36)

Note the results: *"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their hearts, and said unto Peter, and to the rest of the apostles. Men and brethren, what shall we do?"* (Acts 2:37) To be "pricked in the heart" is to be convicted of sin. The record says this was accomplished "when they heard this."

When they heard what? When they heard the Spirit-inspired gospel that Peter spoke. The conviction of those who were "pricked in the heart" is attributed, by Luke the inspired historian, to the Word of God. Jesus had said that the Spirit would convict the world of sin. We conclude, therefore that the Spirit accomplished that very thing on the day of Pentecost through the instrumentality of the Word of God.

On that day Peter answered those who inquired, "What shall we do?" by telling them to "repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." (Acts 2:38) Then, "they that gladly received his word were baptized and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" and " they praised God and had favor with all the people, and "the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." (Acts 2:47) This is an inspired example of the conviction and conversion of sinners. They heard the gospel. By this gospel they were convicted of their sins and came to believe in the Lordship and anointing of Jesus to be the Christ. In obedience to the commands of the gospel they repented and were baptized for the remission of sins. In doing so they were saved and were added to the church, the kingdom of God.

The three thousand on the day of Pentecost heard the gospel of Christ, the Spirit's inspired message. They believed in Jesus as the Christ, were convicted of the guilt of sin, repented of their mistakes and were baptized for the remission of sins. They became member of the church of Christ, the kingdom of God. They were born again, born of water and of the Spirit and became citizens in the spiritual kingdom of God. From this we conclude that the Spirit's part in the new birth is accomplished through the Word of God that he delivered, inspired and confirmed.

Believing

In discussions concerning the new birth, we are told that Jesus concluded his discussion with Nicodemus in the following words, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:15-15) Then conclude that Jesus said one receives eternal life by BELIEVING in him. Thus leaving the impression that eternal life is by believing only or by faith only. It is true that one receives eternal life by BELIEVING in him but not by believing only or at the point of faith. The word believeth in John 3:15 & 16 is used by metonymy, that is a part put for the whole. For example in Acts 11:18, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." Here repentance is put for the whole plan of salvation, a part put for the whole. In 1 Pet 3:21, "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us"

No one I know believes that baptism alone saves. Thus in this passage baptism is put for the whole plan of salvation, a part put for the whole. In John 3:15, 16 believeth is put for the whole plan of salvation, a part put for the whole.

To show that salvation is not at the point of faith or by faith only, let us look at John 1:11-13, *“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 man, but of God.”* Here Jesus revealed that the believer is not yet a child of God. He said he has the power to BECOME a child of God. It is like the person who desires to catch some fish. He buys a fishing license, now he has the power (right) to go fishing. But hasn't caught a fish. However he does have the right to fish. The believer is not a child of God but he has the right to become one. Besides this, Jesus went on to say one was not saved simply because he was born naturally (born of blood). The one saved was the one born of God, born of water and the Spirit. (see John 3:5) Jesus said, *“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.”* (Mark 16:16) He did not say, *“He that believeth shall be saved.”*

Conclusion

“Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” In the light of what has been said we paraphrase the sentence. If and only if a man is baptized for the remission of sins (born of water) having fulfilled the prerequisites to baptism that the Spirit has made known in the gospel of Christ which He revealed, inspired and confirmed, such as faith in God and Christ, repentance and confession of faith in Christ as the son of God, he cannot enter the church of Christ, the spiritual kingdom of God.