

New Birth!

Known by God

by Marina Greenwood

The Most Important Answer

A warning given by Jesus in his first recorded sermon gets to the heart of spiritual matters. In Matthew 7:21-23 Jesus cautions that not everyone who calls him Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, though they may be doing many great and even miraculous things in his name: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

It’s a warning that is so startling and shocking that every time I see it, I feel compelled to stop in my tracks and take stock all over again. Could I see God work through me as these people did and yet be told “away from me, you evildoer”? How can anyone be sure? He says the ones who will enter the kingdom of heaven will be “only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” But isn’t that what those people he mentions were doing?

The key seems to be found in his sentence of judgment: “Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.’” He seems to be reducing life down to the most basic, important, foundational truth: We each need to be sure we’re truly in a *relationship* with God, knowing him and especially being sure we are known *by* him as one of his own dear children.

These people Jesus condemned were called evildoers because their basis of confidence was wrong, as revealed by their answer (“did we not” . . . *do* many things—what we did was in your name and in service to you, after all—isn’t that what you want from us?). It’s doing evil in God’s eyes to serve him on our own terms and based on our own logic of what *we* think would please God. The most amazing part of this passage is that the claims they made weren’t false—they *were* prophesying, driving out demons, and performing miracles, which we know had to be done by the power of God (Luke 11:17-18: “Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: ‘Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub.’” Mark 9:38-40: “‘Teacher,’ said John, ‘we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.’ ‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said. ‘No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.’”). But even seeing God use them to accomplish great things or being able to claim how valid their experiences were was not enough to grant them welcome into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus calls them evildoers, which is shocking! He warns that many people who claim to be serving him as Lord will hear that judgment pronounced, rather than the warm welcome they will be expecting to hear. It’s very sobering, as he means it to be!

If he condemns with the judgment “I never knew you,” then the key to confidence must be to be sure he *does* know me. There seems to be a focus in Christendom, when a relationship with God is emphasized, on us knowing God. And that *is* important, as Jesus said in John 17:3: “Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Revelation 3:20 also emphasizes our part, that all who are Christians need to “open the door” to intimate fellowship with Jesus: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” But a relationship with God can only be formed by God and not us. *He* forgives us, makes us new, and adopts us as his children; we can’t make ourselves his, no matter how much we want to or how much we do in his name to serve him. Paul’s reminder to the Galatians pulls us back to face what is most important, in 4:8-9: “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are ***known by God***—how is it that you are turning

back to those weak and miserable principles?” (Emphasis mine.)

So the most important answer in life is to the question, “How can I be sure *God knows me*?” In other words, “How can I be sure God has brought me into a relationship with him?” That is the answer we’ll be looking for, the answer we all need.

Background

As a sincerely religious high school student, I took advantage of opportunities to attend many churches, Christian-oriented groups, camps, Bible studies, and was in a chorus that performed and witnessed in different churches, all done in a desire to know God. My quest continued at a church-related college.

One day a high school friend visited me at college and shared her new insight into the importance of being “born again.” This was confusing, because we grew up going to the same church and I assumed we were both Christians. I knew she’d never been very spiritual-minded, so I was happy to see her take Jesus seriously at last. But her visit brought into focus for me what had been a nagging undercurrent in all my seeking to that point: For all the talk about being “born again,” I realized I didn’t have any idea when or how that new birth took place. There was no point in time that I could confidently say was when I was born again—when up to that point I was separated from God because of my sin, and after that point I was forgiven, a child of God, and in a relationship with him—known by him.

I had already come to terms with my own responsibility for my relationship with God and had concluded that I couldn’t find biblical support for my parents’ acts of having me “baptized” as a baby and “confirmed” as a young teenager. But I had always gone to church and believed in Jesus. For the first time, I realized the bottom-line question I needed answered was: “Have *I* been born again?” Not knowing what the event entailed, I had to face the possibility—and probability—that I hadn’t been, as it’s surely not an experience one could have without knowing it!

I agonized in my journal about the question but gave up and left the issue unresolved. The next day, I again tried to make sense of the idea of being born again. Exposure to so many different churches only confused me more, as I could not recall any of them asking or answering the question, though they all emphasized faith in Jesus. Again I left the question hanging in my journal. I didn’t know who to go to for help and had to hope that continuing to attend church and learning more about the Bible would eventually give me the answer.

In hindsight, I can see and appreciate God’s hand in getting me to the point of questioning. The promise in Hebrews 11:6 came to mean so much to me, it became almost a motto: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” God rewarded my seeking by sending my way someone who had some knowledge of the answer without being aware that I had the question! Our mutual interest in spiritual things formed the basis (along with the mutual attraction that led to marriage) for being able to talk about our understanding of God’s will. When we met, we were both trying to live as Christians, but we both had confusion about the new birth, though early on we didn’t talk about it and therefore didn’t know where each other stood on that question. After a few months, in a period of separation during school break, he studied the issue for himself to resolve conflicting teachings he’d received. When we saw each other again, he naturally wanted to share his understanding with me, and when he did, it was great news to finally see how clearly the Word of God speaks. He was relieved at my positive response, of course, because he didn’t know that I had already been asking the question he showed me the answer to. So I was born again on August 13, 1974.

Upon finding clear teaching, I was of course eager to share the good news with others. The reality that it wasn’t good news to them to be given an answer to a question they *weren’t* asking was quite a shock at first. Reactions from family and friends were painful, especially when it seemed that my motives or love were impugned. I learned to restrict my input on the matter to new acquaintances who were actively seeking to know more and whose rejection, if it came, wouldn’t feel so personal. But the undercurrent of knowing my input to family and friends would be unwelcome has been a thorn in my spirit nevertheless. To have such an important issue be off-limits isn’t conducive to unity, intimacy, and true peace!

I’ve wondered through the years if it would be better to avoid the issue and thus avoid potential conflict, or to bring it up even with the potential for reaction. I wish everyone would develop the question on their own, so the answer would be good news as it was for me. But because that’s unlikely, and because of the

importance of the question and confusion over the answer in Christendom, writing has come to seem the best way to do something proactive. My hope is that communicating in writing will be an easier way for others to be able to consider what is said without the distraction of who is saying it.

Illegal Alien?

Imagine you are minding your own business at home when a car pulls up and two official-looking “suits” come to your door. They flash their badges from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and ask your name. They confirm it is you that they are looking for, say you are under arrest and will be deported back to the country you came from years ago on a student visa.

What happened? You came to the U.S. to check it out and see how you liked it. In college here, you learned about American history, government and culture, and you developed strong beliefs that America has the right way of life for you, so you stayed. You lived like an American—looked like one, acted like one, talked like one, even worked like one. But eventually the government bureaucracy noticed the fact that you never took the official steps toward legally becoming an American, and you will now face the humiliation and pain of being kicked out of America forever. You are taken to a hearing, where you make your case, pleading how much you love America, believe in her ideals and Constitution, and fit in with Americans. The judge looks you squarely in the eye and tells you that all those are good qualities for citizens to have. “So,” he asks, “why didn’t you ever go through the procedure to become a citizen?”

What possible answers could you give? That you never got around to it? That it seemed unnecessary since you felt like an American already without any official certificate? Perhaps you’d explain that you just believed anyone deciding to live in America is an American, and didn’t know there was more to it than wanting to be one and living among Americans and acting like one? Would any of those answers be a legitimate excuse for not obeying the laws of citizenship in America?

Does it really matter so much whether you are legally a citizen? Anyone who lives in America enjoys many benefits, and by contrast to the countries from which many emigrate, those benefits are precious even without citizenship. But compared with the rights and privileges of citizens, they pale. So if a person *could* take proper steps to become a legal, officially-recognized citizen of the U.S., why wouldn’t he? The only reason that would make sense is ignorance of the procedure, either due to being wrongly informed or being unwilling to research the procedure for oneself or both.

So, standing in front of the judge, with the threat of deportation hanging over your head, how would you react to him saying, “It’s not too late to become a citizen, if you will follow the procedures set out in the law. We will forgive your time of ignorance if you will now act on what you will learn in this manual.” He hands you a book that contains the instructions for becoming a citizen, along with the rights, responsibilities and privileges of citizenship.

Would you take the manual eagerly and gratefully? Or would you be resentful that there is more to being an American, because you thought your experience before being arrested was good and you don’t like being accused of being ignorant? As you weigh it out, the judge cuts into your thoughts: “We want everyone to enjoy the benefits and joys of being an American. Since you have come here and seen and experienced some of those joys, don’t you imagine that becoming a real citizen would be even better? If you thought your life was good before, it can only be better as a true citizen! Will you now follow the procedures for becoming a citizen, or will you be deported?”

I was like this illegal alien for several years. I tried to live as a Christian, went to church every chance I got, and was assumed by everyone to be a citizen of God’s kingdom. And I didn’t consciously question my right to be called a Christian until my friend brought up the issue of being born again. Then my sense of vague uncertainty turned into sharply focused awareness that I’d never actually gone through any “induction ceremony,” so to speak, and had no clear understanding of how to become a Christian officially. So then my research began, and with Providential help I was eventually exposed to the instructions of God’s Manual, the Bible, for becoming a citizen of His Kingdom and being recognized by God as one of his own.

Ever since then, in meeting and talking to many, many others who call themselves Christians, too, it’s become more and more clear that my experience of confusion and ignorance on the subject of how to come into a relationship with God and citizenship in his kingdom wasn’t unique, but rather very common. Many, just like me, have not been taught or known who to ask about it in order to have confidence.

Come As You Are?

Jesus told a parable that touched on the same subject of entrance to the kingdom: In Matthew 22, the parable of the wedding banquet illustrates God's desire for all to join him in celebration and honor of his Son. When the banquet hall was finally filled with guests, verses 11-14 reveal a startling twist that we need to take to heart: "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are invited, but few are chosen.'"

God's banquet is not a come-as-you-are event. He does invite all to the feast, but he provides the "wedding clothes" which must be put on before participating. Galatians 3:26-27 speaks of this: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Jesus himself is our wedding garment, making it possible to cover our sinful selves with his righteousness, to stand before a holy God as we share in the banquet of the life he lavishes on us in honor of his son.

Jesus' point is that it is possible to be wrong about whether we will be welcomed into heaven. We need to make sure we won't be shocked when it's time for the banquet to begin, when it will be too late to "put on" Jesus. Have you "clothed yourself with Christ"?

The Bad News / Good News Principle

We understand that God tells us both bad news and good news. The bad news is that we are sinful and our sin separates us from God. The good news is that Jesus substituted his death for the death we deserve when he died for us on the cross, and he offers to give us his righteous life in substitution for our unrighteous life. So the pain of learning the bad news is assuaged by learning the good news. And the good news is so much beyond what we could expect or even hope for that we are motivated by our gratefulness to Jesus to live for him from then on. All who call themselves Christians seem to understand this foundational principle of God's design to rescue man from the problem of sin.

But what is understood in general terms must be brought down to more specific terms. Most people seem to understand that though Jesus died for all people, not all people will be saved. Not all will benefit from his death by entering a relationship with God that lasts forever. Jesus' death and resurrection for all must somehow be applied to the life of each individual who wants to be right with God.

So another question, more specific, remains: "What must I do to be saved?" as in Acts 16:30, or as Mark 10:17 says, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The general answer is to believe in Jesus, which is repeated over and over, and bottom line, "He who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). All agree on the necessity of faith in Jesus. This is another bad news/good news situation, because, as we'll see, belief must lead to obedience to God's instructions for how to begin a relationship with him or it's useless.

Jesus taught in John 3:3-7 that every person must be "born again:" "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.' 'How can a man be born when he is old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!' Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"

Even before that, we are told in John 1:12-13 that "to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." So belief in Jesus, "receiving him" as being God's Son, is the first step on the path to being "born again;" belief in him results in him giving us the right to be born of God.

In John 1:12-13 and 3:3-7 there is no detail given about how one goes about exercising the right and being born again. The only hint given is that it involves "water and the Spirit." Jesus doesn't explain further at this point. Nicodemus, his audience, wouldn't have been able to understand the specifics yet; the principle of a new birth was being newly introduced. Of course, this was near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

He laid here a foundation that would be built on later. First he had to complete his work of teaching, living a sinless life, proving he is God's Son and sent by God, and ultimately taking on the sin of the world, paying the price of death, and rising triumphant over death. Then he would be able to offer to the world the eternal life promised in John 3:16 to all who believe in him: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

The bad news is that the question of how one is born again is not clearly asked or answered in many churches today. For all the talk of the necessity of being born again, there are more different things taught about *how* to be born again than just about any other subject.

It probably should be no surprise that Satan would love to stir up confusion in this area in particular. After all, when Jesus says you must be born again, it's almost an open invitation to Satan to try to meddle and lead as many astray as possible. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 2:11, "...In order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes." What tricks could he try?

First, and what would seem most likely to succeed, he could try to keep the question of how one is born again from even being raised. If he can keep people content to have the "*right* to become children of God" by believing in Jesus but ignorant about how to *exercise* that right and actually *become* children of God, he has in effect allowed people to come right up to the gate of the kingdom of God and prevented their actually entering it. How could he do that? How about by encouraging people to think that having belief in Jesus *is* how they're born again? Let people talk all they want about believing in Jesus—in fact (James 2:19), "even the demons believe that there is one God—and shudder." Let them believe in Jesus—just don't let them question how to be born again. Let people call themselves Christians because they want to be Christians, let them even put into practice many biblical principles and experience a taste of God's ways being best. Just don't let them look closer at the question of how and when God designed for them to be born again. It appears this scheme has been tried very successfully and has kept many sincere and God-loving people unaware of their need to be born again the way God instructs. It worked on me for many years.

Another scheme would be to let people make up their own way to be born again. If they want to think that saying a prayer, "asking Jesus into their heart," going forward for an altar call at a church service, or going through some church's made-up ritual is how and when they become a child of God, let them. Contradictory teachings can't all be right, can they?! As long as what they do is not taught in the Bible as how to be born again, it's safe to let them do it whatever way is comfortable to them. Satan wants people to feel comfortable, right? And what's more comfortable than doing what a friend, a book, a minister, or the church one has always attended says; or even more comfortable than that is to go by what seems and feels right to oneself. The idea that if a minister or church says it, it must be true, is very comforting, and the idea that "If I were God, I'd have it be this way: ____" is even more comforting. As long as one doesn't stop to ask, "What does *God* say in the Bible on this subject?" Satan isn't threatened. This also seems to have worked well.

So, bottom line, the bad news is that the subject of what the Bible teaches about being born again is almost completely ignored in Christendom. The assumption seems to be that if people go to church, they are Christians. It's backward: People are preached to about how to *be* a Christian without having been taught first how to *become* one.

The good news is that the Bible does, clearly and simply, tell us how to be born again—how to have our sins forgiven and begin the new life of a dearly loved child of God. But a person can't appreciate the good news unless he or she first accepts the bad news. In the general sense, one can't appreciate Jesus' death, burial and resurrection and want the benefit of it unless one first accepts the bad news that one *needs* forgiveness and the power to live a righteous life. In the more specific sense, no one can appreciate the good news that God does say how to be born again—and be eager to learn it—unless first the bad news is understood that it is possible to believe in and serve Jesus but not be born again.

It's always hard to be open to learning new things. It's even harder when we've had no idea that we've been ignorant of something. And it's surely hardest to be open to learning something new when what is learned may call into question the very foundation of the most important aspect of life: one's relationship with God. In order to be open-minded and open-hearted, it helps to focus on the greatness of the good news rather than the discouragement or humiliation of facing the bad news. If one has sincerely loved God and lived under the wrong assumption of being God's child, then how much better will life be when there truly

is the Father/child bond, with all of the promises of the Bible waiting to be experienced on a deeper level than known before? If what one has already experienced in applying biblical principles to life has seemed good, how much greater would it be to experience not just the good effects of following truths but also to be the dear child of the giver of that truth? And even greater, if one tried to live rightly without being God's child, how much easier would life be when God is not only working outwardly as he does in order to draw one to himself, but also working inwardly through his promised Holy Spirit to enable one to become like him from the inside, to have "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control" in ever-increasing measure through the Spirit's power (Galatians 5:22-23)?

So, before going on to read about the good news of how the Bible says we are born again to become God's child, one must face the bad news if it applies. There is always temptation to deflect bad news by "shooting the messenger." There is also the temptation to be angry at those whom one has trusted to be knowledgeable teachers when they turn out to be wrong. Bottom line, each person will stand before God all alone, with full responsibility for his or her own knowledge of the truth that God has made available in the Bible.

An example of the kind of "noble character" worthy of imitating is found in the Bereans who "received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). Every time we hear or read a message claiming to be about God's will (including this booklet!), we are noble in character if we have an eagerness to learn while at the same time we accept responsibility to examine the teaching to see whether it's true from Scripture using objective methods of Bible study.

Another worthy example is Apollos. Acts 18:24-26 says, "Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately." He was preaching but was ignorant about the meaning of New Covenant baptism, knowing only what John the Baptist had taught before Jesus gave it greater meaning. He was open to being corrected and continued to eagerly preach with the added truth benefiting many people. Being open to having one's understanding of God's will corrected is noble and can never harm, only help.

"Examine Yourself"

So before you read any further, please stop and ask yourself, "Am I open to correction?" 2 Timothy 3:16 says that Scripture is "useful for correcting." And 2 Corinthians 13:5 admonishes all of us to "examine yourselves to see whether Christ Jesus is in you." Are you open to the possibility that you may not have been taught how to be born again or that what you have been taught may need correcting? Are you willing to consider that you may not even be a Christian yet?

As you continue to read and see what Scripture says about how to receive forgiveness and the Spirit of God, what will you do if it contradicts what you think up to now? It's best to decide that up front. To question one's own salvation doesn't mean that everything done and experienced up to now is negated. The only shame would be to refuse to consider that God may intend to use our previous experiences as stepping stones to bring us to the point of biblical new birth!

My hope and prayer is that anything newly considered or learned will be appreciated as God at work to continue to draw each of us into the full and deep relationship with himself that he created for us to have and sent Jesus to make possible. The goal of being sure that we each have truly been born again is worthy of taking the time to ask the question and to search for the Biblical answer, because confidence in our new birth gives security that God does know us. It also gives a foundation for unity in our fellowship with other believers, which is precious.

Jesus Gives a Hint

The best place to begin looking for directions for becoming reconciled in our relationship with God is to see what Jesus, the one who made it possible, says. As already mentioned, John tells us that the right to become God's child is given by Jesus to those who believe in him. It also emphasizes that the birth is given

by God directly and is not from natural descent (God has no grandchildren), not from human decision (the adoptee doesn't finalize the adoption), and not from a husband's will (no one can decide for anyone else).

In John 3, Jesus says the new birth is "of water and the Spirit," and that "the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?" Jesus discerns that it isn't time to elaborate yet because the readiness to understand isn't there (verse 12): "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" Jesus' emphasis here is on understanding the message he is teaching from a spiritual perspective.

One can't understand how one can be born again until one is ready to think from a spiritual rather than an earthly point of view. As Isaiah 55:8-9 says, "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" Any time we hear or read something from God's word and don't understand it, we need to discern what our reactions are. If we react like Nicodemus with, "How can this be?" rather than, "Help me understand, God," we're showing our resistance to the possibility that we may need to learn something new. If something seems impossible or wrong, perhaps it's a sign that we're still thinking from a human, earthly point of view and need to stay open to learning how to view it from God's point of view. Especially when we catch ourselves saying, "I know it says _____, but it doesn't mean that," we have to ask ourselves if there are truly biblical reasons for our interpretation or if we perhaps don't *want* it to mean that or don't understand *how* it could mean that. Is our understanding of a passage illuminated by other biblical principles, or is it merely contradictory to what seems right to us in our own human logic?

Often what we deem to be contradictory is really complementary. Rather than either/or, we need to think more in terms of both/and. We know, for instance, that faith in Jesus is essential to being a Christian, but also that when we have that faith, it prompts us to act/work in ways God directs. As James 2:14,17-18,24 says, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?...In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do....You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." The issue isn't faith *or* works, but rather faith *and* works—that neither stands alone. 2 Thessalonians 1:11 is one of my favorite verses, reminding me of what always needs to be my perspective: "With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith." Faith prompts obedient action for God to work through.

So, near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he makes clear that in order to see and enter the kingdom of God, we must be born again. The rest of his ministry focused on teaching about the kingdom of God and revealing God through his own actions and words. He proved he was the Son of God sent into the world to reconcile man to the Father. It wasn't until the culmination of his life's purpose in his death, burial, and resurrection, that he turned back to the new birth.

Context and Foundations

Before we get into more Scriptures that deal with the new birth, let's put a context around the whole subject. Whenever I lead a Bible study with someone who is seeking a relationship with God, first we study foundational truths which need to be understood before the practicals of how to be born again make sense.

For instance, we need to understand the meaning and importance of Jesus' death on the cross. The depth of God's love must be the main motivation for our unconditional and trusting response to him. Also, we need to develop confidence in the Bible as the word of God and accept that following—being a disciple of—Jesus is the way of life we choose in response to God's love. Another often neglected, important subject is to learn about sin and its consequences not just in general, but to understand our own personal sinful nature and how it has put a wall of separation between ourselves and God. Repentance must be specific in order to be effective. Only when one has a "broken and contrite heart" (Psalm 51:17) can one be ready to accept the promise of a new birth with humility, eagerness, and openness to God's instruction. It is out of context to focus on how to be born again without also understanding these other foundational teachings of God's word. (For a study outline of these topics, please send me an email—see back page.)

The Fullness of Time

Jesus himself spent his whole three years of public ministry with only the mention in John 1 and 3 about the concept of being born again to become a child of God. During those years, he laid the groundwork of truth, fulfilled everything prophesied about him (Luke 24:44: “He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’”) which proved he is the Messiah sent from God, and finally he fulfilled God’s plan for reconciliation in his death, burial and resurrection.

Once all had been accomplished, Jesus finally gave the instructions to his apostles to teach to everyone who had received him and believed in his name—in other words, everyone to whom “he gave the right to become children of God.” In Luke 24:45-49, Jesus “opened [his disciples’] minds so they could understand the Scriptures” about why he had been killed and risen from the dead: “And repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.” So at last the forgiveness that would be necessary to be a child of God would be possible. Luke’s account still doesn’t tell us how that forgiveness would be conferred to individuals, but he points us to his sequel, the book of Acts, when in Luke 24:49 Jesus tells them to “stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ instructions is more specific. In 28:18-20, he commissions the apostles to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Mark’s version (16:15-16) is, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

Picking up in Acts 2, the apostles had waited as Jesus instructed, until on the day of Pentecost they were at last “clothed with power from on high” as the Holy Spirit fell on them. They were enabled at last to “preach the good news to all creation” in the miraculous gathering of “God-fearing Jews from every nation of the world,” whereupon they were amazed that “we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” God got their attention and led them to ask, “What does this mean?” That was Peter’s cue to use the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” which Jesus had promised to give him and “loose on earth” the gate to salvation for all believers (see Matthew 16:18-19: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”). Peter’s sermon that day of Pentecost was powerful and effective, laying the foundations for the listeners to understand Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and their personal guilt. The effect of the message was (2:37) that “they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”

The Turning Point

Let’s stop here for a minute. This was a turning point in the history of man’s relationship to God which needs to be appreciated. At this point, God had accomplished everything necessary to make it possible for man to enter into a totally new covenant relationship with his Creator. The history of mankind was pointing to *this* moment. The necessary steps through which God brought man—as recorded in the Old Testament books and the gospels—all were meant to culminate in the new and better way promised through the Messiah.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 tells us God’s big picture: “‘The time is coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord. ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the Lord. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’” And Isaiah 52:13-53:12 tells of the suffering the Messiah would endure to pay the price for man’s sin, summarized in 53:4-5: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God,

smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

Mankind had to learn many hard lessons about sin and about God to prepare for this moment. At last, here was man (at least the first ones to “get it”—these God-fearing Jews) in full readiness to receive what God had been longing, planning and working to give. They were “cut to the heart” by their remorse over killing the very Messiah they had been awaiting. They finally understood that they had missed the point all along. God’s “higher ways” revealed themselves in a Messiah who was not an earthly king but a heavenly one who meant to free them from spiritual bondage and bring them into a Father-child relationship.

If only they had understood! Was it too late? Was there any hope? At last they believed in Jesus, the Son of God. In utter humility, and surely with no reason to expect to hear good news but rather condemnation, they pleaded, “Brothers”—showing their belief in the message by according the apostles the respect they deserved—“what shall we do?”

Do you think they were ready to do whatever they would be told? Wouldn’t the news, if it came, that there *was* something they could do to be reconciled to their God be so wonderful that they would do it gratefully? Wouldn’t they have been eager to act on the faith they now had in Jesus as the Messiah they had been waiting for? Would they have balked at being expected to “obey the gospel” as 2 Thessalonians 1:8 and 1 Peter 4:17 describe?

The Act of Receiving

Before going back to see what Peter’s answer is, there is another issue that seems to be at the heart of much confusion about the new birth. These people asked, “What shall we *do*?” The idea that God would give us responsibility to *do* something to receive the new birth seems hard for some people to reconcile with the idea that we can do nothing to save ourselves. It is God who is totally the giver, and we must be receivers of God’s grace and mercy with no way to earn his favor by any works. As Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

The question then is not “What work must I do to *earn* or *deserve* God’s gift?” Rather, it is “How do I *receive* God’s gift?” In everyday life we don’t even think about it, but when someone is given a gift, there is also an act of receiving. The gift is taken into the hands, the wrapping is removed, and the box is opened, revealing the gift itself, which is then picked up and made the receiver’s own, usually with expressions of thankfulness to the giver. The act of receiving and opening a gift isn’t what anyone would consider a “work” which entitles one to or earns the gift. In the same way, God has offered the great gift of new birth—the opportunity to experience what 2 Corinthians 5:17 describes: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” All he asks of us is to receive it.

The crux of the controversy in Christendom surrounding the new birth is the question of how to receive it. If God does give instructions about it, then those are the instructions we must follow in faith that they are God’s will. In doing so, we are *not* doing a “work” that will make us deserve God’s favor. The favor is already given, unearned. Whatever instructions God gives are the equivalent of telling us how to unwrap the gift and make it our very own. We know the gift is the substitutionary death of Jesus to pay the penalty for our sins. We also know that his death for all doesn’t automatically benefit all, but only those who receive it personally because they not only believe *in* Jesus, but they *believe* him enough to do whatever he says to do, even if it may not make sense at first.

In all the different teachings I’ve heard about how to become a Christian, each one involves some form of the seeker being told to *do* something. “Say this prayer: ____” (sometimes called the “sinner’s prayer”) is the most common advice about how to become a Christian, taught in tracts, books, by TV evangelists, and in many churches. The Bible teaches us that praying is a good thing to do, but is it what Peter tells his hearers in Acts 2, or is there anywhere else in the Bible that tells anyone to pray to be born again? The only allusion to this idea I’ve heard taught is Revelation 3:20: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” The context of the verse is an appeal to those who are already Christians but are lukewarm, urging them to desire dynamic, intimate communion with Jesus. This would rule out an application to those seeking new birth.

Also taught by some is the act of making a confession or profession of faith in Jesus as Lord and calling

on the name of the Lord to become a Christian. Romans 10:9-13 is often referred to: “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” We are told to do these things, yet doing them is not a work designed to earn favor; rather, they spring from our grateful reliance on the favor already offered. They are evidence of our faith in Jesus and his power to save.

Here again, however, the context is not a description of the initial new birth, though believing, confessing faith, and calling on God are obviously needed then and throughout life. Paul had already addressed the issue of beginning a relationship with God through Christ in chapter 6, where he reminds them of the meaning of their immersion into Christ. In chapter 10, being righteous by faith and trust in Jesus is being contrasted with the attempt to be righteous by law, which was the error of the Jews who rejected Jesus. See Romans 9:30-32 also for context: “What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the ‘stumbling stone.’” The context of these verses is about how to live out a relationship with God, not how to begin one in the first place.

No matter what someone is told by a church or a book or a TV evangelist, it is always something that a new believer must *do*. Faith is seen in the actions it prompts (2 Thessalonians 1:11). It’s not a “mental assent” to the truth, but rather, as Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15, also verses 21 and 23).

“What Shall We Do?”

Now, go back to Acts 2. What is Peter’s answer to these first seekers of what to do? In verse 38, he says, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” It would be hard to make Peter’s (and thus God’s) answer any more straightforward and concise. In two sentences, he tells these new believers in Jesus about God’s will and instructions for dealing with their sin.

First, he tells them to repent. It’s obvious that they had remorse when they realized they were responsible for crucifying the Messiah sent by God. Peter urges them to go further because, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 7:8-11, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” Feeling bad about sin isn’t enough, but it should result in repentance as it did with the Corinthians (“...your sorrow led you to repentance”), a change of mind and heart that leads to changed actions.

Along with repentance, he instructs them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, an act that was familiar to the Jews—as seen in the crowds who flocked to be baptized by John the Baptist and then by Jesus’ disciples—has become either controversial or ignored in Christendom today.

Before Jesus even began his public ministry, John the Baptist was preparing the way for him (Mark 1:4-5), “baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” The idea of forgiveness of sins being associated with the act of baptism was not new to the people in Acts 2.

Jesus’ revelation and ministry to the world began with his own baptism, distinguished from all others John performed in two respects: (1) Jesus had no sin to repent of or receive forgiveness for. (Note John’s objection to baptizing Jesus, and his response in Matthew 3:13-15: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented.”) And (2) the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus was the sign John had been told to look for to identify the Lamb of God, the long-awaited Messiah. (John 1:33-34: “‘I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the

Son of God.”) The baptism that John and later Jesus’ disciples (John 4:1-2) performed was a precursor to what would eventually become baptism not only for repentance and forgiveness of sins, but also would include empowerment by the promised Holy Spirit: “And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

The Change of Covenants

To put in context the significance of Acts 2 and other passages we’ll look at later, it’s important to look at the principle of Hebrews 9, especially verses 15-17: “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living.” In reading through the gospels, it’s easy to forget that the Old Covenant was still in effect until Jesus’ death. The New Covenant that took effect after his resurrection—and his victory over sin and death—was first preached to the masses on the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2. In the gospels, Jesus preached that “the kingdom is near,” but in Acts, Peter opened the kingdom officially when the “power from on high” (the Holy Spirit) descended on the apostles, as Jesus had instructed before he ascended back into heaven. In the gospels, Jesus was building faith in himself as the incarnate Son of God, leading up to his sacrificial death. In Acts, the message of salvation through faith in the resurrected Lamb of God was God’s plan fulfilled. At that point, the Old Covenant had completed its purpose and became obsolete as the new and better covenant went into effect, as Hebrews 8:13 makes clear: “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.”

It’s important to apply this distinction to the new birth. For instance, it would be wrong to apply what Jesus said to the thief on the cross to all people, since Jesus was at that very moment in the middle of going through the sacrifice for our sins that would bring in the New Covenant. His gift of salvation to the thief was made under the Old Covenant. We must pay attention to what Jesus instructed to his apostles, who were to be responsible for teaching the specifics of God’s New Covenant to the world. They received their commission to “Go and make disciples, baptizing...and teaching them” after the resurrection (Matthew 28:18-20). So with this in mind, what *does* the Word of God instruct about New Covenant baptism?

“Baptisma”

Defining the word “baptism” would clear up a lot of the confusion in Christendom. The word “baptism” is not a translation, where an English word with the same meaning as the Greek word is used. Rather, it’s a transliteration, where the Greek word is anglicized to become a new word in the English language. So, to define baptism, the Greek word “baptisma” must be defined. A good source for this online is Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (http://www.antioch.com.sg/cgi-bin/bible/vines/find_term.pl.) where under “baptism” the noun *baptisma* is defined: “baptism, consisting of the processes of immersion, submersion and emergence (from *bapto*, to dip), is used (a) of John’s baptism, (b) of Christian baptism.”

Why was the word transliterated rather than using “immersed” for “baptized,” or “immersion” for “baptism”? What do you think? What would have happened to all of the entrenched doctrines of different denominations who define baptism differently? It’s much easier for a church to impose its own doctrine onto the word “baptism” that people know only as some religious rite. And most people are happy to accept whatever definition their church gives it. It would be a bit awkward to be holding to a baptism ceremony where a dribble of water is sprinkled or poured on someone (most likely a baby, which is another issue), while at the same time reading a passage from the Bible about being immersed!

It’s also easier even for denominations that do immerse in water to attach their own symbolism to the rite when it’s called “baptism” than when it’s referred to as immersion. When it’s thought of as baptism, it is a word that is an end in itself, and that end is defined by the denomination’s teachings. When it’s thought of as immersion, it is naturally connected to “the rest of the story,” which is Christ. The question then arises, “What is the meaning of the immersion?” It’s obvious that being immersed in water isn’t an end in itself, but rather is a physical act that has a spiritual meaning, which is that in baptism, as Scripture words it, one

is “baptized [immersed] into Christ.”

It’s interesting to substitute the translation “immerse” for the transliteration “baptize.” Let’s try it.

A Meaningful Act

As we saw in Acts 2, when the crowd was told to repent and be baptized (immersed) for the forgiveness of sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, there was no explanation given about the deeper meaning of the act. Why did God choose that act as the means of conferring forgiveness and the new birth as a new creation and child of God? The crowd didn’t even ask that question. Those who believed and repented simply submitted to the instructions given by Peter (2:41): “Those who accepted his message were [immersed], and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

In Romans 6, Paul reminds these believers that it doesn’t make sense to think one can continue to indulge in sin after one has been immersed into Christ. He appeals to them based on the meaning of their baptism. It seems some had not appreciated the full significance of what was happening as they were immersed in the water. In 6:2, he describes, “We died to sin.” In 6:3-8, he explains what was taking place spiritually while they were being lowered under the water and then lifted up out of it again: “Or don’t you know that all of us who were [immersed] into Christ Jesus were [immersed] into his death? We were therefore buried with him through [immersion] into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now, if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”

The basic truth of the gospel is that Jesus substituted his death for the death we deserve. He shows the greatness of his love for us in dying for us when we were still “powerless...ungodly...sinners...God’s enemies” (Romans 5:6-10). But it’s up to each individual to receive the benefit of what he did. Somehow, we have to make contact with Jesus’ death, with the blood that he shed that is the sacrifice for our sins. This is a foundational principle, as we see over and over. Hebrews 9:14 says, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” Hebrews 10:19-22 also emphasizes it: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” And Colossians 1:19-20 also drives home the point: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

That contact is what Paul describes as happening in baptism. He says that “we were therefore buried *with him through baptism* . . . we have been *united with him* like this in his death . . . our old self was *crucified with him* . . . we *died with Christ*.” We’re talking an amazing, cosmic “rite of passage” here! Somehow, in our burial under water, submitting to God’s directions for “what shall we do,” *God* acts to bring together the historical reality of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection and the point in history of our *own* death to self. At that point, we are “crucified with him”—as if we were on that cross, as we deserve, yet it’s the very inequality of the substitution that is so amazing. We don’t even shed any blood, as he did, and we won’t suffer the worst part, the consequence of our sin, which is death and separation from God, as he did: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Matthew 27:45-46). In his death, he takes on our sin and gives us his righteousness. It’s a trade of places that can never be over-appreciated: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. . . . God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:15,21).

In the immersion in water that God now instructs to those “who received him, to those who believed in his name” (John 1:12), God reaches outside of time and brings together Jesus’ death and our death. We are

given the opportunity to acknowledge that we are spiritually dead, to go ahead and be buried in a grave of water, to have our dead, sinful nature crucified with Jesus on his cross, and then instantaneously receive from God the eternal life won by Jesus' resurrection. We become a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17), "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), and receive "power through his Spirit in your inner being" (Ephesians 3:16).

In baptism a very real, spiritual substitution takes place of Jesus taking *that one* individual's sin on himself and giving his life, his Spirit, and his righteousness in return. That this occurs when that individual is physically buried in water is a wonderful, considerate gift from God. By tying the spiritual act which *he* accomplishes to a physical act that is analogous to an actual burial and rising back up from death, he gives us a deeper sense of how amazing is his substitutionary death, burial, and resurrection on our behalf. Looking back on our own immersion into Christ in the water of baptism can always be a reminder of the fact that we have died to sin and been raised to a new life. It is something tangible to hang our hope on, to know that at that point in time we were truly born again! No matter what trials and discouragements may come our way, we can always be encouraged by the historical fact of our new birth.

The Pieces Fit Together

Once a person understands both the instruction to be baptized (immersed) into Christ and the rich meaning of that act, other Scriptures make sense. For instance, Galatians 3:26-27 is a complete idea now. How many times has verse 26 been quoted, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus," without the rest of the sentence in verse 27, "for all of you who were baptized [immersed] into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ"? The assumption that all who have faith in Jesus will have expressed that faith by being baptized into Christ begins to make sense once a person is willing to start seeing it rather than trying to explain it away.

Another passage that now makes sense is Colossians 2:12, which reminds those who have been immersed: "...having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (Revised Standard Version). Here we see the role that our faith plays. As we submit to God's will by being immersed into Christ, it is our faith that God will do what he has promised that frees him to work, because he gave us free will and waits to be asked to save us. We respond to God's offer by doing what he has told us to do. How kind it is of God to take faith and pin it to the tangible, physical process of immersion in water. We never have to question or doubt the point in time when our faith unleashed God's power to resurrect us from spiritual death.

In 1 Peter 3:21, another question about baptism is answered: How can going under water make someone a Christian? In the analogy of Noah and his family being saved through water in the ark, Peter describes how the flood water foreshadowed God's means of saving man under the New Covenant: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (Revised Standard Version). So is there magic in the water? No, it's not the getting wet or physically clean that's the point, but rather it's the combination of the appeal we're making to God and his resurrection power at work that is the real miracle that saves us when we're baptized. And it happens then because that's when God says it will! "Baptism saves you" not as an end in itself, but as God's means to that end, when the death of Jesus is applied to one life at a time.

One more question is left to answer: What did Jesus mean by "born of water and the Spirit" in John 3:5? We noticed that he didn't explain it then, and that was understandable in the early stages of his public ministry. Now, after seeing all that God's word says about being immersed into Christ and being given the gift of the Holy Spirit, it makes sense that he was looking ahead to the day when the opportunity to believe and be baptized would be given to all people. Titus 3:3-7 summarizes it best: "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life." So we are "born of water and the Spirit" in the "washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." This is equated to being "justified by his grace."

Something to notice in all of the passages we've looked at so far: Baptism (immersion) is an action, but a passive one. It is done *to* us, not *by* us. In Acts 19:3, Paul refers to baptism as something one receives ("So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?'"). Letting someone baptize us is a response of faith to the good news that we can be born again. We aren't performing a "work," but rather we are yielding to God, "calling on his name" to perform a work in us! Only he can wash away our sin and transform us into a new, spiritually alive being. He is doing the forgiving, resurrecting, and empowering as we submit to being immersed in a grave of water where he promises to meet us. The water starts as a spiritual grave where our spiritual deadness is buried, and in the instant we are submerged under water, it becomes a spiritual womb, so to speak, from which we emerge born again to a new life as a new creation designed to know God and be known by God.

An analogy that helps clarify the role of baptism in the process of being born again is to think of our physical birth. A human starts as a tiny seed and develops through stages toward the moment when it is ready to be born into the world. During that development in the womb, we are aware of the powerful working of life, the fetus is on its way to becoming a baby, yet we also know that until it is actually born and takes its first breath, it isn't a baby yet. Yes, we nourish and protect it and anticipate its arrival during the months of development. But we don't count age from the moment of conception, but from the moment of leaving the developmental phase in the womb and arriving in the outside world. The baby has been transformed from life that is human to a specific human life. In the same way spiritually, there are important phases of development from the planting of the seed of truth, through the development of faith in Jesus, conviction about and repentance from sin, until—after whatever length of time that takes, whether short or long—one is ready to be born again and "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). At that point one becomes more than a spiritual being which has the potential of becoming a child of God, one becomes a child of God indeed!

Real-Life Examples

There are many passages of Scripture that show us examples of conversions in the early days of the New Covenant. The book of Acts, being historical more than doctrinal in nature, is a good place to look for how people responded to the good news about Jesus. We already saw the response to the first sermon in Acts 2:41: "Those who accepted his message were [immersed], and about three thousand were added to their number that day." What a beginning! And it was only the beginning. The numbers continued to grow (as in 2:47, 5:14, and 6:1).

Starting in Acts 8, we see accounts of several individuals' conversions. After Philip preached in Samaria, Simon the sorcerer "believed and was baptized" (8:12). When Philip left there, he was sent by the Spirit of God to teach the Ethiopian eunuch about Jesus, in response to the man's search for truth. It's interesting to see his response: "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip [immersed] him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing" (8:35-39). How could the eunuch ask to be immersed in water unless "the good news about Jesus" included the particulars about baptism as the new birth?

Next, in Acts 9, and retold in chapter 22, we see the conversion of Saul the persecutor into Paul the apostle. In 9:5-6, we see the encounter he had with Jesus himself: "'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'" Rather than instructing Saul directly, Jesus chose to delegate that to a godly man, Ananias, who obeyed after voicing some trepidation about Saul's reputation. After Saul's sight was restored, "He got up and was baptized" (9:18). In chapter 22, Saul, now called Paul, recounts his conversion and elaborates on what he was instructed by Ananias to do: "'And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name'" (22:16). We see that Paul had started believing in Jesus as the resurrected Messiah, as his submission to Jesus' instructions makes clear. But as he waited for three days, blind and fasting, he was still unforgiven until he was baptized and "washed his sins away." His account connects baptism for forgiveness to one's initial confession of Jesus as Lord. Romans 10:8-13

concludes, "...for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,'" which begins at one's baptismal confession of faith and continues throughout life. We also see it was immediate!

In Acts 10 we have the conversion of another seeker, Cornelius. This is a milestone where—along with the initial instance of the Holy Spirit descending on the apostles on the day of Pentecost when the gospel was preached first to the Jews—it was God's chosen time to expand the message to include the Gentiles. Just as Peter was finishing up his lesson to Cornelius and his household, we see God act: "...the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days" (10:44-48). God acted in a dramatic way to make it clear that salvation, and therefore immersion into Christ, was to be offered to all people from that day forward. Peter recounts and defends this change in chapter 11 to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, and he clarifies the distinct nature of the Holy Spirit coming upon the Gentiles, which is unique and different from the promise to all that in baptism they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In 11:15-17, Peter explains, "'As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?'" In the next verse, the news is grasped: "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.'" As the gospel began to be preached to the Gentiles, "The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (11:21).

Chapter 16 of Acts gives a couple more examples. There is Lydia in 16:14-15: "One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home." And the jailer and his household in 16:32-33: "Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized."

In 18:8, we read of the conversions of many in Corinth: "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard [Paul] believed and were baptized." Notice how baptism was immediate, not scheduled in later!

Next, in 18:24-28, we learn of Apollos (whom we've talked about before), who had been speaking "with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John" (18:25). He demonstrated a good example of humility in allowing two other disciples, a married couple named Priscilla and Aquila, to teach him what he hadn't learned yet, and he continued to preach and teach once his knowledge of baptism had been corrected.

The verses that follow immediately after the account of Apollos' correction are interesting. The fact that he had been in Ephesus when he was taught further by Priscilla and Aquila seems to pertain to the situation Paul found when he later arrived there at Ephesus. He met some disciples who had been baptized, but with John's baptism because they hadn't heard of the Holy Spirit. Acts 19:3-5 says: "So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?' 'John's baptism,' they replied. Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus." That may mean that Apollos was the one who had taught them about Jesus but hadn't been able to teach them about baptism correctly since he himself had been ignorant. So they were humble and were immersed again, this time in the name of Jesus Christ, which meant they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Notice (though not to get into the subject in depth here) we once again see the different measure of the Holy Spirit coming on them when Paul, an apostle, laid his hands on them; this resulted in their ability to do miraculous things. We see this previously in Acts 6:6-8, when "the seven" were chosen to administer the distribution of food to the needy in the church, the apostles' hands were laid on them, and they received the ability to perform miracles: "They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large

number of priests became obedient to the faith. Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.” We see this again in Acts 8 when two apostles were sent to where Philip (one of the seven) had been preaching and performing miracles, so that the apostles could lay their hands on the new disciples and confer miraculous gifts, which Philip apparently could not do. Acts 8:14-18 says: “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money.”

Since we no longer have apostles, we no longer have—thus no longer need—miraculous gifts that only they could impart. The purpose described in Hebrews 2:3-4 is fulfilled: “This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him [the apostles]. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” Miraculous gifts from the Holy Spirit given through the apostles are not the same as the promise in Acts 2:38-39 of the Holy Spirit himself given in baptism “for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” All who receive the Holy Spirit through immersion into Christ have the amazing promises of the power and new life he imparts, which are wonderfully described in many passages, especially Romans 8.

Why Doesn't Everyone Know This?

Once I had studied through the new birth process for myself and had been immersed into Christ, I got curious about how such a clear teaching could be missed by so many religious people. I was at a church-affiliated college at the time, so I had access to shelves of commentaries in the library. Looking up the verses that talk about baptism, time after time there was some effort to explain how the verse can't mean what it says. If the commentator couldn't come up with some attempt to explain it away, he would simply gloss over it with a vague statement like, “This is an obscure passage,” or else he'd simply skip over the passage. It was very startling to think that I could have been able to see something in the Bible that others could not see. It seemed the reason they didn't see it was not that it wasn't there or wasn't simple and clear. Rather, the efforts to explain away a teaching that was so foundational in early New Testament days must have sprung from the commentator's beliefs that had been built on his own denomination's foundations, which didn't jibe with certain passages of Scripture. A verse *would* seem “difficult” or “obscure” if it didn't fit in with preconceived ideas, wouldn't it?

Wrong teachings about baptism result from two different and opposite preconceived ideas by theologians. One extreme categorizes baptism as a “sacrament” and the other defines it as an “ordinance.” The word sacrament is not found in the Bible; it is a way of trying to define and categorize what seems right according to human wisdom. “Ordinance” is used in the New Testament, but always referring to the Old Covenant laws and never to baptism.

A sacrament is defined as a religious rite that imparts grace by the very performance of the act. Churches that “baptize” infants fall into this camp, whereby the performing of the rite itself is seen to cause God to impart salvation, forgiveness of sin, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Obviously an infant has no faith, nor does one have personal sin for which one is accountable to God and therefore under condemnation (see Ezekiel 18:20: “The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.”). Therefore, those who define baptism as a sacrament remove faith of the baptismal candidate from the equation and insert the will of other persons (the parents) being imposed on another (the infant). Carried to its logical conclusion, this makes baptism spiritually magical—an end in itself—and would make it possible to make a Christian solely by immersing someone in water. The story about Constantine marching his army through a river to “make” them Christians is an example of where “grace (the working of God on behalf of man) alone,” apart from faith, can lead. Is that any more illogical than trying to baptize infants?

An ordinance is a command, requiring an act of obedience. In current usage, it refers to a command to

practice a sign or symbol of God's grace that does not impart his actual power. A correct example of this would be the Lord's Supper. Jesus himself characterized it as a memorial of his death for us symbolized by the bread as his broken body and the wine as his shed blood. This God-ordained ritual does not impart any overt spiritual power or action on God's part, though it does reveal his wisdom in meeting our need for spiritual touchstones. The early Christians gathered "on the first day of the week to break bread" (Acts 20:7)—implying by the Greek grammar that it was their regular weekly practice. This shows how much they valued the Lord's Supper and how their worship revolved around remembering Jesus in the form he gave them to follow. The form of this ritual—lifelong regular repetition of partaking of symbols—reveals its function of reminding us of and proclaiming to others Jesus' sacrifice.

Many people view baptism as an ordinance because it is a rite God has commanded us to do (which is true) and its form is symbolic of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection (which is also true). However, though the form is symbolic of ("analogous to" is probably a better phrase) Jesus' sacrifice and victory and our own death and rebirth, the function as described in the Bible is not symbolic or merely a sign. Nowhere is it stated or even implied that believers were to be baptized merely as an act of obedience, a demonstration of devotion to Christ, a symbolic event, an outward sign, or any other description that would overlook or contradict the biblical function of being "buried with him and raised with him" or "immersed into Christ" or "clothed with Christ" as we've read in the verses we've looked at.

Those who try to explain away baptism as the actual new birth say that surely it can't be the point in time when one is literally born again because they think that would contradict the principle of being saved by faith. Yet they can give no other biblical definition of the point in time when a person's faith becomes saving faith, when at that point their sins are forgiven and they are given the Holy Spirit. How would one even know whether one had passed from death to life if there was no clearly discernable point in time when faith in Jesus developed? For me, the sense that I had always believed in Jesus since I grew up learning about him was one of the things that spurred me to begin to question what the new birth is and when and how it takes place. New birth must happen at a discernable point in time!

The most erroneous aspect of this logic is that baptism *is* an act prompted by faith—an expression of faith—and is not merely an act of obedience, so there is no reason to try to explain it away as not congruent with salvation by faith and not works. That is the real starting point of this false view. One who assumes baptism is a work by virtue of being something we are commanded to do reasons that since we aren't saved by anything we can do, baptism couldn't be involved in the new birth. They fail to make the distinction between works of faith and works of law (see Ephesians 2:8-10: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."). Our works don't save us, but to "obey the gospel" by doing what God tells us to do to become saved is not saving ourselves by our works.

Those who discount its meaning as a faith-prompted submission to God's directions for being born again end up turning it into a work of law (an ordinance), the very thing they fear. When pressed as to whether it is necessary for salvation, they try to say it is important but not necessary, yet those very churches require it for membership. How can something be required for membership in a congregation but not necessary for membership in Christ's body, since they're the same thing? It *is* necessary to obey God's instructions—not for the sake of obedience as an end in itself, but because it is when and where he promises to meet us (when we are buried under water in Jesus' name) to do his work of forgiving and empowering us. Why try to reduce it to merely a symbolic form when God has declared it to have a spiritually powerful function? There's no need to do that!

If baptism is commanded, and no one disagrees with that, then the question becomes how to view our obedience to it. It is not a "grace alone" sacrament that has power and effectiveness apart from the personal faith and free will choice of the responder. Neither can it be relegated to an ordinance—a command obeyed as a symbolic rite just because God said to do it—to make it fit a "faith alone" preconception. Rather, baptism is a gracious, wise, meaningful gift from God, a rite whose function is revealed by its form.

The Scriptures state matter-of-factly the actual spiritual death, burial and resurrection of the believer which *God* accomplishes by his grace and power (the function) at the point in time when the one with "faith in the working of God" (Colossians 2:12) yields to the form which is a picture of what is taking place

spiritually. The form is not the focus of Scripture—it is never described as a symbolic statement on the part of the one being immersed, not a witness or a vow or a public symbol of something that has already happened. It is not done “in obedience to Christ’s command,” (not in the Bible) but as an “appeal to God for a clear conscience” (1 Peter 3:21 RSV). What happens—the function—is the focus. The form is the means God instructs those who have faith to submit to—yes, to obey—in order to reach the goal of the function, which is God’s grace meeting man’s faith, removing the separating wall of sin, imparting his divine nature by giving his Holy Spirit to dwell in and give life to a spiritually dead soul—in other words, new birth as a child of God. There is no other means, act, or point in time described in the Bible when that happens.

The analogy of financial aid for school helps me understand the logic of God’s will. If someone applies for a grant and it is approved, when does he or she actually get the money? It’s not transferred to the student’s account until registration is completed. The grant won’t be received without that step to complete the transaction! In the same way, forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit is approved by God for all people through Jesus’ death. But each person must appropriate—take possession of—what Jesus’ sacrifice made available, by being baptized—immersed—into Christ God commands. Baptism doesn’t cause God to forgive, it simply appropriates the forgiveness already approved and available, completing the transaction of new birth.

Sadly, though forgiveness is approved for and available to all, the way to appropriate it is often neglected or not taught accurately. Many times in Bible studies, I’ve witnessed the struggle someone goes through to decide whether to go by what she sees in the Bible or by what she’s wrongly believed, usually due to not having actually studied it before. It takes a lot of courage to make changes and have convictions that others may not understand or agree with. For those who make it through the temptation to be influenced by other people rather than by Scriptures that they see and understand for themselves, there is amazing joy at seeing how the Bible fits together, with each part of the puzzle adding to the big picture. As faith *and* repentance *and* confession of faith *and* immersion into Christ fit together, we experience the wisdom of God as described in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, where Paul summarizes in verse 13: “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”

“One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism”

Jesus said something just before he was arrested that has haunted me ever since I first saw it. In John 17:20-23, he prayed, “My prayer is not for them [the apostles] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Oneness among believers is obviously very dear to Jesus’ heart, being one of the last things he prayed for. Yet his prayer remains unanswered. Why?

From my own experience over the years in many different types of church groups, it seems the biggest obstacle to oneness is the lack of agreement on what must be agreed on to maintain unity—a vicious circle! We see the push for ecumenism on a large scale, with denominations joining organizations such as the World Council of Churches, yet there isn’t true unity but more of a glossing over of contradictory doctrinal differences or a watering down of standards. On the other end of the spectrum, we see individual congregations splitting over what are clearly matters of opinion such as what song book to use. We humans have a hard time knowing how to go about fulfilling Jesus’ desire, don’t we?!

The question that begs to be asked is, “How can we be unified?” Does the Bible tell us something so basic? Yes! Several passages admonish us on the subject, but one in particular, Ephesians 4:1-6, actually spells out how to do it. First, we’re told what our individual responsibilities are: “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” So the place to begin is with our own individual attitudes and effort. It’s interesting that Paul speaks in terms of *keeping* the unity of the Spirit, which implies that the unity is not of our doing, but is from God’s Spirit in the first

place. We can't make it, we can only either keep it or destroy it. Our responsibility is to put effort into maintaining what God has made.

Then, when our attitudes are right, we can unite on the basics: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope, when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Is it so hard to find clear teaching in the Bible to determine what each "one" is? What if each person focused not on *who* is right but rather on *what* is right? Did God make the Bible too hard for us to understand regarding these topics?

At least we can begin maintaining unity by participating in the one baptism! Baptism (immersion) into Christ is now "the promise...for all" (Acts 2:39). We can go on from there to maintaining unity in other "ones." Then there will be hope "that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). How pleased would Jesus be to see his prayer answered?!

Known by God?

Knowing God and being known by God is the core of Christianity, the meaning of life as God created us to live it. The last minutes Jesus spent with his disciples before he left the last supper on his way to his death reveal the deepest desire of God's heart. The rest of his prayer in John 17, for those disciples and for all who would ever believe in him, brings the focus in on God's underlying purpose for everything he had been doing: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17:24-26). God's ultimate purpose to give us the opportunity to know him and be known and loved by him was fulfilled in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. That we can be "immersed into Christ" and that God will live in and commune with us through his Spirit given in baptism truly is good news!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). What is the gate he refers to? "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:9-10). And how do we enter through the gate? "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly be united with him in his resurrection" (Romans 6:3-5). Jesus is the gate to eternal life, and baptism is the God-designed process of entering the gate to that life through participating in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Also in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promised (Matthew 7:7), "Seek and you will find." May you be among the few that Jesus said *will* seek and will find the gate and enter through it.

We know that God wants all men to be saved. He makes that clear in 1 Timothy 2:4: "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." Also, 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." The only limiting factor to the number who are saved is our own free will and whether we choose to seek God's way or not, and then whether we choose to believe and obey it when we find it.

God is very fair with us, giving us clear teaching about how to know him and how to be sure he knows us. He also gives us straightforward warning, as he says in 2 Thessalonians 1:8-10, "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed." And as we saw in Matthew 7:23, "Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" May we all be among those who will get to marvel at Jesus and not among those who hear his words of condemnation and are shut out from his presence!

Jesus instructed his disciples to “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). May we all be of those who believe and are baptized and so are saved, and not of those who do not believe and are condemned. Those who do not believe don’t need to be told not to be baptized because they wouldn’t even think of it! But like the eunuch in Acts 8, those who believe in Jesus, if they have been taught the whole gospel as he was, will eagerly say, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” It will be the same good news of a great opportunity, now as it was then!

How great is the answer God provides us, that we can know without doubt that we truly know God and are ***known by God!*** Do you know God—*does God know you?* Have you been immersed into Christ through baptism in water for the forgiveness of your sins and so that you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit? I hope so! If not, then (Acts 22:16), “And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name!”



Dedication

As a parent, the most thrilling event in the rearing of one’s children is to watch each of them make a mature and personal decision to become a child of God. During the writing of this booklet, I got to experience the joy of watching my two oldest daughters go through that journey of seeking God. Even greater than I could ask or imagine, they both, unbeknownst to each other, arrived at the point of readiness for their new birth at the same time. Even more amazing, that was on the anniversary of my own baptism into Christ 26 years before! So I dedicate this booklet to my three daughters, in the hope that throughout their lives they will all remain true to their love for God and to their convictions. I hope they will want to share the good news of new birth into a relationship with God with many others. On this day, October 20, 2000, we are preparing to share in the joy of witnessing the baptism into Christ of a friend of one of them. To see in one’s child the thrill of being used by God to draw another to Him is indescribable. I hope they all experience that joy many times throughout their lives!

Responses

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider the subject of this booklet. It was written in the hope that God can use it to help people have confidence in their relationship with him. Realizing from my own experience that it’s easy to assume one is a child of God when that may not really be true, I’ve wanted to pass on to others the clear teaching about the new birth that I was given the opportunity to learn. Please do share with me via email how this booklet has affected you, no matter how you respond. If you have any

further questions or Scriptures related to this topic, please share those with me, too. Or if you would like a “That You May Know” study outline of foundational topics (see p. 8), I’d be happy to send it via email attachment. It is also available as a PDF file at PreciousPromises.wordpress.com.

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