

These days, it seems we hear a lot about “Born Again Christians.” We often hear media talk shows or television “sit-coms” making generalizations about those who identify with this title. Many people are probably curious about this expression, but really don’t know where to go to find out what it means. In this Bible Talk, we shall search for the source of the expression and see what it meant to those who originally used it.

In the New Testament, the first person to present this idea was Jesus. One night, a Jewish religious leader came to visit with Jesus. As they talked, Jesus suddenly said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). The man, whose name was Nicodemus, was surprised and confused by the statement. He asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Then Jesus said, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

The idea of starting all over in life, of becoming a new person, of being born again, is truly an appealing prospect. Wouldn’t it be great to have the slate wiped clean and to be forgiven of all past wrongs and to start all over again, even at your present age and knowledge level? Well, Jesus said that this was possible, and even told how to do it. He said that the process involved “Water” and “Spirit.” There are two other passages in the New Testament which combine these two ingredients, and which help to amplify what Jesus was teaching.

In Acts 2:37, a crowd of convicted sinners asked the apostles what they must do. The answer, found in Acts 2:38, involves these same two elements mentioned by Jesus. They were told to “... be baptized” (there’s the water) and that they would “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” As we have seen in previous Bible Talks, baptism is the point where our faith climaxes in obedience. Our sins are forgiven and we are restored to a place of union with the Spirit of God. It is not hard to see how this condition could be described as a “New Birth.” Being born of the Water and the Spirit involves the obedience of baptism and the restoration of the Holy Spirit.

This explanation of Jesus’ teaching is seen even more clearly in Titus 3:5. In this verse, Paul explains to Titus the process of our salvation. He begins by giving credit to the mercy of God, then says that we were saved “by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.” Some Bible translations actually read, “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” When Saul of Tarsus washed away his sins in Acts 22:16, he was participating in the “washing of rebirth,” and, like the people of Acts 2:38, he surely received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Or, as Paul put it, he was renewed by the Holy Spirit. Renewed to what? Renewed to the spiritual relationship with God that had been lost in sin.

Here are three passages which combine the water of baptism with the restoration of God’s Spirit. These three passages describe the process of becoming a new person. Indeed, Paul reminded the church in Rome that after baptism we can “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). He told the church in Corinth the same thing. He said, “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (II Corinthians 5:17).

We can’t know what everybody else means when they say they have been “Born Again,” but we can know what Jesus and Peter and Paul meant. Not only that, but we can actually participate in it and enjoy a new life in Christ.

1. Jesus said, “Unless one is born of _____ and the _____, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).
2. Agree/Disagree: In Titus 3:5, the phrase “washing of regeneration” in the NASB means the same thing as “washing of rebirth” in the NIV.
3. How is being forgiven of sins (Acts 2:38) and the washing away of sins (Acts 22:16) like a new birth?
4. When Paul used the expression “washing of rebirth,” do you think he had in mind the same thing which Jesus called being “born of water”?
5. Is the Spirit of God in fellowship with those who are still in their sins? (Isaiah 59:2)
6. Is the Holy Spirit reunited with those who obey the Lord?
(Acts 5:32; I Corinthians 6:19; Galatians 4:6)
7. Since sin results in a spiritual death, explain how reconciliation with the Spirit of God is like a new birth.
8. If one receives the “gift of the Holy Spirit” at baptism (Acts 2:38), might this be the same as being “born of the Spirit” (John 3:5) and the “renewal” of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5)?
9. After careful comparison, do you think John 3:5, Acts 2:38, and Titus 3:5 are describing the same process?
10. Does the prospect of “starting all over” ... “getting another chance” ... being “born again” ... have any appeal to you? (Romans 6:4; II Corinthians 5:17)