

# The New Birth

**Text: John 3:1-7**

## Introduction

1. Nicodemus must have been surprised to learn that even a ruler of the Jews was not in the kingdom of God.
  - a. "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (v. 3)
  - b. Nicodemus asked how one could be born again.
2. Jesus explained the new birth in verse five.
  - a. Its two elements: water and Spirit.
  - b. Its necessity: one could not enter the kingdom of God without it.

## I. Some "Suggestions" as to the Meaning of Water

- A. Some say it has reference to the natural birth.
  1. The water which cushions the fetus before birth, the release of which is a sign of approaching delivery.
  2. These say one must "exist," be physically born, in order to be born spiritually.
- B. Some say it is not to be understood literally but figuratively, that it is a symbol.
  1. Calvin translated the passage, "water which is the Spirit."
  2. The presence of figurative language in the Bible cannot be denied. Even "water" is sometimes used symbolically. (John 7:38)
  3. Three rules of Biblical interpretation of figurative language:
    - a. "The sense of the context will indicate it." (D.R. Dungan, *Hermeneutics*, p. 195)
    - b. "A word or sentence is figurative when the literal meaning involves an impossibility." (Ibid.)
    - c. "The language of Scripture may be regarded as figurative, if the literal interpretation will cause one passage to contradict another." (Dungan, 196)
    - d. A summary of these three rules: A word is to be understood in its ordinary, literal sense unless something in the text or the rest of the Bible will not allow it.
    - e. The example of John 7:38. A literal interpretation would be absurd and nonsensical so it cannot be understood literally.

4. What reason would there be for “water” in John 3:5 to be figurative?
  - a. Does anything in the context or other passages force a figurative application? It can be understood literally without causing the slightest difficulty.
  - b. Would the literal application be an impossibility or an absurdity?
  - c. Would it not make sense if understood literally?
  - d. The only reason to make it figurative is because the literal application condemns the widely held position that baptism is not essential to salvation.

## II. “Water” Refers to Baptism

- A. “Water” can only refer to one thing: the water of the baptism of the great commission. (Mark 16:16)
  1. In baptism, a person is buried in water. (Acts 8:36; Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12)
  2. “Water is never present in any act connected with the kingdom of Christ, except one. But in that act it is always present, and never absent. That act is immersion.” (Moses E. Lard, *The Living Pulpit of the Christian Church*, pp. 240-241)
  3. “5. Born of water and the Spirit. The exposition of this much controverted passage does not fall within the scope of this work. We may observe, 1. That Jesus here lays down the preliminary conditions of entrance into His kingdom, expanding and explaining His statement in ver. 3. 2. That this condition is here stated as complex, including two distinct factors, *water* and *the Spirit*. 3. That the former of these two factors is not to be merged with the latter; that the *spiritual* element is not to exclude or obliterate the *external* and *ritual* element. We are not to understand with Calvin, the Holy Spirit as the purifying water in the spiritual sense: “water *which is* the Spirit.” 4. That *water* points definitely to the rite of baptism, and that with a twofold reference—to the past and to the future.” (*Vincent’s Word Studies*)
  4. A.T. Robertson, Late Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky: “We are puzzled by the placing of ‘water’ here before ‘Spirit’ as a necessity to entering the Kingdom of God. But Nicodemus was troubled about ‘Spirit.’ He was thinking only of the physical birth. On the whole it is probable that by ‘water’ Jesus refers to baptism. John the Baptist preached repentance and practiced the baptism of those who confessed their sins. When Jesus repeats the point to Nicodemus he drops any mention of water: ‘You must be born again.’” (*Minor Characters in the New Testament*)

5. "If Brother Vaughn convinced us that born of water refers to anything but the baptism of one previously born of Spirit, we never *knew* it, and we would have owed it to him and to our readers. It means nothing else, and no Baptist that we ever heard or read of ever believed otherwise until A. Campbell frightened them away from an interpretation that is sustained by the consensus of all scholars of all denominations in all ages." (*The Tennessee Baptist*, October 30, 1886, p. 5)
  6. Parallel passages in Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 5:26; and Titus 3:5.
- B. An analogy to clarify this point.
1. Colossians 1:18. Jesus is referred to as the "firstborn from the dead."
    - a. This is said in reference to His resurrection.
    - b. To arise from the dead is to be born from the dead.
  2. In baptism there is a resurrection from the water. (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12)
    - a. The person is buried into water and arises from the water to walk in newness of life.
    - b. Resurrection from the dead is birth from the dead, resurrection from water is birth of water.

### III. Baptism and the Kingdom

- A. John 3:5 justifies the conclusion that baptism is an essential part of the plan of salvation.
1. One cannot be in the kingdom without being baptized.
  2. One cannot be saved without being in the kingdom.
- B. The kingdom of God is composed of all those who have submitted to the reign of God. (Col. 1:13-14)
1. A person is either in the power of darkness or the kingdom of God. (Matt. 12:30)
  2. Those outside the kingdom are lost. Those in the kingdom are saved.
  3. Since baptism is essential to entrance into the kingdom, that makes it essential to salvation.

### Conclusion

1. The new birth is something which has been experienced by all children of God in all ages since the death of Christ.
2. It involves a change in our relationship to God and our relationship to sin.
3. If you are in sin, become dead to sin and alive to Christ. Be born anew and become part of the kingdom of God.