

## JUST WHAT DO YOU MEAN...BORN AGAIN?

One of the church's most popular booklets in Mr Armstrong's day was entitled "Just What Do You Mean...Born Again?" This expression "born again" is a very common expression used in the professing christian world and is perhaps one of the most misunderstood phrases in all of the Bible. It comes from Jesus' conversation with the pharisee Nicodemus who came to Him by night that is recorded for us in **John 3**.

Most people in the Protestant world teach that we are born again when we accept Christ as our Saviour. Are we born again in this life at baptism or are we born again at the resurrection? To answer this question let's read what Christ has to say about this in **John 3** starting in **verse 1**:

"There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.'"

Jesus plainly says that which is born of the flesh IS flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit **IS SPIRIT**" (**John 3:5-6**). He isn't just a spiritual person who's living a good life. If one is born of the spirit **HE IS SPIRIT!**

To drive home the point Christ went on to explain it further in the next two verses: "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (**John 3:7-8**). Notice here that it is the person, NOT the effects of his conversion that is compared to the wind. A spirit being in God's family is powerful and invisible like the wind though, of course, much more powerful.

One is born of God when they are raised from the dead (or changed) at the resurrection. Both **Colossians 1:18** and **Revelation 1:5** state that Christ is the "firstborn **FROM THE DEAD**". Christ through His life and His resurrection from the dead became the pioneer of how God is reproducing Himself through mankind. **Hebrews 2:10-11** says that Jesus is the firstborn among many brethren in this wonderful process of spiritual reproduction.

There has been some confusion on this subject because of the Greek word used by Christ when He says that we are to be born again. The Greek word is "gennao". Now "gennao" is an all-inclusive term describing the whole process from conception to birth or any part of it. As can be seen from these quotes the Greek word can mean either begettal or conception or the act of birth. A good example of another all-inclusive word like this can be found in the German language. The German language does not have separate words for an heir and an inheritor. It uses the same word for an heir as it does for an inheritor. It describes any or all parts of the inheritance process.

In **Romans 1:20** we read: "For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made." Paul here is saying that we can learn many things about God from the world around us because God has patterned many things that He has created in the physical world after things in the spirit world. Some of our animals, for example, are patterned after the appearance of certain features of the angels. The tabernacle that God told Israel to make and the Ark of the Covenant were also patterned after the pattern seen in God's throne in heaven (**Rev. 11:19**).

Drawing from a number of Bible references to such a pattern Mr Armstrong used to teach us that the way in which a baby is born is patterned after how God plans to reproduce Himself. By understanding how a baby is born we can better understand how God plans to reproduce Himself through us human beings.

All human life comes from a tiny egg called an ovum which is produced inside a human mother. This ovum has a very limited life of about 24 hours unless it is fertilized by a sperm cell from a male. Compared to eternity, our human life, of an average of 70 years, is very limited indeed (**1 Peter 1:24**). Once the tiny sperm cell combines with the ovum the genes from both the mother and father join and create a new life! A human being has been conceived but it is not yet a born human being. It still has a long way to go before that momentous day. Human life has merely been begotten, not born.

The apostle Paul shows how receiving God's spirit at baptism is just like a sperm and an egg joining together when a new life is begotten. In **Romans 8:16-17** he wrote: "The Spirit [itself] bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

The spirit in man in each of us is like the ovum and God's spirit is like the sperm from the father (**1 Peter 1:23**). At baptism these two spirits come together to form a new begotten spirit lifeform. A new God being has been begotten but he or she still has a long way to go before he or she is born into God's family.

God's divine spiritual nature (**2 Peter 1:4**) has been imparted to the newly converted person after they have been baptized and received God's spirit through the laying on of hands. God's nature, given as we develop the fruits of God's spirit, is like the genes that come from our father. God the Father then becomes a real father to us every bit as much as our own human father is in this very real process of spiritual reproduction if we choose to be baptized!

Now I happen to be one of those single guys who doesn't really get all excited about babies the way that girls seem to. I kind of like them a lot more once they're past that whole crying half of the time stage and they can speak a little bit. I'd rather have fun with a baby kitten or a puppy. I was telling this to Evan one day and he told me that your attitude will completely change once you have one of your own. We'll see about that ;-)

But seriously, fathers will tell you that there is this special connection that you have with your own flesh and blood children that you don't have with any other child. To know that this little baby or child is from your own flesh and blood is something quite special or so I'm told by those who've had kids of their own. Not only that we also have a special connection with our own brothers and sisters.

Now, we may not feel it much at times but the connection that God has with us as our literal spirit Father who has begotten us at baptism is every bit as real. It's every bit as real as a human father has with his children and we should not underestimate how real that connection is. Just as we have our human father's genes in us we quite literally have this little piece of God in us with the Holy Spirit that He has given to us.

The Apostle Paul went to some lengths to try and emphasize the reality of that special connection we have with God after we're baptized. In **Romans 8:15** he wrote: "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'" Now the word Abba here is not a reference to Anna, Benny, Bjorn and Agnetha of the Swedish pop group from the 70's but is, in fact, an Aramaic word. (Sorry, I couldn't resist that one). The word here Abba is an Aramaic word that has a special personal feeling to it much like our English words Papa or Daddy.

The family connection that we have with one another as brothers and sisters in God's family is also just as real. This, of course, has great implications in how we should treat one another in the church now. God doesn't want us to be a dysfunctional family. He wants us to treat one another with kindness remembering that all our fellow church members are our brothers and sisters in a very real way. It means we should take the time to get to know our brothers and sisters in God's family as well as we are able to and try and make sure that no-one gets left out.

I've kind of set myself the goal to try and have a decent conversation with someone different each Sabbath at church. There are some Sabbaths that I do well with that goal and others where I don't do very well with it but that's one suggestion that I can offer in getting to know the other members of our spiritual family here in the church.

God wants us in the church to be united as a family, not as a team where members get dropped if they don't perform well enough. To learn the lessons of dealing with people with all kinds of different personalities (both easy and difficult to get on with) God has called us into the church with people from all walks of life.

God, ultimately, wants to bring into His Family every human being who's ever lived. Just think about that for a moment. That means everyone, if at all possible, from hardened criminals and terrible dictators to primitive people in Africa and starving kids on the streets of Calcutta. Those will be incredible challenges! Any challenge that we might have today in trying to get along with one another in the church will be nothing compared to those great challenges in the World Tomorrow.

A human life begins with a fertilized egg no bigger than a pin point. During a period called gestation which normally lasts for nine months it will grow thousands of times bigger. As it grows, the physical organs gradually are formed. A heart forms and begins to beat. Other internal organs begin to form, then the head, legs and arms. Finally hair begins to grow on the head and facial features take shape.

Just as the human sperm cell is the very smallest of all human cells, newly begotten Christians start out with a very small measure of God's Holy Spirit and character. In the parable of the sower Christ explained that he who received seed on the good ground "bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (**Matt. 13:23**).

As we grow in God's character the measure of God's spirit grows in us many times over. Just as a human embryo develops all the different organs and begins to look like its parents, so too, we must grow (**2 Peter 3:18**) and develop the fruits of God's spirit and begin to act and live like our Heavenly Father (**Gal. 5:22-23**).

Just as an embryo is nourished in its mother's womb, we, too, must be nourished by spiritual food. Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (**Matt. 4:4**). The church acts as our mother providing that spiritual food through the messages that we receive through the ministry. Not only that, the church helps to protect us from being tossed to and fro by false doctrines just as a mother protects her child in her womb (**Eph. 4:11-15**).

In other places in the New Testament we are told that the church is not our mother but is a virgin who will marry Christ at His second coming. Though the analogy is quite similar here we have to be careful to remember that the church being likened to a mother here in **Ephesians 4** and in **Galatians 4:26** is a completely separate analogy to other places where the church is called a virgin.

We are told in many places that we are to be begotten and then born of God but Paul also uses a similar but different analogy in a couple of places. He uses the term adoption in the sense of a

slave who has been adopted by his master to be his son where he receives all of the privileges of sonship as if he was a literal son of the master.

Not all babies make it to the moment of being born into the world. Sometimes a woman has a miscarriage when a baby doesn't develop properly. Likewise, we can be a spiritual miscarriage if we don't grow in God's character after we have received God's spirit.

Those who have received God's spirit through baptism and the laying on of hands can lose out if they turn their back on God's calling through deliberate choice or by neglect. Paul encourages those who have received God's spirit not to "neglect so great a salvation" in **Hebrews 2:3**. Paul was also aware that he could lose out and become a spiritual miscarriage. He said in **1 Corinthians 9:27**: "I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified".

After a period of nine months on average comes the big day when the baby is finally born. At the resurrection those who have God's spirit will be transformed and be born into God's family on the same God level of existence as God the Father and Jesus Christ. In **Romans 8:19-23** Paul wrote that the creation groans and travails in pain like a mother in labour as we look forward to being delivered from this world and our mortality and receive our glorious new bodies.

**1 Corinthians 15** is often called the resurrection chapter. Paul explains the resurrection in that chapter this way: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality" (**1 Cor. 15:51-53**).

Mainstream Christianity would have us believe that when we die we go to heaven for all eternity playing harps or whatever, yet the Bible tells us that what God has planned for us for the rest of eternity is far more exciting! Paul describes our incredible future in these words in **Romans 8:18-23**:

"For I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation [the universe] waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation [the universe] itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (NIV).

The universe is currently in a state of decay. It is running down and is eagerly awaiting our birth into God's family so it can be set free from that decay. Once we are finished fixing up planet Earth, the whole universe with its billions and billions of stars and planets awaits us. God is in the creating business and we will join the family business of creating and beautifying the entire universe for all eternity with God the Father and Jesus Christ.

This incredible potential is being offered by God to you and me if we choose to live by His way of life, develop godly character and endure to the end! God is reproducing Himself through us and He wants to share His wonderful God level of existence with each and every one of us! That is what it means to be born again! That is our incredible human potential!