

A father, as one that will die, begets a son by his wife to succeed him; but God begets sons of the Church, not to succeed him, but to abide with himself. And He goes on: *That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* We are born spiritually then, and in spirit we are born by the word and sacrament. The Spirit is present that we may be born; the Spirit is invisibly present whereof you are born, for you too must be invisibly born” (§5).

It must be obvious that Augustine understood that Jesus was speaking of baptismal regeneration, rather than a verbal declaration to His sovereignty.

It is through Baptism that regeneration takes place; hence Paul calls this Sacrament “the bath of regeneration” (Tit. 3:5). It is the love of God for us that has made this rebirth possible (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3-4), but on the part of man faith plays an important role (John 1:12.13; 1 John 5:1). Those reborn must lead new lives, the life of Christ (Rom. 6-7; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9).

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Pamphlet 035

Being “Born Again”

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“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew [or *from above*], 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, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’” (Jn. 3:3-5).

The words, “Truly, truly” are used by Jesus in the Gospels to introduce solemn pronouncements and to add a note of authority. He is telling His listeners and future generations to be attentive to what will follow, as His words would be vitally important, and pertain to our salvation. It is crucial that we properly understand anything that could have such an impact. What did the Lord mean when He said that a man must be born anew? What was the common understanding of Jesus’ words among both His disciples and the generations of Christians, which would follow?

To be “born anew” was a Galilean expression, which meant to become like a child, to change one’s thought and habits, become simple like a child, and begin to learn anew. A child has no animosity in his heart against anyone. A child has no creed and has no racial hatred. Children have to be taught to hate, as hate is not part of our basic

human nature. Being “born anew” meant a new beginning. How would this be accomplished?

Nicodemus was a leader of the Jews and a disciple of Christ and one of the few Pharisees to believe in the claims of Christ. The Gospel does not tell us why Nicodemus came to the Lord at night. Perhaps, it was because he was weak in faith, and did not want to be seen in the company of Jesus and endanger his position in the community. Or, perhaps he was hoping to persuade Jesus to tone down His rhetoric a bit, and be more conciliatory towards the Jewish authority. Whatever the reason, what he received was instruction on the nature of Baptism and the motive of the Incarnation (Jn. 3:1-21). Later, Nicodemus was the only Pharisee to speak in defense of Christ when the Sanhedrin plotted His arrest (Jn. 7:50-52). After the crucifixion he helped Joseph of Arimathea to prepare the body for burial (Jn. 19:39-42).

It is possible that Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant by the words, “born anew” because Jesus spoke a different Aramaic dialect. Jesus spoke Galilean Aramaic and the Jews of Judea spoke Chaldaean Aramaic. The phrase “born anew” was taken literally by Nicodemus. What Jesus meant, however, was not a physical change but a spiritual experience.

When Jesus said that one must be “born anew,” 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?”

Nicodemus’ confusion is still manifested by most non-Catholic Christians 2,000 years later. For the Protestant fundamentalist being “born anew” means to be “born again.” The term “born again” has come to mean the making of a verbal declaration accepting Jesus as “personal Lord and Savior.” In order to be “born again” one must have a change of heart, a change of conscience. It’s more than just a feeling; it must mean the death of the old sinful nature, and put on the cloak of righteousness. One must become dead to sin and the devil, and become new and alive to preach the Gospel.

While such change in an individual is most desirable and commendable, it is not the actual meaning of this Scriptural passage. There is absolutely no proof that the phrase “born anew,” as understood by the followers of Jesus, has anything to do with “accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior.” Certainly, every Christian must be in total submission to Jesus as Lord, but the historical references indicate that this Jesus was speaking about “baptismal regeneration.” This is one of the terms used in the Scriptures to describe the change wrought in man by the remission of his sins and the bestowal of the new life of grace, which is a share in the life of God. From the use of this term it is obvious that the change that takes place is not merely an external one, effected only by a covering up of man’s sins or by “imputing” to him the holiness of Christ. Accepting Jesus as “Lord and Savior” does not guarantee that we will be more Christ like. Neither does saying, “Lord, Lord” assure anyone a place in the Kingdom of God. Doing the will of the

Father is a much stronger indication. We need the grace of the Sacrament of Baptism in order to live holy lives.

Baptism is not an act of willful accomplishment that has us “accept Christ” and boast that one is “born again.” Baptism is the incorporation into the Body of Christ.

Today, John 3:5, is one of the most misunderstood passages of the New Testament, but it was not always so. Every Bible commentary written prior to the Protestant Revolt of the sixteenth century understood John 3:5 as referring to the Sacrament of Baptism. The early Fathers of the Church are unanimous on this point. There can be little doubt that the Christian readers of John, during the first fifteen centuries, would have interpreted v. 5, “born of water and the Spirit,” as a reference to Baptism.

The following *Discourse with Nicodemus*, written by St. Augustine around the year 416, is representative of the era: “The Lord says to Nicodemus, and explains to him: *Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* You, says he, understand a carnal generation, when you say, can a man return into his mother’s womb? The birth for the kingdom of God must be of water and of the Spirit. If one is born to the temporal inheritance of a human father, let him be born of the womb of a carnal mother; if one is born to the everlasting inheritance of God as his Father, let him be born of the womb of the Church.