



REAL: AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN A WORLD OF COUNTERFEITS  
**New Birth: Recreated by the Spirit's Presence**  
**John 3:1-8**

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<sup>1</sup> Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>4</sup> 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?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

## Introduction

Evidently Jesus thinks there are only two kinds of people in the world: Those who've been born once, and those who've been born twice. The twice-born, they're real; the once-born, whatever else they are, they're not real.<sup>1</sup>

Which are you? Real, or not real? Are you once-born, or twice-born?

Talk about being twice-born may strike you as bizarre. That's understandable. It sounds curious to this man named Nicodemus, as he hears Jesus insist that if you want to be real, then you must be twice-born. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is *born again* he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3).

Nicodemus is baffled by what Jesus says, though not because he's unschooled or irreligious; he's actually a very learned, pious and devout Jew. No, he's taken aback because he's never heard anything like this before. "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asks. "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (v. 4). But rather than answer his

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<sup>1</sup> I'm indebted to A. W. Tozer for the expressions 'twice-born' and 'once-born'; see his "The Once-Born and Twice-Born," in *The Best of A. W. Tozer* (Book Two), p. 159.

question, Jesus only restates what's a shocking truth for Nicodemus, and perhaps for you: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (v. 5).

If, then, you're going to take Jesus seriously, you've got a tough pill to swallow: *To be real means to be twice-born*. You've got to be born once by water; that's our natural birth; everyone has a share in that. But you must also be born again by the Spirit—a supernatural birth!

You see, real Christians are new creatures. They've been born again, recreated by God, turned into something entirely new, fundamentally different from what they once were. That's why new birth is the beginning of real Christianity. If you want authentic Christianity, you must be born again. Being twice-born is the start of being real.

### **The Temple of the Holy Spirit**

New birth marks the beginning of real, first of all, because that's when the Spirit begins *to indwell you*. During his earthly ministry, Jesus encourages his disciples with the promise that the Father is going to send them another Helper, "to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him." The world, Jesus says, remains oblivious to the presence of the Spirit; but not so those who are real, as Jesus points out: "You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:16-17).

You see, when you're born again, the Holy Spirit takes up residence within you. He takes possession of you; he assumes the title-deed to your entire life; he moves into your heart and begins making himself at home in your life. On the other hand, if you're not born again, then the Spirit doesn't live within you. He may visit you every so often, occasionally rent a room from you, park his car outside your house, send you text messages or even an occasional Christmas card. But, listen, there's a wide difference between the Holy Spirit acting on you, and the Holy Spirit dwelling in you.

The real question, then, becomes, *Does the Spirit live within you?* Has he given himself personally to you? Is he yours, and are you his? Or are you like Saul, Israel's first king, a very sad case indeed! The Spirit often came upon him; but the Spirit never took up residence within him. While he was empowered by the Spirit to do many mighty things, he was never indwelt by the Spirit, causing him to be born again.

If you're real, the Spirit dwells in you. In fact, you've become the dwelling place of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). This means you have been sanctified, set apart, for holy purposes by the Spirit of God; indeed, the whole of who you are—body, soul, spirit—everything about you. And, so, there's no longer anything secular about you; everything you do, everywhere you go, is made sacred precisely because of the Spirit's presence in your life. Think about that!

You see, then, why it matters what comes out of your mouth, which is the gate of your temple. "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving" (Eph. 5:3-4). And why you need to be especially vigilant about what you do with the rest of your body, from gluttony to fornication: "Flee from sexual immorality. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (6:18-20).

## Partakers of the Divine Nature

Becoming the temple of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit taking up residence within you; this comes with new birth and is therefore the beginning of real. But there's a second reason why you only become real when you're born again. Not only is new birth the moment the Spirit begins to indwell you, it's also the moment the Spirit *enlivens* you: gives you new life, raises you from spiritual death, and puts you into a living relationship with the living God.

You see, each and every one of us arrives on the scene of this world as a *living corpse*: "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). You're alive physically, but dead spiritually. You're able to see the light of the sun, taste the sweetness of a mother's milk and enjoy the sound of a father's voice. But you're blind to the light of God's glory, unable to taste the beauty of his holiness, and deaf to the sound of the gospel. The Bible says we show up spiritually dead and incapacitated, right from the start.

That's why if you want to be real, you must be born again! Because only then does God, by his Spirit, give you new life; only then does the Spirit infuse your soul with his life, so that his life becomes your life. The Spirit gives himself to you, indeed unites—even weds, you might say—himself to your soul.

Here, we grope for ways to describe the union of the Holy Spirit with your soul. Words don't do justice to the reality. Perhaps that's why Jesus primarily used pictures. On the last day of a great feast in Jerusalem, Jesus says this of the Spirit's enlivening presence in a person's soul: "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believe in him were to receive" (John 7:38-39). Or to a thirsty and forlorn woman by the side of a well, Jesus promises this: "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

You see, even though the uniting of the Spirit with your soul is a mysterious thing, the writers of the New Testament nevertheless say some remarkable things about it. The Apostle Peter, for example, says that when the Spirit inhabits us, we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). The Apostle Paul says similarly that by the Spirit within us we are "filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). Or the Apostle John says that as a result of the Spirit giving himself to us, "God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12; cf. 3:24).

But, most precious of all, the Scripture says that if the Spirit has made you alive, then *Christ himself* now lives within you: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Through the Spirit of Christ, the risen Christ, who is even now seated at the right hand of God the Father, can live within you. "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ," therefore, says the Apostle Paul, "does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom. 8:9-11).

## Transformed from One Degree of Glory to Another

So, then, if you want to be real, you must be born again. For the new birth marks the beginning of the Spirit both indwelling you, and making you alive. But, thirdly, if you want to be real, you must be born again, because only then does the Spirit of God begin to *exert* himself in

your life; only then does he begin to make his presence both felt and seen; only then does he begin to transform the desires of your heart and the direction of your life.

You see, when the Spirit moves into your life, he immediately gets to work, makes the place his own, changes stuff about who you are and how you live, so it better matches who he is and how he lives. And, little by little, over time, you see your life transformed by his presence. That's the shared experience of all real Christians; the Holy Spirit turns you into what he likes, not by destroying your personality, but by renewing your character. In a word, he makes his character your character; his holiness, yours, until one day the transformation is complete and your character matches his, and the Son's, and the Father's.

In this way, God marks you as his own; in fact, the Bible calls this the 'sealing' of the Spirit. The King of Heaven impresses his image, his character, upon your life so that it's clear you belong to him and not to another. It's the King's verification, his certificate of authenticity. God stamps his own image on you, your heart and soul, the image of his holiness. And as your life is increasingly made holy by the Spirit, you increasingly bear the Lord's image, and by the sealing of the Spirit show that you belong to him.

So, too, this is how the Spirit "bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16). Like a lawyer in a courtroom arguing a case, the Holy Spirit marshals evidence to prove you're real. But what evidence does he use? He uses the change he's made in your life to convince you that you're real. He points to his fruit—the fruit of the Spirit—which he himself has caused to grow in your life. And, so, as he exerts himself in your life, leading you in the path of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and so on, he demonstrates to you that you're real, that you're genuine, that you actually belong to God. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (8:14).

The Spirit may, then, have given you his gifts, but has he given you his grace? Indeed, you may speak in tongues of men and of angels; you may have prophetic powers, understand all mysteries and all knowledge; you may have a kind of faith to move mountains, be willing to give all you have, even embrace martyrdom. But at the end of the day, the question is: Has God shed his love abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5)? Apart from that, the Apostle Paul would say, you're nothing; you're not born again; you're not real.

## Implications

To be born again by the Spirit is a remarkable thing. Sadly, being 'born again' has become so cliché as to be trivialized in our culture. But if we let Scripture guide us, we realize that the new birth is a glorious reality with profound implications for you and me, and for the church. Here are several key implications for you to consider:

*First, even though you're still you, you're entirely new.* Genuine Christians are an entirely different kind of creature, set apart fundamentally from all other human beings. The difference between real and not real is one of kind, not simply of degree. A real Christian isn't merely a cleaned-up version of a non-Christian, but an entirely new creature.

*Second, even though you're entirely new, you may not be entirely nicer than those who aren't new.* Just because you're real, doesn't necessarily mean that you'll be in every respect a nicer person than someone who's not real. What you need to remember is that God begins recreating you by starting right where you are and with precisely who you are. And, let's face it: some of us are starting off in a whole lot worse shape than others! So, the question is not: Are you nicer

than every non-Christian? But are you nicer—more Christ-like—than you would be without Christ?<sup>2</sup>

*Third, even though you're born again at a specific moment in time, the evidence of new birth is best seen only over an extended period of time.* You're born again at a particular moment in time; you're not born again over time, as though it were a slow and steady process. But what usually takes time to detect are your spiritual vitals, those reliable signs of new spiritual life. The Spirit transforms us in different ways and at different speeds; no one's transformation is exactly the same as anyone else's. God has a unique way of dealing with each and every one of his children.

*Fourth, even though your salvation doesn't depend upon the evidences of new birth, nevertheless, if there are no evidences in your life, then you have no reason to think you're either saved or born again.* To be born again is to experience a profound change, a fundamental alteration of who you are. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). If the desires of your heart and direction of your life have not changed, then you have no reason to assume you're born again.

And the change must be substantive, not superficial; it must be real change in the core of who you are, your heart, the direction of your life. And it must be permanent, not temporary. Even a pig can be cleaned up for a party, or a dog taught to eat a meal with a fork and knife. But, as the Apostle Peter says, those moral reforms won't last, if the nature of that creature hasn't been fundamentally changed: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire" (2 Pet. 2:22). You may have struggled with some particular sin before you were converted, and after your conversion you will probably still struggle with that sin and have to guard against it. But that sin will have lost its power over you; it will no longer dominate you as it once did.

*Fifthly, even though you must be born again, you cannot give yourself new birth.* Spiritual regeneration isn't within your control or mine. It's not something you can purchase at the drugstore, borrow from a friend, or order on Amazon.com. Remember Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (v. 6). Flesh only gives birth to flesh. It may be more refined, prettier, and even in a sense more virtuous or nicer flesh; but it's still flesh. And, apart from the Spirit, you'll never be anything other than flesh.

But also recall Jesus' words about the mysterious moving of the Spirit: "The wind [i.e., Spirit] blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (v. 8). You can no more control the Spirit than you can catch the wind. The Spirit is sovereign in salvation; and he gives new birth to whomever he pleases.

All we can do is cry out for the Spirit to blow in our direction. Some of you need to do that; you need to cry out to the Spirit for the gift of new birth. You need to beg God to give you new life, new birth, a new heart. Do it today! Invite the Holy Spirit to come into your heart and take

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<sup>2</sup> Here I draw on the wonderful chapter of C. S. Lewis's in *Mere Christianity*, entitled: "Nice People or New Men." Edwards counsels similarly: "Indeed allowances must be made for the natural temper: conversion does not entirely root out the natural temper: those sins which a man by his natural constitution was most inclined to before his conversion, he may be most apt to fall into still." But Edwards balances this admission with an important caveat: "yet conversion will make a great alteration *even with respect to these sins*" (p. 341).

up residence in your soul. Entreat the Lord to do what only he can do—and to do what he does best. Ask him to give you new birth!

### **George Whitefield’s Startling Realization: Be Born Again, Or Be Damned!**

George Whitefield, the leading evangelist of the First Great Awakening in the mid-1700s in America and Great Britain, became the remarkable man he was through a startling realization. As a student at Oxford, Whitefield happened upon a small book by a Scottish pastor named Henry Skougal entitled, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. He read the book intently, yet the book startled him deeply. Why? Because through Skougal’s book he came face to face with what it means to be real; he saw clearly how the Bible defines authentic Christianity, over against its counterfeits.

And what young Whitefield realized was that what the Bible defines as real was seriously at odds with what he thought Christianity was all about. Listen to how he describes this startling realization about what it means to be a real Christian:

God showed me that I must be born again, or be damned! I learned that a man may go to church, say his prayers, receive the sacrament, and yet not be a Christian. How did my heart rise and shudder, like a poor man that is afraid to look into his account-books, lest he should find himself a bankrupt.

‘Shall I burn this book? Shall I throw it down? Or shall I search it?’ I did search it; and, holding the book in my hand, thus addressed the God of heaven and earth: ‘Lord, if I am not a Christian, or if I am not a real one, for Jesus Christ’s sake, show me what Christianity is that I may not be damned at last!’

God soon showed me, for in reading a few lines further, that, ‘true religion is a union of the soul with God, and Christ formed within us’, a ray of Divine light was instantaneously darted in upon my soul, and from that moment, but not till then, did I know that I must become a new creature.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Most Glorious Work of God**

Real Christians are new creatures. And it all begins with the giving of new birth. There’s nothing more glorious than when God gives a sinner new birth: when he pours out his own Holy Spirit into the life of a sinner posting for hell. I agree entirely with Jonathan Edwards, who says that grace in the hearts of saints, the gift of new birth, the presence of the Spirit in your soul—this is “the most glorious work of God.”<sup>4</sup>

Let us rejoice, then, in the goodness and loving kindness of God, who has sent a Savior into the world, for our sins and for our salvation; and who now saves us, not because of what we do,

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (Vol. 1), p. 73 (emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 203.

but as an expression of his own mercy, and in a way that is both mysterious and marvelous: “by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:5-6).

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift: the gift of his Son, our Savior, who gives us the gift of new birth by his Spirit.

Amen and amen!

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