

What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

What Does It Mean
to Be Born Again?

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Chapter One

Must I Be Born Again?

I once spoke with a gentleman who said he wanted to learn more about the Christian faith. He said he thought that he was a Christian and wanted to know more of what Christianity involved. But, he cautioned, “I don’t want to be a *born-again* Christian.”

When I heard that, my mind snapped back to the 1976 presidential campaign, when Jimmy Carter identified himself as a born-again Christian. About that same time, Charles Colson, who had been an adviser to President

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Nixon and who became embroiled in the Watergate scandal, was converted to Christ and wrote a book titled *Born Again*, which sold millions of copies and was made into a movie by the same title. Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver and even Larry Flynt, the publisher of *Hustler* magazine, got into the act by announcing to the world that they had been “born again,” though Flynt now calls himself an atheist.

Suddenly the term *born again*, which had been known only in a very small segment of the church, became a hot news item and started to receive national attention. It was borrowed by the secular world and applied to things outside the Christian faith. For instance, if a baseball player had a good year following a particularly bad year, it was said he was a “born-again” player.

Somewhere in all the hype, however, the true meaning of the term *born again* became obscured. As a result, much confusion exists, even within the church, as to the precise nature of the new birth. The purpose of this booklet, then, is to examine what it means, biblically and theologically, to be born again.

At the outset, I must note that the phrase “born-again Christian,” in a narrow, technical sense, is a redundancy.

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This is because, according to the New Testament, in order to become a Christian, one must first be born again (John 3:3–5). Therefore, if a person is born again, he or she is a Christian. So to call somebody a “born-again Christian” is like saying that such a person is a Christian Christian. The New Testament knows of no other kind of Christian.

Also, the term *born again* is a popular synonym for the theological term *regenerate*. I know of no church in the history of Christendom that has not had a doctrine of regeneration or rebirth. That is, every Christian body in Western history has had to develop some kind of concept of what it means to be reborn spiritually. This is because the concept did not originate with theologians, Bible commentators, or preachers. The very idea of spiritual rebirth has its origins in the teaching of Jesus. Since Christians identify themselves as followers of Christ, naturally they have been interested in understanding what Jesus says about this idea.

Jesus' Conversation with Nicodemus

The account of Jesus' first teaching on this subject is found in John 3. I would like to work through this passage slowly

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so that we can gain a solid foundation for our ensuing discussion of the new birth.

John writes, “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night” (vv. 1–2a). John immediately introduces us to Nicodemus and tells us two things about his background: first, he was a Pharisee, and second, he was a ruler of the Jews. The Pharisees were a conservative religious sect known for strict obedience to the law of God. The “rulers of the Jews” were the religious authorities in Israel. The Jewish nation was under the imperial authority of Rome and was ruled by a Roman governor. However, the religious authority in Israel was vested in a group of seventy men who formed a body known as the Sanhedrin. These men were the rough equivalent of senators in the United States or cardinals in the Roman Catholic Church. When John identifies Nicodemus as a ruler of the Jews, he is clearly indicating that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. Not all Pharisees were members of the Sanhedrin, but some members of the Sanhedrin were Pharisees. So Nicodemus was a learned and powerful man, highly trained in theology.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Why did he do that? I have a suspicion that Nicodemus was slightly nervous.

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He did not want to be seen publicly with Jesus, who was popular with the people but was an object of suspicion among the religious authorities. So he was discreet in his first meeting with Jesus.

However, he came with fine words: “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’” (v. 2). It’s significant that this leader of the Jews recognized Jesus as a rabbi and addressed Him with the respect that was reserved for a theologian. Nicodemus was acknowledging that Jesus was an authentic teacher of the Word of God. He then went on to declare that at least some of the Jewish leaders recognized that Jesus was a teacher sent by God, thanks to the signs He was doing. This attitude was very different from that of many in the party of the Pharisees. They did not have such a positive view of Jesus. In fact, they attributed His remarkable activities to the power of Satan (Matt. 12:22–32). But this Pharisee refused to make such an outrageous charge; rather, he came praising Jesus. He was saying, “Jesus, I recognize that You must be a teacher sent from God because no man could exercise the kind of power that You have displayed unless God was authenticating His message.”

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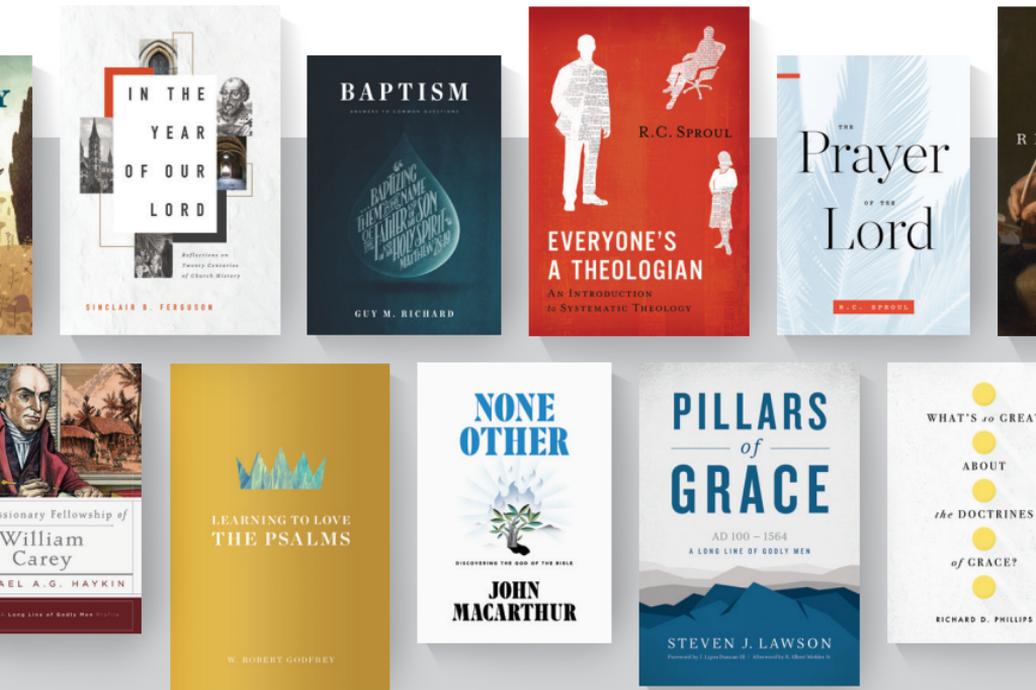
A Necessary Condition

Notice how Jesus responded. He didn't say, "I'm humbled by this honor that you've bestowed on Me, ruler of the Jews, member of the Sanhedrin; it's great to be praised by someone in such a lofty position." It's almost as if Jesus could not wait for Nicodemus to stop complimenting Him. Once Nicodemus fell silent, Jesus responded as He always did in His teaching—by cutting through the fluff and getting to the heart of the issue. He said to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3). In other words: "Nicodemus, stop talking about peripheral matters and personal honors. The thing I want to get across to you is this: There is something a person absolutely must do in order to see the kingdom of God."

In theology and philosophy, we enjoy making distinctions, and one distinction that is very important in these disciplines is the one between what we call a "necessary condition" and a "sufficient condition." A necessary condition is defined as something that absolutely must happen before something else can follow. For example, in order for a fire to ignite, the presence of oxygen is absolutely required. If there's no oxygen, there can be no fire. By

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How can a person be born a second time?

When Jesus said to the Jewish leader Nicodemus, “You must be born again,” Nicodemus asked in astonishment, “How can these things be?” Some two thousand years later, people are still confused about the term “born again,” though more people than ever claim to have had the experience.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul cuts through the confusion and carefully explains what it means to be born again. Dr. Sproul affirms that the new birth is essential for salvation and goes on to show that this regeneration is a sovereign work of God in our hearts.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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