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July-August Letter

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Dear Brethren,

Modern Christendom continues to embrace teachings and ideas that have no basis in the Scriptures. Instead, most Protestant and Catholic doctrines are based on ancient pagan concepts—with just enough of the truth mixed in to make it *appear* to be of God. This is true of most teachings that go by the name “Christian”: immortality of the soul; heaven as the reward of the saved; just “accept Jesus” and you’ll be saved; the veracity of the Law for today; the observance of pagan holidays such as Christmas and Easter; the abandonment of the weekly Sabbath and annual holy days; plus many more. But one of the most maligned teachings of today’s “Christianity” has to do with being “born again.”

According to mainstream Christianity, one is “born again” when he or she has “received Christ” and been “saved”—typically at baptism. Thus, being “born again” is seen as a *religious experience*. Yet most Christians have great difficulty explaining from Scripture what it means to be “born again” or “born of God.” Indeed, there is great confusion on this subject. The Bible, however, is quite straightforward on the topic.

In John 3:1-12, Jesus taught that to be “born again” literally means to be “born of the Spirit”—to *become* a spirit being. As we will see, other passages show that this “new birth” *to spirit life* will take place at the first resurrection when Christ returns. Thus, Jesus is the only one who has been “born again”—as He is the *firstborn from the dead*. No one else has yet been resurrected from the dead to eternal life—no one else has been “born again.”

The Pagan Origin of the Popular “Born Again” Doctrine: It may come as a surprise to many that the idea of a “second birth” *as a religious experience* is not unique to Christianity. In fact, the concept is quite ancient. In his epochal book *The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop demonstrates that pagan religions, which had their roots in ancient Babylon, had a belief and practice of being “born again” or “twice born.” For example, Hislop wrote: “The Brahmins make it their distinguishing boast that they are ‘twice-born’ men, and that, as such, they are sure of eternal happiness. Now, the same was the case in [ancient] Babylon, and there **the new birth was conferred by baptism**” (p. 132, emphasis added). Note that the pagan teaching of being “born again” or “twice born” had nothing to do with being raised from the dead, and that it was linked to the rite of *baptism*.

But how did this false teaching find its way into nominal Christianity?

Jesus repeatedly warned His followers about false messiahs, false apostles, and false teachers who would, if possible, deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:5, 11, 15, 24; see parallel accounts in Mark and Luke). The apostles likewise warned believers to be on guard against false apostles and false teachers (II Cor. 4:11; I and II Timothy; Titus 1; II Pet. 2; I, II and III John; Jude; Rev. 2, 3, 13 and 17). The New Testament is replete with warnings about false apostles and false teachers who would come in “sheep’s clothing” but would inwardly be “ravening wolves,” seeking to pervert and destroy the truth of God.

The apostle Paul warned the Thessalonians in 51 AD that an apostate religious system, which he called the “mystery of lawlessness,” was beginning to penetrate the Church (II Thess. 2:1-12). He warned, “Do not let anyone deceive you by any means because *that day* [of Christ’s return] *will not* come unless the apostasy shall come first, and the man of sin [the final anti-Christ] shall be revealed.... **For the mystery of lawlessness is already working**” (verses 2, 7).

Over time, this “mystery religion,” modeled after the ancient Babylonian “mysteries,” has developed into a great apostate “Christianity”—which Christ has identified in Scripture as “**Babylon the Great, the mother of the harlots and of the abominations of the earth**” (Rev. 17:5). The early leaders of this religious system established numerous false teachings, among them the doctrine that one is “born again” at conversion—or, in Protestant-speak, when one has “accepted Jesus.” Just as in ancient Babylon, this “new birth” is associated with baptism, but has nothing to do with being raised from the dead to spirit life.

Early Latin “church fathers” adopted the Babylonia idea that one is “born again” through baptism. *Justin Martyr*, for example, taught that converts to Christianity are to be “led ... to a place where there is **water**; and **there they are reborn** in the same kind of rebirth in which we ourselves were reborn” (*The First Apology*, 61). *Irenaeus* taught that Christians “are made clean, by means of the **sacred water** and the invocation of the Lord, from [their] old transgressions, being spiritually **regenerated as new-born babes...**” (*Fragment*, 34). Likewise, *Clement* wrote that, in this present life, Christians “are **regenerated and born again of water**” (*Recognitions*, 6:9). These statements reveal that the early “church fathers” believed that being “born again” was a *religious experience* tied to the rite of baptism.

A contributing factor that has obscured the true meaning of the phrase “born again” is the mistranslation of John 3:5 in the *Latin Vulgate*. Originally translated by Jerome in 383 AD, the *Vulgate* inserts the word “again” into verse five, making it read “born **again** of water.” Yet no Greek manuscript includes the word “again” in the passage. By contrast, Erasmus’ Latin translation from the Greek correctly renders the verse as simply “born of water.”

It is probable that the Latin church leaders—such as those quoted above—were influenced by an early, pre-*Vulgate* translation of the Scriptures with a corrupt rendering of John 3:5. At the very least, Jerome’s translation perpetuated the false “born again” teaching with its corruption of John 3:5. The faulty rendering has remained a part of the *Latin Vulgate* and is the basis of the Catholic “sacrament of baptism”—typically given to infants or children.

Biblical scholar William Tyndale, the first to translate the New Testament from the Greek into English, translated John 3:3, 5 correctly. However, in other writings he taught that when one is converted and receives the Holy Spirit, one has been “born again.” It is likely that Tyndale’s theology contributed to the Protestant “born again” teaching.

The True Meaning of “Born Again”: In order to fully comprehend the scriptural meaning

of when one is “born again,” Jesus’ teachings in John 3:1-12 must be examined. The context of these verses proves that being “born again” does *not* mean a conversion or baptismal experience. Rather, it means a literal *transformation from flesh to spirit*: “Now there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus by name, a ruler of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher *Who* has come from God; because no one is able to do the miracles that You are doing, unless God is with him.’

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, **unless anyone is born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man who is old be born? Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, **unless anyone has been born of water and of Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which has been **born of the flesh is flesh**; and that which has been **born of the Spirit is spirit**. Do not be amazed that I said to you, “It is necessary for you to be born again.” **The wind blows where it will**, and you hear its sound, but you do not know *the place* from which it comes and *the place* to which it goes; **so also is everyone who has been born of the Spirit**.’

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘You are a teacher of Israel, and you do not know these things? Truly, truly I say to you, we speak that which we know, and we testify of that which we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things, and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?’ ” (John 3:1-12).

It is clear that Jesus was not talking about a conversion or baptismal experience in this dialogue. Rather, he was comparing one’s physical birth—a fleshly existence—to that of being “born anew” or “born again”—to an actual spiritual existence. Jesus describes two births: one of water and one of the spirit—“unless anyone has been **born of water and of Spirit**” (John 3:5). Jesus then contrasts a birth of the flesh with a birth of the Spirit: “That which has been **born of the flesh is flesh**; and that which has been **born of the Spirit is spirit**” (verse 6).

When a human being is born, he or she is *born of flesh*—a physical being. Further, every human being has been “born of water” from the womb—referring to the amniotic fluid of human birth. One who has been *born of water* (via the womb) **has been born of the flesh—and is flesh** (John 3:5-6).

But Nicodemus missed the point when Jesus referred to a new or second birth of the Spirit: “**unless anyone has been born ... of Spirit**.” What kind of *existence* does one have who has been “born of the Spirit”? Jesus answered that question when He said “that which has been **born of the Spirit is spirit**.” Jesus clearly meant that anyone who has been born of the Spirit is, in fact, **a spirit being**. The new, spiritual birth means that one who has been “born again” *is* a spirit being, no longer composed of human flesh. Since one who has been “born of the flesh is flesh,” it follows, as Jesus said, that one who has been “born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

Every human is limited by fleshly existence and a physical environment. However, as a spirit being, one is not bound by the flesh or limited by the physical realm. Jesus stated that one who has been “born of the Spirit” cannot necessarily be seen, just as the wind cannot be seen: “**The wind blows where it wills**, and you hear its sound, but you do not know *the place* from which it comes and *the place* to which it goes; **so also is everyone who has been born of the Spirit**” (verse 8). Therefore, one who has been “born again”—“born of the Spirit”—must be invisible to the human eye, having the ability to come and go as the wind. That is hardly the case of one who has been baptized and converted—for he or she is *still* in the flesh and is limited by the flesh.

Jesus also said that a fleshly human being “cannot see” or “enter into” the Kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). Paul reiterated this when he emphatically stated: “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (I Cor. 15:50).

When Is One Actually Born Again? *When*, then, is one literally “born again” or “born anew”? Matthew wrote that Jesus was the “firstborn” of the virgin Mary (Matt. 1:25). Jesus’ human birth was by water. He was flesh (I John 4:1-2), as any other human being. When Jesus was resurrected from the dead *as a spirit being*, He became, in Paul’s words, the “**firstborn from among the dead**” (Col. 1:18). John verified this when he wrote that Jesus was the “**firstborn from the dead**” (Rev. 1:5). Therefore, Jesus was “born again”—“born of the Spirit”—at the time He was *resurrected*. It was exactly as He had told Nicodemus, “That which has been born of the Spirit is **spirit**.”

As a spirit being, Jesus was not limited by the physical realm. In fact, He walked through doors and walls, suddenly appearing to the apostles and disciples (Luke 24:33-43). Though spirit, Jesus was able to manifest Himself as a man, with the appearance of flesh and bone.

Not only is Jesus the firstborn from the dead, He is also the “**firstborn among many brethren**” (Rom. 8:29). If Jesus is the *firstborn*, this means there are others who are yet to be “born again.” The true body of believers is called the “church of the firstborn,” as Paul wrote: “But you have come to Mount Sion, and to the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem; and to an innumerable company of angels; to the joyous festival gathering; and to **the church of the firstborn**, registered *in the book of life* in heaven; and to God, the Judge of all” (Heb. 12:22-23). It is called the “church of the firstborn” because believers will be “born again”—“born of the Spirit”—in the first resurrection when Jesus returns (Rev. 20:4-6).

The Bible reveals that at the resurrection believers will be “born again” of the Spirit and receive a glorious spirit body, shining as the sun. Paul explains: “It [the body] is sown [in death] a **natural body** [that which has been born of the flesh *is flesh*]; it is raised [in the first resurrection] a **spiritual body** [that which has been born of the spirit *is spirit*]. **There is a natural body**, and **there is a spiritual body**; accordingly, it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul; the last Adam became an ever-living Spirit.’ However, the spiritual was not first, but the natural—then the spiritual.

“The first man is of the earth—made of dust. The second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the one made of dust, so also are all those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly one, so also are all those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the one made of dust, **we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one** [at the resurrection].

“Now this I say, brethren, that **flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God**, nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I show you a mystery: we shall not all fall asleep, but **we shall all be changed** [born again of the Spirit], in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet shall sound, and **the dead shall be raised incorruptible**, and **we shall be changed**. For this corruptible must put on incorruptibility, and this mortal must put on immortality. Now when this **corruptible shall have put on incorruptibility**, and this **mortal shall have put on immortality**, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’ ” (I Cor. 15:44-55; also see I Thess. 4:14-18).

In summary, the scriptural evidence clearly reveals that one is not “born again” or “born of the Spirit” until the resurrection at the return of Christ. Being “born again” has nothing directly to do with baptism or conversion. When one has been “born again,” he or she will be a spirit being—

composed of spirit. This is the true meaning of “born again.”

What Does it Mean to Be “Born of God”? Contributing to the confusion on this subject is the “born of God” passage in I John 3:9, a verse that has been grossly mistranslated. Unfortunately, this mistranslation has led many to mistakenly assume that Christians who are “born of God” (or “born again”) *cannot sin*. But as we have seen, no Christian has yet been “born again” or “born of God.” Moreover, the idea that Christians are *immune* from sinning is obviously false.

The *KJV* reads: “Whosoever is **born** of God **doth not commit sin**; for his seed remaineth in him: and **he cannot sin**, because he is **born** of God.” As translated, this verse contradicts other verses in I John, as well as the rest of the New Testament.

Contrary to this incorrect translation, John wrote that even Christians who have the Holy Spirit *do indeed sin* at times—and that they need to confess their sins for forgiveness (I John 1:7-10; 2:1-2). Frankly, it would be completely incongruous for John to write the passages above about how converted believers *do* sometimes sin and, at the same time, write in I John 3:9 that one who has been “born of God” (or “born again”) “does not commit sin”—and that such a person “cannot sin.” Since the Scriptures do not contradict one another, what is the solution?

It is apparent that I John 3 cannot be referring to those “born again” to spirit existence by a resurrection; as shown above, *only* Jesus has been “born again” as spirit by being resurrected from the dead. No one else has been or will be “born again” by a resurrection until Christ’s return. Thus, I John 3:9 can *only* apply to Christians *still alive*.

The problem with this passage comes from two mistranslated words or phrases. First, the word “born” is translated from the Greek verb *gennao*. In the *KJV*, *gennao* has been translated as “beget, begat” or “begotten” 55 times; as “born” 37 times; and as “conceive, bear, brought forth, deliver, or gender” 4 times. The context determines whether *gennao* should be translated “begotten” or “born” (Wigram, *Englishman’s Greek Concordance of the New Testament*).

With this understanding, the first part of I John 3:9 can be corrected by simply translating *gennao* as “begotten” instead of “born.” As a result, the correct rendering should read: “Everyone who has been **begotten** by God....”

The second phrase in I John 3:9 that has not been accurately translated in the *KJV* is “doth not commit sin.” There is no question that a converted person *does*, at times, commit sin; but upon true repentance, through the grace of God and by the blood of Christ, those sins can be forgiven. The key to understanding this phrase is an accurate translation of the Greek verb *poiei*, translated “commit.” As many of the better Bible translations bring out, the meaning is simply that one who is begotten of God—who has been “converted” and begun his or her Christian journey—does not *practice* sin, or *live in* sin. This is also verified by numerous Bible helps, such as Berry’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*—which says that the Greek wording of this passage has the meaning of “*to do, generally, i.e., habitually, to perform, to execute, to exercise, to practice, i.e., to pursue a course of action, to be active, to work...*” (p. 81).

The context of John’s epistle is not about a Christian’s inability to commit sin. Therefore, *poiei* in this context means **practicing sin as a way of life**. When verse 9 is rendered “does not *practice* sin,” the contradiction created by the *KJV* is removed. The correct translation of this portion of verse 9 reads: “**Everyone who has been begotten by God does not practice sin.**”

Furthermore, this meaning of *poiei* is retained in the second part of verse 9 with reference to “cannot sin,” which should read “cannot *practice* sin.” Thus, the entire verse correctly translated should read: “Everyone who has been begotten by God does not practice sin because His seed of

begettal is dwelling within him, and he is not able to *practice* sin because he has been begotten by God.” This rendering harmonizes with the rest of John’s epistle (and the entire New Testament) and removes all contradictions.

One of the reasons for confusion on this subject is that many fail to understand that **conversion is an ongoing process**. In one sense, a person is “converted” when they have repented, been baptized for the remission of their sins, and received the Holy Spirit (by which they are actually *begotten*). In another sense, however, their conversion has only *just begun*. As a *process* of change and growth, conversion takes place over one’s lifetime. Thus, sin still sometimes occurs—but *not* as a way of life or practice. Only at the end of that period of growth, change, and overcoming is the Christian finally “born again” at the resurrection as a spirit-composed immortal member of God’s family.

For a full discussion of being “born again,” please request our free booklet *What Do You Mean—Born Again and Born of God?*

The Holy Spirit—Key to Becoming Born Again: One of the greatest false teachings of this world’s “Christianity” deals with the understanding of the Holy Spirit—which they see as a “third entity” of some kind of “triune” Godhead. As noted above, salvation is a *process*. It begins with repentance and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. It is that Spirit that then leads and empowers the new convert on a lifelong journey of change and overcoming—becoming Christlike in every way—in preparation for eternal life in the Kingdom of God. But Christendom rejects the idea of salvation being a process—believing instead in a false “once saved, always saved” concept.

Indeed, understanding the truth of the Holy Spirit is vital to becoming “born again.” The New Testament reveals that the Holy Spirit is not a person—not part of some nonsensical trinity. Rather, it is the very power of God, which is imparted as the gift of God to everyone who repents of sin and accepts the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38). Upon true repentance, baptism, and the laying on of hands, God the Father puts the power of the Holy Spirit within each true Christian, thereby making him or her His begotten child. Thus begins the *process* called “conversion”—i.e., *change*.

However, it is not until the resurrection, when Jesus Christ returns to the earth, that all those who have died in the faith, together with those truly converted Christians who are still alive, will be “born again.” They will be transformed from fleshly human beings to glorified children of God and will reign with Jesus Christ as kings and priests in the Kingdom of God.

With little denominational variation, the Trinity doctrine stands as a centerpiece of virtually all “Christian” religions. As doctrine, its origins are clearly found in the early proto-Catholic church that arose after the apostolic era. But as we will see, its roots can be found in the ancient pagan world—with influences from Babylon, Egypt, Greece, etc. In the centuries immediately following Jesus’ time, various disputes arose concerning His exact “nature.” The issue was eventually somewhat settled by the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. The Roman emperor Constantine—who held no particular conviction on the matter—convened the council strictly in order to prevent religious division within his empire.

While the Council of Nicaea more or less resolved the issue of Jesus’ divinity, it at best only hinted at an early form of Trinitarianism. The Nicene creed simply noted: “We believe in the Holy Spirit”—yet declined to elaborate. In time, disagreements soon centered around the exact nature of the Holy Spirit. As Karen Armstrong writes, “People were confused about the Holy Spirit. Was it simply a synonym for God, or was it something more?” (*A History of God*, p. 115).

In the second half of the fourth century, three theologians from the province of Cappadocia in eastern Asia Minor began to shape the doctrine of the Trinity. Going beyond Nicaea, they proposed that God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit were coequal—united as one being, yet also distinct from one another. These theologians—Basil (bishop of Caesarea), Gregory (bishop of Nyssa), and Gregory (of Nazianzus)—were all trained in Greek philosophy, which obviously influenced their theological views.

But the Trinity doctrine continued to be refined over time. The teachings of the Cappadocian theologians paved the way for the Council of Constantinople (381 AD) to “affirm the divinity of the Holy Spirit, which up to that point had nowhere been clearly stated, not even in Scripture” (*HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, “God”). The council adopted a statement that, in part, reads: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages.... And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets....”

With this declaration, the Trinity doctrine, as generally understood today, became the official Catholic teaching concerning the nature of God. Other beliefs about the nature of God were banned.

But there is *zero* biblical support for the idea that the Holy Spirit is a person or a third member of a so-called trinity. The whole idea is based on pagan concepts and human reasoning as inspired by Satan the devil. Again, the Holy Spirit is *the power by which God accomplishes His will*. The “impregnation” of the Holy Spirit from God the Father as a spiritual begetting is granted freely to each believer upon repentance of sins, baptism by immersion, and the laying on of hands. This begetting of the Holy Spirit is the earnest and assurance of the promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ. As the power of God, the Holy Spirit makes each begotten child of God a partaker of the divine nature and imparts the ability to develop the love of God. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

Thus, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit imparts the power to each individual to live in accordance with God’s will and to overcome the temptations of human nature, the world, and Satan. As the spiritually begotten believer seeks to serve and obey God, the Holy Spirit will lead him or her to understand the Word of God, which is essential for salvation.

The Holy Spirit is the spiritual seed by which a human is begotten by God, enabling people to live in the flesh and yet become spiritual children of God. In short, the Holy Spirit is simply the *power of God in action*. That same spirit working in us gives us the power to overcome temptations and evil. The false belief of the Trinity that the Holy Spirit is a living being is unquestionably contrary to the entirety of God’s Word. The Holy Spirit is simply the mechanism for, and projection of, His POWER, will, and love. Those who have the Holy Spirit within them have received the greatest gift—the power by which God will change them so that they become the eternal “born again” children of God in the resurrection.

The Spirit of Man—Another Vital Key: As we consider the meaning of becoming—via a lifelong *process*—“born again,” it is also important to understand the role of the “spirit of man.” Again, this world’s Christianity looks at salvation as simply a matter of “accepting Jesus—a one-and-done event. They do not recognize the vital need for personal growth, change, or developing godly character. But as Jesus said, only those who *overcome* will inherit positions of authority in the

Kingdom of God (Rev. 2:26; etc.). As we have seen, this process is made possible as we are led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. But the entire process plays out in our hearts and minds because we have been given the “spirit of man”—that part of our being that gives us the power of *mind*. This human spirit is not a “soul” at all; rather, it gives us the ability to think and reason and create. Otherwise we would be mere animals. Moreover, this human spirit gives us the ability to have an *intimate relationship* with God—to communicate with and know Him—to grasp vital spiritual concepts. Notice what Paul wrote: “For who among men understands the things of man except by the **spirit of man** which is in him? In the same way also, **the things of God no one understands except by the Spirit of God**” (I Cor. 2:11).

The world doesn’t understand this! Modern Christianity is blind to this! But this is what makes salvation possible—the Spirit of God interacting with the spirit of man. This is what will ultimately make it possible for us to one day become “born again”!

Brethren, thank you for your love and prayers for us and all the brethren. We pray for you every day—for God’s blessings and protection, and for your health and healing. We thank you for your tithes and offerings—used to serve the brethren and preach the Gospel of the coming Kingdom of God. We pray that God will bless you and keep watch over you in all things. May God’s love and grace continue to be upon you.

With love in Christ Jesus,

Fred R. Coulter

FRC

PS: Our program of distributing Bibles and Greek-English Interlinears continues to be a success! And we still have plenty of Bibles and Interlinears left—so feel free to request copies if you can place them into the hands of those who have a sincere desire to study the Scriptures. You can order copies individually or by the box—paperback, 8 in a box; vinyl, 6 in a box; and Interlinears, 4 in a box. Thank you and keep up the good work!