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“Born From Above” or “*Born Again*”?

Did Jesus tell Nicodemus that, to enter the Kingdom of God, he would have to be “born from above”? Or did He say, “You must be *born again*”? Many claim that “born from above” is the correct translation. But is it? Was Jesus speaking of receiving the Holy Spirit, which comes “from above,” or was He speaking of mortal human beings actually *becoming* immortal spirit beings?

by Vance A. Stinson

Ask the average church-goer to define the expression “born again,” and he or she is likely to say that it means “to accept Christ as Savior,” or “to be baptized with the Holy Ghost,” or something similar.

Thousands, perhaps millions, claim to have been “born again.” Televangelists speak of it. Ministers of virtually every denomination preach on it. “Born again” must be one of the most popular “religious” phrases of all!

But how many really understand what it means to be “born again”?

Many claim that Jesus really said, “You must be born *from above*”; that “born from above” is a much better translation than “born again”; that the “new birth from above” is the beginning of the Christian experience, and that it involves spiritual enlightenment, or “change of perspective.”

But is that what Jesus meant when He said, “Except a man be *born again*, he cannot see the Kingdom of God”?

Jesus and Nicodemus

The phrase “born again,” now so popular among evangelicals, first appears in the third chapter of John’s Gospel.

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be

with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be *born again*, he cannot see the Kingdom of God (verses 1-3).

Jesus' reply seems unrelated to Nicodemus' statement. Why did He respond in this way?

According to some commentators, Jesus' response was to Nicodemus' inability to "see" beyond a certain point. The Pharisee was willing to acknowledge that Jesus was "a teacher come from God," but was not willing to accept Him as the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Son of God. Thus, Nicodemus was unable to "see," or *experience*, the operation of the Kingdom. He had only seen a visible sign, but was unable to "see," with spiritual perception, the invisible Kingdom of God.

According to this view, Jesus was telling Nicodemus that in order to perceive the operation of the Kingdom, and in order to take part in the activities of the Kingdom, one must experience a "change of perspective" through reception of the Holy Spirit.

Further, it is claimed that John's pointing out that Nicodemus was a Pharisee (verse 1) and Nicodemus' use of the word "we" (verse 2) show that Nicodemus represents Judaism. Therefore, this entire account represents a confrontation between Jesus Christ and Judaism.

According to the theory, John's purpose in writing this section was to show that the Jews rejected Christ, but the Gentiles accepted Him. This thought is strengthened, so it is claimed, by the fact that the very next chapter shows that the Samaritans accepted Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

Further "support" can be found in John's use of meaningful terms, such as the word "night." Nicodemus came to Jesus "by night." The word "night" supposedly represents "spiritual darkness." Thus, Nicodemus, representing Judaism and its adherents, was groping in spiritual darkness, unable to

"see" that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, the Redeemer and Savior of the World.

As one scholar said, "The issue here is 'Who is Jesus?'"

But was that really the issue? Did Nicodemus reject Jesus as the Messiah? Was he in total spiritual darkness, unable to see the operation of the Kingdom through the works of Jesus? Did Nicodemus represent Judaism? And did John intend that this account represent the confrontation between Christ and Judaism?

Was Nicodemus Groping in Spiritual Darkness?

It is certainly true that Nicodemus did not at this point understand that the Messiah would suffer and die, be resurrected, ascend to heaven, and return to this earth to establish His Kingdom. Even Jesus' disciples did not understand these things.

But the idea that Nicodemus was completely blind as to Jesus' Messiahship is simply *not true!* The truth is, Nicodemus went to Jesus because he at least *suspected* that Jesus was the Messiah. This becomes clear when we examine all that the New Testament tells us about Nicodemus.

Notice John 19:38-42:

And after this [the death of Jesus] Joseph of Arimathaea [a member of the Sanhedrin], being a *disciple of Jesus*, but *secretly* for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. *And there came also Nicodemus*, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the

sepulchre was nigh at hand.

Does the above leave the impression that Nicodemus was a representative of the Christ-rejecting Jews?

Of course not! Consider these points:

1) Nicodemus was willing to risk assisting Joseph in the burial of Jesus. These men were members of the Sanhedrin ("rulers of the Jews"), and risked ridicule and persecution from their Sanhedrin associates, most of whom hated Jesus and had a hand in His murder.

2) Joseph was a *secret* disciple of Jesus. The fact that Nicodemus knew about Joseph's plans and assisted him in carrying out those plans indicates that the two shared their secret thoughts about Jesus. Nicodemus himself may have been a closet disciple!

Is it not clearly obvious that Nicodemus had at least suspected that Jesus was the Messiah? Otherwise, why the association with Joseph of Arimathaea? Why the concern over Jesus' body?

It may be true that Jesus' death curbed Nicodemus' suspicion, but the fact that he took part in the preparation and burial of Jesus' body shows that the life, teachings, and works of Jesus certainly impacted Nicodemus' life. No doubt, the question of Jesus' Messiahship had been more than just a passing thought!

Nicodemus' favorable regard for Jesus is also seen in John the seventh chapter.

Jesus was preaching in the temple, and the people were divided: Some believed His message and some did not. Some even believed He was the Christ. But some were there for no other reason than to capture Him and take Him to the Sanhedrin, but their mission failed.

Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, Why have ye not brought Him? The

officers answered, Never man spake like this man. Then answered them the Pharisees, Are ye also deceived? Have any of the rulers of the Pharisees believed on Him? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed. Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth? They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet (John 7:45-52).

Nicodemus' defense of Jesus shows that he did not share the Pharisees' feelings about Him. Moreover, unless someone—and there's a good chance it was Nicodemus!—told John what was said in the meeting between the officers and the Pharisees, how could John have known what was said? It is not likely that this discussion took place within hearing distance of Jesus or His disciples, so it is very possible that Nicodemus, a converted member of God's church by the time John wrote, told John of this occasion.

The reason Nicodemus came to Jesus was that he at least *suspected* that Jesus was the Messiah. He came *by night* either because he sought an uninterrupted conversation or because of *fear of the Jews*—the same reason Joseph kept his discipleship a secret.

Indeed, this account does show that the Pharisees opposed Jesus, but Nicodemus obviously did not represent the Pharisees. Rather, he, as Joseph of Arimathaea, was an exception. The risks he took in (1) coming to Jesus, (2) defending Jesus' right before the Sanhedrin, and (3) assisting Joseph in obtaining, preparing, and burying the body of Jesus strongly indicate that Nicodemus thought of Jesus as something more than just another "teacher sent from God."

When he said, "*we* know that thou art a teacher come from God," he was definitely not speaking for all the Pharisees. The "*we*" must have included himself, Joseph of Arimathaea, and perhaps a few other Pharisees who wondered if Jesus

was in fact the One whose appearance they had for so many years awaited.

It seems that Nicodemus *could* see the "operation of the Kingdom" through the works of Jesus; but he didn't know what to make of it because he, like Jesus' disciples, had some erroneous ideas about the Kingdom.

What was on Nicodemus' Mind?

Nicodemus, suspecting Jesus was the Messiah, must have had many questions in mind when He came to Him by night; questions such as these: "If you are the Messiah, when will you restore the Kingdom to Israel?" "How do you plan to overthrow the Romans?" "How can a man secure for himself a place in the Kingdom?"

We are told that Joseph of Arimathaea, Nicodemus' close associate, was a man who "waited for the Kingdom of God" (Luke 23:51). Both men knew that before the Kingdom could be established, the Messiah had to come. Their interest in Jesus shows that they believed He was (or could be) the Messiah who would restore the Kingdom.

Like Jesus' disciples, Nicodemus assumed that the Messiah would lead a bloody revolt against the Romans and restore the Kingdom of Israel to full statehood as a sovereign nation. But Jesus, knowing Nicodemus' mind, explained to him that the Kingdom would not be like that at all.

"Except a man be born again," He said, "he cannot see the Kingdom of God." In other words, the Kingdom is not made up of mortal, flesh-and-blood human beings (see I Corinthians 15:42-50). Therefore, to see the Kingdom—to enter into it and become a part of it—a person must become something other than a mortal, flesh-and-blood human being. He must be changed from mortal to immortal, from corruptible flesh to incorruptible spirit.

He must be *born again*!

"Again" or "From Above"?

The Greek word translated "again" (John 3:3, "born *again*"), is rendered "from above" in many modern English translations. The word is *anōthen*, and can mean "from above," "anew," "from the top," and "from the first." In John's Gospel, the term usually means "from above" (see John 3:31; 19:11), but that doesn't mean that "from above" is always the preferred translation. Many commentators claim that *anōthen* should be translated "from above" in John 3:3.

But should it? Rather than go to Greek scholars and assume they speak the language Jesus and the apostles spoke, let's go to someone who *definitely* spoke the language of Jesus. His name is Nicodemus!

In response to Jesus' startling statement, Nicodemus asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the *second time* into his mother's womb, and be born?" (John 3:4).

Clearly, Nicodemus understood Jesus to say that a man must be born *anew*—a "second time"—to see the Kingdom of God. The idea of receiving the Holy Spirit "from above" was well known to the Jews, as was the concept of being "made new" through healing of infirmities. Had Jesus used a word that meant "from above," Nicodemus surely would not have replied the way he did; he would have thought Jesus was speaking of a spiritual "birth," or "renewal," through reception of the Holy Spirit.

It seems that virtually every commentator assumes that the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus took place in Greek. They then proceed to explore the various nuances of meanings of the Greek words used in the text.

But keep in mind that both Jesus and Nicodemus spoke Aramaic fluently, and that this conversation probably—almost certainly—took place in Aramaic, not Greek. So

regardless the nuances of meaning of a single Greek term, it is clear that Nicodemus did not hear Jesus say anything that remotely resembled "spiritual renewal from above"! Rather, he understood Him to say that a man must *come forth from the womb a second time!*

Born of Water and of Spirit

Nicodemus' question was the *natural* response one would expect after telling a person he had to be born a second time.

In reply, Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

What did Jesus mean by "born of water and the Spirit"? Was He speaking of "baptism with water" and "baptism with the Spirit," as most seem to think?

Commentators have proposed several possible meanings for the expression "born of water." The following three are probably the most popular:

1) "Born of water" could refer to baptism, for when one is immersed into water he "comes forth" from the water—hence, "born of water."

2) The two words, "water" and "Spirit," may mean the same thing. Bullinger's *Companion Bible* states: "Not two things, but one, by the latter Noun [Spirit] becomes a superlative and emphatic Adjective, determining the meaning and nature of the former Noun [water], showing that one [water—the former noun] to be spiritual water: i.e. not water but spirit. It is to be rendered 'of water—yea, spiritual water'" (page 1518).

3) The birth by "water" may be a description of natural human birth, because of the fluids associated with human birth.

All the above seem logical, but the most probable meaning is a combination of the latter two.

Remember, Nicodemus had just asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" To him, "birth" meant physical, human birth—a coming forth from the womb—which could well be described as birth by "water."

Jesus answered by explaining that He had a different kind of birth in mind. "Except a man be born of water—yea, spiritual water [rather than natural water, or fluids associated with the natural birth Nicodemus had in mind]—he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God."

Flesh and Spirit

Jesus further explained: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (verse 6). Jesus delineates the two kinds of births. Birth "of the flesh" is the birth Nicodemus had in mind. Those who experience this birth, Jesus said, are *flesh*; and those who experience the second birth—who are "born of the Spirit"—are *spirit*. Is that hard to understand?

Notice, too, that Jesus did not say, "That which is born of the flesh is *fleshly*." He said, "That which is born of the flesh is *flesh*"! In Greek, *sarx* means "flesh"; *sarkikos* means "fleshly." Had Jesus intended to say "fleshly," John would have used *sarkikos*.

Some claim that verse 5 should not be taken literally, and insist that Jesus was not teaching a "lesson in physics"—that is, "born of the flesh" and "born of the Spirit" have nothing to do with bodily composition.

Of course Jesus was not teaching a "lesson in physics." He was merely pointing out that the kind of birth Nicodemus had in mind was not the kind of birth He, Jesus, had in mind. Nicodemus was thinking of natural human birth (does that have anything to do with bodily composition?), and Jesus simply replied by saying "That which is born of the flesh is

flesh," and went on to say, "That which is born of the Spirit *is* spirit."

Now, are *you* flesh, or not? If you were "born of the flesh"—if you came into this world through the kind of birth Nicodemus had in mind—then you *are* flesh; you are *composed of flesh*. But once you have been "born of the Spirit"—the kind of birth necessary to "see," or *experience*, the Kingdom of God—then you *are* spirit!

Is it really as unbelievable as some would have you believe that Jesus was speaking of bodily composition? After all, are there not several scriptural passages that speak of bodily composition?

The book of Genesis tells us that "the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground" (2:7). Should we spiritualize this verse away, perhaps take it to mean that "dust of the ground" suggests that man is morally and spiritually "dirty"?

Or what about Adam's statement when God presented him with Eve? He said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23). We could "spiritualize" this one away and say that "bone of my bones" and "flesh of my flesh" means that humankind is a "materialistic and fleshly-minded" race of beings.

Do you see how easy it is for a person to spiritualize away any scripture that doesn't fit his belief system? Apologists have been doing it for centuries. To justify their belief in the "immortality of the soul," for instance, "death" does not mean death; it means "separation." "Destruction" does not mean destruction; it means "reduced to a state of ruin." "Gehenna fire" is not a literal fire that literally consumes; it is an ethereal region, or condition, wherein eternal retribution is administered to the ungodly.

When Jesus spoke of being born of the Spirit, He was speaking of a literal change of bodily composition—the same

change Paul spoke of in I Corinthians 15:51,52:

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep [in death], but we shall all be *changed*, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump [Christ's Second Coming]: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be *changed*.

Was Paul teaching a lesson in physics when he wrote the above words? Call it "physics" if you wish, for he was indeed speaking of a radical bodily change—a change from corruptible flesh to incorruptible spirit!

Like the Wind

Before proceeding with our analysis of Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus, consider this brief summation of what we have seen thus far:

1) Jesus said that to enter the Kingdom of God a person must be born again. As we have seen, Nicodemus, who spoke the language Jesus spoke, understood Him to say born *again*, not "from above." Nicodemus knew about receiving the Holy Spirit, which comes "from above," but it was clear to him that Jesus was speaking of something far different from reception of the Holy Spirit.

2) In this context of natural birth vs. spiritual birth, Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh *is* flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit *is* spirit." If all who have experienced natural birth are composed of flesh, then it logically follows that those who experience spiritual birth are composed of spirit. Some feel it is not believable that Jesus was speaking of bodily composition. But the apostle Paul, who was taught by the same Christ who met Nicodemus, was definitely speaking of bodily composition when he wrote of the corruptible "natural body" and the incorruptible "spiritual body" (I Corinthians 15:44), and when he stated dogmati-

cally that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God" (verse 50).

Now, with the above fixed firmly in mind, notice how Jesus further explained what He meant by "born again":

Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit (John 3:7,8).

Some argue that this merely means that the Holy Spirit is like the wind in that, as with the wind, we cannot see the Spirit, but we can see the effects of the Spirit's activity as it changes people's lives; and just as we cannot tell where the wind comes from or where it is going, the natural mind cannot discern the Source from which the Holy Spirit proceeds.

This seems logical at first glance, but in view of what we have already seen, it certainly seems more likely that Jesus was speaking of the *nature* of those who experience the "new birth." We have seen evidence that He was in fact speaking of bodily composition—*i.e.*, natural body vs. spiritual body—in the preceding verses. It makes sense, then, that He was still speaking of bodily composition (or the nature of "born again" citizens of the Kingdom) when He used the "wind" analogy.

Jesus was saying that those "born of the Spirit," or "born again," are like the wind in that they are invisible, powerful, of a nature quite unlike that of mortal, flesh-and-blood human beings. They are like the resurrected Christ (I John 3:2), who was able to appear and disappear at will (John 20:19,26), and who is described by Paul as a "life-giving Spirit" (I Corinthians 15:45).

Nicodemus had thought of the Kingdom of God as a flesh-and-blood kingdom; had believed the Messiah would lead a

bloody revolt against the Romans, and would restore the Kingdom unto Israel. But Jesus said, in effect, "No, Nicodemus, your ideas about the Messiah and the Kingdom are completely wrong. To enter the Kingdom, you must be born again; you must be changed from flesh to spirit, from mortal to immortal. Citizens of the Kingdom are not like the sword-bearing warriors you have in mind; they're like the wind—invisible, powerful, able to accomplish great things in a way no flesh-and-blood warrior ever could. Don't be astonished at this. You, a learned rabbi and teacher of Israel, should be able to comprehend it."

The "Kingdom" in John's Gospel

The word "kingdom" (Greek: *basileia*) appears five times in John's Gospel. In chapter 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that only one who is "born again" can "see," or "enter," the "Kingdom of God" (verses 3,5). In chapter 18, Jesus says to Pilate: "My Kingdom is not of this world: if my Kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my Kingdom not from hence" (verse 36).

In chapter 14—though the word "kingdom" does not appear—Jesus describes the future Kingdom of God as His "Father's house" wherein are found many "dwelling places" (John 14:1-3).

The point is that John's Gospel emphasizes the "other-worldly" nature of the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not speak of the Kingdom as having already been inaugurated. It is a kingdom that is *being prepared* for the saints, who will enter into it at the Second Coming (John 14:3).

The Jews thought the Kingdom was "of this world," but Christ said it was not. They thought they would join the Messiah in battle against their oppressors, but Christ said His Kingdom was "not from hence." They thought the Kingdom

would be established then and that they would take their place in it, but Christ said that His disciples would take their place in the Kingdom in the *future*, at the Second Coming. No doubt, John included the account of Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus in order to underscore the "other-worldly" nature of the Kingdom.

When Jesus said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God," He was not telling Nicodemus that in order to see the "operation of the Kingdom" one had to take on a new perspective through inward change. No, He was speaking of the "other-worldly" nature of the Kingdom, and the "other-worldly" nature of its citizens.

The Gospel of the Kingdom

The phrase "Kingdom of God" occurs numerous times in the New Testament, but only twice in John's Gospel. Interestingly, both occurrences are found in the account of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus.

It is clear that Nicodemus did not understand the nature of the Kingdom, but how many professing Christians today do? Many think the Kingdom of God is the church. Some think it is "heaven." And, believe it or not, some even think it is the United States of America.

With so much confusion about the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, no wonder so few understand what it truly means to be "born again"!

In unraveling the mystery of the Kingdom of God, let's turn our attention to the Genesis account and see if we can find some clues.

The first 25 verses describe the creation (or *recreation*) of the world. Then, in verse 26, we find the first mention of God's plan to create a creature in His own image, after His likeness. Notice:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (Genesis 1:26-28).

Notice two important points: (1) Mankind was made in the image and after the likeness of God. (2) Mankind was given dominion over the earth.

At first glance, one would think that the above two points are merely statements of accomplished fact that have no eschatological implications. Man *was* made in the image of God, and God *did* give man dominion over the earth. But is that *all* the passage means? Or is there more to it?

The writer of the book of Hebrews quotes the eighth Psalm to show us that God did in fact give man dominion over the earth, but quickly adds, "But now we see *not yet* all things put under him [man]" (Hebrews 2:8). In other words, *God's promise to give man dominion over the earth has not been fulfilled in the fullest and final sense!* Man will see the ultimate fulfillment of that promise in "the world to come" (Hebrews 2:5).

So, then, the Genesis record *does* carry eschatological implications! This means that just as man has not received dominion in the ultimate sense, *neither has he been made in the image and after the likeness of God in the ultimate sense!*

When we come to understand this important truth, then we are prepared to understand what the Gospel of the Kingdom of God is all about. We are prepared to understand that the true Gospel is the message of God's plan to restore this

"fallen" world and to bring to completion His plan to make man in His image and after His likeness, thus bringing man into the divine family of God. That is the very heart and core of the Gospel!

Once we understand this great truth, many scriptures take on wonderful new meanings. Take, for instance, I John 3:1,2:

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, *we shall be like Him*: for we shall see Him as He is.

John was not using metaphor when he described God as "Father" and the saints as "sons of God." He was saying that true Christians, as the children of God, will, at the Second Coming, *be made in the image and after the likeness of God!* They will literally enter into the divine *family* of the immortal God, will literally become like Christ, who is very God!

Another passage that "leaps off the page" once this great truth is understood is Romans 8:15-19:

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation [revealing] of the sons of God.

Again, the descriptions of God as "Father" and the saints as His "children" (or "sons") are not metaphor! The saints have been "fathered" (*gennao*) of God through the "Spirit of

adoption [or *sonship*]." However, they have *yet* to be "glorified" and *yet* to be "revealed." This glorification and revealing obviously involves a radical *change*. As we have noted, the apostle Paul spoke of this change in his first epistle to the Corinthians. He wrote:

As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy [*i.e.*, we are physical, flesh-and-blood human beings, like the first man Adam, who was made from the elements of the earth], we shall [at the Second Coming] also bear the image of the heavenly. Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I shew 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 trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory (I Corinthians 15:48-54).

Do you see how certain familiar scriptures "come alive" once the wonderful truth of God's purpose for humankind is understood? Notice that Paul says that "we shall bear the image of the heavenly." Recall that in the very first chapter of the Bible we saw that God purposed to make man in His own image! Clearly, in the passage above Paul is speaking of the ultimate fulfillment of God's purpose, when human beings will shed their mortality and take on the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Notice, too, that Paul associates this radical change from mortal to immortal with inheritance of the Kingdom of God. Flesh-and-blood human beings, he says, cannot inherit the Kingdom—they have to first be changed from "earthy" to

"heavenly." In essence, he says that to see the Kingdom of God one must be *born again*!

The Witness of Nature

The passages quoted above from John's and Paul's writings show clearly that (1) the saints are the "sons of God" *now*, and (2) they will receive the fullness of "sonship" at the Second Coming of Christ, when they will be radically changed into the "image of the heavenly." Add to these two important points the fact that a person becomes a "son of God" when the Holy Spirit joins with his human spirit, and the analogy is inescapable: The Holy Spirit is the "spermatozoon," and the human spirit (mind) is the "ovum." When the "spermatozoon" and "ovum" unite, a brand new life—a "new creature in Christ" (II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15)—is conceived ("begotten," or "fathered"). The "new creature" must grow and develop until it is time to come forth from the "womb."

Some argue that the analogy, while interesting, is "not in the Bible." They apparently think that a doctrinal truth cannot be established unless it is spelled out in so many words in Scripture. The fact that God is called "Father," that the saints are called "sons of God," and that the Holy Spirit is described as the means by which the Father makes us His sons is not enough to convince them of the conception/growth/birth analogy.

But is the Bible the sole source of divine revelation? Perhaps this question sounds radical, if not blasphemous, to those who adhere to the old Protestant battle cry, *sola scriptura*, which means that the "Bible alone" is the source of doctrinal truth.

However, the Bible itself declares that it is not the sole source of divine revelation. Believe it or not, there is another source that must be considered alongside the biblical

revelation. Romans the first chapter tells us what that source is:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold [suppress] the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them [or, has been made known to them]. For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, *being understood by the things that are made*, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse (Romans 1:18-20).

While this passage deals primarily with the fact that the creation is a witness to God's awesome power and divine nature, it also teaches us that the creation reveals much about the mind and purpose of the Creator—just as a work of art reveals much about the artist. Therefore, the analogy we have presented is firmly established on *what can be seen* both in Scripture and in nature.

Does *Gennao* Ever Mean "Conception"?

For years we have taught that the Greek word *gennao*, translated "born" in John 3:3, can be used both of conception and birth. However, some have taken issue with this teaching, claiming that we have mistakenly confused "begettal" (one of the meanings of *gennao*) with "conception."

But is this correct? Have we made a mistake in our understanding of *gennao*?

Most concordances and word study guides confirm that *gennao* means "to beget," or "to be born." It is most often used of men begetting (fathering) children. For instance, "Abraham begat [*gennao*] Isaac..." (Matthew 1:2). Notice how this same verse is rendered in some of the modern English versions:

New American Standard Bible: "To Abraham was born Isaac...."

New International Version and *New Revised Standard Version*: "Abraham was the father of Isaac...."

New American Bible (Catholic): "Abraham became the father of Isaac...."

Jewish New Testament: "Avraham was the father of Yitzchak...."

The word is used both of "fathering" children and "bearing" children. The covenant from Sinai is compared to Hagar, who is "bearing children [*gennao*] for slavery" (Galatians 4:24, NRSV). In one instance, the word is used of conception: "...for that which is conceived [*gennao*] in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20).

Some claim that the word, as it is used in Matthew 1:20, simply means "began" ("to begin," or "have a beginning"), but does not actually *mean* "conception." It's like the English word "begin": We can use the word when we speak of the conception of a new life, but the word itself cannot be defined as "conception of new life."

Further, it is argued that the word "beget" (or "begotten") is archaic, and has been misunderstood by those of us who differentiate between spiritual "begettal" and spiritual "birth." The word means "to father," "to be fathered," or "to be born," they argue, but does not mean "conception."

Actually, it is *they*—the ones who argue against our understanding—who misunderstand. Apparently, they have not had a clear understanding of what we have taught all these years!

In various articles, booklets, and sermons, we have said that the saints have been "begotten, but not yet born." This simply means that the new spiritual life has begun (has been "fathered"), but has not yet "emerged from the womb." Those who take issue with this understanding apparently fail to see that *gennao* (the "fathering" of a child) takes place *before* birth.

Consider this: Abraham was Isaac's father *before* Isaac was born. Isaac was "fathered" *before* he was born—you might say, "begotten, but not yet born." *Gennao* took place *before* Isaac was born. Yet, it is also correct to say that *gennao* took place on the day of Isaac's birth. The word applies to *new life*, whether one that has just come into existence (conception) or one that has just come into the world (birth).

Clearly, it is a mistake to limit the term to the moment of birth. As any Greek scholar should be able to explain, *gennao* takes place as soon as a new life is formed.

Members of God's true church have been "begotten, but not yet born." That's a fact—one that's not based on confusion or misunderstanding of the words "begettal" and "birth." God's people have experienced begettal, and now look forward to that glorious time when they will emerge from the womb as the incorruptible children of God.

And that brings us to the next question.

Does "Born Again" Mean "Resurrection"?

For decades, Messrs. Herbert W. and Garner Ted Armstrong, and all the ministers associated with them, taught that the saints will not be "born again" until Christ returns and gathers His elect. At that time, all the saints from every age of human history will be instantly transformed ("born again") and will rise to meet the returning Christ. Because of the association of the new birth with the resurrection, some apparently came to think of "born again" and "resurrection" as synonymous terms.

In fact, some argue that our understanding of "born again" cannot be correct because had Christ been speaking of the resurrection (when He said "Ye must be born again"), He would have said "resurrection," for the concept of resurrection was well-known and needed no figure of speech.

The argument seems logical, but it overlooks the simple fact that Jesus was *not* speaking only of the resurrection, or "raising of the dead." He was speaking of the *change*, the *transformation*, the saints will experience when He returns to establish His Kingdom. The dead saints will be raised and changed simultaneously, but the living saints will experience the change, or "new birth," without having experienced death!

This truth is brought out clearly in the above quotation from I Corinthians 15, as well as from I Thessalonians 4:16,17:

For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we [Christians] which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

For many thousands of saints the new birth will *involve* resurrection, but the new birth itself can take place without a resurrection. When Christ appears, the living saints will be instantaneously transformed. They will take on the image of their Elder Brother, the Firstborn Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Christ the Firstborn

Jesus Christ is called the "firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29), the "firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18), and the "first begotten [NRSV: "firstborn"] of the dead" (Revelation 1:5). We have said that since He was the *firstborn* among many brethren and the *firstborn* from the dead, many others will be "born from the dead" as He was.

However, some argue that "firstborn" is a title connoting privilege, not order of birth; therefore, we are incorrect in saying that the title "firstborn" suggests that Christ was the *first* among many brethren to be *born* from the dead.

It is certainly true that "firstborn" is a title connoting privilege, but that doesn't mean that the title has nothing to do with order of birth. The title came from the fact that, among the ancient Hebrews, the *first* son to be *born* to a household inherited certain familial privileges and responsibilities. A simple concordant study will reveal that "firstborn" usually means order of birth.

Christ's title of "firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15, NRSV) obviously denotes His preeminence over all things, and does not mean that He was the first thing God created, as some erroneously believe. However, when Christ's title of "firstborn" is used in connection with His brethren and/or the resurrection (or transformation), both preeminence and order of birth are implied. Notice the following scriptures:

For whom He [God the Father] did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He [Christ] might be the *firstborn among many brethren*. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified (Romans 8:29,30).

And He [Christ] is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the *firstborn from the dead*; that in all things He might have the preeminence (Colossians 1:18).

Do these descriptions—"firstborn among many brethren" and "firstborn from the dead"—have anything to do with order of birth? First Corinthians 15:20-23 sheds some light on this question:

But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the *firstfruits* of them that slept [are asleep], For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all [*i.e.*, all who are in Christ] be made alive [by resurrection]. But every man *in his own order*: Christ the *firstfruits*; afterward they that are Christ's

at His coming.

The term "firstfruits" was associated with the harvest in ancient Israel. Just as the term meant the *first* of the *fruits* (grain, or produce) to be harvested, so "firstborn" meant the *first* to be *born* to a family. When used of Christ in relation to His brethren and the resurrection, both terms denote the *order of resurrection*. Proof of this is seen not only in the above passage but also in the fact that the saints have not yet been resurrected.

Once we consider all the terms that are used to describe Christ's relationship with the saints, the truth is inescapable. Consider these facts:

- 1) Christ is called the "Son of God."
- 2) The saints are called "sons of God."
- 3) Christ calls the saints His "brethren."
- 4) Christ's title of "firstborn" is connected with His resurrection and with His brethren.

Now, with these facts fixed firmly in mind, what does the Bible mean when it tells us that Christ is the "firstborn among many brethren" and the "firstborn from the dead"? Does it not mean that Christ (the Son of God) was the *first* to be *born* (by resurrection) into the immortal family of God, thus opening the way for the saints (the sons of God, Christ's brethren) to be born (by resurrection/transformation) into God's family?

That's precisely what it means!

Moreover, the connection of "firstborn" with "*from the dead*" and "*among many brethren*" makes no sense if order of birth is not intended.

Sonship Through Resurrection

The Bible says that the saints are "sons of God" *now*, in this life (I John 3:2; Romans 8:16). Yet, the same book

connects sonship with resurrection (Luke 20:36; Romans 8:23). Similarly, God's Word says that Christ was the Son of God while He was on this earth as a mortal human being (Matthew 3:17; 16:16,17; 17:5); yet, His Sonship is connected with His resurrection (Acts 13:32-34; Romans 1:4). How can this be? Is it a contradiction?

No, it is not a contradiction, and it is not difficult to understand if one understands that the resurrection/transformation (whether of Christ or the saints) is a literal *birth* into the immortal family of God.

An important point of truth that helps clarify the connection between resurrection/transformation and sonship is expressed by Jesus in Matthew 22:31,32:

But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

Since Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are dead, the only way the God of the living can be their God is that they be resurrected. Unless there is a resurrection, God is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The same may be said of Jesus Christ. Consider this:

- 1) Christ was dead.
- 2) God is not the God of the dead.
- 3) Therefore, the dead Christ could not be the Son of God without being resurrected.

Further, had He not been resurrected, He could not be the "firstborn from the dead" or the "firstborn among many brethren," for His redemptive work would be ineffectual. Paul said that "if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins" (I Corinthians 15:17). This is further proof that Christ's title of "firstborn" expresses both preeminence and order of birth, and is ineffectual apart from

His resurrection.

Do you now see how Christ's Sonship is related to His resurrection? Had Christ not risen, He would not be the Son of God—for God is the God of the living, not the God of the dead.

The same is true of the apostles, the prophets, the thousands of martyrs of ages past: *Without a resurrection, sonship is impossible!*

Thus, when God calls the saints the "sons of God," He has the future in view—for if there is no future resurrection (or transformation), then none of us are the sons of God now!

But, thankfully, Christ's resurrection made immortality a real possibility for the rest of us. Therefore the saints are the "sons of God" now, but will not experience the fullness of sonship until they are changed from mortal to immortal. Again, the phrase "begotten, but not yet born" clarifies the issue. A true Christian is a son of God now, just as Isaac was the son of Abraham while he (Isaac) was still in the womb. But, just as Isaac had to be born into the world in order to receive the full benefits of sonship, so the saints must be born into the immortal family of God in order to receive full benefits as the sons of God.

"Born Again" in I Peter 1

The expression "born again" is also found in Peter's first epistle:

Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: Being *born again*, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the Word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the Word which by the Gospel is preached unto you (I Peter 1:22-25).

Peter used the word *anagennao*—translated "born again" in the above passage—which means essentially the same thing as the verb *gennao* when it is accompanied by the adverb *anthen*, as in John 3:3. Peter was telling his Christian readers that they had been "begotten anew" of "incorruptible seed." The "incorruptible seed" could be the Holy Spirit, received through hearing and responding positively to the Word (or Gospel), or it could be the living and enduring Word itself—or both.

A few verses later, Peter described Christians as "newborn babes," and admonished them to "desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (I Peter 2:2). Some believe this is a continuation of the thought Peter raised in verse 23: "You have been born again... therefore, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the Word...."

While this interpretation seems logical, it is not certain. Peter not only described his Christian readers as "newborn babes," but he also described them as "lively stones," who are built into a "spiritual house"; as a "holy priesthood," a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people"; as "strangers and pilgrims" (verses 2-11). So we cannot be certain that Peter intended to connect "born again" with "newborn babes."

In any case, Peter obviously intended to illustrate the responsibilities of the Christian life through several meaningful analogies, some of which were drawn from Old Testament ideals of Israel. Whether he was thinking of spiritual conception or birth when he used the word *anagennao* is immaterial where the purpose of this study is concerned.

Peter's use of *anagennao* ("born again") does not contradict anything we have seen thus far. Besides, there is no hard and fast rule that says a term or phrase must mean

the identical same thing throughout the Bible. This booklet deals primarily with the phrase "born again" as it was used by Jesus in John the third chapter. Though we conclude that Jesus was speaking of the transformation from mortal to immortal one must experience in entering into the Kingdom of God, there is no reason to conclude that the biblical writers could not use the same or similar terms in describing other aspects of true Christianity and God's plan for humankind.

Actually, "born again" is not a bad description of true spiritual conversion, but we do feel that Jesus' use of "born again" in John 3 should be understood differently.

"Born of God" in I John

The word *gennao* is used 10 times of true Christians in John's first epistle. Notice:

"If ye know that He is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born [*gennao*] of Him" (2:29).

"Whosoever is born [*gennao*] of God doth not commit sin [habitually, as a way of life]; for His seed remaineth in Him: and he cannot sin [cannot go on sinning *and* continue to be a true Christian], because he is born [*gennao*] of God" (3:9).

"Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born [*gennao*] of God, and knoweth God" (4:7).

"Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born [*gennao*] of God: and every one that loveth Him that begat [*gennao*] loveth Him also that is begotten [*gennao*] of Him" (5:1).

"For whosoever is born [*gennao*] of God overcometh the world..." (5:4).

"We know that whosoever is born [*gennao*] of God sinneth not [habitually, as a way of life]; but he that is begotten [*gennao*] of God keepeth himself..." (5:18).

John's intent was to show his readers how to distinguish between the "children of God" and the "children of the devil" (I John 3:10). He said that one who is "born of God"—one whose Father is God—does not practice sin as a way of life; shows love toward his brethren; believes that Jesus is the Christ; overcomes the sinful ways of the world; lives according to God's standards of righteousness. Those who exude opposite behavior, regardless their claims, are "children of the devil."

As with the case of Peter's "born again" analogy, it makes no difference whether John was thinking of birth or pre-birth begettal when he used the expression *gennao*. An analogy is an analogy, and even if John had birth in mind, that fact does not determine Jesus' use of "born again" in John the third chapter. (Interestingly, in his first epistle, John does not use *anochen* ["again"] with *gennao*.)

However, there is a reason for believing that John used *gennao* of pre-birth begettal. He wrote, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God [we have been "fathered" (*gennao*) of God], and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that when He [Christ] shall appear, *we shall be like Him* [a radical change will occur: As He was "born from the dead," so shall we be "born from the dead," or, if living, instantly transformed—made in His image, after His likeness], for we shall see Him as He is" (I John 3:2).

Clearly, John's use of *gennao* agrees perfectly with our understanding of the "new birth."

Questions and Answers

While our discussion of the "new birth" has been fairly thorough, there are still many questions that have not been fully addressed. The following are just a few of the questions one might ask concerning the new birth, the resurrection body, and related subjects.

Question: The resurrected Christ said clearly that He was *not* a spirit. He even allowed His disciples to touch Him and feel His wounds. Also, He ate with them. Doesn't all this prove that Jesus' resurrection was not a spiritual resurrection? And doesn't it mean that the saints, since they will be made like Him, will have bodies that are both material and immortal?

Answer: There is no reason a spirit being would be unable to have a material body. But the body, regardless its composition, would be completely subject to the will of its owner. At present, such is not the case. Your consciousness depends upon the functional capacity of your brain, which depends upon the functional capacity of your body. Shut-off the blood flow to the brain, and *you*—your consciousness—fades into oblivion. If you were a spirit being, you would not have this problem. Rather than be dependent upon your body, your body—whatever sort you chose to have—would be totally subject to your will. You would be able to dematerialize and rematerialize, move about invisibly, appear and disappear, and appear in a different form—just as Jesus did on several occasions. He did on one occasion *seem* to say that He was not a spirit being, but a closer look at what He actually said, and the circumstances involved, shows that He didn't deny that He was a spirit being.

In Luke 24, Jesus appears to His disciples and says "Peace be unto you." The disciples were "terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit." But Jesus responded, "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have" (verses 36-39). Jesus' response was to the disciples' mistaken belief that they were seeing a spirit—that is, an angel, or demon perhaps (see Matthew 14:26 and Acts

12:15). To let them know that it was really Him, and that He was really alive and in their midst, He had them touch His material body.

But the fact that He was able to enter the room without using the door shows that He was not restricted to the limitations of a physical body. On the contrary, His physical body was under His complete control. Even if it were cut into tiny pieces and burned—if that were possible, or if He permitted it to happen—*He*, Jesus, would not be harmed or hindered in any way, and could, if He so desired, reconstruct a new material body in a moment.

Question: Most commentators say that "spiritual body" (I Corinthians 15:44) means "spiritual *person*," or "supernatural body." They say that the word "spiritual" simply refers to the nature of the person occupying the resurrected body. That is to say, he (or she) is no longer carnal, but is spiritual. They also say that the physical bodies of the saints will be reconstructed and raised at the return of Christ, and that a "spiritual resurrection" is not a biblical concept. Is this true?

Answer: No, it is not true. Let's look at what Paul actually said in I Corinthians 15. The question was: "How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?" (verse 35). Paul's response was clear:

1. The body that dies and is buried is not the same as the body that is raised (verse 37,38).
2. The resurrection body is imperishable (verse 42).
3. The resurrection body is glorious (verse 43).
4. The resurrection body is powerful (verse 43).
5. The resurrection body is *spiritual* (verse 44).

"There is a *natural* body, and there is a *spiritual* body," Paul said. Notice that "natural body" is set at contrast against "spiritual body." The natural body is the one we have now;

the spiritual body is the one we will have in the resurrection.

That should be clear, but Paul apparently wanted to make certain that nobody misunderstood. He added a couple more points:

6. The first Adam was "natural"; the second Adam—Christ—was made a "life-giving spirit" (verses 45-46). "And as we have borne the image of the earthy [Adam—referring to his "natural" body], we shall [in the resurrection] also bear the image of the heavenly [Christ, the "life-giving spirit"]" (verse 49).

7. "...flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God" (verse 50).

In order to conclude that the resurrection is physical in nature, as so many fundamentalists teach, one must overlook the thoroughness of Paul's argument, and force unnatural meanings into several of the terms the apostle used in this chapter. For instance, "spiritual body" must become "spirit-controlled body," "supernatural (but still physical) body," or "spiritual person" (as opposed to "carnal person"); and "flesh and blood" must become an expression for "carnality," or come to mean "*mortal* flesh and blood" (as opposed to *immortal* flesh and blood).

Why do so many "orthodox" Christians insist upon a physical resurrection for the saints? Probably because of their doctrine of the "immortality of the soul." Most believe that the immortal souls of Christians will return with Christ and enter their resurrected bodies. Obviously, a soul (itself a spiritual entity) would not need a *spiritual* body, so the resurrection body must be a material body. All the "explaining" of otherwise clear scriptures could be avoided if the doctrine of the immortality of the soul were discarded.

Question: When Nicodemus failed to understand what Jesus meant when He spoke of being "born again," Jesus

asked, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" This sounds as if Jesus were saying that Nicodemus should have known these things since he was a great rabbi who knew the Scriptures. The Old Testament says quite a bit about the Holy Spirit and certain people receiving the Holy Spirit, but does it say anything about a radical change of man's nature? Doesn't Jesus' rebuke suggest that His discussion on being "born of the Spirit" was really about conversion through *receiving* the Spirit?

Answer: The Old Testament *does* speak of the radical change of man's nature, of resurrection, and of immortality—though perhaps not as clearly as the New Testament. Notice:

1. God said He would make man in His own image. As we have seen, that is yet to be fulfilled in the ultimate sense. Nicodemus may have been capable of understanding this.

2. God promised Abraham that he and his descendants would possess the land of Canaan as an "everlasting possession" (Genesis 17:8), which requires that Abraham be given everlasting life. Since he had been told that he would die (Genesis 15:15), the promise of "everlasting possession" could only be fulfilled through Abraham's resurrection. While nothing is said here about becoming a spirit being, it is obvious that everlasting life involves an existence radically different from the present one.

3. The concept of an eschatological regeneration is suggested in Job 14:14: "If a man die, shall he live again? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come." According to *Word Biblical Commentary*: "The LXX [Septuagint, or Greek translation of the Old Testament, familiar to Jesus and the early church] renders Job 14:14, 'All the days of my service I would wait, till my release should come'... literally, 'I will endure till I 'become again,'

i.e. until I live again through resurrection..." (Volume 36, p. 48). The verb form of the noun *paliggenesia* is used here. The term *paliggenesia* is translated "regeneration," which means "new birth," in Matthew 19:28:

And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, *in the regeneration* when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

4. Daniel stated fairly clearly that God's reward to the righteous will involve a radical change of nature:

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt [abhorrence]. And they that be wise [those who awake to everlasting life] shall *shine as the brightness of the firmament*; and they that turn many to righteousness [the same group] *as the stars for ever and ever* (Daniel 12:2,3).

5. When the Sadducees, who did not believe in a resurrection, challenged Jesus on this subject, Jesus quoted a passage from the book of Exodus showing that even the Torah, the only Scriptures accepted by the Sadducees, indicates there will be a resurrection. Here's the way Jesus responded to the Sadducees' challenge:

Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are they given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven. But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob [taken from Exodus 3:6, 16]? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

Notice that Jesus told the Sadducees that they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. This indicates

that had the Sadducees carefully considered the power of God (as clearly seen in creation) and passages of Scripture such as the one Jesus quoted, they should have been able to see that there will be a resurrection to immortality for the righteous, and that immortality suggests an existence very different from the present one.

Question: If "born again" refers to the resurrection and transformation of the saints, why did Jesus, in the same context, speak of His coming death and of the salvation that comes only through Him (John 3:14-21)? Doesn't this suggest that "born again" has to do with Christian conversion through accepting Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit?

Answer: Jesus was addressing Nicodemus' misunderstanding about the Kingdom of God, the Messiah, and the work the Messiah would accomplish in establishing the Kingdom. As stated previously, Nicodemus thought Messiah would lead a bloody revolt against the Romans and restore the Kingdom to Israel. Like many other Jews, he thought the Kingdom was "of this world," and would be established through violence. Jesus simply responded to Nicodemus' misunderstanding by explaining that the citizens of God's Kingdom are not flesh-and-blood men, but are immortal spirit beings who do not need swords and spears to accomplish their purpose, and that Messiah came to die in order to save men, not lead a bloody revolt.

Conclusion

Some feel that by emphasizing the future "regeneration," we fail to see the importance and necessity of the present "regeneration," or spiritual conversion.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

A good understanding of the future transformation, or new

birth, underlines the importance of spiritual growth and development. Just as an embryo must be properly nourished and must develop properly in order to come into this world alive and healthy, so the "new creature in Christ," the spiritual "embryo" created by the union of God's Spirit with the human spirit, must grow and develop spiritually as it prepares to enter into a new world, the Kingdom and Family of God.

God's people have indeed experienced *gennao*, but they have yet to experience the fullness of the new life God has so graciously granted to them. If you are a member of God's true church; if the Spirit of God dwells within you, then you are a child of God, a new creature in Christ. Jesus Christ is your Elder Brother. You are an heir of God, and joint-heir with Christ. You now have the privilege of addressing Almighty God as "Father," for you are begotten of Him.

Yes, begotten, but not yet born.