

## **SPECIAL STUDY ON BAPTISM**

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### **JOHN 3:3-5**

The third New Testament passage reflecting on the meaning of baptism is John 3:3-5, which is part of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus about the necessity of the new birth.

*Jesus answered and said unto him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."  
Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."*

Though not everyone agrees that the word *water* in verse 5 refers to baptism, such a strong case can be made for it that this has been the predominant view throughout Christian history.

### **Water and Baptism**

If the water in John 3:5 does not refer to baptism, then to what *does* it refer? Two main alternatives have been suggested. First, some try to equate the water-birth of verse 5 with *physical* birth, the water itself referring to amniotic fluid. Though verse 4 does introduce the idea of physical birth into the context, the term for water is never used in this sense elsewhere in the New Testament. Verse 6 uses a different term to characterize physical birth, namely, "born of flesh". This is the common expression for ordinary physical birth when contrasted with spiritual or supernatural birth (John 1:13; Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:23, 29). Another problem is that interpretation would have Christ saying, "Unless a person is born physically, he cannot be saved" - an awkward and puzzling affirmation to say the least.

The second main alternative is that *water* here is used figuratively as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Such a figure may be found elsewhere in Scripture, as in Isaiah 44:3 and John 7:37-39. It is most likely also that Jesus' reference to "living water" in John 4:10-14 points to the Holy Spirit, though the latter is not specifically mentioned in the context.

Thus such a usage in John 3:5 would not be conceptually alien to either the Bible as a whole or to John's gospel in particular. Counting against this view is the straightforward, prosaic nature of Jesus' statement in John 3:5, and the lack of any contextual indication of a figurative intention for the term *water*, whereas in both John 4:10-14 and John 7:37-39 he speaks of the Spirit as *living water*. Also, in these latter two passages, there is a contextual contrast between ordinary water and living water offered by Jesus. Such a contrast is absent in John 3:5. Finally, in John 3:5, the expression "*born of water and the Spirit*" is so terse and tight that there is really no room for symbolic maneuvering (as there is in the poetic parallelism of Isaiah 44:3, for example). There are simply two nouns, both of which are objects of the one preposition "of" (*ek*) and are joined by the simple conjunction "and" (*kai*). Some have sought to identify water and Spirit here by translating *kai* as "even," viz., "born of water, even the Spirit." But the terseness of the expression plus the other considerations listed above would permit this interpretation only if there were no other reasonable and readily recognizable referent for the word *water*. But such is not the case. In both the historical and literary contexts the term *water* would immediately call to mind the common practice of baptism in water.

When Nicodemus heard Jesus' words for the first time, he had several good reasons to apply them to baptism. We who read them today in the light of the other New Testament teaching have these and even more such reasons. First of all, the fame of the ministry of John the Baptist, highlighted by the novelty of his baptizing repentant Jews (rather than allowing them to baptize themselves, as in Essene and proselyte baptisms), cannot be overemphasized. All Israel knew that John baptized in water (see John 1:26-31). Nicodemus could not have helped but connect Jesus' words with John's work.

Second, Jesus' own baptism by John, which must have been widely reported in that day and which is recorded for our reading, involved a conjunction of water baptism and the descent of the Spirit. See Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-33. Thus a reference to "water and Spirit" would not unnaturally cause us to think of baptism.

Third, John the Baptist's teaching contained a strong emphasis on the distinction between water baptism and Spirit baptism. See Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33. This is capsulized in Mark 1:8, "I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Thus again, when "water and Spirit" are mentioned together in John 3:5, we would quite naturally think of baptism.

Fourth, another aspect of John's teaching was the relation between his water baptism and the coming kingdom (Matt. 3:2). Thus in John 3:5, when Jesus relates water and the kingdom, it again brings baptism to mind.

The four items above would apply to anyone who knew of John the Baptist's ministry, including Nicodemus. The fifth and last reason for understanding Jesus' reference to water to mean baptism would apply only to those who know the teaching of the whole New Testament. I am referring to the interrelation of the concepts of baptism, birth, and resurrection. This passage refers to being "born of water." Do any other New Testament passages specifically speak of baptism as a birth? No, but two important texts speak of it as a resurrection from spiritual death, namely, Romans 6:4,5 and Colossians 2:12. This is significant because in Scripture resurrection and birth are figuratively intertwined. Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 1:5 speak of Jesus as the "first-born from the dead" (see Romans 8:29). Acts 13:33 equates the raising up of Jesus with the day of his begetting. Thus "raised up in baptism" and "born of water" are equivalent concepts, and we are justified in taking John 3:5 as a reference to baptism.

Some who agree that this refers to baptism think that John's baptism or even Jewish proselyte baptism must be in view, since these are the only kinds of baptism with which Nicodemus would have been familiar. We need not limit the specific reference to something in his experience, however. Jesus taught publicly about other future events and future blessings without explaining them as such. He spoke thus of his victorious resurrection: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19-22). His statement concerning the living water in John 7:37-39 referred to the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit. Some think His teaching about eating His flesh and drinking His blood (John 6:53ff) has to do with the Lord's Supper. Thus Christian baptism cannot be excluded from John 3:5 simply because it had not been instituted yet. In fact, even the second part of the statement, "born of Spirit," is itself a reference to the future Christian era, since regeneration via the indwelling Holy Spirit was a blessing offered only after Pentecost (John 7:37-39; Acts 2:38-39).

Some complain that those who are more inclined to a sacramentalist view of baptism are guilty of indiscriminately interpreting every Biblical reference to water as a reference to baptism.<sup>1</sup> In the early Christian centuries such a complaint would have been justified in view of the excessively allegorical hermeneutic of the church fathers, but such is hardly the case today. Of the nearly 80 occurrences of the Greek word for water (*hudor*) in the New Testament, there are only three disputed passages where anything is at stake: John 3:5; Ephesians 5:26; and Hebrews 10:22. Of the other references, about 30 speak of ordinary water in non-baptismal situations. Eighteen other uses occur in the book of Revelation, where scenes of apocalyptic symbolism include a variety of fountains and streams. Five times John mentions "water and blood" in connection with Jesus' ministry and death. There are 16 undisputed references to water baptism (both John's and Christian),<sup>2</sup> and seven undisputed figurative uses.<sup>3</sup> In view of the fact that *water* indisputably means baptism in twenty percent of its occurrences, it is surely not unreasonable to interpret it this way in the three disputed passages if such is exegetically and theologically warranted. This is especially true in view of the fact that *water* is indisputably used in a figurative sense less than ten percent of the time, and this on only two occasions (John 4:10-15 [6 times] and John 7:38 [once]). In view of the comparative distribution of the term, there is more justification for seeing water baptism in the three disputed passages, including John 3:5, than for excluding it therefrom.

## **Entering the Kingdom**

This passage is without question dealing with salvation and with an essential condition thereof in the Christian age. The salvation is called "seeing (or entering) the kingdom of God"; the condition is "being born again."

The basic meaning of the Biblical words for *kingdom* is kingship or reign or dominion; the "kingdom of God" is the reign of God. A secondary meaning is the realm over which the king reigns. A major theme of Old Testament prophecy is the coming of the kingdom. A typical statement is Daniel 2:44, "*And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed.*" This was the major

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<sup>1</sup> A helpful discussion of this complaint is Donald Nash, "Water and Baptism" *Christian Standard* (April 30, 1978), 113:396-398.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 3:11,16; Mark 1:8,10; Luke 3:16; John 1:26, 31, 33; 3:23; Acts 1:5; 8:36,38,39; 10:47; 11:16.

<sup>3</sup> John 4:10,11,14,15; 7:38

element in the eschatological hope of the Jews; they were “waiting for the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43). John the Baptist’s message was so electrifying because he was declaring the imminence of this kingdom: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matt. 3:2). This was Jesus’ message, too (Matt. 4:17).

In one sense the coming of Jesus Himself *was* the coming of the kingdom, since God the King was present as Jesus Christ for the very purpose of establishing His Lordship over all of creation. The events which decisively accomplished this purpose were His death, resurrection, and ascension to glory. This was the establishment of His kingdom in the sense of His *reign*. The kingdom in the sense of the *realm* over which He reigns is made up of those who willingly acknowledge and surrender to Christ’s Lordship, viz., those who make the “good confession” that Jesus is Lord. In its identifiable concrete form the kingdom-realm is the church. The two are apparently equated in Matthew 16:18-19.

Thus from the perspective of Nicodemus, the kingdom was still a future reality; but like all good Jews he would be anxiously awaiting it and eager to enter it and be a part of it. Jesus is here telling him (and all of us) what would be necessary for entrance into the kingdom once it was established. (There is no significant difference between seeing the kingdom [verse 3] and *entering* it [verse 5].)

“Entering the kingdom” is a soteriological idea. To a Jew like Nicodemus, it would be the ultimate salvation experience. To non-Jewish people today or to anyone not steeped in the eschatological hope of the Old Testament, the expression does not immediately conjure up all the connotations of salvation; but that is its intent. To enter the kingdom is to surrender to the Lordship of Christ and thus to enter the state of grace and the realm of salvation.

## **Born Again**

Jesus’ affirmation in John 3:3-5 is that being *born again* is an essential condition for entering the kingdom. In verse three He uses the word *anōthen*, which can mean either “from above” or “again”. The dominant idea here seems to be the latter. At least Nicodemus seemed to have understood it this way. In his response (verse 4) he asks whether it is possible for an old man “a second time” to enter his mother’s womb and be born. Though the word itself points to the idea of the rebirth, Jesus’ reply (verse 5) indicates that the second birth is indeed a birth “from above” insofar as it is accomplished by the Spirit. The concept of being “born of God” is prevalent in John’s writings.<sup>4</sup> It is a supernatural act which only God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, can perform.

The concept of “born again” is identical to the concept of personal regeneration as it occurs in Titus 3:5. The Greek expressions are practically equivalent in meaning. This new birth or regeneration is the change that takes place in the sinner’s inner nature during his conversion. It is one of the two main aspects of the “double cure” that God offers to the sin-sick. The first aspect is justification or forgiveness, which changes our objective relationship to God and His law by removing the guilt and penalty of our sins. This second aspect addresses the fact that sin has corrupted our hearts and souls with an inner depravity; it has infected our spirits with weakness and sickness and even spiritual death (Eph. 2:1,5). Regeneration is the point when this negative state of our souls is reversed. It is a new creation (II Cor. 5:17) when we are inwardly renewed (Titus 3:5). It is a

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<sup>4</sup> John 1:13; I John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,4,18.

resurrection from death to new life (Eph. 2:5,6), new life in the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13).

Such a momentous act as new birth or regeneration cannot be accomplished by our own efforts; it is an act of God Himself upon the soul. God's prophetic word through Ezekiel makes it very clear that He alone is the author of this work: "*Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh*" (Ezek. 36:26). Specifically it is the work of the Holy Spirit, as the next words of Ezekiel's prophecy indicate: "*And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes*" (Ezek. 36:27). In the words of John 3:5, we are "born of the Spirit." Paul calls it the "regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

As was indicated above, this personal regeneration by the Spirit is a blessing that began on the day of Pentecost and is limited to those of the Christian era. Old Testament saints did not enjoy the reality of the indwelling Spirit and His regenerating power. Thus in John 3:3-5 the reference was totally future as far as Nicodemus was concerned. The kingdom that he longed to enter was yet to be established, and the condition for entering it was not yet available. Nor was Christian baptism, which according to these words of Jesus was to be intimately associated with being born again into the kingdom.

## **Baptism and Salvation**

Given the probability that "water" in John 3:5 refers to Christian baptism, and given the fact that "born again" and "kingdom of God" refer to salvation, we cannot avoid the conclusion that baptism is inseparable from the new birth and thus is a condition for salvation. This is in full agreement with the teaching of Mark 16:16.

The declaration in John 3:5 is unmistakably clear. Unless a person is "born of water and the Spirit", he cannot enter the kingdom, that is, he cannot be saved. This new birth that must precede entrance into the kingdom is *ex [ek] hudatos kai pneumatos*, "from water and Spirit". The preposition *ek* basically means "from", either in the sense of separation ("away from") or source ("out of"). Only the latter fits the context here. In some sense, water and Spirit are the source of the new birth. Various shades of meaning as worded by Arndt and Gingrich include these: "the direction from which something comes," "origin," "effective cause," "the reason which is a presupposition for something," "the source from which something flows."<sup>5</sup>

These are very strong meanings, most of which reflect some type of cause-and-effect relationship. No one disputes such a meaning of *ek* when applied to *pneumatos* ("of Spirit"). That the Holy Spirit is the origin or source or cause of the new birth is accepted as very natural. Thus it is quite a jolt for some to recognize that the same preposition and the same grammatical form used for "Spirit" are used also for "water". It is a single prepositional phrase, with a single preposition which has two objects joined by the simple conjunction *kai* ("and"). Such a construction (especially the non-repetition of the preposition for the second object) brings the two objects into the closest possible

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<sup>5</sup> William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 4 ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 233-234.

relationship, marking them as two aspects of a single event. M.J. Harris makes the following comment concerning this construction and this verse:<sup>6</sup>

*...Sometimes, therefore, the non-use of a second or third [preposition] in NT Greek may be theologically significant, indicating that the writer regarded the terms that he placed in one regimen as belonging naturally together or as a unit in concept or reality. ex hydatos kai pneumatos (John 3:5) shows that for the writer (or speaker) “water” and “Spirit” together form a single means of that regeneration which is a prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of God....No contrast is intended between an external element of “water” and an inward renewal achieved by the Spirit. Conceptually the two are one....*

The whole expression, says Beasley-Murray, defines the manner in which a person is “born again” (verse 3).<sup>7</sup>

Does this mean that water and Spirit have an equal or identical causal relationship to the new birth? Few if any would be willing to go this far; metaphysical limitations simply preclude it. The only true source, cause, or origin of the new birth in any literal sense is the Holy Spirit. This is true not just because Spirit alone can impact upon spirit, but also because this birth is something that only God can accomplish. No physical act performed by a creature could do what only the Divine Spirit can do.

Nevertheless the language of John 3:5 makes the action of the Spirit *at least simultaneous* with the act of baptism. Thus the least that should be said is that baptism is the *occasion* for the new birth.<sup>8</sup> If anyone is dissatisfied with this terminology, it should only be because it is too weak, not too strong. The language of John 3:5 actually warrants a much stronger way of speaking of the relationship between baptism and salvation.<sup>9</sup>

This verse more than any other in Scripture shows the propriety of speaking of the *necessity* of baptism for salvation. As we saw in the discussion of Mark 16:16, however, this is only a *relative* necessity, not an absolute one. Just as the wording in Mark suggests that the only absolute necessity on man’s part is faith, so does the wording in John suggest that only the working of the Spirit is absolutely necessary to accomplish the new birth (as compared with water). This is the conclusion some draw from John 3:6,8, where “born of the Spirit” is used but not “born of water”. The action of the Spirit is the only thing absolutely indispensable for the new birth. Baptism is not inherently necessary and can be omitted where physically impossible to administer. The possibility of such an exception in prohibitive circumstances does not negate the rule laid down in John 3:5 for ordinary circumstances, however. Surely our doctrine of baptism must be based on clear statements concerning its nature and effects, and not on inferred exceptions.

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<sup>6</sup> Murray J. Harris, “Appendix,” p. 1178.

<sup>7</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 228, fn. 2. This, he says, is a reason why the reference to water cannot mean physical birth.

<sup>8</sup> Beasley-Murray (ibid., p. 231) agrees: “In John 3:5 it is the occasion when the Spirit gives to faith the regeneration that qualifies for the Kingdom.”

<sup>9</sup> This is no doubt the reason why many will not admit that “water” means baptism in this verse. They have concluded on theological (rather than exegetical) grounds that baptism *cannot* have such a relationship to salvation.

## **Summary**

Concerning John 3:3-5 we have seen that the term *water* in verse 5 most probably is a reference to Christian baptism even though it was not instituted until later at Pentecost. We have seen also that this Pentecostal inception applies as well to the new birth and the establishment of the kingdom, which are concepts related to salvation in the Christian age. “Entering the kingdom” means receiving salvation, and “born again” is an essential condition for it. Finally we have seen that baptism itself is a (relative) necessity for salvation, since one cannot enter the kingdom without it.