

What Does It Mean to be Born Again?

grace church position papers

When a person refers to himself as being “born again”, people tend to feel uncomfortable, as it creates the mental image of a preacher touting an oversized bible, picketing all things liberal, and trying to convince others that Jesus was a card-carrying, registered Republican. In light of such stereotypes, Christians today tend to shy away from identifying themselves in this way. Still, though the phrase has taken many “knocks”, the term “born again” is actually what separates truly converted, spirit-filled Christians from the moralistic church attendees.

So what does it really mean to be born again? Must a person be “born again” in order to be a Christian? How can we know if we are “born again”? Does it matter what terminology we use to describe the condition of being “born again”?

In Ephesians 2, Paul describes man’s spiritual state as dead and calls all of us enemies of God. In I Corinthians 6, he says we are idolaters, revilers, and swindlers apart from God. These classifications are not merely representative of behaviors that can be altered but more accurately describe our position and condition before God. Such a hopeless state cries out for something radical, something outside of ourselves: a new birth.

The concept and terminology of “being born again” is deeply rooted in Scripture. As Jesus tells Nicodemus, “in order to see the Kingdom of God, you must be born again.” (John 4:3) As we are all born physically, we must all be born again spiritually. Similar to our physical birth, our spiritual birth is out of our control. It is a supernatural work of God that cannot be forced, earned or manipulated.

To be “born again” (the doctrine of regeneration) means that we have been made new. Throughout the New Testament it is often described as a new life or a new birth. This new birth—made available to us by Jesus’s sacrifice and God’s grace—saves us from the wrath of God (Ephesians 2:3, John 3:36), makes us right with God (Ephesians 2:13, Hebrews 9:22) and grants us adoption

into His family (Galatians 4:5). Without being born again, we remain in the helpless state Jesus described to Nicodemus. Without this new birth, we will never enter the Kingdom of God.

To avoid the negative cultural stereotypes attached to being “born again”, some evangelicals will instead use the terminology of “being saved”. However, when pressed, they often have a hard time explaining precisely what this means. They cannot tell you what they are saved from, or articulate what they are saved to. Instead, they will recount a personal experience of asking Jesus into their heart, reciting a prayer, or being baptized. Unfortunately, none of those actions leads to spiritual regeneration so the phrase “saved” and others like it are often misleading and vague.

As Christians, it is important that we use language that adequately reflects God’s great redemptive love for us. When given the opportunity we want to provide clarity, not create more questions. When describing what Christ has accomplished for us, and the miraculous new birth, our desire should always be to communicate in a way that is both clear and attractive. And while these other phrases can be used to express genuine conversion, they can also be used as religious filler or a mask to avoid spirituality. At Grace, and in the cultural south, sadly enough it is easy to replace true conversion with the memorization of a few phrases and routine religious performance.

So how do we know the difference? How can one determine if they are truly a born-again Christian or if they are just a religious Nicodemus who is fooled into thinking they have a genuine relationship with God?

In a sermon from May 2011, Matt Williams asked some challenging questions that should serve to help provide some clarity as to whether or not we are born again:

- Are you able to think about and articulate some things that God has personally done for you? Note that this is more than just saying Jesus died on the

cross and rose from the dead for you. Yes, He did that, but what has He done for you recently? How has He intervened to shape your life personally?

- How have you changed on the inside? What desires, passions, and affections have changed within you? What used to make you angry that doesn't anymore? In the past, what have you obsessed over but now no longer do?
- What has changed in your life that can only be explained by Jesus? In what areas are you more like Jesus from no effort of your own?
- Do you have a story? Can you explain why God doesn't hate you when you sin... or why He doesn't love you more when you obey?

If you are struggling to answer these questions, you may not have had the spiritual rebirth that Jesus longs to give you. We would encourage you to read through the Gospel of John and continue to ask the same questions to yourself. Begin to cry out to God and confess to Him that you need Him and Him alone to save you from your sinfulness. Ask God for a spiritual "rebirth". Additionally, discuss this issue with a community group leader, neighbor or friend that has a personal relationship with Jesus. If you still have a hard time understanding the Gospel, God's great love for you personally, and what it means to be born again, please contact the church office. Pastors on staff would love to discuss this issue with you further.

For more on this topic:

Williams, Matt (2011, May 8). Religious Wrong [Podcast].
Grace Church Greenville, SC, Teaching

Grudem, Wayne. "Regeneration" Bible Doctrine. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999. 300-306

Peays, Ben. "Regeneration" Don't Call It a Comeback.
Wheaton: Crossway, 2011. 83-94