

headed for hell from fundamentalist church pews with a Bible in their hand and a prayer on their lips. Many others have become disillusioned with all the hypocrisy, and have concluded that there's really nothing to this "born-again" stuff after all.

TRUTH TURNED TO ERROR

But doesn't the Bible teach that men must be born again? Was this not an absolutely fundamental teaching of our Lord, his apostles, and the Church down through the ages? Yes, of course it was, and without this there is no true Christianity. But error cloaked in biblical terms is still error.

In the case of the current born-again movement, scriptural terminology is being used to teach just the opposite of its original meaning. The great doctrine of man's need for regeneration (the miraculous new birth) is being presented in a way that denies the very point it is supposed to teach. Simply stated the error is this—that men are born again as a result of something they do. This something may be "going forward" at the close of an evangelistic service, repeating a "sinner's prayer," or making a "decision" for Christ. Whatever the requirement that is put before the sinner, the impression is given that sinful man himself is the one who brings about regeneration.

The sad results of such a teaching can be seen all around us. Evangelists who believe that men "dead in sin" (*Eph 2:1*) can and will turn to God if the right kind of emotional and psychological inducement is presented, push and pressure lost people into making "decisions." Whatever is necessary to get people to come forward, or raise their hand, or sign a card is tried by today's so-called "soul winners." Highly emotional meetings, prolonged appeals, and even the deceitful tactic of having counselors strategically placed in the audience to come forward at the time of the "appeal"—all are merely the techniques of crowd psychology.

Those who do come forward and repeat a prayer after the evangelist are then coached into believing that God has come into their lives, and that they are now "saved" and "born again." Deep down,

though, they know nothing has really happened. There has been no miracle. The person may give mental assent to the doctrine of the new birth and try to rejoice in it, but there has been no supernatural passing from death unto life (*Eph 2:4-5*). This is why most of the "converts" of this kind of born-againism show no real zeal for God, and many fall away completely, after only a month or two. So it's not strange that we often see quite a few of these same persons coming forward again and again repeating (mimicking) the same empty prayer.

That some people are brought into the kingdom in these situations is no doubt true. But it is in spite of these methods, not because of them. If we turn to the Scripture most often quoted regarding the new birth, we find the Lord teaching just the opposite of what is popular today.

"YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN"

Jesus told Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again" (*John 3:7*). What did he mean by that? First of all, it should be noted that *Jesus was not telling Nicodemus to do anything!* "Ye must be born again" was not a command that Nicodemus was to obey; it was simply a statement of fact. Nicodemus, in his blindness, misunderstood this statement and asked how anyone could do such a thing as that: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (*v4*). To this, Jesus said in effect: "I'm talking about the Spirit of God coming and miraculously generating life in you. You being flesh can only produce flesh. Only the Spirit of God can produce the spiritual birth you must have in order to enter the kingdom of God; and the Spirit of God blows (breathes life) where he pleases" (*v6-8*).

The message and methods of modern evangelism are conspicuously absent in this account. The Lord did not give Nicodemus "Four Spiritual Laws" or any instructions on "How to be Born Again"; and he certainly used no manipulative tricks. He was concerned to emphasize just one thing: *Regeneration is a miraculous work of God's Spirit.*

We must tell men to turn from their sins and believe the gospel, but in doing this we

should realize that when a man does repent and believe, it is the result of God's prior regenerative work within him. If this were not the case, if man must actually initiate his own salvation, then it would be impossible to escape the conclusion that men do not need regeneration at all, but possess in themselves an innate goodness which causes them to seek after God. Though it be ever so slight, this goodness is then the ultimate reason why one man is saved and another is lost. But the Word of God teaches exactly the opposite: "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none that understandeth; there is none that seeketh after God...there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (*Rom 3:10-12*).

This plainly shows there is no "spark of goodness" in man that causes him to respond to the gospel. In fact, man, blinded by sin and Satan, does not even understand the gospel: "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not" (*2 Cor 4:3-4*). "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (*1 Cor 2:14*).

An unsaved man is in total rebellion against God and his truth: "The carnal mind is enmity against God" (*Rom 8:7*). If regeneration were contingent upon man first desiring God, no one would ever be born again, for "there is none that seeketh after God." Moreover, if man must ultimately be given credit for coming to God, Christianity is turned into just one more of this world's man-centered religions or cults which teach *salvation by works*. All such man-centered systems offer a false hope; for it's simply impossible for sinful man to make himself "different" than he is (*see 1 Cor 4:7*)—he needs a new heart; he needs to be "born again!"—even as Charles Wesley wrote in that great hymn of the faith:

And Can It Be

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray:
I woke — the dungeon flamed with light!
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

It is this "quickening ray" that makes the difference in the soul of man between light and darkness! between lost and saved! between freedom and bondage! between life and death!

You may protest that this makes God the ultimate determiner of who is saved. To this the apostles and prophets with one voice cry, "Amen!" "Salvation is of the Lord" (*Jonah 2:9*). "It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (*Rom 9:16*). The apostle John says that Christians "were born, not...of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (*John 1:13*). That's why we praise the Lord when someone is converted! We know that God has graciously wrought a miracle—the sovereign, supernatural miracle of the new birth.

This truth should give us confidence to present the pure gospel, knowing that it is not up to us to somehow maneuver and manipulate men into Christianity. It should also bring us to our knees before God who is sovereign in salvation. Only he can remove the heart of stone and give a new heart. Only he can give life to the dead. Only he deserves the blessing, glory, and honor: "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (*1 Cor 1:31*).

ARE YOU BORN AGAIN?

Are you born again? It is not enough to reply, "I belong to the church; and I suppose I am." Thousands of professing Christians have none of the marks and signs of being born again which are given to us in God's Word. What are these marks? They are listed in the first epistle of John. The apostle gives us six marks whereby we can know whether we have truly been born again.

(1) "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin...Whosoever is born of God sinneth not" (*1 John 3:9; 5:18*). A man that is born again does not commit sin as a habit. He no longer sins with his heart and will and whole inclination, as an unregenerate man does. There was probably a time when he did not think whether his actions were sinful or not, and never felt grieved after doing evil. But all that has changed. Now he hates

sin, flees from it, fights against it, mourns when he falls under its influence, and longs to be delivered from it altogether.

(2) “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1). A man that is born again believes that Jesus is the only Saviour by whom his soul can be pardoned; that he is the divine person appointed by God the Father for this very purpose, and that beside him there is no Saviour at all. In himself he sees nothing but unworthiness, but in Christ he sees ground for the fullest confidence, and trusting in him he believes that his sins are all forgiven. He believes that for the sake of Christ’s finished work, and death upon the cross, he is reckoned righteous in God’s sight, and can look forward to death and judgment without alarm.

(3) “Every one that doeth righteousness is born of God” (1 John 2:29). A man that is born again is a holy man. He endeavours to live according to God’s will, to do the things that please God. His desire is to love God with all of his heart, and to love his neighbour as himself. He is continually looking to Christ as his example as well as his Saviour, and shows himself Christ’s friend by doing whatsoever Christ commands (John 15:14).

(4) “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren” (1 John 3:14). A man who is alive in Christ has a special love for all true disciples of Christ. Like his Saviour, he loves the worst of sinners, and can weep over them; but he has a peculiar love for those who are in Christ. A true Christian is never so much at home as when he is in the company of other believers. Others may value learning, riches, or rank in society—the regenerate man values grace. Those who have the most grace, and are most like Christ, are those he loves most.

(5) “Whosoever is born of God overcometh the world” (1 John 5:4). A man born of God overcomes the love of the world. He doesn’t make this world’s opinions his rule of right and wrong. He doesn’t mind going against the stream of this world’s ways and customs. He overcomes the fear of the

world. He is content to do many things which those around him think unnecessary. He is ridiculed; it doesn’t move him. He loves the praise of God more than the praise of men. He has counted the cost. He is no longer the servant of fashion and custom. His first aim is to please God.

(6) “He that is begotten of God keepeth himself” (1 John 5:18). He who is begotten of God is very careful of his own soul. He endeavours not only to keep clear of sin, but also to keep clear of everything which may lead to it. He is careful about the company he keeps. He is very careful over his own behavior. He knows that his own heart is deceitful, the world is full of wickedness, and the devil is always working to do him harm; and, therefore, he would be always on his guard. He desires to live like a soldier in enemy territory, to wear his armor continually, and to be prepared for temptation. He’s watchful, humble, and prayerful.

The apostle John places these six marks before us. What would he say about you? Are you born of God? This is the scriptural evidence of being born again. Read them over again, and lay them to heart.

There is a vast difference in the depth and distinctness of these marks in different people. In some they are faint, dim, feeble, and hardly to be discerned. In others they are bold, sharp, clear, plain, and unmistakable, so that any one may detect them. But these are the scriptural marks that the apostle gives of truly being born of God. He tells us that a person who is born again:

- Does not commit sin
- Believes that Jesus is the Christ
- Does righteousness
- Loves the brethren
- Overcomes the world
- Keeps himself

We must conclude that only those persons are born again who have these six marks about them; and that all men and women, regardless of their religious profession, who have not these marks, are not born again. What would the apostle say about you? Do you have these marks? Are you born again? □

the gospel

The gospel of Christ is good news of pardon to the guilty, addressing all as equally guilty before God. It reveals an atonement sufficient for all; and everyone is commanded to receive it as a faithful saying, that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:15).

The gospel is addressed to those who are “far from righteousness” (Isa 46:12); who are poor, and blind, and naked; who have no money to purchase salvation, no merit to recommend them to the favor of God (Isa 55:1; Luke 7:42).

Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Matt 9:13). If we are not sinners, we have nothing to do with the gospel; and if we are sinners, let us not reject the counsel of God against ourselves, by vainly supposing that anything about us gives us a peculiar claim to his favor, or by imagining that our sins are too great to be forgiven. The thief upon the cross was saved by faith in Jesus, and none shall enter heaven in any other way. Our only plea is this — “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

Although the Scriptures are so clear on this subject, it is a stumbling-block and foolishness to the great body of those who hear the gospel. It offends their pride to be put upon a level with the outcasts of society; surely, they think, some difference will be made; but they err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor understanding the malignity of sin or the grace of God.

They view salvation as a kind of bargain which God proposes to make with his creatures, that on certain conditions he will accept them; while in fact it is the message of reconciliation, equally addressed to all mankind, declaring that a full atonement for sin has been made upon the cross, and inviting every sinner of Adam’s race instantly to approach God through Christ.

When Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, it was a remedy equally adapted for all who had been bitten (Num 21:8; John 3:14-15). By looking to the serpent the patient was healed; and in reference to this emblem, Christ, indiscriminately addressing all mankind, says, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else” — “a just God and a Saviour” (Isa 45:21-22). □

“Born-again” ism

There is much talk these days about the rapid growth of the cults—the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Mormons and many other groups are making converts at astounding rates. Yet, the combined effect of all these groups is overshadowed by a movement that in the last few years has grown by leaps and bounds. The amazing development of what might be called *born-againism* is affecting all sectors of society. This born-again phenomenon could well be viewed as the fastest growing cult around us.

Born-againism has permeated fundamentalist denominations as leaven in dough, and expanded into the culture at large. Candidates espouse it in order to get votes, entertainers use it to attract crowds, sports superstars proclaim it to give respect to their game, and the business world promotes it in order to make money. Even the secular press, radio, and TV have found it fashionable to occasionally slip the little words “born again” into their speech and print. That the world has jumped on the born-again bandwagon in order to exploit it is sad but not surprising. We really shouldn’t expect anything else from the spiritually blind worldling. The real tragedy is that the whole mess was spawned and spread by the Church, and is now lauded as a great revival of Christianity.

The truth is that much of contemporary evangelicalism, like the church of Sardis, appears to be alive, but is actually dead (Rev 3:1). And we can’t blame the atheists, the agnostics, or the liberals for this condition. No, the fault lies with the supposed “Bible believers.” Error has been preached as truth and propagated with cultish zeal. As a result multitudes have believed a lie and are