

Did Jesus mean, “You must be born again,” or “You must be begotten again?”
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“You must be born again,” is often used by Christians to evangelize. It is taken from the translation of Jesus’ command to Nicodemus in John 3. However, is born again the best translation? Is the birth analogy sufficient to explain the transformation of a sinner into a new creation with a spiritually new heart?

In John 3:6, Jesus said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The late John Murray, respected New Testament scholar points out in Redemption Accomplished and Applied, “It needs to be particularly noted what is implied in this familiar expression ‘born of the Spirit.’ It is not quite certain whether the exact meaning of the word rendered ‘born’ is that of begetting or bearing. According to the usage of the New Testament it could be either. If it is the former, then the thought is patterned after the action of the father in human procreation—the man begets. If it is the latter, then the thought is patterned after the action of the mother—the woman bears, the child is born of the mother. We cannot be more certain which of these more precise meanings is in view here....” Other scholars and writers agree as does John Piper in Finally Alive; it could be translated bearing or begetting according to the context. (cf. Matt.1:16) Both words read meaningfully in the John 3 account.

In the remainder of this article I propose that it may be more biblically, theologically and logically correct to say you must be ‘begotten again’ (i.e. ‘conceived again’ or ‘regenerated’) versus ‘born again’ in order to harness the potent force of regeneration in a Christian’s life.

In Matthew 1:20 the Greek word ‘gennao’ commonly translated born, or begotten is translated conceived, “...an angel of the lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.’” The conception of a baby confirms that begetting and life creation has taken place as biblical genealogies show. Paul testified to spiritual begetting in his letter to Philemon, “I appeal to

you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains.” (v. 10 NKJV; cf. I Cor. 4:15) A spiritual genealogy happens when each Christian leads at least one other person to the Lord. Sadly, physical and spiritual family lines may die out when members stop reproducing. Fortunately, even elderly Christians may be fruitful in old age begetting or giving birth to spiritual children.

Did you begin developing physically or become a person when you were conceived or when you were born? A number of states try to protect pre-born babies by legislating that personhood begins at conception. No further DNA was added after you were conceived. It was not at my birth that I became a unique person and began the process of physical development. I was well on my way at that point as were you. Likewise in spiritual regeneration, “... (God’s) divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.” (II Peter 1:3 NAS)

Throughout Scripture, God is the active, seeking, wooing, life-giving God. Using begotten instead of born in John 1:13 makes more sense to me in describing those who received Jesus, “who were begotten not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but begotten of God.” Likewise, all the ‘born of God’ verses in I John could be translated ‘begotten of God’ as the margin notes of the 1973 New American Standard Bible state. This is especially relevant to I John 3:9, and I John 5:18, “No one who is begotten of God practices sin because His seed (Gr. sperma) abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is begotten of God.... We know that no one who is begotten of God sins; but He who was begotten of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him.” (See also I John 2:29; 4:7; 5:1, and 4) The only begotten Son of God protects Christians from the evil one.

The abiding seed of God in the children of God separates them from the children of the Devil. (Eph. 2:1-3) Jesus in John 8:31-48 confronted treacherous followers based on their fatherhood, “If God were your Father, you would love Me; for I proceeded forth and have come from God...You are of your father the devil, and

you want to do the desires of your father.” Too often professed believers do not abide in Christ’s Word but are slaves of sin. (John 8:31-36)

With what kind of nature were you conceived as a member of Adam’s fallen race? David described himself and us in his confession, “I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (Psalm 51:5) To make any sinner a new creation in Christ (II Cor. 5:17), spiritual regeneration should be understood to correspond to the earliest moment of the sinner’s existence, i.e. conception, not birth. Physical life develops from its point of origin and Jesus thus illustrated that spiritual life develops from its point of origin. (Jn. 3:6) God the Father begets His children by the Holy Spirit with a new nature in His image. (Eph. 2:5-9; cf. Gen.5:1-3 and Eph.4:22-24) Regeneration by the begetting heavenly Father precedes the evidence of spiritual life, i.e. repenting and believing. (John 1:12f.) Everyone who has been generated physically must be regenerated spiritually to see or enter the kingdom of God.

Spiritual life from God the Father flows in His children to include their faith and repentance (conversion), justification, adoption, assurance, sanctification, giftedness, words and power to witness, perseverance, resurrection and glorification. The Christian has received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that he might know the things freely given to him by God. (I Cor. 2:12)

Our heavenly Father is compared and contrasted with earthly fathers,

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:13 NAS; cf. Rom. 8:11, 32)

“It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline...Furthermore, we had earthly fathers (lit. fathers of our flesh) to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits (or, our spirits), and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed

best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.” (Heb.12:7, 9f. NAS)

What may be some of the fallout caused by ignoring or minimizing the masculine analogy of begetting to produce spiritual life? Consider these possibilities: defective teaching on salvation and spiritual life dynamics; men leaving the church emotionally or literally; over feminization of the Church; lax spiritual discipline; an inadequate view of God’s power to regenerate sinners; less confidence and intimacy by Christians with their heavenly Father.

May we live confidently as God’s children by what the apostle Peter wrote, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (I Peter 1:3 NKJV)

“That which is begotten of the flesh is flesh; and that which is begotten of the Spirit is spirit.” (John 3:6)

To see these and related thoughts worked out practically in the application of redemption see www.youlastforever.com.

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