



Reformation Christian Ministries

Born Again? The Mission Implications of New Birth

May 2004

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. ...I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. [John 3:3; Matthew 16:18; Acts 2:47]

Many Christians today think of the phrase *born again* (literally, *born from above*) as though it is a command that we are capable of obeying. They treat it the same way as they do the command, ***Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house*** (Acts 16:31). And yet, in the case of the “believe”, we recognize that such commanded faith is actually a gift from God, that is not of ourselves (Ephesians 2:8). Even though it is manifested through our human agency, the power to believe is not from us. But this is not so with being born again. Sure, it is a gift, but **it is not even something we do. It is something that is done to us.** Babies don’t give themselves birth. They don’t give themselves life. This is something that is done to them. Lazarus did not give himself life to enable him to walk out of the grave (John 11:43). Life was given to him, and as a result he was able to walk. Likewise, new birth is given to us literally “from above”.

Many evangelism programs center on training people to show others **how to be “born again”**. Then, to feel especially useful, these trained people then want to go literally around the world to help people know how to be born again. To many, the critical experience to determine is whether or not someone has been “born again”. No matter what else happens in their life, that is the most important thing. Why? Because they assume that if someone is born again, they must be a Christian, so if they can determine **the one** (that they are born again), they can know **the other** (that they are a Christian). Consequently, in the mind of many, the key question regarding family and friends is: have

they been born again? If they think they have, then they feel comforted. If not, then this, above all, must happen and is paramount.

I myself have been guilty and have had to work through this in the past. I am confronted with this again and again in our ministry work. Man’s nature wants to seek what God has kept hidden and ignore what God has revealed (Deuteronomy 29:29; 1 Corinthians 2:9-10). Here are some recent examples. A distraught mother asked one time of her daughter who was in danger of excommunication, “I know she is disobedient, but is she a Christian?” People constantly ask Dr. Franco Maggiotto about some friend of theirs who is still in the Roman Catholic Church, but claims to be “born again” and thus “a Christian.” Inordinate amounts of money are spent doing evangelism and soul-winning on the premise that even if those souls never connect with a church, **AT LEAST** they are born again and are Christians. But is that accurate biblically? Is there anything wrong with that picture?

Is it biblically accurate? No. Scripture tells us in Acts 11:26 that the term “Christian” was first applied to the members of the church at Antioch. While the only two other instances of the use of the term “Christian” in the Bible (Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16) are used more generically of those who were gathering together in church assemblies to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, it was always a reference to those who were following Christ **AND** identified with the Church. Those Jews who may have secretly believed, were not included in their number until they officially identified with Christ through baptism and admission to the church (John 19:38; Acts 19:24-28). Salvation in the Scripture is clearly linked to identity with the Body of Christ visible, that is, the church (Acts 2:47). And while it does say in other places “added to the Lord” (Acts 5:14; 11:24), it is clear from the overall teaching of Scripture that being “added to the Lord”, means added to His Body, which on earth is His Church (Ephesians 1:22-23; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 12:12-13, etc.). And thus Christ puts the building of His church as central when He says *I will build my church...* The process of glorifying God and discipling the nations means Christ is building His church. It is no wonder that the phrase was used only once in Scripture in John 3:3 to explain it to Nicodemus, a theologian, who himself did not get it. Christ’s purpose

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Fields: Albania, Italy, Russia, U.K., Congo, Zambia, and Suriname.

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in mentioning it was to explain that the life necessary for one to become a Christian is from above, not from one's self. It is in God's control, not man's. It was a theological point for a man who needed to be set in his place, who was too full of himself and the power of the Sanhedrin and needed to understand how impossible salvation was for man apart from God's sovereign act of regeneration. It was never intended to be something that people could do themselves.

What is wrong with this picture?

There is a great deal of Nicodemus in many people today who want to try to understand "new birth" so they can **do it** or say that someone else has done it, so they can know they are "saved." Their answers are different from that of Nicodemus, but their desire to have control is still the same. They concentrate both in their minds and their activities on something they cannot effect (giving someone new birth) while often refusing to accept the "indicators" of new birth (or lack thereof). The basis for determining whether one is a Christian is by inspecting their fruit (Matthew 7:16, 20): do they believe, have they been baptized (joined a true church) and do they follow the Lord. Instead, out of a natural concern for the salvation of friends and loved ones, many press for the impossible knowledge of someone's new birth in spite of their disobedience in one or more of these areas. One of the clearest areas of disobedience is a refusal to either join a true church or to leave a false or apostate church or cult. The Scriptures make it clear that there is no certain hope for salvation outside the church (so says Acts 2:47 and all the great confessions of faith Westminster Conf. 25:2; Belgic Conf. 28, Second Helvetic Conf. 27).

Our comfort level as to one's salvation should never be based upon whether or not someone is "born again." That is something that God alone knows. We have never been called to teach people how to be "born again". We have been called to lead people to Christ, and Christ is found through faith in that Gospel preached and in covenant-keeping communion with His church. It is for this reason that true missionary work is always centered around the work of Christ building His Body the Church. And thus **mission work is planting, building and educating churches**. Everything else of a ministry nature is but an outreach from those churches or from the people of those churches into the world, and even then, to yet further build His church.

How does knowing this help us personally?

- It helps us to avoid taking false comfort in claims of new birth by those who remain in apostate churches or outside of the church. Is it possible they could be born again? Maybe. But there is no promise of Scripture on which to be confident. The Lord is building His church and adds to His church those He is saving (regenerating) and outside of the church there is no ordinary hope for salvation.
- Instead of focusing upon something no man can know (whether someone is regenerated), we should focus on what we can know (whether someone is obedient in their service to Christ in the membership of a true church). We are not asked to be judges of that which only God can discern.
- Even in the process of excommunication (which puts someone out of the church), the elders are not to seek to discern the status of someone's regeneration, but rather the status of their obedience and repentance.
- This also helps us avoid the idea that true churches can have any true dialogue with apostate churches other than a call to repentance and the rejection of their apostasy.
- It further helps us to avoid sinking mission money into situations which do not have a direct connection to building up Christ's church.
- Ministry in the name of Christ should always be done by the church or by those sent from the church, so that those who see Christ's hand in the ministry know where He can be found and with whom He is identified. In this way again, He is building His church.

All of the work of Reformation Christian Ministries is done with the express intention of building the church of Christ. Therefore, we are committed to working in, through, or to local churches under the oversight of local churches. We encourage the prayer, financial, and human support of you and your church in this ministry of Reformation.

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