



What is a "Born Again" Christian?

Chances are good that you've also heard the term and maybe wondered what is the difference between a "born again" Christian and a "regular" Christian. We are in an election year, and it seems that "Born Again Christians" is one of the groups that pollsters include in their statistics. But what are they referring to?

The term "born again" actually comes from this passage of Scripture in John chapter three.

1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

A couple of notes are in order at this point in the story:

First, the Greek term often translated "born again" can also be translated "born from above." ("Born from above" may be a more accurate translation that highlights the fact that this "second" birth comes from God and is spiritual, whereas our first birth came from earth and is physical.)

Second, as the following comment makes clear, Nicodemus was still thinking along "physical" lines...

4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

A couple more points:

First, Jesus makes it very clear that being "born again" (or "born from above") is absolutely necessary. It is not optional. A person can't be in God's kingdom without it. One commentator put it this way: "Born once - Die twice. Born twice - Die once." The second birth being the one Jesus tells Nicodemus about here, and the second death is the "lake of fire" (hell) described in Revelation 2:11, 20:6, 20:14 and 21:8). The only way to avoid this "second death" is to be "born again."

Second, Jesus seems to be obviously referring to baptism when He talks about such birth being "of water and the Spirit." (It is in baptism that we find the Spirit and water connected.)

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

Maybe you can relate to Nicodemus. Sometimes we just "don't get it" when it comes to spiritual things. Thank God Jesus doesn't give up on us... (even if He has to get in our face a bit like he does with

Nicodemus here:)

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. "

Jesus gives an indication in v14 that Nicodemus will eventually see Him lifted up on a stake - the cross. And that everyone who looks to Jesus and what He did for them on that cross will be healed spiritually, just as those who looked at the bronze snake Moses lifted up were healed physically (see Numbers 21:4-9)

The passage continues with a paragraph that includes the most well-known verse in the Bible:

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

It should be noted that Jesus concludes the passage in verses 19-21 by defining faith as more than just "knowing" that He is the Savior. He defines faith as trusting Him enough to actually change one's life in an effort to live the way He says - in the truth and light.).

Based on that passage, it would seem me that the term "Born again Christian" could simply be shortened to "Christian." Jesus defines "born again" as being baptized and having faith in Him. That simply defines what it means to be a follower of Christ or "a Christian."

That meaning may not be the meaning behind the term as you hear it used, however. In recent years some have sought to make a distinction between Christians by designating as "born again" those who have had a "conversion experience" that led them to change and become faithful followers of Jesus.

It seems to me that the better definition of "born again" is the one that refers to all Christians who call Jesus "Lord." It doesn't matter if that faith started with baptism as an infant or with a specific experience in later years. As the apostle Paul wrote: No one can call Jesus "Lord" except by the [power of] the Holy Spirit.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net