

Identity Crisis



"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: 2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. 3 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. 4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? 5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a

man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. 8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. 9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?" - John 3:1-9 (KJV).

The preceding scriptures are very familiar to us. In these verses, Jesus begins to lay out the foundation for a person's salvation. He is speaking to Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, and a teacher of the Law. Jesus explains the salvation process to a totally astonished Nicodemus. We hear Nicodemus declare, *"How can these things be?"* In the very next verse, John 3:10, Jesus chides Nicodemus telling him that as a teacher of the Law and one who claims to know the Jewish scriptures and was given the responsibility of teaching the people, that he should know what Jesus was speaking about. The "born again" experience was not a new concept that Jesus was bringing forth. It was spoken by God, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by the writers of the Jewish scriptures found in the Law (Torah), the Prophets and the Writings.

Even though there are no direct quotes or verses in the Jewish Scriptures that specifically say "born again" or "born from above," the whole purpose of the Jewish scriptures were to point to this fact - that a person needs to be "born again." It begins way back in Genesis 3 with the "fall" of Adam and Eve. God had warned them that if they did not obey His simple command to not eat of the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil that they would "die." Without going into the whole account, needless to say we know what happened. They disobeyed and they refused to "own up" to it. The result was banishment from the Garden and "death." But wait a minute. They didn't physically die at that moment. We read that Adam lived 930 years before he physically died. When God told them that if they disobeyed they would "die," He was referring to a "spiritual death." When they ate of the fruit and refused to "own up" and repent, they not only began the process of the physical body deteriorating to ultimately physically die, but they **immediately** experienced "spiritually death." This "spiritual death" was banishment and separation from the presence of God.

However, we see in Genesis 3:15, God immediately speaks and puts into action His plan of redemption for Man - *"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."* This plan of redemption was already in God's heart for we know that Jesus was and is, the "Lamb slain" for us even before the foundations of the earth were created. *"And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of **the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.**"* (Revelation 13:8)

Nicodemus, as a teacher of the Word of God, should have known what the spiritual condition of every person was and is without a Savior - they are separated from God, which is "spiritual death." However, for Nicodemus, as well as many of the Jewish leaders and many of the Jewish people, they believed that they were spared from "spiritual death" simply because they were the "children of Abraham." They had a false sense of security in their spiritual condition simply because they were the "children of Abraham." John the Baptist spoke to them about this false sense of security in Matthew 3:18 - *"And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."*

Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, as well as everyone else - Jew and Gentile, saying that they were all "spiritually dead." Jesus emphatically declares that they must be "born again." We can put it his way - the only hope for a physically dead person is resurrection. The only hope for spiritually dead people is to be born again or "born from above." Jesus told Nicodemus that in order to be "born again" and "*experience the Kingdom of Heaven*," a person must be, "...*born of water and of the Spirit...*" What did Jesus mean by this? First, when Jesus mentioned "water," I believe Jesus was referencing us to the Baptism of John - the baptism by water. John's baptism was not a purification ritual. It was an action of repentance.

We must remember that John's baptism was not a "new thing." He was using the Jewish rite of Baptism, which they understood was an action of truly repenting from a sinful lifestyle. The Jewish rite of baptism was not a "mikvah" (a ceremonial cleansing). It was a rite that a Gentile had to go through before becoming a Jewish convert. It was an action of repenting and turning from their "Gentile, pagan ways." When the Jewish people went to be baptized by John they were acknowledging how sinful they were. This was a big statement they were making. They were literally saying that they were just as sinful as a Gentile and needed to repent. They were acknowledging their need to repent and turn towards Yahweh, God. Therefore, when Jesus referenced "water" in His statement to Nicodemus, He was referring to the fact that a person must first truly recognize their sinfulness and their need for God. There must be a heart of "true repentance." Another, term that Jesus used for this would be that a person must be "*poor in spirit*" to be able to enter the Kingdom of God. (Matthew 5:3)

In His statement to Nicodemus, Jesus also mentioned being "*born of the Spirit...*" What did Jesus mean by this? He was telling Nicodemus that once a person's heart has come to the place of truly recognizing their need for God and has a heart that truly understands and chooses to repent and "turn towards God," it is at this point that the Holy Spirit comes and brings forth a "regeneration" of that person's "dead spirit" and gives it **new life**. Through a heart of true repentance, the blood of Jesus that was shed for all our sins, comes and washes and totally cleanses them from their sin. It is the Holy Spirit's work to "regenerate" that person's spirit and make it "born from above" - born again. Titus 3:5 tells us, "*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost...*" The word "regenerate" comes from the Greek word, "*paliggenesia*" which means "new birth, reproduction, renewal, re-creation, regeneration."

What Jesus was saying to Nicodemus was that this "regeneration," this "born again" experience, would be a **new birth** of a totally new species of being. It would be a species that had never existed previously. The "born again" person would no longer be a sinful, Jew, Gentile, Barbarian, Scythian, male or female. This "new species of being," this new creation, would come to be known a "son of God," as stated in John 1:12, "*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the **sons of God**, even to them that believe on his Name...*"

The person's spirit **is not** resurrected. They are made **totally new!** Spiritually, they are totally different! The person is not the same individual. They are totally changed into a totally new species of being. They are changed into a "son of God." That is what we are told in 2Corinthians 5:17 - "*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a **new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.***" The born again person is a totally new creature that never existed before. The individual is not the same person with a spirit that has been resurrected. No, their spirit is totally, totally different - they are a new creation!!! In recognizing their need for God, through the blood of Jesus and the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, the individual becomes a "new creation in Christ."

When I am in a teaching setting I put it in the following manner to explain what has taken place within a person who is truly "born again." I tell them, " Before I realized my need for God and that I needed to turn towards Him through a heart of true repentance and receive Jesus as my Savior, my Lord and my God, I was a "pig." Now through the "new birth" and by the work of the Holy Spirit, I am not just a renewed and

cleansed pig, but rather I have been changed into a "sheep." I was a "filthy pig" (a sinner) but now I am a "sheep of His pasture." I am now a "son of the Most High God," a member of God's "Household of faith." The true born again believer has been totally transformed. They have been totally changed into what God had always intended and desired for them to be.

This now brings us to a problem I see within the Body of Christ. I believe we have an "identity crisis." As we have just discussed, when a person is truly born again, they experience a total change in who they are. The person who is truly "born again" loses their identity of who they were before Jesus. That person, their nature, their lifestyle, their entire identity has been "put away." They are now to "put on" the character and nature of the One whose "image" they bear. Jesus referred to those who would ultimately experience this total change of identity as His "disciples." The term "disciple" means not just to be a student or a pupil of someone but it refers to changing your lifestyle to the one you are choosing to follow. It implies a total change of identity from which you were before you chose to follow that "someone." For the believer in Jesus, this means that through the "born again" experience, we are to lose and "put away" our old ways and lifestyle because we are a "new creature" that is now in the image and likeness of the One we are choosing to follow - Jesus.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Galatians 3:28, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all **one in Christ Jesus.**"* Paul was exhorting the believers, which consisted of those who were Jewish, those who were Gentile, those who were male and those who were female, that they were to put away their old ways and thoughts. They were to put away their backgrounds and where they came from. They were to put away all thoughts and language of distinction that would cause separation. They were not to refer to themselves as "Jewish believers," "Gentile believers," "male believers," or "female believers." They were not to distinguish themselves as anything else but "*one in Christ Jesus.*" Anything else would hinder and bring division to the Body of Christ.

Paul expresses this same thought to the believers in Ephesus. Ephesians 2:13-16 (Amplified Version), *"But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were [so] far away, through (by, in) the blood of Christ have been brought near. 14) For He is [Himself] our peace (our bond of unity and harmony). He has made us **both [Jew and Gentile] one [body]**, and has broken down (destroyed, abolished) the hostile dividing wall between us,15) By abolishing in His [own crucified] flesh the enmity [caused by] the Law with its decrees and ordinances [which He annulled]; **that He from the two might create in Himself one new man [one new quality of humanity out of the two]**, so making peace.16) And [He designed] to reconcile to God both [Jew and Gentile, united] in a single body by means of His cross, thereby killing the mutual enmity {and} **bringing the feud to an end.**"* Wow! Did you hear what you just read? *"...One new man...bringing the feud to an end."*

Paul again expresses this same thought to the believers in Colosse as we read in Colossians 3:10,11, *"And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge **after the image of him that created him:** 11 Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but **Christ is all, and in all.**"*

In all of the above scriptures and in many of the New Testament letters written by authors who wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we find exhortations to stop the arguments of whether one was a Jewish believer, Gentile believer, circumcised or uncircumcised, male believer, female believer, a believer who they considered to be a barbarian (a person who spoke a different language other than Greek), or Scythian believer (considered to be the "wildest of barbarians"), slave or free. What the Holy Spirit was saying through these writers of the New Testament was that there should be no quarrels between believers of which one has it right or who is a "second class" believer. The fact is that if you believe in all that Jesus did and you truly experienced being "born again," than simply put, you are a member of God's Household of faith. We are all to look at ourselves and each other as "one in Christ, Jesus," nothing else.

At the first "Council" at Jerusalem that was chronicled for us by Luke in Acts 15, we see that there was a great dissention among the leadership concerning this very thing. They were arguing about what the Gentiles must do now that the door of salvation had been opened to them, as well as to the Jewish people. Many of the leadership thought that the Gentiles who believed should now be circumcised and become Jewish. With the wisdom of the Holy Spirit prevailing through the leadership of James, it was decided that the Gentiles who believed in Jesus did not have to become Jewish (be circumcised nor do any of the Jewish rituals of conversion to Judaism) to be true disciples of Jesus. However, the stipulations given to the newly saved Gentiles were those that were in reference to their old ways of pagan worship. They were to turn from and abstain from their "old pagan ways." Just as in the writings of the Book of Hebrews, the Letter of James *"to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad"* (James 1:1 - KJV) and many of the other New Testament letters who exhorted those who were Jewish and now believed in Jesus to turn from and not get caught up in the rituals and ways of their old lifestyle of Judaism.

It is important to note that nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus ever say that circumcision or being Jewish was a prerequisite for salvation. The only prerequisite that Jesus ever spoke of was that which concerned a true heart of repentance. Jesus and John the Baptist constantly declared, ***"Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."*** The true "spiritual" circumcision referred to in the Jewish scriptures was that of the "circumcision of the heart" as found in Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4 and elsewhere. It is speaking of a person's "repentant heart."

You may be thinking, "What about cultural and ethnic differences? Should we all look the same?" To that I would say, of course not. God made us culturally and ethnically different and that is a good thing. Different styles and forms are good because they open up the message to people attracted to certain styles and forms. However, if we are truly born again, it is our spirits that are now *"one with the Father and Jesus."* If this "oneness" within our spirit is truly manifested within the Body of Christ, it would bypass and not allow cultural and ethnic differences, styles and forms to bring divisions (denominations). The "attitude of our heart" should passionately desire and seek being in "one accord" through the Holy Spirit, connecting each member within the Body of Christ so that we are that "One Man in Christ." Unfortunately, the Body of Christ has strayed and fallen short from this.

I would also like to briefly discuss the terms "Christianity" and "Christian." We know that Jesus never came to establish a new religion. He was very clear in this as we read John 7:16, *"Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me."* He never referred to His followers and those that believed in Him as "Christians." Nor did He ever give them the command to call themselves "Christians" after His resurrection. The word "Christian" used in the New Testament is actually an adjective, a word of description, and not a noun. The essence of the term "Christian" means to be "a follower of Christ" and His teachings. Again it is an adjective which is a word of description. This term has become accepted within the Body of Christ. This is not necessarily a bad thing. However, its origin and original use was not meant to be very flattering but rather to be a term of mockery to the believers and disciples of Jesus, as we will see.

The noun form of the word "Christian" is "Christianity" which, as we know is the name of a "religion" in the world, today. Easton's Bible Dictionary in defining the word "Christian" states, "The name (Christian) given by the Greeks or Romans, probably in reproach, to the followers of Jesus. It was first used at Antioch." This is very true as we read in Acts 11:26 (KJV) which reads, *"And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples **were called Christians first in Antioch.**"* The Aramaic Version in Plain English puts it this way, *"And when he found him, he brought him with him to Antiakia, and they were assembling together for a full year with the church and they taught many people. From that time, the disciples were **first called Christians by the Antiochenes.**"* The citizens of Antioch were obviously non-believers.

It is interesting to note that you will never read any of the New Testament writers using the term "Christian" or "Christianity" to describe themselves. The word "Christian" is only used three times in the New Testament. However, it is always used by a "non-believer." The first time was in Acts 11:26 as previously mentioned. In Acts 26:28 we read, "*Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.*" King Agrippa who is a **non-believing** Jewish person is speaking in a mocking tone to the Apostle Paul. Peter does use the term in his first letter. 1Peter 4:16 (Amplified Version) reads, "*But if [one is ill-treated and suffers] as a Christian [which he is contemptuously called], let him not be ashamed, but give glory to God that he is [deemed worthy to suffer] in this name.*" Peter here seems to be referencing this term as it was spoken by those who were opposed to the believers. Unfortunately, the term "Christianity" is still thought of to be a reproach to and by many. This is because of the many atrocities that have been wrought throughout the last 2000 years "in the name of Christianity."

In concluding our discussion I would simply like to repeat the prayer that Jesus prayed over His disciples the last night of His life here on this earth. "11) *And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are...* 20) *Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word;* 21) ***That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.*** 22) *And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one:* 23) *I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.*" - John 17:11, 20-23 (KJV)

I believe that Jesus, who is our great Intercessor (Hebrews 7:25; Romans 8:34), was and is continually praying this prayer over His Body, the true "born again" believers in Jesus, His disciples, the members of God's Household of faith. Our identity should lie in this - no matter where we came from, no matter what religious, cultural or ethnic background we were from, no matter what we look like, the bottom line should be this - through the blood of Jesus and by our born again regenerative experience, each of us, as well as collectively, exist as a totally new species of being. The scriptures refer to us as the "One man in Christ."