

# The Gospel Unashamed

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."

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## What Does it Mean to be "Born Again"? John 3:3-7

--By Terry Carter

"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, **unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**'" John 3:3 (NKJV)

In this verse, Jesus tells Nicodemus, who had come to Him by night, that he must be born again to see the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant by this and so he asked whether a man can enter his mother's womb the second time. Jesus responded by pointing out that the new birth is of water and Spirit, as opposed to flesh. He makes this clear by stating that what is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. In other words, if a man did enter his mother's womb a second time, he would only be born of flesh the second time, not of the Spirit. This is not what it means to be "born again". Being born again involves water and the Spirit.

"5 Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, **unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.** 6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." John 3:5-6 (NKJV)

This should not have surprised Nicodemus. In fact, Jesus rebuked him for being a teacher in Israel and

not knowing these things. "7 **"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'**"...10 Jesus answered and said to him, "**Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"** John 3:7,10 (NKJV)

Nearly two thousand years have passed, and we have come to a time when many who consider themselves leaders in the Christian world, know as little about being born again as Nicodemus did. It has once again become necessary to explain what it means to be born again.

There are two things that are clear from this passage in John. The first is that this is not a fleshly birth. It has nothing to do with being born of a woman or emerging from the womb. The second is that it involves water and the Spirit.

As has been said so many times, Scripture is the best commentary on itself. There are other passages of Scripture that connect water and the Spirit, a new birth and water, or all three.

On the day of Pentecost, the Jews were convicted by Peter that Jesus is both Lord and Christ. They cried out "What shall we do?" Peter answered that they needed to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. "Then Peter said to them, "**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**" Acts 2:38 (NKJV)

This is a clear connection between the waters of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Paul makes it clear in Romans that baptism marks the end of our old life and the beginning of a new life in Christ. This is what it means to be "reborn". It means that we have ended our old life and begun a new one. Baptism into the death of Christ marks the time when we die to sin and begin our walk in a newness of life. That is, our old life has ended and a new life has begun. We have been reborn.

**Romans 6:2-4 (NKJV)** "2 Certainly not! How shall **we who died to sin** live any longer in it? 3 Or do you not know that **as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?** 4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that **just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.**"

Perhaps the clearest passage is found in Paul's letter to Titus. There, Paul talks about the "washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit". "...not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy **He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,**" Titus 3:5 (NKJV)

There are some things that make this particularly important.

First, the word "regeneration" means "to be born again" or "rebirth". Some

translations even translate the word as “new birth”. This clearly connects what Paul is talking about here with being born again.

Second, it is not just regeneration or rebirth, but the washing of regeneration. There is water involved just like in **John 3:5**. Some translations render it “bath” instead of washing. This clearly refers to baptism. Even commentators that deny any connection between baptism and salvation admit this to be a reference to baptism.

Third, we have the renewing of the Holy Spirit. It is not the Holy Spirit who is being renewed here. Rather, the Holy Spirit is renewing us by the washing of regeneration. The picture is clear. In baptism, the Holy Spirit renews us, and this is a rebirth or regeneration. The connection to **John 3:5** is also crystal clear. In baptism we are born of the water and the Spirit. This is what it means to be reborn.

Today there are many who deny this to be true. They argue that water in **John 3:5** has nothing to do with baptism. We will look at what they claim it does refer to in a moment. But first it needs to be pointed out that their position is a new one, not an old one. The people who were taught by the apostles and those who learned from ones who were taught by the apostles believed that the water in **John 3:5** did refer to baptism. In fact, this was the universal understanding of the church for centuries.

Consider the testimony of the early Christian writers. Dr. W. Wall, is the author of ‘*The History of Infant Baptism*’. He studied all the writers from the death of John to the fifth century. He said the following in regards to water in **John 3:5**: “*There is not any one Christian writer, of any antiquity, in any language, but who understands it of baptism; and if it be not so understood, it is difficult to give an account how a person is born of water any more than born of wood.*” (4<sup>th</sup> London edition, page 116, vol. 1, 1819)

*Christians of those times [about 150 A.D.] (many of whom lived in the days of the Apostles) used the word “regeneration” (or “being born again”) for baptism; and that they were taught to do so by the Apostles. And because we see by it that they understood **John 3:5** of water baptism; and so did all the writers of those 400 years, not one man excepted.*” (page 54)

Dr. Wall also said the following in regards to the terms “regenerate” and “born again”: “*The Christians did, in all ancient times, continue the use of this name, “regeneration,” for baptism; so that they never use the word “regenerate,” or “born again,” but they mean, or denote by it, baptism.*” (Vol. 1, page 24)

Bishop White said, “*Regeneration as detached from baptism never entered into any creed before the 17<sup>th</sup> century*”.

Listen to B.F. Westcott’s comments on **John 3:5**: “*All interpretations which treat the term water here simply figurative and descriptive of the cleansing power of the Spirit are essentially defective, as they are also opposed to all ancient tradition.*”

*“It can, then, scarcely be questioned that as Nicodemus heard the words, water carried with it a reference to John’s baptism, which was a divinely appointed rite (1:33), gathering up into itself and investing with a new importance all the lustral baptisms of the Jews...”*

*“...they look forward to the fullness of the Christian dispensation, when after the Resurrection the baptism of water was no longer separated from, but united with, the baptism of the Spirit in the ‘laver of regeneration’” **Titus 3:5, Eph. 5:26**...” (The Gospel According to John, pages 49-50)*

Even Adam Clark makes the following comments on **John 3:3-5**: “*...the Jews supposed every baptized proselyte enjoyed; [a new birth] for they held that the Gentile, who became a proselyte, was like a child new born ... they acknowledged that a man must be born again ... they made*

*that new birth to consist in profession, confession, and external washing.”*

*“To the baptism of water a man was admitted when he became a proselyte to the Jewish religion; and in this baptism, he promised in the most solemn manner to renounce idolatry, to take the God of Israel for his God, and to have his life conformed to the precepts of the Divine law.”*

*“...baptism by water into the Christian faith, was necessary to every Jew and Gentile that entered into the kingdom of the Messiah...”*

Note carefully that even though he sees the water as figurative of the Spirit’s working, he must admit that the passage is talking about literal water being used in a literal washing which happens in baptism. So, while he saw baptism as merely symbolic, he admits that the water in **John 3:5** refers to baptism. He makes a similar admission about the washing of regeneration in **Titus 3:5**. To him there was no question whether these referred to baptism. He simply argues that that didn’t mean that baptism was essential to salvation.

Matthew Henry admits that the “washing of regeneration” in **Titus 3:5** is baptism.

Both George Whitfield and John Wesley believed that water baptism was the means of the new birth. Whitfield said that **John 3:5** urged, “*the absolute necessity of water baptism*”. Wesley said it is, “*by water as the means, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again*”.

The president of Yale, Timothy Dwight said, “*to be born of water is to be baptized*”.

It is certainly true that the above quotes are from mere men. However, they are studied men who simply documented that the “water” in **John 3:5** was universally understood to be referring to baptism for the first 400 years of Christianity and nothing opposed to that entered any creeds for the first 17 centuries of Christianity. When men claim that it

refers to something else today, they are teaching something new, not something old. They are teaching something different than what those who were taught by the apostles believed.

### Objection 1: “Water” means “Spirit”, not “water”

Some today argue that “water” in **John 3:5** has nothing to do with baptism. They claim that “water” here actually means “Spirit”. If you object that this makes the verse nonsensical as it would say that you must be born of “Spirit and the Spirit”, they respond that it should read, “water, even the Spirit”. That is, the word “and” should be translated “even”. Thus, they would have us believe that “water” does not mean “water” and “and” does not mean “and”. Oh how convenient it is to rewrite the verse mire to your liking.

While admitting that some want to make “and” mean “even” in **John 3:5**, Vine’s Expository Dictionary points out why this is not likely. *“The epexegetic or explanatory use of ‘kai’ [Greek for ‘and’] followed by a noun in apposition and meaning ‘namely’ or ‘even’ is comparatively rare. Vine’s cautionary word needs heeding, that ‘this meaning has been introduced into too many passages.’”*

So, it is rather unlikely that it is proper to translate the word “and” as “even” in this passage. Such a conclusion is not justified by the Greek.

When asked why they would think that “water” actually refers to the Spirit, they may point you to **John 7:38-39** where Jesus speaks of water in reference to the Holy Spirit. “38 “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, **out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.**” 39 **But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive;** for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” **John 7:38-39 (NKJV)** In this passage, however, it is clear right in the context that “water” refers to the Holy Spirit. This is true for two reasons. First, John plainly says so in

verse 39. Second, Jesus does not simply use the word “water” in verse 38. Instead, He uses the adjective “living” to describe this water. He is not speaking of mere “water”, but “living water”.

The same thing is true in **John Chapter 4** when Jesus is speaking to the woman at the well. The context makes it clear that Jesus is not talking about actual literal water. First, He calls it “living water” just like in **John Chapter 7**. But further, He makes it clear that this is water only He can give in contrast to that which she can draw from the well. This is water that can cause you to never thirst again. Clearly this is not literal water.

But there is nothing in the context of **John Chapter 3** to indicate that “water” is anything other than actual literal water. There is no explanation by John that it is anything other than literal water. Jesus does not call it “living water” but simply “water”. He doesn’t speak of this water as having any special properties that normal water does not possess. He simply calls it “water”.

It is worth noting that the Gospel of John uses the word “water” 24 times in 20 verses. Outside of **John 3:5**, which is the verse in question, it always means literal water except when it is referred to as “living water”.

This only happens in **Chapters 4** and **7**. In both those passages it is clear from both the context and the designation as “living water” that literal water is not intended. To try and make “water” in **John 3:5** anything other than literal water simply ignores the context and imposes a theological bias on the passage.

### Objection 2: Water here means the amniotic fluid of childbirth.

It is interesting that while some try to argue that “water” doesn’t mean water at all, others want to make it the water of childbirth as opposed to baptism. You cannot argue that baptism is not in the context and also argue that amniotic fluid is in the context. But

there are other problems with this position as well.

**First**, it would simply make no sense for Jesus to tell Nicodemus that he had to be born of amniotic fluid and the Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God. He had already been born of his mother and was asking whether he needed to do that a second time.

**Second**, Jesus says, “That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of Spirit is spirit.”, **John 3:6**. In other words, Jesus is not talking about a physical birth at all. He is talking about a Spiritual birth that is of water and the Spirit.

**Third**, if you must be born of amniotic fluid to enter the Kingdom, then babies that are miscarried have no hope. In other words, if physical birth is necessary for salvation, those who died before physical birth are lost. I don’t think anyone wants to take that position. (Although there have been those in the past that have had some wild theories about this sort of thing.) This would make physical birth more important than baptism.

What Jesus told Nicodemus is pretty plain to an unbiased mind. To be reborn is to be born of the water and the Spirit. There is no good reason to believe that “water” here means anything other than literal water. It is obviously not amniotic fluid, but the water of baptism that He is referring to here.

As Paul says in Titus, it is the “washing (or bath) of regeneration (or rebirth) and the renewing of the Holy Spirit that saves us, **Titus 3:5**. This is in perfect agreement with what Peter said on Pentecost and what he said in **I Peter 3:21**, “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:” **KJV**

You need professional help to misunderstand that. Unfortunately, there are plenty of “professionals” around who are more than happy to help you misunderstand.