

ARE YOU BORN AGAIN?

Editorial

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The Bible is an old book, but its message is as up to-date as a morning newspaper. Man's greatest need is not money, nor education, nor security for old age. Man's greatest need is to come into a right relationship with God. In the third chapter of John, we hear Jesus saying that in order to see the kingdom of God, one must be "born again." It is by means of the new birth that we become children in the family of God. In our day the words "born again" have taken on a new prominence. The news magazines tell of famous personalities who speak of being born again. One noted TV personality said, "I was depressed one night, and walked out on the porch and looked up at the moon, and saw the face of Jesus in the moon. Suddenly I felt warm and good inside. I knew it right then. I was born again." The problem with most of the testimonies is that usually nothing is said about repenting, and turning from sin, and sincerely trusting in the finished work of Calvary. The testimonies are all about "water running down the face" or "looking up at the moon and seeing Jesus" or "feeling good and tingly inside." Many today are asking some vital questions: What does the new birth mean? What does the Bible say about being "born again"? The Bible is absolutely clear in its declaration that the "new birth" is not a mere outward altering of life. It is not a human accomplishment. Jesus says that to be a part of God's kingdom, we must be born of water, "and of the Spirit" (John 3:5). The new birth is a "renewing which comes by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). When a person acknowledges his sinful state, repents of his rebellion and disobedience, and believes the message of the

Gospel--the Holy Spirit imparts to that person a new life! The new birth is a tremendous spiritual change wrought in the human heart by the Holy Spirit. It cannot be observed with the human eye. We can only see its results. The new birth is a mystery no one can clearly explain; at the same time it is a reality that no one can explain away! The new birth is something that no one can hide. Evidences of the inner change will be seen in many ways. The article featured in this issue of the *Witness* names some evidences of the new birth. These include an agape love for our fellow human beings, obedience to God's commandments, and refusal to practice sin. --H. S. M.

Are You Born Again?

by J. C. Ryle

The subject of regeneration, of being born again, is a most important subject at any time. Those words of our Lord Jesus Christ to Nicodemus are very solemn, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). The world has gone through many changes since those words were spoken. Empires and kingdoms have risen and fallen. Great men and wise men have lived, labored, and died. But there stands the rule of the Lord Jesus unaltered and unchanged. And there it will stand, till heaven and earth shall pass away: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." But the subject is one which is doubly important in the present day. Things have happened which have drawn special attention to it. Surely it is a time when every Christian should examine himself upon the subject, and make sure that his views are sound. One point has to be ascertained, and only one--"What saith the Scripture of

truth!" "Regeneration" means that change of heart and nature in a man when he becomes a true Christian. This change of heart is so complete that no word could be more fitting than "regeneration," or "new birth." It is an entire alteration of the inner man. His will is new, his tastes new, his opinions new, his views of Sin, the world, the Bible, and Christ new. He is to all intents and purposes a new man. The change seems to bring a new being into existence. It may well be called being "born again." There seems to be much confusion of ideas, and uncertainty about what regeneration really is--all arising from simply not adhering to the Word of God. Let not the din and smoke of controversy draw your attention from your own heart. Is your heart changed? Alas, it is poor work to wrangle and argue and dispute about regeneration if we know nothing about it within. That there is a necessity for our being regenerated, or born again, is most plain from our Lord Jesus Christ's words in the third chapter of John's Gospel. Nothing can be more clear and positive than His language to Nicodemus: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The reason for this necessity is the exceeding sinfulness and corruption of our natural hearts. Just as rivers flow downward, and sparks fly upward, and stones fall to the ground, so does a man's heart naturally incline to what is evil. We not only commit sin, but we also love sin. We not only need to be cleansed from the guilt of sin, but we also need to be delivered from its power. The man who denies the universal necessity of regeneration can know very little of the heart's corruption. The vast majority of people in the world see nothing, feel nothing, and know nothing in religion as they ought. Man naturally has no sense of spiritual things. He is like the lunatic who calls straw a crown, and dust diamonds. He says, "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing." There is nothing so sad as the utter corruption of our nature. Men need to be regenerated-born again. It is not a little changing and outward amendment they require. It is not merely putting restraint on raging

passions and quieting unruly affection. All this is not enough. Each one needs a new heart and a new will. You may be saved and reach heaven without many things which men reckon of great importance--without riches, without worldly comforts, without health, without house, without land, without friends; but without regeneration you will never be saved at all. I bless God that the saints in glory will be a multitude that no man can number. I comfort myself with the thought that there will be many people in heaven. But this I know and am persuaded of from God's Word, that of all who reach heaven, there will not be one single individual who has not been born again. The next step is to find out the signs and evidences by which a person may know whether he is born again--whether his heart has been changed by the Holy Spirit, or whether his change is yet to come. Now these signs and evidences are laid down plainly for us in Scripture. God has not left us in ignorance of this point. He foresaw how some would torture themselves with doubts and questions, and would never believe it was well with their souls. He foresaw how others would take it for granted they were regenerate. He has therefore mercifully provided us with a test and gauge of our spiritual condition, in the first Epistle of John. There He has written for our learning what the regenerate man is, and what the regenerate man does--his ways, his habits, his manner of life, his faith, his experience.

1. DOES NOT HABITUALLY PRACTICE SIN First of all, John says, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin" (1 John 3:9) and again, "Whosoever is born of God sinneth not" (1 John 5:18). A regenerate man does not habitually commit sin. He no longer sins with his heart and will, and whole inclination, as an unregenerate man does. Sin no longer pleases him, nor is even a matter of indifference; it has become the abominable thing. He cannot prevent it from dwelling within him, but he can say that he abhors it, and the great desire of his soul is to not commit sin at all.

2. BELIEVES JESUS IS THE ONLY SAVIOUR Secondly, John says, "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). A regenerate man believes that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour by whom his soul can be pardoned and redeemed; that He is the divine person appointed and anointed by God the Father for this very purpose, and that beside Him there is no Saviour. He may have his doubts and fears. He may sometimes tell you he feels as if he had no faith. But ask him whether he is willing to trust in anything instead of Christ, and see what he will say. Depend upon it--he would say that, although he does feel weak, he would not give up Christ for all the world.

3. ENDEAVORS TO DO WHAT PLEASURES GOD Thirdly, John says, "Every one that doeth righteousness is born of Him" (1 John 2:29). The regenerate man is a holy man. He endeavors to live according to God's will, to do the things that please God. No doubt he is not perfect. He finds an evil principle within him constantly warring against grace and trying to draw him away from God. But he does not consent to it, though he cannot prevent its presence. He will generally be able to say, with John Newton, "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world, but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."

4. HAS A SPECIAL LOVE FOR THE BRETHREN Fourthly, John says, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14). A regenerate man has a special love for all true disciples of Christ. Like his Father in heaven, he loves all men with a great general love, but he has a special love for those who are of one mind with himself. Like his Lord and Saviour, he loves the worst of sinners, and could weep over them; but he has a peculiar love for those who are believers. He and they may be very different in

many ways, but they are Jesus Christ's people. They are his Father's sons and daughters. He cannot help loving them.

5. COUNTERS THE STREAM OF WORLDLY OPINION Fifthly, John says, "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world" (1 John 5:4). A regenerate man does not make the world's opinion his rule of right and wrong. He does not mind going against the stream of the world's ways, notions, and customs. "What will men say?" is no longer a turning point with him. He loves the praise of God more than the praise of men. He fears offending Him more than giving offence to man. He has counted the cost. He has taken his stand. His eye is upon Him that is invisible. He is resolved to follow wherever He goes. It will be necessary in this following to come out from the world and be separate. The regenerate man will not shrink from going so. His first aim is to please God.

6. KEEPS CLEAR OF WHAT MAY LEAD TO SIN Sixthly, John says, "He that is begotten of God keepeth himself" (1 John 5:18). A regenerate man is very careful of his own soul. He endeavors not only to keep clear of sin, but also to keep clear of everything which may lead to it. He is careful about the company he keeps. He feels that evil communications corrupt the heart, and that evil is far more communicable than good, just as disease is more infectious than health. He desires to live like a soldier in an enemy's country, to wear his armor continually, and to be prepared for temptation. He finds by experience that his soul is ever among enemies, and he studies to be a watchful, humble, prayerful man. There is a vast difference in the depth and distinctness of these marks among those who are regenerate. In some people they are faint, dim, feeble, and hard to discern. You almost need a microscope to make them out. In others they are bold, sharp, clear, plain, and unmistakable, so that he who runs may read them. It seldom happens that all are equally manifest in one and the same soul. But still, after every allowance, here we

find boldly painted the six marks of those born of God. Without these marks it is vain to fancy you are scripturally regenerate. There must be a certain family likeness between God and His children. Without this likeness you are none of His. There must be some visible evidence of the Spirit dwelling within you; it should be clear, no matter how small. If you have these marks I have been speaking of, strive to make them more clear and plain. Let your repentance be a growing habit, your faith an increasing faith, your holiness a progressive holiness, your victory over the world a more decided victory, your love of the brethren a more hearty love, and your watchfulness over yourself a more jealous watchfulness. This is the way to be useful and happy on your earthly pilgrimage. This is the way to put to silence the opposition of truth's enemies. Let others, if they will, have regeneration on their tongues; let it be your care to have it shining forth in your life, and to feel it in your heart.

Dr. John C. Ryle (1816-1900) was an influential writer and preacher in England. He was the author of such books as *Practical Religion* and *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*. Dr. Ryle's chief desire in all his writing was to "exalt the Lord Jesus Christ and to make Him beautiful and glorious in the eyes of men, and to promote the increase of repentance, faith, and holiness upon the earth."