

What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?

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R. C. SPROUL

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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Chapter One

Must I Be Born Again?

I once spoke with a gentleman who said he wanted to learn more about the Christian faith. He said he thought that he was a Christian and wanted to know more of what Christianity involved. But, he cautioned, “I don’t want to be a *born-again* Christian.”

When I heard that, my mind snapped back to the 1976 presidential campaign, when Jimmy Carter identified himself as a born-again Christian. About that same time, Charles Colson, who had been an adviser to President

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Nixon and who became embroiled in the Watergate scandal, was converted to Christ and wrote a book titled *Born Again*, which sold millions of copies and was made into a movie by the same title. Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver and even Larry Flynt, the publisher of *Hustler* magazine, got into the act by announcing to the world that they had been “born again,” though Flynt now calls himself an atheist.

Suddenly the term *born again*, which had been known only in a very small segment of the church, became a hot news item and started to receive national attention. It was borrowed by the secular world and applied to things outside the Christian faith. For instance, if a baseball player had a good year following a particularly bad year, it was said he was a “born-again” player.

Somewhere in all the hype, however, the true meaning of the term *born again* became obscured. As a result, much confusion exists, even within the church, as to the precise nature of the new birth. The purpose of this booklet, then, is to examine what it means, biblically and theologically, to be born again.

At the outset, I must note that the phrase “born-again Christian,” in a narrow, technical sense, is a redundancy.

Must I Be Born Again?

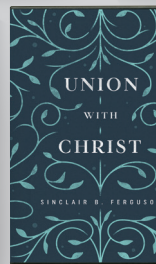
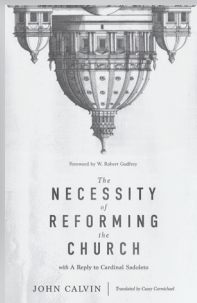
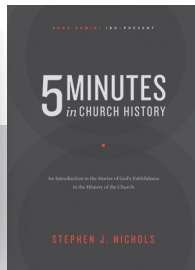
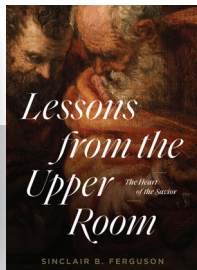
This is because, according to the New Testament, in order to become a Christian, one must first be born again (John 3:3–5). Therefore, if a person is born again, he or she is a Christian. So to call somebody a “born-again Christian” is like saying that such a person is a Christian Christian. The New Testament knows of no other kind of Christian.

Also, the term *born again* is a popular synonym for the theological term *regenerate*. I know of no church in the history of Christendom that has not had a doctrine of regeneration or rebirth. That is, every Christian body in Western history has had to develop some kind of concept of what it means to be reborn spiritually. This is because the concept did not originate with theologians, Bible commentators, or preachers. The very idea of spiritual rebirth has its origins in the teaching of Jesus. Since Christians identify themselves as followers of Christ, naturally they have been interested in understanding what Jesus says about this idea.

Jesus' Conversation with Nicodemus

The account of Jesus' first teaching on this subject is found in John 3. I would like to work through this passage slowly

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