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Born Again

Doctrinal Study Paper

*Approved by the Council of Elders
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All scriptures are quoted from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (© 1988 Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee) unless otherwise noted.

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PREFACE

From the Council of Elders...

After many months of work and review, the study paper on “Born Again” has been completed and approved for distribution by the Council of Elders. Since this topic has much emotion attached to it, let us explain what was approved, what we should be teaching and what we should not be teaching about “Born Again.”

The paper reinforces Herbert W. Armstrong’s use of the analogy of conception at baptism and *birth when one actually enters the Kingdom of God*. The explanation of John 3 will show that indeed when one is truly born of the Spirit, he will be a spirit being. We were born of the flesh and are therefore, flesh. John 3 has a duality that should not be denied. This chapter also discusses conversion as a transformation that God initiates in the life of a Christian and the new relationship that he or she has with God as a child of God, but this does not deny the concept of the analogy that Mr. Armstrong taught us for so many years—indeed the paper emphasizes the validity of that analogy.

The difference in this paper is the additional understanding of the Greek word *gennao*. We believe that one should not take the position that this word can only refer to conception. *Gennao* is a much broader term and refers to the whole process of conception and birth. We should be teaching this broader concept of the Greek word.

Salvation is a two-step process—beginning with conversion (which is both a one-time event and an ongoing process) and ending with entrance into the Kingdom. The analogy of conception and birth for entrance into the Kingdom is certainly valid for explaining the process of salvation. We are not “saved now” nor are we “born again” as the concepts are used in typical evangelical terminology.

This paper will demonstrate why we believe the Greek wording in John 3:3, *gennao anothē*, translated “born from above” in many modern translations, is a more accurate rendering than the phrase “born again.” It can also be translated as “fathered from above,” which better conveys the “regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). As Christians, we must be transformed once we repent of our sins, accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and become baptized (Romans 12:2). In John 3, Jesus is referring to conversion, and then a change from flesh to spirit at the time of the resurrection.

The biblical analogy of a new begetting, as at conception by being fathered from above, is just as valid as the analogy of children and babes in Christ as a transformed *new man*. These analogies help us understand the process of salvation. However, the usage of the term “born again,” to exclusively apply to when we receive the Holy Spirit, conveys an incomplete understanding of the conversion process and it is preferable not to use it. This is the essence of the study paper.

This paper does not constitute a change in the doctrine of salvation but a deeper understanding of the analogies and the Greek words used in the New Testament to describe the process of salvation.

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Jesus said, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). What did He mean by that statement? What does it mean to be “born again” and when does it take place?

Many relegate “born again” solely to an instantaneous experience of becoming a Christian. “Born again [is a term] used to refer to a Christian...who is twice born—once of human parents and once of the Holy Spirit when he or she accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.”¹ Is this all there is to it? Is this what Jesus meant in John 3? Is the phrase “born again” even a correct and appropriate translation?

In order to understand fully the concept Jesus referred to in John 3, we must understand the correct meaning of the term “born again” and its role in the process of salvation. As this paper will demonstrate, the Bible uses terminology relating to birth to describe certain aspects of the doctrine of salvation. Therefore, it is important to understand the basic stages or events in the process of salvation in order to see why this terminology was used and where it fits in the process.

“Born again” is so misunderstood in the mainstream Christian world because it is a two-stage process, and because of a misunderstanding of the original meaning in the Greek.

The Process of Salvation

Salvation is a process that includes two major stages. The first stage begins with being called by God, coming to understand His will, having faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, repenting and surrendering to God, being baptized and forgiven of all past sins and receiving the Holy Spirit. We call this part of the process “conversion.” A Christian is said to be “converted.” The word *conversion* refers to a change in the individual. A converted individual is a changed individual. Though conversion takes place at a definite time, it begins with a process (repentance) that culminates in an event (baptism) and the laying on of hands to receive God’s Holy Spirit. That event defines the change that takes place in the individual as a result of God working through him. Of course, change does not stop at baptism. Repentance and overcoming are lifelong pursuits for the truly converted individual.

It is proper to say that salvation includes much more than repentance and baptism. The process is not finished at baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. In fact, that is only its beginning. This is the first stage or event in the salvation process. In the Bible, conversion is represented as a miraculous, life-transforming process. It begins with God opening the minds of those whom He is calling (John 6:44), so that they can begin to understand the Scriptures with a clarity and depth they could never attain on their own. If they choose to respond to God’s calling, their minds will be opened to comprehend the Word of God, which begins to make sense to them. Also involved in the conversion process is the concept of overcoming and growing in grace and in knowledge (2 Peter 3:18), which is a lifelong process. When we receive God’s Spirit, we begin a new life of spiritual growth, of replacing our selfish human nature with God’s divine nature. After baptism, God begins to transform our lives through the power of His Spirit.

¹Terry L. Miethe, *Compact Dictionary of Doctrinal Words*, p. 48.

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This is the background for the conversation Christ had with Nicodemus in John 3. Christ was trying to show Nicodemus that a person must be engendered by the Holy Spirit (fathered from above) and finally be literally born a second time as a spirit being (John 3:5-6; compare with 1 Corinthians 15:48-52). The first stage in the salvation process is being “born from above”, or begotten of the Father, but that is not the complete process. Just like a baby that is conceived in the mother’s womb, it is not fully born until the actual birth process of delivery at the end of the pregnancy. This analogy will be further explained later in this paper.

The entire conversion process concerns the wonderful transformation that God—through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit—makes in us. However, the final and most dramatic aspect of our transformation will occur at the resurrection of the dead when Jesus returns and we are resurrected, that is, finally born as spirit beings in God’s family. This event completes the process of salvation.

Therefore, even though conversion refers to a definite time in the past when a Christian’s life was changed, the process of salvation will not be fully accomplished until the resurrection (Revelation 20:6). This is the time when a dramatic change will take place in the individual—when he will be changed from mortal to immortal (1 Corinthians 15:53).

As *The New Bible Commentary* on Romans 8:15 states: “The present possession of the Spirit is a sample (firstfruits) of the full harvest to be reaped at the redemption of our bodies. In a like earnest expectation to that of the visible world, Christians who experience the ‘first installment’ (the same word is found in 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14) of the Spirit, the foretaste of His transforming power, also sigh for the deliverance of the body from sin and sin’s environment. The resurrection will be the final stage of sonship with God. The passage in 2 Cor. 5:1-10 is closely parallel. Cf. Eph. 4:30)”²

So there are in fact two transformational stages in the life of everyone whom God is calling into His family. One is at the time of conversion (Romans 12:2) and the other is at the time of the resurrection (Philippians 3:21).

The Resurrection “Birth”

The hope of every Christian is to obtain eternal life through the resurrection of the dead (Titus 1:2; 3:7; Acts 24:15; Colossians 1:27). How and when Christians will enter the family and Kingdom of God has been revealed to us by the example of Jesus Christ. It is through the resurrection of the dead. As Paul declared, our faith is in vain if there is no resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17). He mentioned before, “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen” (1 Corinthians 15:13).

But Christ arose from the dead and is the *first* of the firstfruits of those who will be resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:20). It is through the resurrection that man will be changed from mortal flesh into immortal spirit (1 Corinthians 15:42-53).

² *The New Bible Commentary*, p. 1,032.

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This resurrection from the dead has yet to take place. It is a future event. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Colossians 1:18).

Christ was the first *born* from the dead. The word translated “firstborn” is *prototokos* in the Greek. Some see this as a title denoting preeminence, with nothing to do with birth order. But Colossians 1:18 tells us that Christ was the *prototokos* from the dead. He is the first ever born from death to eternal life! This parallels 1 Corinthians 15:20, “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has [thereby] become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep [died].” He is called the “firstborn” because He was the first to be spiritually resurrected, and up to this point in time He is the only one born of human flesh who has gone through this process. He has the preeminence.

But others are to follow, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). Christians will be born into the family of God. Christ was the first, but the rest will follow. The relationship of Christ to those who follow is that of a brother.

The relationship described is that of family. As the Greek Bible scholar Spiros Zodhiates wrote concerning John 1:18:

“The word *monogenes* actually is a compound of the *monos*, ‘alone’, and the word *genos*, ‘race, stock, family’. Here we are told that He who came to reveal God—Jesus Christ—is of the same family, of the same stock, of the same race as God. There is ample evidence in the Scriptures that the Godhead is a family ...”³

Christ was “declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4; see also Acts 13:33). In the same way, Christians will become incorruptible children of God, members of the God family, by the resurrection from the dead. The terminology describes a birth—being born into the family of God. Just as our children in the flesh are born into a human family, so the children of God will be born into the God family.

In Romans 8:16-19 Paul referred to the two stages in the process of salvation when he spoke of us as children of God now and as children of God in the glorified state in the resurrection:

“The Spirit Himself [Greek, *autos* – itself, KJV] bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God [first stage, now], and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified [second stage, in the resurrection] together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing [Greek, *apokalupsis* – something hidden now made known to all] of the sons of God [second stage, or birth in the resurrection].”

³ Spiros Zodhiates, *Was Christ God?*, p. 21.

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A few verses later in this same chapter Paul uses the analogy of birth to describe the event when a Christian is changed into a spirit being through the resurrection:

“For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only *that*, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption [more correctly translated ‘sonship’], the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:22-23). This statement shows birth at the resurrection is, in effect, a biblical analogy.

Biblical Analogies

The Bible uses many analogies and figures of speech to teach spiritual truths. However, one has to be careful in the use of analogies, as each is often limited in context to a specific and direct application. For example, in Matthew 13:33 Jesus used leaven as an analogy of the Kingdom of God. Then in Matthew 16:12 He used leaven as an analogy of the false doctrine of the Pharisees. In 1 Corinthians 3:9-11 Paul states that Jesus Christ is the foundation of God’s building, but in Ephesians 2:20 he says that the foundation is built on the apostles and the prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone.

Analogies are also used in the Bible regarding specific aspects of the salvation process. Paul uses the analogies of a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15) and a “new man” (Ephesians 2:15; 4:24; Colossians 3:10) to describe the converted person.

The individual is not in a literal sense a “new creation” or a “new man,” but there is a definite transformation that takes place at the time of conversion which makes him spiritually a “new” person (Romans 12:2). From the time of his conversion the individual lives differently than he did before. Conversion means a new life, a change of life, a fresh start, a different outlook, a new beginning. The Christian is in that sense a “new man.” Conversion describes the transformation that takes place at the time of repentance in the life of the individual (this is what is meant by being “fathered from above” as described in the section, “Nicodemus Visits Jesus”). However, a sudden and dramatic change from mortality to immortality will take place at the time of the resurrection (Philippians 3:21 – this is the *literal* fulfillment of being “born again”).

God as our Father has much more in mind than just a relationship with us in this life. His desire is that we attain to the resurrection from the dead, put on immortality and become glorified children in His family and Kingdom. The ultimate destiny of humanity is to inherit the Kingdom of God by being changed from mortal to immortal (1 Corinthians 15:35-54).

Another analogy that the Bible uses likens newly converted individuals to “newborn babes” (1 Peter 2:2), needing milk (basic elements) of the Word as they begin a life of growing spiritually, after being “fathered from above.” Of course, this is just an analogy. The individual is not *literally* a “newborn baby” at the time of conversion. On the other hand, a significant change takes place in his life—his outlook and behavior in life must now be that of a “new man” (Ephesians 4:24). It is so significant that it can be considered the beginning of a new life. So, the newly converted individual is referred to as a “babe in Christ.”

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However, at some point every analogy ceases to be valid. We must also be careful not to take analogies as literal. For example, the role of the mother is conspicuously absent in the analogy of the new birth. God is our Father, just as He is the Father of Christ. Yet there is no being who is the mother in a literal sense of the word, who would also have to be the literal wife of God. The Church could be used in the sense of a mother, but this must be understood as an analogy and not in a literal sense. Furthermore, the Church is referred to as the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-32; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7-9). Other scriptures refer to Church members as Christ's brothers (Hebrews 2:9-11). Clearly different analogies are used to explain different aspects of our relationship to God and to Jesus Christ.

Analogies are beneficial, but care should be taken to apply them to the specific point or purpose that is intended.

Regeneration

The analogy of a new birth at the time of the resurrection does not fit into the theology of most churches because it contradicts the belief in an immortal soul and going immediately to heaven or hell after death. Also, the theological concept of regeneration was considered an instantaneous result of one's commitment to Christ without repentance or change of conduct. As *The New Dictionary of Theology* points out:

“Because infant baptism became a general practice in the early church, and it was assumed that regeneration came about at the same time, the biblical understanding of regeneration was forgotten. The Reformers, by contrast, emphasized that without personal faith (where appropriate), baptism would hold no benefit. But it was only with the rise of the Anabaptists, the development of pietism and the Evangelical Awakenings that special emphasis was placed on regeneration as the individual *starting point* of the Christian life. (Calvin himself saw regeneration as a *life-long* process.) In the Roman Catholic Church and in some Protestant denominations (e.g. the Lutheran Church), the doctrine of baptismal regeneration is still represented” (p. 574, emphasis in original).

“Regeneration” (Greek, *palingenesia*) is an important word in helping us to understand the analogy of the new birth. *Palingenesia* is defined in Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* as “new birth (*palin*, again, *genesis*, birth).” The *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* defines it as “the beginning of the new life of an individual or a people.”⁴ It is a combination of *palin* (“again”) and *genesis* (“source, origin, beginning, birth, descent, procreation, existence”).⁵ Therefore, it is used to refer to “spiritual regeneration” or “restoration” (of all things). It represents a new beginning.

There are only two places in the New Testament where *palingenesia* occurs. One is Titus 3:4-5 where the baptismal regeneration or the first stage in the process of salvation is mentioned:

⁴Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, p. 8.

⁵*ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 242.

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“But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of *regeneration* [*palingenesia*] and renewing of the Holy Spirit.”

Clearly, “regeneration” here refers to something that takes place at baptism. We are saved at that time (even though the process of salvation is not yet complete) from the life and condition of sin according to God’s mercy. The *washing* or cleansing of former sin is associated with regeneration. Baptism by immersion in water signifies the cleansing of sins committed by the “old man.” It also symbolizes the death of “the old man” and marks the *beginning* of the “new man” in anticipation of the new body in the resurrection. Spiritual growth from that point onward is accomplished through the “renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 12:2; Titus 3:5).

So, we see that when we are converted, a new life has begun. This regeneration and renewal is expressed as “a new creation” in 2 Corinthians 5:17. A Christian at conversion is transformed in his mind, as Paul stated in Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” We thus see, if the resurrection is a birth (as the Bible shows it to be), then our spiritual life before the resurrection can be considered as that of an unborn child (fathered from above), meaning conception occurred at the receipt of God’s Spirit.

Now notice the other account using *palingenesia*:

“So Jesus said to them, ‘Assuredly I say to you, that in the *regeneration* [*palingenesia*], when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel’” (Matthew 19:28).

Obviously, this “regeneration” is not talking about conversion at baptism, but of the restoration of all things at Christ’s return. Vine says this about the word “regeneration” used in this verse:

“In Matt. 19:28 the word is used, in the Lord’s discourse, in the wider sense, of the ‘restoration of all things’ (Acts 3:21, R.V.), when, as a result of the Second Advent of Christ, Jehovah ‘sets His King upon His holy hill in Zion’ (Ps. 2:6), and Israel, now in apostasy, is restored to its destined status, in the recognition and under the benign sovereignty of its Messiah.”⁶

“Regeneration” in Matthew 19:28 describes a time after Christ’s return to rule this earth. It relates to the restoration of all things spoken of in the third chapter of Acts. This is the time when everything will be restored, and when the righteous will be raised to eternal life—the ultimate goal of the regeneration referred to in Titus 3:5.

The *Zondervan Bible Encyclopedia* mentions the common beliefs about regeneration:

“A survey of the idea of regeneration in the Scriptures shows that it is not sharply defined. It warrants, however, making a distinction between *regeneration in the sense of the initial*

⁶Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 949.

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act by which God through the power of His Holy Spirit re-creates one into the new life in Christ and *regeneration in a broader sense*, which includes conversion, sanctification, and the final restoration of all things. Regeneration in the narrower sense it has assumed in theology should not be considered in isolation from this broader context. It is indeed, first of all a new birth; but *it also has to do with the entire process of renewal* both in its personal and in its cosmic dimensions” (“Regeneration, doctrinal formulation”).

An example of the second event or “regeneration” is found in the Old Testament, in Job 14:14, which in the King James Version reads: “If a man die, shall he live again? All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come.” Here, the scripture clearly refers to what happens to a man after death when he is to live again – be restored to life and offered a new beginning. Where the verse here has “change,” the Greek *Septuagint* uses the words *palin genomai*, referring to being born again.

As noted earlier regarding the Greek term *palingenesia*, the word *palin* means “again, back, once more, a second time” (*Hastings’ Dictionary of the Bible*). And related to *genesia*, “the Greek *genomai* is defined as ‘1. of persons, things, occurrences, to come into being, *be born*, arise, come on: John 1:15; John 8:58, 1 Corinthians 15:37’” (*Abbott-Smith Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*). The Greek scholar Johann Cook translates latter part of the verse, which is written in the *Septuagint* as “ὑπομενῶ, ἕως ἄν πάλιν γένωμαι,” as “I would endure until I would be born again” (“The Profile and Some Theological Aspects of the Old Greek of Job—Resurrection and Life after Death as Points in Case,” *Old Testament Essays*, 2011, p. 336). So it appears that those who produced the *Septuagint* regarded the coming change at the resurrection to be a new birth.

Therefore, there are two transformations that will ultimately take place in the life of a Christian (Romans 12:2 and Philippians 3:21) and both are expressed as being new (Titus 3:4-5 and Matthew 19:28).

Now, the Greek word *anagennao* is a synonym of the Greek word *palingenesia* and also may be translated “to regenerate.” The difference between the two terms is very slight. *Palingenesia* is from *palin* (again) and *genesis* (beginning) and *anagennao* is from the preposition *ana* which in this context means “again” and *gennao* (engender). *Palingenesia*, or regeneration, is used for the present (the begettal and conversion process) as well as the future (the millennial restoration of the earth). *Anagennao* is used for the present stage (the begettal and conversion process), as seen in 1 Peter 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has *begotten us again* [*anagennao*] to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...” And then again in vs. 23, “...having been born [begotten] again [*anagennao*], not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever...”

The grammatical form of the Greek word *anagennao* in this latter passage (verse 23) is the perfect passive participle. It describes an action that took place in the past, which has results continuing to the present. The context is *origin* (“not of corruptible seed but incorruptible”). The focus is on the origin of the new life of a Christian, i.e., by the begettal again of the Holy Spirit, the Father’s incorruptible seed (1 John 3:9), through the Word of God.

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Peter is describing a past event that relates to the present—the relationship established between God and man by the receiving of God’s Holy Spirit through the preaching of God’s Word, which bears fruit (1 Peter 1:25). That is what happens when a person is engendered again (*anagennao*) with a new life in Christ, and “puts on” a *new man* (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10). This verse describes how God regenerates a person by His Spirit, opening his mind to understand the word of truth (1 Corinthians 2:11). Peter then compares this new convert to a newborn baby needing the “milk of the word” of God in order to grow spiritually (1 Peter 2:2). However, he is not yet “born again” as a spirit being, because flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:50).

Gennao

We now must look at the Greek word *gennao*. A definition of *gennao* is: “to beget, passive voice, to be born, mainly used of men begetting children; more rarely of women begetting children; deliver...of conception (Matthew 1:20)... Metaphorically, of God’s divine nature imparted to the believer (John 3:3, 5, 7).”⁷

Another definition is: “To bring forth, produce, cause (metaphorically).”⁸

Zodhiates defines *gennao* as “from *genos*,...generation, kind, offspring. To beget as spoken of men; to bear as spoken of women.... Metaphorically, to generate.... Spoken in a Jewish manner of the relation between a teacher and his disciples, to beget in a spiritual sense, to be the spiritual father of someone.... Spoken of God begetting in a spiritual sense which consists in regenerating, sanctifying, quickening anew, and enobling the powers of the natural man by imparting to him a new life and a new spirit in Christ (I John 5:1).”⁹

Gennao emphasizes origin. This is clearly apparent by looking at the word family to which it belongs: *genea* (“same generation, people of the same kind, descendants”), *genealogemai* (“be descended from”), *genealogia* (“genealogy”), *genesis* (“source, origin, beginning, descent, lineage, history, existence”), *gennema* (“offspring, kind”), *genos* (“descendant, nation, kind”) ¹⁰. Origin is also the common denominator of numerous English words derived from this word family: *generate*, *gender*, *engender*, *genealogy*, *genus*, to name a few.

While the Greek word *gennao* can be used for both the mother and the father, we do not have an equivalent word in English to define these respective roles. As far as the process is concerned, the mother gives birth. When *gennao* occurs in reference to the mother, the King James Version uses “bear” or “born” (depending on whether the verb is active or passive).

⁷ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, p. 898.

⁸ Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

⁹ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, p. 364.

¹⁰ Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Vol. 2, pp. 50, 51; Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 242.

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When used in connection to the father, the King James Version translates *gennao* as “beget.” However, we should not conclude that two different definitions are involved in the translation of *gennao*.

Unfortunately, some believe that “beget” means only “to conceive” and cannot refer to a born child. They therefore conclude that when *gennao* is used for the father it defines only the act of conception. On the other hand, they conclude that when *gennao* is used for the mother it defines the act of birth. This is not the case. *Gennao* cannot be dissected in this manner, as though conception alone is meant for the father’s role and birth is meant for the mother’s role. *Gennao* relates to the completed process in both cases and the definitions bear this out.

“Beget” is an archaic word which means “to get,” or “to produce” (that is, in a reproductive manner [at conception] or in a procreative way [at birth]). It must be understood that the Greek word *gennao* and the English word *beget* do not refer exclusively to conception, though of course, conception is included in every birth. The idea that either *gennao* or *beget* mean only “to conceive” is not supported by the definition of either word in their respective languages. Some newer translations replace “begat” in the genealogies with “fathered.” Unfortunately, they retain “born” in John 3, probably because the term “born again” is so deeply entrenched in mainstream Christianity.

But did the translators of the King James Version ever use “beget” to refer to an already born child? Yes, they did. Please note Hebrews 11:17, “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son.”¹¹ Of course, Isaac was already born, yet he is referred to as Abraham’s “begotten” son. One might say that this is a mistranslation and that it should be “born” son. But that is not the point. The point is that the KJV translators understood “begotten” to mean a born son, fathered by Abraham, and we should understand it that way when we read this version. The issue is not what the translation should be but what the word meant to the translators.

We can see the different applications of *gennao* in Matthew 1:20 (“That which is conceived [*gennao*] in her is of the Holy Spirit) and Luke 2:11 (“For there is born [*gennao*] unto you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”).

The Greeks had more than one word for having children, each emphasizing a different aspect of the process. *Gennao* emphasizes the genetic origin or lineage of the new child. In Bible times the father was credited with having fathered a child after it was born, not before.

Metaphorically, *gennao* means “to generate.”¹² God the Father “generates” or “engenders” us from above to establish a Father/son relationship with us. This new beginning is also referred to as “a new creation” in 2 Corinthians 5:17, but it is not a new birth in a bodily sense.

¹¹The Greek word in Hebrews 11:17 is *monogenes*. However, the Greek word is not the issue. The issue is what the English word “begotten” meant to the translator.

¹² Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, p. 364.

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(See Appendix A for an explanation of *gennao* and other Greek words for “birth” and Appendix B for the English word *beget*.)

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

John tells us that one of the purposes of his book is “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and [as a result] that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). In fact, John begins his book by describing the divine origin of Jesus Christ (John 1:1). In his Gospel, John frequently demonstrates the failure of those with whom Christ came in contact to recognize who He was or where He came from.

The reason for this, Christ states, is, “You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world” (John 8:23). On another occasion John the Baptist affirmed that Christ came from above (John 3:31), speaking of Christ’s divine origin. It is this stark contrast between the origin of the Son of God and His message and the lack of understanding on the part of those of human origin that becomes the focus of the discourse between Christ and Nicodemus.

In John 3:1-2, John says Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and recognized that Jesus performed miracles and was “a teacher come from God.” He obviously didn’t understand the whole picture. It was not enough to recognize Christ as an inspired teacher or miracle worker. His statement can be understood as a subtle, indirect request to teach him something that would help him in his role as a “teacher of Israel” (verse 10). Jesus would indeed impart vital spiritual truth to Nicodemus, but He would also explain what is necessary to be able to comprehend spiritual truth.

Since the Jews were eagerly anticipating the establishment of the Kingdom of God, it was fitting for Christ to bring up the subject. He responded in verse 3, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

What did Christ mean by the expression in Greek, *gennao anothēn*, translated above as “born again”? Scholars are divided over the meaning of *anothen* in this verse. Some favor “again” while others favor the more literal “from above.” The response by Nicodemus in verse 4 (“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”) seems to indicate that Nicodemus understood *gennao anothēn* in the sense of a second human birth. Nicodemus was unable to understand anything other than a second physical birth. But is that what Christ meant?

Let us now look at *gennao*. “Birth” and “born” are words associated with the mother’s role in bringing forth a child. But Jesus is emphasizing the role of a father, not a mother. A father does not give birth. A father engenders. It would seem strange to say that we must be born from God, when fathers do not give birth. Yet God the Father is the source of *gennao anothēn* (John 1:12-13).¹³ On the other hand, it is not strange when we consider *gennao* in the sense of describing

¹³ “The Johannine writings use the expression *gennethenai ek* (to be begotten of), to describe the origin of the believer.... The believer knows that his true existence does not belong to this world; his beginning and end are in God through Jesus Christ. In the dialogue with Nicodemus the references to being born (*gennethenai*) mean that

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origin. In other words, the birth that Christ was describing to Nicodemus is of divine origin, not human origin—the source of that birth being from above, from God the Father. Jesus is talking about the source or origin of becoming God’s children (in John 3) and not the act of physical birth or delivery of a baby. The expression “were born” in John 1:12-13 would be better translated “were begotten (or engendered).”

Therefore, both Greek words, *gennao* and *anthen*, relate to divine origin and should be understood in that way. If one is to see or enter the Kingdom of God, it is necessary for a new relationship to occur, which originates with or comes from God. With that in mind, *anthen* would be more suitably translated “from above” because it more clearly indicates the origin of that relationship than does the word “again,” which is not as specific.

It is thus preferable not to use the term “born again” when translating *gennao anthen*. It fails to convey the depth of the source of our new life—that it comes from God who fathers us. A more accurate rendering would be “fathered from above” which acknowledges God as our Father and the source of our new relationship as children of God.

The first birth “of the flesh [which] is flesh” of only around 70-80 years is not good enough. Mankind desperately needs a second birth “of the Spirit [which] is spirit” (John 3:6), which has no limits and grants life that never ends.

Another controversy in this chapter is whether Christ was referring to this new relationship in the sense of that which takes place at conversion or that which takes place at the resurrection from the dead. Or does it refer to both? As we have shown, salvation is a process and it involves two major stages—the change or transformation which takes place at conversion and the change or transformation which takes place at the time of the resurrection. We have also indicated how *palingenesia*, or regeneration, is used for the present (the begettal and conversion process) as well as the future (the millennial restoration). We have shown that *anagennao* is used for the present (the begettal and conversion process).

George E. Ladd makes an interesting observation about the Gospel of John which relates to this issue. He states:

“The most difficult problem in the Johannine theology is its apparently different dualism from that of the Synoptics. The dualism in the Synoptic Gospels is primarily horizontal: a contrast between two ages—this age and the Age to Come. The dualism of John is primarily vertical: a contrast between two worlds—the world above and the world below.... This same dualism is obvious in the language of Jesus descending from heaven to earth and ascending again to heaven (John 3:13).

“While the primary emphasis of John is on the vertical dualism of above-below, the Gospel does not lose sight of the eschatological [a term which means the study of end-time events, including the resurrection] dualism.... There is no reason to reject the eschatological

man must receive a new origin. He must exchange the old nature for the new” (Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (revised), Vol. 1, p. 179).

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meaning of the Kingdom of God. ‘Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God’ (3:3, 5).... In this saying the Kingdom of God is a present reality to be received now that qualifies one to enter the Kingdom of God in the future. Present and future are inseparably bound together. There is no reason not to understand the Johannine saying in the same way. The Kingdom of God is an eschatological blessing. Furthermore, the Synoptics regard those who have received the Kingdom of God as sons of God (Mt. 5:9, 45). In summary, we would recall that the Synoptics have a vertical dualism as well as an eschatological dualism. Heaven is the realm above where God’s children may treasure up rewards (Mt. 5:12). If the Synoptics recognize a vertical dualism but emphasize the eschatological, John recognizes the eschatological but emphasizes the vertical.... The teaching of the resurrection in the Fourth Gospel involves both a future objective eschatological event and a present spiritual reality.”¹⁴

Hence, it is reasonable to view Christ’s statements to Nicodemus in a dual sense.

For example, does the word “see” (verse 3) mean “to perceive” and “to understand” or does it mean only “to see” in a literal sense? A converted individual will “see” the Kingdom of God in a sense (Matthew 13:11, 13, 16). He will understand what it is. It has deep meaning to him. It is no longer a mystery to him, for he “sees” it, understands it as never before. Clearly, a person who has received God’s Spirit is one who understands the Kingdom of God and other spiritual concepts (1 Corinthians 2:6-11).¹⁵ The same verb “see” is used in John 3:2 when Nicodemus stated, “We know that You are a teacher come from God.” The same word translated “see” in verse 3 is translated “know” in this verse because it means “recognize,” “perceive” or “know” and not “see” in the literal sense. Hence, it is reasonable to interpret Christ’s statements in this sense.

On the other hand, based in John 3:5-6, we can conclude that Christ was ultimately teaching about a second birth into the Kingdom of God. His teaching was not limited to an understanding of spiritual concepts in our minds. It was a real change to spirit beings in a literal kingdom, ruled by Jesus Christ. Jesus uses a different verb in verse 5, saying that it is something we *enter*. Later John quotes Jesus as saying, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). It will be established in the future when He returns as King of Kings to rule the earth. The end result of spiritual begetting from above is seeing and entering this marvelous kingdom. It has all the characteristics of a literal kingdom. It is meant to be seen—literally. But it is not something we can literally see now—we can only conceptualize it. The Kingdom of God will be seen for the first time in a literal sense at the time of the resurrection by those who will be born into the family and Kingdom of God.

When Nicodemus asked a question about entering the womb a second time (verse 4), it was in essence a comment on what seemed to him as impossible. Jesus responded, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

¹⁴ George E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 223-224, 302-305.

¹⁵ “The infinitive ...(*idein*), translated “see,” implies discernment or perception of meaning rather than simply registering a visual image, whereas *blepo* means ‘to have the power of sight.’ The implication in John 3:3 is that without spiritual rebirth one cannot even perceive the reality of the kingdom of God” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9, p. 49).

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What did Jesus mean by “born of water”? Some see this as a reference to natural, physical birth, which is accompanied by watery fluid, contrasting it with a spiritual birth. However, by beginning the statement with “unless” it is not likely that Christ would be stipulating a physical birth which everyone has experienced.

Others see “born of water” as a reference to baptism, symbolizing the death and burial of the “old man” (the old nature) in a watery grave and the beginning of a “new man” who now walks in the Spirit (Romans 6:1-6; Galatians 5:25). It would then be appropriate that Christ should mention baptism as a “birth” in connection with entering the Kingdom. Others see “born of water” as a reference to the spiritual growth and cleansing of the Christian as he lives by the Word of God (Ephesians 5:26; John 15:3).

Either of these explanations would be a reference to the first stage in the process of salvation. The expression describes the separation from the old life and the beginning of a new life led by God’s Spirit. This washing and renewal of the Holy Spirit is called “regeneration” (Greek *palingenesis*) as we have already seen in Titus 3:5.

Christ is not talking about “entering a second time into his mother’s womb.” He is talking about a complete spiritual change, which begins in this life and ends at the resurrection. The discussion goes far beyond just becoming a baptized disciple. It goes beyond this to include being changed into or being born as a glorified son of God. Christ’s words should not be reduced just to baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit.

Why would Nicodemus even consider that Christ was speaking of “entering a second time into his mother’s womb”? How could Nicodemus come to such a strange conclusion? To zealous Jews such as Nicodemus, the concept of needing to be converted was unimaginable. Orthodox Jews such as he did not need to be converted. They were the chosen people, sons of Abraham, children of the Covenant. Gentiles needed to be converted (to Judaism), but Jews did not. As Christ indicated, Nicodemus could not understand heavenly things (verse 12) and seemed to believe that Christ was teaching an absurd concept of “entering a second time into his mother’s womb.” He totally missed the point.

However, the emphasis of Jesus’ message was not merely on the beginning of the process, but on what it means to be fully born of the Spirit. He further said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (verse 6). Are those words to be taken in a literal or figurative sense?

It is difficult to apply the term “**enter** the kingdom of God” to the time of conversion. Furthermore, the expression “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (verse 6) indicates a literal sense which cannot be ignored. Flesh is flesh—that is what it is. Since the second part of the sentence is dependent upon the first part, it too must be taken in a literal sense. Spirit is spirit—that is what it is. The Greek word for “is” (*esti*) is in the present tense. The verb simply means that at the time when one is born of the Spirit, this person “is” a spirit being.

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Jesus is stating what should have been obvious to Nicodemus. He was a fleshly human being who was born of fleshly parents. He could not enter the Kingdom of God while still in that state. As Paul said, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 15:50).

In 1 Corinthians 15:44-46 we find statements compatible with the point of John 3:6. “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There *is* a natural body, and there *is* a spiritual body. And so it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being.’ The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual.”

And verse 50 is critical. “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption” (1 Corinthians 15:50). Only a spirit being can enter God’s Kingdom—one who *is* spirit. Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus in terms of what is required to enter the Kingdom. One must be “regenerated” to enter the Kingdom of God.

This does not mean that there is no spiritual element or aspect to the present Christian life as a result of conversion. There are two sources of life—physical and spiritual. Flesh can only originate from flesh, and spirit can only originate from spirit. Both “of the flesh” and “of the Spirit” are genitive nouns preceded by the preposition *ek*, a construction that emphasizes source or origin. Nicodemus did not understand Jesus because he was of human origin. Jesus, in addition to being human, was of divine origin. He offered the opportunity to become sons of God (divine origin—God as our Progenitor) to those who “received Him” (John 1:12-13).

As Paul states in Romans 8:9: “But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Of course, we are still in the flesh, but God the Father has “conveyed *us* into the kingdom” (Colossians 1:13) in a spiritual sense. Conversion is the beginning of the salvation process and we do not *literally* enter the Kingdom of God until the resurrection and return of Jesus Christ.

The emphasis of John 3:6 is that which is engendered of the flesh will have the qualities or nature of flesh. Likewise, that which is engendered of the Spirit will have the qualities or nature of the Spirit. In John 6:63 Jesus contrasts flesh and spirit, emphasizing the Spirit as the source of life, “It is the Spirit who [that] gives life; the flesh profits nothing....” He then said, “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life.” This does not equate Christ’s words *per se* with spirit or life—it means that Christ’s words are spiritual, and they are the source of life.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that unless one is engendered from above (from God), he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Why? Because flesh can only engender flesh along with its inherent nature, whereas the Spirit engenders from the source of Spirit, resulting in imparting its inherent nature. This new nature begins in this life and extends into eternity upon entering the Kingdom of God through the resurrection.

The principle of duality (horizontal and vertical aspects of salvation, as described earlier by George E. Ladd) in John’s Gospel is supported in John 3. Clearly, a change in the life of the individual takes place at the time of conversion. The source or origin of that change is “from above”—from God. The believer starts seeing and understanding things of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10-11). This change is so profound that it can be described as the beginning of a new life.

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However, there is not a new body as there will be in the resurrection. Though converted, we are still human, still flesh, still mortal. The actual rebirth as a spirit being will take place at the time of the resurrection. The source of that birth is, once again, “from above”—from God. We will be changed from mortal to immortal. This “rebirth” will bring us into the family and Kingdom of God in all its fullness. We will no longer be flesh, but spirit.

In 1 John 3:1-3, John brings out this duality even clearer, “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God [first new beginning or regeneration]; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be [second new beginning or rebirth], but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him [in His glorified state], for we shall see Him as He is [spirit will see spirit].”

Jesus then explains to Nicodemus the fleshly/spiritual dichotomy with an illustration from nature. No one knows the origin of the wind, but the effects can be experienced. Likewise the “natural man” (anyone “engendered of flesh”) can see the results of a “spiritual man” (one “having been engendered from the origin of the Spirit”), but he cannot comprehend the spiritual source of those results (John 3:8—see also 1 Corinthians 2:14-15). The basic thrust of the wind analogy is not so much the composition of wind, but rather its effect (though we can correctly conclude that spirit, like wind, is invisible). Nicodemus was still bewildered (John 3:9), thus proving Jesus’ point—having not been engendered from above he was unable to comprehend spiritual truths.

After explaining that Nicodemus could not understand spiritual truths (verse 11), Jesus then reveals His heavenly origin and His impending crucifixion to make possible salvation and eternal life for all mankind (verses 13-17). The account ends with Jesus emphasizing the same dichotomy in terms of the metaphors of light and darkness (verses 18-21).

Summary of John’s Gospel

We have already seen the Kingdom of God mentioned in verses 3 and 5 of John 3. It is a kingdom which will grow to cover the earth following the second coming. It is also important to note a special emphasis Jesus Christ gave about eternal life, recorded by John in this Gospel. Everlasting life is a major theme in John’s Gospel, particularly in the sections in and near chapter 3. In the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus states, “That whoever believes in Him should not perish but have *eternal life*. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (verses 15-16).

Other verses in John that emphasize how much Jesus had eternal life very deeply in mind are John 3:36; 4:14, 36; 5:21, 39-40; 6:27, 39-40, 44, 47, 54, 58, 68; 10:28; 17:2-3. There is a major focus on eternal life in this Gospel account—an emphasis made by Christ and recorded by John. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Christ’s words to Nicodemus include the time of the new birth in the Kingdom of God.

John 5:24 records a statement of Jesus that is especially relevant. “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me *has* everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has *passed from death into life*.” Once we are truly converted, our names are placed

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in the Book of Life. John made similar statements in 1 John 3:14 and 5:11. Initial conversion at the time of baptism is an important first event in the process of salvation. We receive the Holy Spirit of God and we have life. But that is just the beginning. We are still mortal. Life in its fullness—eternal life—immortality—comes at the time of the resurrection. It comes at the time of our birth into the family of God.

God will leave our names in the Book of Life unless we show we no longer want a relationship with Him. In Philippians 4:3 we read of Christians “whose names *are* in the Book of Life.” But our names can be removed! Revelation 3:5 clarifies, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” Also, in Revelation 22:19, we see that “if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book.” Paul said he could become disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:27). Falling away from the truth is a possibility (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Even now, Christians *are* children of God (Romans 8:16). They have received God’s Spirit, which is a part of His very life and nature. The spark of spiritual life has begun, but not concluded successfully. Christ is living in us through the Holy Spirit. So, as long as Christ remains preeminent in our lives and we don’t allow the sinful self to reassert itself above Christ, the spiritual life will continue as the Christian grows and overcomes. Then, at His return, the resurrection will occur and the process of salvation will be complete.

In John 3, Jesus subtly hints at understanding spiritual matters once we are begotten from above (John 3:3), but His main thrust based on Nicodemus’ questioning is eternal life as a spirit being in the Kingdom of God at the time of the resurrection (John 3:5-6).

Gennao in 1 John

A verse that has puzzled many is 1 John 3:9. “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.” A similar verse is found in 1 John 5:18, and 1 John 5:1 and 4 are related. Are these verses referring to the Christian now or to the resurrected child of God?

The verb *gennao* in 1 John 3:9 is in the present indicative, which is progressive, or linear. A simple statement of fact would have required the aorist. A.T. Robertson says regarding this passage: “This is a wrong translation, for this English naturally means ‘and he cannot commit sin’ as if it were....aorist.... The present active infinitive *hamartanein* can only mean ‘and he cannot go on sinning....’ A great deal of false theology has grown out of a misunderstanding of the tense of *hamartanein* here. Paul has precisely John’s idea in Rom. 6:1 *epimenomen tei hamartiai* (shall we continue in sin, present active linear subjunctive) in contrast with *hamarteson* in Rom. 6:15 (shall we commit a sin, first aorist active subjunctive)” (italics added).¹⁶ A clearer translation of 1 John 3:9 would be, “No one who is born of God *makes a practice of sinning...*” (Williams Translation). In other words, a Christian is one who does not go on habitually sinning.

¹⁶ *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, by A. T. Robertson, Vol. VI, p. 223.

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The context of 1 John chapter 3 is unmistakably referring to the present Christian life. It is not referring to the future life in the resurrection. Because we are now the sons of God (verses 1 and 2) we should not live a life practicing sin. John states clearly that a Christian will sin (1 John 1:8-10). However, there is a clear distinction between one who succumbs to temptation and sins and one who habitually practices sin, making no effort to overcome or to resist sin. John also states, “Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him” (1 John 3:6). Here John describes, not the resurrected son of God, but the Christian in this life who does not practice sin (habitually). Verse 10 contrasts the Christian who will live righteously with the children of the devil. Obviously, he is referring to this life, not after the resurrection. The point John is making is not that a Christian will never sin. He is stressing that the way of life of a Christian is not a life of sin. This is not because of his inherent nature but because of the divine power that is within him.

Some have stated that the negative *ou* (not) before the verb *commit sin*, in verse 9, is an absolute negative and means that it is impossible for the individual to sin—therefore, since we as humans in this life do sin, even after conversion, this verse must be speaking of the resurrected individual. However, the negative *ou* is also used in verse 6 before the verb *sin*. Clearly verse 6 is talking about the Christian now, not after the resurrection.

When *gennao* is used in the Epistles of John, it refers to the new life in Christ that the convert now enjoys. It implies that our relationship with Christ is a process that continues to grow and develop.

Conclusion

“Born again” should not be relegated to merely a catchy phrase or slogan. Jesus’ words to Nicodemus as well as other references in the Bible to this topic are meant to convey a message much deeper than a phrase some associate with mostly an emotional experience.

The two major stages in the process of salvation in the life of a Christian are, as we have seen, conversion and the resurrection. Conversion has to do with a process that begins with the calling of God, leading to repentance, baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. The origin or source of that event is God. Conversion is the beginning of a new life as children of God, initiated by God our Father. We become God’s sons and daughters at that time, though not in the bodily form that will take place at the resurrection. This terminology teaches us profound truths about the process of salvation.

The second major event in the process of salvation is that which will occur in the resurrection. It begins with the stage described above, conversion. After a life of growing in grace and in knowledge, a Christian looks forward to the final event in the process of conversion—being resurrected and changed into a spirit-born son of God. This event, which is even more dramatic, can also be called the beginning of a new life initiated by God. The Scriptures direct us to God as the source. We become God’s sons in His family in the complete and full meaning of that term.

We also conclude that it is quite appropriate and helpful to continue to use the unborn child analogy in describing the aspects of the salvation process that take place from the time of baptism

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to the time that a Christian will be resurrected as a spirit being in the family of God. Baptism certainly can be compared to the conception that occurs when a new human life begins. The physical and mental development of a human being from birth to adulthood can be correctly compared to the period of spiritual growth and development that a Christian is to have. Finally, after this period of growth and development, Christians will, by analogy, be born into the family of God, which is comparable to the birth of an unborn child into a human family.

Appendix A Greek Words for Birth

New Testament Greek employs three terms to express the concept of bringing forth children. Each has a distinctive nuance which, unfortunately, can be lost in translation. Careful consideration of the conceptual meaning of each word can shed light on otherwise difficult to understand passages of Scripture, and clarify controversies resulting from inaccurate or incomplete impressions.

1. ***Apokueo*** (from *kueo*—“swell, be pregnant”¹⁷). This word presents birth as the end result of pregnancy, implying an orderly process or progression of events. It occurs only twice in the New Testament. James 1:14-15 explains sin as the end result of a progression of events in reaction to a stimulus. James 1:18 states that God “brought us forth” (*apokueo*) to be “a kind of firstfruits” of His creation. This implies a progression of events “by the word of truth” in concert with God’s will.
2. ***Gennao*** (from *genos*—“generation, kind, offspring”¹⁸). *Gennao* emphasizes origin. This is clearly apparent by looking at the word family to which it belongs: *genea* (“same generation, people of the same kind, descendants”), *genealogemai* (“be descended from”), *genealogia* (“genealogy”), *genesis* (“birth, lineage, history, existence”), *gennema* (“offspring, kind”), *genos* (“descendant, nation, kind”)¹⁹.

When used in connection to the father, the King James Version translates *gennao* as “beget.” When *gennao* occurs in reference to the mother, the King James Version uses “bear” or “born” (depending on whether the verb is active or passive).

While conception is involved in the process, neither *gennao* nor “beget” refer exclusively to conception.

3. ***Tikto*** means “to bear, give birth (to).”²⁰ *Tikto* refers to the physical birth, the delivery of a child from the womb of the mother.

Prototokos (from *protos*—“first” and *tikto*) is an important term applied to the resurrection of Jesus Christ as “the firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5), and “the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). *Prototokos* describes the resurrected Jesus Christ as the *firstborn*, clearly implying a future resurrection of all believers.

The nuances of these words have an important bearing on our understanding of biblical metaphors relating to our status as children of God. *Gennao* and related words stress the divine

¹⁷Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, p. 228.

¹⁸*ibid.*, p. 364.

¹⁹Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Vol. 2, pp. 50, 51.

²⁰Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, art. *Tikto*.

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origin of our change of character in this life and resultant Father/son relationship with God. *Prototokos* (from *tikto*) relates to an actual birth, the act of bearing or producing a child. It refers to the change of body from flesh to spirit in the resurrection.²¹

²¹ Troy Martin, Chair of Religious Studies at St. Xavier University, author and Greek authority, explained the difference between *gennao* and *tikto* in this manner: “They both are translated into English as ‘to beget’ or ‘to bear’ children. Just from my sense of it, ... after reading them over and over again in Greek texts, is that *tikto* refers more to the physical birth itself, whereas *gennao* takes into account kind of the genealogy of it.”

Appendix B Beget

Much of the controversy over *gennao* involves how to express this word in English. It is often translated by the word *born*, but it is also often translated by the word *beget* (or one of its principal parts, *begat* or *begotten*).

Beget is an archaic word that has been misunderstood due to a lack of familiar contemporary usage. *Beget* is derived from the Middle English *begetten* (“to obtain”) and an Anglo-Saxon word *begitan* (“to obtain”; *bi*—“be” and *gitan*—“to get”). *Beget* means: “1. To procreate, as a father or sire; to generate; as, to beget a son. 2. To produce, as an effect; to cause to exist; to generate; as luxuries *beget* vice.”²²

(*Procreate* means “to bring forth offspring.” To *sire* means “to bring into being” or “originate.”)²³

Another definition is, “beget... *tr.v...* 1. To father; sire. 2. To cause to exist or occur; produce: *Violence begets more violence*. [Middle English *biyeten*, *bigeten*, from Old English *begatan*.]”²⁴

For a more detailed definition: “beget... 1 *obs*: to acquire esp. through effort 2 a: to procreate as the father: SIRE (and Mehujael *begat* Lamech—Gen. 4:18 (AV)) (no conquering race ever lived...among a tributary one without *begetting* children on it—A.T. Quiller-Couch) b: to give birth to: BREED (excellent cows do not ~ only excellent daughters—V.A. Rice & F.N. Andrews) 3 *obs*: to make (a woman) pregnant 4: to produce usu. as an effect or as a natural outgrowth (economic dependency ~s a moral subservience—J.M. Morse) (emotionally *begotten* rationalizations—Ernest & Pearl Beaglehole).”²⁵

The meaning of the term *beget* (and its other principal parts), transcends the narrow meaning of impregnating an ovum. It refers to the finished process of generating or bringing forth a child, not just the production of a yet unborn child. While the dictionaries include the act of impregnation as the beginning point in the process, the dictionaries also include the birth or finished product. The definition is clearly not limited to “to conceive.” Both terms (*gennao* and *beget*), when applied to the father, stress the paternal *origin* of the child. Therefore, many modern translations translate *gennao* as to “father” or to be “the father of.”²⁶

It is a mistake to define *beget* to mean exclusively the act of impregnation or conception and dictionaries of the English language do not support this narrow definition. A “begotten child” refers to a child that has already been born, not to the embryo or fetal stages of the unborn child. “To beget” is not a synonym for “to impregnate” or “to conceive.”

²² Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, Deluxe Second Edition, p. 167.

²³ Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.

²⁴ American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition, p. 166.

²⁵ Webster’s Third New International Dictionary.

²⁶ See New Revised Standard Version, New International Version, New English Bible, The Amplified Bible, Twentieth Century New Testament, etc.

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A “begotten” son, then, refers to an already born son, not just to an unborn child. When we read that “Abraham begat Isaac,” we understand that this refers to the already born son, Isaac—not the unborn son. This does not mean that Abraham performed the role of the mother by giving birth to Isaac. It means that Abraham fathered or produced a son, Isaac.

It will be helpful in this respect to review Hebrews 11:17, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten *son*.” This verse obviously refers to the already born son Isaac, not to the unborn fetus. Clearly, the translator understood the word “begotten” to mean an already produced son and that the word was not limited to just the impregnated or conceived unborn child. It is for this reason that the word “fathered” would normally be a better translation than “begot” in order to avoid confusion about the meaning of the Greek word *gennao* or the English word “begat.”

Appendix C Hebrew Word Study: *Yalad*

In the context of the present study of the theological concept of being “born again,” there is a need to come to understand the meaning of the very common Hebrew word *yalad*, often translated “to beget.” This word occurs over 200 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, most frequently in the genealogies. A good example would be Genesis 5:3-32, where the word appears some 27 times, and is translated “begat” in the KJV or “begot” in the NKJV translation. In this same passage, the NRSV uses “became the father of.”

Does this word refer to the conception, the birth, the entire process or is it in fact one concept in Hebrew, roughly equivalent to what the NRSV expresses as “to become the father of”? Does it refer to the action of the father, the action of the mother, or both?

The following scriptures should serve to make this clear. First we can see clearly that *yalad* includes the action of the father in the procreation of children. Note Genesis 17:20: “And as for Ishmael, I have heard you.... He shall beget [*yalad*] twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.” Proverbs 23:22 reinforces this: “Listen to your father who begot [*yalad*] you, and do not despise your mother when she is old.”

However, the word also encompasses the action of the mother. Note Deuteronomy 25:6: Speaking of the woman involved in the levirate marriage, Moses enjoins, “And it shall be that the firstborn son which she bears [*yalad*] will succeed to the name of his dead brother...”

In fact, it is quite clear that both father and mother may *yalad*. Note Zechariah 13:3, which speaks of the obliteration of false prophets in the millennial age: “It shall come to pass that if anyone still prophesies, then his father and mother who begot [*yalad*] him will say to him, ‘You shall not live, because you have spoken lies in the name of the Lord.’ And his father and mother who begot [*yalad*] him shall thrust him through when he prophesies.”

The same point is conclusively demonstrated in Jeremiah 16:3: “For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and daughters who are born [from the root *yalad*] in this place, and concerning their mothers who bore [*yalad*] them and their fathers who begot [*yalad*] them in this land.”

The Hebrew language clearly shows us that *yalad* does not mean “to conceive.” Note Genesis 30:3 where the barren and rather frustrated Rachel invites her husband, Jacob, to have sex with her handmaid Bilhah, so that she (Rachel) may have offspring in a vicarious sense: “Here is my maid Bilhah; go in [*bow*’, not *yalad*] to her, and she will bear [*yalad*] a child on my knees, that I also may have children by her.” Two distinct words are used in Genesis 29:35, one meaning “to conceive” and the other, *yalad*, translated “to bear.” “And she conceived [*harah*] again and bore [*yalad*] a son, and said, ‘Now I will praise the Lord.’ Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she stopped bearing [*yalad*].”

The same distinction is evident in Judges 13:3, 5 where Manoah’s barren wife receives a message via the Angel of the Lord: “Indeed now, you are barren and have borne [*yalad*] no

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children, but you shall conceive [*harah*] and bear [*yalad*] a son... For behold, you shall conceive [*harah*] and bear [*yalad*] a son.”

Yalad in fact means neither “to conceive,” nor “to have sex with.” Both concepts are present in Genesis 4:1, where Adam and Eve have a son named Cain. “Now Adam knew [*yada*, a euphemism for sexual relations] his wife, and she conceived [*harah*] and bore [*yalad*] Cain, and said, ‘I have acquired a man from the Lord.’”

We can see from the above that *yalad* is most accurately rendered “to have [a child or children].” “To father” or “to sire” would be acceptable translations when the context refers to the action of the male parent. Yet the concept is potentially broader still, since it can even encompass the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. “When you beget [*yalad*] children and grandchildren and have grown old in the land” (Deuteronomy 4:25). So *yalad* can even refer to a father being the progenitor of future generations. Clearly, the mere act of impregnation would not fit the context here. The emphasis of *yalad* is genealogical, not biological.

So, “to have (offspring)” would best render the sense of *yalad*. This conclusion is reinforced by the apparent parallelism between “beget” (*yalad*) and the passive voice of “to descend from” in 2 Kings 20:18 and Isaiah 39:7. Here the prophet Isaiah warns King Hezekiah of the fate of his offspring: “And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from [margin, be born from, literally “shall go out from”] you, whom you will beget [*yalad*]...”

We may draw the following conclusions:

1. *Yalad* encompasses both the action of father and mother in generating offspring.
2. *Yalad* does not mean “to conceive”; this concept is rendered by *harah*.
3. *Yalad* does not mean “to have sex with.”
4. *Yalad* is probably best translated “to have (offspring).”
5. The use of the English word “beget” to translate *yalad* clearly indicates that the translators understood the English word to refer to an already born child.

Appendix D *Gennao* in Matthew 1:20

Does Matthew 1:20 demonstrate that the Greek word *gennao* can be limited to impregnation by the father? This question arises because many translations render *gennao* as “conceived” in this verse. To answer this question we need to understand why *gennao* was used in this passage.

The word *gennao* means “to engender” or “bring into existence.” When used of children, it refers to a child that has already been born. *Gennao* simply credits the father or mother as being the parent of the child. The emphasis is the genetic origin of the child, either in reference to the father or the mother. The nuance is genealogical, not biological. Of course, every birth is biological, but the emphasis of *gennao* is origin. Reducing a father’s role merely to the biological act of impregnating the mother-to-be does not accurately represent the meaning of *gennao* and ignores the real purpose Matthew had in mind when he chose this word.

The context of Matthew 1:20 is not an account of the conception of Jesus from a biological point of view. If that had been the case, Matthew could have used *sullambano*, as Luke did in Luke 2:21, where he simply stated that Jesus “was conceived in the womb.” The focus of Luke 2:21 is on the biological conception of the unborn child. Therefore, *gennao* is not used. On the other hand *sullambano* is not used in Matthew 1:20.

Matthew is not concerned about the biological aspect of Jesus’ conception. Joseph knew that Mary was pregnant. He knew that he was not the father. He considered putting her away privately because he assumed that she must have had sexual relations with some other man and became pregnant. The angel revealed to Joseph that the pregnancy was not due to some unfaithfulness on Mary’s part, but rather the pregnancy was of the Holy Spirit.

The emphasis is not on how she became pregnant—the biological focus. It is rather on where it came from, its origin, who was responsible. The angel revealed that the origin or responsibility was from God, from the Holy Spirit. Mary’s pregnancy was from God.

There are other words in Greek that refer explicitly to impregnation through the sperm of the father. One, *katabole*, is found in Hebrews 11:11. It refers to Sarah miraculously being impregnated by Abraham. However, this word was not used in Matthew 1:20.

A different wording is used in Matthew 1:20, which states, “...that which is conceived [*gennao*] in her is of the Holy Spirit.” The focus is on the genealogical origin of Mary’s pregnancy, not on the biological act of impregnation nor on the biological origin of Christ. The following phrase “of the Holy Spirit” emphasizes the divine origin of that pregnancy, which is the main point of this passage. The Greek preposition *ek* (“of”) means “out of” and is often used to denote source or origin, adding further emphasis.

In order to explain the divine origin or source of the unborn child in Mary’s womb, Matthew uses *gennao*. He does not use *sullambano* or *katabole*, as these words refer to biological conception. The problem is, how do we translate this into English? Note that the King James

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Version translators did not say “that which is begotten in her.” The child had not yet been born; therefore the translators did not use a word that meant an already delivered child when this was not the case. They chose to use “conceived” because the child had not been born. Some of the more modern translations render *gennao* in this verse as, “the expected Child within her” (*The New Testament: A New Translation* by Olaf Norlie) and “her Child” (*The New Testament in the Language of Today* by William Beck). Technically, *gennao* refers to the origin of the fetus as having been brought forth or engendered by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the meaning of *gennao* in Matthew 1:20 is consistent with its meaning throughout the rest of the New Testament. Its contextual use reflects the genealogical or ancestral origin of what has already been brought forth, not a description of the biological process of conception.

Appendix E The Unborn Child Analogy

The analogy of physical conception and birth has been used to describe the process that takes place in the life of a Christian, including both initial conversion and the time of the resurrection. The moment of conception has been compared to the moment of the laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit. The life of a Christian has been compared to the development of an unborn child in the womb of the mother. Consistent with this analogy, the individual would be born into the family of God through the resurrection from the dead.

This analogy shows that salvation is a process, not just an act that takes place and is finished at conversion. It shows that a Christian must grow and develop (2 Peter 3:18) and that conversion, like conception, is just the beginning, not the end. It shows that salvation is completed at the time of the resurrection, which can be compared to a birth, being “born” into the family of God. It shows that the concept of “once saved, always saved” is false in that just as an unborn child can be miscarried, likewise an individual can lose salvation (Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 1 Corinthians 9:27).

However, as with any analogy, there are limitations in using the illustration of an unborn child to describe a Christian. One of the limitations of this analogy is that an unborn child in its mother’s womb cannot make individual choices or decisions nor does it develop the important attributes of character, language and all branches of knowledge, skills and other abilities that are developed only after birth and must be learned. In that respect, a Christian cannot be compared to an unborn child. Decision making, character development, education, discipline, skills and abilities are all actively developed from birth through adulthood. In this sense a Christian’s life of spiritual growth and development can be compared much better to that of a child or an adult rather than to that of an unborn child. A Christian is one who is actively participating in overcoming and growing in grace and in knowledge as part of the salvation process.

Consider the following verses which can only describe children which are already born rather than unborn children:

“As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2).

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able” (1 Corinthians 3:1-2).

“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Hebrews 5:12-14)

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In each of the above scriptures, a Christian is compared to an already born baby whose spiritual “milk” is the most basic spiritual nourishment necessary to grow to spiritual maturity. The analogy of an unborn child would not work, since it can’t drink milk. Furthermore, the spiritual growth that is described involves the individual’s own active mental and spiritual processes. An unborn child analogy simply would not be applicable.

Peter speaks of this active growth and overcoming process which can be used only in the analogy of an already born child, not an unborn child: “As obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, *as* in your ignorance” (1 Peter 1:14).

James uses the analogy of an already born child in describing the converted as firstfruits: “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (James 1:18). The Greek word for “brought forth” is *apokueo*. It is defined as: “to give birth, to bring forth (from *kueo*, to be pregnant).”²⁷ The prefix *apo* (from) indicates to bring forth from pregnancy.

Jesus uses the analogy of a child in describing the humility a Christian is to display: “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4).

Paul often spoke of Christians as children. The children he had in mind in his analogy were already born, not unborn children. “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma... For you were once darkness, but now *you are* light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (Ephesians 5:1-2, 8). Here he speaks of the Christian walking, something an unborn child cannot do.

In Romans 8:16-17 Paul describes Christians as already born children, who are heirs of God: “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together.”

John in his epistles describes the active mental and spiritual relationship with God in the life of a Christian at this time by using the analogy of an already born child, rather than the analogy of an unborn child: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). A child can love, but an unborn child cannot. An unborn child does not know anything. A child is capable of love and of knowing and as such is a stronger analogy than that of an unborn child.

John also uses the analogy of a child already born in reference to doing righteousness (1 John 2:29), believing (1 John 5:1) and overcoming (1 John 5:4). The analogy of an unborn child does not work in describing these actions of an already born individual.

²⁷ Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

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Of course, a Christian is to grow to spiritual maturity, to become a spiritual adult. The physical and mental development of a human being from birth to adulthood is an analogy of the spiritual growth and development that a Christian is to have. Paul expressed this growth in these terms: “Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect [mature] man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

Therefore, the Bible uses the birth analogy to describe two stages in the salvation process. As we have shown, the first stage, or “conversion,” refers to the divine procreation of a child, not to a developing child inside the womb. This babe in Christ is to grow and develop into full Christian maturity. Scriptural references to Jesus as the “firstborn” (*prototokos*) relate to the stage that will take place at the time of the resurrection—“birth” into the very family of God.

The apostle John sums up the two stages in the process of salvation in 1 John 3:2: “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”