



## Ignored and Misunderstood Scriptures (1 John 5:1) Belief-New Birth, Which First?

*Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. (1 John 5:1 KJV 1900)*

If you were to ask this question of most contemporary Christians, including pastors, without hesitation they would respond that belief must occur first. In fact, most will state their belief that belief in some way directly contributes to, if not causes, the new birth event.

Our study verse states a Biblical truth simply and clearly. The believer *is* born of God. This means that the new birth occurred prior to our belief. At the nano-second we believe, John states that we are already born of God. At that moment, new birth is already a completed event. This means that our belief cannot in any way cause or contribute to our new birth.

A. T. Robertson was a Southern Baptist whose New Testament Greek knowledge is still respected almost a hundred years after his work was completed. In other passages, typically interpreted by contemporary Christians as "Decisional salvation," Robertson joins their number and affirms his SBC beliefs. However, in his Word Pictures in the New Testament, he offers a quote from another writer as affirming his understanding of this verse.

The Divine Begetting is the **antecedent, not the consequent** of the believing (Law).

He understood the Greek language too well to contradict it in this verse. New birth occurs prior to our belief. Jesus affirmed this same order of events.

*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, **hath** everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but **is passed** from death unto life. (John 5:24, emphasis added)*

Follow the verb tense Jesus used in this verse. "Heareth" and "Believeth" are both present tense verbs. They identify action that is unfolding now. "Hath" and "is passed" identify a present reality that necessarily occurred at some prior time. Jesus taught the same order of events that John affirmed in our study verse. The hearing believer has already been born again. He is not in the process of being born again. He already is wholly "**passed from death unto live.**"

Folks who hold that belief must occur prior to—and in some way contribute to—the new birth event ignore these and similar verses, but they usually hold to a basic new birth principle. A few choose to wholly reject New Testament new birth teaching by downgrading Jesus' use of the birth symbol, claiming that He only intended to teach that the "New birth" symbolism means that Jesus gives us a clean, fresh start, a "New beginning." They wholly reject New Testament teaching that, in this event, Jesus used "born again" as a symbol of a new God-given spiritual life. Notice Jesus' words in John 5:24 above. He did not say that the believer has been given a fresh start. He specifically stated that the believer has already passed "**from death unto life.**" Jesus didn't teach that this possession of "everlasting life" was a mere fresh start for the believer. He stated that belief evidences a completed and previous passage from death to life.

In His detailed teaching to Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus affirmed this same truth.

*Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3 KJV 1900)*

*Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)*

Twice in His lesson to Nicodemus, Jesus made the same point that we've seen in the two lessons above. As with those verses, take careful notice of the order of events. In Verse 3, Jesus emphasized that no man can "See" the kingdom of God apart from being born again. What is the order of events then? New birth occurs first, and new birth itself enables the person to "See" God's kingdom.

Being born of water and the Spirit, Verse 5, in this context, I believe, refers to the same event that Jesus referenced in Verse 3, being "*born again.*" There is no suggestion that Jesus taught Nicodemus about two different birth events. Again, in harmony with the previous verses we've examined, Jesus precisely states the order. No one can "enter" the kingdom of God unless he was previously born of this spiritual birth. In a

conversation with a Jewish rabbi, Jesus' reference to water quite likely refers to the universal cleansing quality of water. The birth that Jesus taught to Nicodemus involves a cleansing process of the person who experiences it.

Much teaching in contemporary circles builds its foundation on the premise that personal belief is a pre-requisite and either directly causative or, at the least, instrumental, in the new birth process. You often hear this salvation process described, "God does His part by Jesus' coming and His forgiveness. You do your part by believing." In effect this teaching is a hybrid concept of salvation part of God and part of man, part of God's grace and part of man's works, salvation by a blend of both grace and works, not at all in agreement with New Testament teaching in the verses we've examined. We should not forget; Jesus chose and taught Nicodemus by using this "New birth" symbol. He further associated his symbol with our natural birth.

*That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:6 KJV)*

Jesus emphasized to Nicodemus that His teaching was not mystical or difficult to understand. If Nicodemus understood the basic everyday reality of childbirth, he could understand the principle of "New birth" that Jesus taught him. A simple question. In the process of conception, pre-natal development, and the actual birth event, how much does the baby contribute? Does the baby choose his parents or his date of birth? Does he contribute "His part" to his actual birth process? Or is the baby passive in this process? Clearly the baby is passive. I suggest that Jesus taught Nicodemus—and us—that we are likewise passive in our spiritual new birth, our essential or eternal salvation experience.

Once the baby comes into the world, passivity ends, and the baby must begin a lifetime of active development and learning. Likewise, Jesus taught that, once we are born again—once He gives us this new spiritual, eternal life—we should strive to learn about Him and His kingdom, to "See" it in faith and to understand its spiritual qualities. Further, we should labor to enter into His kingdom, a present kingdom that we can see in our here and now, an orderly sphere of life where He rules as Lord and King, where His children strive to acknowledge Him and to respect, believe, and above all, to practice His commandments and ways in our lives. We are passive in coming to be alive, but we become active as living spiritual beings. Likewise, by His choice of this birth symbol, Jesus teaches the same principle. In fact, He emphasized this point to Nicodemus.

*The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is*

*every one that is born of the Spirit. (John 3:8 KJV)*

Jesus referenced being born of the Spirit in conjunction with being born of water, Verse 5. In Verse 8 He emphasized that the Spirit is His active and causative agent in our new birth. It is not a cooperative event. The Spirit accomplishes the whole process. Notice His description. "*The wind bloweth where it listeth.*" Simply stated, the Spirit works, blows, where He chooses. He is the active and intelligent causing agent in this work. We can no more control or direct the Holy Spirit's saving work than we can direct or control a hurricane or a tornado. We may witness the evidence of His work in the lives of people we know. Praise God we can. But neither they nor we are controlling or causative in directing Him in His saving work.

Jesus answers another human imagination in this verse. Ask a contemporary Bible student or pastor/teacher how people were saved during the Old Testament era, before Jesus came. You will most often hear some form of salvation by works explanation that they were saved by keeping Moses' law. However, Jesus said that **everyone** who is born of the Spirit is born in precisely this same way. God doesn't need multiple ways to save His people. His one way is quite sufficient, Old or New Testament era. Further, Paul in Hebrews 10:1-4 emphatically teaches that the law or any of its ordinances could not save even one person. For New Testament believers, Jesus is God's timeless, one-and-only-one Savior of sinners. Paul underscores this truth again in Hebrews 9:24-26 by his reminder; if Jesus had needed to offer Himself annually, as the high priests offered the annual Day of Atonement sacrifice under Moses' Law, Jesus would have died annually since the "**foundation of the world,**" from the very beginning. ***This point emphasizes that Jesus was no less the exclusive Savior of His people in the Old Testament era as He is in the New.***

If we accept New Testament teaching in these various passages, we must reconsider the teaching that ultimate or eternal salvation is a cooperative event in which we, by our believing in Jesus, actually either cause or serve as some kind of instrument in our new birth. In effect, this teaching contradicts Jesus' words in John 3:8, by making us, not the Holy Spirit, the directing controlling agent by our willingness to believe or by our refusal to do so. In this idea, we take control in our own new birth; the Holy Spirit becomes subservient to us, not at all the truth that Jesus taught Nicodemus.

Further, believing these verses which consistently teach that our belief follows after our new birth event renders belief a subsequent evidence of the new birth. It cannot cause the new birth when it occurs after the new birth has already been completed. In the "Active vs. passive" equation mentioned above, belief in Jesus is a noble and right action that grows out of our new

birth rather than causing it. In Galatians 5:22 Paul mentions "**faith**" as one description of the "**fruit of the Spirit**." Notice that faith is not a cause of the Spirit's presence in our lives. Rather faith grows out of the Spirit's present indwelling us. Thank the Lord, He has given His children this gracious quality to know and believe in their loving, saving, and keeping Father and Savior.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church  
16434 Woodruff  
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday                      10:30 A. M.  
Joseph R. Holder    Pastor