

Being Born Again

John 3:1–8; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 8

Studies in the Heidelberg Catechism #7

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LET’S turn to the sermon notes page where you will find the words of Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 3, questions and answers 6–8. Let’s joyfully read responsively these questions:

Q.6. Did God create man so wicked and perverse?

A. No. God created man good and in his own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might truly know God his creator, love him with all his heart, and live with God in eternal happiness, for his praise and glory.

Q.7. Then where does man’s corrupt nature come from?

A. From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise. This fall has so poisoned our nature that we are all conceived and born in sin.

Q.8. But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?

A. Yes, unless we are born again by the Spirit of God.

The biblical concept of being “born again” has lost its meaning in American Christianity and culture. Most view it as an emotional experience that changed your life when you “accepted Jesus into your heart.” I once heard an interview with John Travolta where they described his starring in *Grease* and *Dance Fever*, but then going dormant for so many years only to re-emerge and be “born again” into the movie industry.

What does Jesus mean when he speaks of being **born again** in John 3? He is speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit in giving the dead sinner new spiritual life. This is why the New Testament elsewhere speaks of “regeneration” or the restoration of our fallen human nature. We last Lord’s Day that the Fall depraved our entire person so that our original ability to know God, love him, and live in communion with him was lost. Regeneration or being born again renews our minds to know God, renews our affections to love God, and renews our wills to live in communion with God.¹

The Necessity of Being Born Again

This leads to our first point: *the necessity of being born again*. Our fall in Adam from the heights of creation (Q&A 6) to the depths of depravity means that “our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin” (Q&A 7). This is the background to our question tonight: **But are we so depraved that we are completely incapable of any good and prone to all evil? Yes...** Let me show you this from the surrounding context of John 3.

¹ See Bastingius, 13 col. 1; Ursinus, 64.

At the beginning of chapter 2 Jesus performed his first sign by turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. By doing so he “manifested his glory” (2:11) to his disciples who then “believed in him.” The disciples didn’t just believe in the sign, but they believed in the purpose of the sign, which was to reveal Jesus’ glory as the Son of God. Jesus then cleansed the temple of its false worship. The Jewish religious leaders didn’t believe he had the authority to do this so they asked for a sign. He said he would raise up the temple in three days, meaning, he would be raised. They missed the whole point that *he* was the glorious Temple of God standing before them, but they still didn’t believe despite the sign. And just before our text there is an account of Jesus’ attendance at the Passover where “many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing” (2:23). They had apparent faith. They professed to follow Jesus. Yet these supposed disciples didn’t see the glory of Jesus, they only saw the outward sign. Because of this Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them” (2:24). The Greek text is more striking: many “believed” in his name (2:23) but Jesus didn’t “believe” in them (2:24). Wow! How many thousands today have gone forward at an altar call because they saw the sign that Jesus filled a need in their life? He’s a great friend, he makes life easier to cope with, or he has a wonderful plan for our

lives. Why did John describe the situation this way? Jesus **knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about *man*, for he himself knew what was in *man*.**”

That brings us to Nicodemus. He is the example *par excellence* of these “many” false disciples who believed in Jesus’ name. Why do I say this? **Now there was a *man* who came to Jesus by night** (vv. 1, 2). This ***man of the Pharisees*** was one of those whom Jesus knew all too well. John makes this literary link to show us that Nicodemus is one such false disciple—at least for now. Despite what you may have thought were pious statements, **Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God and no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him** (v. 2), Jesus responds to this in this way: **Truly, truly**—“amen, amen”—**I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God** (v. 3).

So why is it necessary to be born again? Because Jesus knows all men, and that he knows what is in every man. He knew what was in the crowds. He knew what was in the Jews. He knows what is in you! And unless you undergo a rebirth you are unfit for the presence of God!

The Impossibility of Being Born Again

That leads to *the impossibility of being born again*. As what is in our hearts isn't bad enough news, Jesus tells Nicodemus—and us—that it is impossible for us to bring about our own new birth. You can try to give yourself new life but all the plastic surgery, dieting, exercise, make-up, and day spas are only taking the old you and making you a younger looking old you! Can you give yourself new life? No, and this is exactly Nicodemus' point when he says, “**How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?**” (v. 4) Physically speaking, naturally speaking, earthly speaking, humanly speaking there is no way you can be born again out of your mother's womb—it's impossible! You cannot give yourself a new life.

Jesus says you must be **born again** and Nicodemus understands it to mean physical life. The word Jesus uses, though, is intentionally a word with double meaning. Does it mean **again**, as Nicodemus understood it? Yes, but Jesus also understands it in a second way: you must be born “from above.” Nicodemus, if you want to enter heaven you must be born from heaven. If you want to enter the kingdom of God you must be born **of God**. So the impossibility of performing Jesus' command to be born again is not only

physically impossible, but it is spiritually impossible for you to be born “from above.”² Jesus’ point is that if the lesser miracle of being born again physically is impossible for man to accomplish, how much more so is it to be born “from above?” Jesus says in 3:6, **that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.** All those who are born naturally are natural. All who are born earthly are earthly. All those who are born in sin from their mother’s womb are sinners. Therefore, all of us who were born in such fashion cannot enter the kingdom of God.

The Possibility of Being Born Again

The good news, though, is that *the possibility of being born again* is not found in us but in God himself. That’s what makes the Gospel so beautiful. *God* accomplishes what is impossible for you to do! We are born again “by the Spirit of God,” as the Catechism says. With man salvation is impossible, but with God all things are possible! You must be born again, you must be born from above, and God comes and performs this in you! **That which is born of the flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the Spirit is spirit** (3:6). He is “the Lord and *Giver of life*” (Nicene Creed). Notice the phrase in 3:6, 8 **born of the Spirit.** The source of this new birth is the Holy Spirit, not

² Bastingius, 32.

man. And we are acted upon by the Spirit. We are absolutely passive in the act of regeneration. John uses the passive voice in the Greek text, which means that the action is performed *on* the subject, not by the subject! We are *given* a new heart (Ezek. 36:25-27), we *become* a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2:10), and we *have been* resurrected (Eph. 2:5).

So how do I know if I have been **born again** if it's all of God? If I believe, I have already been born again. So give yourself to the Lord tonight and know the joy of being made new. Amen.