

The term “Born Again” has different meanings as it is used in various Christian circles and can be confusing. The original meaning as Jesus used it, even back then, confused even the learned men of the time.

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” ³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” ⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” John 3:1-4 (NIV)

The Hebrew culture gives us more reasons why Nicodemus was confused because there were 6 ways a man was considered born again.

- 1) When a Jewish boy becomes *bar mitzvah* at thirteen, he is said to be “born again.”
- 2) When a Jewish man was married he was said to be “born again.” A member of the Sanhedrin must be married, so Nicodemus could not be “born again” again by marriage.
- 3) A Jew could be “born again” when ordained as a rabbi. Since Jesus called Nicodemus a “teacher”, he could not be re-ordained.
- 4) When one became head of a rabbinical school he was said to be “born again”. Nicodemus “held the office of teacher in Israel,” which meant he was already head of a rabbinical school.
- 5) A Gentile was said to be “born again” if he converted to Judaism.
- 6) If one was crowned as king he was considered “born again”.

Nicodemus had gone through every process available in Judaism to being “born again.” The only way he could be “born again” at his age was to reenter his mother’s womb and start the process all over again, which was absurd.

This gave Jesus the opportunity to explain some spiritual truths to this already “born again” teacher of Israel, primarily that he still needed to be spiritually “born again.”

⁵ *Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ John 3:5-7 (NIV)*

When Jesus said Nicodemus could not see or enter the kingdom unless he was born again, he was referring to conversion. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that his religion of human works, human wisdom, and his descent from Abraham was not what made him acceptable to God.

This phrase “born again” is actually a pun. There’s a double meaning in the original language—born again/born from above. Jesus utilizes this double meaning to say you have to be born from above. True knowledge of God is from God—it’s not something you can attain through study and hard work or through your heritage—all things that Nicodemus has tried.

Jesus was telling him that he needed a spiritual rebirth, to acknowledge his own spiritual insufficiency and turn away from the things he was committed to. It required a conversion of the mind and heart, beginning a new spiritual life with a new way of thinking, leaving one’s old ways and ideas completely behind.

⁸ *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? vv 8-10*

The word Spirit in Hebrew is *Ruach* and means breath, wind or spirit. Just as the invisible power of the wind accomplishes things that can be seen, the invisible power of the Holy Spirit working in converted Christians accomplishes works and produces fruits that can be seen.

The only requirement is to accept Jesus as the one who provides the access through His death and resurrection. This acceptance is an ongoing process and not a once in a lifetime event.

These scriptures highlight another truth that can be easily missed unless one is familiar with the Honor/Shame part of this culture. If a conversation is taking place publicly, there’s a good chance that honor/shame is at stake. The difference between the questions Nicodemus and Jesus’ disciples asked and those asked by Jerusalem’s Jewish leaders was context: Nicodemus and the disciples questioned Jesus privately. The Jewish leaders questioned him publicly. The primary difference here is motive: Nicodemus and the disciples were asking sincere questions, while the religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus.

Private questions were not honor challenges. Public questions were.