

How do I now if I am born again?

How do I know if I am born again?

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Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 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." "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven — the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:1-16)

Introduction

Jesus made it very clear when he spoke to Nicodemus that we must be born again. He said quite clearly, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of

God unless he is born again," and "you must be born again" (John 3.3 and 7).

I want in this booklet to address the question of how you can know if you are born again, and how we can know if others are born again. You might ask, "Why do I need to know if I and others I know are born again?" Here are some reasons:

- For your own sake, so that you can be sure if you really are a true Christian, and enjoy assurance if you are, and seek Christ for salvation if you are not, or if you are not sure.

- So that you can counsel others effectively. If someone comes to you with a problem, the first and most important thing is to seek to ascertain if he or she is born again. Any advice you give will be very different depending on the view that you take as to whether or not the person is born again.

- So that you can assist properly in decisions about whom to baptise and accept into church membership. Although this is primarily a work for elders, "ordinary" church members are also of necessity involved in this process. You may, for example, be asked to be part of a group of people to interview a potential candidate for baptism, so you need to know what signs to look for in someone who professes to be a believer.

- If you are not yet married, so that you can make a good judgement about whether a potential spouse is a Christian. The Scriptures say that we should not be "unequally yoked" with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6.14). For us to obey this Scripture, we need to be able to make a valid judgment about whether or not a potential marriage partner is a true believer.

Someone might object, "But only God knows our hearts. No-one can know for certain if someone else is a believer." It is true that none of us can know infallibly if someone is converted, but God has revealed in his Word signs of the work of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life. For example, John says in his first letter chapter 3 verse 10, "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are....", and he then goes on to give a sign of conversion.

In what follows I wish to speak about things that do not necessarily indicate that the rebirth has happened in a person's life, and then to speak of positive signs of the rebirth, and then to draw some lessons for us from what we have seen.

1) Things that are not necessarily signs of the rebirth

Here are nine things which do not necessarily indicate that a person has been born again:

1) Attendance at church

You might think that someone is born again because he goes regularly to church. But there are all sorts of reasons why people go to church, such as upbringing, habit, the desire to impress, the desire to gain credit with God, and so on. Going to church *can* be a sign of the rebirth, and certainly if someone does not meet with other believers any profession he makes of conversion must be doubted. But going to church does not necessarily indicate that someone is born again.

2) Praying "the sinners' prayer"

Many think they are born again because they have been to the front of a meeting or prayed the "sinners' prayer" with someone. But the rebirth is a miracle, something which cannot be brought about by human power. Jesus said about the work of the Spirit in a person's life, "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" (John 3.8). Just as you can see the effects of the wind, but you cannot dictate to the wind where to blow, so you can see the effects of the Spirit in a person's life, but you cannot tell the Spirit where to work.

3) Zeal

Sometimes we can be fooled into thinking that someone is born again because he is very zealous in his service of God. But zeal for God in itself is no proof of the rebirth. Paul says about the Jews of his day "For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Romans 10.2). What he says about Jews in his day is equally true for Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Moslems, amongst others, in our own day.

4) Knowledge of the Bible

Nor should we be taken in by someone's knowledge of the Scriptures. If

someone has a very extensive knowledge of the Bible, this does not necessarily mean that he is truly converted. The Scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus' day were experts in the Bible, but on the whole they did not understand it, nor did they have the Holy Spirit. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5.39 – 40).

5) Overcoming addictions

Some people think that because they have overcome some serious moral problem, such as alcoholism or drug addiction, they must have been born again. Such changes *can* be a sign of the rebirth, and if someone claims to be a Christian yet does not repent of such abuses, his profession is to be doubted. But sometimes people who are not true believers overcome such addictions for other reasons than the rebirth. Sometimes it is because they can see that the addiction will kill them. Sometimes it is because the substance they used to take is no longer attractive to them. Often in such instances addiction to one substance will be replaced by another addiction to another substance or sin. Overcoming an addiction is not in itself a proof of the rebirth.

6) A pleasant personality

Sometimes we can think to ourselves "This person is so pleasant, polite, honest and hard working that he must be born again." We need to be aware that God in his love gives to all men the desire and ability to obey his law up to a certain amount. We are affected by sin, but, thank God, none of us is 100% sinful 100% of the time. This is what theologians call God's "common grace" which he shows to all mankind, which is to be distinguished from his "saving grace." There are differing factors which can contribute to how pleasant a person is, such as the way he was brought up, what sort of family he had, exposure to the Bible, and so on. Just because a person might seem pleasant, this does not necessarily mean that he is born again.

7) Experience of miracles or speaking in tongues

Sometimes people feel sure that they are born again because they believe they have experienced miraculous answers to prayer, or that they "speak in tongues". However, we need to remember that Judas Iscariot was one of the

twelve apostles. There is every indication that he performed miracles along with the others, but he ended his life under the condemnation of God. Jesus said,

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (Matthew 7.21 – 23)

7) Visions and voices

Some claim to have a saving knowledge of God on the basis of having seen a vision or heard a voice which they think means that God is for them. However, we need to remember that the devil himself “masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). Our own minds and imaginations can also play tricks with us.

8) Religious excitement

In some churches there is considerable religious excitement, leading people to dance, fall over, go into trances and so on. Some think that experiencing such things is a sure sign of the rebirth.

However, we need to remember that in many religions of the world, even in those with no connection with Christianity, people experience religious excitement. There are many things that can contribute to feelings of excitement, such as loud music, hypnotic suggestion and so on. Whilst joy based upon the truth of God’s word is a mark of the Spirit’s working in a person’s life (Galatians 5.22), religious excitement in itself is no certain sign of the rebirth.

2) Positive Indications of the rebirth

Here are ten positive signs that a person has been born again:

1) Conviction that the Bible is the Word of God

Paul says to the believers in Thessalonica “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” 1 Thessalonians 2.13. When someone is born

again he does not need to be argued into accepting the Bible as the Word of God. He *knows* it is, because the Holy Spirit who breathed out the Scriptures witnesses with the believer's heart that the Bible is God's very Word.

2) Conviction that Jesus is the eternal Son of God who became flesh

When someone is born again, the Holy Spirit within him convinces him that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who became flesh. This is something which can indeed only be properly accepted and received by the working of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. What did Peter confess to Jesus? "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And what was Jesus' reply? "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." (Matthew 16.16 – 17). It was God the Father himself who supernaturally revealed to Peter, by means of the Holy Spirit, who Jesus is, and this experience is repeated in every true believer. Without the operation of the Holy Spirit in a person's life he cannot properly "see" who Jesus is. "No-one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12.3).

3) Conviction of sin

A person who is born again will experience conviction of sin. Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit comes he "will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16.8 – 10). Before his conversion a person who is born again is very likely to have thought of himself as a "fairly decent sort of person" who is "not perfect" but "tries his best". When the Holy Spirit works in him, however, he sees himself for what he is, a hell-deserving sinner, who has nothing to offer God which can in any way make up for, or pay for, his sin.

4) Resting upon Christ, and him alone, for salvation

Another sign of the rebirth is resting upon Christ, and him alone, for salvation. The person who is born again knows he is a sinner who deserves hell, he knows he cannot save himself, and he knows that Christ dying in the place of sinners is his only hope. Believing this, he runs into the arms of Christ, and wholeheartedly embraces him as his Saviour. He does not object, as unbelievers do, to the doctrine of the penal substitution, the teaching that Christ died for the sins of others. He is just grateful for it, and trusts Christ that he bore his sin. This is why the apostle Paul says that faith is "the gift of God" (Ephesians 2.8). Repentance and faith are gifts from God, the fruit of the work of the rebirth

in a person's life.

5) Meekness when sin is pointed out

A person who is truly born again will be meek when his sin is pointed out by another person. He already knows he is a sinner. He has no righteousness of his own to stand on. He has a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51.17). Therefore he cannot object when someone points out his sin. Hence Jesus said "Blessed are the meek, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5.5).

6) Pain upon falling into sin

A true believer will experience anguish when he falls into sin. The person who is truly born again will not experience sinless perfection, although he will grow to be more like Christ. When he sins, the Holy Spirit within him will make him feel deeply sorrowful. His anguish will be similar to that which Peter felt when he denied Christ. It is doubtful that a person who feels no pangs of conscience or remorse when he sins knows anything of the true work of the Spirit in his life.

7) A desire to put things right when one has fallen into sin

Not only will a person who is born again want to get right with God when he has fallen into sin, he will also be very anxious to put things right with any human being who has been harmed by his sin. Here is how Paul described some believers who were anxious to put right harm that they had done: "See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter" (2 Corinthians 7.11).

8) Delight in the law of God

A person who is born again will have a new attitude to the law of God. Before, he would have seen the commandments of God as restrictions upon his freedom. If he believed they were from God at all, he will have regarded them with resentment, as rules which prevented him from doing what he wanted to do. But following the rebirth, however, the true believer has the law of God written on his heart (Jeremiah 31.33). He genuinely echoes the words of the apostle Paul "For in my inner being I delight in God's law" (Romans 7.22).

9) Progress in holiness

We have already stated that a true believer who has been born again will never experience sinless perfection in this life. However, the Holy Spirit in him will progressively change his life to make him more and more like Christ. The Holy Spirit will not allow him to continue in sin, but when the believer does fall into sin, the Holy Spirit will make him feel miserable until he repents and goes forward in his relationship with God. John says,

He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God (1 John 3.8 – 10).

10) Love for believers for Christ's sake

The person who is truly born again will have a genuine love for other born again believers. He will see other believers as his brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. He will no longer think of them from a “worldly point of view” (2 Corinthians 5.16). He will be unable to look upon them using the old distinctions of race and class that he used to use, but he will now see them in a new way, as beloved fellow believers. This will mean that he will be committed to a local church, and he will work out within that church the obligation for believers to love one another with the love with which Christ has loved us (John 13.34). The scripture is quite clear that the absence of love for other believers is a clear sign of the lack of the rebirth in a person's life.

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. (1 John 3.11 – 15).

3) Lessons for us

What lessons can we take from what we have seen?

First of all, we need to test ourselves against this “check list” to see if we really have been born again. If you are not born again you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and you will go to Hell. If you have any doubts about whether or not you are born again, I urge you to seek Christ and ask him to give you the Holy Spirit. Ask God to show you your sin and need, that you might come to Christ and trust him as your Saviour.

If you know you have been born again, thank God for the work he has done in your life, and give him all the glory for it. Make sure that you co-operate with the Holy Spirit who is now living inside you, and who is working in you to make you more like Christ. The more you co-operate with him, the greater happiness and peace you will know in your life, even though there may be hardships you have to go through.

Also, if you are a believer, seek to grow in your discernment, that you may be able to see more clearly which of your friends and acquaintances are true believers and which are not, so that you may be able to help them effectively, and also so that you may accurately discern those with whom it is wise and good to relate deeply, and those with whom your relationship needs to be more distant.

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