

## Born Again from the Water and the Spirit (Fr. Cornel Todeasa)

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I once met a “born again Christian” on a plane. He had never heard of the Orthodox Church and was curious. “What is an Orthodox Christian? Are you born again?” he asked. While many Christians in America have never heard of Orthodox Christians, we hear a lot about “born again Christians.” If you, my fellow Orthodox Christians, were asked these questions, how would you answer?

My reply to his inquiry was, “Yes, we Orthodox are born again Christians. But in the “true believing way!”

Was my answer presumptuous? What is the “true believing way?” To find the answer, we need only to turn to the Gospel according to St. John (Chap. 3) and look at the conversation between our Lord and Nicodimus. Nicodimus was “a Pharisee . . . a ruler of the Jews,” who came to Jesus “by night” to ask Him about the “signs” He gave, which showed “that God was with Him.”

Jesus told Him that “Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” The Lord makes it very clear that a new birth (being born again) is necessary for Salvation and for “seeing the Kingdom.”

When Nicodimus naively asked how one can “enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born,” Jesus replied, “Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom.”

We see, then, that our Lord was very specific about what being “born again” means: it is to be “born from water and the Spirit,” which we know is Holy Baptism.

As Father Dumutru Staniloae writes, The rebirth of man in Christ, or the indwelling of Christ in him — This spiritual event is produced by the Mystery of Baptism and is equivalent with the entrance of man in the mystical body of Christ or in the Church. It consists, on the one side, of the annulment of primordial sin and of the other sins committed through the weakness sustained by the power of the primordial sin and, on the other side, by the indwelling of Christ and His grace in the soul, which is equivalent with the beginning of a new life in man. The walls of the spiritual prison crumbled and man entered the circuit of the unending love of Christ, manifested in the Communion of the Church.

Baptism is the commandment or commission given to the disciples by Jesus before His ascension into Heaven:

. . . all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.

(Matthew 28: 18-21)

Baptizing believers in the name of the Holy Trinity is exactly what the disciples did after they received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day. St. Peter preached the same day and three thousand people were baptized (Acts 3:41). If we read the Acts of the Apostles carefully, we see that baptism is the beginning of a new life, a new birth for every person becoming a member of the Body of Christ.

Our “new birth” is, unfortunately, understood by some confessions (denominations) in many different and incorrect ways. For many, “born again” only means making a new commitment to Christ and a new confession of faith. They make no connection between the new birth and Holy Baptism.



Orthodox believers also make a new commitment to Christ.

This recommitment also takes place through the Sacraments. Any time we repent in Holy Confession and receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, we are recommitting our lives to Christ, and we renew our baptism. This renewal of our baptism is a new commitment to Christ and the Gospel, but it is not considered a “new birth.”

Other denominations equate a “new birth” with a personal experience of the holy, a direct mystical touch by the Holy Spirit. This notion is again incorrect. A special experience of the Holy Spirit could be a valid spiritual experience, but once again, is not a “new birth.” It is not baptism.

Some churches associate new birth with baptism, but baptize only in the name of the Lord and not in the name of the Holy Trinity as Jesus commands. The early theologian Origen writes,

There is no legitimate baptism unless it be in the name of the Holy Trinity, since Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself said to the disciples that they should baptize . . . in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

There are even some churches that require new parishioners to be re-baptized (repeat their baptism) since they believe the only correct baptism is found in their church.

When St. Paul says, “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5), he

points to the fact that being born again from the water and the spirit can only take place one time. In the Creed, we also confess our faith in having “one Baptism.” In the Orthodox faith, Baptism cannot be repeated.

Referring to these words of our Lord, our new birth (being born again) takes place only once and is from the water and the Holy Spirit. As Christ was born from the Spirit, we must also be born from the Holy Spirit to enter the Kingdom. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born from the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

The early church, or the true believing Church (the Orthodox Church), which from the time of the Apostles until today has followed the teachings of our Lord, recognizes only one new birth and that is through Holy Baptism done in the name of the Holy Trinity: “We have seen the true Light; we have received the Holy Spirit; we have found the true Faith. Wherefore, let us worship the indivisible Trinity; for He has saved us” (Stichera of Pentecost).

Through Holy Baptism, we Orthodox Christians are born again, and through Holy Chrismation, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, which helps us to grow into the likeness of God.

And through the sacrament of Holy Confession, we renew our commitment to Christ and His teachings. Above all, through Holy Communion, we unite ourselves with Christ — so that not we, but Christ, lives in us.

So, when you are asked, my fellow Orthodox Christians, if you are “born again Christians,” answer, “Yes! . . . but in the truly biblical, “right-believing,” orthodox way: the only way. Reply that “I was born again from the water and the spirit through my baptism.”

*By Father Cornel Todeasa*

*This article was taken directly from the chapter “Born Again From the Water and the Spirit,” from Fr. Cornel’s book Seek First the Kingdom. This book can be purchased from Regina Orthodox Press by clicking their link here: <http://www.reginaorthodoxpress.com/sefiki.html>*

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