

## Steve Ray's Notes for John 3:1-5

### *What Does Water and Spirit Mean?*

**Recently a friend sent me an email trying to prove that Born Again by "water and Spirit" did not mean baptism. Here is one paragraph that he sent in which he quotes another Fundamentalist Bible commentator:**

*"In John, chapter 3, Jesus told Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews and a Pharisee, that one must be born 'from above' (Gr. anothen) in order to enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus asked if one could enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born. But Jesus told him that one must be born 'of the Spirit' in order to enter the kingdom of God. A better translation of John 3.5 would read: "... except a man be born of water—even of the Spirit—he cannot enter the kingdom of God." The little greek word kai is often translated "even"—which I believe better conveys the Lord's meaning here. He is contrasting the water of the womb and fleshly birth, with the water of the Spirit and heavenly birth. Water is often symbolic of the Holy Spirit in scripture (John 4.10-14; 7.37-39; Revelation 22.1, 17; Isaiah 12.3; 44.3; Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.33)."*

**So I responded:**

*"Hello Friend. Thanks for your recent e-mail. In reading even the first part of the article you sent I see it is exactly the arguments I used before, by God's grace, I realized better. The things you said in your paragraph are utter nonsense and though the author you quote cites a lot of Scripture, his reasoning and conclusion are blatantly unscriptural. I tried to explain to you the biblical understanding of "born again" when we had lunch but I saw at the time that you either were not listening or it went right over your head -- I'm not sure which."*

**My Comments to my friend:**

First, the Greek word *anthen* can and does mean both "born again" or "born from above". They both apply. John frequently uses words with two meanings (eg. *pneuma* which means both "wind" and "spirit").

*"Born of water and the Spirit"*: Using the word "even" instead of "and" is NOT a better translation. It is a cop-out. The little Greek word "*kai*" is the common word for "and" and only if someone has a Fundamentalist doctrinal bias would they try to slip the word "even" into the translation. It is dishonest and I am surprised you would fall for it.

**John 3:5 in the best Evangelical Translations of the Bible**

Below are your major Protestant translations. Notice NONE of them cheat and use the word "even"! Why not? Because they recognize something that your author either doesn't or is being dishonest about. Like you said to me, "Please study carefully with an open heart to the Holy Spirit" (and not to denominational bigots who twist Scripture to teach the doctrines of men).

The King James Version	The New International Version	Young's Literal Translation	The Revised Standard Version	The New Jerusalem Bible	The Good News Translation	The Contemporary English Version
5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water <b>and</b> of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.	5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water <b>and</b> the Spirit.	5 Jesus answered, 'Verily, verily, I say to thee, If any one may not be born of water, <b>and</b> the Spirit, he is not able to enter into the reign of God;	5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water <b>and</b> the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.	5 Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born through water <b>and</b> the Spirit;	5 "I am telling you the truth," replied Jesus. "No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water <b>and</b> the Spirit.	5 Jesus answered: I tell you for certain that before you can get into God's kingdom, you must be born not only by water, but by the Spirit.

So, if the best translation of *kai* is actually "even", then why don't the best translations use "even" instead of "and"?

**The Very First Christians (unanimously!!)** By the way, notice how the very first Christians interpreted John 3:5 below. Look how far you have strayed for the Early Church, the followers of the first apostles, and the martyrs and champions of the faith:

**St. Justin Martyr** (c. 100-c. 165), "Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated [reborn]: in the name of God the Father . . . and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing of water. For Christ said, 'Except you be born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' . . . The reason for doing this, we have learned from the Apostles" (*The First Apology* 1, 61) (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985], 1:183).

**St. Theophilus of Antioch** (died c. 185 A.D.), who first coined the word "Trinity," writes, "Those things which were created from the waters [Gen 1] were blessed by God, so that this might also be a sign that men would at a future time receive repentance and remission of sins through water and the bath of regeneration" (*To Autolytus* 2, 16) (William Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970], 1:75).

**Origen** (c. 185-c. 254) "The Church received from the Apostles the tradition [custom] of giving Baptism even to infants. For the Apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of divine mysteries, knew that there is in everyone the innate stains of sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit" (*Commentary on Romans* 5, 9) (Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 1:209).

**St. Augustine** (AD 354-430) "Who is so wicked as to want to exclude infants from the kingdom of heaven by prohibiting their being baptized and born again in Christ?" (*Pecc. merit.* 3, 6, 12) (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ., 1971], 5:244). "This [infant baptism] the Church always had, always held; this she received from the faith of our ancestors; this she perseveringly guards

even to the end" (Sermon 11, De Verb Apost) (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles Herbermann, et al, [New York: Robert Appleton, 1907], 2:270).

**Protestant Commentators** "Even" (no pun intended) scholarly Evangelical commentators will tell you the truth about this verse:

**Baptist commentator George Beasley-Murray** wrote in one of the most solid Evangelical commentaries on John's Gospel, "Suggestions like these do not do justice to the text [of John 3:5] and have not commended themselves to scholarly opinion. It would seem that **the text relates birth from above to baptism and the Holy Spirit**" (*Word Biblical Commentary: John*, [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987],36:48).

**Protestant commentator R.V.G. Tasker** agreed, "In light of the reference to the practice by Jesus of water baptism in verse 22, it is difficult to avoid construing the words 'of water and of the Spirit' conjunctively, and **regarding them as a description of Christian baptism**, in which cleansing and endowment are both essential elements" (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel According to St. John* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ., 1977], 4: 71).

Look what **Martin Luther** said! "Here [John 3:5] Christ is speaking of Baptism, of real and natural water such as a cow may drink . . . Here Christ also speaks of the Holy Spirit and teaches us to regard Baptism as a spiritual, yes, a Spirit-filled water, in which the Holy Spirit is present and active . . . And **thus the person who has been baptized is said to be born anew** . . . In this passage Christ declares that whoever is not born anew of the water and the Holy Spirit cannot come into the kingdom of God. Therefore God's words dare not be tampered with. Of course, we are well aware that Baptism is natural water. But after the Holy Spirit is added to it, we have more than mere water. It becomes a veritable bath of rejuvenation, a living bath which washes and purges man of sin and death, which cleanses him of all sin" ("Sermons on the Gospel of St. John" *Luther's Works* ed. Jaroslav Pelikan [St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publ. House, 1957], 22:283).

### **Further Thoughts on "Water and the Spirit"**

**It seems that God is kind of boring is a way :-)** since He always starts new things in the same way -- with "water and the Spirit". Consider the following:

**1)** The first creation came from the earth which was covered with WATER, and the SPIRIT hovered over the waters, and from the water emerged land and man and God's first creation (Gen 1:1-2).

**2)** A new humanity was started with Noah through WATER and SPIRIT. The ark went through the water and a dove (representing the Spirit) hovered overhead with an olive branch. Peter said this represents baptism which "now saves us" (1 Peter 3:18-21).

**3)** The nation of Israel was created through the WATER of the Red Sea (baptism) with the cloud and fire of the Holy SPIRIT overhead -- my oh my, again we have water and Spirit (Ex 14).

**4)** Ezekiel then describes what the New Covenant will look like. He said we will be

sprinkled with clean WATER and his SPIRIT will be placed in us (Ez 25:36). Born again, I suspect.

**5)** Then Jesus, right before saying you must be born of "water and the Spirit," had just gone down into the WATER of the Jordan and the SPIRIT came down and landed on his head. Again, water and the Spirit (Mt 3:16; Jn 1:29).

**6)** Jesus teaches Nicodemus that he must be born again, or from above which is accomplished through "WATER and the SPIRIT."

**7)** When Jesus finished these words what was the first thing he did? He went down and baptized people in the Jordan with his disciples (Jn 4:1-2).

**8)** At the first Holy Ghost Gospel Revival meeting :- ) Peter stood up at Pentecost and said, "Repent, and be baptized (WATER) every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy SPIRIT" (Acts 2:38).

**9)** Peter also says "Baptism now saves you" (1 Pet 3:18), and Paul is told "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16), and Paul writes that we are saved "by the washing of regeneration (WATER) and renewal in the Holy SPIRIT" (Titus 3:5).

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Too bad many Evangelicals and Fundamentalists refuse to see it but the Bible is pretty clear about new birth through the sacrament of baptism. The Early Church is also very clear, as is the teaching of the Catholic Church today.

When someone asks me "Have you been born again?" I simply say "Absolutely, but I've been born again the Bible Way!"

By Steve Ray

*Edited version of his blog from:*

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