

which are designed to change the natural man into a form which is capable of receiving the new life. A man can no more be born again and be endowed with the life of a higher kingdom without proper preparation for that change, than a potato can be endowed with the life of the body without the processes of mastication and digestion, or soil can be endowed with life without passing through the life-giving processes of the plant which is introduced into the soil.

THE LAYING ON OF HANDS

The ordinance of the church which completes this new birth and brings an endowment of Christ's life is the ordinance of laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. It was this new birth through the laying on of hands, this baptism with the Holy Ghost and with fire, which John promised should come from one who came after him. It was this new birth which Jesus promised to his disciples, and which came to them on the day of Pentecost, after they had obeyed the preparatory ordinances of the church. When the bystanders saw and heard the results of this new birth, they gladly listened to Peter and the eleven, who preached to them and told them how they too might have the experience of the new birth.

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call."—Acts 2:38, 39.

Thus may all be born again, and become God's sons and daughters, heirs of his kingdom.

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Grow Up into Christ

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.—Ephesians 4:11-16.

BIRTH is the beginning, not the end. When a baby is born into the world, his growth is not finished; it is just beginning. He has before him, if God wills, a whole lifetime in which to come to physical, mental, and spiritual maturity; to learn to grow, to develop, to change, to come to the fullness of his potentialities and capabilities.

When a man is "born again of water and of the Spirit," his life in God's kingdom is not complete, nor mature, nor perfect; it is not finished; it is only just begun. He has not arrived; he has only started his journey. He is not "grown up into Christ"; he has only been born into a new environment, with a new purpose, a new sense of direction. The new birth does not bring the complete and mature and perfect new life; it only *makes possible* the new life, which then must be lived to fullness, to maturity, to perfection.

BAPTISM IS THE BEGINNING

One of the misconceptions of the spiritually infantile mind is that when we are "born again" we have arrived, that henceforth we have reached the goal, and that we never more need to strive or struggle or grow or repent. Such people are like the little six-year-old boy who was once my neighbor. After about six weeks in the first grade, he came home to his mother greatly excited one afternoon and said, "Oh, Mother, I'm almost finished with school! Just a few more pages and I'll be through with my reading book."

Spiritual infants think that when they are born again they can do no more sin because they have arrived at spiritual maturity and perfection. They quote I John 3:9, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."

The idea that it is impossible for the born-again Christian to sin is an idea which had its origin in Gnosticism, the first great heresy to enter the Christian church. Among other strange doctrines, the Gnostics taught that matter, and therefore the physical body, did not exist. They argued that if the spirit was "born again," the man was saved, regardless of the actions of his body which after all simply didn't exist anyway. The body could sin as it liked, and so long as the spirit kept aloof and pure there was no sin. The modern Christians who contend that it is impossible for one who has been born again to sin, are the spiritual descendants of these Gnostic heretics, against which the first epistle of John is almost completely directed.

Comparison with other translations gives light as to the sense in which John meant this disputed verse to be interpreted. Murdock's translation of the Peshitto Syriac reads, "Every one that is born of God doth not practice sin." The twentieth century translation reads, "No one who has received the new life from God lives sinfully." The Centenary translation published by the American Baptist Publishing Society, reads,

"Whoever is a child of God cannot go on sinning." The Inspired Version, the correction by Joseph Smith, reads, "Whosoever is born of God doth not *continue* in sin" (I John 3:9).

We repeat, the man or woman who is "born again" has not arrived; he has only started to live. Though the new birth is certainly essential before a man can begin to live as he should, it does not guarantee instantaneous perfection, or an instantaneous salvation. There is still the possibility that born-again men may fall from grace, if they do not continue to make wise and righteous choices, if they do not continue to grow, to learn, to mature, to progress toward perfection. Having been born into Christ, they must "grow up into Christ." Jesus counseled his disciples to "pray lest ye enter into temptation." Paul manifested some concern lest he, a born-again Christian, should become a castaway. Read carefully the sixth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, which counsels them to go on to perfection, not staying forever with the first principles of repentance, faith, baptism, and laying on of hands. Then it states a determination for them, "Let us go on unto perfection . . . if God permit." Now in verses four and five, notice that there is a danger to those who do not go on to perfection:

"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame."

Men who are born again, but fail to go on to perfection may fall away through their own neglect; and if they prove false to the new life that is in them, and to all the help and strength which that new life can give to keep on combating sin, then there is no hope of their revival.

DOES NOT CONTINUE IN SIN

This does not mean that born-again people never sin, but that they do not *keep on sinning*, or *continue* to sin. The quality of their life is changed. Their allegiance has been shifted; they are facing in a new direction as they journey through life. Before the new birth, they loved and delighted in sin. After the new birth they abhor sin, even though through weakness they may find themselves overcome by it on occasions when they are not as alert or watchful or faithful as they should be. If they do slip into sin, they will heed the promptings of the new life which has been transplanted into them and *repent* of that sin. Repentance brings forgiveness, and they can continue on to perfection, overcoming day by day until all sin is eliminated from their lives. On the other hand, the man who has not been born again commits sin, loves his sin, and keeps on sinning. There is nothing within him to call to repentance, so long as he is ruled by his own carnal, sensual, devilish, stubborn, rebellious spirit. And without repentance there can be no forgiveness. Thus the man who has *not* been born again goes on from worse to worse, until the end is both physical and spiritual death, and eternal banishment from God.

Peter also has something to say about those who are born again, but permit themselves to be overcome. II Peter 2:20 says, "For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning." In the tenth chapter of Hebrews the author says (verses 26, 27). "For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation."

There are many passages in Paul's epistles which stress the fact that men who are born again need to "grow up" into

Christ. Paul certainly had been born again before he wrote to the Philippians:

"Not as though I had already attained [arrived], either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect [mature], be thus minded."—Philippians 3:12-15.

What Paul is saying is that he has not yet "arrived," he is not yet mature or perfect; he has not yet finished the race. The new birth started him on a new life, gave him a new hope, a new goal, and set his feet in the path leading to the attainment of that goal. But he must press forward until he reaches the goal, perfection in Christ Jesus.

There is small consolation in Paul's writings for those who think that the new birth is the end and goal of all Christian endeavor, the stopping place, rather than the beginning place. Read, for example, the fifth chapter of the Hebrew letter, beginning with the eleventh verse.

"We have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age."

Here the author was writing to some people who had been born again, but had never progressed out of their spiritual infancy. They were still eating milk when they should have been ready for more solid food; and because of their immaturity in spiritual things, the writer found it hard to tell to them the things which they should have been prepared to hear and to teach to others.

In I Corinthians 14:20, Paul again says: "Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in *malice* be ye children, but in *understanding* be men." In Colossians 1:28 he expresses a desire to present every man perfect (and perfect here carries the sense of maturity) in Christ Jesus.

When you are born again the battle is not over; it has just begun. Before that time you were fighting on the *wrong* side. Now you are fighting on the *right* side, but the battle is still to be won. Satan will now try harder because *you* are trying harder. He doesn't need to worry about those who are still in rebellion against God and Christ; they are his anyway. Satan *is* intensely concerned about those who have deserted him, and those who are active against him. It is worth remembering that Jesus received his strongest and most insistent temptation just after his baptism, after his reception of the Holy Spirit, and just as he was ready to begin his life work. Do not expect to be immune to temptation or sin after you are born again, but

"Watch and fight and pray,
The battle ne'er give o'er;
Renew it boldly every day,
And help divine implore."

ASSISTANCE IN GROWING

Although each one of us must *individually* be born again, growing up into Christ is not altogether an individual process. Our Scripture reading from the fourth chapter of Ephesians says that God gave some apostles, and some prophets, and

some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect [mature] man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). Till *we all* come to the perfect man! Not some of us, individually, but all of us, together. If we are to grow as we should, we need each other. If the hand of an infant is to grow, the hand needs the life of the body, the whole body, working and functioning together, to supply the materials of growth. If the body dies, the hand dies. If the body thrives, the hand thrives and grows. If the infant member of the church expects to grow, he needs all the other members of the body to give him the sustenance of growth, to help direct that growth. Just as no single organ or member of the body can grow alone, so no one who is born again can grow up into Christ unless the rest of the body of Christ, his church, functions in its proper place and carries out its appointed task toward the nourishment and strengthening and growth of the body as a whole. As Paul goes on to say: that we,

"Speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which *every joint* supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of *every part*, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

When every part, every joint, every organ, every member of the body does its part in cooperation with every other part, directed by Christ, the head, who is the life-giving intelligence which permeates that body, the entire body will grow together, and each member will grow with it, until we *all* come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.