

The Early Church Fathers on Being Born Again

In John 3:3, Jesus tells Nicodimus no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. To some this means that once a person makes a personal commitment to Christ he is born again. As the Apostle Paul would say: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). And, of course, there is a mountain of evidence that proves the power of God can change lives. However, when Jesus and the Early Church Fathers spoke about being born again they were talking about something different. When Nicodimus questioned Jesus following the above proclamation, Jesus got more specific. He said: "I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." In other words, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being baptized. It is important to point out that Jesus is not speaking of merely being baptized. Baptism infuses us with grace. Grace enables us to recognize our need for Christ. It also enables us to be who God wants us to be. And that brings us to salvation.

Justin Martyr

Then they are brought by us where there is water and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father... and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit [Matt. 28:19], they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, "Unless you are born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (*First Apology* 61 [A.D. 151]).

Irenaeus

And [Naaman] dipped himself . . . seven times in the Jordan' [2 Kgs. 5:14]. It was not for nothing that Naaman of old, when suffering from leprosy, was purified upon his being baptized, but [this served] as an indication to us. For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean, by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, from our old transgressions, being spiritually regenerated as newborn babes, even as the Lord has declared: 'Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' [John 3:5] (*Fragments of the Lost Writings* 34 [inter A.D. 175-185]).

Theophilus

Moreover, those things which were created from the waters 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—all who proceed to the truth and are born again and receive a blessing from God (*To Autolycus* 2:16 [A.D. 181]).

Clement of Rome

But you will perhaps say, 'What does the baptism of water contribute toward the worship of God?' In the first place, because that which has pleased God is fulfilled. In the second place, because when you are regenerated and born again of water and of God, the frailty of your former birth, which you have through men, is cut off, and so . . . you shall be able to attain salvation; but otherwise it is impossible. For thus has the true prophet [Jesus] testified to us with an oath: "Verily, I say to you, that unless a man is born again of water . . . he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (*Recognitions of Clement* 6:9 [A.D. 221]).

Cyprian

[I]t behooves those to be baptized . . . so that they are prepared, in the lawful and true and only baptism of the holy Church, by divine regeneration, for the kingdom of God . . . because it is written "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (*Epistles* 72 [73]: 21 [A.D. 252]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

Since man is of a twofold nature, composed of body and soul, the purification also is twofold: the corporeal for the corporeal and the incorporeal for the incorporeal. The water cleanses the body, and the Spirit seals the soul. . . . When you go down into the water, then, regard not simply the water, but look for salvation through the power of the

Spirit. For without both you cannot attain to perfection. It is not who says this, but the Lord Jesus Christ, who has the power in this matter. And he says, 'Unless a man be born again,' and he adds the words 'of water and of the Spirit,' 'he cannot enter the kingdom of God.' He that is baptized with water, but is not found worthy of the Spirit, does not receive the grace in perfection. Nor, if a man be virtuous in his deeds, but does not receive the seal by means of the water, shall he enter the kingdom of heaven. A bold saying, but not mine; for it is Jesus who has declared it (*Catechetical Lectures* 3:4 [A.D. 350]).

Hilary of Poitiers

Or, again, since he who plants and he who waters are one, are they not one because, being themselves born again in one baptism they form a ministry of one regenerating baptism? (*On the Trinity* 8:9 [A.D. 356-360]).

Basil

This then is what it is to be born again of water and of the Spirit, the being made dead being affected in the water, while our life is wrought in us through the Spirit. In three immersions, then, and with three invocations, the great mystery of baptism is performed, to the end that the type of death may be fully figured, and that by the tradition of the divine knowledge the baptized may have their souls enlightened (*On the Holy Spirit* 15:35 [A.D. 375]).

Gregory of Nyssa

purposing to change us from corruption to incorruption by the birth from above, the birth by water and the Spirit, Himself led the way in this birth, drawing down upon the water, by His own baptism, the Holy Spirit; so that in all things He became the first-born of those who are spiritually born again, and gave the name of brethren to those who partook in a birth like to His own by water and the Spirit. But since it was also meet that He should implant in our nature the power of rising again from the dead, He becomes the in that He first by His own act loosed the pains of death(9), so that His new birth from the dead was made a way for us also, since the pains of death, wherein we were held, were loosed by the resurrection of the Lord. Thus, just as by having shared in the washing of regeneration (*Against Eunomius* 2:8 [A.D. 382]).

Ambrose of Milan

The Church was redeemed at the price of Christ's blood. Jew or Greek, it makes no difference; but if he has believed, he must circumcise himself from his sins [in baptism (Col. 2:11-12)] so that he can be saved . . . for no one ascends into the kingdom of heaven except through the sacrament of baptism.... "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (*On Abraham* 2:11:79-84 [A.D. 387]).

Augustine

It is this one Spirit who makes it possible for an infant to be regenerated . . . when that infant is brought to baptism; and it is through this one Spirit that the infant so presented is reborn. For it is not written, "Unless a man be born again by the will of his parents" or "by the faith of those presenting him or ministering to him," but, "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit." The water, therefore, manifesting exteriorly the sacrament of grace, and the Spirit effecting interiorly the benefit of grace, both regenerate in one Christ that man who was generated in Adam (*Letters* 98:2 [A.D. 408]).

Jerome

He endeavors to show that "they who with full assurance of faith have been born again in baptism, cannot be overthrown by the devil" (*Against Jovianus* 1:3 [A.D. 393]).