

“I cannot too strongly celebrate the publication of this book. Owing in part to several decades of dispute over justification and how a person is set right with God, we have tended to neglect another component of conversion no less important. Conversion under the terms of the new covenant is more than a matter of position and status in Christ, though never less: it includes miraculous Spirit-given transformation, something immeasurably beyond mere human resolution. It is new birth; it makes us new creatures; it demonstrates that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. All the creedal orthodoxy in the world cannot replace it. The reason why ‘You must be born again’ is so important is that you must be born again.”

D. A. Carson,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois

“Many will be thankful that John Piper is here addressing the key need of our times. Every awakening begins with the renewed discovery of Christ’s teaching on the new birth. Here is that amazing teaching in lucid yet comprehensive form; with a relevance to readers worldwide.”

Iain H. Murray

“When I was a boy my grandmother asked me, ‘Have you been born again?’ Though I didn’t understand what she meant at the time, that question led to my conversion to Christ. In this wonderful book, Pastor John Piper rescues the term ‘born again’ from the abuse and overuse to which it is subject in our culture today. This is a fresh presentation of the evangelical doctrine of the new birth, a work filled with theological insight and pastoral wisdom.”

Timothy George,  
Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama  
and Senior Editor of *Christianity Today*

“Expository and practical, this rich survey of New Testament teaching explores the nature of the new birth and the life which flows from it. Full of refreshment and encouragement, it reveals more deeply the glory of Christ and the gospel and motivates a renewed commitment to live out this good news and share it with others.”

David Jackman,  
The Proclamation Trust, London, U.K.

“The *doctrine* of the new birth is cheapened and hidden because so many ‘professing Christians’ have not experienced the *reality* of the new birth. The *reality* of the new birth is seemingly so little celebrated because so few understand the majestic *doctrine* of the new birth. *Finally Alive* sweeps away so much confusion and gives its readers so much cause for rejoicing in the saving work of God through Jesus Christ His beloved Son. Nothing could be more vital than God’s people understanding what regeneration looks and feels and tastes and desires and speaks and walks and thinks like. Nothing could be more eternally important than Christian people knowing what the Bible teaches about the new birth and knowing that they have experienced



it. One wonders why it's taken so long for a book on the new birth to be written! But now it has and I pray every reader rejoices in God for the rich beauties of Christ Jesus so compellingly shared in its pages."

Thabiti Anyabwile,

First Baptist Church, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands

"John Piper rescues the term 'born again' from its contemporary status as a gauche or glib cliché and reunites it with a fully orbéd biblical understanding of the new birth. Theologically thorough and yet heart-warmingly pastoral and practical, this important book should help God's people to value the remarkable status and responsibility of being 'born again.'"

Richard Cunningham,

Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), U.K.

"Regeneration, or new birth, meaning simply the new you through, with, in, and under Christ, is a largely neglected theme today, but this fine set of sermons, criss-crossing the New Testament data with great precision, goes far to fill the gap. Highly recommended."

J. I. Packer,

Regent College, Vancouver, Canada

"The evangelical church is witnessing a resurgent commitment to social action—the doing of good deeds for a needy culture and world. While correct and commendable for many reasons, one danger now as ever is that 'good deeds' will supplant 'good news.' We need constant reminders of the truth of what Jesus said: 'What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?' (Matt. 16:26). John Piper's *Finally Alive* is a vivid and stirring description of the Bible's teaching on what it means to be born again. The good news of the gospel—that by God's grace, and through faith in Christ and the all-sufficiency of his atoning death, one may be fully forgiven and born again to newness of life that will never end—is a message that must be understood, believed, embraced, and proclaimed for true transformation of life to occur. 'You must be born again' (John 3:7) is a 'must' we dare not lose. *Finally Alive* unpacks the truth, the necessity, and the process of the new birth clearly and beautifully. For those curious about the Christian faith to those deeply committed to Christ and his ways, come read and behold the glory of any and every sinner's only hope—the miracle of the new birth that brings forth new life in Christ that will never end."

Bruce Ware,

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

"*Have I been born again?* is not a question to be answered hastily. In this book, Piper strips away our complacency, arguing that many people falsely believe they are Christians. Because no issue could be more critical, I believe this is the most important book Piper has written."

Adrian Warnock  
blogger





# FINALLY ALIVE

What Happens When  
We Are Born Again



John Piper

CHRISTIAN  
**FOCUS**





John Piper is pastor for Preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He has ministered at Bethlehem since 1980. John and his wife, Noël, have four sons, one daughter, and an increasing number of grandchildren.

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ISBN 978-1-84550-421-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published in 2009

by

Christian Focus Publications Ltd.,  
Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire,  
IV20 1TW, Scotland, Great Britain  
[www.christianfocus.com](http://www.christianfocus.com)

and

Desiring God,  
PO Box 2901 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55402, USA  
[www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org)

Cover design by [moose77.com](http://moose77.com)

Printed in the Bell & Bain, Glasgow

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*Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*

John 3:7-8





## INTRODUCTION

### AUGUSTINE, LEWIS, BARNA, AND THE BIBLE

The declaration of Jesus that we must be born again (John 3:7) is either deluded or devastating to the one who would be captain of his soul. Not many biblical realities are better designed by God to reveal our helplessness in sin. “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). It is the Wind, not we, who finally rules the soul.

Two stories about the freedom of God’s Spirit in the new birth will help us avoid superficial stereotypes about how he works. St. Augustine was converted to Christ in A. D. 386, and C. S. Lewis became a Christian in 1931. For both, it was after long struggles with unbelief. But the way the Wind blew with its final converting power was dramatically different for each.

#### AUGUSTINE’S STORY

For Augustine, the idol that kept him from Christ was sex. He had given way to his passions for the last sixteen years. He had





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AUGUSTINE, LEWIS, BARNA, AND THE BIBLE

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left home at age sixteen, but his mother Monica had never ceased to pray. He was now almost thirty-two. “I began to search for a means of gaining the strength I needed to enjoy you [O Lord], but I could not find this means until I embraced the mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Then came one of the most important days in church history. It was late August, 386. Augustine was almost thirty-two years old. With his best friend Alypius, he was talking about the remarkable sacrifice and holiness of Antony, an Egyptian monk. Augustine was stung by his own bestial bondage to lust, when others were free and holy in Christ.

There was a small garden attached to the house where we lodged...I now found myself driven by the tumult in my breast to take refuge in this garden, where no one could interrupt that fierce struggle in which I was my own contestant...I was beside myself with madness that would bring me sanity. I was dying a death that would bring me life...I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant...I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees.<sup>2</sup>

But he began to see more clearly that the gain was far greater than the loss, and by a miracle of grace he began to see the beauty of chastity in the presence of Christ. The battle came down to the beauty of continence in fellowship with Christ versus the “trifles” that plucked at his flesh.

I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes...All at once I heard the singsong voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but

<sup>1</sup> Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions*, 152 (VII, 18).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 170–171 (VIII, 8).





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## FINALLY ALIVE

again and again it repeated the refrain “Take it and read, take it and read.”<sup>3</sup>

So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting... seized [the book of Paul’s epistles] and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: “Not in reveling in drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature’s appetites” (Rom. 13:13-14). I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine was born again. He never turned back to the old ways. The Wind blew in a garden. It blew with a child’s voice. It blew through a word of Scripture. And the darkness of his heart was dispelled.

### LEWIS’S STORY

Since 1925, Lewis had been a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, where he served as tutor in English Language and Literature. Lewis is perhaps best known today as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

On an evening in September, 1931, Lewis discussed Christianity with J. R. R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings*) and with Hugo Dyson. In retrospect, we can say that God was putting things in place for the conversion that would follow the next day.

However, unlike Augustine, the conversion was unemotional and without manifest struggle. All the struggle had gone before. Here is how he tells the story of his saving bus ride to the zoo:

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 177–178 (VIII, 12).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 178 (VIII, 12).





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#### AUGUSTINE, LEWIS, BARNA, AND THE BIBLE

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I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven into Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. And yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. “Emotional” is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake. And it was, like that moment on top of the bus, ambiguous. Freedom, or necessity? Or do they differ at their maximum?<sup>5</sup>

Whether one is driven almost to madness in the moment of the new birth, or experiences it quietly on a bus to the zoo, the reality is in fact stupendous. Nothing is more important for two human souls than to say truly, “We know that we have passed out of death into life” (1 John 3:14). That’s the reality this book is about.

#### THE DEFAMATION OF THE TERM *BORN AGAIN*

But not everyone today is jealous to esteem this miracle for the wonder that it is. If you go to research groups online, you can read things like this: “Born Again Christians Just as Likely to Divorce as Are Non-Christians.” The same kind of statistics are given by Ron Sider in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) and by Mark Regnerus in his book *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

What matters most for our concern in this book is the way the term *born again* is being used. In particular, the Barna Group, a Christian research firm, has used it in reporting their

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc., 1955), 237.





findings. In the report titled “Born Again Christians Just as Likely to Divorce as Are Non-Christians,” Barna uses the word *evangelicals* interchangeably with *born again* and reports that:

- Only nine percent of evangelicals tithe.
- Of 12,000 teenagers who took the pledge to wait for marriage, 80% had sex outside marriage in the next seven years.
- Twenty-six percent of traditional evangelicals do not think premarital sex is wrong.
- White evangelicals are more likely than Catholics and main-line Protestants to object to having black neighbors.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the broadly defined evangelical church as a whole in America and the West in general is apparently not very unlike the world. It goes to church on Sunday and has a veneer of religion, but its religion is basically an add-on to the same way of life the world lives, not a transforming power.

#### A PROFOUND MISTAKE

I want to say loud and clear that when the Barna Group uses the term *born again* to describe American church-goers whose lives are indistinguishable from the world, and who sin as much as the world, and sacrifice for others as little as the world, and embrace injustice as readily as the world, and covet things as greedily as the world, and enjoy God-ignoring entertainment as enthusiastically as the world—when the term *born again* is used to describe these professing Christians, the Barna Group is making a profound mistake. It is using the biblical term *born again* in a way that would make it unrecognizable by Jesus and the biblical writers.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics reported in Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 18–28.





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AUGUSTINE, LEWIS, BARNA, AND THE BIBLE

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Here is the way the researchers defined *born again* in their research:

“Born again Christians” were defined in these surveys as people who said they have made “a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today” and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as “born again.” Being classified as “born again” is not dependent upon church or denominational affiliation or involvement.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, in this research the term *born again* refers to people who *say* things. They say, “I have a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. It’s important to me.” They say, “I believe that I will go to Heaven when I die. I have confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior.” Then the Barna Group takes them at their word, ascribes to them the infinitely important reality of the new birth, and then slanders that precious biblical reality by saying that regenerate hearts have no more victory over sin than unregenerate hearts.

THE NEW TESTAMENT  
MOVES IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION

I’m not saying their research is wrong. It appears to be appallingly right. I am not saying that the church is not as worldly as they say it is. *I am* saying that the writers of the New Testament think in exactly the opposite direction about being born again. Instead of moving from a profession of faith, to the label *born again*, to the worldliness of these so-called *born again* people, to the conclusion that the new birth does

<sup>7</sup> [www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=170](http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=170), accessed 05-05-08.





not radically change people, the New Testament moves in the other direction.

It moves from the absolute certainty that the new birth radically changes people, to the observation that many professing Christians are indeed (as the Barna Group says) not radically changed, to the conclusion that they are not born again. The New Testament, unlike the Barna Group, does not defile the new birth with the worldliness of unregenerate, professing Christians.

For example, one of the main points of the First Epistle of John is to drive home this very truth:

- 1 John 2:29: “If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.”
- 1 John 3:9: “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.”
- 1 John 4:7: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.”
- 1 John 5:4: “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”
- 1 John 5:18: “We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.”

We will come back to texts like these in the chapters to come. There are many questions to answer, and we will distance ourselves plainly from perfectionism and deal realistically with the failures of genuine Christians.

But for now, is it not true that these statements appear to be written with the very claims of the Barna Group in mind? Are





#### AUGUSTINE, LEWIS, BARNA, AND THE BIBLE

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these texts not addressed to the false claim that born again people are morally indistinguishable from the world? The Bible is profoundly aware of such people in the church. That is one reason why 1 John was written. But instead of following the Barna Group, the Bible says that the research is not finding that born again people are permeated with worldliness; the research is finding that the church is permeated by people who are not born again.

#### “REGENERATION”

This is a book about the new birth. What does the Bible teach about being born again? Another word for being born again is *regeneration*. It is helpful to use that word from time to time. I hope you are willing to add it to your vocabulary if it's not there. That would include adding the word *regenerate* as both a verb (God *regenerates* people) and an adjective (only *regenerate* people are saved). Regenerate people and born again people are the same. I will use the terms interchangeably.

#### DESECRATING THE TERM *BORN AGAIN*

In this introduction, I will give an overview of where we are going and why. You can already see one of the reasons I want to focus on this issue. The term *born again* is desecrated when it is used the way the Barna Group uses it. And, of course, that particular misuse of the biblical term is not the only kind.

The term *born again* has come to mean for many people merely that someone or something got a new lease on life. So a quick survey of the internet shows that Cisco Systems, the communications company, has been born again; and the Green Movement has been born again; the Davie Shipyard in Montreal has been born again; the west end in Boston has been born again; Kosher foods for Orthodox Jews have been born again, and so





on. So it's not surprising that we have to be careful when we read that 45% of Americans say they have been religiously born again.

The term *born again* is very precious and very crucial in the Bible. So our main concern is to know what God intends when the Bible uses this language, so that by his grace we may experience it and help others do the same. It is of enormous consequence that we know what being born again really means.

#### WHAT REALLY HAPPENED TO US?

Another reason for a book on the new birth is to help followers of Christ to know what really happened to us when we were converted. It is far more glorious than many think it is. It is also more glorious than I think it is. It is wonderful beyond all human comprehension. But that mystery is not because there is little about it in the Bible. There is much about it in the Bible. It's because when all is understood as well as we can understand it in this age when we see "in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12), there is still more. So I hope that when we are done, we will know more fully and know more accurately what happened to us when we were born again.

#### WHAT MUST HAPPEN TO BE BORN AGAIN

Another reason for this treatment of the new birth is that there are millions of people who do not yet follow Christ. They are not born again. I pray that God might use this book as one means of their new birth. Some of them are church attenders and church members, even leaders. But they are not born again. They are cultural Christians. Religion is a formal, external thing. There has been no true inner awakening from spiritual death to spiritual life.

I want to serve those people by showing them what must happen to them. And by the word and the prayers of believers





and the Spirit of God, I hope that this book will be a means of many being born again. The new birth, as we will see, is not a work of man. No human makes the new birth happen. No preacher and no writer can make it happen. You can't make it happen to yourself. God makes it happen. It happens to us, not by us.

But it always happens through the word of God. Here is the way the apostle Peter puts it: "Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God....And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pet. 1:23–25). So even though God is the one who begets his children, the seed by which he does it is the word of God, the gospel that we preach. So I pray that one of the great effects of these very human chapters will be that very supernatural miracle. My aim is to explain the new birth as clearly as I can from the Bible so that readers can see it for themselves.

There are three reasons I want you who are Christians to know what happened to you when you were born again:

- 1 When you are truly born again and grow in the grace and knowledge of what the Lord has done for you, your fellowship with God will be sweet, and your assurance that he is your Father will be deep. I want that for you.
- 2 If you know what really happened to you in your new birth, you will treasure God and his Spirit and his Son and his word more highly than you ever have. In this, Christ will be glorified.
- 3 In the process of believers discovering what really happened to them, the seriousness and the supernatural nature of conversion will rise and that, I pray, will serve a more general awakening of authenticity in the Christian church so that religious hypocrisy will diminish and the world will see real love and sacrifice and courage in the service of Christ.



CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT BEING *BORN AGAIN*

There are several crucial questions we will be asking. One is: *What is the new birth?* That is, what actually happens? What is it like? What changes? What comes into being that wasn't there before?

Along the way, we will be trying to explain how the new birth relates to other things that God does to save us. For example, how does being born again relate to:

- God's effectual calling ("Those whom he called he justified," Rom. 8:30),
- the new creation ("If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation," 2 Cor. 5:17),
- God's drawing us to Christ ("No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," John 6:44),
- God's giving people to his Son ("All that the Father gives me will come to me," John 6:37),
- God's opening our hearts ("The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul," Acts 16:14),
- God's illumining our hearts ("God...has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," 2 Cor. 4:6),
- God's taking the heart of stone out and giving us a heart of flesh ("I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh," Ezek. 36:26),
- God's making us alive ("even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ," Eph. 2:5),
- God's adopting us into his family ("You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" Rom. 8:15).

How does God's act of regeneration relate to all these wonderful ways of describing what happened to us when God saved us?



Another question we will ask is: *Why is the new birth necessary?* Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:7, “You must be born again.” Not “I suggest it,” or “Your life would improve if you added this experience.” Why is it that “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3)? This is one of the great reasons for pursuing a right knowledge of the new birth. Until we realize that we must be born again, and why we must be born again, we probably will not realize what our condition really is without salvation.

Most people do not know what is really wrong with them. One way to help them make a true and terrible and hopeful diagnosis is to show them the kind of remedy God has provided, namely, the new birth. If you have a sore on your ankle and after the doctor does his test, he comes in and says, “I have hard news: We have to take your leg off just below the knee,” then that remedy tells you more about the sore than many erudite medical words. So it is with the remedy “You must be born again.”

After *What?* and *Why?* we will ask *How?* How does it come about? What does God do in regeneration? What did he do in history to make it possible? If new birth is decisively the work of God, which it is, how do I experience it? Is there anything I can do to make it happen? What is my part in bringing it about?

After *What?* and *Why?* and *How?* we ask *For what?* What is the aim of the new birth? What effects does it have? What changes come about in life? What is it like to live as a born-again person?

And finally, *What can we do to help others be born again?* If God is the great Doer in this affair, what can we do? Does our doing really matter? We will end with the practical matter of personal evangelism and how it relates to the new birth.





THE GREAT NEED AND THE USE OF MEANS

Much is at stake in seeing the new birth in true biblical proportions. Heaven and hell are at stake—and a church in the world *now* that acts more like Jesus and less like the culture around it.

Which brings us back to where we started, namely, the claim that born again Christians have lifestyles of worldliness and sin that are indistinguishable from the unregenerate. I don't think so. 1 John 5:4: "Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith." But my conviction is not rosy news for the church. It implies that there are millions of church attenders who are not born again.

Nevertheless, in spite of this conviction, I will distance myself from perfectionism. In other words, I don't think that the new birth makes us perfect in this life. Sin remains, and the fight of faith is a daily necessity. Some unbelievers look like better people than some believers. But that is because some pretty bad people have been born again, and the process of transformation is not always as fast as we would like.

It's also because there are unregenerate people who for all kinds of genetic and social reasons conform to an outward morality while being God-indifferent or God-hostile on the inside. God sees the line between the regenerate and the unregenerate perfectly. We don't. But there is such a line, and those who have been born again are being changed, even if slowly, from one degree of humility and love to the next.

This matters. It matters for eternity, and it matters for the glory of Christ in this life. If people are to enter finally into the kingdom of God (John 3:3), and if the church is to let her light shine on earth that people may give glory to God (Matt. 5:16), then the new birth must be experienced.





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AUGUSTINE, LEWIS, BARNA, AND THE BIBLE

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God is the great Doer in this miracle of regeneration. And he has not been silent about it. This means that he does not want us to be ignorant of what he does in the new birth. It means that knowing what he has revealed about the new birth is good for us. When Jesus said to Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (John 3:7), he was not sharing interesting and unimportant information. He was leading him to eternal life.

That’s what I hope this echo of Jesus’ words—this book—will do. Only God regenerates human beings. But he uses means. May his mercy make this one of them. If he does that for you (or if he already has), then you are (or you will be) truly, invincibly, finally alive.





PART ONE  
WHAT IS THE NEW BIRTH?





*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"*

John 3:1-10

