

John 3:5-6 (Misinterpreted Scriptures)

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:5-6 NASB)

Misinterpretation: This passage is used by the UPC as evidence that a person must be baptized (born of water) and be filled with the Holy Spirit (born of the Spirit) in order to enter the kingdom of God. In other words, to be saved, according to the UPC's interpretation of this passage, a person must be baptized of water and receive the Holy Spirit.

Facts: It's indisputably clear that a person must receive the Holy Spirit to be saved (cf. Rom. 8:9). Therefore, the UPC's interpretation of the "born of the Spirit" portion of this passage is correct. (The problem with their view of receiving the Holy Spirit is that it is something that happens after faith—a view that Paul clearly disagrees with in Eph 1:13 when he writes that we are "sealed" with the Holy Spirit upon belief).

The greater question, then, is about baptism. What does Jesus mean when He says that a person must be born of water to enter the kingdom of Heaven? Is He referring to water baptism or something else?

In order to answer that question I'd like to quote from Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary. Their explanation of this passage is the best that I've read anywhere. I could just paraphrase it but in my mind that would be plagiarism. They sum it up better than I ever could.

Before I give the citation, though, I'd like to stress that

baptism is indeed commanded by Christ (cf. Mat. 28:19). Because of that, if a person claims to have believed and yet refuses to obey Christ then I doubt the sincerity of their belief. Nevertheless, baptism is a *response* to grace, it is not the *cause* of grace. We get baptized *because* we are saved, not *order* to get saved.

Without further ado, here is the quote from Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary ((I apologize for the long paragraph; that is how it was written))

Of water has been interpreted as: (1) water baptism. But the NT teaches that one is born again at the point of faith, not baptism (Acts 10:43–47); (2) a synonym for the Holy Spirit. The phrase could be translated “born of water, even the spirit”; (3) a symbol of the Word of God (Eph. 5:26; 1 Pet. 1:23); (4) physical birth; (5) John’s baptism; or (6) a symbol, along with wind, in OT imagery for the work of God from above. The first three views are questionable since they must rely on future teaching in the Scripture which would not have been accessible to Jesus’ listeners For interpretation 4, the idea is that Nicodemus brought up physical birth (3:4) and Jesus went on to say, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” (3:6). If one could enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, he would still be flesh. This position is not likely since Jesus’ words would be trivial and do not advance the argument. Options 5 and 6 are the better choices for the meaning of the statement. Option 5 is a viable one since Nicodemus would probably be familiar with John’s baptism. Jesus would be saying that one must identify with and accept John’s message (baptism) and then one would receive Messiah’s baptism in the Spirit as John promised (1:31–33). This view has both historical and theological support. Christ emphasizes by v. 6 that there are two realms, that of the flesh and the Spirit. Humans cannot save themselves but must rely on God’s Spirit to regenerate them. Option 6 relies on the translation of pneuma, wind or spirit.

Under this view the Greek term should be understood as wind rather than spirit and thus serve alongside of water as symbols for spiritual truths similar to how these terms are used in the OT (for example, Is. 44:3–5 and Ezek. 37:9, 10). Jesus, then, is contrasting the things from below (earthly womb) from the elements of water and wind from above (the divine work of the Spirit of God). A teacher of Israel should understand such OT imagery. Nicodemus may have been challenged by Christ, since he was a teacher of Israel, to understand the questions of Prov. 30:3–5: (1) Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? (2) Who has gathered the wind in His fist? (3) Who has bound the waters in a garment? (4) Who has established all the ends of the earth? (5) What is His name, and what is His Son's name? "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him" (compare John 3:15, 16). ((Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald Barclay Allen and H. Wayne House, Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), Jn 3:5.))

I agree with their opinion that views 5 and 6 are the most likely. I used to believe that being born of water referred to baptism, but I changed my mind even before I left the UPC. I decided that it was more likely that it referred to physical birth while being born of the Spirit referred to spiritual birth. I still think that is a plausible view; it does make sense textually. However, I now think that it was referring to OT imagery. I'm not dogmatic about my view because there are other explanations that make sense. This is one of those passages that has several potential interpretations. The one thing that they all agree on, though, is that Jesus is clearly saying that the Holy Spirit is necessary for salvation. That's what we need to focus on. The method of receiving the Holy Spirit—belief—is given several verses later, in John 3:16.