

The Armstrong Born Again Doctrine

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1.0 Introduction

During His earthly ministry, Jesus used many different analogies to explain the gospel of the kingdom of God to His disciples. One of the most famous is a statement made by Jesus to Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews, telling him that he must be born again.

Most people interpret being born again as a metaphor for Christian conversion, but an alternative explanation appeared among various Millerite groups during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Many within the Church of God Seventh Day held the traditional view that Christians are reborn internally at conversion and externally at the resurrection (i.e., two separate metaphors); but some began to teach that conversion was merely a conception and that the new birth (mentioned in John 3) actually occurred only at the resurrection.¹

In the early days of the Worldwide Church of God, Herbert Armstrong taught the traditional view, but around 1945, he began to teach that the Christian life is a gestation period and that Christians are finally born again at the resurrection.² The purpose of this paper is to review and evaluate Herbert Armstrong's position about being born again.

2.0 Defining Terms

Since this topic involves questions about semantics, a brief review of the terms and concepts related to the doctrine of salvation is in order. According to the Bible, all human beings since Adam (with the exception of Jesus Christ) have sinned and have incurred the death penalty (Rom 5:12). Since the time of Adam, human nature has been intrinsically corrupt and unable to obey God (Jer 17:9, Rom 8:7).

Salvation is much more than simply accepting Jesus; it is "the sum total of all God's work for man in delivering him from his lost condition in sin and presenting him in glory."³ Salvation involves a total transformation of the mind, heart and body to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. It is a process that includes election, vocation (calling), conversion, justification, regeneration, sanctification and glorification.

Election refers to the sovereign act of God whereby He chose for salvation all those whom He foreknew.⁴ The doctrine of election is based on God's omniscience; however, theologians differ over whether this should be understood as predestination and prescience. In Calvinist theology, God chooses (foreordains) who will believe and elects them to salvation; in Arminian theology, God foreknows who will choose to believe and elects them to salvation.

Vocation is the gracious act of God in which He invites humans to accept salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.⁵ Because human nature is corrupt, God must call (draw) people to receive salvation (Rom 3:10-11, John 6:44). Theologians distinguish between the general calling of all people through the proclamation of the gospel and the effectual calling of God, which involves the application of the gospel to the elect through the work of the Holy Spirit. As with election, in Calvinist theology, God's calling and grace are irresistible; those who are chosen by God are irresistibly drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit and inevitably brought to salvation. This is the

¹ Craig White, *History of the Born Again Doctrine*, Internet <http://www.originofnations.org>, accessed 2-16-2007.

² David Hunsburger, *Born Again*, Internet <http://www.wcg.org>, accessed 3-10-2008.

³ H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 91.

⁴ Henry Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 258.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

doctrine of Irresistible Grace. In Arminian theology, however, those who are called can resist the Holy Spirit and lose out on salvation.⁶

Conversion is the human response to the call of God that consists of repentance and faith. Repentance is a change of mind, heart and will in which a person acknowledges personal guilt, turns from sin and seeks forgiveness. Similarly, faith is the turning of the soul to God just as repentance is the turning of the soul from sin. It is more than just intellectual comprehension of the revelation of God for even the demons know the facts about God (James 2:19); faith includes the surrender of the heart to God and the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior.⁷ In Calvinist theology, all those who are chosen by God and given faith by the Holy Spirit are eternally saved; they are kept from losing faith and falling away by the power God and thus persevere to the end. This is the doctrine of Perseverance. In Arminian theology, those who are truly saved can lose their faith and fall away from salvation.⁸

Conversion is followed by justification, which is a declarative act; God justifies sinners by declaring them to be righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. Justification does not make one upright or righteous; it is a declaration, announcement or verdict about the individual.⁹

Regeneration involves the transmission of divine life to the soul and the imparting of a new nature to the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit (Tit 3:5). This new spiritual life affects the believer's mind, heart and will to such a degree that he is said to be a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17, Eph 4:24). Humanity is morally depraved by nature and in need of more than just forgiveness for past sins; the Holy Spirit regenerates the heart and makes fellowship with God possible.¹⁰ The Holy Spirit is also responsible for the regeneration of the body in the resurrection (Matt 19:28, Rom 8:11).

Sanctification is both an act and a process. Initial or positional sanctification occurs when one first believes in Christ and is wholly set apart or dedicated to God; it also includes the imputing of holiness to the believer through faith in Christ. As a process, it continues throughout this life as an ongoing separation from evil and the conforming of one's life to the image of Christ. Complete and final sanctification (i.e., glorification) occurs at the return of Christ when the body of the believer will be glorified in sinless perfection and immortality.¹¹

2.1 The Kingdom of God

Based on numerous prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jews in the first century believed that a political messiah would appear who would deliver them from oppressive Roman rule and establish a righteous, eternal empire under Israelite control (Isa. 9:6ff, Dan. 7:21-22, 27). The apostles also eagerly anticipated the establishment of this earthly, messianic kingdom (Luke 19:11, Acts 1:6-7, Rev 5:9-10).

Over the centuries, theologians have divided into three different positions regarding the nature and timing of the kingdom of God. These three positions are called Premillennialism, Amillennialism, and Postmillennialism.

Premillennialism is the belief that Christ will return at the start of a 1000 year period of peace and righteousness and will reign as King on the earth. Premillennialism (also known as chiliasm

⁶ House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*, 91, 100.

⁷ Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 268-274.

⁸ House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*, 100.

⁹ Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 275.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 279-280.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 287-293.

or millenarianism) was the dominant view in the first three centuries of the Christian Church and was taught by early leaders such as Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Tertullian. Many in the ante-Nicene period believed that they were living in the last days and that Christ would soon return; however, this view faded after the union of church and state under Constantine.¹²

Amillennialism is the belief that there will be no earthly, millennial kingdom before or after Christ's return and that the kingdom of God is present in the world through the church. The Alexandrian school of interpretation attacked the literal interpretation of Scripture on which Premillennialism was based. Origin used the allegorical method of interpretation to spiritualize the concept of the future kingdom into the present Church Age from Adam onward.¹³ Amillennialism is widely followed in the modern period; notable proponents include Louis Berkhof, Abraham Kuyper, Anthony Hoekema and the Roman Catholic Church.

Postmillennialism is the belief that the world will be converted through the work of the church resulting in a long period of peace and prosperity commonly called the Millennium after which Christ will return. Postmillennialists believe that Christ is now reigning from His throne in heaven and that the kingdom is being established throughout the world through the missionary activity of the church. Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135-1202) and Daniel Darby (1638-1726) were early proponents of the idea which was later adopted by theological liberals. More recent proponents include Charles Hodge, A. H. Strong and B. B. Warfield.

However, Armstrong believed that the kingdom of God was something quite different than either an earthly, messianic kingdom or the authority of Christ ruling the hearts of men, which is represented on earth by the church; in his mind, the kingdom was synonymous with and limited to a divine, polytheistic family.

As the ancient Kingdom of Israel was composed of the human FAMILY of the human man Israel, so the Kingdom of God will be composed of the *divine* family of the divine GOD!...

A KINGDOM is a nation composed of people, as well as the GOVERNMENT of that nation. The Kingdom of GOD is composed of the divine FAMILY of God. The One Being we habitually think of as GOD is the FATHER of that Family.

Christ is a Son of God -- a member of that divine FAMILY, even as we may be!! That divine FAMILY *is* the Kingdom of God.¹⁴ [Emphasis his throughout]

This unique definition is dependent on Armstrong's antitrinitarian teachings about the nature of God and his belief in human deification (i.e., apotheosis as opposed to the orthodox doctrine of glorification). It also reflected his belief that the church is not now part of the kingdom; at best, the church was only an embryonic form of the kingdom.

2.2 Beget

Because conception and birth are integral parts of this teaching, the meaning of the archaic term *beget* is also crucial. While frequently used in the King James Version, this term has disappeared from modern translations.

Although Armstrong consulted and cited several dictionaries on this topic, his explanation clearly illustrates his actual understanding of the term.

¹² Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Wheaton: Victor Book, 1986), 448, 452.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Herbert W. Armstrong, *Just what do you mean - Born Again?*, (n.l.: Worldwide Church of God, 1972), 5, 10.

A fertilized ovum -- an embryo -- is NOT a *born* human person. Life from the father has been imparted to it -- he has begotten it -- but neither embryo nor fetus is YET a *born* person....

At the *time* when the father *begets* and the mother *conceives* -- of the union of sperm cell and ovum -- the fertilized ovum becomes an *embryo*. But it is not yet delivered from the womb -- not yet *born*!...

Beget refers to the father. And the father's action is to *cause* the *start* of the process toward birth.¹⁵

As these passages show, Armstrong used the term *beget* to refer specifically to fertilization. In his mind, the terms *beget* and *birth* referred to two separate and distinct events.

2.3 Gennao

When Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again (John 3:3, 5), the Greek word that John used for the birth process was *gennao*. There is no way to know for sure which language was spoken in the original conversation; but Koine Greek was widely spoken at this time, and the New Testament was written in Koine Greek.

Translating Koine Greek into English can be quite a challenge because the vocabulary and grammar evolved over time and then died out centuries ago. To make matters worse, New Testament authors varied in their ability to write in Greek since it was likely a second language for many of them; occasionally, one can still see the underlying cadence of Semitic expressions even in the English translation.

Scholars must study the context of every occurrence of a term like *gennao* to narrow the range of possible meanings and then select English terms that closely match the intended meaning. The amount of similarity between any two terms is called the semantic overlap, which is rarely a perfect match; therefore, every translation is only an approximation of the original.

Although Armstrong could not translate Koine Greek, he did consult several popular lexicons to gain an understanding of the term. He cited *Thayer's* (obsolete by this time), *Liddell and Scott* (a classical Greek reference) and *Strong's* (a terse and unreliable resource).

Based on his research, Armstrong concluded that *gennao* was a rather flexible term that could be translated as either *beget* or *born* depending on the context because it "included the whole process of birth even from conception."¹⁶

Thus, the one Greek word, *gennao*, means PRODUCTION THROUGH A PROCESS that includes and is generated by the imparting of the fertilizing or lifegiving element by the father. There is a TIME when the culmination in BIRTH has not *yet* occurred.

In the Greek, *gennao*, the word is all-inclusive as a PRODUCTION PROCESS. But in English, the word *birth* is NOT all-inclusive, and refers only to the final stage of the process -- the time of parturition -- delivery of child from the womb....

And since the Greek *gennao* is an all-inclusive term -- referring to begetting by the father, but also, secondarily according to the lexicons, including the process culminating in birth, the translators had to decide which English term to use in each case.¹⁷

¹⁵ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 17, 22, 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-34, 35.

3.0 Jesus and Nicodemus

Although John introduces the concept of spiritual rebirth in the opening lines of his gospel (John 1:12-13), it does not take center stage until Jesus meets Nicodemus (John 3:1ff). At this point in the narrative, Jesus has driven the money changers from the temple precincts and placed Himself in direct opposition to the Jewish rulers. Judea was seething with resentment against Roman rule and eagerly expected a descendant of David to appear to liberate them; therefore, the Jewish religious leaders were wary of Jesus' popularity among the people and alarmed by any mention of a kingdom.

During their discussion, Jesus gave Nicodemus several statements about the nature of the kingdom of God. Each statement provides interpretive clues about the gospel of the kingdom of God and the meaning of being born again. Jesus said:

- “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).¹⁸
- “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).
- “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).
- “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8)

In John 3:3, the expression *born again* comes from the Greek terms *gennaō anōthen*, which can be translated as either “born again” (NKJV, NASB95, NIV, ESV, NCV) or “born from above” (NRSV, ISV, NET Bible). While other occurrences of *anōthen* in John's writings suggest the latter, Nicodemus clearly understood Jesus to mean a second birth (John 3:4); and while there is no way to be certain which language Jesus originally used, John apparently intended to convey a double entendre in this case (see Bauer on *gennaō*).

3.1 Seeing the Kingdom

Armstrong explained that in order to see the kingdom (John 3:3), one must be resurrected (i.e., born again) because the spirit realm is invisible to human eyes. In John 3:8, Jesus said that those who are born again are like the wind, which Armstrong believed was further evidence for this explanation. “You cannot see wind. Wind is compared to spirit. It is INVISIBLE. That's why mortal FLESH, as we now are, cannot SEE the Kingdom of God. Those who inherit it will *be* spirit -- normally invisible to eyes still human.”¹⁹

While this explanation appears to be consistent with several other passages dealing with the invisible nature of the spirit realm (e.g., Num 22:22-33, 2 Kings 6:8-17, 1 John 3:2), it does not prove that John 3:3 is speaking of the resurrection. Any proposed explanation would have to be consistent with the rest of Scripture because inconsistency is positive evidence of error. Since there are other possible explanations for this passage, consistency is necessary but not sufficient to prove that John 3:3 is a reference to the resurrection.

¹⁸ Scriptures are quoted from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

¹⁹ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 15.

3.2 Born of the Spirit

Armstrong felt that John 3:6 was the key to understanding what Jesus meant about being born again. He saw a clear connection between being born of the Spirit and the resurrection.

Here is the crux point that explains it all: Jesus said:

“That which is born of the flesh IS flesh: and that which is born of the Spirit IS *spirit*.”

Man is now flesh -- human. He is MATERIAL SUBSTANCE. “Dust thou art,” said God to Adam, “and unto dust shalt thou return.” Again, “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 3:19 and 2:7).

But, said Jesus plainly, when one is born of the Spirit HE WILL BE SPIRIT! Look at it! Read it in your own Bible.

The Kingdom of God will be composed of SPIRIT BEINGS -- not of humans!²⁰

Although most Christians interpret being born again as a reference to Christian conversion, Armstrong associated it with the transformation of the body from flesh and blood to spirit that occurs at the resurrection when Christ returns. This interpretation was foundational to all of Armstrong’s subsequent teaching on this subject.

3.3 Entering the Kingdom

Since Armstrong believed that being born of the Spirit was a reference to the resurrection, he also concluded that Christians could not enter the kingdom until the resurrection. Since the kingdom of God was composed only of spirit beings, a Christian could not enter that kingdom until the resurrection, and since the kingdom of God is also the family of God, a Christian could not become a part of that family until changed from flesh to spirit in the resurrection.

3.4 Status of the Church

As a result, Armstrong concluded that the church could not be part of the kingdom since physical Christians had not yet entered the kingdom. He reasoned that the kingdom would be composed solely of “spirit beings” and not mortal humans.

It had been the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that their church is the Kingdom of God. When one embraces the Catholic faith, he is regarded by Catholicism as having already *entered into* the Kingdom of God. Protestants have largely followed this assumption as applying to Protestantism, though some regard the Kingdom of God as some ethereal something “set up in men's hearts.” Many translators *assumed this error*.²¹

He explained that Christians now are only spiritually begotten (i.e., conceived) but not yet spiritually born. The church is only an embryonic form of the kingdom, and Christians are merely unborn children of God until the resurrection.

²⁰ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 13-14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

By combining this conclusion with his other teachings on the nature of God as a divine, polytheistic family and the doctrine of human deification, Armstrong concluded that entering the kingdom of God was equivalent to being born (again) into the family of God. Thus, the notion that the kingdom of God is the divine family of God (section 2.1) stems from a lengthy chain of inferences that begins with associating John 3:6 with the resurrection.

3.5 Inheriting the Kingdom

Paul taught that Christians cannot inherit the kingdom of God as flesh and blood (mortals) and that Christians will not be changed from mortal flesh to immortal spirit until the resurrection from the dead (1 Cor 15:22-23, 50-53). Therefore, Christians cannot inherit the kingdom of God until the resurrection.

Similarly, Armstrong claimed that being born again refers to a change from flesh to spirit (based on his interpretation of John 3:6) and that Christians will not be changed from flesh to spirit until the resurrection. Therefore, Armstrong concluded, Christians cannot be born again until the resurrection.

Armstrong's original writings were significantly more convoluted than this and require careful study to untangle the two separate arguments. A review of the principles of deductive reasoning and symbolic logic are particularly useful in this case.

However, the important point to remember is that Armstrong's interpretation of John 3:6 was assumed as a premise in reaching this second conclusion. This is clearly seen in his second and third statements below when he substituted the phrase "born again" with the idea of being changed into spirit based his view of John 3:6-8.

Until born again, we cannot *see* the Kingdom of God -- (Jesus to Nicodemus, John 3:3).

Until born again, we cannot *enter into* the Kingdom of God -- (Jesus to Nicodemus, John 3:5).

Until no longer flesh, but *changed* into SPIRIT, we cannot enter into the Kingdom of God -- (Jesus to Nicodemus, John 3:6-8).

While still flesh and blood (as Nicodemus was and we are) we cannot *inherit* the Kingdom of God -- (Paul to the Corinthians, I Cor. 15:50).

Until the resurrection, at Christ's coming, we shall not be changed from corruptible flesh into incorruptible SPIRIT (Paul -- I Cor. 15:50-53 and verses 22-23).

Until the resurrection, therefore, we cannot *see*, *enter into*, or *inherit* the Kingdom of God. WE CANNOT BE BORN AGAIN UNTIL THE RESURRECTION!²²

In the above arguments, Armstrong also exchanged the term *unless* (from John 3:6) for the term *until* (from 1 Cor 15). This has a subtle effect on the timing of these events (making born again simultaneous with entering rather than just a prerequisite for entering).

4.0 Conversion as Conception

Based on the conclusion that one is born again at the resurrection, Armstrong taught that conversion can be likened to conception and the Christian life to a gestation.

²² Armstrong, *Born Again*, 16-17.

But now see how God's Spirit entering and dwelling in one compares to the physical sperm impregnating the ovum -- the imparting of eternal SPIRIT life, later to produce -- to bring forth -- a SPIRIT PERSON! A fertilized ovum -- an embryo -- is NOT a *born* human person. Life from the father has been imparted to it -- he has begotten it -- but neither embryo nor fetus is YET a *born* person. In the same manner the Spirit-begotten human is not, *yet*, a SPIRIT PERSON or BEING, as Jesus said he shall be *when* born again!²³

Thus, Armstrong taught that Christians today have not been born again. They need to grow spiritually within the womb of the church, "the mother of us all" (Gal 4:26, Heb 12:22-23), or risk the possibility of spiritual abortion. After the resurrection, Christians will have eternal life independent of God just as a born child is no longer dependent on his mother.²⁴

He explained that biblical passages referring to Christians as already born again should be properly translated as being begotten.²⁵ In the King James Version, these passages appear in the writings of Peter (1 Pet. 1:3, 23) and John (John 1:13, 1 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 4, 18).

Based on his understanding of the terms *beget* and *gennao*, Armstrong insisted that the translators had chosen the wrong term because of a doctrinal presupposition (i.e., that the church is the kingdom of God). Indeed, Armstrong noted that newer translations, like the American Revised Version, used the term *begotten* rather than *born* in these passages.

5.0 Resurrection as a Birth

Armstrong cited several passages that appear to refer to the resurrection as a birth. Although they do not explicitly connect the metaphor of being born again or born of the Spirit with the resurrection, they were cited in overall support of Armstrong's interpretation of John 3:6.

5.1 Christ Was Born Again

Since Jesus was the first to be resurrected to eternal life, Armstrong claimed that "Christ was born a SON of God *by a resurrection* from the dead (Rom 1:4)."²⁶ Although all humans may be born again by a resurrection, Armstrong explained that Jesus was uniquely the Son of God in both a physical and spiritual sense.

Jesus was, in the human flesh -- His first birth -- a descendant of David, and, by the resurrection from the dead -- (born AGAIN) -- the Son of God, now no longer human, but composed of SPIRIT -- a Spirit Being. He thus became the FIRST SO BORN of many brethren who *shall* be BORN AGAIN at the time of the resurrection of those who are Christ's.

Of course we understand, and so did Paul in writing the above, that Jesus was also the Son of God while in the human flesh. Though *born of a human* woman, He was sired by God. But this is comparing the two births -- the one from the human Mary, as descended from the human David -- the other, by His resurrection to glory, as Son of God by His resurrection, in the same manner we may be.²⁷

²³ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19, 27-28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

5.2 Christ the Firstborn

Armstrong taught that Jesus is “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29) because Christians will be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ through the glorification of the body in the resurrection (Phil 3:20-21) when they will be put on His same plane and also become God’s sons. According to Armstrong, God is going to have many sons, but so far, Jesus is the only human to be born of God though many have been begotten.²⁸

In Colossians 1:15-18, Paul described Christ as “the firstborn over all creation... the firstborn from the dead.” The first reference emphasizes the lordship of Jesus Christ (a key theme of Colossians) while the second points to His priority in the resurrection, which is implicitly referred to as a birth.

In Revelation 1:5, John also referred to Jesus as the “firstborn from the dead.” The significance here is that two separate authors (Paul and John) both use the same expression. While the King James Version translated *prototokos* in Revelation 1:5 as “first begotten,” modern translations more properly render it as “firstborn.”

5.3 Creation Labors

In Romans 8:19-22, Paul said that the creation was eagerly waiting for the revealing of the sons of God. Creation has been subjected to “futility” (undoubtedly referring to the time of Adam’s sin), but it will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God in the future. He said that “the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now” (Rom 8:22).

Armstrong claimed that this passage designated the resurrection into glory as a birth. He said that the creation will finally be delivered (a birth) from the bondage of corruption when Christ returns, the resurrection occurs, and the kingdom of God is established. “Although this is not referring directly to *our* being born again, it is a direct comparison to the BIRTH of a child being DELIVERED from its mother's womb.”²⁹

6.0 Problem Passages

Armstrong’s rejection of the traditional understanding of being born again raised several questions. The concept of conversion as a rebirth did not develop in a vacuum, and several passages that correspond with that position will be addressed in addition to other passages that did not seem to fit the new interpretation.

6.1 The Kingdom is at Hand

In Mark 1:14-15, Jesus said that the time was fulfilled and that the kingdom of God was at hand. If the church is not connected with the kingdom in some way, then Jesus appears to be mistaken about its arrival. The disciples eagerly expected the kingdom to come soon, and Jesus had to address those expectations on a couple of occasions (Luke 19:11ff, Acts 1:6ff).

²⁸ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 42-43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

Armstrong explained that the good news of the kingdom of God could not be announced until a successor had qualified to replace Satan as earth's ruler. Where Adam had failed, Jesus succeeded. After He overcame Satan's temptations in the wilderness, the time had fully come to announce His coming kingdom. This was not possible until after His victory over Satan.³⁰

6.2 Christ as Only Begotten

Several passages (e.g., John 1:14, 3:16) refer to Jesus as the only begotten Son of God. If conversion is referred to as a spiritual conception in the New Testament, the implication is that none of the patriarchs and prophets in the Old Testament would have had the Holy Spirit, which goes against the biblical evidence.

Armstrong explained that passages like this are referring to Jesus' human birth and are not part of the rebirth analogy. He said that before Jesus was conceived by Mary, He was not the Son of God; His human birth was His first birth.³¹

Indeed, Armstrong said that Jesus could not be called the firstborn if being born again refers to receiving the Holy Spirit. "This, again, PROVES that the conversion in this life -- receiving the Holy Spirit -- is only a *begettal* -- NOT a birth! For Old Testament fathers and prophets *received* God's Spirit -- but they were not "born again" because Jesus was the *first* so born!"³²

6.3 Newborn Babes

In 1 Peter 2:1-2, Peter referred to Christians as newborn babes rather than unborn children. This passage, and many others like it in the New Testament, would be a natural extension of the conversion-rebirth analogy and evidence for the traditional interpretation.

Armstrong dismissed this passage by explaining that Peter was forced to use another analogy in this case. "He is comparing the Christian's spiritual 'gestation' period to the growth of a newborn human physical baby simply because it would be awkward indeed to compare it to a physical embryo or fetus. He is not saying we *are* already *born* babes in God's Kingdom -- but *as* -- or *like* newborn human babes."³³

7.0 Analysis and Critique

The preceding summary represents the essence of Armstrong's position that Christians are born again at the resurrection. While he used this teaching to illuminate many other doctrines, like the nature of God and the deification of humanity, most of that material did not necessarily depend on this interpretation as a prerequisite.

Although Armstrong's position may appear plausible, there are many problems with it that have yet to be addressed. Much of Armstrong's evidence was either incorrect or easily explained according to the traditional interpretation, and there is considerable evidence for the traditional explanation that Armstrong failed to discuss.

³⁰ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

Indeed, questionable passages should be interpreted in the light of clear passages, and it is just as easy to interpret John 3:6 as a reference to conversion rather than resurrection. Since it can be interpreted both ways, it is not decisive, and further evidence must be sought.

But, getting at the truth requires more than just additional data; it requires a different approach to the question. The basic problem here was assuming that there is only one rebirth analogy; in an effort to eliminate the traditional interpretation, Armstrong was forced to ignore any contrary evidence or twist those passages out of context.

A careful analysis shows that there are several different birth-related analogies in the New Testament. To demonstrate this, the previous sections will now be reviewed and corrected.

8.0 Redefining Terms

The first task is to clarify the meaning of each of the key terms. The definition assigned to each was only partially correct, which led to misunderstanding and faulty conclusions. Each of these key terms will now be re-examined and clarified.

8.1 The Kingdom of God

In order to properly define the kingdom of God, it is necessary to consider all the different constituent parts of a kingdom. Ironically, Armstrong himself provided a better definition than the one given above. He wrote, “A government -- or kingdom -- is composed of four things: (a) a KING, ruling over (b) people, subjects or citizens within (c) a definite jurisdiction of territory, with (d) laws and an organized system of administering them.”³⁴

For example, consider the Roman Empire, which administered Judea during the time of Jesus and Nicodemus. The emperor at that time was Tiberius Caesar who was reputed to be an able, if tactless, administrator.³⁵ His subjects included all Roman citizens (regardless of their location) as well as any conquered peoples or slaves within the various provinces and territories that constituted his realm. The imperial legal system, upon which Paul frequently relied for protection, was designed to maintain peace and order throughout the empire for the benefit of its citizens; Rome’s chief concern was to maintain the status quo and not to promote social justice or equality.³⁶ The kingdom of God, as described by Jesus and the apostles, stands in stark contrast with this example.

While the gospel of the kingdom of God was clearly the central message that Jesus preached (Mark 1:14-15), there is a certain tension within His teaching concerning this kingdom. Often, Jesus spoke of the kingdom as a present reality (Luke 17:20-21) while at other times it was clearly a future event (Matt 6:10).

Bock refers to this tension as the “already” and the “not yet” aspects of the kingdom. The future aspect relates to the Old Testament and the covenant promises to Israel while the present aspect is related to the church and the exercise of her mission through the power of the Holy Spirit.³⁷ Lowery explains that a “kingdom” normally denotes the idea of a realm (including land and people) ruled by a king; however, it can also refer to the exercise of rulership and authority,

³⁴ H. W. Armstrong, *The Incredible Human Potential*, (nl: Worldwide Church of God, 1978), 16.

³⁵ John L. Stipp, C. Warren Hollister, and Allen W. Dirrim. *The Rise and Development of Western Civilization*, 2nd ed., Vol. 1, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1972), 265.

³⁶ Kenneth G. Radant, *New Testament Literature and History*, (Calgary: Prairie Bible Institute, 1996), 126.

³⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke-Acts* in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 95-97.

and it is not always clear if one aspect or the other or both are being referred to in a particular passage.³⁸

Clearly, the kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future event. God's authority extends over Christians who choose to embrace salvation now, but Christ will also forcibly establish His authority over all nations when He returns. At conversion, Christians become citizens of another government and part of the kingdom of God.

8.2 To Beget

The term *beget* actually has a broad range of meanings although some are now obsolete. Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines it this way:

- 1 *obs*: to acquire esp. by effort
- 2 a: to procreate as the father: SIRE...
b: to give birth to: BREED...
- 3 *obs*: to make (a woman) pregnant
- 4 to produce usu. as an effect or natural outgrowth

Ironically, the primary definition (to acquire) is not even related to reproduction, and the secondary meaning (to procreate, give birth) can be used of both parents showing that *beget* has a much broader meaning than just fertilization (cf. Zech 13:3 KJV). This is even clearer in The Oxford English Dictionary (with examples from the KJV period included).

1. *trans.* To get, to acquire (usually by effort)...
1602 SHAKS. *Ham.* III. ii. 8 You must acquire and beget a Temperance that may giue it Smoothnesse.
2. To procreate, to generate: usually said of the father, but sometimes of both parents...
1611 BIBLE *Prov.* xvii.21 He that begetteth a foole, doth it to his sorrow
b. Const. *on, upon, or upon the body of*
1509-10 *Act I Hen. VIII.* xix. Pream. The heires males whiche he shulde begett on the body of the said Elizabeth. [*sic*]
c. = GET (with child). *Obs.*
1603 SHAKS. *Meas for M.* v. i. 517 There's one Whom he begot with childe
3. *Theol.* Applied to the relationship of the Father to the Son in the Trinity; also to the spiritual relationship of God to man in regeneration.
1549 *Bk. Com. Pr. Athanas. Cr.*, The Son is of the Father alone: not made, nor created, but begotten.
4. *fig. and transf.* To call into being, give rise to; to produce, occasion.
1588 SHAKS. *L.L.L.* II. i. 69 His eye begets occasion for his wit.

Thus, the basic definition of *beget* is to acquire, to procreate or to produce (in a generic sense). While it is typically used of men fathering children, it also can be used of females giving birth, or trees producing fruit or even (in an abstract sense) of ideas producing actions.

³⁸ David K. Lowery, *A Theology of Matthew* in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 35.

8.3 Gennao

The lexicons of Armstrong's day used the term *beget* to define *gennao*, which lead to some confusion based on the artificially narrow definition that was applied; however, modern lexicons give a clearer picture of the meaning of this term. For example, Bauer defines *gennao* this way.

1. *beget* - a. lit. *become the father of...*
b. fig. of the [influence] exerted by one person on another... of a teacher on pupils...
2. of women: *bear...*
3. fig. *bring forth, produce, cause...*

Swanson's *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* gives an even better explanation.

1. LN 23.58 **procreate**, bring into being, become the father of (Mt 1:2);
2. LN 23.52 **give birth** (Lk 1:13);
3. LN 13.56 **be born of**, involving of a radical change in the whole person (Jn 3:5);
4. LN 13.129 **cause to happen**, produce, give rise to (2Ti 2:23);
5. LN 41.53 be born again or **be born from above** (Jn 3:3)

The references to the Louw-Nida (LN) lexicon are included below (without the Greek).

23.58 the male role in causing the conception and birth of a child—'to be the father of, to procreate, to beget.'

23.52 to give birth to a child—'to bear, to give birth.'

13.56 (a figurative extension of meaning of [*gennao*] 'to give birth,' 23.52) to cause to experience a radical change, with the implication of involvement of the total personality—'to cause to be born, to be born of.'

13.129 to cause to happen, with the implication of the result of existing circumstances—'to cause, to produce, to give rise to.'

41.53 (an idiom, literally 'to be born again'); to experience a complete change in one's way of life to what it should be, with the implication of return to a former state or relation—'to be born again, to experience new birth, rebirth.'

Now that the term *beget* has been freed from the artificially narrow sense of fertilization by the father, there is clearly a greater degree of similarity with *gennao*. Both terms basically mean to procreate, to become the father of, to give birth or to produce.

While *gennao* (*Strong's* 1080) can refer to the male role in generating children, it does not refer to conception; the Greek term for conception is *sullambano* (*Strong's* 4815). When translating these terms into English, it is important to remember that while a father or a mother may beget a child, only a mother can conceive or give birth, and translators usually try to follow the context accordingly.

The following table illustrates the various active and passive uses of these verbs when discussing human reproduction.

Examples of Reproductive Terminology

Case	Subject	Verb	Predicate	Greek
#1	A father	begets	a child	<i>gennao</i>
#2	A mother	conceives	a child	<i>sullambano</i>
#3	A mother	gives birth to	a child	<i>gennao</i>
#4	A child	is begotten	by his father	<i>gennao</i>
#5	A child	is conceived	by his mother	<i>sullambano</i>
#6	A child	is born	by his mother	<i>gennao</i>

Examples of each of these six cases are given below from the King James Version with the associated number from *Strong's* lexicon to help identify each term:

Case #1: “Abraham begat [1080] Isaac; and Isaac begat [1080] Jacob; and Jacob begat [1080] Judas and his brethren” (Matt. 1:2)

Case #2: “And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived [4815], and hid herself five months, saying” (Luke 1:24)

Case #3: “A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered [1080] of the child...” (John 16:21)

Case #4: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for ^{1} the Child who has been ^{2} conceived [1080] in her is of the Holy Spirit” ^{1} Lit *that which* ² Lit *begotten* (Matt 1:20)

Case #5: “And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was *then* called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived [4815] in the womb” (Luke 2:21)

Case #6: “...she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born [1080] into the world” (John 16:21b)

Matthew 1:20 is the only time that *gennao* is rendered as *conceived*, but the marginal notes in several translations make it clear that the Greek literally means *begotten* because the Holy Spirit produced the miracle of the Incarnation. As this example illustrates, the King James Version is not always consistent when rendering the Greek text into English.

While Matthew 1:20 is a clear example of using *gennao* to refer to a child that has been fathered but not yet born, this is usually not the case unless it is clearly indicated by the context. Indeed, since gestation is only a small fraction of an entire lifetime, a begotten child is usually also a born child unless the context clearly indicates otherwise (e.g., Matt 1:2 KJV above).

Another interesting example is 1 John 5:18, where *gennao* is rendered (inconsistently) as both *begotten* and *born* in the same passage. It should be clear by now that when translators later changed *born* to *begotten* in the American Standard Version, they were doing so to be consistent with the context of God as the Father and not to suggest that Christians are in some kind of gestation state.

While an unborn state cannot be absolutely precluded in passages like 1 John 5:8, it also cannot be demonstrated; therefore, much of the evidence for Armstrong's interpretation of conversion as a conception is lost at the outset. On the other hand, there are enough passages that clearly refer to conversion as a rebirth to settle the matter.

9.0 John 3 Revisited

When Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again, He was introducing the metaphor of conversion as a spiritual rebirth that is well documented in both Scripture and history. Paul described the Galatians as his own children and his efforts to convert them as his own personal labor pains (Gal 4:19). Indeed, Christians were also often referred to as babies or infants who needed milk (1 Cor 3:1-2, Heb 5:12, 1 Pet 2:2).

Hunsburger argues that being born again is known to refer to conversion because early Jewish rabbis spoke of proselytes as having been reborn.³⁹ Among the Jews of the Talmudic period (ca. A.D. 200-500), it was said that "one who has become a proselyte is like a child newly born" (Yebamoth fol. 22a)⁴⁰. Another passage says, "He who teaches the son of his neighbor the Torah, Scripture ascribes it to him as if he had begotten him" (Sanhedrin fol. 19b); Paul and John used this metaphor as well (1 Cor 4:15, Philm 10, 1 John 2:1).

While the Talmudic evidence is impressive, it does not prove that this metaphor already existed when Jesus met Nicodemus. Indeed, after a careful study of this subject, Mounce concluded that Judaism only provided the atmosphere and terminology for this metaphor and that Jesus is the actual originator.⁴¹ If so, it could have easily passed from Jewish Christians to the rabbis during their interaction in the early first century.

9.1 Seeing the Kingdom

When Jesus said that one must be born again to see the kingdom, He could be talking about understanding or experiencing the kingdom rather than literally seeing the invisible spirit realm. In John 3:2, Nicodemus said, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God." Jesus replied, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see (Greek *idein*) the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). *Idein* is the second aorist active infinitive of *horao* (*Strong's* 3708), which means to see, to understand or to experience an event or state.

Basically, Jesus could be telling Nicodemus that he really does not have eyes to see or ears to hear (Matt 13:15ff, Mark 8:18). The unconverted mind lacks spiritual perception (1 Cor. 2:6ff); in this case, Nicodemus failed to see (understand) that Jesus is the Messiah, the embodiment of the kingdom of God, and not just a teacher sent by God.

On the other hand, Jesus could also be saying that a person must be converted before they can ever hope to experience the kingdom in the future. This kind expression is used throughout the Bible; for example, those who do not obey the Son will not "see life" (John 3:36), while those who keep Christ's words will not "see death" (John 8:51). These passages are discussing the eternal consequences of accepting or reject the gospel, which was the same topic that Jesus was discussing with Nicodemus.

³⁹ Hunsburger, *Born Again*, Internet.

⁴⁰ See also T. Bab. Yebamoth fol. 48b, 62a and 97b.

⁴¹ William D. Mounce, *The Origin of the New Testament Metaphor of Rebirth*, (University of Aberdeen: United Kingdom, 1981), 339-341.

While Armstrong's explanation cannot be entirely ruled out, it is much less likely than the traditional interpretation given the number of interpretive options involved. Since there are several plausible options, this passage cannot be used to prove his position.

9.2 Born of Water and Spirit

In John 3:5-8, Jesus made three important statements about being born again, which He also described as being "born of the Spirit." Although the terminology is slightly different, there is no indication of a break in the context and being born of the Spirit is just as essential to partaking of the kingdom of God as being born again; therefore, Jesus must be referring to the same birth analogy that He discussed in John 3:3-4.

In John 3:5, Jesus said that one must be born of water and Spirit to enter the kingdom of God, which clearly points to conversion since water plays no role in the resurrection of the saints. Early Christians, such as Ambrose, explained this passage as a reference to baptism and spiritual regeneration (*On the Holy Spirit* 3:10:64).⁴² Calvin and others associated it with the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification and regeneration. Curiously, Armstrong never addressed this reference to water in his booklet on this subject.

Baptism was an integral part of the ministry of both Jesus and John the Baptist in the early chapters of John's gospel (John 1:25-33, 3:22-26, 4:1-2); therefore, water would naturally be associated with baptism in this context. Baptism is a tangible affirmation of repentance and faith in the process of Christian conversion (Act 22:16), and immersion was a well-known and important part of Jewish ritual cleansing ceremonies.

Since water could also refer to the sanctifying and regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, Armstrong's explanation is even less likely. Many commentators have suggested that Nicodemus would have readily associated water with the work of the Holy Spirit based on Ezekiel 36:25-27. Paul spoke of "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Tit 3:5), which also suggests a connection with being born of water and Spirit.

Some have suggested that being born of water is a reference to a physical birth (i.e., as either amniotic or seminal fluid), but this is very unlikely. In John 3:6, Jesus clearly referred to the first birth as being "born of the flesh" not born of water. If He had wanted to refer to a physical birth in John 3:5, He could have clearly and consistently said that one must be born of the flesh rather than using the more ambiguous and confusing reference to water. But, there is an even greater problem with this interpretation. Why would Jesus bother to say that one must be born of the flesh before he can enter into the kingdom? Did Nicodemus really need such a basic, self-evident statement from the Son of God?

Moreover, the grammar of John 3:5 indicates that both water and Spirit are connected with the second birth and not just Spirit alone. Carson observes that water and Spirit are both part of a genitive prepositional phrase that describes the kind of birth that is required to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus was not referring to two births in this passage; John 3:3, 5, 6b and 7 are parallel statements about the significance of being born again.⁴³

Armstrong's interpretation cannot explain this reference to being born of water and Spirit, which undermines his entire teaching on this subject. While other statements in this passage could be referring to either conversion or resurrection, John 3:5 is uniquely consistent with the notion of conversion.

⁴² See Appendix A – Ancient Citations for additional references.

⁴³ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, Second Edition, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 42.

Armstrong relied heavily on John 3:6 to equate the resurrection with being born again, but this passage can also be interpreted as a reference to conversion. Armstrong clearly stated that this passage was central to his entire interpretation, yet he never bothered to explain why this could not also be a reference to conversion.

Indeed, numerous passages describe conversion as a new life or a new creation. For example, Paul said that Christians “are not in the flesh but in the Spirit” if the Holy Spirit dwells within them (Rom. 8:9). Similarly, Paul characterized the Corinthians as carnal (*sarkikos*, fleshly) rather than spiritual (*pneumatikos*) because of their poor behavior (1 Cor. 3:1ff). He told the Ephesians to lay aside the old man and put on the new man by being renewed in the spirit of the mind (Eph. 4:20-24, Rom 12:2); to renew (*ananeoo*) means “to cause something to become new and different, with the implication of becoming superior” (Louw-Nida 58.72). Paul also told the Colossians to put off the old man and put on the new (*neos*) who is renewed (*anakainoo*) in knowledge (Col 3:9-10, 2 Cor 4:16). Christians are “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17).

Since John 3:6 can be interpreted in two different ways, additional evidence must be sought to determine what Jesus meant by being born again or born of the Spirit. One of the cardinal rules of interpreting Scripture is to use clear passages to illuminate ambiguous ones; since John 3:6 is a contested passage, it cannot be used as proof of Armstrong’s position.

In John 3:8, Jesus told Nicodemus, “The wind (*pneuma*) blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit (*pneuma*).” Ironically, the Greek term *pneuma* can refer to the wind or a spirit, and in this passage both meanings are used.

As with John 3:3, this metaphor is just another way of saying that Nicodemus lacked eyes to see and ears to hear because he was unconverted. Indeed, Jesus later lamented that Jerusalem would be destroyed because, like the inhabitants of Sodom, they did not recognize (see) the time of their visitation and judgment (Luke 19:41-44). He condemned the Pharisees and Sadducees because they could forecast the weather, but they could not recognize (see) the signs of the times in which they lived (Matt 16:1-4).

9.3 Entering the Kingdom

Scripture supports the notion that Christians finally enter the kingdom at Christ’s return (Matt. 7:21ff, 25:21, 23, Acts 14:22); however, since conversion occurs before the return of Jesus Christ, there is no problem with associating conversion with being born again. When Christ returns and establishes His kingdom on the earth, He will judge and reward those who have been faithful with positions of authority within His kingdom; only then will the saints finally enter into the joy of their Lord (Matt 25:21, 23).

In John 3:5, Jesus was essentially telling Nicodemus that he had to be converted before he could enter the kingdom of God. This is exactly what Jesus said about entering the kingdom in Matthew 18:3; when the disciples asked who would be the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus placed a child in their midst and told them that a converted, childlike attitude is a prerequisite to entering the kingdom.

Indeed, Jesus appears to be introducing Nicodemus to the rather new idea that Christian conversion is a necessary prerequisite to eternal life. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was undoubtedly familiar with the resurrection of the dead (Dan. 12:1ff, Acts 23:8), but the notion that one must also be converted appears to have been quite unexpected.

9.4 The Church and the Kingdom

This raises the question of whether or not the church is a part of the kingdom now. Because Armstrong equated John 3:6 with the resurrection, he argued that the church could not be part of the kingdom. This conclusion is no longer tenable.

While several passages indicate that Christians enter the kingdom at the resurrection, others show that Christians are a part of the kingdom now. Paul plainly said that God has “delivered us from the power of darkness, and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Col 1:13). Other translations use “transferred” in place of “conveyed,” but the basic idea is that Christians have changed their status relative to these two kingdoms.

This apparent inconsistency is resolved by understanding the present and future aspects of the kingdom discussed earlier. Armstrong narrowly defined a kingdom as a single family, but Paul was clearly not an Italian even though he was a Roman citizen. In the same way, Paul said that gentile Christians “are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). The Philippians enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship because their city was a Roman colony (Acts 16:12), but Paul explained that Christians possess an even greater citizenship in heaven as a present reality (Phil 3:20).

As with the Roman Empire, the kingdom of God currently has citizens and subjects in different locations. God currently rules over the angels in heaven and over humans on earth who have voluntarily submitted to His authority. When Christ returns, all humans will become subjects of His kingdom but not necessarily citizens.

A Roman soldier or ambassador might travel outside the territory of the Empire, but he was still a citizen and subject of that kingdom. If he happened to be the heir apparent, he would have to return home to inherit the kingdom when the Emperor died.

Similarly, Christians are like ambassadors stationed in an embassy far from home; they are presently subjects of the kingdom of God but not yet rulers or inheritors. The church is a colony of God’s kingdom on the earth; but this does not mean that the church is the kingdom since the church represents only a portion of God’s subjects and has no political sovereignty on the earth. Numerous Scriptures refer to Christians as “sojourners and pilgrims” in this world (1 Pet 2:11), dwelling like resident aliens until the kingdom comes (Heb 11:13).

9.5 Inheriting the Kingdom

Paul clearly taught that Christians must wait until the resurrection to inherit the kingdom. Until then, Christians are heirs of the kingdom (Dan 7:27, Jas 2:5). At Christ’s return, there will be a period of judgment and reward for God’s servants, which includes receiving a portion of the kingdom as an inheritance (Matt 25:34).

Armstrong claimed that Christians will not be born again until the resurrection based on his interpretation of John 3:6; however, since John 3:6 is a contested passage, this conclusion is no longer certain. Indeed, John 3:5 is more likely referring to conversion than resurrection and John 3:6 does not say that flesh will be changed to spirit.

In addition, there is nothing in 1 Corinthians 15 that explicitly connects the resurrection with the metaphor of being born again. While it is true that Christians will be changed from flesh and blood to spirit at that time, Paul does not refer to this event as a rebirth or describe it as being born of the Spirit.

10.0 Conception as a Misconception

Armstrong claimed that Christians are currently in a gestation state awaiting their final spiritual birth in the resurrection. Consequently, he insisted that *gennaō* should be translated as *begotten* rather than *born* when referring to Christians.

However, there are numerous problems with this explanation. For example, there are no passages that portray Christians as unborn children, there are no passages that use the term *sullambano* (i.e., conception) as a metaphor for conversion, and there are no passages that refer to the church as “the mother of us all” as Armstrong claimed. Hebrews 12:22-23 also does not equate the church with the heavenly Jerusalem simply by mentioning them together in the same passage.⁴⁴ God and the angels are also mentioned in the same passage, but they certainly cannot be equated with the church. In Galatians 4:24-26, “Jerusalem above” clearly refers to the new covenant not to the church.

Armstrong’s assertion that Christians are now unborn children in God’s family but not yet actual children until born again at the resurrection is inherently inconsistent. In order to accommodate the passages that plainly declare that Christians are now children of God (Rom 8:14, 1 John 3:2), Armstrong explained that an unborn child is the offspring of its parents.⁴⁵ But, in order to maintain his artificially narrow definition of the kingdom as a spirit composed family, Armstrong also claimed that Christians do not become part of God’s family until the resurrection. This self-contradictory position highlights the basic flaw in Armstrong’s arbitrary definition of the kingdom.

10.1 Babes in Christ

On the other hand, there are numerous passages that picture conversion as a birth and Christians as born children. For example, three passages refer to converts as born children (1 Cor. 3:1-2, Heb. 5:11-14, 1 Pet. 2:2). In another passage, Paul speaks of being in labor pains in connection with his wayward converts because he has lost them to another gospel and must suffer birth pains again until they are restored to Christ (Gal. 4:19). Paul repeatedly speaks of his converts as his own children (1 Cor. 4:15, 1 Tim. 1:2, Philm. 10); individuals like Timothy and Onesimus were always referred to as adult sons and not unborn children. The same is also true in John’s epistles (1 John 2:1, 3:18).

James explained that lust gives birth (*tikto*) to sin and sin brings forth (*apokueo*) death, but God has “brought us forth (*apokueo*) by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (James 1:15, 18). The Greek verb *apokueo* means to give birth, to bring forth (Bauer) or to bring into being (Louw-Nida). Since God is the subject of the sentence in James 1:18, it is better to render *apokueo* as bringing forth rather than giving birth.

James used *apokueo* in these two parallel passages to create a stark contrast between the work of sin and the work of God in the life of the believer. In James 1:18, *apokueo* is in the aorist (past) tense and is modified by the phrase “by the word of truth” (i.e., the gospel) referring to conversion rather than resurrection (Rom 10:17). Therefore, it is not scriptural to say that Christians have not yet been brought forth into God’s family as Armstrong claimed.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

Peter explained that God “has begotten us again (*anagennao*) to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3). The Greek term *anagennao* means to beget again or to cause to be born again (Bauer) making it semantically equivalent to *gennao anothēn* and the best possible evidence for interpreting John 3:3. In this passage, *anagennao* is a masculine nominative singular aorist active participle, which means that it is better translated as having been begotten again rather than born again; the aorist form of the participle proves that this is referring to conversion in the past and not resurrection in the future. Basically, Peter is saying that God has given us a new life in the authentic faith of the Christian gospel that was made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, Christians have been born again (*anagennao*) through the living and enduring word of God (1 Pet 1:23). In this passage, *anagennao* is a masculine nominative plural perfect passive participle, which indicates an action completed in the past with continuing results; however, as Wallace explains, an intensive perfect emphasizes the result or present state produced by past action, which is often best translated using an English perfect tense.⁴⁷ This new life comes through faith in the word God, proving that this is discussing conversion not resurrection.

Because 1 Pet 1:23 refers to the incorruptible seed (*spora*) of God’s word, *anagennao* should technically be translated as “having been begotten again” (cf. 1 Pet 1:23 ASV), but this passage is clearly referring to born children for three important reasons. First, the surrounding material makes no reference to gestation (e.g., Matt 1:20, Rom 9:10-11), which is absolutely essential in this case since there are no other scriptural references to conversion as a conception that can be cited as a precedent, but there are numerous biblical references to conversion as a birth. Second, if Peter had wanted to suggest that Christians have not yet been born, he could have used the term *sullambano* (conception) instead. Third, Peter specifically refers to Christians as “newborn babes” (*artigenetos*) in close proximity to *anagennao* (1 Pet 2:2). The vocabulary of 1 Peter clearly shows that Christians have already been born again and that John 3 is discussing conversion rather than resurrection.

As with James 1:18, the inseminating agent is the Word of God and not the Holy Spirit. Hearing the Word of God produces saving faith in the mind of a Christian leading to baptism and regeneration (Rom. 10:17).

10.2 Born of God

John also described Christians as having been born of God (John 1:13, 1 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 4, 18). The term *gennao* in these passages occurs in either the aorist or perfect tense and can be translated as *begotten* because the context involves the Father as the active agent and Christians as the passive recipients of this new life; however, there is nothing about the context of these passages that would indicate that Christians are unborn children of God.

The grammar of these passages clearly indicates that the command to be born again is fulfilled through conversion. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born (*gennao*) again (John 3:7). Those who believe in the name of Jesus have been begotten (*gennao*) of God (John 1:12-13). Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten (*gennao*) of God (1 John 5:1).

If the apostles wanted to say that Christians are yet unborn, they could easily have done so, but they deliberately chose to use terms associated with birth instead. However, this does not mean that the resurrection is never spoken of as a birth.

⁴⁷ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 574-5.

11.0 Resurrection Passages

Contrary to Armstrong, Romans 1:4 does not say that “Christ was born a Son of God by a resurrection from the dead.”⁴⁸ Paul said that Jesus was declared (*horizo*) to be the Son of God by the resurrection. The Greek term *horizo* indicates that the resurrection confirmed that Jesus is the Son of God (Matt 12:40, Acts 17:31). He was identified or singled out by the resurrection.

In Romans 8:29, Paul wrote, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Christians are conformed to the image of Christ first through sanctification in this life and then through glorification in the resurrection, and this passage is probably referring to both. Christians do inherit some divine attributes as a result of glorification (i.e., eternal life and a sinless nature), but they will never be placed on the same plane as God (Isa 43:10, 44:6). Christians become God’s children at conversion not in the resurrection (John 1:12-13).

In Colossians 1:15, Paul referred to Jesus as “the firstborn over all creation” to stress His pre-eminence in all things, but this passage does not explain how Jesus became the firstborn. It is of no value in interpreting John 3 since it does not connect the resurrection with the metaphor of being born again.

Both Paul and John referred to Jesus as “the firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:18, Rev 1:5); while these passages do implicitly refer to the resurrection as a birth, they do not explicitly connect the resurrection with the metaphor of being born again. Since there are different birth analogies in the Bible, one cannot simply assume that these verses are automatically connected to John 3 without a greater degree of similarity between them. Indeed, leaven can be a symbol of evil or the kingdom of God depending on the context (Matt 13:33, 16:6).

Romans 8:19-23 does implicitly refer to the resurrection as a birth, but it is of no value in connecting the resurrection with John 3. Armstrong himself conceded that this passage is not referring directly to Christians being born again. In Romans 8:22-23, Christians are groaning in pain along with creation rather than being born; indeed, the terms *resurrection* and *birth* are not even used in this passage but rather *adoption* and *redemption*.

12.0 Problem Passages Revisited

Because Armstrong’s teaching was based on incorrect definitions and faulty exegesis, he was unable to solve several problems with his interpretation. These problem passages will now be re-examined to underscore the soundness of the traditional interpretation.

12.1 The Kingdom is Among You

Armstrong tried to explain Mark 1:14-15 by saying that Jesus had just qualified to replace Satan and was now able to announce His coming kingdom; but this fails to explain how the kingdom could be “at hand” since nearly 2000 years have elapsed since this announcement began. Armstrong struggled to avoid the rather obvious implication that the church is now part of the kingdom, but Jesus plainly told the Pharisees that the kingdom was already present in their midst (Luke 17:20-21). Yet, Jesus appears to contradict Himself when He told Pilate that His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36).

⁴⁸ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 42.

This is easily resolved by understanding the present and future aspects of the kingdom discussed earlier. When Jesus is speaking of the kingdom as a present reality, He is referring to individual Christians as citizens of the kingdom. When He speaks of the kingdom as a future event, He is referring to an empire that will exercise civil authority over the whole earth.

This does not mean that the church has already entered the kingdom; becoming a citizen of the kingdom and entering the kingdom are distinct events. Thus, Jesus said that His followers are those who are entering (a present participle) the kingdom (Matt 23:13) and that hypocrites will not enter the kingdom of God in the Day of Judgment (Matt 7:21-22). Similarly, Paul wrote that Christians have been translated into the kingdom already (Col 1:13) and that Christians must enter the kingdom by going through many tribulations in this life (Acts 14:22).

12.2 Two Birth Analogies

The Bible refers to Christ as the only begotten Son of God because of His miraculous physical birth. Christians are now children of God, but there is a distinct difference between the process of conversion at work in a human life and the unique incarnation experienced by Jesus Christ as God in the flesh.

However, Armstrong claimed that being born again could not refer to receiving the Holy Spirit (i.e., conversion) since the patriarchs and prophets had the Holy Spirit before Jesus. His point was that New Testament authors would not have referred to Jesus as the firstborn if they were in the habit of referring to converts as being born again since the patriarchs and prophets had the Holy Spirit before Jesus did.

But, this argument fails to distinguish between the two separate birth analogies. As stated before, this kind of either-or thinking will lead to erroneous conclusions. Since New Testament authors used different birth analogies at various times, his argument cannot be sustained.

While Jesus was the first to be resurrected to eternal life, He was also the first to experience the baptism of the Spirit in connection with water baptism, which can be thought of as a watery birth. Indeed, Gregory of Nyssa taught that Jesus led the way in the birth by water and the Spirit through His own baptism and therefore became the firstborn among many brethren because He shared in the washing of regeneration, but He was also the firstborn from the dead because He was the first to be resurrected to eternal life (*Against Eunomius* 2:8).⁴⁹

12.3 Awkward Indeed

Finally, Armstrong tried to dismiss Peter's description of Christians as newborn babes (1 Pet 2:1-2) by claiming that it would be "awkward indeed" to compare Christian growth to gestation, but ancient people generally understood that the unborn grow in the womb even if they did not know exactly how this happened (Job 31:15, Ps 139:13, Eccl 11:5). In Romans 9:11, Paul referred to Esau and Jacob as "being not yet born" (*gennaō*) when discussing the doctrine of election without any undue awkwardness.

Obviously, Peter was building on his previous statement that Christians have been born again (cf. 1 Pet 1:23, 2:2). The proximity of these two passages to each other, the use of the term *artigennetos* (infants) and the similarity in meaning between *anagennaō* and *gennaō anōthen* all clearly support the translation of *anagennaō* as "born again" and the inescapable conclusion that being born again was a metaphor for conversion.

⁴⁹ See Appendix A – Ancient Citations

13.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to review and evaluate Armstrong's teaching concerning spiritual rebirth. Most Christians interpret being born again as a reference to conversion, but Armstrong taught that Christians are only conceived at conversion and undergo a lifetime of spiritual gestation until they are finally born again through the resurrection. After careful re-examination, the following conclusions have been reached.

13.1 Definitions

Armstrong arbitrarily defined the kingdom of God as a family of spirit-beings thus setting the stage for the erroneous conclusion that the church is not now part of the kingdom of God. A broader definition that includes the present and future aspects of the kingdom is better able to explain the biblical data; Christians are currently non-ruling citizens of God's kingdom who will enter and inherit the kingdom when Christ returns.

Armstrong used the term *beget* to refer primarily to fertilization, but it actually means to procreate, to become the father of, to give birth or to produce (in a generic sense). It is typically used to refer to men fathering children, but it can also refer to women giving birth.

The Greek word *gennaō* also means to procreate, to become the father of, to give birth or to produce. *Gennaō* does not refer to conception; the Greek word for conception is *sullambano*, which is specifically limited to the role of the mother. *Gennaō* can refer to a child that has been fathered but not yet born, but this is usually not the case unless clearly indicated by the context since gestation is usually only a very small portion of an entire human life.

13.2 Internal Evidence

When Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again, He was introducing the metaphor of conversion as a spiritual rebirth that is well documented both in Scripture and history. When Jesus said that one must be born again in order to see the kingdom, He appears to be referring to spiritual understanding or experiencing salvation and not physical vision. The expression "born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5) clearly points to conversion since water plays no role in the resurrection of the saints and is uniquely consistent with the notion of conversion. Armstrong relied heavily on John 3:6 to equate the resurrection with being born again, but this passage can also be interpreted as a reference to conversion, so it cannot be used as proof for his position.

13.3 The Church

While several passages indicate that Christians enter the kingdom at the resurrection, others show that Christians are a part of the kingdom now. This apparent inconsistency is resolved by understanding the present and future aspects of the kingdom; God currently rules over the angels in heaven and over humans on earth who have voluntarily submitted to His authority. Christians are like ambassadors stationed in an embassy far from home; they are presently citizens of the kingdom of God but not yet rulers or inheritors.

13.4 Misconceptions

Armstrong claimed that Christians are currently in a gestation state awaiting their final spiritual birth in the resurrection, but there is no scriptural support for this position. Armstrong's assertion that Christians are now unborn children in God's family but not yet actual children until born again at the resurrection is inherently inconsistent and self-contradictory. However, numerous passages describe Christians as a new spiritual creation; they also picture conversion as a birth and converted Christians as born children.

13.5 Related Passages

Armstrong cited several passages in an attempt to connect the resurrection with the metaphor of being born again, but his evidence is not compelling. He claimed that Jesus was born again by a resurrection from the dead, but this is a clear case of eisegesis. Many passages that refer to Jesus as the firstborn focus more on His pre-eminence than on the method by which He became the firstborn; they are of no value in interpreting John 3 since they do not specifically discuss being born again or born of the Spirit.

Armstrong struggled to avoid the rather obvious conclusion that the church is now part of the kingdom, but this does not mean that the church has already entered the kingdom. When Jesus is speaking of the kingdom as a present reality, He is referring to individual Christians as citizens of the kingdom; when He speaks of the kingdom as a future event, He is referring to an empire that will exercise civil authority over the whole earth.

Armstrong ultimately failed to distinguish between two separate birth analogies in the New Testament involving both conversion and the resurrection. Forcing all the biblical data to fit just one analogy led to twisted Scriptures and erroneous conclusions.

13.6 Born Again

When all the evidence is considered, both internal and external to John 3, the most likely meaning of being born again is that of conversion. While some passages in John 3 seem to fit a resurrection interpretation, the overall weight of historical, cultural, grammatical and theological evidence clearly favors conversion as the intended meaning of being born again.

Appendix A – Ancient Citations

Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), The First Apology, 61

I will also relate the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ; lest, if we omit this, we seem to be unfair in the explanation we are making. As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. 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 Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, “Except ye be born again, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”⁵⁰

Hippolytus (d. ca. 236), The Discourse on the Holy Theophany, 8

And if he is made God by water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the laver he is found to be also joint-heir with Christ after the resurrection from the dead.⁵¹

Tertullian (ca. 160-240), On Baptism, 12

When, however, the prescript is laid down that “without baptism, salvation is attainable by none” (chiefly on the ground of that declaration of the Lord, who says, “Unless one be born of water, he hath not life”)...⁵²

Cyprian (ca. 208-258), The Epistles of Cyprian, 71 To Stephen, Concerning a Council

1. Cyprian and others, to Stephen their brother, greeting. We have thought it necessary for the arranging of certain matters, dearest brother, and for their investigation by the examination of a common council, to gather together and to hold a council, at which many priests were assembled at once; at which, moreover, many things were brought forward and transacted. But the subject in regard to which we had chiefly to write to you, and to confer with your gravity and wisdom, is one that more especially pertains both to the priestly authority and to the unity, as well as the dignity, of the Catholic Church, arising as these do from the ordination of the divine appointment; to wit, that those who have been dipped abroad outside the Church, and have been stained among heretics and schismatics with the taint of profane water, when they come to us and to the Church which is one, ought to be baptized, for the reason that it is a small matter to “lay hands on them that they may receive the Holy Ghost,” unless they receive also the baptism of the Church. For then finally can they be fully sanctified, and be the sons of God, if they be born of each sacrament; since it is written, “Except a man be born again of water, and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”⁵³

⁵⁰ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.viii.ii.lxi.html>

⁵¹ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iii.iv.ii.vi.html>

⁵² <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.vi.iii.xii.html>

⁵³ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.iv.lxxi.html>

Methodius (d. ca. 311), The Banquet of the Ten Virgins, Thaleia 8

For in this way, too, the command, “Increase and multiply,” is duly fulfilled, the Church increasing daily in greatness and beauty and multitude, by the union and communion of the Word who now still comes down to us and falls into a trance by the memorial of His passion; for otherwise the Church could not conceive believers, and give them new birth by the laver of regeneration...⁵⁴

Ambrose (ca. 340-397), On the Holy Spirit, Book 3:10

64. Who is he who is born of the Spirit, and is made Spirit, but he who is renewed in the Spirit of his mind? This certainly is he who is regenerated by water and the Holy Spirit, since we receive the hope of eternal life through the laver of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. And elsewhere the Apostle Peter says: “Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” For who is he that is baptized with the Holy Spirit but he who is born again through water and the Holy Spirit? Therefore the Lord said of the Holy Spirit, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again by water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.⁵⁵

Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-394), Against Eunomius, Book 2:8

In what sense then does He become “the first-born among many brethren?” in what sense does He become “the first-born from the dead?” Assuredly this is plain, that because we are by birth flesh and blood, as the Scripture saith, “He Who for our sakes was born among us and was partaker of flesh and blood,” 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 “first-fruits of them that slept” and the “first-born from the dead,” in that He first by His own act loosed the pains of death, 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, He became “the first-born among many brethren,” and again by having made Himself the first-fruits of the resurrection, He obtains the name of the “first-born from the dead,” so having in all things the pre-eminence, after that “all old things,” as the apostle says, “have passed away,” He becomes the first-born of the new creation of men in Christ by the two-fold regeneration, alike that by Holy Baptism and that which is the consequence of the resurrection from the dead, becoming for us in both alike the Prince of Life, the first-fruits, the first-born...⁵⁶

⁵⁴ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf06.xi.iii.iv.viii.html>

⁵⁵ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.ii.iv.x.html>

⁵⁶ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205.viii.i.iv.viii.html>

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