

Introduction

Two different interpretations:

1. Traditional:

- Conversion & resurrection are both referred to as a rebirth (separate analogies)
- John 3 is discussing conversion

2. Armstrong:

- Conversion is only a conception, not a birth
- John 3 is discussing the resurrection

The Kingdom of God

Armstrong: The kingdom of God is a divine family of spirit beings, not physical humans¹

Correction: a “kingdom” can also refer to land and people or to the exercise of authority²

The kingdom of God is a present reality and a future event (Luke 17:20-21, John 18:36)

Beget

Armstrong: *beget* refers to fertilization by the father³

Correction: *beget* means to procreate, become the father of, give birth or produce

Zech 13:3 KJV “...then his father and his mother that begat him...”

Gennao

Armstrong: *gennao* can be translated as either *beget* or *born*⁴

Correction: *gennao* means to procreate, become the father of, give birth or produce

- *Gennao* does not refer to conception (*sullambano*)
- *Gennao* can refer to an unborn child, but this is usually not the case

Seeing the Kingdom

John 3:3 “...unless one is born again, he cannot see (*idein*) the kingdom of God.”

Armstrong: a person must be changed from flesh to spirit to see the spirit realm

Correction: *idein* means to see, understand or experience an event or state

- The unconverted lack spiritual vision, understanding (Matt 13:15ff, Mark 8:18)
- The unconverted will see (experience) death, not see life (John 3:36, 8:51)

Therefore, John 3:3 cannot be used to prove Armstrong’s position

Born of Water and Spirit

John 3:5 “...unless one is born of water and the Spirit”

- The second birth = water and Spirit together, not just the Spirit alone⁵
- Water plays no role in the resurrection of the saints, is consistent with conversion
- Water refers to baptism, sanctification and/or regeneration (Ezk 36:25-27, Titus 3:5)
- Armstrong’s interpretation cannot explain being born of water and the Spirit

¹ Herbert W. Armstrong, *Just what do you mean - Born Again?*, (n.l.: Worldwide Church of God, 1972), 5, 10-14.

² David K. Lowery, *A Theology of Matthew* in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 35.

³ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 35, 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32, 36.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, Second Edition, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 42

Born of the Spirit

John 3:6 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”

Armstrong: being born of the Spirit refers to the change from flesh to spirit at the resurrection

Correction: many passages also describe conversion as a new spiritual life or creation

- Rom 8:9 Christians are not in the flesh but in the Spirit
- 1 Cor 3:1 they were carnal (*sarkikos*, fleshly), not spiritual (*pneumatikos*)
- Eph 4:20-24 Put on the new man by being renewed in the spirit of the mind
- Col 3:9-10 Put on the new [man] who is renewed in knowledge
- 2 Cor 4:16 The outward man perishes, the inner man is renewed daily
- 2 Cor 5:17 Christians are “a new creation”

Therefore, John 3:6 cannot be used to prove Armstrong’s position

Like the Wind

John 3:8 “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.”

Armstrong: those who are resurrected will be invisible to human eyes

Correction: this could also refer to spiritual blindness (Luke 19:41-44, Matt 16:1-4)

Therefore, John 3:8 cannot be used to prove Armstrong’s position

Entering the Kingdom

John 3:5 “...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”

Armstrong: Christians cannot enter the kingdom until the resurrection

Correction: conversion and resurrection must both occur before entering the kingdom

- Christians do enter the kingdom at Christ’s return (Matt 7:21-23, Acts 14:22)
- But, Nicodemus also needed to be converted to enter the kingdom (Matt 18:1-3)

Status of the Church

Armstrong: the church cannot be part of the kingdom now (begotten, not born)

Correction: the church is part of the kingdom now as citizens, resident aliens

- Col 1:13 God has “...transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son”
- Ephesians 2:19 Gentiles are “...fellow citizens with the saints”
- Philippians 3:20 “For our citizenship is in heaven...”
- Christians are sojourners, pilgrims & resident aliens (1 Pet 2:11, Heb 11:13)

Inheriting the Kingdom

Armstrong: being born again refers to a change from flesh to spirit (John 3:6)

- Christians will not be changed from flesh to spirit until the resurrection (1 Cor 15:50-53)
- Armstrong concluded that Christians will not be born again until the resurrection

Correction: Armstrong assumed that John 3:6 is discussing resurrection

- John 3:5 (born of water and the Spirit) is a reference to conversion
- John 3:6 does not say that flesh will be changed to spirit or mention resurrection
- 1 Corinthians 15 does not describe the resurrection as being born again

Conversion as a Conception

Armstrong: conversion is only a conception; the Christian life is a gestation

- The church is “the mother of us all” (Galatians 4:26)⁶
- *Gennao* should be translated as *begotten* not *born*⁷

Conception as a Misconception

Correction: there are no passages that portray Christians as unborn children

- There are no passages that refer to conversion as a conception (*sullambano*)
- There are no passages that refer to the church as “the mother of us all”⁸
- In Galatians 4:24-26, “Jerusalem above” is the new covenant not the church

According to Armstrong:

- Christians are unborn children in God’s family now (Rom 8:14, 1 John 3:2)⁹
- Christians are not part of God’s kingdom, family until the resurrection¹⁰

Note: Armstrong’s arbitrary definition of the kingdom is internally inconsistent

Babes in Christ

Many passages picture conversion as a birth, Christians as born children

- Gal 4:19 Paul suffered birth pains until they were restored to Christ
- Christians are often referred to as infants (1 Cor 3:1-2, Heb. 5:11-14, 1 Pet. 2:2)
- Paul described his converts as his own children (1 Cor. 4:15, 1 Tim. 1:2, Philm. 10)
- Timothy and Onesimus were treated as adult sons, not unborn children
- John described his converts as his own children (1 John 2:1, 3:18)

The Greek verb *apokueo* means to give birth, to bring forth or to bring into being

- James 1:15 “Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth (*apokueo*) death.”
- James 1:18 “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth (*apokueo*) by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.”

The Greek verb *anagennao* means to beget again or to cause to be born again (e.g., John 3:3)
Christians have already been born again (cf. 1 Pet 1:23, 2:2)

Christ Was Born Again

Armstrong: “Christ was born a SON of God *by a resurrection* from the dead (Rom 1:4).”¹¹

Correction: Jesus was declared (proved) to be the Son of God by the resurrection

Romans 1:3-4 “concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, (4) who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord”

⁶ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 19, 27-28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10, 13-14.

¹¹ Armstrong, *Born Again*, 42.

Christ the Firstborn

Rom 8:29 “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.”

Armstrong: Christians will be conformed to the image of Jesus through the resurrection

Correction: Rom 8:29 could be talking about conversion or resurrection (unclear)

Armstrong: Christians will be put on His same plane and also become God’s sons.¹²

Correction: Christians inherit eternal life and a sinless nature as a result of glorification

But, Christians will never be placed on the same plane as God (Isa 43:10, 44:6)

In Col 1:15, Jesus is called “the firstborn over all creation”

Note: this passage does not explain what is meant by the term “firstborn”

In Col 1:18 & Rev 1:5, Jesus is called “the firstborn from the dead”

Note: these passages do not connect the resurrection with the terminology of John 3

- Leaven can be a symbol of sin or the kingdom based on the context (Matt 13:33, 16:6)
- Rebirth can refer to conversion or resurrection based on the context

Creation Labors

Romans 8:22 “the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now”

Armstrong: “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.”¹³

Correction: Rom 8:19-23 does not connect the resurrection with the terminology of John 3

- In Romans 8:22-23, Christians are groaning in labor pain rather than being born
- The terms *resurrection* and *birth* are not used, but rather *adoption* and *redemption*

6.0 Conclusion

The traditional interpretation provides a better explanation of the biblical data

The most likely meaning of the metaphor of being born again in John 3 is conversion

¹² Ibid., 42-43.

¹³ Ibid., 20-21.

Appendix – 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.”¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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”)...¹⁶

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.”¹⁷

¹⁴ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.viii.ii.lxi.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iii.iv.ii.vi.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.vi.iii.xii.html>

¹⁷ <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...¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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...²⁰

¹⁸ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf06.xi.iii.iv.viii.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.ii.iv.x.html>

²⁰ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205.viii.i.iv.viii.html>