

How to Become a Christian

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Philip H. Curtis

Today I'm beginning a new sermon series: "Christianity 101." In colleges and universities, an introductory level course is usually designated "101": Physics 101, Education 101, French 101, etc. In each case the course is basic, the beginning level of study in that subject.

Over these next several months, I plan to speak to you about the basics of Christianity: Christianity 101. Lord willing, we will cover such topics as Christian beliefs, Christian behavior, and, initially, Christian beginnings, that is, "How to Become a Christian," "How to Be Sure You Are a Christian," and "How to Grow as a Christian." I've taken my outline for this series from a book, no longer published, by one of my favorite authors, John Stott: *Christian Basics*. (Mr. Stott, by the way, recently died and has departed to be with Christ.)

So today we begin with this basic question: How do you become a Christian? Or, in other words, how can a person enter the kingdom of God, or how can a person receive eternal life and be saved from eternal condemnation? These are important questions, the most important questions you will ever consider, whether as a child, a young person, or an adult.

But perhaps you're thinking, "Are these questions really so important? After all, I'm already a Christian. I was born and raised in a Christian home. I live in a Christian nation. What else is required? You ask, 'How do you become a Christian?' That's easy, live a good life and practice the Christian religion!"

But consider this: If anyone would seem (on the surface at least) to be a citizen of God's kingdom, surely it was the man named Nicodemus in John 3. He was a Pharisee (v. 1), a member of the strictest religious sect in Palestine in the first century AD. The Pharisees tithed their income, fasted twice weekly, and kept the Sabbath scrupulously—they were the most religious kind of people. Nicodemus was also "a member of the Jewish ruling council" (v. 1), the Sanhedrin. In our terms today he was a church elder or even a cardinal in the Vatican! Also, Nicodemus was a "teacher of Israel" (v. 10). He not only followed the orthodox faith but he taught it to others. In addition, he had a high view of Jesus: he called him "Rabbi" (Teacher), confessed him to be "a teacher who has come from God," and believed that God was with him, as demonstrated by the miraculous signs which Jesus was performing (v. 2). But despite all this, according to Jesus, Nicodemus was not yet a citizen of God's kingdom. He had not yet received eternal life. (Notice also that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, perhaps fearing that other Pharisees or religious leaders would disapprove of his association with Jesus.)

Nicodemus reminds me of John Wesley, the 18th century founder of the Methodist Church. With his brother Charles and other friends, John started a “Holy Club” at Oxford University in London. The members of this club were orthodox in their Christian beliefs: they believed the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. Their lives were full of good works. Among other things, they visited the prisons of London and started a school in a London slum, paying the teacher and providing clothes for the students out of their own pockets. These men were very religious, attending Communion every week, fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, and observing both Saturday and Sunday as Sabbath days. Yet, John Wesley, by his own testimony, was not yet a Christian. In 1735 he sailed to Georgia to serve as a chaplain to the colonists and as a missionary to the Indians, but he came back two years later very disillusioned. He wrote in his *Journal*, “I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh! who shall convert me? . . . I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.”¹

Then how is a person “converted”? How do you become a Christian, a citizen of God’s kingdom? How can you receive eternal life and be saved from God’s judgment? According to Jesus, in John 3, there are two requirements for becoming a Christian.

First Requirement: YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

These are Jesus’ own words in John 3:7 (NIV throughout): “*You must be born again.*” This phrase, “born again,” is not politically correct in some circles today, but Jesus was not afraid to use it. In fact, he says that rebirth is necessary to see or experience the kingdom of God (v. 3). This second birth is a requirement, a “must” for entering God’s kingdom.

When Nicodemus introduces himself to Jesus and calls him a teacher from God, Jesus, who knows the hearts of us all, does not respond directly to Nicodemus’s statement. Instead, he speaks directly to the need of this man’s life: “I tell you the truth [lit., Amen, amen], no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (v. 3). “Born again” could be translated “born from above.” Jesus is saying that a physical birth on earth is not enough; you must experience a birth from above, you must be born of God.

Nicodemus seems to take Jesus literally: “How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” (v. 4) He interprets Jesus as speaking of another physical birth. Impossible! And, even if he is taking Jesus figuratively, Nicodemus seems to be saying, “How is such a new birth possible for an old man like me? How can I begin my life all over again?”

Jesus explains to Nicodemus that he is not talking about another physical birth, but a spiritual birth: “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh [physical birth] but the Spirit gives birth to spirit [spiritual birth]. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’ (vv. 5-7). This new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit of God. He is the one, the only one, who can impart this new spiritual life to us so that we can enter the kingdom of God.

¹ From *The Journal of John Wesley*, entries for 24th and 29th January, 1739.

“You must be born again” (v. 7). The “you” in this verse is plural. This teaching of Jesus is not just for Nicodemus. It is for all of us. No one can see or enter the kingdom of God unless he has been born anew. You can become a citizen of the United States by being born physically in this country or by being born of American citizens living abroad. But to become a citizen of God’s kingdom, you must be born again, spiritually.

Jesus illustrates what he is talking about in verse 8: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” In the original Greek language (in which the New Testament was written), “wind” and “spirit” are the same word. Jesus is using a play on words, a pun, in order to drive home the point that the new birth is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. Just as a gust of wind blows wherever it wishes and we cannot control its origin or its destination (remember Hurricane Irene?), so the new birth is a sovereign, invisible work of the Spirit. Just as you did not give yourself physical life in the beginning, so only the Holy Spirit can give you new spiritual life.

In verse 5 Jesus further defines the new birth as being “born of water and the Spirit.” The emphasis throughout the passage is on being “born of the Spirit” (vv. 5, 6, 8). What then does he mean by being “born of water”? According to verse 10, Jesus rebukes Nicodemus for not understanding what he is talking about: “You are Israel’s teacher, and do you not understand these things?” He expected this Pharisee to understand the new birth from the Old Testament. And, in fact, I believe Ezekiel 36:25-27 provides the key to interpreting Jesus’ words in John 3:5. To the nation of Israel, which had turned away from God to idols and sin and, as a result, had gone into exile in a foreign land in the 6th century BC, the LORD makes this promise:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Here we have Ezekiel’s explanation of what it means to be “born of water and the Spirit.” This new birth involves cleansing us from sin, giving us a new heart, and receiving the gift of God’s Spirit, all of which results in a radically transformed life of obedience to God’s commands. It means beginning life all over again.

Many years ago, I was sitting beside a young man on a Greyhound bus to New York City (I was a young man at that time too!). The conversation turned to spiritual things, and I shared my personal testimony with my fellow-passenger. At one point, he asked me directly, “How can I begin my life all over again?” Naturally, I shared with him this story of Nicodemus from John 3 and Jesus’ teaching about the new birth. As we came into the city and were driving through Harlem, he suddenly got up (with no explanation), walked to the front of the bus, and asked the driver to let him off at the next light. (Normally, passengers do not exit the bus on this trip until they arrive at the Port Authority terminal.) The driver complied, and the young man was gone. Why did he suddenly get off the bus? I’ll give you my answer later in the message.

But, let me ask you this question right now: “Are you born again? Have you been born of the Spirit? Have you been cleansed from your idols and sins? Do you have a new heart? Is the Holy Spirit moving you to obey God’s commands? Is he living within you?” Unless you are born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. You must be born again to be a real Christian. But there’s also a second requirement to becoming a Christian.

Second requirement: THE SON OF MAN MUST BE LIFTED UP

Again, these are Jesus’ words in John 3:14-15: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so *the Son of Man must be lifted up*, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Here’s another requirement for becoming a Christian, another “must”: “The Son of Man *must* be lifted up.”

Who is this “Son of Man”? Throughout the four Gospels, “Son of Man” is Jesus’ favorite name or title for himself. He is the Son of Man. He’s talking about himself. Now, of course, Jesus is also the Son of God, as the following verses 16-18 clearly indicate. But 2000 years ago, he also became the Son of Man when he was born of a human mother on earth.

But what does Jesus mean that “the Son of Man must be *lifted up*”? What is this “lifting up”? He explains it by referring to an incident in the Old Testament: “*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert*, so the Son of Man must be lifted up” (3:14). In Numbers 21:4-9, the people of Israel were journeying through the desert toward the Promised Land, and for the umpteenth time they grew impatient and complained against God and against Moses. “Why did you bring us into this desert? We don’t have any bread! There’s no water!” God punished the people by sending venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many died. The people came to Moses and confessed, “We have sinned against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us” (v. 7). When Moses prayed for the people, the LORD directed him to “‘make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. When anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”

In order for the people to live and not die from the snakebite and because of their sins, Moses had to put the bronze snake on a pole for the people to see. In the same way, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, had to be lifted up on a cross publicly to die for our sins. And just as the people in Moses’ day were healed and did not die when they looked at the snake with eyes of faith, so by looking to Christ with faith, we may have eternal life in him. The Israelites were saved from physical death and given physical life. By believing in Jesus, we are saved from eternal death and are given eternal life. Or, as expressed earlier in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, we gain entrance into the kingdom of God.

In summary then, notice that the two requirements to become a Christian are both the work of God. In history, 2000 years ago, Jesus, the Son of Man, was lifted up on the cross for our sins in order that we may have eternal life (v. 15). And today, we are born again of the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God (v. 7). For us to become Christians, it requires the work of both the Son of God and the Spirit of God.

But, what about us? What do *we* have to do in order to become Christians? Friends, there's nothing you can *do*! God has done the work for you through his Son and through his Spirit. Rather, there's a person for you to *believe* in, to *trust* in, to put your *faith* in—Jesus Christ. In some of the most wonderful verses in the Bible, which follow immediately after John 3:15, God makes it very clear that our part in becoming a Christian is to simply believe in his Son, Jesus Christ:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever *believes* in him is not condemned, but whoever does not *believe* stands condemned already because he has not *believed* in the name of God's one and only Son (John 3:16-18).

Notice that the only condition to our having eternal life is to believe in God's Son. Faith in Christ delivers us from perishing, from God's condemnation. By faith we receive eternal life, we are saved.

John Wesley, whom I mentioned earlier, discovered this truth for his own life. In May 1738 he visited a church meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. Martin Luther's preface to his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans was being read, about believing in Jesus. Wesley wrote in his *Journal*, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."² On that day, John Wesley was born of the Spirit, entered the kingdom of God, received eternal life, and was saved from eternal condemnation. In other words, he became a Christian. He put his trust in Christ.

If this is the only condition for receiving eternal life—believing in Jesus—why doesn't everyone take this step? I think John 3:19-20 supplies the answer:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world [Jesus is the Light of the world, John 8:12], but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

In other words, people do not come to the light of Jesus and believe in him because they don't want their sin to be exposed. They don't want to give up their sin. I think this is the reason why the young man on the Greyhound bus abruptly left his seat beside me and got off the bus. He had come under conviction of sin. He wanted to start his life all over again but he didn't want to part with his sinful ways. And he wanted to escape from the light.

By the way, if you continue reading the gospel of John, it appears that Nicodemus eventually did believe in Jesus. In John 7:50-51 he openly defends Jesus before the rest of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. And in John 19:38-42, he is one of two men who openly claims the body of Jesus for burial after his crucifixion.

² *Journal*, entry for 24th May, 1738.

But what exactly does it mean to believe in Jesus? How do you do it? John 1:12-13 helps us to understand:

Yet to all who *received him* [Jesus], to those who *believed in his name*, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

Notice that “receiving Jesus” and “believing in his name” are equivalent expressions. To believe in Jesus is to receive or accept him into your heart and life. And in John 1:13 this act of receiving Christ is linked to becoming a child of God and being born of God, in other words, being born again.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus pictures himself as standing outside the door of our hearts and inviting us to admit or receive him: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” A number of artists have pictured this scene with Jesus standing outside the door and knocking, waiting for admission, and longing to sit down and have fellowship with us. This verse was the key to John Stott’s becoming a Christian as a young man. He writes:

Intellectually speaking, I had believed in Jesus all my life, on the other side of the door. I had regularly struggled to say my prayers through the key hole. I had even pushed pennies under the door in a vain attempt to pacify him. I had been baptized, yes and confirmed as well. I went to church, read my Bible, had high ideals, and tried to be good and do good. But all the time, often without realizing it, I was holding Christ at arm’s length, and keeping him outside. I knew that to open the door might have momentous consequences.³

Eventually, the Lord did enable Stott to open the door of his heart. He received Jesus Christ, he believed in him. He was born of the Spirit, became a citizen’s of God’s kingdom, received eternal life, and was saved from eternal condemnation. He became a Christian. You can open the door of your heart also. Here’s a simple prayer that can help you take this step:

Lord Jesus Christ, I admit that I have sinned against God and others, and have gone my own way. I repent of my self-centeredness. I thank you for your great love in dying for me, for bearing in my place the penalty of my sins. Now I open the door of my heart to you. Come in, Lord Jesus. Come in as my Savior, to cleanse and renew me. Come in as my Lord, to take control of me. And by your grace I will serve you faithfully, in fellowship with your other disciples, all my life. Amen.⁴

Will you offer this prayer to the Lord today? Will you believe that Christ died for you and trust the Spirit to transform you life? Will you become a real Christian?

³ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 23-24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.