

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

BORN AGAIN TO LOVE

1 Peter 1:22-25

by

Steven J. Cole

July 26, 1992

© Steven J. Cole, 1992

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

July 26, 1992
1 Peter Lesson 7

BORN AGAIN TO LOVE 1 Peter 1:22-25

We live in a culture which has taken some biblical words and used them in a way that redefines and cheapens them so that they no longer mean what the Bible means. But then they seep back into the vocabulary of Christians with their devalued meaning.

Take the term “born again.” The media uses it to describe anyone who makes a comeback or gets a fresh start in life. A baseball team that has been in the cellar and suddenly starts winning is called “the born again” Dodgers. Chrysler under Lee Iacocca was a “born again” corporation.

And so it's not surprising when over 50 percent of Americans say that they're “born again Christians.” They mean that they had some sort of religious or emotional experience that resulted in a fresh start in life. It may have involved praying to Jesus or “inviting Him into their hearts.” But in most cases, they have no idea what the Bible means by being born again.

Another word that has become devalued is “love.” We say, “I love pizza”; “I love New York” (I saw a bumper sticker that said, “If you love New York, please get on I-40 and drive east”); “I love baseball”; “I love my dog”; “I love my family”; “I love Jesus.” But what does it mean?

It's like the little girl who was invited to dinner at her friend's home. The vegetable was buttered broccoli. The mother asked if she liked it. She replied politely, “Oh, yes, I love it!” But when the broccoli was passed she declined to take any. The hostess said, “I thought you said you loved buttered broccoli.” The girl replied sweetly, “Oh, yes ma'am, I do, but not enough to eat it!”

I bring up these two terms, “born again” and “love” because they are central to understanding Peter's thought in 1 Peter 1:22-25. If we allow our culture's devalued definitions of these words to affect our

thinking, we will miss what the apostle is saying. So as we work through these verses, we must keep in mind the biblical definitions of these words and consciously reject our culture's definitions of them.

Peter was writing to scattered groups who represented the first Christians in an otherwise thoroughly pagan world (1:1). Through God's mercy they had been "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3). These scattered groups of believers were made up of both Jews and Gentiles, a radical cultural mix in that day. And they were being persecuted for their faith. As often happens in our families, suffering turns small irritations into conflict and triggers friction that otherwise might not exist. Thus Peter, after showing them that being a Christian requires a holy lifestyle, brings the rubber of holiness down to the road of life and shows that the new birth demands a new love in the family of God:

Christians must love because they have been born again through God's imperishable Word of truth.

As we saw last week on the subject of holiness, Peter stated the demand (1:15-16), but then went into a lengthy rationale as to why Christians must be holy, namely, because their heavenly Father is also their judge and they have been redeemed with the precious blood of Christ (1:17-21). He does a similar thing here with the subject of love. First, he states something that is true of his readers due to their conversion: They had purified their souls in obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren (1:22a). Then he states the consequent demand: "Fervently love one another from the heart" (1:22b). He follows this with a theological truth relative to their conversion, which he supports with a lengthy quote from Isaiah 40:6-8: They have been born again through God's imperishable Word (1:23-25).

Thus Peter is saying that the kind of holiness he has been describing, holiness which stems from the new birth, must work itself out in love for fellow Christians. We'll look first at two aspects of the new birth; and then we'll look at the new love that must follow. Keep in mind that we must define "the new birth" and "love" from a biblical perspective, not as our culture defines them.

1. The new birth is marked by purity of soul in obedience to the truth (1:22a).

To understand verse 22 properly, we must see that Peter is talking about something that takes place at conversion or the new birth. If this were not so, Peter could not state, as he does, that this purity of soul in obedience to the truth was true of his readers. At conversion, a person begins a new life of obedience to the truth of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The outward symbol of this obedience to the truth is baptism, which pictures the inward purification from sins that takes place when a person trusts in Christ. Thus when Peter talks about his readers purifying their souls in obedience to the truth, he is referring to their obedience in baptism.

We need to be clear on two things here. First, baptism does not save anyone. Personal faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ saves a person from God's wrath and judgment. But baptism is the way a person who has trusted Christ confesses Him publicly. We've gotten away from this in our day and have replaced it with walking the aisle. Preachers will say that we must confess Christ publicly (which is true) and then encourage people to get out of their seats in front of everyone and come forward. But the New Testament way of confessing Christ is to be baptized. But baptism does not save the person. Baptism is the outward symbol of obedience to Christ that reflects the inward reality of saving faith.

I heard a message by Stuart Briscoe in which he tells about being in a village in Bangladesh with the elders of that village who were Muslims by birth and background, but who had put their trust in Christ as Savior. They were sitting cross-legged on a dirt floor discussing whether they should all publicly confess Christ by being baptized. They could believe in Christ with no consequences. But if they were baptized, they would be tried and convicted as heretics and would be publicly beaten with bamboo rods. Since most of these men were old and somewhat frail, this could very likely result in their deaths.

That brings "obedience to the truth" of the gospel down to the most basic level, doesn't it! Would you be baptized if you knew that it meant social ostracism, a public beating, and perhaps death? Briscoe reported that to his knowledge, all of these men went through with

being baptized. I don't know if any of them died from the beatings. But the baptism didn't save them. It did prove the reality of their faith in Christ which did save them.

That leads to the second thing we must be clear about: There is no such thing as saving faith apart from obedient faith. There is a pernicious error in our day that you can believe in Jesus Christ as Savior, but obedience to Him as Lord is optional. If you want a fire insurance policy to protect you from hell, then believe in Jesus as your Savior, but you don't need to go all the way and obey Him as Lord. You can just go to church when it's convenient, drop a few bucks in the offering plate now and then, and call yourself a Christian. But if you like hardship and suffering, if you think that denying yourself and taking up a cross and living a holy life sounds adventurous and exciting, then you can sign up for the discipleship track. You'll be rewarded with a few extra benefits in heaven.

Please listen carefully, because your eternal destiny depends upon your understanding this: There is no such distinction in the Bible. Christians are those who have purified their souls in obedience to the truth. In 1 Peter 1:2, Peter says that we are chosen "unto obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ" (literal translation). The word "obedience" stands alone grammatically and refers to the initial acceptance of the gospel. In 1 Peter 2:8 and 3:1, he refers to unbelievers as those who are "disobedient to the word." In 4:17 he refers to unbelievers as "those who do not obey the gospel of God."

In Romans 1:5, Paul describes the goal of his own mission as "to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles." In Romans 10:16, he states that not all heed (the word means, "obey") the gospel, and then cites Isaiah 53:1 as corroborating: "Lord, who has believed our report?" Believing and obeying are used interchangeably. In Romans 16:26, he says that the preaching of the gospel leads "to obedience of faith." In 2 Thessalonians 1:8, Paul says that when Jesus Christ returns, He will deal out "retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."

John 3:36 makes the same connection between belief and obedience: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on

him." Acts 6:7 refers to the spread of the gospel in the days following Pentecost, when a number of the Jewish "priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

Does this mean that true Christians never disobey God? Of course not! But it does mean that there is no such thing as a characteristically disobedient believer. If a person claims to be saved, but lives in chronic disobedience to God and disregard for His Word, the person is deceived (1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 6:7; 1 John 3:7). Saving faith is marked by purification of the inner man and obedience to God's truth. Part of that obedience involves sincere love for the brethren.

Thus Peter's first point is that the new birth is marked by purity of soul in obedience to the truth.

2. The new birth takes place through God's imperishable Word (1:23-25).

Grammatically, "you have been born again" (1:23) is parallel to "you have purified your souls" (1:22) and could be translated in the same way, "Since you have been born again." Peter is stating an accomplished fact with continuing results which is the basis for his command to love one another. The idea is that the new birth which takes place through God's eternal Word brings us into a new, eternal family where God is our common Father. Peter brings out two facets of this new birth which takes place through God's Word:

A. The new birth is effected by God through His Word, not by man.

The Greek participle ("have been born again") is passive, pointing to God's action in the new birth. J. I. Packer defines the new birth as "an inner re-creating of fallen human nature by the gracious sovereign action of the Holy Spirit" ("Regeneration," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [Baker], ed. by Walter Elwell, p. 924). It is God who saves us "by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

He does it through His Word (both preached and written). James 1:18 affirms: "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by

the word of truth" The only way we can know God is through the revelation He has given about Himself. Men can speculate about what God is like, but it is only through revelation, not speculation, that we can truly know God. He has chosen to record that revelation in the Bible. Thus He uses the truth contained in the Bible, especially the truth about His Son who gave Himself on the cross for our sins, to bring about the new birth in human hearts.

Wherever the Bible has gone and the good news about Jesus Christ recorded in the Bible has been preached, whether among a savage tribe or in a sophisticated, educated culture, the miracle of new birth has taken place. People are transformed inwardly by God's power through His Word, not through human self-improvement.

A skeptic once told Gaylord Kambarami, the General Secretary of the Bible Society of Zimbabwe, "If you give me that New Testament I will roll the pages and use them to make cigarettes!" Gaylord replied, "I understand that, but at least promise to read the page of the New Testament before you smoke it." When the man agreed, Gaylord gave him the New Testament and that was the last he saw of him for 15 years.

Then, while Gaylord was attending a Methodist convention in Zimbabwe, the speaker on the platform suddenly spotted him, pointed him out to the audience and said, "This man doesn't remember me, but 15 years ago he tried to sell me a New Testament. When I refused to buy it he gave it to me, even though I told him I would use the pages to roll cigarettes. I smoked Matthew and I smoked Mark and I smoked Luke. But when I got to John 3:16, I couldn't smoke anymore. My life was changed from that moment!" That man is now a full-time evangelist, preaching the Word he once smoked! God uses His Word to bring the new birth!

B. The new birth is not temporary, but lasting.

Peter describes the new birth as coming from an imperishable seed, in contrast to the perishable seed of human birth. That imperishable seed is the Word (Luke 8:11) which is living and abiding. Thus the new life which God imparts through His Word is eternal, not subject to death.

Peter quotes from Isaiah 40:6-8 (LXX) to support his point. In the context, Isaiah was writing prophetically to God's people who had been taken into captivity in Babylon, comforting them that God would fulfill His promises by restoring them to the land. Babylon, outwardly, was one of the most impressive and powerful kingdoms on the face of the earth. The hanging gardens were considered one of the wonders of the ancient world. The walls of Babylon seemed impenetrable.

But Isaiah says, "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls off; but the Word of the Lord abides forever." In other words, don't be fooled by the outward impressiveness of Babylon. It will fade like a flower, but God's Word will stand forever! Of course, God's Word through Isaiah proved true. In case they missed the point, Peter adds, "This is the word which was preached as good news to you." Thus when you are suffering in an alien world that looks glamorous and seems lasting, don't be fooled. It will fade and perish; but the new birth you possess through God's Word will abide forever.

This new birth, marked by purity of soul in obedience to the truth, which takes place through God's imperishable Word, is the basis for the command Peter gives to love one another:

C. The new birth demands a new love (1:22b).

Peter's readers were suffering as aliens in a foreign world. If you were an American living in a strange country like Tibet, and you were being hounded for being an American, and you heard that there was another American also in the same city, you'd seek him out. You'd cling to him as one who understood what you were going through. This would be especially true if the person were a blood relative, born to the same family as you. That's Peter's point, that those who are members of God's family through the new birth must stick together in this alien world.

The implication of verses 22 & 23 is that this new love is the necessary result of the new birth; and, yet, it is not automatic and thus must be commanded and nurtured. In other words, when you purify "your souls in obedience to the truth," which, as we've seen, is a

reference to saving faith, that obedience took you down a one-way path toward sincere love for the brethren. Because that is true, you must exert yourself to do it, to love fervently from the heart. Paul writes the same idea (1 Thess. 4:9-10): "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more."

I've developed this definition of biblical love: Biblical love is a self-sacrificing, caring commitment which shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved. Thus it is not a sentimental feeling, like so much modern love, since at its core it is a commitment. It does not mean always being "nice," since sometimes the commitment to seek a person's highest good involves confronting them in a way that causes pain. If I have a choice between a doctor who is nice and who gives lots of hugs, and who sends me out the door feeling good; and another doctor who says, "Steve, I'm going to be honest: You're very sick. The cure will be painful, but it will make you well"; give me the second doctor. He's the one who really loves me! He's willing to confront the sickness in my life and he's committed to helping me get better.

Love is always caring, even when it must confront. It is not devoid of feelings of compassion and tenderness. It often involves sacrifice on the part of the one extending it. The highest good for anyone, of course, is that he comes under the lordship of Christ so that his life gives glory to Him.

Peter describes this love here in three ways: First, it is a sincere love. The word means "not hypocritical" (see Rom. 12:9; 2 Cor. 6:6; 1 John 3:18). Biblical love is not affirming and gushy to a person's face but then disparaging of him when he's not around. It's not manipulative, trying to butter a person up for one's own advantage, while in your heart you despise him. Biblical love doesn't try to use someone for the "connection" for personal gain.

Second, it is a clean love. There is strong manuscript evidence for the reading, "fervently love one another from a clean heart" (1:22). In other words, love is not for impurity, such as sexual favors. Neither should it be a camaraderie because of common sinful pursuits, such as

going out drinking or partying together. You cannot love if you harbor unconfessed sin in your heart. It must stem from a clean heart.

Third, it must be a fervent love. This word stems from a verb meaning to stretch out or strain. It implies effort and emotion. It is used of Jesus' fervent prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44) and of the church's fervent prayer for Peter when he was in prison facing execution (Acts 12:5). It shows that while love is an emotion, it is more than an emotion. It can be commanded and thus involves the will. It involves hard work and effort. It's not always easy. But it is required as a crucial part of the outworking of our salvation.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by asking two important questions: First, Have you truly been born again, not just in the American cliché sense, but has God's Spirit imparted spiritual life to you? You ask, "How can I know for sure?" There are several tests given in the Bible, but the test which comes from our text (and is developed repeatedly in 1 John) is, "Do you obey God's truth?" It's not that you never sin, but is the desire and bent of your life to please the Savior who loved you and gave Himself for you? It will be impossible for you to love others as God wants you to do if you have not been born again. So you must put your trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord as the primary matter.

Second, Are you working at loving as you should? That may sound like a contradiction, since our culture says that you either have love or you don't and there's not much you can do about it. But God's Word says that if we've been born again we must work at having a sincere love, a clean love, and a fervent love, especially toward other Christians. You may need to begin at home or with an extended family member. It may be someone in this church. But if you've received the new birth, you've got to work at the new love. Christians must love because they have been born again through God's imperishable Word of truth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can a person who claims to believe but lives in disobedience have assurance of salvation?
2. Can a true Christian be repeatedly defeated by sin? What's the difference between this and a false faith?
3. Is there a difference between loving and liking? Must we like all fellow believers?
4. How can I fervently love someone I dislike?

Copyright 1992, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.