

## **“Are You Born Again?” “You Betcha!”**

By Steve Ray

Grilled salmon sizzled on his plate as Andy and his family sat down for dinner. No sooner had they crossed themselves to bless the food, than the doorbell rang. Andrew dragged himself to answer the door while his family began eating.

Two smiling faces peered in the door. “Good evening, we hope we’re not interrupting your dinner.” Rolling his eyes, Andy responded, “Can I help you?” The first smiling face said, “We are from the local Baptist church and stopped by to see if you are born again.”

Andy had been a Catholic all his life and remembered hearing that phrase somewhere in his past, but at this moment he hesitated. “Well, ahh, I’m a Catholic.” The second smiling face displayed a hint of glee, “Can we come in and share the Gospel with you?” Andy blurted out, “Actually, we are in the middle of dinner-maybe another time.” “OK”, said the delighted Baptists, “how about next Tuesday evening?” Andy sighed and agreed.

Sitting down to cold salmon, he realized he had his work cut out for him. After dinner he retreated to his den, grabbed his Bible and Catechism and got to work. Take a few minutes and study along with Andy as he prepares for the Tuesday visit and the inevitable debate on the much-abused phrase “born again”. Andy started by reading the third chapter of St. John’s gospel. Open your Bible and read along with Andy.

Andy began his mission with a barrage of questions. Is the phrase “born again” in the Bible (Jn 3:3)? Does the Catechism mention this “new birth” (CCC 720, 591)? To understand, Andy thought about Nicodemus. What does Nicodemus and his legalistic system represent (Ro 7:5-6; CCC 1963)? Can the Jewish Law bring new birth and salvation? Is being born of the seed of Abraham sufficient for salvation (Mt 3:8-9; Jn 8:33-47)? What is Jesus bringing to Mankind (Heb 9:15; 12:24; Lk 22:20; CCC 292)?

After thinking about Abraham, Andy concluded that Jesus’ teaching was obviously based on Old Testament passages which Nicodemus must have known well. How did the Old Testament explain the approaching new covenant (Ez 36:25-27; Jer 31:31-34)? How might Ez 37:1-10 have pictured the new covenant (CCC 715)?

Next, Andy sought the source of this new birth and what it means. Who brings about this birth from above (Jn 1:12-13; CCC 505, 526)? The Greek word for “born again” is “anothen” which can also be defined as “born from above”. How does Nicodemus misunderstand Jesus’ use of the word “anothen” (anwqen) in verse 4? What two elements are necessary to “enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5)? Is faith necessary (CCC 505)? Does Jesus proclaim “faith alone” as the means of achieving new birth? What does Jesus mean by “born of water and the Spirit”? (Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 3:20-21; CCC 720, 1215, 1225, 1257; see also Acts 2:38; 22:16). What was the result of this birth from above (2 Cor 5:17; CCC 1214)?

Who was the father of the Jewish leaders (Jn 8:44; CCC 2852)? Our first parents incurred death by acting on Satan's word; we are begotten anew by listening to what word (1 Pet 1:23; CCC 1228, 2769)? What is our natural state (Eph 2:1-4)? What does God provide us (Jn 1:12-13; 3:5; 2 Cor 5:17; CCC 1214)? What differing births does Jesus contrast in verse 6? Why is the Church called our Mother (CCC 507)? Is Baptism necessary for salvation (1 Pet 3:21; CCC 846; 1257)? Andy knew the Baptists would ask about the thief on the cross-the thief was not baptized?" (Lu 23:39-43; CCC 1258-1260)? Jews applied circumcision to their infants as a sign and doorway into the Old Covenant (Gen 17:6-14; Lk 2:21; CCC 1150)? In the New Covenant, what takes the place of circumcision (Col 2:11-13; CCC 527)?

Andy wondered if the context would help explain Jesus' words about "water and Spirit". He discovered that being "born from above" clearly referred to baptism by the very context and framework of the text. What had just happened to Jesus-something still fresh in everyone's mind (Mt 3:16; Jn 1:31-32)? How were "water" and "Spirit" involved in this recent event? How would this explain "birth from above"? Compare the "birth" of the first creation (Gen 1:1-2). Andy discovered something at the end of the dialog that confirmed his hunch about the context. What did Jesus do immediately after talking with Nicodemus (Jn 3:22-26; 4:1)? Why did Andy conclude that this framework confirmed that new birth came through baptism?

Andy expected the Baptists to resist the historical and Catholic teaching of baptismal regeneration. He wondered how Protestants re-interpret this passage. Study showed that some reduce "water" to semen, or the amniotic fluid accompanying natural birth. Andy chuckled, certain that this was wishful thinking without biblical basis or precedent in Jewish thought. Others claim that "water" and "Spirit" are synonyms, as in "water, even the Spirit". These novel interpretations seemed like recent attempts to avoid Catholic conclusions. Andy discovered Baptist commentator George Beasley-Murray wrote, "Suggestions like these do not do justice to the text and have not commended themselves to scholarly opinion. It would seem that the text relates birth from above to baptism and the Holy Spirit" (*Word Biblical Commentary: John*, [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987],36:48).

He found Protestant commentator R.V.G. Tasker agreed, "In light of the reference to the practice by Jesus of water baptism in verse 22, it is difficult to avoid construing the words 'of water and of the Spirit' conjunctively, and regarding them as a description of Christian baptism, in which cleansing and endowment are both essential elements" (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel According to St. John* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ., 1977], 4: 71).

Since Martin Luther had initiated the Protestant break with the Catholic Church, Andy checked Luther out. What he found surprised him. "Here [John 3:5] Christ is speaking of Baptism, of real and natural water such as a cow may drink. . . . Here Christ also speaks of the Holy Spirit and teaches us to regard Baptism as a spiritual, yes, a Spirit-filled water, in which the Holy Spirit is present and active. . . . And thus the person who has been baptized is said to be born anew. . . . In this passage Christ declares that whoever is

not born anew of the water and the Holy Spirit cannot come into the kingdom of God. Therefore God's words dare not be tampered with. Of course, we are well aware that Baptism is natural water. But after the Holy Spirit is added to it, we have more than mere water. It becomes a veritable bath of rejuvenation, a living bath which washes and purges man of sin and death, which cleanses him of all sin" ("Sermons on the Gospel of St. John" *Luther's Works* ed. Jaroslav Pelikan [St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publ. House, 1957], 22:283).

Andy looked back over his notes and felt he was ready to share his discovery with his Baptist visitors. Would he be nervous? No, with adequate preparation he was confident. For the first time he understood that being "born again" was a result of baptism. From now on, when a friendly Baptist would ask Andy if he were born again he would smile and confidently proclaim, "You betcha!" He would then ask them to turn in their Bibles to John 3:5 and then . . .

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**St. Justin Martyr** (c. 100-c. 165), "Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated [reborn]: in the name of God the Father . . . and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing of water. For Christ said, 'Except you be born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' . . . The reason for doing this, we have learned from the Apostles" (*The First Apology* 1, 61) (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985], 1:183).

**St. Theophilus of Antioch** (died c. 185 A.D.), who first coined the word "Trinity," writes, "Those things which were created from the waters [Gen 1] were blessed by God, so that this might also be a sign that men would at a future time receive repentance and remission of sins through water and the bath of regeneration" (*To Autolycus* 2, 16) (William Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970], 1:75).

**Origen** (c. 185-c. 254) "The Church received from the Apostles the tradition [custom] of giving Baptism even to infants. For the Apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of divine mysteries, knew that there is in everyone the innate stains of sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit" (*Commentary on Romans* 5, 9) (Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 1:209).

**St. Augustine** (AD 354-430) "Who is so wicked as to want to exclude infants from the kingdom of heaven by prohibiting their being baptized and born again in Christ?" (*Pecc. merit.* 3, 6, 12) (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ., 1971], 5:244). "This [infant baptism] the Church always had, always held; this she received from the faith of our ancestors; this she perseveringly guards even to the end" (Sermon 11, De Verb Apost) (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles Herbermann, et al, [New York: Robert Appleton, 1907], 2:270).