

What Does It Mean to Be “Born of God”?

I John 3:9 implies that Christians never sin. How can this be true?

There is great confusion about what it means to be “born again”—and similarly, “born of God.” In John 3:2-12, Jesus taught that to be “born again” literally means to be born of the Spirit, to become a spirit being, which will take place at the first resurrection when Christ returns. Jesus Himself is the *firstborn from the dead*. No one else has been resurrected from the dead to eternal life—no one else has been “born again” or “born of God.” (See *What Does it Mean to be “Born Again”?*)

Contributing to the confusion is the “born of God” passage in I John 3:9—a verse which is grossly mistranslated. Unfortunately, this mistranslation has led many to mistakenly assume that Christians who are “born of God” (or “born again”) cannot sin. But are Christians already “born of God”? Moreover, are Christians really immune from sinning?

A faulty translation of two Greek words in I John 3:9 in the *KJV*, as well as in other versions, is at the heart of the problem. The *KJV* reads: “Whosoever is **born** of God **doth not commit** sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and **he cannot sin**, because he is **born** of God.” As translated, this verse presents irreconcilable contradictions with other verses within the Epistle of First John, as well as the rest of the New Testament.

Contrary to this incorrect translation, John wrote that even Christians who have the Holy Spirit **do indeed sin** at times—and that they need to confess their sins for forgiveness: “However, if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, *then* we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, His own Son, cleanses us from every sin. **If we say that we do not have sin, we are deceiving ourselves**, and the truth is not in us. **If we confess our own sins**, He is faithful and righteous, to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar**, and His Word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. **And yet, if anyone does sin**, we have an Advocate with the Father; Jesus Christ *the* Righteous; and He is *the* propitiation for our sins; and not for our sins only, but also for *the sins of* the whole world” (I John 1:7-10; 2:1-2).

It would be completely incongruous for John to write the passages above about how converted brethren *do* sometimes sin and need forgiveness, and at the same time to write in I John 3:9 that one who has been “born of God does not commit sin” and that such a person “cannot sin.” Since the Scriptures cannot contradict one another, what is the solution?

Two Mistranslated Words in I John 3:9: This passage cannot be referring to those “born again” to spirit existence by a resurrection because *only* Jesus Christ has been “born again” as spirit by being resurrected from the dead. No one else has been or will be “born again” by a resurrection until Christ’s return. Thus, this verse can *only* apply to Christians *still alive*. Yet, the *KJV* translation contradicts numerous New Testament passages that show Christians do sometimes sin. A careful examination of this verse reveals two incorrectly translated Greek words.

“Born of God”: The first mistranslated word is found in the phrase “**born** of God.” The word “born” is translated from the Greek verb *gennaō*. In the *KJV*, *gennaō* has been translated as “beget, begat” or “begotten” 55 times; as “born” 37 times; and as “conceive, bear, brought forth, deliver or gender” 4 times. The scriptural contexts determine whether *gennaō* should be translated “begotten” or “born” (Wigram, *Englishman’s Greek Concordance of the New Testament*).

With this understanding, the first part of I John 3:9 can be corrected by simply translating *gennaō* as “begotten,” instead of “born.” As a result, the correct rendering should read: “Every one **who has been begotten** by God...” The phrase “who has been begotten” is translated from the Greek participle *gegennemonos*, which is a perfect passive participle of the verb *gennaō*. This participle means that the begetting had already taken place in a past time. As in human life, a be-

gettal is not a birth. Begettal takes place *first*; then, after gestation, birth occurs.

“Doth Not Commit Sin”: The second phrase in I John 3:9 that has not been accurately translated in the *KJV* is: “doth not commit sin.” There is no question that a converted person does, at times, commit sin; but upon true repentance, through the grace of God and by the blood of Jesus Christ, those sins can be forgiven. The key to understanding this phrase is an accurate translation of the Greek verb *poiei*, translated “commit.” As used in verse 9, *poiei* is a third person, singular, present tense form of the verb *poieo*, which means: “to do, generally, i.e., habitually, to perform, to execute, to exercise, to practice, i.e., to pursue a course of action, to be active, to work...” (Berry, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 81).

The context of John’s epistle is not about a Christian’s inability to commit sin. Therefore, *poiei* in this context means **habitually practicing sin**. When *poiei* in verse 9 is rendered “does not practice sin,” the contradictions created by the *KJV* are removed. The correct translation of this portion of verse 9 reads: “Everyone who has been begotten by God does not practice sin.” This is a true statement and conveys the original meaning of the Greek. Furthermore, this meaning of *poiei* is retained in the second part of verse 9 with reference to “cannot sin,” which should read, “cannot practice sin.” Consequently, the entire verse correctly translated should read: “Everyone who has been begotten by God does not practice sin because His seed of *begettal* is dwelling within him, and he is not able to practice sin because he has been begotten by God.” This rendering harmonizes with the rest of John’s epistle and removes all contradictions.

The Conversion Experience: One of the reasons for confusion on this subject is that many fail to understand that conversion is an *ongoing process*. In one sense, a person is “converted” when they have repented, been baptized for the remission of their sins, and received the Holy Spirit (by which they are actually *begotten*). In another sense, however, their conversion has only *just begun*. As a process of change and growth, conversion takes place over one’s lifetime. Only at the end of that period of growth, change and overcoming is the Christian finally “born again” at the resurrection into the spirit Family of God.

Repentance: The calling of God the Father and Jesus Christ goes out through the preaching of the Gospel and reading of the Word of God. Repentance is the first step toward responding to that call. Though it is the Holy Spirit of God that convicts and leads one to repentance (Rom. 2:4), one must choose to repent (Luke 13:1-5). When Peter powerfully preached the Gospel, speaking of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he made it clear to all those gathered at the temple in Jerusalem on Pentecost 30 AD that their sins crucified Jesus Christ. This moved three thousand to repent and to be baptized: “Therefore, let all *the* house of Israel know with full assurance that God has made this *same* Jesus, Whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.’ **Now after hearing this, they were cut to the heart**; and they said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?’ Then Peter said to them, ‘**Repent and be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you yourselves shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all those who are afar off, as many as *the* Lord our God may call.’ And with many other words he earnestly testified and exhorted, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’ Then those who joyfully received his message were baptized; and about three thousand souls were added that day” (Acts 2:36-41). True godly repentance leads to conversion: “Therefore, repent and be converted in order that your sins may be blotted out, so that *the* times of refreshing may come from *the* presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Baptism: The second step in responding to God’s call is baptism by water. As Peter preached, the repentant believer is to be baptized. Baptism is by full immersion in water, signifying that the repentant believer is conjoined into the death of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. The apostle Paul wrote of the true meaning of baptism: “We who died to sin, how shall we live any longer therein? Or are you ignorant that we, **as many as were baptized into Christ Je-**

us, were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him by baptism into death; so that, just as Christ was raised from *the* dead by the glory of the Father, in the same way, we also should walk in newness of life. For **if we have been conjoined together in the likeness of His death, so also shall we be in the likeness of His resurrection.** Knowing this, that our old man was co-crucified with *Him* in order **that the body of sin might be destroyed, so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin;** because the one who has died *to sin* has been justified from sin. Now if we died together with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him [at the first resurrection], knowing that Christ, having been raised from *the* dead, dies no more; death no longer has any dominion over Him. For when He died, He died unto sin once for all; but in that He lives, He lives unto God. In the same way also, you should indeed reckon yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore, **do not let sin rule in your mortal body** by obeying it in the lusts thereof. Likewise, do not yield your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin; rather, yield yourselves to God **as those who are alive from the dead,** and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God” (Rom. 6:2-13).

Those who have been baptized are dead to *living in sin* as a way of life. They are to walk in newness of life and are not to let sin rule in their “mortal” bodies—but to fight against it, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Jesus Christ (II Cor. 10:4-5). Since those who have been baptized still have **mortal bodies**, it is evident that they have not been “born again” as a spirit being. Rather, when they receive the Holy Spirit, they have been “begotten again”—God the Father’s “seed” lives in them.

Receiving the Holy Spirit: The third step in responding to God’s call is to receive the Holy Spirit, which comes after repentance and baptism. The apostle Peter said, “Repent and be baptized ... for the remission of sins and **you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**” (Acts 2:38). The gift of the Holy Spirit is given by the laying on of hands (Acts 8:14-17; 19:5-6).

When one receives the Holy Spirit, he or she is *begotten* again and receives the “seed” of eternal life from God the Father. The apostle John wrote in I John 3:9, “Everyone who has been **begotten by God** does not practice sin because **His seed of begetting is dwelling within him,** and he is not able to *practice* sin because **he has been begotten by God.**” The Greek word for “seed” is *sperma*. This is the same word used in English for the seed of one’s natural father. The father’s sperm begets or impregnates the mother’s egg, and a new life is conceived—begotten, but not yet born. Likewise, when one receives the Holy Spirit, God the Father begets the repentant believer with His seed of eternal life and a new spiritual life is conceived—begotten, but not yet born. As long as the seed of eternal life from God the Father remains within, the believer will not habitually practice or live a life of sin. God’s Spirit will convict of sin in heart and mind, leading him to repentance and restoration.

Conversion is a Process: God is perfecting a marvelous new creation within each true Christian through the power of the Holy Spirit: “Therefore, **if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation;** the old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (II Cor. 5:17). Paul also likens what God is doing within each begotten Christian as having “Christ formed in you” (Gal. 4:19). He wrote that the saints were given understanding of “the mystery that has been hidden from ages and from generations, but has now been revealed to His saints; to whom God did will to make known what *is* the riches of **the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory**” (Col. 1:26-27).

Although God the Father and Jesus Christ are doing the perfecting work, each newly begotten child of God must submit in loving obedience. Spiritual growth takes place in the heart and mind: “I exhort you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy *and* well pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service. Do not conform yourselves to this world, but be **transformed by the renewing of your mind** in order that you may prove what *is* well pleasing and good, and the perfect will of God” (Rom 12:1-2).

God continually renews the mind of the Christian through the power of the Holy Spirit by writing His laws and commandments in our hearts: “And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after He had previously said, ‘This *is* the covenant that I will establish with them after those days,’ says *the* Lord: ‘**I will give My laws into their hearts, and I will inscribe them in their minds**’ ” (Heb. 10:15-16). This operation can be compared to an actual reprogramming of the Christian’s heart and mind—the process of conversion.

True Christians who have been “begotten again” by the seed of eternal life from God the Father are thus being perfected. The old carnal mind and the body of sin must be put to death by the power of God’s Holy Spirit: “Therefore, **put to death your members** which *are* on earth—sexual immorality, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil desires, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things, the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, among whom you also once walked, when you were living in these things. But now, you should also put off all *these* things: wrath, indignation, malice, blasphemy, *and* foul language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, *seeing that* you have **put off the old man** together with his deeds, and have **put on the new man, who *is* being renewed in knowledge** according to *the* image of Him Who created him; where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian *nor* Scythian, slave *nor* free; but Christ *is* all things, and in all” (Col 3:5-11). And again, “For this reason, we do not lose heart; but if our outward man is being brought to decay, yet **the inward man is being renewed day by day**” (II Cor. 4:16).

In order to be overcomers, Christians must continually repent and confess their sins to God, asking for forgiveness through heartfelt prayer: “If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, *then* we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, His own Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we do not have sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **If we confess our own sins, He is faithful and righteous, to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**” (I John 1:7-9).