

Jesus vs Fake Religion

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[0:00] Morning, church. It's good to see you all. Well, the 2023 global stats provide a ballpark breakdown of world religions.

8 billion people, give or take a few. 32% Christian, 23% Islam, 15% Hindu, 7% Buddhist. Other things out there as well, but the big ones. The world is religious. In fact, projected studies have concluded that atheism and agnosticism, and those who do not affiliate with any religion, will over the next two decades make up a declining share of the world's total population. Our 2021 national census revealed 44% of Australians identify as Christian, down from 61% in 2011.

So it's in 10 years, a big drop. Another 9% are the religions, and 39% of us now claim no established religion.

[1:08] Justine Toe from CPX, the Centre of Public Christianity, observed, it's interesting, some of the most religious people I know wouldn't be caught dead in a church. Some of the most religious.

But what if everyone is religious? Even the non-believers among us. What I've noticed is that decidedly non-religious types are the most devoted to clean eating, kale, superfoods, mindful meditation, cold-pressed juices, sunrise yoga, intermittent fasting, and pounding the treadmill at the gym.

Maybe our obsession with health and clean eating reveals that we've traded God for good living. She goes on to ask, So why does this matter? Her answer, I guess it all comes down to how you understand religion.

We might have left behind traditional religion, perhaps, but we can't outrun our religious impulses. They've caught up with us in our pursuit of beauty, health, and well-being, among otherworldly delights.

So it's interesting when I get branded as religious, when I see religion all around me, practised by new true believers, as faithful as anyone you'll find in traditional places of worship.

[2:25] The world is religious. There is no denying it. In John 3, Jesus challenges religion, having zealously turned tables in the temple courts, publicly admonishing fake religion.

We see outward displays, even sincere religious devotion aren't the answer. Jesus claims, If we want to see, and if we want to enter the kingdom of God, we must, we must be born again. This is an imperative. It's not a suggestion. We must be born again. To understand why religion isn't the answer, the new birth needs to be our focus today.

And so in considering being born again, I want to address five questions, which you can follow along using the St. Paul's app. Who is the new birth for? Where is the new birth from?

What does the new birth do? How does the new birth come? And how can we know that we're born again? So first of all, who is the new birth for? If I asked you to talk to the person next to you just briefly, but we won't, about your, if someone said to you, what's your religious affiliation, would you say, I'm Anglican?

[3:48] Or would you say, I'm born again? Because you do know that if you say, I'm a born again Christian, that kind of puts you straight away as a type of person in their head.

Now they're going to think, oh, you're one of those emotional happy clappy types. Or they might think, oh, you're one of those ex-addicts who is like really broken, and you need a crutch to lean on. Or they might think you're that fundamentalist political conservative. And so generally when you hear the term born again, people think of a kind of type of person.

So this text indirectly and directly undermines that idea completely. Firstly, it indirectly does this because the passage gives us Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a member of the religious ruling council, the Sanhedrin.

He would have been a very high status figure, a wealthy figure, and so by no means he's a happy clappy emotional type. Secondly, he wasn't a broken type of person.

[4:50] He was a Pharisee. He wouldn't have needed more moral structure. Pharisees were the epitome of religious moral structure and authority. And thirdly, for a Pharisee, he's actually not that conservative.

He's one of the more open-minded people we come across in the Gospels. Here is a religious man, even though he comes from the elite upper class, who's open to radical new ideas.

Look where we find him. He comes to Jesus. And albeit it's at night, so he probably doesn't want his friends to notice that he's seeing Jesus. But he does speak to Jesus respectfully.

And the way Jesus responds to Nicodemus, the new birth is a challenge to religion and morality. Jesus doesn't say, you're a religious kind of guy.

That's got your foot in the door. You're three quarters of the way to heaven. So now that you've come to me, I'm going to give you a spiritual supplement that will take you that final quarter all the way to heaven.

[5:50] No, Jesus says, you must be born again. Your religion, your morality, nothing you've done counts.

Nothing. No matter how good you are, no matter how sordid you think you are, it comes to nothing, you must be born again. It also means, no matter how messed up you are, no matter how broken you are, you can be born again.

Because Jesus directly says this, verse three, I say to you, no one can see, and later in verse five, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

So who's the new birth for? It's for the religious, it's for the broken, it's for the morally upright, and it's also for the irreligious and morally bankrupt.

It's for all humanity, as we're reminded in Romans 3, 23, for all have sinned, all have sinned, and fall short of God's glory. So where's the new birth from?

[6:53] When Nicodemus heard Jesus refer to the kingdom of God, his mind would have gone to the future, to the end of time, when that long-awaited Messiah arrives and the resurrection of all things and the final new kingdom would be established.

Being born again, Jesus is directly saying that God's future can come into the present, into your heart right now. The renewing, regenerating power of God to heal everything and remove all evil and all sin and everything actually comes into your heart now.

Only partially while we await the arrival of the new kingdom, when everything will finally be made right, but it still comes now, and that's what it means to be born again. So the new birth is from the future, and it's the power of God to regenerate the entire world coming into your life and your heart now.

That's amazing. They don't underestimate its power. So what does the new birth do? It's fairly clear from the metaphor that it's the establishment of a new life, divinely implanted by God.

Now one of the most controversial parts of this passage is where Jesus says, you must be born of water and of the Spirit. And so there are certain churches that say, ah, you have to have the Holy Spirit by being baptised in the Holy Spirit, and so you have to be baptised.

[8:20] But this isn't actually about baptism. It's more likely the background of Jesus' statement is Ezekiel 36, where Ezekiel talks about God's Spirit as water in a desert.

Because in a desert, water isn't just life-giving, it's life itself. And so it's a metaphor for the Spirit.

What this is saying is that the new birth is having God's life, his Spirit, implanted in us.

Jesus then uses the metaphor of a baby being born. And so this is what it looks like when we experience a new birth in Christ. It gives us what happens when a new child is born, a new sensibility and a new identity.

When a baby is born, all their senses are immediately activated. For the first time, they're born into a world of amazing sensations. I remember bringing our daughter home for the first time from hospital and putting her head on my shoulder here and holding her up and going, look, that's the sky.

And a bird went, and her head went, and that was a bird. And there's a tree. Suddenly everything, all our sensations are activated.

[9:35] Being born again, you cross from death to life. To be born again means spiritual realities that you could not sense before that were either invisible to you or maybe you'd say inaudible to

you.

Suddenly you notice them. You can sense them because you're given a new sensibility. Verses 19 to 21, Jesus contrasts living in darkness with living by the truth and coming into the light.

It's like the lights come on. The old saying, seeing is believing, is flipped when we're born again. Believing is seeing. Remember in essence in verse 3, Jesus is saying, if you're born again, you see the kingdom of God.

The new birth, there's a new perception of God, a beauty and excellence of truth. Whether we ascribe it to the head or the heart, we see the kingdom of God.

I think it's the head and the heart. And the way we know we're born again is that both our mind is illuminated and our heart is moved. And spiritual truth that you might have heard before but didn't make sense to your mind and it certainly didn't touch your heart, it now does.

[10:50] Even though you may be religious, even say, of course I'm a Christian, I go to church and I believe God loves me. But if the love of fame and accolades or the love of romance and maybe sex is much more real to you than God's love, then God's love remains abstract.

According to Augustine, the new birth starts to reorder the loves of our hearts because the things that we might have read in the Bible or have heard about that have been abstract concepts, they become realities.

The light comes on and they start to make sense. That's just the heart. It's also that something goes on in the mind. There's an awful lot of truths in the Bible that just don't make sense until you're born again.

God's word begins to convict and to guide. People have presuppositions about Christianity. That is for good religious people. That's a perception.

Being a Christian means, oh, you ask Jesus into your life, then you try harder, harder than you've ever tried to be a good person just like Jesus. But here Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and us, you're not saved by being a good person, being moral or religious or going to church.

[12:05] But by being born again, saved by grace alone, through faith alone, through Christ Jesus alone. When we're born again, we can see the kingdom of God.

Our mind is opened, our heart is moved, and we have new sensibility. The new birth not only brings a new sensibility, but also a new identity. Jesus says, the new life comes into you like a baby being born, and babies are born into families.

In John chapter 1, which John read to us at the start of the service, identity and family are very closely tied to the new birth. Yet to all who did receive him, that is 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 of a husband's will, but born of God. Notice as soon as it starts talking about the new birth, it talks about the rights of the children of God. Because we are born, we're born into a family and into a name. What does that mean? What is our identity? If not from natural descent or human decision, our identity's sense of self-worth has to be based on something.

[13:21] Some cultures, your identity is family-oriented, fulfilling your family's responsibility and expectations, and there's pressure and demands from your family that can control you, and that can be smothering.

In other individualistic cultures, your identity is how you feel about yourself when you decide who you want to be. Of course, that's putting a lot of pressure on yourself as well.

How interesting that to be born again, to be born of God, is to not be born by family descent, and it's not natural descent or of human decision.

Our identity is received, not achieved. Our identity is based on God's love for us and the fact that God is now our Father.

There is an unconditionality in his regard for us, and this is so different from any other kind of identity. We have a new identity unlike anything we've ever had before.

[14:25] Being religious, being moral, being rich, doing good, being beautiful, being successful, being helpful and charitable won't achieve anything. We can't save ourselves.

God loves us because of what Jesus has done on the cross, not what we've done. Every other identity is based on our own performance. The new birth gives us a new sensibility and identity in Christ.

Only then do we realise we've become who we are and who we're made to be. So how does the new birth come? Up to now, I've been talking about the new birth as if it was pretty much the same thing as conversion.

There's a distinction between the two. Turn from sin, repent and believe, sort of our role, and what God does is the new birth. There's a sense in which if someone says to me, how can I be born again?

Technically, the right biblical answer is there's nothing you can do. John 3 verse 8 talks about that. The wind blows wherever it pleases.

[15:30] You hear it sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. And so it is with everyone born of the Spirit. That's God's work, God's work, and that's out of our control.

There's these two things, what we do, repent and believe, and what God does, which opens our eyes and hearts to new life. That's the new birth, but they're inextricably linked.

The new birth causes the conversion. Because Jesus says you have to be born again to see the kingdom, in other words, the gospel of the kingdom to make sense to you at all, there's already been a work of God in your heart.

The text in front of us gives us some interesting ways of thinking about these two things. Repent and believe flies in the face of religion. It's a transformation of our minds and our heart.

because nothing in our hands I bring to the cross of Christ we cling. No merit of our own can we claim, but a holy rest in Jesus' name. New birth comes through repentance.

[16:32] So what does it mean to repent? Of course it means to be sorry for sin. But in this text, Jesus uses a fascinating illustration of what it means to repent and believe.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

What happened in the desert? We find it back in Numbers chapter 21. It's that the children of God had sinned, so God sent a plague of venomous snakes and they bit them and they were dying.

And in a sense, the venom represented sin in their life. Basically, the venom represented in their bodies what was killing them in their soul.

And what Moses was told to do was to take a bronze serpent, an image of the thing that was killing them, put it on a pole and all they had to do was look because some of them were so sick, so immobilised, they couldn't possibly go over and reach out and touch it.

[17:38] All you had to do is look and see. And it's the invitation we often see throughout the Gospels. People would rush and say, come, come and see, come and look, come and see, is he the one?

Look to Jesus. Believing is seeing. Repentance is not just asking God for forgiveness of our sins. The repentance that brings eternal life is to say, Father, I not only repent for all the bad things I've done, I repent for all the bad reasons I did my good things.

All the good things I've done, I've been doing to control you or to feel good about myself or to get other people to look at me. I've done bad things and even the good things I've done, I've done for bad reasons and therefore, I'm totally spiritually bankrupt.

I admit my total, absolute helplessness, religious and moral bankruptcy and I need your grace. That's repentance.

Then there's faith. Jesus says, whoever believes will have eternal life. You must be born again. And so he says, you're like a newborn baby. Just think, a baby contributes nothing to their birth.

[18:56] I've seen two, they make no contribution. They make no effort. So we're not, in fact, both of ours didn't want to come out but anyway, we're not born again by our own efforts and work but we're born again by somebody else's work.

In John 16, Jesus uses this metaphor. A woman giving birth to a child is pained because her hour has come. But when her baby is born, she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child has been born into the world.

In the book of John, every time the word hour is brought up, it's usually in reference to the hour of Jesus' death. Here Jesus is saying, he's identifying with a woman in labour.

He's saying, I'm like a woman in labour, you'll be born again but not just through my pain and sufferings, not just at the risk of my life and just think back then, pre-hospital, you could actually lose your life giving birth.

It was risky. You'll be born again at the cost of my life and you'll come into the light because on the cross I became all your darkness and I overcame that darkness.

[20:10] You will come into the light because I've overcome the darkness and I'm going to have such joy to see your life coming from death. Religion is humanity's attempt to get to God on our terms.

Being born again, God comes to us and welcomes us on his terms in what Jesus has accomplished on the cross. Faith is defined as confidence and trust.

If you put faith in yourself or religion then it's misdirected. Our faith, our confidence and trust must be in Jesus and Jesus alone.

So here's our last question. How do we know we're born again? Every theologian who understands anything in the Bible has always said changed life. We're saved by faith alone but not by faith which remains alone.

We're saved not by our works but if we're truly saved it's always resulted in a changed life. Always. In John 2 Jesus entered the temple courtyard.

[21:17] He saw fake religion in action. He saw the hypocrisy and the injustice and he turned tables. Never underestimate the power of the new birth to change somebody.

Look at Peter. Look at Paul. When they were born again they turned tables. They turned into world-changing gospel-centred mission-minded compassionate loving justice-seeking Christians. They were not made of anything more promising than you or I. There is no fear. There is no guilt. There is no hurt. There is no flaw that the new birth can't at least partially repair.

So what about Nicodemus? Whatever happened to him? Let's fast forward to John 19. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body of Jesus and then they personally dressed the body for burial.

What's going on here? Now this is no proof. I'm not trying to say this is proof that Nicodemus was born again but there is something going on here. Maybe let's call this evidence.

[22:22] Here's the kind of thing that has to happen in your life if you really can say yes they are born again or I am born again. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who are members of the religious ruling council asked for the body of Jesus.

A man who'd just been executed for leading a perceived revolutionary movement who wants to be seen as a follower of Jesus at this time. How dangerous would that be?

Mark's gospel actually says in chapter 15 they went up boldly very boldly they went and asked for the body but then they dressed it as this tenderness they dressed it for burial and only women and slaves normally did that job.

Because they're very bold and because they're very tender they have lost their religious class pride they perform a lowly task honouring Jesus. When born again boldness and humility work together. They're signs the new birth is bringing change in our lives. In C.S. Lewis' Mere Christianity he talks about how scary it is to let God come into your life and change you but he really says there's no alternative.

[23:37] The principle runs through all of life from top to bottom give up yourself and you'll find your real self lose your life and you'll save it submit to death death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end submit with every fibre of your being and you'll find eternal life.

Keep back nothing nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead look for yourself and you'll find in the long run only hatred loneliness despair rage ruin and decay but look for Christ and you will find him and with him everything else thrown in.

Truly I say to you said Jesus no one can see or enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life Amen what happened to us I and what will him be