

## *1 John 5*

*“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God...”*

Orthodoxy believes that being “born of God” generally means to be baptized. The common Christian phrase “born again” comes from in John chapter 3. There Christ tells Nicodemus,

*“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Then Christ specifies what it means to be born again: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, 5).*

The term “born again” as it has come to mean in English emphasizes its repetition of the first, physical birth. That is how Nicodemus understood it. He said *“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”*

Greek original for “born again” is “yennethe anothēn” (“γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν).” The word for “again” can also mean “from above,” which would emphasize its heavenly origin more than its repetition. Certainly, both nuances are true.

Whichever nuance you choose, to be “born again” involves belief, water and the action of the Holy Spirit. That essential “*believe*” is also part of the Orthodox baptismal service:

Priest: “Do you join Christ?”

Catechumen and sponsor: “I do join Him” (x3)

Priest: “And do you believe in Him?”

Catechumen and sponsor: “I believe in Him as King and as God.”

*“... and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.”*

In John’s Gospel, Christ said the same thing in slightly different words:

*“Then Jesus cried out and said, “He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me” (John 12:44).*

In this verse John also uses the term “begotten” to describe the Son’s Trinitarian relationship with the Father. The Greek original is *γεννήσαντα* which means “From a variation of *genos*; to procreate; figuratively, to regenerate.”

This is a favorite theme in John’s writings. He uses the closely related word “only-begotten” (*μονογενῆ*) four times in his Gospel:

*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).*

*“No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18)*

*“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16)*

*“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18)*

This is the term that the Holy Spirit and the Apostle John selected that best-describes the indescribable relationship between the first and second Persons of the Holy Trinity. The Fathers of the first Ecumenical Council embraced “only-begotten” and enshrined it into the Creed for all time:

*“I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages...”*

The term “only-begotten” is in the beginning of the Hymn of Justinian, the second Antiphon of the Divine Liturgy:

*“Only-begotten Son and Word of God; Who for our salvation did so humble Yourself by taking on flesh from the Theotokos and ever-Virgin Mary; Without change You did become man and were crucified Christ our God, but conquered death by death. As one of the Holy Trinity, and being glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit, save us.”*

“Only begotten” is one of the most important terms in all Christian theology. But our theology goes beyond its terminology. The highest form of theology is based on relationship and love. The text continues:

*“<sup>2</sup> By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God...”*

This theme of divine agape love, that is the essence of God Himself, and whose energies radiate down to us, and which we absorb, and we reflect back to Him, which we then reflect towards one another, is the central theme of 1 John. But the text reminds us that this web of agape love is not merely a feeling or cerebral belief. It involves action.

*“<sup>3</sup> For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.”*

Agape love which does not keep commandments is not real agape love. Christ said, “...*why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?*” (Luke 6:46). This connection between true agape love and keeping Christ’s commandments are clearly seen when Christ restored Peter:

*“He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Feed My lambs.’ He said to him again a second time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Tend My sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you ‘love Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you*

*love Me?’ And he said to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed My sheep.’ (John 21:15-17).*

Three times Christ asked Peter if he loved Him, three times Peter said he loved Him, and three times Christ required Peter to prove it by doing what He said. Peter had recently seriously sinned by denying Christ three times. Christ was offering him forgiveness and restoration as an apostle, but it was conditioned on Peter’s loving Christ and doing what he said. Can you imagine if Peter said, “Yes Lord, I love you, but I don’t believe that feeding your lambs or tending your sheep is essential to You forgiving me and restoring me as an apostle. I believe I can just believe in you, but if I don’t do what you told me to do, I’ll be fine. You’ll still forgive me anyway.” Many Christians believe this. But 1 John 5:2 and 7 say that our relationship with God is based on love, and that love is based on keeping His commandments. The latter is not optional.

*“And His commandments are not burdensome.”*

Christ spoke similar words, *“For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:30).* Orthodoxy expects a lot from its believers. We are expected to pray regularly in a very busy world. We are expected to fast in a world full of enticing food. We are expected to attend church on Sundays when others are resting and relaxing. We are required to ask forgiveness and give forgiveness even though this runs against our inclinations. We are expected to give a portion of our money to the church and to those in need when we’d really rather spend it on ourselves. More than most Christians of other confessions, we Orthodox sometimes secretly feel that our commandments ARE burdensome, and His yoke is NOT light. Some people leave the Orthodox Church and go nowhere, or go to a church that has far fewer expectations of them.

Perhaps a good way to understand *“And His commandments are not burdensome”* is to compare the burdens Christ places on us and the burdens that the world puts on us. In the parable that bears his name, the Prodigal Son worked for his wealthy father. He certainly had chores and duties he was expected to complete them, and was reprimanded when he did not. One of the reasons he took his inheritance and left his father’s house was he thought that living on his inheritance would be much easier than working for his father. But he discovered that the mild burdens of living in his father’s house were MUCH easier than poverty and feeding pigs with food he himself was not allowed to eat. He learned, and we must remember, that the spiritual disciplines the Christ gives us are light compared to the sorrows that a worldly undisciplined life place on us. *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).*

*“<sup>4</sup> For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”*

The Christian life is one of victory over adversity. As Christ said. *“Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).* We will struggle in this life. We will constantly battle “the world, the flesh and the devil.” We will lose many of those battles, but if we keep fighting, the victorious outcome of the war is certain. *“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Revelation 3:21).*

***“<sup>6</sup> This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood.”***

John was the only one of the Twelve that were present at Christ’s crucifixion. All the other 12 disciples had fled, but John joined the holy women at the foot of the Cross. He witnessed the following detail and wrote of it in his Gospel:

***“But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe” (John 13:33-35).***

Some of the early Church Fathers saw baptism in this mention of water, and the Holy Communion in this mention of blood. The above verses are recited by the priest as part of the preparation of the bread and wine before each Liturgy.

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at the significance of the term “only-begotten” and its profound description of the Holy Trinity. Now the text reveals even more:

***“And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.”***

These words reveal the mystery of the Holy Trinity more concisely and clearly than any other biblical text. One God, one in essence, three in Persons. All later Fathers, Councils and Creeds add mostly details.

Next the text turns to witnesses and testimonies.

***“<sup>9</sup> If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son.”***

Christ is the Father’s incarnational witness and testimony to the world. It is appropriate that one of Christ’s titles is “the Word.” According to Old Testament law, in legal procedure, “...*by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established*” (Deuteronomy 19:15). The Holy Trinity followed this legal precedent at Christ’s baptism by providing two or three witnesses. The Apolytikion of the Theophany sings,

***” Lord, when You were baptized in the Jordan, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest. For the voice of the Father gave witness to You, calling You Beloved; and the Spirit, in the form of a dove, confirmed the certainty of His words. Glory to You, Christ our God, who appeared and enlightened the world.”***

***“<sup>10</sup> He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. <sup>11</sup> And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. <sup>12</sup> He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”***

**In John's Gospel, Christ speaks similarly: "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6)**

**The life that is to be found in Christ is reflected in our prosphoro. In the West, the bread that is used for Holy Communion is made without leaven. This practice has strong biblical precedent. In the Old Testament, leaven in bread was often a symbol of sin. Before Passover, God commanded:**

***"Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel (Exodus 12:15).***

**The Passover itself was called the Feast of Unleavened Bread:**

***"So you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this same day I will have brought your armies out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as an everlasting ordinance" (Exodus 12:17).***

**That is the symbolism behind the unleavened wafers used in Western communion. However, the bread in the East follows a different symbolism. The reason the Eastern Church uses leavened bread is leaven is living organism. The living microbes emit natural gases which make the bread soft. The bread is literally alive, symbolizing what this verse says: *"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."***

***"<sup>14</sup> Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him."***

**The world and the devil have convinced many that our Lord is vengeful and always seeking ways to punish us. That is a colossal lie. The truth is God is always incredibly merciful to us and is looking for ways to bless us. Christ said,**

***"If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:11-13)***

**The entire Lord's Prayer is based on this principle, as we children ask our Father, who is in heaven, to give us blessings. If He does not grant our requests, it is for good reasons known by Him, if not by us.**

***"<sup>16</sup> If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. <sup>17</sup> All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death."***

This verse teaches that there are many degrees of sin. Some are extremely serious, *“sin leading to death,”* which can place our souls in jeopardy. Other sins are much less severe, *“sin not leading to death.”* These are analogous to misdemeanors and felonies in criminal laws. Oecumenius writes: *“The only sins which are not repented of are the sins leading to death. Judas, although he showed remorse he did not repent and was led off to death.”*

*“<sup>19</sup> We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.”*

Paul reminds us of the planetary scope of evil and the evil spirits that are behind it:

*“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly place” (Ephesians 6:12).*

What are examples of evidence of the world (not just the US) under the sway of the evil one?

Now the book of 1 John draws to a close.

*“<sup>20</sup> And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.”*

The ending is much like the end of the Gospel of John:

*“This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24).*

It is also similar to the beginning of the Gospel of John:

*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).*

In all these cases John is saying, “We Apostles know these things about Jesus. We are eyewitnesses of Him and knew Him personally. We are telling you what we saw. Believe our testimony and believe in Jesus., and know him as we did.” That message is as relevant today as it has ever been.