

The New Birth—Right and Wrong Views

Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. Erwin Lutzer

Dr. John Ankerberg: We're talking with Dr. Erwin Lutzer about the important topic, "How you can be sure, how you can certain that you will spend eternity with God," something that all of us want to know for sure. Erwin, let's go back to the fact of when we have a human birth, there are two elements that are involved in that, and interesting, in the Bible there are two elements that contribute to the new birth there. Kind of explain that.

Dr. Erwin Lutzer: First of all, just like a father and a mother come together and the father contributes the sperm and the mother contributes the ovum, and that's what really forms a human being, in the very same way, when Jesus talks about the new birth, there are two elements that come together. One is the Word of God. It says that we are born of the Word because that's the truth of the Gospel; and the other is the Spirit of God. And so the Word of God and the Spirit of God work together to produce a miracle in our hearts, a miracle that we can't produce on our own. It has to be a God thing. In fact, when Jesus says that you have to be born again, really the Greek says, "You have to be born from above." So the people who need a miracle from God. It's a miracle that I've experienced. I know you've experienced it. But without it, the Bible says, *we will not see the kingdom of God*—and those are the words of Jesus [John 3:3].

Ankerberg: The human characteristics of a child are interesting to see. You see a little baby and you say, "Oh, it looks like its mom. It looks like its dad." It has certain characteristics. And it's true. Is that also true spiritually?

Lutzer: Exactly. In fact, as a result of that, we should be God-like. You know, the Bible talks about being godly. It's like we should have some of the attributes of God, you know—love, joy, peace, and all of those works that the Holy Spirit of God births in our hearts.

Ankerberg: Moral attributes.

Lutzer: Those moral attributes of God. Now, that does not mean that we ever become God. You know, it's not as if somehow we all become little gods running around. No, we still will be human beings throughout all of eternity, but isn't it marvelous to know that God shares His nature with us so that we can have the opportunity even in this life, with all of our struggles and all of our continual struggles and sins, we have the opportunity to progress so that we become God-like.

Ankerberg: Jump to the next point and that is, you have some warnings for people. You say that some people have walked an aisle, put up their hand, prayed a prayer, but they never got saved.

Lutzer: That's right. Let's just hop into this. Let's talk about children.

Ankerberg: Okay.

Lutzer: A child brought up in a Christian home. He's told he has to accept Christ as Savior. He prays a prayer. Maybe his age is five or six. And later on he grows up and he has no awareness that he's really saved, no sense of assurance. His parents tell him, "Oh, no, no. You accepted Christ at the age of five because you prayed a prayer."

Now, I want to be very clear on this: I believe that children can be saved at the age of five or six. But, there are instances like this where wisdom on the part of the parents would say, "All

right, if you're not sure, let's make it sure now. You transfer your trust to Christ, receive Him as your very own, and as a result, you can receive the assurance of faith."

Let me use my own testimony. I was brought up in a Christian home. I asked Jesus into my heart every single night and I didn't feel anything different. I didn't act different. And I thought to myself, "I can't be saved. Where do I go?" At the age of 14 my parents said to me, "You know, we're not sure whether or not you've ever trusted Christ." And I said, "Well, I've tried, but it hasn't worked." And they said, "You know what you need to do, this is actually the step of faith."

And then I understood that the best terminology is not really "inviting Christ into your heart." It's used often, but that's not the best terminology. You know, little children sometimes say, "Well, if He comes in, is He going to get wet with blood?" You know, they interpret it literally. The best terminology is to say, "Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for sinners. Why don't you accept Him and trust Him as the One who bore your sin?" And when I did that at the age of 14, I had the assurance of salvation.

So, one danger is that of children. The other danger is people going forward in a meeting. Now, this is very sensitive, okay? But somebody gives an invitation: "Come forward to be saved." Really problems. Number one, what about the person who is like I was—too shy to go forward in a crowd of hundreds of people?

Ankerberg: Because you felt you couldn't do that, you'd rather go to hell than to walk forward.

Lutzer: John, you're giving my testimony exactly. That's the way I felt at about the age of 10 or 11. I said, "You know, if I have to go forward to be saved, I guess I'll go to hell." I mean, I was so shy that my sisters had to pull me out from under the bed when we had company.

The second thing is that we give the impression that just because you've gone forward, you're saved. That's another wrong impression.

Ankerberg: And the reason it's wrong is because people are trusting their action of walking down the aisle or of saying a prayer. It's something they did; it's not trusting Christ.

Lutzer: I like to shock people and say flat-out: Prayer doesn't save you. It never has and never will. That usually gets their attention. It is faith in Christ that saves you. It is that transfer of trust to Christ. You know, not even the thief on the cross actually prayed when he said, "Remember me..." Well, I guess that was a prayer. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" [Luke 23:42]. But it was the faith that that thief had in Christ. And it's possible for you to say the right words, to sign a decision card, and yet faith has not yet been birthed in the human heart. This is a good point at which I need to tell you a true story.

In Canada, there were some guys who came along and convinced everyone who lived on this street, they said, "We'll plant you evergreens for so much money." So all the neighbors got together and said, "Let's do it." The guys came, took their money, planted the evergreens. Weeks later these things all began to turn brown. The neighbors watered them more. The more they watered them, the browner they became. Finally, somebody went over and thought, "What kind of a tree did they plant?" Pulled it up and discovered that what they had done was put branches into the ground. No roots. Nothing.

Jesus said, "Every tree that my Heavenly Father has not planted shall be torn up" [Matt. 15:13]. Isn't that sobering? So I believe there may be many people who may look like evergreens, to use an expression. They may look like other trees, but they have no root. God has never regenerated them, has never granted them the wonderful privilege of being born again because they have never—and I love this expression—they've never "savingly believed." They may have assented; they may have signed their card. And so we need to be very, very careful.

Ankerberg: What is saving belief? Contrast that with intellectual belief.

Lutzer: Well, you know, I think that even an example is right at your desk. You know, there's a sense in which I could believe that this chair could hold me. That would be mental assent. But it's not until I choose to sit down and to say, "Okay, I trust it now with myself." And when I trust it with myself, thank God, John, your chair here held me. Okay? In the very same way, people can say, "I love Jesus. I trust Him. I believe that He's the Savior." They can have that intellectual belief, but if I might say, I think sometimes the greatest distance in the world is the distance between the head and the heart where there is that transfer of faith, where there's the recognition of helpless sinfulness that says, "Jesus, you alone are the One. Be my Savior. I receive you as the One who died for me."

Ankerberg: Go to the story of Moses and lifting up the serpent in the wilderness to explain this.

Lutzer: This is so exciting. In fact, it's in the third chapter of John. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus and says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."

Do you remember the story? The people had a plague. They were cursed of God because of disobedience and God sent a plague. Moses said, "What do I do?" and God says, "You take a serpent"—a brass serpent, a snake—"you put in on a pole, and everybody who is going to look at this pole is going to live."

Now, John, I can imagine that there were some scientists among them, some skeptics—I'm sure there were—who said, "That does not make a bit of sense! What possible connection can there be between me looking at the pole with the serpent outside of me, how can that affect the disease of my body and stop the progress of the disease?" Scientifically, medically, rationally, no sense at all. But you know what, God says, "If you do that, I will do a miracle."

And there are some people who are listening today who are saying, "You know, this business of Jesus dying so many years ago, what does His death 2,000 years ago have anything to do with me? What's the connection?" God makes the connection. And today there are people who could be looking to Christ, who can look to Christ with that look of faith and as a result of seeing Jesus, not on a pole but as it were, on a cross, and then of course, dying and raising again and ascending into Heaven who say, "I want to receive that." What they will discover is not only that they will be justified, but something else will happen. There will be a miracle that will take place in their hearts and they will say, "I don't understand it, but it has happened." It's called the new birth.

Ankerberg: Maybe there's someone reading this right now who is like Nicodemus. They're religious; they've got rules but no reality. And Erwin, I'd like you to say a prayer for the folks that want the miracle of the new birth. They want God to do it to them. Would you pray?

Lutzer: John, I want to tell these people who say, "Yeah, but I've sinned so much," the issue is not the greatness of your sin or your crimes, the issue is whether you are willing to look to the wonder, and the beauty, and the completeness of what Jesus did on the cross. So nobody who desires to believe may be excluded.

Ankerberg: Exactly.

Lutzer: So let's pray.

Father, we want to thank you so much that Jesus came to die for us. We thank you that even as He was raised on the cross, those who look with faith receive His gift. And

we pray today that many people will be born again of the Holy Spirit because they have looked to the risen Christ. And may you grant them the ability to pray a prayer like this:

“God, I know that I’m a sinner. I can’t save myself. The disease of sin permeates my body, pollutes my mind. But at this moment I look to Christ. I receive Him as the One who bore my sin. I accept Him personally as my Savior.” Grant, oh God, that they shall have the assurance of eternal life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

If you have prayed to receive Christ as your Savior, write to us at The John Ankerberg Show, P. O. Box 8977, Chattanooga, TN 37414. We’ll be happy to send you some materials to help you start your new life in Christ.