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# Explaining the Wind: How Self-Identified Born Again Christians Define What *Born Again* Means to Them

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Christian students on college campuses form a large proportion of the student body on many campuses, and consequently, they are an important influence, collectively, on the existential dialogue occurring on university campuses. However it is understood, regeneration is a fundamental and central element of the life and belief system of Christian students. Some college students who identify as Christian also define themselves as born again, yet a multiplicity of understandings of this concept appears to exist. The present study sought to investigate how self-identified, born again Christian students define the term born again, how they come to know that they are born again, and how they experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in their personal lives. Due to the exploratory, phenomenological nature of the research questions, we chose a qualitative, interview-based method. Specifically, 18 self-identified born again Christians were interviewed. Five types of responses regarding how they defined what it meant to be born again were uncovered and discussed.

The religious and spiritual life of college students has been on the forefront of matters of concern in higher education institutions in the United States since its very foundation (Thelin, 2004). Lately these issues increasingly appear in college student literature (Astin & Astin, 2010; Bryant, 2007; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Toussaint & Jorgensen, 2008), in part given their importance to students themselves. Nationwide studies show that students' spirituality is a source of joy for two-thirds of students and that nearly half consider it essential or very important to grow spiritually in college. In addition, four out of five have attended religious services during the last year, with four in ten considering it essential or very important to follow religious teachings in their everyday lives (Astin & Astin, 2010).

Although the terms spirituality and religion are often used interchangeably and are correlated (Beckwith & Morrow, 2005; HERI, 2005), they are conceptually distinct (Rogers & Love, 2006). Spirituality has been defined as an openness to the transcendent, subjective, and a search for meaning and authenticity (Barnett, Krell, & Sendry, 2000; Chae, Kelly, Brown, & Bolden, 2004; Parks, 2000). Religion is often described as an institutional construct emphasizing systems,

doctrine, and social processes (Barnett et al., 2000; Buchko, 2004; Duffy & Blustein, 2005; Hill et al., 2000; Love, 2001; Parks, 2000). Research suggests that today's college students are growing in opposite directions on these variables such that they are becoming more spiritual but less engaged in religious activities. As this occurs, students are becoming more ecumenical in their worldview, believing that non religious people can live just as morally as religious believers, and rejecting the notion that God will punish those who don't believe in Him (Astin & Astin, 2010).

Spiritual growth during the college years can be experienced as a struggle in students' quest for faith and understanding. During these years, students often reexamine their pre-college religious and spiritual beliefs. Quantitative research shows that as students move from their first year to the end of their junior year, many find increased meaning during difficult times, feel more centered and at peace, and see each day as a gift (Astin & Astin, 2010). Qualitative research suggests that in resolving these struggles, college seniors tend to recommit to their faith, readjust their beliefs, become more ecumenical, or abandon their former beliefs (Fisler et al., 2009).

Matters of spirituality and religious belief have many intersections with aspects of the college student experience. Most of this research has focused on broad developmental concepts rather than on the experience of different student sub-populations who subscribe to certain belief systems. A preponderance of studies has focused on

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Christian students (e.g., Bryant, 2008; Moran, 2007; Moran et al., 2007). However, there have been a few studies on groups with other belief systems such as Mormons (Barry & Nelson, 2005) and Muslims (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Peek, 2005).

### Conversion and Regeneration

Conversion, specifically religious conversion, is the most heavily researched topic in the psychology of religion, with over a century of research by hundreds of authors (Hood, Hill & Spilka, 2009). Despite this length and depth of study, conversion has not been studied systematically nor in a methodologically sophisticated manner. Conversion is typically characterized by significant change within the individual. How such processes occur and the speed with which conversion happens, even how many times it can happen, is described in a variety of ways. Most psychologists define conversion as an intrapersonal process that involves “a radical transformation of self” (Hood et al., 2009, p. 209). Christian theologian Grudem (1994) defines conversion as “our willing response to the Gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation” (p. 709). For Grudem, the critical concepts underlying conversion are turning from sin (repentance) and proclaiming faith in Jesus.

Grudem (1994) defines the related term of regeneration as “a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us” (p. 699) and notes that it is “sometimes called ‘being born again,’” (p. 699), thus suggesting an intricate relationship between these concepts. Grudem notes that a critical distinction between regeneration and conversion is that the individual plays no active role in regeneration; however, one does play an active role in conversion. In fact, the language of birth itself strongly implies the act of a parental figure rather than a volitional act on the part of the one born. In the case of regeneration, according to Grudem, it is the Holy Spirit who is the catalyst. Grudem uses the terms born again and regeneration interchangeably; noting that faith in Christ is the first result that can be seen of regeneration.

While the characteristics of regeneration based on scripture have been well documented (Grudem, 1994), exactly how the new spiritual birth is accomplished is not completely observable. The wide range of experiences typically reported contributes to the unobservable nature of the process that unfolds. The concept of regeneration is central to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The centrality of being born again is addressed directly in Jesus’

dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3:3 (NIV) “I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again.” The modern church’s use of the born again phrase leads to the conclusion that there is a multiplicity of understandings among those who identify as Christian. Lee (2008) noted that while Christian conversion has traditionally been understood as a dramatic and often instant transformation, during the last few decades scholars have found this depiction lacking in describing the conversion experiences of many Christians, who perceive spiritual transformation as a process more than an event. She referenced Smith’s (2001) observation that there are at least four different perspectives regarding conversion depending upon whether interpretations were drawn from the Synoptic Gospels, John’s Gospel, Acts, or the Pauline writings. Each model of conversion portrayed in these different biblical texts provides readers with “distinct but complementary perspectives on the Christian experience of conversion” (p. 124). Mulder (1990) extended this notion by pointing out that New Testament accounts of conversion are enigmatic. The drama of Paul’s conversion is an example of conversion that differs from the more progressive transformations of characters such as Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10) and Timothy (Acts 16). Historical examples of Christian conversion include *Pilgrim’s Progress* author John Bunyan’s, whose analogy of walking the Christian path suggested that his conversion was gradual. Moreover, John Edwards’s report of an awe-inspiring sense of God depicted in nature suggested that his conversion was aesthetic, while C.S. Lewis’s cognitive struggles with doubt indicated that his conversion was intellectual. Finally, Albert Schweitzer’s decision to turn his back on a career in medicine and leave home to work as a medical missionary suggested that his conversion could be considered ethical or moral. Mulder (1990) offered these examples to illustrate variance in conversion experiences, maintaining that most experiences of transformation include elements of each type of conversion.

According to Berger (2009), being born again is one of six broad distinctive characteristics that distinguish evangelicals as a discrete group of people. That is, evangelicals are typically characterized by 1) a firm belief in the supernaturally redemptive power of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, 2) the Bible’s role as the definitive guide for proper Christian living, 3) the belief in the power of prayer, 4) an obligation to evangelistically share one’s faith with others, and 5) adherence to a fairly

strict moral code. Berger then described the sixth distinctive: the process of becoming *born again*, an act of individual choice to take up the Christian faith and to follow the teachings of Christ as presented through Scripture.

Regardless of the inability to directly observe the totality of the process by which one becomes born again, Grudem (1994) advocated the perspective that changes in a believer's life are a necessary condition to verify the born again experience. Specifically, qualitative changes such as authentic love for God and people, intrinsically motivated obedience to Christ's teachings, and the character of Christ consistently demonstrated over time through the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) are authenticators. The inherently intrinsic and private nature of this process certainly contributes to humanity's difficulty in understanding and explaining the phenomenon.

### **Being Born Again**

Not all those who self-describe as Christian will report an experience of being born again. In Barna's (1999) analysis of 4,200 interviews including 1,200 youth and 3,000 adults, findings revealed that while 76% of Americans considered themselves Christians, only 40% of these self-identified as born again. Further, of the 40% who identified as born again Christians, 32% became born again before the age of 14 years, suggesting that fewer than 10% of Christians made born again decisions as teenagers or adults. A similar study found that only 10% of college students said they had experienced Christian rebirth (Schafer, 1997). Thus, the identities of being born again and Christian overlap but are not interchangeable.

Though research is increasingly plentiful on the religious and spiritual lives of college students, research on the spiritual or religious conversion experience is limited. One study of Christian conversion experiences used a hermeneutical approach to analyze 13 interviews of African American women, most of whom were over 50 years old. These women understood conversion to be transformative, personal, a process rather than a single event, demonstrated through behavior, and different from being saved (Lee, 2008). These results helped to set the stage for the present study; however, given the very different nature of our sample and the importance of cultural and situational context, we didn't presume that our population would define or experience conversion in the same way.

The conversion experiences we studied took place at a secular university. Scholars who embrace spirituality and religious expression as part of the pluralistic nature of the modern secular university note how today's college students have a "virtually insatiable" appetite for pondering issues of religious expression (Nash, 2001, p. 3; Nash, 2007). Other researchers note that secular university campuses, with their strong emphasis on postmodernism and naturalism, are challenging settings for working out, in a personal spiritual sense, the born again experience (Moran et al., 2007). One might even expect some hostility toward those who claim to be new spiritual creatures based on the work of God. Given the potential conflicts of the born again experience in a traditional academic environment, one might meaningfully question, at least in a phenomenological sense, the born again experience of college students. Alternatively, the college experience might serve as a catalyst for the solidification of students' faith as they retreat to the familiar beliefs of their family. Amidst the unfamiliar diversity of perspectives represented on a campus, some students may well unquestioningly foreclose on the familiar beliefs of their youth (Marcia, 1966).

The authors of the present study describe themselves as born again Christians. Of course, this perspective involves many assumptions. The most important relevant assumptions shared by the authors are in line with Grudem's (1994) analysis as follows:

1. The new birth is a fundamental element in the life of every Christian.
2. Regeneration is a work of God through the Holy Spirit, in which the new Christian receives a new, spiritual life.
3. In line with Christ's teaching, the presence of the Holy Spirit may not be seen directly, but can be seen (evidenced) in His effects in the new believer's life, nature, and behaviors.
4. The Christian is aware of the Holy Spirit's presence and influence in life-changing ways.
5. Regeneration is not only a theological concept, but it is also a very real personal experience in the life of every believer.
6. Individuals may experience the new birth in very different ways.

The purpose of this study was exploratory in nature, designed to investigate how self-identified, born again Christian students defined the term "born again," how they came to know that they were born again, and how they experienced

the presence of the Holy Spirit in their personal lives. Due to the exploratory, phenomenological nature of the research questions, we chose a qualitative, interview-based method.

Given the general rise in interest in spirituality, broadly defined, over the past two decades, and especially in psychology, an approach that focuses on the experience and understandings of a distinctly Christian perspective seemed important to distinguish the Christian experience from more general forms of spiritual inquiry.

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study responded to an invitation for people who were “Born Again Christians,” who were undergraduate students, and who were from 18 to 25 years of age. Students attended a large Midwest university in a state commonly referred to as being part of the Bible belt. Volunteers included eleven females and seven males. Participants identified themselves as Baptist (8), Church of Christ (2), Latter Day Saints (1), Methodist (1), Non-denominational (5), and Presbyterian (1). All participants except one identified their race as White or Caucasian; the remaining participant identified as a Pacific Islander. Several methods were used to recruit participants including an advertisement on Facebook, announcements at meetings of multiple Christian student organizations, snowball sampling, emails from members of a campus Christian faculty group to students they knew who might meet the criteria for our study, referrals from local pastors in town, and participants from a research pool of human subjects taking coursework in Educational Psychology.

### Procedure

Participants were interviewed one-on-one with one of the authors from this study in a private conference room or office. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 14 questions (see Appendix). Interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and were then transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted over the course of two academic semesters. In order to protect participant confidentiality, only one experimenter served as a contact person for the participants. Participants did not provide their names to interviewers. Instead, they provided a self-selected pseudonym to be used throughout

the study. Recordings and transcriptions were kept under lock and key. Participants were informed about all of these procedures at the beginning of their interview. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

The authors of the study met every other week for constant comparison, to compare field notes from interviews, begin to identify emergent themes, share insights, and assess for when the point of redundancy and saturation was reached. When we reached 18 interviews, we determined this point had been reached and concluded our interview process.

In keeping with recommendations by Aten and Hernandez (2005), steps were taken to ensure credibility and rigor. To protect the validity of our findings, multiple researchers collaborated on this project. Although all four authors are self-identified born again Christians, each represents a different denominational background, providing diversity of perspective and validity safeguards. In addition, preliminary research findings were shared with an InterVarsity group of Christian faculty and graduate students, where themes and interpretations were presented for discussion and scrutiny to check the plausibility of initial conclusions.

When the participants who responded to our solicitations did not uniformly embody our understanding of Christian conversion, we reexamined our assumptions (Lee, 2008). That is, we studied the narratives of our participants because they self-identified as born again Christians, regardless of whether or not all of the researchers agreed that the participants exemplified the term born again. Subsequently—even when their responses may have been incongruent with our own beliefs and understandings—we explored our volunteers’ perspectives about being born again Christians, their definitions of what being born again meant to them, and their explanations of how they identified and made meaning of their status as born again. Similar methods using individual interviews and inductive approaches to analyses have been used in other studies involving Christian college students (Le Cornu, 2005).

## Results

As participants reported their experiences with defining how the term born again applies to them, five overarching themes emerged. First, some students described *dissonance* with the term born again in such a way that although they

ascribed to the process of being born again, they were uncomfortable with applying the specific term to themselves. Second, students described comfort in their salvation, suggesting a sense of *security* in their relationships with God through Christ. Third, some participants described ways that *doctrine* backed their experiences of knowing that they were born again. Fourth, some participants reported specific *evidence* in their lives and experiences that they believed supported their relationship with God and the Holy Spirit. Finally, some participants reported feelings that led to an *experiential* type of understanding of their status of being born again. Each theme, supported by participant quotes, is presented below with discussion following.

### **Expressions of Dissonance With the Term Born Again**

Notably, many participants in this study expressed unease regarding the use of the term born again and its application to their conversion experiences. While some individuals may have preferred not to identify with this term due a desire to hide their religious convictions, participants in our study appeared to be distancing themselves as a result of personal religious convictions that conflicted with their interpretations of the term born again Christian. Three distinct patterns of discomfort with the term arose in our interviews:

- 1) The term's meaning was not well understood or collectively negotiated among our sample.
- 2) The term invoked skepticism because it was perceived as too cheaply co-opted to describe their experience.
- 3) The term was inadequate in describing their personal and individually unique experience.

In the first case, participants seemed to express dissonance with their understanding of the meaning of the term born again. For example, Scout was asked how she defined the term born again. Chuckling, she replied, "I would say... it's not the term I usually... not necessarily the term I usually use." While Scout described herself and her social group as passionate in their pursuit of a personal relationship with Christ, none of them appeared to be particularly familiar with the term born again. In reference to one of her friends who had also volunteered to participate in the study, she elaborated about their lack of familiarity with the phrase born again, "I was talking to my friend walking

over here, and she was like, 'I don't know if I know what that means!'" Tim referred to his perception that the term has been negatively interpreted when he commented, "Born again Christian is really, it... it sounds kind of cliché but... it's sometimes misunderstood by a lot of people." Similarly, when asked if she defined herself as a born again Christian, Hayden replied, "Um, I actually, I don't usually say born again Christian, I usually just say Christian." Lucy clarified, "I define myself as a Christian that has been born again."

Another form of discomfort with the use of born again reflected dissatisfaction with its definitional specificity. An interesting finding was that this dissatisfaction was reflected in both a desire for a less flexible view of the phenomenon of regeneration and a desire for a more flexible interpretation. For example, Sarai explained, "I think for me, the term born again Christian um, was kind of overused whenever I was growing up because people, a lot of people would be like, 'I'm a born again Christian.' And then that would happen time and time and time and time again, maybe five or six times, they would become a born again Christian. And I just didn't understand the concept of someone being a born again Christian five or six times."

On the other hand, Pioneer expressed dissatisfaction with term for the opposite reason. When asked if he defined himself as a born again Christian, he responded, "Not necessarily... Not in the context that I feel most people would put it in. I feel like my definition is very different... My definition ... but that's probably not how a lot of people relate it. You know that second time, or that third time, or that fifth time, or, you know the constant renewal of your commitment to God." The contradictory views of Sarai and Pioneer highlight the theological challenge of negotiating the nature of the born again experience, as well as the social challenge of collectively understanding its meaning to the individual.

### **Christian Security**

Despite some participants' discomfort with the term born again, many volunteers expressed comfort in their salvation, suggesting a sense of security in their relationships with God through Christ. Three patterns of comfort and Christian security emerged in their interviews:

- 1) Students derived assurance through their faith in God.

2) Students derived assurance by turning away from selfishness and sin.

3) Students derived assurance through their personal surrender to God's Lordship.

Many participants shared feelings of spiritual confidence because of their faith. Erin, for example, described overcoming earlier doubts and reported, "But now I know that, like, that I am born again 'cause I believe." In defining what makes a born again Christian, Maisie expounded, "Someone who...became alive again by just knowing Christ, um, understanding what He has done for us." Similarly, Peter explained, "I would say it (born again Christian) is someone who has put their faith in Jesus Christ to be their Savior."

Several volunteers indicated spiritual certainty based on their repentance from selfishness and sin. In recounting how he knew he was a born again Christian, Morris said, "I repented of my sins and that is what a born again Christian is. It's someone who has repented, someone who has admitted they are a sinful person...and has asked God for forgiveness of their sins." Jackson agreed, "I would define a born again Christian as someone who has gone from a self-centered life in sin of some kind of true experience with Christ." Kasey Webb further explicated, "A born again Christian is someone who has realized that their sense of self is not important... taking on the full identity of Christ and believing and trusting in Him that He came, took on the identity of man, died for our sins, lived the perfect life. Died for our sins and rose again."

Other students expressed spiritual assurance because of their commitment to follow Christ as Lord. For example, Heidi described a born again Christian by saying, "A born again Christian is somebody who not only knows about Christ and how He died on the cross and rose again, but they believe that, believe in Christ as their Savior." Samantha similarly elucidated how she knew she was born again, "I have always believed that he (Jesus Christ) died on the cross and I just came to the point where I was ready to ask Him to be the Lord of my life." Finally, Susie defined a born again Christian by saying, "It's someone who's decided to make a commitment, um, to just really give their life over to God and let His teachings, um, just the beliefs of the religion kind of rule your decisions in life."

### Doctrinal Principles

A sizable number of participants conveyed that they knew they were born again based on their understanding of basic Christian doctrinal principles. In some, but not all, cases it appeared that respondents were reciting what they believed a definition of "born again" is, more so than communicating that being born again was their identity.

One respondent noted the necessity of confessing Jesus Christ as having died for her sins, that He existed, and that He was God's son. She continued to note her contention that baptism is necessary for being born again by stating that a person "has to go all the way under, it's not sprinkling, its nothing else, you have to be actually baptized, which is the burying and come back up..." Thus to this particular respondent, being born again meant being baptized by immersion. A similar though less proscriptive response came from Sara who noted "If a person is baptized, or however their religion is seen to be, noticed or recognized as a Christian, then they are born again if you take that on."

Others had less specific doctrinally related responses. For example, Jackson stated "a lot of it has to do with my belief in the Bible and what it tells me about my faith and being born again." Such a response indicated that the participant pointed to scripture for a definition of born again; however, a specific elaboration of the term was not offered. The lack of elaboration suggested some uncertainty. Another participant whose definition of being born again seemed vague yet made reference to the Bible was Sarai, who noted "I have assurance of salvation whenever I put my trust in Christ, um, I know that I am a new creation and I just, I mean, the Bible just tells me that." Her lack of specificity suggested some lack of reflection on how she defined the term born again.

Still others pointed to doctrinal elements such as recognizing man's fallen nature and God's perfection as the essence of their conversion. For example, Kasey noted "I literally did pray 'Lord, I am a sinner, I know you are the only perfect thing in this world and that you are just great.'" In a similar way, Hayden reported "Basically to me all that means is that I believe that Christ is my Lord and Savior and that Jesus died on the cross for my sins." Others emphasized the doctrine of repentance and divine forgiveness, like Morris who stated that his understanding of being born again meant that "It's someone that has

repented; someone has admitted they're a sinful person and they do sin, and that has asked God for forgiveness of their sins." Samantha put a slightly different nuance on her definition, noting "When you accept Jesus into your life...believing that He died on the cross and asking Him to bring His Holy Spirit into your heart, and you just, He becomes the Lord of your life."

Kasey Webb put it this way, "Someone who has realized that their sense of self is not important and rather than taking on the full identity of Christ and believing and trusting in Him that He came, took on the identity as a man, died for our sins, lived the perfect life before. Died for our sins and rose again, and so yeah, pretty much, believing that Jesus came and died for us." Similarly, Scout reported, "I just prayed a prayer to trust the Lord with my life and recognized the fact that I was a sinner and in need of a Savior and that Jesus Christ was that Savior." Another doctrinal element was mentioned by Tim who stated "You're not a Christian until you actually take up your cross and ahh, start living the way Christ tells you to live."

### **Evidence**

When inquiring "how do you define the term 'born again' Christian?" many participants provided a degree of evidence that confirmed for them their status of being born again. Specifically, the reported evidence appeared to center around their descriptions of changes in their thinking and subsequent actions relating to others.

A major element the participants reported in providing evidence appeared to be the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Specifically, the participants reported that they felt the Spirit guiding and directing their lives through conviction and feeling a new sense of right and wrong that guided their conscience and decision-making.

Several participants reported evidence of the Holy Spirit actively working in their lives. Specifically, Maisie stated a feeling of consciousness and conviction as a result of the Holy Spirit guiding her. She stated: "...knowing what is wrong and right. I think it is the Holy Spirit convicting you." Many other participants echoed this specific notion and referenced how the Holy Spirit guided them in their thoughts and actions. For example, Jackson reported: "I believe the Holy Spirit produced fruit in my life. I think He lives in me and guides me in as far as what is right and wrong. Someone just enables me to have love instead of pride and I think that is the

Holy Spirit." Samantha stated: "Any time I make a decision, I feel the Holy Spirit." Scout: "I think a lot...(about Holy Spirit). The easiest way to try to think of it is just like a conscience." Peter provided a detailed example in his recollection of a specific situation: "...I was walking back to my room and God kind of stepped in, and in my mind He replayed that whole argument to let me see it from an outside view, and I just felt the conviction of God come upon me..." There was no doubt that these participants believed that God's presence in their life was clearly evident—specifically through the power of the Holy Spirit guiding and convicting them in their daily walk through life.

Overwhelmingly, many participants reported evidence of being born again as not only having very strong feelings regarding the presence of God in their lives but also having a sense of peace that translated into a changed life. With that in mind, several students described the process of turning away from sin and pursuing a closer relationship with God that they reported has led to a transformational experience in their lives. Maisie stated: "Just someone who was once dead in their sins and um, became alive again by just knowing Christ, um, understanding what he has done for us and deciding to live a different life." Similarly, Yannick reported: "Well, I mean honestly, I consider that way (born again) because I don't think I have ever been the same person after that." Other participants reported more of a "procedural change" they underwent that has led them to a Christ-centered life. For example, Jackson stated: "Someone who has gone from a self-centered life, in sin of some kind, through a true experience with Christ, through conviction and repentance, and belief, and then through the sanctification process begins to produce fruits and participates in good works as a result of faith." Scout reflected: "Someone that believes in the salvation of Jesus Christ. And believes that they are... 'born again' is kind of a confusing term but just that, um, they've changed their lives to want to pursue a godly, Christ-centered life." Susie reported: "It's someone who's decided to make a commitment um, to just really give their life over to God and let his teachings and, um, just the beliefs of...of the religion kind of rule your decisions in life."

Participants also reported their belief that being born again was evidenced through their love for others and their changing focus from themselves to others. Several participants

described the selflessness they experienced and how this has translated in their care for others. For example, Kasey stated: "It's definitely whenever I'm pursuing Him rather than just pursuing my own selfish ambitions that I feel His presence more and more." Peter explained how he now has an ability to see things differently in his statement: "...I was walking back to my room and God kind of stepped in, and in my mind He replayed that whole argument to let me see it from an outside view, and I just felt the conviction of God come upon me..." Yannick reported that "the essence of my faith system is just that, love God and love other people...I mean, that to me is what it's all about."

### Experiential Understandings

When asked the question: "How do you know you are born again?" these students shared experiences that confirmed their born again status. A relatively common element of the experiences reported included some reference to the Holy Spirit. For example: "I do feel the Holy Spirit" (Erin), "Someone enables (me) to have love instead of pride and I think (He) is the Holy Spirit" (Jackson), "I feel like the Holy Spirit is your conviction when..." (Pioneer), "I mean there's that gut feeling and sometimes you have to decipher whether it's the Holy Spirit or me" (Scout).

Two of the students specifically mentioned Jesus Christ as an integral part of their born again experience. Maisie reported more of an attribution of the work of Christ in their experience: "There was a joy that overpowered me and in no time, Christ has made me this way for a reason". Tim said "...it's a relationship with Jesus and so if you can identify Jesus as a person who is actively involved in your life and you understand that He has saved you, then that's how you know." Implied here, also, was an attribution about the role of Jesus Christ in salvation.

Some students also seemed able to relate the born again experience to circumstances in their broader life experience. Erin indicated, "I do feel the presence of the Holy Spirit whenever, especially when I feel alone." Heidi added, "Sometimes it is like you feel God leading you. But, then, if you are far away from God by not spending enough time with Him, you're not going to feel the Holy Spirit as much." This experience was of a more personal nature for Peter who said, "There is no longer the depression, no longer the hatred, it's been replaced with...love and care for others." Collectively these three per-

spectives are revealing of common elements of the Christian experience many have over time. That is, the Holy Spirit can be especially present during times of need; peace with the Spirit requires the believer to invest in the relationship. The fruitful evidence is largely expressed in our relations with those around us, respectively.

These themes were evident in other students' responses as well. Kasey suggested that we must invest in the relationship, stating "It's definitely when I start reading the word and just focusing on His love for me and the joy that I get from His love for me that I really sense the Holy Spirit." Here, the Holy Spirit was acknowledged, the personal investment in learning about and from God was evident, as was the fruit of joy. Another work of the Holy Spirit, conviction, was acknowledged by Maisie stating that, "The big thing for me is that when I do wrong, I feel a conviction about those things."

### Discussion

Many participants in this study described their status as being born again. Based on a long history of being brought up in the church, many seem to know "about" the Holy Spirit and how God works in people's lives. Many of the participants reported being taught the Truth of God. However, some participants neglected to describe a personal relationship and response to the Holy Spirit such as that which is described in the third chapter of the Gospel of John.

The differences between two participants, Sarai and Pioneer, distinguish the disparate views of individuals calling themselves born again. Sarai hailed from a non-denominational background that emphasized the importance of Scripture in understanding Christian living. Her response when asked to define the term born again included the scriptural reference to becoming a new creation (Second Corinthians 5:17). Paradoxically, this passage was also the basis of her objection to the notion of becoming born again multiple times. Pioneer, however, expressed rather nonspecific and abstract notions of discipleship, emphasizing the relational aspects of faith rather than what he referred to as "Sunday school answers." His equating being born again with repeated re-commitments to live for Christ after having abandoned previous commitments offered a pointed contrast to that of Sarai and demonstrated the diversity among college students who identify as born again.

An interesting finding from this study was related to the nature of the population under investigation. The findings appeared to be relational rather than theological. In other words, the emergent themes seemed to be consistent with what we would expect with the developmental characteristics of the college population. Longitudinal research on the cognitive development of college students suggests that they tend to view knowledge as increasingly uncertain as they progress through college, and believe that knowledge is personally intuited the more they develop. Gender related patterns are also evident such that particularly for women, a relational approach to knowledge predominates whereby personal relationships are paramount for determining the validity of a claim to knowledge (Baxter-Magolda, 1992, 2001). Thus, the finding that our participants expressed some uncertainty about their beliefs and looked for relational elements to confirm their beliefs is fitting with developmental theory. Insofar as some churches respond to the characteristics of the population they see before them, they may shy away from doctrine and move into a realm that focuses on having a personal relationship with God on one's own terms. Another connection with the developmental characteristics of the population centers on the nature of the manner by which the responses emerged. It appears that for the participants, words were insufficient in explaining God and the nature of their relationship with Him.

Nash (2001) has noted a revival of interest in spirituality and religion on campus, and believes it to be a vibrant aspect of pluralism. This observation offers another paradox related to our findings. Pluralism is rooted in the postmodern assumption that there is no absolute truth. Yet, most religions make claim to absolute Truth. Some researchers suggest that the postmodern influence in the academy has a secularizing and corrosive influence on the faith of college students (Kimball, Mitchell, Thorton, & Young-Demarco, 2009). It seems that a wide variety of interests are being revived, some that conform to pluralistic notions of a spirituality devoid of absolute truth, some that accept the Bible as Truth, and some that subscribe to other religious texts. The results of this study have highlighted several points of discussion that illustrate a complex process of self-definition as a born-again Christian. Our participants seemed to be clearly articulating their experience of God's presence in

their life as both a cognitive and affective process. Yet, how they defined the term born again and how they knew of this term as a self descriptor was divergent.

Research by Lee (2008) identified transformative, personal, processes-oriented conversion experiences that were evidenced by changes in behavior. The present study found more disparity in responses with less clarity in how participants defined a born again experience. At least two reasons are apparent for this difference. First, Lee (2008) studied women over 50, who were likely to be more mature in their faith and could speak with greater perspective on their conversion. Secondly, Lee (2008) used a highly selective sample of her acquaintances or those referred by friends. In the present study, we used an approach where participants came to us based on their understanding of the term born again Christian. Thus, it appears that the sampling method has a major implication for the findings in studies of Christian conversion.

This study had several limitations. First, all of the students in this study came from one campus, in a cultural context where church going and identifying oneself as Christian is normative as part of the culture. Had the study taken place on a campus in a different region with a different culture, it is likely that we would have heard different responses from our participants. In addition, only one of our 18 respondents was a person of color, despite the fact that the population on our campus includes 19% minority students. Thus, Caucasian students are substantially overrepresented in our sample.

As a research team we struggled mightily with a decision about whether or not to have screening criteria for participants who came forward as volunteers identifying themselves as "born again Christians" when our discernment and understanding of Scripture at times told us otherwise. Given the qualitative nature of our study, we decided to include all those who self-identified as born again Christians in our study. The major limitation of our study, therefore, is that participants' experiences are described who have not been subjected to any screening criteria other than signing up for a study where they self-identified as born again. We caution readers to interpret our findings in light of the diversity of individually self-selected definitions of the term born again and with the understanding that this study sought to tease out those meanings as our participants understood them.

There are many continuing questions about the born again experience of college students that merit attention in future research. One approach would be a much more open-ended inquiry to explore the conceptual as well as experiential aspects, particularly with a broader range of students. In the current study, the structure of the questions limited the broader types of responses students were able to explore. Focus groups also might provide a rich dialogue regarding students' experiences. Future efforts might focus on questions students themselves have about the born again experience, which based on the observations made here, might prove to be revealing and expansive. Another set of questions might address the relationship of born again experiences to standardized measures of Christian spirituality. The relationship of self-reported experiences to measures of faith maturity might be extremely interesting. Along a similar line of inquiry, it might be useful to study the relationship of born again experiences to self and/or peer-reported behavioral indicators designed to reflect the expected fruit of the Spirit.

### Implications

The ways in which college students define the term born again are clearly diverse; and some of those ways may conflict with scripture (John 3:3, NIV). Given this, church and parachurch organizations (e.g., Athletes in Action, Student Mobilization, InterVarsity) should prioritize explaining the concept of being born again in their ministry efforts. Given that spiritual rebirth is a central doctrine to the Christian faith and so many self-identified born again Christians either have understandings of the term that appear to conflict with scripture or are distancing themselves from it, it would seem that there is a missed opportunity to educate people about John 3:3 and other verses that refer specifically to this concept.

A sizable number of participants in our study noted that they were born again at what seemed like a young age, perhaps 6 or 8 years old. To these participants, their experiences often consisted of walking to the front of a church or standing up at a church camp and saying they believed that Christ died for them. This begs several questions about whether that is all there is to being born again or if it is more complex than that. What are churches teaching, and to what extent is that which is being taught consistent with scripture? What happens when one

is born again? Should we expect to see the Holy Spirit working in their lives? These are questions we believe should be pondered.

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**Appendix**

1. This is a study about born again Christians. Do you define yourself as a born again Christian?
2. How do you define the term born again Christian?
3. How do you know that you are born again?
4. To what extent, if any, do you feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life?
5. Describe your recollection about the circumstances that led to your conversion?
- 5a. Tell me about any experiences you have had that were influential in your being born again?
- 5b. Tell me about any people that were influential in your being born again?
- 5c. Tell me about any events that were influential in your being born again?
6. Was your becoming born again more of a process or a single event? Please describe?
7. Was there a role of the Bible in your conversion?
8. Do you have any stories that illustrate how your life is now compared to how your life was before you were born again?
9. How has your faith changed compared to before you were born again?
10. Are there ways in which your faith has been tested on campus?
11. How do you describe your experience as a born again Christian attending a public University?
12. How could this institution accommodate you better as a Christian student?
13. Have you experienced any challenges to your faith as part of your experience on campus?
14. Is there anything about your becoming born again that we haven't discussed that you believe is important?