

“You Must Be Born Again”
John 3:1-17
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. During the 1976 presidential election, Jimmy Carter mentioned in a very interesting interview -- which included his admitting that he had lusted in his heart -- that he was “born again.” When that particular magazine hit the newsstands, it seemed as though every other person in America wanted to know what in the world this Christian descriptor “born again” meant. Needless to say, people – even the most well-meaning Christians – get pretty creative with their definitions.

Frederick Dale Bruner in his outstanding contribution to the field of the study of the Holy Spirit warned that the historical tendencies about “born again” have included...putting too much on individual remarkable experiences and subjectivism, and creating rigorous evidences that one has received such a status through strict spiritual obedience (Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 258). So what does it mean to be “born again”?

If anything is clear in our Gospel text in John 3 it’s that the well-trained Pharisee, Nicodemus, was utterly clueless. Jesus said plainly at verse 3: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” To which (with his head spinning), Nicodemus complained in the form of a question, “*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?*” (vs 4) Who could blame poor Nicodemus? Surely he was speaking for most people. Jesus seemed to be speaking in riddles.

It is, however, probably important to note under what circumstances Nicodemus had come to Jesus Christ. The text says at verse 2 that Nicodemus “*came to Jesus by night*”. By nature we are like Nicodemus. It isn’t cool to be too out in the open about our relationship with Jesus Christ. Furthermore – and let’s be honest – much of what He says as recorded in Scripture seems irrelevant, confusing, or at times just downright unreasonable or impossible! For example how can a person be “born again”?

Ok, so let’s take a closer look at what the Lord is saying here: The Greek word here at John 3:3 is *anōthen* and can be legitimately translated as “from above”. Jesus’ message is quite simple. Just leave it to everyone else to make it overly-complicated:

1. “born again” means “born from above”...that is, we were all born in a physical sense, now we need to be born in a spiritual sense. Our earthly mother gave birth to us physically; God -- who is “from above” -- must give birth to us spiritually.

Jesus is saying that unless we are spiritually born by God, we “*cannot see the kingdom of God.*” (vs 3)

2. The word “see” in this verse means “experience.” That is, we are not speaking of empirical observation, like you can “see” an altar in front of where you are sitting, but spiritual (or inward) experience. There is something indeed that we experience when the kingdom of God is our guide and it produces in us “another heart, mind, and natural desire.” (FC SD II 26)
 - a. God impacts our heart, that is, our choices about how to live.
 - b. God impacts our mind, that is, our thoughts that fill our mind.
 - c. God impacts our soul, that is, our desire and the things we strive for.

And thirdly,

3. What exactly do we mean by the “kingdom of God” itself? That means we experience the reign of God as our King and Leader

So here is the total translation (a theological one) of what Jesus said to Nicodemus who came in darkness according to the time of day, but who also came in spiritual darkness according to the condition of his soul (and Jesus spoke in all love and compassion): “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born from above/spiritually born from God, He cannot experience/truly know in his heart, mind and soul (impacting your choices, thoughts, and desires), the reign of God/the leading of God in their life.*”

That’s what Jesus said, but He didn’t leave us hanging there. He went on to explain “how” at verse 5: “***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.***” And in saying this, Jesus unlocked the door to heaven for every one of us! It is the door of the Lord’s Word and Sacraments (like Holy Baptism) which is how the Lord births, gives and sustains a new life in you!

So I have encountered sincere souls over the years confessing to me that they don't "get it," they can't will themselves to have faith, they don't know how to snap their fingers and arrive to a spiritual born-again experience (I respond by assuring them that they speak the truth, ***because there is nothing we can do to control the Holy Spirit***). We can't follow the 4 steps or 10 principles; we don't train or discipline ourselves into the Kingdom of God; we don't open ourselves up to do xyz for Jesus; we don't wait to get zapped by lightening or to have visions...we have but one calling in this regard: take Jesus at His Word!

It is Jesus who has unlocked heaven by giving us baptism and the baptismal life that follows it. That is, He tells us *where* the Spirit will come to us and *how* the Spirit will abide with us. The "where" of the Spirit is where Holy Baptism is administered and in this great washing away of sins you and I are totally passive, but the Spirit is powerfully active. He does the work; He creates the new creation! By way of analogy when you were born from your mom and the doctor said "push!" he *wasn't* talking to you...you were passive; mom was active. The one being born does nothing; but the one birthing does everything. By ensuring your passivity in this new birth, it is God's way of saying: "I am not calling you to do, or give, or figure out, or to jump through hoops...I am calling you to receive my good and gracious gifts."

But surely, there must be something that accompanies Holy Baptism that indicates *how* the Holy Spirit is in us! It's true, our lives begin to change. Oh, I'm not talking about becoming some super-saint that is less a sinner and who thinks themselves better than other people (because we never are), but I am speaking of *God's way* of describing the Spirit's abiding in us.

Just a few verses after John 3:16 the Lord Jesus said this at John 3:21:

"But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out by God."

- 1) The born-again child of God "does what is true."
- 2) The born-again child of God "comes to the light."

Now listen to these words of St. Augustine on this way of life: "*He that does truth accuses his evil works in himself, spares not himself, forgives not himself, that God may forgive him: for that which he desires God to forgive, he himself*"

acknowledges, and he comes to the light; to which he is thankful for showing him what he should hate in himself.” (NPNF1, 7:86)

And what is that light that shows you to “accuse yourself”? It is the Word of God *and* (in John’s Gospel) it is the Christ Himself. This is how you know that the Spirit of God lives in you: you abide in the light and the Law in that light causes you to despise yourself; and the Gospel in that light causes you to know that God loves you more than anything! Nothing causes us to hate more than God’s Word (Amos 5:15: “hate evil”) -- even and especially the evil in ourselves -- but on the other hand, nothing fills us with love more than God’s Word: to know how we are unconditionally love and how that love overflows. So one part drives us away from ourselves; and the other part drives us to Jesus.

It is in this light of the Gospel and in the Gospel alone that the Christian takes comfort. This is the sign of the Spirit’s work: forsaking yourself and holding *only* to Jesus. This truth and this light is the sign of the one who is born-again. How did it all begin for you? You were baptized! How do you remain in this miraculous flood? By sticking to the truth: only sinners need their sins washed away! So I will gladly confess therefore that that is what I am! But how is this known? Through the light of Christ’s Word and through this light dear Christian hear the truth: You have been baptized; the Spirit has been poured out upon you; and you are born again!