

THE SCANDAL OF REBIRTH

Read John 3:1-3 (See pg. 3)

What does it mean to be “born again?” Why do some people call themselves “born again Christians?” Is a “born again Christian” more of a Christian than other Christians? If so, how does one get “born again?” Pastors get these questions all the time.

The American philosopher William James once said that there were two kinds of Christians: lifelong Christians who gradually mature in their faith, and “conversion Christians” who have an abrupt conversion experience, usually as adults. I think it’s fair to say that most Christians tend to fall into one of these categories, but as far as the Bible is concerned, both lifelong Christians and conversion Christians are born-again Christians. Jesus made it clear that a person has to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God, and since a Christian by definition is someone who has entered the Kingdom of God, the only way a person can become a Christian is by being born again. The question is: what exactly does that mean?

Well, what's it like to be born the first time? The first thing we can say is that it always involves a lot of pain. Whether the labor lasts for a few hours or a few days, it's a violent and painful process for both the infant and the mother. The second thing we can say is that the infant has nothing to say about the matter. He has nothing to do with when or where he was conceived, who his parents are, how he is knit together in the womb, and when and where he is born. He doesn't even choose his own name. The infant is utterly dependent upon others for his creation, his gestation, his deliverance and his survival. All he can do is cry when things aren't going well.

And so it is, says Jesus, with our spiritual rebirth. When and where it begins and how long it takes is not up to us; it's completely up to God. We do not act: we are acted upon. All we bring to the table is sin, helplessness and dependency. And for this very reason, the idea of spiritual rebirth is an offense—a scandal to us. It reduces us to the status of helpless infants, and we don't like to think of ourselves that way.

As a matter of fact, we like to think of ourselves in the opposite way: as independent, self-sufficient people who are in charge of our lives. We want to be achievers, high performers. But we don't “achieve” our spiritual rebirth any more than an infant “achieves” his delivery from his mother's womb. He is driven forth by forces that are far beyond his control and he receives his new life purely as a gift. And whether we like it or not, that is how spiritual rebirth works as well. We don't “achieve” our entry into the kingdom of God: it comes to us purely as a gift—whether it takes a few days or a lifetime. We don't make a decision for Christ; God makes a decision for us.

And I think that bothers us. It bothered Nicodemus too. You see, Nicodemus was a very accomplished man. He was a rabbi, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish ruling council. He was a devout man who had dedicated his entire life to God. And when Nicodemus sensed something about Jesus, something different, something authentic, he sought him out in order to find out more about him.

So he came to Jesus at night—presumably to avoid being seen by other Pharisees who hated Jesus, and he opened the conversation by saying: *“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”* Now this isn’t exactly a confession of faith, but it does show deep respect. In all likelihood, Nicodemus was looking forward to having a deep theological discussion with Jesus—rabbi-to-rabbi. And so he is dumbfounded when Jesus replies: *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”*

Now this is hardly what Nicodemus expected to hear. Understandably, he is befuddled. He asks: *“How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”* But Jesus only says once again: *“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”*

In order to be saved, you have to be reborn! And Nicodemus is flabbergasted. A man of great intelligence and deep piety, a scholar of the Scriptures and a spiritual leader of Israel—he doesn’t have a clue as to what Jesus means. “How can this be?” he asks. Does Jesus mean that all of his knowledge and accomplishments count for nothing when it comes to entering the kingdom of God? That he must become a spiritual fetus and wait for God to deliver him? It’s completely beyond his comprehension.

And let’s be honest: it’s beyond our comprehension as well. Like Nicodemus, we are offended, scandalized by the idea that all the things we can do—our good deeds, our regular attendance at church, our striving to obey the commandments, our repentance when we fail—none of these can save us. We have to be born again—and there’s nothing we can do to make that happen. It’s all out of our hands.

I think that this idea is so radical, even *traumatic*, that like Nicodemus, we don’t know what to do with it. In a world that honors those who “make things happen” and “get results,” Jesus’ words strike at the very root of our values. When it comes to our spiritual condition, it’s not strength and self-sufficiency and being proactive that count with God; quite the opposite, it’s weakness and helplessness and neediness. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the hungry, the thirsty, the mournful and the persecuted. Scandalous!

But the scandal goes even deeper than that: spiritual rebirth comes only when and where God chooses. Jesus says, *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”* We can no more control the time and circumstances of God’s deliverance than we can control which way the wind blows. We can no more induce spiritual rebirth than an infant can induce his own delivery from his mother’s womb. It’s completely beyond our control—and WE CAN’T STAND IT! One of the strongest urges we have is the desire to be in control of things—of our job situations, our finances, our marriages, our children—our lives. In my former career in human resources management I saw a lot of studies of job stress, and I learned that one of the main sources of job stress in the workplace is having little or no control over how to do your job. For example, one job that always came in high on the job stress charts was the job of assembly line worker. The assembly line worker has virtually no control over any of the conditions under which he works. He is told exactly what to do, how to do it, when to do it, where to do it, how fast to do it, and who to do it next to. He is strictly controlled and he has little or no influence over those who control him. The result is stress.

Another occupation which always comes in high on the stress charts is that of a nurse in a hospital. The nurse is between two demanding parties: the doctor and the patient. She has to be responsive to the requests of both parties and has very little control over either. The result is job stress.

That's why we long for control: having control takes away the stress of being subjected to the control of others. But when we long for control over our spiritual condition, what we are longing for is the opposite of faith. Faith is trust in God to meet all of our spiritual needs. When we long for control, we are trusting ourselves to meet our spiritual needs. And that's God's job—not ours.

We are born "poor in spirit" with no spiritual resources of our own. We are born dead in our transgressions, with no spiritual life in our bodies. We are like Lazarus, who lay moldering in his tomb and couldn't lift a finger to save himself. All he could do was await the coming of One whose Words—"Lazarus, come forth!"--could raise the dead man to new life. So if you think of yourself as being like Lazarus, you won't be far off target. And although it may seem scary to give up the "fool's gold" quest for control and place all of your trust and confidence in God, that is the very way you can take to enter His blessing. First of all, you will be humbled, and that's the best thing that can happen to you, because it's with pride that we bind our sins, and being humbled bursts their bonds. Second, when you yield yourself up to God, lock, stock and barrel, you are doing the very thing that God wants you to do. Third, Jesus will call you his brother, as he said, "*Whoever does the will of my father who is in heaven is my brother and sister.*" Or, as Paul wrote: "*Those he foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*" Finally, God will open your eyes and you will begin to see things as they really are. God will show you the truth, and the truth will set you free. Labor may last 2 hours or 2 days, and being reborn can take an instant or a lifetime. It may be violent at times, but God will see you through.

The scandal of rebirth is really a blessing in disguise. The good news is that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead—you've already been born again and have eternal life—whether you're a lifelong Christian or an adult convert. That is the will of a merciful God, who so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son, so that all who believe in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. Amen.

John 3:1-8 You Must Be Born Again

3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."