

What It Means To Be 'Born Again'

John 3:1-16

Bryn MacPhail / Jan. 30, 2011

If I were to survey you this morning, and ask you to characterize the messages of Jesus, I'm curious about what your response would be.

I'm guessing that some of you might say that Jesus most often delivered a message of *love*. After all, isn't that why we like to sing the hymn, "Jesus Loves Me"?

Others might suggest that, because Jesus was "meek and mild", His messages were usually tender and compassionate.

Now, I hate to put a wet blanket on those positive thoughts, but I must tell you that is a very domesticated view of Jesus.

I don't mean to be unkind when I say that the message of Jesus that is often presented in our day is a watered down version.

How do I know this? As I speak with people, I note that very few are startled by Jesus. Very few people seem bothered by Jesus.

And yet, the collective response to Jesus and His message two thousand years ago was very different.

Jesus upset a great many people when He spoke. And this was *the usual* response to His preaching.

On one occasion, the listening multitude attempted to throw Jesus over a cliff (Lk. 4:28-30).

On at least two occasions those who heard Jesus' message attempted to stone him to death (Jn. 8:59; 10:31).

And, on countless occasions, the religious leaders sought to have Jesus arrested because of what He was teaching.

I can assure you, the hymn 'What A Friend We Have In Jesus' was not a Temple favourite.

As we move through the Gospel of John over the next few weeks, I want to encourage you to seriously think through what you believe about Jesus and His message.

It may be the case, that we too have been worshipping a domesticated Jesus, rather than the Jesus of the Bible.

As you reacquaint yourself with the Jesus of the Bible, what you will undoubtedly notice is that the claims of Jesus do not amount to a pool of ethical counsel.

Nor could we say that Jesus' message is that of a cheerleader, where He shouts to His followers, 'keep up the good work.'

People don't stone cheerleaders.

Teachers who encourage others to ‘keep up the good work’ are typically not in danger of being thrown off a cliff.

The claims of Jesus will likely challenge both our worldview and our lifestyle to the very core.

And I submit to you that if you take these claims seriously, a response of indifference will be impossible.

One possibility is that you will be *bothered* by the words of Jesus—one possibility is that the Jesus of the Bible will offend you.

Another possibility (the one I’m hoping for), is that having better understood Jesus’ claim on your life, you will *renew your commitment to follow Him and your affection to love Him*.

One of the earliest claims made by Jesus is found here in John, chapter 3. It is not a claim about His identity, but rather, it is a claim about what is required for entry into the kingdom of God. Jesus says, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God”** (3:3).

What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase ‘born again Christian’? Do you think of a group of fanatical Christians who approach Christianity a lot differently than you?

Or, when you think of the phrase 'born again Christian' do you think of yourself?

For reasons unknown to me, the phrase 'born again Christian' has become synonymous with Christianity's over-zealous fringe, rather than being known as a description for every Christian.

I know what it is like to have someone ask me, "Are you born again?"

Often, the question behind that question is, "Does your Christian life look just like mine?"

And so, sometimes, I'm tempted to answer "No". I'm tempted to resist the phrase because there is a corner of Christianity that I'm not eager to identify with.

And yet, I think it is massively important that we recognize that *this phrase originates with Jesus*. The call for each of us to be "**born again**" is a basic claim made by Jesus.

As such, I don't think it is wise to shun the phrase just because it has been hijacked by a group of Christians that we are not comfortable with.

Jesus is explaining what is required for entry into heaven and, surely, that ought to arrest our attention.

Admittedly, John chapter 3 is famous more for verse 16 than it is for verse 3. And yet, I would suggest that *verse 3 is the hinge on which verse 16 turns*. We cannot have one without the other.

What we have in this chapter is the recorded dialogue between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. And what we learn from Jesus at the outset of this conversation is that the kingdom of God is reserved for those who are "**born again**".

As we seek to determine what Jesus means by "**born again**", we will be helped by what we know about the man with whom Jesus is speaking.

We read that Nicodemus was a "**Pharisee**" and "**a ruler of the Jews**" (3:1). That is to say that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the powerful ruling body of Judaism in the first century.

It is noteworthy that John mentions that Nicodemus came to Jesus "**at night**"(3:2). Theologians speculate that Nicodemus came by night because he didn't want to be seen by his colleagues who were known to throw people out of the synagogue for believing in Jesus (Jn. 9:22).

Unlike his colleagues, Nicodemus was anxious to learn from Jesus, addressing Him respectfully as "**Rabbi**"(3:2).

Although Nicodemus addresses Jesus respectfully, acknowledging that He has "**come from God**" (3:2), Jesus does not hesitate to cut short the pleasantries.

Immediately, Nicodemus is confronted by the words of Jesus, "**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God**"(3:3).

So what does that mean? What does it mean to be "**born again**"?

Nicodemus responds by asking, "**How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?**"(3:4).

It is unfortunate that Nicodemus' reply has often been misunderstood. Jesus was teaching a spiritual truth in symbolic terms.

Nicodemus, a teacher himself, would have been quite familiar with this rabbinical method of teaching. Nicodemus picks up on Jesus' symbolism, and replies utilizing those same symbols.

Jesus states, in symbolic terms, that *in order to gain the kingdom of God one must become a new person.*

Nicodemus replies, using those same symbolic terms, asking, 'How can an old man fundamentally change who he is? You can't teach an old dog new tricks, can you?'

Nicodemus had committed his entire life to not only being a good Jew, but also being a teacher of the Jews.

Now Jesus was saying that Nicodemus had to forsake the path he was on and start over.

A few weeks ago, Allie's computer became infected with an aggressive virus that was severely compromising her computer's performance.

My first instinct was to locate this virus and delete it. I soon realized that the negative effects of the virus had spread beyond what I could see.

I then downloaded a couple of programs that were designed to "clean" the computer, thus eliminating the virus.

Unfortunately, none of my attempts to fix Allie's computer succeeded.

It eventually became clear that the only way to remedy the problem was to erase all of the contents from her computer and to reinstall the operating system.

This was a drastic step, but a necessary step, if Allie was to have a well-functioning computer.

I present this example to illustrate Jesus' point that *half measures will not do*. Jesus did not come to give us a superficial cleaning. Nor did He come to do some patchwork on our soul.

This notion that we need to be born again is an indication of how thorough Jesus is with His redeeming work.

Jesus goes on to equate being **born again** with being **born of the Spirit** (3:8).

Sticking with the analogy, the Spirit becomes, in a manner, our new operating system. And with a new “operating system” we begin to think and behave in profoundly different ways than we previously did.

In other words, we should see some evidence within our lives which indicates that the Spirit of God is present and at work.

One of my senior colleagues asks an excellent question to help us in this regard. He asks, “If it were a crime in this country to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

We can’t simply point to our being a caring and loving person, for there are many caring and loving people who are not professing Christians.

Nor can we simply point to our being committed to our family and friends, for there are many non-Christians who could claim as much.

What evidence would we point to?

Is our character changing in some distinguishable way? *Is our outward devotion to Christ* measurable and growing? Do the people close to us detect any kind of *transformation* in us?

If it were a crime in this country to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Those who have been born again, those in whom the Spirit of God dwells, should be different and distinct from those who have not yet been reborn.

I was speaking with a friend back home in Toronto who owns and operates a very successful foodservice business. This friend shared with me how his assistant approached him recently and told my friend, in a very positive way, “You are a different person. You’re not the person who hired me many years ago.”

For my friend, this was the best compliment in the world.....because he understood that genuine spiritual rebirth changes a person.

My worst fear is to be the same pastor ten years from now. I long the Spirit of God to change me, and to increasingly conform me to the likeness of Christ.

Now, that being said, I wouldn’t want you to think that the Spirit’s transforming work is automatic or total.

The Bible teaches that we have the ability to “**quench**” and the ability to “**grieve the Holy Spirit**” (1Thess. 5:19; Eph. 4:30).

In other words, we have the capacity to counter the Spirit’s transforming work within us.

Perhaps I can offer another personal illustration which will help.

I regularly engage in a couple of habits that are at odds with one another.

Four to five days a week I engage in rigorous exercise working out at a gym and playing sports. If I continue with this it will greatly elevate my level of physical fitness.

To my shame, however, I must also report that I have what might be described as an addiction to junk food.

Pizza, chicken wings, onion rings, Doritos, Fritos, potato chips—the list goes on...and it's not pretty.

Based on my exercise routine, I should be in excellent physical condition—but I'm not. I keep countering the benefits of exercising by neglecting to eat nutritious food.

I fear that something like this is going on in the lives of people who have been born of the Spirit.

The work of the Spirit puts us on a trajectory that would elevate our level of spiritual fitness, but we counter this by neglecting to have an intake of spiritually beneficial food.

If we read the newspaper more than we read our Bible, and if we chat on facebook more than we talk to God, then we are countering the transforming work of the Spirit.

Many of us should be in better spiritual condition, but we've been countering progress by not feeding upon the things that will help us to grow.

I would like to leave you with a question to consider: What is the current status of your relationship to Jesus Christ?

Are you like Nicodemus? You are sincerely seeking the truth. You want to know God, but you need some direction.

Or are you someone who has detected the Spirit's work in your life. Maybe you have experienced new birth, but for whatever reason you haven't progressed in your spiritual life as much as you would have liked.

What is the current status of your relationship with Jesus Christ?

Wherever you are on the journey, I want to encourage you: *Your next step can be forward.*

Whatever you have done in the past, whatever you have left undone, today is a new day and an opportunity to move forward in faith.

To be born again is to abandon a trajectory of our own design for a trajectory of God's design.

To be born again is to be born of the Spirit of God.

The Spirit of God has designs to transform you and me, and to conform us into the likeness of Jesus.

Let's embrace this design. And let's embrace the blessings that accompany new birth.