

Trouble in the Biblical World: Confusion

Nicodemus confirms his clandestine meeting with the young upstart from Nazareth. The reason? This popular prophet was teaching provocative things that needed clarification. The meeting will be done in stealth, scheduled in the shroud of anonymous darkness because Nicodemus doesn't want people to get the impression that he is officially validating this man Jesus, at least not yet. He is a Pharisee, and a member of the high court, after all so he must exercise discernment. Although he is open minded, he is not sure if he should censure Jesus or embrace him. Much of what Jesus taught sounded both true *and* confusing. However, he doesn't have enough information and the information he does have is in much need of clarity, crystal clear clarity.

You get more bees with honey, so he addresses Jesus with three honorific titles: "Rabbi," "Teacher from God," and "Miracle Worker." Jesus, however, dispatches with the pleasantries. He answers the question Nicodemus has yet to ask (v3),

No one enters the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

A bewildered Nicodemus objects (v4)

How can a man be born again when he is old?
Surely, he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!

Did he just see the movie, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button?"

Trouble in Our World: Confusion Over Born Again-ness

A few years ago, at a family reunion, I finished a round of golf with a couple of cousins I hadn't seen in years. It was a great time. Yes, I beat them like a drum, but as we were in the car coming home the conversation shifted into the forbidden religious zone. Ironically, I didn't initiate it, Lee did. Out of the blue he blurted, "What's this born-again nonsense" he lashed out to no one in particular." "It's the stupidest thing I ever heard of." I wasn't the only Christ follower in the car so I, miraculously, held my tongue. OK, for a second. When no one responded, I said, "Well Jesus taught about it so it can't be *that* stupid, right?"

In his late 60s, Lee was our oldest cousin, and as such, he may have been referring to the 70s a.k.a. the last great revival in our nation. Who remembers the saturation of

“born again” bumper stickers, “I’m saved” slogans, and televangelists on every station? But like a burr in the saddle, Lee was genuinely agitated by the term, partly because he didn’t understand it and partly because he saw too much of the “holier than thou” attitude of those who claimed to be “born again.” When I tried to offer an explanation, he immediately shut it down and said, “It doesn’t matter anyhow, I never be born again.” Unfortunately, Lee passed away a few months after his rant. I wonder if he wants to change his mind now.

Grace In the Biblical World: Clarification

As both a good Jew and esteemed teacher, Nicodemus was familiar with the concept of the KOG. Heck, he probably did seminars on it at the Temple. Simply put, the KOG refers to God’s rule, rights, and reign in heaven, on earth, and in people’s hearts. It is most vividly and powerfully expressed in Jesus’ character, teachings, and actions. In Matthew 13, he described it as a “Pearl of Great Price” and a “Treasure Hidden in a Field.” It is a realm of such beauty and worth that any wise person would gladly give up whatever is necessary to enter it. In the “Disciple’s Prayer” Jesus said we should constantly pray for its full implementation on earth and “Seek” it first beyond all things (Matthew 6:9, 33). Nicodemus, however, wasn’t confused with Jesus’ messaging about the KOG but with how one entered it. You’ve heard the expression, “In like Flint?” Well, the Jews believed they were in the KOG because they were genetic Jews and obeyed the Mosaic Law. But Jesus’ “born again” requirement blew up Nicodemus’ theological apple cart.

Nevertheless, Jesus is stunned that for all his religious and academic credentials, Nicodemus is unable to grasp the metaphor. Thus, he clarifies it with another *slew of metaphors*. Beginning in John 3:5 Jesus says:

5 “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 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 born of the Spirit.”

Here Jesus equates being “born again” with being “born of the Spirit.” In other places, he said one needs to be “born anew,” “born from above,” and “born of God.” “Holy Smokes Jesus.” “That’s about as clear as mud” I picture Nicodemus standing there with an exasperated look on his face. Nevertheless, he should have been catching a *poketo* of

what Jesus was throwing. Gentile converts to Judaism were called “newborn children” so being “born again” as a conversionary work should not have been foreign to him. So, Jesus needles him, “You’re a teacher of Israel and you still don’t get it” (v10). Or as my late pap-pap would put it, “Buy him books, send him to college, and he still flunks.”

Grace In the Our World: Clarification

Scattered throughout the NT are images, metaphors, and analogies that help clarify “born again-ness.”

Unless you change and become like little children you will not enter the KOH.

(Matthew 18:3)

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth.

(James 1:18)

Jesus saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the HS.

(Titus 3:5)

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

(I Peter 1:3, 23)

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

So, for any who are suffering from “Nicodemus-itis” this morning let’s just say that being “born again” is:

A supernatural work of God’s Spirit in our hearts regenerating us to new life in Christ.

Conclusion/Application

To bring even more clarity to what it means to be “born again into the Kingdom of God” listen to the following hypothetical:

Your friend returns from vacation and tells you about this new land he has visited. You’ve always been more-or-less satisfied with your home but it’s the only reality you’ve ever known. But oddly, your friend’s stories make you notice things you hadn’t before: the stinging air pollution, the bland and boring culture, the crude and uncreative people, and the stalled-out economy. The more you hear stories of the place your friend visited—of exciting people, vibrant culture, beautiful scenery, and

a robust economy—the more restless you feel. That evening your dinner is interrupted by six successive calls from telemarketers selling gas masks so you can breathe better on high-pollution days, and then something snaps. That's it! I'm leaving! I'm heading to this place my friend raved about.

But you're apprehensive as a 1000 questions swirl in your mind. You share your concerns with your friend, and he says, "Don't worry, I'm going with." That tips the balance and the two of you set off. You approach the border to this new land and the immigration official asks you one question: "Do you wish to leave your past behind and start a new life here?" When you say "yes" he issues you a passport. The only condition is that you take a shower. He explains that all immigrants must wash off the dirt and smell of their old country so they can have a fresh new start in their new place. You eagerly comply. Afterward, you step outside and take a deep breath, and your lungs feel as if you are inhaling pure joy and peace. The spirit of this new place is entering you. You feel exhilaration in your soul like never before.

You find a new home, meet your new neighbors, and settle into a whole new life. You quickly realize you have a lot to learn. The people speak a new language here. It's not the old familiar tone of pride, judgment, bragging, deception, insulting, and lying. Rather, it's one of gratitude, encouragement, truth telling, admitting faults, and celebrating joys. As you settle into your new life, you almost feel that you have been born into a new story and a new world.

If you liked to be "born" into the new story and the new world of the KOG, bow your heads and hearts and pray with me now.