

You Must Be Born Again!

John 3:1-16

John 3:22-30

Are you an ordinary Christian or one of those new fangled "Born Again" ones? Groan, Misunderstanding! Hardly new fangled because Jesus, not some evangelical religious zealots, coined the phrase and used it as a description! There is no super breed of Christians (more pious and religious than the rest), there are no categories: you either are a Christian (Born Again) or you are not! It describes how you become a Christian (an experience common to us all): how you become part of God's Family. For your physical life you were (self-evidently) born, for your spiritual life you were Born Again! And if you want an example of the distinction I am making then look no further than me: I became a Church Member in a Congregational Church that had just become a URC in 1974 because I needed to do so to become an Officer in the Boys' Brigade, yet I had not become a Christian, I was not Born Again (as I have come to understand it) till a personal encounter with God in Canada in August 1975! It's more than possible to know about God but not to truly know Him in a first-hand transforming and personal way.

But let's pause for a moment before we plunge further into our Journey with John and make some tenuous assumptions. John's purpose stated in 20:31 is to teach his readers about Jesus and lead them to true life and faith in Him! John 1 tells us of radical nature of Jesus' life and ministry with the invitation: Come and see (v46)! John 2 tells us how will this happen? New Wine of the Kingdom poured into the New Wineskins of Repentance: the wine of the Kingdom brought to the rarefied waters of Judaism - and as crucified and risen one He Re-establishes and renews its worship - the new wineskin (all of Jesus: nothing of self) is created. Remember that chapter 2 finishes with Jesus saying that he knew what was in the heart of men! So in Chapter 3 John

answers the key question: How can I recognise and receive Him? The answer is clear: only by a sovereign supernatural work of Grace: by being Born Again!

So to the dialogue with Nick the Priest which clarified the radical nature of the Kingdom Jesus was inaugurating: this Faith Jesus told him was not based on miraculous signs (2:23 Nick was probably a representative of this group) nor was it based on works: both are Satan's temptations into mere religion. Nick had impressive credentials on the works front: a member of the Sanhedrin (v1) & a Pharisee (a zealot for the law and pure religion) and a highly regarded teacher (v10). Interestingly none of this got him into the Kingdom. In John's impressive light/dark symbolism Nick comes by night possibly because of the difficulty of finding time to talk to Jesus by day but also because of furtiveness (this was not the kind of company Nick should keep: "Rabbi" was generous/ "we know" was patronizing/ i.e. this is how we have judged your ministry to date).

But Jesus rocks Nick back on his heels; the Temple tables are turned again: you can't see the Kingdom of God unless you are Born Again (v3/7): clearly there is a link here to physical birth (but this kind of birth you can do nothing about it: it's not an act of man!). It could also be translated: Born from Above: this brings an emphasis on the origin of the experience: heavenly and essentially supernatural. Nick seeks clarification: back to the womb? Jesus clarifies: you can't enter the Kingdom of God unless you are born of the water and the Spirit (v5). John the Baptist had hinted as much in 1:33. But water is not a reference to baptism here, important though that is. Everyone on earth has been born of water; when they began life their mothers waters broke and birth took place. But there is a second birth that must happen - a work of the Spirit, a supernatural regeneration. Jesus goes further: Flesh (that's you Nick) gives birth to Flesh but the Spirit (that's me) gives birth to Spirit (v6). Let me pause there

for this profound statement is the secret of effective fruitful Christian living and growing Churches: flesh will always fail us, fleshly responses will always fall short, and dealing with challenges in the flesh will never produce the goods! Hear it Church! So being Born Again is a work of the Spirit (whatever you and I do we can never ever force the issue of salvation in someone's life). John 16:8 shows how the Holy Spirit brings conviction and helps us to change: it's a sovereign, incomprehensible, mysterious work! Therefore an Evangelistic Church must also be a praying Church crying out to God for the salvation of the community it serves.

So Jesus emphasises the point to Nick who by this time must have been reeling: you should not be surprised at my saying: You must be Born Again (v7). You is personal, must is insistent: the divine decree, something has to happen to you! God has no grandchildren! The Holy Spirit must plant in your hearts the life from above! You see the wind: you can't control that, just so with the Holy Spirit, He blows where He chooses!

But how!!!! I just don't get it says Nick (v4, 9,10) I can't see what you are saying: no you can't says Jesus. I can't enter my Mums womb a second time, I can't understand. Raise your eyes Nick, you are too worldly you need revelation: Christian sight: you need to lift Him above all others, above all else! Numbers 21 tells of a plague of snakes sent by the Lord because of the impatience of the Hebrews and their complaints about diet. If they were bitten they would die. So Moses cried to God in repentance and God said to put a bronze snake on a pole: if they were bitten, they should look to the bronze snake and live! So with Jesus: He was lifted up says John (crucified and exalted) and we can look up and accept His perfect sacrifice. Nick you can only receive this new life from God through me, Jesus, who have come from God and one day will be lifted up as an object of faith: If I be lifted up I will draw all men to me! (12:33).

So John (not Jesus) summarises this in the words of John 3:16, For God so loved the World that He gave His one and only Son that who so ever believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life! South Americans translate this: God so hurt in His heart that He gave Jesus!

So to the Fruit of a Born Again Life (v17-21): No Condemnation (Romans 8:1): the purpose of Jesus coming was to our be Saviour (when He comes again He will come as Judge): our part is to believe! If we don't believe John says we condemn ourselves because we have not acknowledged the uniqueness of Christ. Light has come into the World but people love the darkness and of course it's a painful step to come into the light, to let His light shine into your soul but its worth it: people need a saviour and to hear the good news of forgiveness!! But many won't come to the light in case their deeds are exposed! If only they would realise that they have been exposed all along!! We need to live by the truth embodied in Jesus and come into the light: this will be a clear testimony to the grace of God! To walk through life knowing you have nothing to hide or to prove is true freedom: you are who you are and you are becoming whom God is making you. Salvation is a process: Lord enliven our Spirit and Soul daily!

So what should our response be? (v22-36)

A Man can only receive what is given him from heaven (v27): how true! We are God's workmanship from start to finish: truly a work in progress. John the Baptist is John the Evangelist's example to help us to respond: a big gun in the Kingdom of God! John, faced with a request from his disciples to grab the microphone as it were from Jesus, likens himself to the best man at a wedding - and is willing for the One who is the true light to take the limelight while he stands back in the shadows. Not only does John point away from himself: I am not the Christ, but he gives us the recipe for effective Christian living, the watchword for all life and ministry: He must become greater; I must become less (v30)

This happens as Jesus and His disciples began a period of baptising - a sign of repentance that paralleled John the Baptist's practice. Evidently Jesus was proving more of a crowd puller than John - hence the consternation among John's disciples. 'Everyone is going to him' (v26) sounds like a wail of despair. It's a sad reality that envy and jealousy are often found among the people of God. What began as holy passion can too easily be distilled into a sense of superiority, and competitiveness seeps into our relationships, ousting cooperation. Such attitudes public or private have no place at St Andrews or the Body of Christ in Canterbury.

John's comments that follow remind us that it's all about Jesus who is above all things, that God is truthful and can be trusted (we can and must walk by Faith) and that Jesus embodied a life that had the Spirit within limit. Believers live as they are saved: by Grace alone! John the Baptist's final word to us is one of choice: whoever believes in the Son has Eternal Life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him (v36). Your choice: believe or reject, but no fence seating allowed!!

This dialogue with Nick is a crucial part of the New Testament, since it clearly expresses the truth of spiritual rebirth only by the Holy Spirit; the fact that it is by the secret powerful operation of God the Holy Spirit alone that one can experience salvation.

Finally, and in a way applying this by the Spirit to a matter John could not have foreseen let me ask whether a congregation of God's People would ever need to be Born Again? When we moved to London in 1987, the Plaistow congregation, which was one of four I became minister of, had all the characteristics of a Christian Ghetto. Religion and Outward conformity were more important than revelation of Christ (Unrighteousness went unchallenged - as long as you did your

religious duty (i.e. turning up at 6.30pm on a Sunday evening) then that was all that was necessary). Law had overtaken grace - not God's law (i.e. His Word) but a pharisaic set of additional rules or standards of acceptance (including being white and Anglo-Saxon!) that justified them and excluded others. It was Salvation by Works and not by Faith. Granted it was the Nicodemus kind of religious works (social action) but it had no power because it relied on them and not God. The fellowship (a combination of three Churches), which numbered 600 plus post war, was by then down to 30. It needed to be Born Again and it was: the 30 became 100 over a five year period with 19 different nationalities worshipping Christ, and the building was used by two other black led congregations numbering 300 further believers! When, as then, the preoccupation in a congregation is 1. more with whether the Pastor is wearing robes or a dog collar than whether He is a Man of God; 2. more whether the old hymns will be sung than whether our ministry of worship is clearly showing and exalting the Lord Jesus to the Community we are called to serve; 3. more with an organisation sustained by human effort than a living organism being allowed to grow with Christ as its head - it is when these and other examples are characteristic of a congregation that it needs to be Born Again of the Holy Spirit and the sooner the better!

John wants you and me to find abundant life in Christ: he has shown us who Jesus is, helped us to see that the New Wine is being poured but that the wineskins that are our lives need a supernatural overhaul. Now he through Nick's story and John the Baptist's experience shows us that we need to open ourselves to the Unique Work of God through the Holy Spirit and the Cross which will create in us that life long wineskin and set us on a journey which will culminate with Christ in glory. It's not simply a matter of illumination; it's a matter of regeneration. Not just new seeing but new being. And its

God's promise for you and your children: physical and spiritual.

Pastor David

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