

## **CAN PRESBYTERIANS BE BORN AGAIN?**

**John 3:1-17**

**Preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

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As I approach my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, I find myself becoming just a little envious of the young people around me entering adulthood with bright futures ahead of them. I catch myself thinking, “Wouldn’t it be great being 19 years old again, except this time I’d have the body of a nineteen year old, but the wisdom of a 60 year old?” I could relive my life again avoiding past mistakes and better prepared to handle the challenges of youth.

But after a while I snap back to reality and quickly set aside these childish dreams, realizing the past is past, you can’t go back, and quite frankly you shouldn’t go back. These daydreams are illusions, so stay put in the present tense and make the most of it, because that’s all that’s real.

I think this is what Nicodemus was trying to say after Jesus told him, “You must be born again.”

Listen again to this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus this time from Gene Peterson’s translation of the New Testament.

Jesus said, “...Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above (or born again) it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s Kingdom.”

“How can anyone,” replied Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up?...What are you saying with this ‘born from above’ talk?”

Nicodemus, a very wise rabbi, agreed you can’t turn back the clock, you can’t be young again, you can’t be born again. Trying to recapture your youth and undo the past is a symptom of midlife crisis; the only cure is embracing the present. This is all true but Nicodemus still wasn’t getting Jesus’ point. Jesus wasn’t advocating turning back the clock to recapture the past, but pushing the clock forward to guarantee the present.

Jesus said, (Nicodemus) “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to...the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into new life, it’s not possible to enter God’s Kingdom...the person who takes shape within us is formed by something you can’t see or touch—the Spirit...so don’t be surprised when I say you must be born from above or out of this world, so to speak... That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’, by...the Spirit of God.”

Jesus reasserted an essential teaching of the Christian faith: the coming of God’s Kingdom into the world will mean a fundamental paradigm shift. Reject this shift and you’ll stay stuck in your old patterns and be left behind.

It's sort of like what happened in the television industry several years back. You could keep your old T.V. set and refuse to buy into the new and improved high definition flat screened plasma T.V. but the day was coming when you'd turn on your old set and get nothing but static because you refused to let go of the old and be embraced by the new.

Keep in mind Nicodemus was a renowned scholar who spent his life immersed in the scriptures, pondering the sacred mysteries of life and seeking God's guidance. So if Nicodemus was a thoughtful, serious man, why was he stumped by all this "born again" talk?

I think if Nicodemus was alive today he'd be your typical life-long Presbyterian, an organization man, a believer in "the system," and doing things "decently and in order." He'd follow the Golden Rule, pray every day, worship regularly and be a leader in his church.

But the older he got the more he'd unintentionally lose his youthful idealism and love of risk taking. He'd find solace in tradition, no longer push the envelope or think outside the box. However, when he took the time to dwell on it, he'd recognize that same youthful hunger he once had for God, plus a deepening yearning for adventure, taking that step into the darkness, with the assurance if he wandered in the dark long enough he'd somehow stumble into the light. Yes, I think it's true, deep down in even the most orthodox, life-long Presbyterian there beats the heart of a 19 year old waiting to be reborn into something new, exciting and good.

Did you notice how Nicodemus came to Jesus at night? He sought Jesus under the cover of darkness. Old orthodox Nicodemus got in touch with his youthful idealism and made the decision to take a risk and wander in the dark long enough to stumble into the light.

John doesn't report whether Nicodemus immediately saw the light during his initial encounter with Jesus, but as you read on in John's gospel you discover that after the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimethia, another Pharisee, was joined by Nicodemus, who both brazenly came out in broad daylight carrying 75 pounds of myrrh to anoint Jesus' body in Joseph's tomb.

So, by the end of the story starchy old Nicodemus is born again. But born again into what? One interpretation; born again means you're saved, you're guaranteed a place in heaven so don't worry about hell, and live your life with impunity.

But being a wise and serious man, Nicodemus realized the real benefits of being born again don't kick in only at the hour of your death. Listen again to what Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Unless you are born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to—God's Kingdom."

Let's talk again about paradigm shifts. Whenever the Kingdom of God comes down to earth the world system is exposed as being broken and unfixable. Think again of the revolution in broadcasting. When you turned in your old T.V. for a new high definition plasma T.V. you were automatically rewarded with images you never before thought possible.

Likewise when you are born again into the reality of God's Kingdom you experience a new world view and life style you never before thought possible. You begin thinking, believing and living outside the box. You become incredibly creative in your approach to life, an adventurer, a risk taker, willing to do things differently to insure different outcomes. You begin to understand what Jesus meant when he said things like "the last shall be first" and "whoever does the will of God is my mother, brother and sister." You also gain a new appreciation for Jesus' righteous anger towards religious hypocrites and unjust rulers. What's more, Jesus' call to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me now makes perfect sense.

Born Again isn't living your life over again, trying to avoid the same mistakes twice. It's better than that—born again means transformation, God remaking you into Christ's image, shifting you away from the way of the world to the way of the Kingdom. Now you can experience the gift of freedom and the wonder of eternity right here, right now! Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Unfortunately that phrase "born again" has been hijacked by the religious right and the fundamentalists. They claim being "born again" is code for "God loves me more than God loves you." No wonder the majority of people today are turned off by Christianity.

So, how do we turn them back on? By reclaiming the reality of being born again; not to save our own skin but to be reborn into Jesus, a life of sacrifice and service, putting yourself "out there" allowing yourself to be interrupted from your precious routines just like Jesus, because you've come to know what he already knew: it's when you sacrifice yourself, it's when you welcome interruptions, when you stop defending yourself and begin denying yourself, that's when you find yourself being born again.

Born again is not a badge of honor, but rather the promise of growing into your humanity, becoming more like Jesus by responding to God who birthed you in the first place in his image.