

**Born Again?**  
**March 20, 2011**  
*John 3:1-10*

“Are you born again?” The question jars. Well, the question is worth pursuing. After all, no less of an authority than Jesus says, “You must be born again.” And no less than a Ph.D. in Judaism, Nicodemus, stumbles over the announcement. He’s not naïve; he gets the concept. O yes, he knows what Jesus demands but he doesn’t want to know. He had hoped for theological placebos – available at any local pulpit pharmacy every Sunday. Or theological chitchat – the kind that takes place in coffee shops in close proximity to schools of religion – that’s what he desired. Nicodemus wanted a tune-up and Jesus told him he needed a heart transplant. Nicodemus, hears the words, “You must be born again,” but that’s not for him, he thinks.

What happens? Nicodemus stutters, “Be, be born again?” We understand. Like Nicodemus we shrink from the idea. I don’t know who would be more disturbed, a liberal being called a “born again Christian,” or a conservative being called a “socialist.” For example, for more than three decades “born again” has defined a particular set of conservative political values built around issues like prayer in schools, abortion, and gay marriage. Don’t you agree that gay marriage and abortion are not part of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus? Being born again has nothing to do with becoming a member of a political party. But we have to say that this is the message in our culture. **Put this down: Being born again, no matter the caricatures of pollsters and sociologists, has nothing to do with your politics.**

Some Christians use “born again” as a code word for being a real Christian. “We are born again Christians.” The redundancy rankles: “I’m a Christian Christian.” Born again “bona fides” matter in some areas. At a catfish diner, a preacher friend, kept intruding into my culinary experience: “But, Rev. Kennedy, are you born again?” One web site reads, “Catholics vs. Born Again Christians.” Some born again types put down folks who believe in Christ, participate in a faith community, but can’t articulate “born again” rhetoric. Born again Christians can make you feel second-rate. **Put this down: Being born again is not the only way to talk about a relationship with God.**

In a modern novel, Raney tells her husband that she had a personal experience with Jesus Christ when she was twelve years old, “As a matter of fact, I cried.” “Were you saved, Raney? Is that it?” asks Charles. “Were you saved and now you’re going to heaven and nothing else matters?” “Charles,” Raney said, and she was mad, “you can run down whoever and whatever you want to, but when you run down my experience with Jesus Christ you are putting yourself below the belly of a hog.” I’m on Raney’s side. No one should make fun of another’s religious experience, yet how many Christians who read Spang feel superior to those who just read the Bible? And how many conservative evangelicals feel better than what they label as those “over-educated” divines who are compromising the faith? Born again is not a theological laboratory for dissection but a life-changing experience for discipleship. Born again is not a club to beat up Christians baptized as infants. There wouldn’t even be a church

today without all those centuries of baptized infants who grew up to be church fathers and mothers and saints and martyrs and who kept the gospel alive.

Born again is **only one** of the fourteen ways that NT writers describe what happens when Jesus Christ comes into our lives. A few examples: justify, save, adopt, reconcile, and redeem. No one word wins the blue prize at the language fair of God's Word. The wind blows where it wills; the Holy Spirit surprises with more ways to be reborn than we have imagined.

Christian language is not just colloquial; it points to commitment. We are not in the business of fad words or cool words, but we seek language that matches life. Language is not a game for Christians. It is a wellspring of life. Being born again is an important part of the language of faith. To politicians, pollsters, preachers, and the press, I say, give us back our word. Being born again is a good way to talk about the extraordinary that comes in Christ. Make no bones about it, I am a born again Christian.

So what does Jesus say? Jesus says, being born again is like being born as a baby. Being born again is an entry-level position. The NT writers are clear at this point: Christians are to mature and grow up. We are not to be infants blown here and there by every wind of teaching. The born again are to become the mature body of Christ. **Being born again is the beginning, requiring a lot of growing up, and not the be-all and end-all of Christian life. Being born again takes a life-time of faith and may happen multiple times.**

Jesus tells Nicodemus, "What is born of the flesh is flesh." On the cover of our Order of Worship is a depiction of Plato's Cave. In his work, *The Republic*, Plato paints a picture of humans living in an underground cave with their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move. They see only their shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire reflects on the opposite wall of the cave like puppets. They are imprisoned by ignorance. The only hope for humans is to find the way out of the cave to the good and the truthful, which for Plato was philosophy.

Too many of us live in a cave where we are prisoners to the shadows and echoes. Life appears as one of relative ease and comfort but it is a life unto death. Novelist Walker Percy once said, "[There are] "people who seem to be living lives which are good by all sociological standards and yet seem to be more dead than alive. Whenever you have a hundred thousand psychotherapists talking about being life-affirming, and a million books about life enrichment, you can be sure there is a lot of death around."

In our time Plato's cave has gone digital with HD, wide-screen, and puppets in living color. Cave evangelists mimic the language of faith. State Farm will bring salvation back. The all-body deodorant, AXE Excite, proclaims, "Even angels will fall." Caveland has technology to fill the empty spaces. Does anyone really notice when gadgets become gods?

Tragically, much of what passes for church resides in Caveland. We hear religious truth claims, but they are the echoes of cave professors. Plato says that authority figures pass along the wall carrying all sorts of false images and idols which appear as shadows along the wall. Honors are conferred on those who are the best cave-dwellers, those who write the most alluring descriptions of cave life, those who have earned Doctors of Ministry or Divinity in caveology and spelunking.

Well, Jesus offers an alternative place: A kingdom of God. Jesus says that to get to the kingdom from the cave, we are to be born again of water and the Spirit. Water often means baptism and that is the meaning of born again for many Christians. Becoming a Christian is like getting out of Plato's cave. Being born again may be sudden or it may take a long time. You may see the light but not know the source. You may start out of the cave and stop or you may stand at the entrance because the world outside is just too much, too scary, too wonderful to imagine. You may come out of the cave on your own or you may be carried out by others. Many people will never know there is a way out unless someone comes down and tells them. Being born again is not all about you but also about the community of faith. It's not about a judgment on people of other faiths or no faith or the wrong kind of faith. The point is to concentrate on living outside the cave. And make no mistake. One has come down into the cave to tell you about the light, the truth, the wonder, and the joy of life in the kingdom of God. He descended into the lower regions of the earth. He was born in a cave, buried in a cave, but no cave could hold him and now this rabbi to whom Nicodemus came by night, this same Jesus invites you into a life of new birth.

Leaving the cave for the kingdom may be as natural as breathing or as painful as birth. After all, being born is a traumatic experience for mom and for baby. No wonder most babies are born screaming their lungs out. Yet new birth makes the first birth look like a walk in the park. From cradle to grave, following Jesus is a difficult and challenging adventure.

No wonder we hesitate at the entrance to the cave. "Born again? Who needs it?" For example, young adults already content in the cave of shadows see no need of a new life. Christian Smith, sociologist at Notre Dame has written a book, *Souls in Transition* on "emerging adults." They are typically 20-somethings who are personally going through as much as a decade of '**adulthoodescence**,' a combination of responsible adults and the personal-freedom-oriented inclinations of adolescents. They are mobile, option-loaded, free and crazy. They are at home in the cave.

I have no idea if you are interested in a kingdom of light, but here are two pictures for you to consider: one a picture of the last time Nicodemus appears in the gospel. Give him credit: He's attending burial details for Jesus. In his hands a mixture of myrrh and aloes – the paraphernalia of death. He is still hanging around caves. He's there with Jesus when the disciples have fled, but he's still in the shadows – caught between life and death.

The other picture is a kingdom of life and light: brighter, broader, and more beautiful. A journey of being born again and again. It is in this second picture that I want to find you. I want more for you than you can ever find in the cave. This is what it means to be born again.

Deeply moving spiritual experiences, a journey to a promised land, an explosion of joy – experiences that can only be defined as born again. I want for you all the amazing variations, the polytemporal experiences of born again life. From now on, whenever asks, “But are you born again”, smile and say: “Yes I am. I am being born again and I will be born again from the cave called the grave to the glory of life. God bless you and thank you for asking.”