

HAPPY BIRTHDAY—AGAIN!

One hundred years before the founding of Saugatuck Church, back in the first half of the eighteenth century, a spiritual revival swept across the American colonies that was so far reaching in its impact that it came to be known as the Great Awakening. One of the most significant voices in that revival was the preacher George Whitefield. Whitefield was an Englishman, who made many trips to the Colonies. He was a powerful orator and in a day long before public address systems, he could speak to a crowd of thousands and be heard by all.

Whitefield was a firm believer that those who did not accept the gospel were doomed to eternal punishment. As a result, his words were filled with passion and a sense of urgency. Whitefield, you see, was about the business of saving souls.

One of his favorite texts was John 3:3. In the King James English of his day it read, “Ye must be born again.” The revivalist was once asked why he based so many of his sermons on that verse. “Because,” he said, “you must be born again.” (Quoted by C. Douglas Weaver, *A Cloud of Witnesses*, 106)

For Whitefield, and so many others, being born again was central to their understanding of the faith. But over time, the term “born again” has been appropriated by one part of the church, and has become synonymous with a fairly conservative understanding of the faith. As one commentator notes, it has become, and I quote, “a slogan and rallying cry for an entire segment of contemporary Christian experience.” (Gail R. O’Day, *New Interpreter’s Bible* IX: 554) Indeed, to most folks, being born again means having an identifiable conversion experience, and believing certain theological doctrines. One author, for instance, who worked for years with a very well-known evangelist, has boiled the experience of being born again down to three simple steps. “To walk with God,” he writes, “. . . you must be born into his family. This new birth begins with a clear commitment to Jesus Christ. The ABCs of clear commitment are as follows: 1) Acknowledge your sin and need of a savior. 2) Believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross to atone for your sins. 3) Confess Christ as your personal lord and savior.” (Charlie Riggs, *Learning to Walk with God*, 16)

Unfortunately, such a formulaic approach to the notion of being “born again” misses some of the real power of this idea offered up by Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus. We could of course, write it off as a lost cause. We could let part of the church have a corner on the phrase “born again”. Or, we could enter into a dialogue, and offer up an alternative understanding. I for one am in favor of the later. For, as Marcus Borg notes, “Rightly understood, being born again is a very rich and comprehensive notion. It is at the very center

of the New Testament and the Christian life. We need to reclaim it.” (*The Heart of Christianity*, 105)

To do that, to reclaim the term ‘born again’, we need to first take another look at the text itself. Unfortunately, it is one of those stories that are so familiar, we often hear it without really listening to it.

Jesus is approached in the middle of the night by one of the Pharisees, a man named Nicodemus. He has been impressed with Jesus. His teachings have touched his heart, and he has witnessed some of the miraculous healings Jesus has performed. “We know, “ he says, “that you are a teacher who has come from God.” (John 3:2b)

Jesus, though, doesn’t respond directly to Nicodemus. Instead, he says, “I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (John 3:3) There are all sorts of translation issues in this verse, notably the fact that the original Greek can be translated as either “born again” or “born from above.”

But there is also a problem with the phrase “kingdom of God.” For most of us, the word kingdom conjures up a place, but the phrase would be better translated as the reign of God. Many have understood being ‘born again’ as the entrance requirement for getting into heaven. But Jesus isn’t talking about the afterlife. He is talking about the here and now. To be able to live as God would have you live, he is saying, you need to start all over again. You need to set aside all your preconceived notions and view the world anew. You need to see things through God’s eyes. Or, as Jesus says at another point in the gospels, “Unless you become like children you will never enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 18:3)

Marcus Borg tells a lovely story about a three year girl whose parents were expecting a second child. She was very excited about becoming a big sister, and shortly after her new baby brother was brought home from the hospital, she asked her parents if she could be left alone for a few minutes in the nursery with the new baby.

At first her parents’ resisted, but then they remembered they had a two way monitor in the room, so they would be able to follow what was happening.

They heard their first born cross the room, and then listened as she stood by the crib. Then, in her little girl voice, they heard her say to her new brother, “Tell me about God—I’ve almost forgotten.” (Ibid, 113-114)

Children instinctively know about God. But the world beats and batters away at them. The world tells them to get theirs while the getting’s good. Put your own needs ahead of others. Never trust the other guy. And in time, they do indeed forget. They forget about the love of

God that encompasses all. They forget. We forget. In order to remember, you must be born again. You must be born from above.

You see, it's not about your intellectual beliefs. It's not about affirming the virgin birth, or the particularities of Trinitarian theology. It's not about thinking the scriptures are the literal words of God. It is about your willingness to trust that God's is boundless. It is about your As St. Paul says, "love never ends." Or, in the words of novelist Vinita Wright, "love is always the last thing left standing." (Vinita Hampton Wright, *Dwelling Places*)

You must be willing to set aside the fears, the bigotries, and the false ideas that weigh you down, and start all over again. No matter who you are, no matter where you are in life, you must be willing to trust that God's love is so great it can and does include you and all other creatures. And then, you must be willing to allow God's love to so fill your life that it reshapes, recasts, everything else. You must be willing to allow God's love to change the very rules of the game.

I don't usually watch the news; I rely instead on newspapers and radio. But I happened to see the CBS Evening News last Friday. It closed with a story that about Cylie Pastian.

Cylie is a fifth grader who lives in the tiny town of De Smet, South Dakota. Two years ago, Cylie developed bone cancer in her right leg. She went through the usual round of treatments, chemo, radiation and so forth, and in the end was relieved of the cancer. She was out of school for a long time, and she really missed her friends. She also missed playing basketball.

Unfortunately, when she finally got back to school, the treatments had left her with a very fragile ankle. Her doctor would not let her play ball. So she was confined to the sidelines, where she kept the team statistics, and served as chief cheerleader. She carried it all with a terrific attitude. "You could see her on the sidelines," said one of her teammates, "just smiling from ear to ear." Still everyone wanted her to be able to get on the court and play.

"But," noted reporter Steve Hartman, "outside of changing the very rules of the game, there was no way to guarantee Cylie's safety. Which is why they changed the very rules of the game."

The authorities developed a new rule, the Cylie Rule. Any time there is a foul, anyone recovering from bone cancer would be allowed to check in and shoot her team's free throws.

Players and coaches all agreed. And as a result, Cylie could play again.

It meant that the other kids had to give up their own chances to make free throws. Did they resent the new rule? Not at all. "I think it brought us closer together," said one of her

teammates. "We're all like sisters. We're a big family." (Assignment America, CBS Evening News, 2-15-08)

You see, being born again means seeing others as brothers and sisters, not as competitors. It means allowing God to work in our lives, and if necessary, change the very rules so that one day everybody gets into the game of life. It means trusting that there really is enough love to go around.

In coming here to have Nick baptized today, Kim and Mark and Nicole have reminded us all how true that is. Not just when it comes to a kid's game of basketball, but when it comes to life itself. There is enough love to go around. They might not think of themselves as being born again, but in coming to that realization, they have had to change the very rules of the game. They have had to broaden and expand their understanding of family. As the baptismal vow they just took reminds us, they have already had to "grow with their child in the Christian faith."

George Whitefield was passionate about being born again, because he was convinced that it was the only way souls could be saved. I am passionate about it, because I think it is the only way our world can be saved. I'm no fundamentalist. I'm not even what the press would call an evangelical. Theologically I'm about as liberal as they come. But I am convinced, we need a fresh start. We need to remember God. We need to see things in a new way and live out of a belief that love is the answer. Not competition, not privilege or coercion. But love. Sisters and brothers, we need, if necessary, to change the very rules of the game, and find a way to let the Cypriotes and Nicks of the world into the game of life.

We need to be born again. Not in the sense of professing a particular dogma, but rather in the sense of trusting God's love enough to live in that love. For in the end, it always is the last thing left standing.

Amen

John H. Danner

