

READ THE TEXT

In the city of Reno, Nevada, is a modern-day picture of an ancient truth...

It's Bill Harrah's auto collection, now housed in the National Automobile Museum.

On display are 200 cars, domestic and foreign,
each restored to gleaming perfection.

One appreciates the accomplishment all the more
when one sees the rusting frames and battered carcasses of autos awaiting
restoration in the junkyard nearby.

How much time, skill, and money it takes to restore just one junked car!

How much more it takes
to restore a human being whose life has been battered and scarred by sin.

Not just a little repair work, but a TOTAL RESTORATION!

Jesus said it this way:

“You must be BORN AGAIN”

Those were His words to a man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was no derelict, no misfit, no bum.

He was intelligent and respected – a “ruler of the Jews” who sat on the
highest governing body in the land.

But Nicodemus was troubled.

That night as he stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight to meet Jesus,
his heart was anxious.

On the outside, he appeared dignified and in control,
but on the inside he was restless, searching. He knew something in his life
needed to change, but he didn't know what.

So he came seeking this man, of whom he had heard so much.

“I must meet him...tonight!” Nicodemus had told himself.

What Nicodemus heard that night was more than he had bargained for...

He had expected a theological discussion.

To be sure, he had expected to learn something from this young rabbi.

But he was not prepared for what he heard:

“YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN!”

People today are still astounded by the idea.

Yes, Jesus was a fine man. Yes, a good teacher.

He'll teach us right from wrong,
give us steps to take toward moral improvement
show us how to be more religious, surely.

That's what we expect.

But instead we hear this strange sermon:

“YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN!”

Christianity still proclaims what Jesus told Nicodemus that night.

God does NOT want “nicer” people – He wants completely NEW creatures.
NOT a “makeover,” but a NEW BIRTH entirely.

No one will enter the Kingdom of God without it, because, explains Jesus,
“That which is born of the flesh is flesh.”

To rephrase it, sinful parents don't produce sinless children!

We make light of it.

“Nobody's perfect,” we say, reducing sin to a harmless, and altogether excusable
imperfection...something like crooked teeth
that can be pulled into line with a year or two of wearing braces!

If that's our view of sin, RELIGION becomes nothing more than a repair job.

A series of “personality adjustments.”

A matter of trying harder and harder to be “good.”

In the same way, I suppose, as one might teach a horse to jump higher and further.

But the GAP between us and God is simply too enormous, says Jesus:

Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God!

It's as if we had brought our poor horse to the edge of the Grand Canyon and urged it to jump across.

No horse, no matter how well-bred or well-trained, could manage such a leap.

Only if that horse became a different creature – only if it grew wings like Pegasus – could he hope to cover that distance!

We are only **flesh and blood**, said Jesus.

If we are to come back to God, it can only happen by becoming new creatures.

You MUST BE born again!

“But how?” retorted Nicodemus.

“You're talking nonsense. You're asking the impossible!”

We say the same.

“I'm just the way I am. I'll never change. God is asking too much.”

Look again at that phrase Jesus uses.

The words “BORN AGAIN” have a double meaning in Greek.

We can translate them as we did: “Born again.”

But the same words can also be translated “Born from above”.

FROM ABOVE.

Something God must do in us!

We cannot do this by ourselves any more than a baby can conceive itself or give itself birth.

There's an old fable

about a farmer who decided to transplant a brier bush into his rose garden.

“You fool!” the bush protested, I'll never produce anything but thorns!”

Nevertheless, the farmer went ahead.

After transplanting that bush, he grafted a rose stalk onto the top of the brier.

When summer came, the brier was astonished at the beautiful pink roses it bore.
“How did I do that?” asked the brier.

“Your beauty,” replied the farmer, “is not something you produced,
but something I have given you.”

BORN AGAIN means “Born from above,”
God reaching down, grafting Jesus Christ on to us.

There’s no other way to become new creatures,
except by letting God attach us to JESUS CHRIST.

“How can this be?” puzzled Nicodemus.

Now Jesus’ strange sermon gets even stranger.
By water and the spirit, he explains.

The NEW BIRTH comes in Baptism.
There we are grafted into Christ.
There the Old Self dies and a New Self is born.

God has given us no other way to be born again.
So Peter preached to the throng at Pentecost,

Repent and be baptized, every one of you!

If you spend much time in a Lutheran Church, this is probably not NEWS to you.
We have our baptisms, for the most part, right in front of the whole church
on a Sunday morning.
We sing hymns about baptism. Recite the Catechism sections on it too.

But I must say that the grace and saving power of Baptism
is a message that needs increasingly to be heard in our country these days.

People talk of being “Born again,”
but there is rarely any mention of baptism in that discussion.

Most of you remember BILLY GRAHAM, one of the most powerful
evangelists in our generation, and one whom I have greatly admired.

But in one particular, his message puzzled me.

Graham wrote an entire book on this subject – HOW TO BE BORN AGAIN – an excellent book in many ways, with one astonishing omission...

nowhere in the book does he say ANYTHING about being BAPTIZED!

What we hear everywhere is talk of making a “personal decision” for Christ, or of having a “personal experience” of being saved.

The result is that many people who do believe in Jesus and have been baptized come to DOUBT THEIR SALVATION.

They wonder if, perhaps, they are not really true Christians.
They wonder if they ought to make some new decision.
They aren't sure they've had the right set of experiences.

Now there is nothing wrong with having memorable experiences, or feeling a soaring of one's emotions, or even making commitments to obey the Lord...

as long as we remember that GOD is the subject, the “Doer” in all this, that the NEW BIRTH is His doing and that it is sealed in Holy Baptism.

For commitments waver. Emotions are unpredictable. Experiences may deceive.

But nothing can undo the action of God.
It stands certain and sure: I HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED!
There God gave me a new birth!

Does it seem astounding to claim so much for such a simple act?

We hear the splash of water...and a few spoken words.
How can it be that a whole new life is born here?

“It is like the wind,” Jesus told Nicodemus.

“You can hear the sound it makes, and watch the tree branches swaying at its touch. **But you will never fully understand where it comes from, or where it goes.** It remains MYSTERIOUS!”

The Mystery of Baptism, of the holy Spirit at work in the water and the words, is beyond full comprehension.

God commands us to receive it in FAITH,
and hold fast to His promise that here a NEW LIFE BEGINS.

Begins.

Yes. But the new life BEGUN must also be LIVED.

And that is the message WE need to hear from those in the “Born Again” movement.

For, as I preached last Sunday to the confirmation class, there are people who have been BORN AGAIN, who have been BAPTIZED, but not much more has happened.

They have stopped growing, stopped living a redeemed life!
Their love for the Lord has grown cold.

So it is that those who are “BORN AGAIN” must be “reborn” daily and renewed in that long-ago baptism. The way couples married long ago must find daily renewal in their marriages.

Several years ago, Dr. Martin Marty, a well-known Lutheran professor at the University of Chicago was being interviewed on a TV talk show by a Baptist host.

The conversation turned to the “Born Again” Movement. The interviewer asked teasingly, “By the way, Marty, are YOU born again?”

Without hesitation, Marty replied, “Yes, on February 26, 1028...I believe that being BORN AGAIN happened in my baptism.”

“Was that it?” queried the interviewer.

“No,” replied Marty, “I was born again today, and every day!”

So it is with the life God gives. Daily it is to be reclaimed, renewed, and lived out in repentance and faith, or it may die.

WHAT DOES BAPTISM MEAN FOR DAILY LIVING?

Luther asked long ago in the Catechism.

It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance, and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.

Day after Day.

What Marty was asked, I will ask you...

HAVE YOU BEEN BORN AGAIN?

If not, hear this sermon as God's invitation to you.

Step out of the shadows, Nicodemus, and into the Light.

Please talk with me after church today about how God might give you this new life.

If you, like most others here today **HAVE** been born again,
then make the most of it!

Rejoice in it! Reclaim it day after day!

Like a married couple that stands to renew their vows,
stand again before the Lord today.

Let Him take you by the hand and lead you into greater joy, greater service.

Strengthen that marriage, begun so long ago in your baptism!

In the name of Jesus. Amen.