

Born Twice

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**Sermon Series:
Following Jesus
Around**

John 3:1-8

*Are you a
born-again
Christian?*

In a week when America paid tribute to former President Gerald Ford, I read an excerpt from a book about his life in *Time* magazine. Given today's sermon, I was drawn to the title of the article, *The Other Born-Again President?* The 1976 presidential race was an epic battle between two born-again Christians: Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter.

Jimmy Carter was a well-identified, born-again Christian. He was a Southern Baptist who taught Sunday School and did mission work. He filled in for preachers on vacation and traced his conversion back to the tender age of 11. Carter spoke candidly about his mid-life recommitment to Jesus Christ in his campaign autobiography, *Why Not the Best?*

Gerald Ford was raised as an Episcopalian in the Dutch-Calvinist stronghold of Grand Rapids, Michigan. While serving as the Republican Minority leader in Congress, Gerald Ford was profoundly moved by a sermon by chaplain Billy Zeoli. Whether that was the day Ford committed his life to Christ, no one is quite certain, not even Zeoli. "It's hard to say when a man does that," Zeoli says plainly. "That's a God thing. But I think that day is the day he [Ford] looked back as an extremely important day in knowing Christ." Ford later affirmed in a published tribute to his chaplain

that he and Zeoli "...both put our trust in Christ, our Savior and have relied on Him for direction and guidance throughout our lives."

During the campaign, Zeoli challenged Ford to write an autobiography similar to Carter's, discussing his faith. "Nobody knows you're a Christian," Billy said. "Let's put a book together about your faith and how God has used you."

Ford flatly refused. "You told me a long time ago, we're not going to take advantage of our faith to get elected." In the words of the article, "The contest between Ford and Jimmy Carter was a battle between two born-again Christians—but only one was willing to run as one."

Some of you proudly identify yourselves as born again. You find it a convenient way to differentiate a real Christian from a nominal one. Others of you react negatively to the term, associating it with far right-wing politics or aggressive evangelistic techniques.

Are you a born-again Christian? Before you answer that question with absolute certainty, I want to explore with you where the phrase "born again" originates in the Bible. It appears several places in Scripture, most notably in John 3.

It surfaces in a conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. According to verse 1, Nicodemus is a member of the religious order of the Pharisees, who

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believed God's grace was extended only to those who faithfully kept all 613 laws contained in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Nicodemus also served as a member of the Jewish Ruling Council, called the Sanhedrin, which acted as a Jewish Supreme Court.

We are told in verse two that Nicodemus approaches Jesus by night, to avoid detection. As a representative leader of the old religious order, Nicodemus doesn't want to be seen talking with Jesus.

Nicodemus addresses Jesus in courteous, respectful tones: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." The language "we know" suggests Nicodemus is there to represent people besides himself.

Jesus answers Nicodemus in verse 3: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (or, alternatively, "born again").

Where did that come from? Nicodemus wants to exchange pleasantries, and Jesus proceeds to blow him out of the water.

Born again is translated in the New Revised Standard Version as "from above." Jesus speaks about being born again as "from the top" or "from above."

Nicodemus's reply in verse 4 demonstrates he is thinking of an OBGYN birth rather than a B-I-B-L-E birth. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Either Nicodemus is genuinely confused or he chooses to misunderstand. Haven't you known people who, when they don't like where the conversation is going, proceed to play dumb? Nicodemus doesn't like the part about being born again. A heathen Gentile, why yes, of course, but not a Pharisee, a leading rabbi.

Jesus doesn't back off in verses 5-8 from his born-again directive. "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of Spirit is Spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

"How can these things be?" Nicodemus asks. At this point in the conversation, Nicodemus disappears. What happens to him? Maybe he needs time to let Jesus' message sink in.

Nicodemus resurfaces in two other places in John's gospel. The first appearance, in the 7th chapter, is when the Pharisees are pressing the temple police to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus' defense to ask that the accused be given a fair trial (7:50).

The second reference is even more telling. After Jesus is crucified, Joseph of Arimathea steps forward to ask for Jesus' body for burial in his tomb. Jesus' disciples have scattered to the four winds, save Joseph and another man, who accompanies him, Nicodemus!

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This time he isn't there as a seeker, but as a disciple, helping take Jesus' body away (19:39).

Let me return to the question asked earlier in this sermon. Are you a born-again Christian?

According to Jesus, every Christian, by definition, is born again. Now, strictly speaking, the phrase "born-again Christian" is a redundancy. It's theological stuttering, the equivalent of saying you are a Christian-Christian.

The Pharisees insisted God's grace was given only to those who kept the law. But Jesus' language of new birth suggests otherwise. Birth is not something we can control, whether physical or spiritual.

Being born from above is beyond us, like the wind. We cannot tell where the wind comes from or where it is going. Spiritual rebirth is like that.

Entrance into the kingdom of God is not a matter of human striving. It is not a reward for good behavior. Spiritual birth is something only God can effect.

Jesus' teaching about spiritual birth excludes the possibility that salvation can be achieved by human merit. Rebirth is something God does. We do not do it ourselves.

In a word, we call it grace. Grace, as we have said before, is God's unmerited favor. Grace is not something we earn or deserve; it's something God freely gives to those who ask for it.

I remember a PBS special called *Genesis*, hosted by Bill Moyers, who interviewed panel-

ists from diverse religious backgrounds on issues raised in the book of Genesis. I recall how panelists tiptoed around the problem of sin, a major theme in the early chapters of Genesis. Finally, a novelist on the panel, Mary Gordon, became weary of all the religious double speak and said, "People just aren't right. There's something wrong with us that we cannot fix ourselves."

What we cannot fix ourselves, God remedies through Jesus Christ. God takes the initiative through Jesus Christ to restore people to God.

Using Paul's words in Ephesians, "We are saved by grace through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). Grace is God's doing. Faith trusts God's grace as sufficient for us. We are born again when we open our lives to God's power from above.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned the extended conversation the French Existentialist Albert Camus had with Howard Mumma, pastor of the American Church in Paris in the 1950s. Camus admitted that he started coming to church because he was on a pilgrimage to find God. What I didn't tell you was that Camus was particularly drawn to the Biblical character of Nicodemus. Mumma preached on the John 3 text about Nicodemus one Sunday, so Carmus asked him afterward, "What does it mean to be born again?" Mumma replied, "To me to be born again is to enter anew or afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to receive Christ's forgiveness. It is to wipe the slate clean. You are ready to move ahead, to commit

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yourself to a new life, a new spiritual pilgrimage.”

Camus looked at him with tears in his eyes, “Howard, I am ready. I want this. This is what I want to commit my life to.” Shortly after their conversation, Camus died in a car accident.

I cannot tell you precisely how or when this new birth happens. There is no doubt about Paul’s born-again moment, when he was blinded by the heavenly light and heard Jesus calling him (Acts 9:3-5). Yet, for Timothy, Paul’s younger protégé, no such climactic born-again moment is identified in Scripture. Timothy was nurtured in the faith at the knee of his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5).

St. Augustine heard a child’s voice directing him to “Take up and read,” whereupon he opened the Bible to a verse about putting on Christ (Romans 13:13). C.S. Lewis was traveling to the zoo in a motorcycle sidecar when he decided to commit his life to Christ. Lewis said of the experience, “When we started out I didn’t believe Jesus was the Son of God and when we reached the zoo I did.” Kathleen Norris chronicles in her spiritual autobiography, *Amazing Grace*, about her slow turn back to the church and faith in Christ. Feodor Dostoevsky was handed a Bible by a peasant woman as he boarded a labor camp train to Siberia. He read it cover to cover and, as a consequence, became a Christian.

The much-maligned actress Jane Fonda became a believer, the result of a two-year conversation with her chauffeur. Actor Stephen Baldwin was introduced to faith through the transformation in his wife, Kenya. After months of attending church with her, he announced his new-found faith by being baptized.

You cannot be reborn by your own efforts alone. Rebirth is God’s work of grace in Jesus Christ. Open your life to Jesus Christ and you will be born again.

