

Introduction

A couple of years ago, I walked by a church sponsored tent at the Canfield Fair. A young man from the tent approached me as I did and asked, "**Excuse me sir, but are you a Christian?**" "**Yes, I am,**" I replied. To make sure I was though, he went on to ask more specifically, "**But are you born again?**" That one of the church's favorite expressions isn't it, "**born again.**" Christians use it all the time.

It comes from the text we just read, John 3:1-8. This text records the celebrated encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Verse 1 tells us two things about Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, meaning a member of their ruling body, the Sanhedrin. A majority of Pharisees attributed the "**signs**" or miracles that Jesus did to the devil. But according to verse 2, Nicodemus attributed them to God.

So he came to Him one night and they talked about the kingdom of God. Notice how Jesus explained that kingdom to him - in terms of two births, and that's what I'm going to preach about today, the two births.

The First Birth

The first birth is found in verses 5-6. In verse 5, Jesus calls it being "**born of water.**" The word "**water**" there probably refers to the amniotic fluid in which we lived in our mother's womb. "**Born of water**" has a parallel phrase in verse 6, "**born of the flesh.**" Those two phrases define our first birth. It's a fleshly birth that brings us out of our mother's womb, verse 4, and to a physical life.

Now, all of us know by experience what the essence of that physical life is. It's the power to act upon and respond to the realities of the material world. Something is physically alive when it has that power. Let me ask you. What is the most obvious thing that the following have in common: roses, lettuce, grapes, mosquitoes, dogs, monkeys, and human beings? The most obvious thing they have in common is that they're physically alive. Each one has the power to act upon and respond to

certain realities of the material world.

Consider a head of lettuce, for instance. Like all vegetables, it has the powers of action and response. If it hasn't been picked, it's able to draw the energy of the sun, the moisture of the rain, and the nutrients of the soil into itself and grow. It's truly alive.

But its level of life isn't very high is it? A father once explained the condition of his brain injured son to me this way, "**He's a vegetable.**" I knew what that meant of course. His son could act and respond only minimally to the material world. That metaphor we use suggests that living things have different levels of life, varying powers of action and response, and they do.

Vegetables, for instance, are alive to sun, rain, and soil but dead to everything else, like play. Suppose I try to play hide and seek with a head of lettuce. I'll hide but it won't seek because it can't. Vegetables are dead to play and countless other material realities.

Now, dogs have life just as vegetables do but at a much higher level. Their powers of action and response are far greater. They're alive to material realities to which vegetables are dead, like play. I play hide and seek with my dog Isaac all the time. I hide and he actually seeks.

In the same way, human beings have life just as dogs do but at a much higher level. Our powers of action and response are far greater. We're alive to countless material realities to which they're dead, like language. If I said, "**I hate you**" to my dog Isaac, he wouldn't be upset because he doesn't understand language. But if I said, "**I hate you**" to you, you'd be upset because you do understand it.

That then is the first birth that Jesus identifies. It's the fleshly birth that leads us to our physical life. We have the power to act upon and respond to the realities of the material world in significant ways.

The Second Birth

The second birth that He identifies is also found in verses 5-6. He calls it in both verses being "**born of the Spirit.**" Our English

translations capitalize the word "**Spirit**" there and rightly so. It refers to the Holy Spirit. Just as our parents are the source of our first birth, so the Holy Spirit is the source of our second.

Now look at a line in verse 6, "**that which is born of the Spirit** (capital "S") **is spirit** (small "s")." The small "s" is correct. The meaning of the line, therefore, is this. Just as our first birth thrusts us into a physical life, our second birth thrusts us into a spiritual life. The Holy Spirit explodes into the very core of our personality, into the very ground of our being, and creates a new life there, a spiritual one.

In verse 3, Jesus reveals what this new life does. It gives us the power to "**see the kingdom of God.**" The kingdom of God is a non-material and invisible realm. It's comprised of spiritual realities, the dominant of which are the person, works, and powers of God. When we're born of the Spirit, He gives us the power to "**see**" those spiritual realities - the power to act upon and respond to them.

Obviously, those who aren't born again don't have that power. As alive as they are to the realities of the material world, they're utterly dead to the realities of the spiritual world. They're vegetables spiritually just as people with brain injuries are sometimes vegetables physically. Consider how unable lettuce is to act upon and respond to mathematics. Those who aren't born again are just as unable to act on and respond to the kingdom of God. They are no more able to have the fruit of the Spirit, for instance, than lettuce is able to calculate $9 \times 9 = 81$.

But those who are born again are able to act on and respond to the kingdom of God. They've come alive to the spiritual realities that comprise it. Imagine a head of lettuce coming alive to play and being able to play hide and seek. Or coming alive to mathematics and being able to calculate $9 \times 9 = 81$. Those are dramatic changes. But neither is more dramatic than the one that takes place when people are born again. They come alive to the kingdom of God. They're able to act on and respond to the person, works, and powers of God.

Examples abound. My mother and several others prayed for a woman

on her deathbed to be healed and she was, instantly, as they prayed. I didn't think up the introduction to last week's sermon. God did and spoke it to me. A father and mother, whose daughter was brutally raped, beaten, and murdered, found **"perfect peace and forgiveness in the presence of God."** A man testifies that fasting loosened the grip of materialism and anger that was choking his life. And finally, a dying woman raised up and declared seconds before taking her last breath, **"I see Jesus and He has His hands outstretched to me."**

Those people were born again of the Holy Spirit. They had the power to act on and respond to the kingdom of God, the results of which were the things they experienced and did. If they had not been born again, they could not have experienced and done them.

Those then are the two births that Jesus identifies. The first is a fleshly one that leads us to a physical life. The second is a spiritual one that leads us to a spiritual life.

The Basis of The Second Birth

Obviously, we'd didn't have any say so in the first birth. But we do in the second. We're born again only if we decide to be. The Holy must work first to enable us to decide that. But when He does, we're born again only if we decide to be. The basis of the second birth is a decision we make. Unfortunately, there's a great deal of confusion about what that decision is. So let's clear up the confusion. Based on personal experience I believe people make and carry out one of three basic decisions with regard to Jesus.

One is to let Him forgive them. They've done bad things and feel horribly guilty about it. That guilt is weighing them down and making them miserable and they desperately want it gone. So, they decide to let Jesus forgive them and take it away. They say the sinner's prayer and mean it. They confess their sins and based on His shed blood, ask Jesus to forgive them. But that's all they want Him to do. They want Him to forgive them and then leave them alone otherwise. They've don't want

Him intruding any further into their life than that.

Years ago, I counseled a guilt-ridden husband who had been unfaithful to his wife. He felt so damned by what he had done that he had bouts of crying and couldn't sleep. So I explained to Him that Jesus had died on the cross for that sin of his. I also told him about the sinner's prayer and asked him if he'd like to say it. He replied that he would and did, which made feel **"a thousand times better"** to quote him. During the next several weeks though, I tried to disciple him but to no avail. He had no interest in learning more about Jesus and His way. The decision he made was clear. Let Jesus forgive Him and that's it.

There's another decision people make with regard to Jesus. It's to let Him help them. They have problems in areas of their life that they, on their own, can't solve, and want Jesus to assist them with those problems in those areas. They have felt needs and so, decide to let Him meet them. But that's all they want Him to do. They want Him to meet their needs and then leave them alone otherwise. What they've done is make Jesus **"part of their life"** as we say it. They need Him here, here, and here in their life and want Him to come here, here, and here and help them. But they don't need Him there, there, and there in their life and want Him to stay away from there, there, and there. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it, they make Him **"the god of the gaps."**

Doctors diagnosed an Akron businessman with Hodgkin's disease and prescribed a regimen of treatments to address it. His business partner, a friend of mine, saw that as an opportunity to witness to him, again, about Jesus. He told him that Jesus would see him through his illness if he would **"accept Him as his Savior"** and so he did. Several weeks later, an issue arose with a struggling customer of theirs and my friend suggested that Jesus would want them to give him extra time to pay. To which this businessman replied, **"I want Jesus to help me with my Hodgkin's not run my business."** The decision he made was clear. Let Jesus help him and that's it.

A third decision people make with regard to Jesus is found in

verses 16 and 18. He mentions those who **"believe in"** Him. *The New Bible Dictionary* explains what the Greek word translated **"believe"** in conjunction with the preposition **"in"** means: **"It denotes not simply a belief that carries an intellectual assent. It denotes a faith, which takes a man out of himself and puts him into Christ."** I'd say it differently but the meaning is the same. We give up our life as we understand it to Jesus. We quit governing us and let Him govern us.

What that means as a practical matter is this. We make and carry out the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says. To make that decision means to intend it. To carry it out means to arrange all of our affairs around it. That becomes our **"business as usual"** so to speak. We have nothing better or even as good to do. Everything else is secondary or subservient to that.

Those then are three decisions people make with regard to Jesus: (1) let Him forgive me; (2) let Him help me, and (3) let Him govern me.

But listen to what A. W. Tozer wrote about the first two of those: **"A notable heresy has come into being through evangelical Christian circles – the widely accepted concept that we humans can choose to accept Christ only because we need Him as Savior and that we have the right to postpone our obedience to Him as Lord as long as we want to."** What he's saying is this. Neither of those first two decisions is the basis of the second birth, and he's right.

One decision and one decision alone is the basis of the second birth. It's to let Jesus govern us. If we do that, we'll be born again. If we don't, we won't be. It really is as simple as that.

Conclusion

Someone once asked the celebrated 19th century evangelist Dwight L. Moody when he was born. To which he replied: **"Which time? The first or second?"** Let me ask you a question in closing. You obviously have the first birth. But do you, like Moody, have the second as well? Let Jesus govern your life. You'll have the second birth if you do.