

Born From Above, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. L2050220
Genesis 12: 1-4 and John 3:1-17
Elon Community Church, UCC, 20 February, 2005

It was late at night. The city streets were noisy because of all the tourists in town for the celebration. He was tired because of all the people who had been clamoring for his attention. He was emotionally exhausted, too, because of the tensions and anxiety caused by the religious leaders. He knew they had been muttering about him, staring at him with those looks of suspicion, anger, and fear. He pondered their intrigue. Perhaps he shouldn't have been so rash about those people selling cattle and changing money. Well, what was done was done. Finally, Jesus dozed off to sleep.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door! It wasn't a loud knock, but rather a tentative one. Still, it woke him up from needed sleep. It wasn't the kind of knock he had anticipated, but then, perhaps it was a trick. In spite of what could happen, Jesus opened the door. There stood one of those religious leaders, a Nicodemus by name. Was he alone, or were there others behind him? Jesus looked. He could see no one else. Nicodemus had a strange look on his face: not the look of confrontation, or authority, but a rather quizzical look.

Jesus invited him in. What was he doing here this time of night? Was he sent by the other Pharisees, or did he come of his own accord? Nicodemus spoke. "Rabbi," he said. That was a sign of respect: calling him "rabbi." Jesus relaxed a little.

Nicodemus continued: "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." Wow, he recognized Jesus as one who has come from God. But, Jesus thought, this assertion was based on the signs, like changing water into wine, and the healing he had done. The assertion wasn't necessarily based on faith or trust, or even respect.

So Jesus challenged Nicodemus: "You don't necessarily believe that I have come from God. . . You can't know the kingdom of God without being born again."

Nicodemus was puzzled. What did Jesus mean by saying "born again?" He asked, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus tried to be patient with the man's lack of creative thinking. That's the way it is with these legal types, you know: no imagination. They take everything so literally. Slowly, he said, "... No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Nicodemus looked really confused now. Jesus tried to explain: "Don't 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."¹

"Born again," or "born from above?" Which is it? The reality is, it is both— both time and place. The word John chooses here in the Greek is *anōthen*. It has a dual meaning. *Anōthen* speaks both of a time of birth ("again") and the place from which the new birth is generated ("from above").

Nicodemus was oblivious to the two levels of meaning. He focused on the temporal "again,"

¹John 3:8

and protested that this was physiologically impossible. The fact that Jesus meant a spiritual rebirth went over Nicodemus' head.

Perhaps you've been intimidated by someone who claims to be a born again Christian. Someone who has been truly born from above would never use the phrase "born again" as a means of bragging or intimidation. The phrase "born from above" is used in the New Revised Standard Version, whereas the King James Version uses "born again." Both translations reflect the fact that *anōthen* in Greek has two meanings and John meant both meanings: "to be born again" and "to be born from above."

Some contemporary Christians use the phrase "to be born again" in reference to a particular moment of conversion. This severely limits the intention of Jesus' original word which was a complex one. Such usage repeats Nicodemus's misunderstanding of Jesus' words when he focused on the physical rebirth.

If we interpret the Greek word "*anōthen*" as describing spiritual rebirth through personal conversion, something *I do*, then we disregard the important divine part of this process. The change or new life comes from something outside of us. It comes as a divine action: God's grace. It comes from above through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross.

To be born again, or born from above, involves two factors. The first is the divine act of the grace of God in giving us Jesus in the first place. The second factor involves our own change of heart, by in fact opening our hearts to God's love.

Because of this middle-of-the-night dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, we have a different picture of God. This is not a judgmental God who condemns the world, but a God who loves the whole world to the extent that God sent a son in order that the world might be saved through him. Reflect on that thought. God loves you. God loves the whole creation.

Picture light coming from above, light streaming through the upper windows, flooding our worship space, and flooding our very existence. God's light is from above: above our petty human ways; above our trials and tribulations. It lights our paths and guides our ways.

Picture the wind blowing through the branches of the trees, stretching out our flags and perhaps blowing our cars from one lane into the next. They cannot withstand the wind currents. Neither can we withstand the spirit that comes from God. It is God's wind! It blows wherever it wants. It will blow us in the direction God wants.

Now, you may be saying to yourself, "This is all well and good, Dr. Kuhn, but how can I be born from above? How can I be born anew?"

I ask, "What did you do to get born in the first place?" Nothing! It was something that happened to you over which you had no control. What do you do to get born from above? Nothing! You cannot *do* anything to be born from above. Stop trying to manipulate and control your life and the lives of everyone around you. Simply accept God's love. Be open to God's spirit. It will blow into you when you're open.

Nicodemus left Jesus that night. He left a different man. Perhaps he was still confused and literal, but he stood up for fairness— to an extent— as he challenged the Pharisees to give Jesus a hearing (John 7:50). He went with Joseph of Arimathea to bury the body of the crucified Jesus (John 19:9). I think he was born again— from above.