

Born Again Presbyterians

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Second Sunday in Lent, March 7, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

What do you think of when you hear the words "Born Again Christian"? Whose face do you see? I see the face of Jamie. His family has worshiped at the East Kishacoquillas Presbyterian Church for two hundred years. Both his mother and father are elders. His grandfather was an elder in that church for forty consecutive years, back when the only time you rotated off the session was when you died. Jamie was baptized as a child in that church and became a communicant member when he was in eighth grade. But something happened to Jamie in his senior year of high school. He got born again. It was a powerful emotional experience for him. He couldn't stop talking about it. Twenty years later, Jamie will still tell you that was the turning point in his Christian life and that he wasn't a Christian before that experience. I see Jamie's smiling face when I hear the words, "Born again."

But I also see the face of a little baby girl with wispy, blond, curly hair. She's wearing a white lace baptismal gown and she's held by her father before a marble baptismal font. I take her in my arms, pour water on her head generously in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and pray, "By the power of your Spirit, bless this water, that it may be a fountain of deliverance and rebirth. Wash away the sins of her who is cleansed by it. Raise her to new life, and graft her to the body of Christ. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon her, that she may have power to do your will, and continue forever in the risen life of Christ...."

Years later I get a letters from that girl. Sometimes she asks what I think, as a Christian, about a social issue. Another time she asks about the resurrection of Christ and the authority of the Bible. People know that Jesus Christ makes a difference in her life. I think of her when I hear the words, "Born Again Christian."

I also see the face of Bill. He doesn't find it easy to express his feelings. In fact, Bill doesn't even know what he's feeling most of the time and he doesn't even care. When he was growing up he used to hear testimonies of men and women who were lost and sin, they got born again, they felt the weight of their sins rolled away. Bill couldn't relate to those testimonies. He had always been pretty straight. He knew he wasn't perfect, but he just couldn't relate to these emotional testimonies. He left the church when he left home for college. But his daughters start to go to Sunday School with neighbors who were members of the church I served. One daughter receives in Sunday School a new Bible translated into contemporary English. She brings it home and happens to place it on the foot stool in the living room, on top of the Sunday paper, before she runs upstairs to change her clothes. A little later Bill sits down in his easy chair to read the Sunday paper and sees the Bible. He picks it up, flips through it, comes to the Gospel of John and begins to read. He's fascinated. He continues to read throughout the afternoon. A whole new world opens before him and he wants to know more. Next Sunday he comes to church and quietly listens. Week after week he continues to come. One Sunday, after the service, he says to me, matter of factly, without a touch of

emotion in his voice, "How do I join this church? I think I believe this stuff." He has all kinds of questions and doubts which he loves to raise in a Sunday School class. He's always questioning. Faith doesn't come easy for him but something is happening in his life and it's related to his growing faith in Christ. When I think of a Born Again Christian, I think of Bill.

When you hear the words, Born Again Christian, whose face do you see? Who do you think of? How often do you think of a Presbyterian? Jesus said that even Presbyterians must be born again.

How do we get born again?

Jesus says, first of all, that the new birth is the work of God's Spirit. The Spirit of God is like the wind. "The wind blows where it wills" not where we will. We can't manipulate the Holy Spirit by turning the lights down real low in the sanctuary, preaching scary sermons, or playing music that's meant to excite our emotions, or by pouring water on the head of an infant. No church, no sect can domesticate the Spirit of God or say, "Here's the area in which grace will be valid - in this church, or this method of evangelism." The Holy Spirit can't be controlled by us. You can't identify the new birth when any one kind of conversion experience, neither can we confine the new birth to the institutional church. The Spirit of God gives new life when and where and how the Spirit pleases to work.

But, secondly, I believe that there's a close relationship between being born again and baptism. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit." The Gospel of John says a lot about

water. The early Christians who read this couldn't help but understand this as an allusion to the water of baptism. Obviously, water, by itself doesn't save us apart from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can't be so tied to baptism that you can't be born again without baptism. Nor does baptism guarantee the new birth. But, ordinarily, a person is born again through the ministry of the church, through baptism, through Christian nurturing. A child learns from the time they are little about Jesus and how he died to save us and how we are to trust him as our Lord and Savior. My prayer for every child I baptize is that he or she will never know a day in which he or she didn't know and trust Christ as Lord and Savior.

And, thirdly, Jesus indicates that there's a close relationship between faith in Jesus Christ and being born again. Jesus not only says that "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit", he also says that, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The important thing is not when or how the Spirit gave you new life, but that you trust in the God whom we know through the death and resurrection of Christ. Don't be intimidated by people who try to make you feel that you're not really born again unless you share their kind of conversion experience. If you have a faith in Jesus Christ that works, you've been born again.

Let us pray: Grant, Almighty God, that we, who have been redeemed from the old life of sin by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, may be renewed in your Holy Spirit, and live in righteousness and true holiness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.