

Easter Vigil: Born Again

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA at the Easter Vigil, April 2, 1988 at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Oxford, PA.

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

Tonight a child has been baptized. In the prayer of Thanksgiving over the Water we prayed, "We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism.... Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit." This phrase refers back to when Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Except one be born of water and of the Spirit, one cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

A lot of us don't quite know how to answer when someone asks, "Are you born again." ^{And ye Through baptism we all can say we are born-again,} As far as I know Jesus was the first person to use the term *born again*. What did he mean? It seems to me that we can't possibly understand what Jesus meant about being born again unless we know what it means to be born at all. Think about what's involved in birth.

First, how many of you remember when you were born? You can't. We were too young. When we think about spiritual rebirth we should expect something similar. I can't remember when I was born again any more than I can remember when I was born the first time. ^{we need others to help us remember,} In the last couple of years I've been encouraging parents to have someone take pictures when their child is baptized just as they did when the child was born. Then, as they grow up, they'll look through the picture album. We can explain to them that here's a picture of when you were physically born in the hospital and here's a picture of when you were spiritually reborn in the church through baptism." And then we can go on to tell them about how God, like his physical parents, has loved and cared for them long before they could ever remember.

A second characteristic of birth is helplessness. There are only three things a new born child can do and two of them are eat and sleep. A new born infant needs a family to feed and change and cuddle her or him. Infants ^s simply can't survive all by themselves. The same is true for someone

who's born again. So often those who claim to be born again speak as though they don't need the church or even that the church kept them from being born again. But a new born child of God needs a family to feed and clean and cuddle him or her. Born again Christians can't make it on their own.

One more thing, our physical birth marks the end of a comfortable and sheltered existence. Before we were born we lived in climate controlled comfort and warmth, protected and fed automatically. We didn't have to think. We didn't even have to breathe. But then we were born and began to experience the discomfort of cold, the effort of breathing, and feelings of hunger. Sometimes as Christians we long to go back to the warmth and security of the womb. We want to escape the responsibility of personal existence and personal choice. Being born again doesn't mean that everything is going to go smoothly for you. Rather spiritual rebirth is the beginning of a process of growth that continues until our life's end and beyond. Spiritual rebirth brings us into a world where we have to begin to think, act, and make difficult decisions and take personal responsibility for our faith. The church, of course, is there to nurture and guide and discipline but a sure sign of spiritual rebirth is that we begin to personally struggle with and appropriate the faith of the church for ourselves.

Let's not be intimidated when people ask if we've been born again. As Christians we've been born again into the family of God. It's not strange that we can't tell people the exact day and hour we were born again but we know we've been born again because the Holy Spirit has given us life, we know God as our Father, we know and trust Christ as our Savior and we are being nurtured in the church, the family of God. Amen.