

A zealous Christian Evangelical was trying to convert a Hindu, and getting frustrated. "The thing is," argued the frustrated Christian, "you have to be born again!" "But I have been born again!" insisted the Hindu. "And again and again and again ..."

“Born again Christian” was not a term that was in wide-spread use until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. in America. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> c., the Holiness Movement in American Christianity promoted “sanctification” as a second blessing after original conversion. The Church of the Nazarene and Wesleyan movement came out of that, with Christians seeking Christian perfection and total love for God. The Pentecostal Movement began in 1906 Los Angeles, with a black Holiness preacher leading the Asuza Street Revival. Going beyond the Holiness Movement, Pentecostals sought an ecstatic experience of being baptized by the Holy Spirit, which was distinct from the Christian ritual of water baptism. “Talking in tongues” and miraculous healings and supposed prophetic declarations were signs of baptism by the Holy Spirit. When 15 year old Billy Graham went forward at a Revival Meeting in Charlotte NC in 1934, he had a profoundly moving, deep sense of peace which impacted his whole life. Graham later would describe being "born again" as a spiritual rebirth from above, in which God transforms a person’s heart through the Holy Spirit. The term began to be widely used within Evangelical Churches which emphasize a personal, heartfelt commitment to Jesus as one’s personal savior. The term born again Christian then became more popular in the 1970s Charismatic Movement, which, like the Pentecostal Movement, was marked by ecstatic experiences, claimed gifts of healing and talking in tongues.

Born again terminology was also adopted in much of right-wing American Christianity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> c, as it differentiated itself from the Liberal Christianity that had gotten involved in racial justice and the Peace Movement and other social causes. The old Mainstream denominations like Methodists and Presbyterians who supported organizations like the National Council of Churches, were criticized by conservative Christians. In differentiating themselves from “liberal” Christians, they denigrated liberals as not being true Christians because they hadn’t accepted Jesus into their hearts as their personal Savior, they hadn’t been born again.

In Jesus’ late night theological conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus a phrase is used that is variously translated as “born again” “born anew” or “born from above.” It depends on how the preposition that goes with **γεννηθῆναι** or being born is understood. **ἀνωθεν** (*anōthen*) is a simple preposition which is used four different ways in the NT Greek Bible:

1. **in extension from a source that is above, from above** (Mark 15:38, Matt 27:51, John 19:23, 3:31, 1:17, 19:11, James 3:15, 17)

2. **from a point in time marking the beginning of something, *from the beginning*** (Luke 1:3, Acts 26:5)
3. **for a relatively long period in the past, *for a long time*** (Acts 26:5)
4. **At a subsequent point in time involving repetition, *again*** (Gal 4:9, John 3:3)

To understand what Jesus meant by being born from above or born again, let's look at the context. Jesus is talking about being born **ἄνωθεν** in response to Nicodemus acknowledging that he must come from God because of all the signs Jesus has been giving. In verse 3, Jesus first says that only someone born **ἄνωθεν** is able to **see** God's realm. When Nicodemus scoffs at the image of a grown man climbing back into his mother's womb in order to be born again in v. 4, as if it was a physical birth into this world, Jesus tries to clarify saying that someone has to be born of both water and spirit to **enter into** God's realm in v. 5. Verse 6 is Jesus' observation that flesh gives birth to flesh and spirit gives birth to spirit. Then v. 7 is the repeated phrase that it is necessary to be born **ἄνωθεν**. In verse 9 Nicodemus asks how this is possible? And in v. 10 Jesus scolds Nicodemus for being a special religious teacher and not knowing these things.

When Nicodemus originally tries to take Jesus' comment about being born again literally, Jesus corrects him. It is ironic that the American Christians who say you have to be born again are usually ones who try to take the Bible literally. “The Bible says it, I believe it” is a common slogan. Yet in this late night talk show hosted by the Messiah, Jesus keeps trying to get Nicodemus to understand not to take things literally, physically, not to confuse what is spiritual with what is bodily. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus has been highly trained in religious dogma. In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about every yod and tittle in the Torah – the yod being the smallest written Hebrew letter and a tittle is a tiny pen stroke or hook distinguishing one Hebrew letter from another, like the letter dalet (d) from a resh (r). Nicodemus would have been an expert in such distinctions, in knowing exactly the ramifications of all 613 mitzvot or commandments that Jews found in the Hebrew scriptures. The Pharisees were dogmatic experts, opinionated as to exactly how to interpret and follow the minutest aspect of the Jewish law.

But Jesus' wasn't promoting religious dogma, he was providing spiritual teaching. The spiritual truths Jesus taught didn't fit the paradigm Nicodemus was used to. The truths Jesus taught weren't played out in the same sandbox, or even on the same playground. A paradigm shift means not just a reformation or improvement in existing models of understanding the world, but a transformation of how a model itself is perceived. The paradigms we use to make sense of the world around us are both epistemological – our ideas about knowledge, and ontological – our ideas about existence, about “what is.”

Matthew (9:17), Mark (2:22) and Luke (5:37) all report Jesus as saying that you can't fit new wine into old wineskins. The teaching that you must be born from above or anew has to be understood spiritually. Not as doctrine to be tested on, but as spiritual truth to enlighten the mind and heart.

Whoever is born of flesh is flesh, and whoever is born of spirit is spirit Jesus says in verse 6. Being able to see God's realm, becoming a spiritual person is not an achievement. Being born from above or born anew is not a human attainment. It is something engendered by God. God does the birthing. Later on in verse 17 of chapter 3, after the famous verse about God so loved the world, Jesus says that God sent the Son not for judgment but that the world might be saved, made whole. We humans in the flesh are not whole, are not complete, are not fulfilled, are not aware of our connection to the Creator who made us, are not mindful of mysterious relationship we have with the divine. Not until we have been birthed not just physically but spiritually.

Jesus is not just a teacher. Not just someone who lived a model life. But there's something about having Christ within. St. Paul in Colossians referred to “Christ in you, the hope of glory” and in Galatians wrote “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” In trying to describe what can't be described, sometimes Christians have talked about having an Inner light, or known a Christ consciousness, or recognized that the Kingdom of God is not somewhere external but within. Jesus Christ is unique, called the only-begotten Son of God. And yet, Christ is to live in us. 13<sup>th</sup> c. Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said, “This God has not begat only one son. The eternal is forever begetting the Only Begotten.” Which earned Meister Eckhart the label of heretic from the dogmatic, tradition bound Catholics of his day. The late Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong said, ‘Christianity is not about The Divine becoming human. Christianity, is about the human becoming divine.’ I think Spong got it wrong. It's both, not either or. Christianity, not as religion but as spiritual approach, is both about the Divine becoming human and the human becoming divine. Not that any human being develops Zeus like powers over the universe, but that human beings may incorporate and live out the tender mercies of the God who didn't just create and then forget or leave, but who continually pours out compassion, hope, healing and justice.

It's really sad that so many Christians interpret being born again so narrowly and self-righteously. When what Jesus was talking about was something expansive, something “mind-blowing” to use the hippy jargon of my youth. As a human who has had the experience of giving birth, I know that I gave birth to other human beings, not myself. Of course I didn't give birth to myself! My mother was the one who gave birth to me. When Jesus talks theology with Nicodemus in the dark of the night, repeating the need to be born from above, it is God who births us spiritually.

To see the reign of God, to enter the kingdom of God is something that happens spiritually. The Spirit births spirit. I think our only choice might be to stop it from happening. We can't make ourselves be born from above... we might block it, not be open to it, not understand it, not admit it. But God's will is for us to be born both of water and of spirit. God's will is not to exclude or shut anyone out, but to invite everyone to see and enter the divine realm, the Kingdom of Heaven. A spiritual birth from above is what makes that possible.