

“Ye Must Be Born again”

“Ye must be born again.” (St. John 3:7b)

Of all the comments I have ever seen or heard on this familiar verse of Scripture, the one that means the most to me is by C.S. Lewis: “How is this to be done?” he asks. “Now, please, remember how we acquired the old, ordinary kind of life.” (*Mere Christianity*, p. 62) That is to say, if we want to understand what our Lord meant by being born *again*, let us begin by considering how we were born the first time!

And for everyone here and for everyone you have ever know and for everyone who ever has been, you were born the first time out of a relationship! A relationship between a man and a woman. We might go a step further and comment that the quality of that relationship had a great deal to do with how we came into the world—wanted or not wanted, cherished or ignored. But whatever the quality, the fact remains that each of us was born out of a relationship.

And now I suspect that you have already gotten to the next point ahead of me— and are waiting for me to catch up. And since you are already at the next point, take a good, strong hold and stay with it. As we were born the first time out of the relationship of our parents, so we are born again in a relationship to Jesus Christ. “Ye must be born again.”

And the point that I want to stress this morning is this: Keep focused on the relationship itself, not the incidentals. Keep the relationship central and let the side effects take care of themselves.

As we look at the New Testament, no two relationships with Jesus Christ were the same. They all had much in common, because they were all with Him; but the relationship of Peter was not exactly that of John, and the relationships of Peter and John to Christ were not exactly the same as those of Mary or Martha or Lazarus. Or the relationship of Nicodemus with Christ. Nicodemus attracted a lot of attention because he came to Jesus by night. (It was so unusual, that even in the account of the Crucifixion, Nicodemus is still identified as “he who came to Jesus by night.”) It was an unusual thing to do. It was also a sneaky thing to do. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Judaism; and he did not want to jeopardize his position. He was afraid when he first came; but at the Crucifixion he was different. When he and Joseph of Arimathea came to ask Pilate for the Body of Christ, Nicodemus knew what he was doing and what the cost could be. He knew he would sit with the Sanhedrin no more. He knew that his own life was on the line, and possibly the lives of his family as well. It was not exactly the same relationship as that of Peter or John. It was his own relationship. Just as every physical birth is unique, so I believe, every spiritual birth is distinctive. “Ye must be born again.”

A great deal of needless confusion is caused, I think, when someone demands that your experience must be exactly the same as his in order for it to be valid. “Let me tell you about *my* conversion; let me tell you about what the Lord did for *me*.” As Dr. John Stott warns, this kind of announcement may come across more as self-advertising than as witnessing to the Lord. As a matter of fact, I cannot find in the entire New Testament any place where anyone says, “I have been saved”. (If you can find such a statement, please give me the reference, so that I can correct my state-ment.) St. Peter never says, “I have been saved.” St. John never says, “I have been saved.” In II Timothy St. Paul refers to “the God who hath saved us”; and in I Cor-inthians “to us who are saved”; and in Romans he says “We shall be saved”—have been, are, shall be—but always “*we*”, never “*I*”. Always the community! Always the fellowship! Never the solitary individual. In speaking of himself, St. Paul says, in the Letter to the Philippians (quite possibly the earliest letter he wrote)”Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect...But I press toward the mark.”

There has been a great deal of needless confusion on this important point, caused to some extent by those who demand that every experience fit into one pattern, in all incidentals exactly like their own. But the central point is that the new life in-volves a relationship, a relationship with the Living Lord. And the important thing is to keep your eyes on the relationship and let the Lord take care of the incidentals. It is a living relationship, and because it is living it is developing. And it is a relation-ship we share with others. It is a relationship which is established by the Holy Ghost, the Third Person of the Trinity, Who is the relationship of love between the Father and the Son. And we are, by God’s mercy, included in that relationship. And in that relationship we pray for one another. In the Prayer our Lord taught us, we begin by praying to the Father, and then we continue to pray for ourselves and for one another:
our daily bread, *our* trespasses, lead *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us*. We pray in our Lord’s Prayer to the Father, for ourselves and one another, and in the Spirit, for the Spirit is the relationship.

Ye must be born again. We were born the first time out of a relationship. We are born again by a relationship. But the first time, we had no choice. This time we do. This time our Lord stands at the door and knocks. He invites. Concentrate on the relationship and let the Lord take care of the rest of it. And indeed He has taken care of the rest of it right here this morning: His table, the meeting place He has ap-pointed, His Body and His Blood—His Life—offered for you.

A sermon preached at All Saints Church, Pensacola, Florida, on Trinity Sunday, 7 June 1998, by The Rev. Hugh B. Hall, Jr.