

*John 3:1-10,16 (NRSV)*

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, 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.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

<sup>16</sup>“For 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.

*Colossians 3:1-14*

[Since] you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, <sup>3</sup>for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

<sup>5</sup>Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). <sup>6</sup>On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. <sup>7</sup>These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. <sup>8</sup>But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. <sup>9</sup>Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices <sup>10</sup>and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. <sup>11</sup>In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! <sup>12</sup>As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup>Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup>Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

*It bothers me that so many Christians give Christianity a bad name. It plays into the hands of those who are looking for an excuse to ignore us.*

*What does it really mean to be a Christian and what responsibilities come with it?*

“I don’t go to church, they are all just a bunch of hypocrites.” How many times have you heard something like that. Too many to count, I’d bet.

First, hypocrisy is pretending to be what one is not, especially when it comes to virtues and religion. I’ll grant that there are probably genuine hypocrites in church, but for many Christians striving to be a better disciple of Jesus, their mistakes are not hypocrisy but simply a failure to yet be the person we are striving to be. A high jumper who is trying to clear seven feet and failing isn’t a hypocrite, just an athlete trying to get better.

Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that there are many who proclaim themselves Christian but are a terrible witness to Christ. Some are very public about it. Here, I’m thinking of men like Robert Tilton, Jim Bakker, and others. Some of these very public embarrassments are simply disciples caught up in the glittering vices. Others, I fear, are frauds. Blessedly, in the end, only God can know the state of anyone’s heart.

And then there are well-meaning Christians who say the most stupid and hateful things that are anything but a testimony to the love of God and the Good News. As someone who

says and writes thousands of public words each week, I am well aware of the dangers and am the first to ask for grace and the benefit of the doubt from time to time. Nonetheless, I wish some Christian leaders would guard their tongues a bit more carefully. To pronounce that the horror of 9/11 was God's punishment on a sinful America was terribly hurtful and based on a misreading of the Old Testament. And just the other day, Pat Robertson went on about some Haitian deal with the devil a couple of centuries ago that resulted in all the suffering in the last couple of centuries, including the earthquake. Good grief!! Even if he believes such a thing, doesn't he understand how that falls on the ears and hearts of non-believers.

All of the apostle Paul's teachings about how Christians ought to behave boil down to this: (1) do what is a good witness to Christ and (2) do what builds up the body of Christ. Avoid what is a bad witness. Avoid what tears down the body of Christ. That's it. If only all of us would heed Paul's teachings, there would be many fewer obstacles thrown up in the paths of non-believers.

Why is it that so many of those who claim to be Christian give Christianity such a bad name? Gandhi was quoted as saying, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." That sums up the attitude of a lot non-believers. If only we Christians were just more, well, Christian. What gives?

*Who is in the pews?*

With all that said, let's step back and get a bit of perspective on just who is in the pews.

Approximately 80% of adult Americans self-identify as Christian. So the question is, are they all actually Christian in something other than name? To put it another way, are some of them "cultural Christians," who have a Christian heritage but have embraced only the label. That question begs another, "What's a Christian?"

The apostle Paul would say that a Christian is someone who has placed their faith, their trust, in Jesus Christ. Their badge of membership would read simply, "Faith in Christ."

Can we know who has faith in Christ? The answer is a straightforward "no, we can't." Goodness, we have trouble enough knowing the state of our own heart, much less someone else's.

So that's it? End of conversation? In a way, yes. The truth is that we can never make pronouncements on who is a Christian and who is not, for we can never know the nature of someone else's relationship with God.

C. S. Lewis wrote that he would sometimes meet a quite awful person who claimed to be a Christian and think to himself that the person couldn't possibly be a Christian. But then he came to realize that he didn't know just how awful the person would be without Jesus. He also realized that some people are nice by nature or upbringing, including many non-believers. How much more wonderful a person could they be, he thought to himself, if they came to know Christ.

But mustn't there be more to this? Doesn't how we live mean anything? Doesn't it say something about who we are and who we claim to be? To get at that, we need to first remind ourselves how one becomes a Christian.

*Born from above*

All Christians are new creations; the old has gone and the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17). Or to put the same point differently, all those who have placed their faith in Christ have been born anew. And who creates? God, of course. This is God's work, not our own. Nobody helps along their own birth. That is Jesus' point to a Pharisee named Nicodemus in the first of today's Scripture passages (John 3:1-10,16).

Jesus wants Nicodemus to grasp that being part of God's people and their entry into God's kingdom had never been about what Nicodemus had most valued: the Law, circumcision, the temple, the land. Instead, it had always been and still was about faith, faith that was possible only after the radical transformation, the rebirth, brought by the Spirit of God.

When we are "born of water and the Spirit," when we are cleansed and given new life, the transformation is total, reaching into every part of our being. This is not about adding something to us that was lacking. It is not about fixing something that was broken. It is not

about any incremental approach. Rather, it is about our complete and utter rebirth, regeneration, re-creation.

Granted, we often don't act like the born-from-above people of God, a bit like a child who isn't acting his age. But the Spirit works with each of us so that as we mature in Christ, our thoughts, words, and actions increasingly conform to the new person God has created. All this, because God loves us so much that he gave his only Son on that cross, so we might be offered the new birth of water and the Spirit.

This rebirth of water and the Spirit is for each person. It can't be inherited from parents nor passed on from one generation to the next. The content of our faith can be taught and we can be good examples for our children, but being born from above must come to each person and, for some, it can come very late in life.

#### *From birth to maturity*

As a Christian, do we have any part to play in this? Not in the rebirth, but certainly in what comes after. You can think of our growth toward Christlikeness as a cooperative project, one needing both God and ourselves to work toward that goal. It is a process.

That is the point Paul makes in his letter to the Colossians, the second of today's Scripture passages. He gives us a list of vices and a list of virtues. We are to set aside the one and embrace the other. We are to "put to death" the vices, the sins, that separate us from God and "set our minds on things above." We are to shed our old lives and embrace our new lives. We are to strip off our old selves and put on our new selves. Off with the old clothes, on with the new. Paul works this metaphor really hard!! Why? Perhaps, Paul has in mind the baptism practices of the early church. Many of the Christians in the first century were converts from paganism and came into the Christian community as adults. Frequently, they would wear old clothes to the baptism and emerge from their immersion to put on a new set of white clothes, signifying the purity of the new life they were entering.<sup>1</sup>

When we put on this new life, this "new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (v. 10), the transformation encompasses our whole being. Intellectually, we believe things that we didn't before, about ourselves, this world, about our purpose in life, and so on. Morally, we gain a different sense of right and wrong, of good and evil. Behaviors, thoughts, even TV shows and movies which once seemed harmless, no longer do. Emotionally, we love differently. We lavish less love upon ourselves and pour out our love upon God and one another. We become spiritually open to God, but also to the spiritual needs of others. We see the image of God in those whom we once ignored, or worse, oppressed.<sup>2</sup> The old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is the complete reshaping of our core convictions and, hence, of how we think and live.

Though our rebirth is a gift from God, we still must learn to walk in the Spirit of Christ, to walk in God's way, to walk in a manner befitting the new clothes that we wear. Paul knows that we are talking about a process, not merely a moment. It is why he speaks of the new self as *being* renewed. It is in the same sense as our proclamation that God's kingdom has come *already*, but *not yet* in all its fullness. We have been renewed *and* we are being renewed. We have been saved *and* we are being saved.

Paul wrote to the Galatians in a similar vein, "If [since!] we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). Even for those who have been "raised with Christ," getting rid of the old and putting on the new does not come naturally and if we were on our own in this, we would fail. But we are not alone. Rather, God has provided a helper and comforter, the Holy Spirit, who guides us, guards us, and strengthens us so that we may truly become whole, complete, and mature disciples of Christ (Matthew 5:48). The Holy Spirit is God's presence with us and in us, every step of the way.

#### *Being a good witness to the love of God*

This is the fourth study in this series and the most challenging to write. Are 80% of adult Americans really Christian? I doubt it, but that is really about as far with it as I can go. I can't ever know where any person is in their relationship with the God revealed in Jesus

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<sup>1</sup>from Tom Wright's, *Paul for Everyone: The prison letters*, published Westminster John Knox Press in the U.S., 2003. Dr. Wright is currently the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England.

<sup>2</sup>I've paraphrased some of this from John Stackhouse's book, *Humble Apologetics*, Oxford press, 2002.

Christ. How could I know who has been “born from above?” How could I gauge where anyone is in their project of conforming to the character of Christ? I have enough trouble understanding where I am!

Still, does the behavior of those who profess Christ often pose obstacles to those are looking in the window? Yes. And it is not a new problem. Paul himself told the Corinthian Christians to restrain their over-the-top enthusiastic tongues-speaking in worship because non-believers looking in would think they are crazy (1 Corinthians 14:23). It is still good advice applies to much of what we do.

I can't know who is a “real Christian,” but I do know this. We can help one another to understand what is a good witness to Jesus and what is not, what builds up the community of believers and what tears it down. And we can urge one another to live evermore holy lives.

Senate Chaplain Barry C. Black feels that the biggest challenge in his job is to be ethically congruent; i.e., to walk the talk, to not only profess and proclaim his faith in Christ but to live it. He says, “I have to make sure my actions match my rhetoric. I call it ‘pass the private eye test’ and ‘being who you say you are.’ Capitol Hill is a very seductive environment with money, power, and beautiful people. There are those who want to get to you because they feel you can help them get to others, so being the ‘real deal’ is critical.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the question we need to answer isn't “Who is a real Christian?,” but  
*“Am I the real deal?”*

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Has anyone ever complained to you about the “hypocrites in the pews?” How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
2. Does it seem to you that too many Christians give Christianity a bad name? What are some examples? How have you accounted for that? Have you ever been tempted to pronounce that someone isn't a Christian, despite what they say? What's your reaction to C.S. Lewis' realization that he could never know whether someone was a Christian based on their behavior (p. 3 of the study). Do you think he was right?
3. In the study, I make the point that Paul's teachings on how we ought to live boil down to doing what is a good witness to Christ and doing what builds up the church. How helpful are these two teachings to shaping our day-to-day lives. If we were to take them seriously, how would it change your daily life?
3. What is your reaction to the phrase “born-again Christian?” What do you think it means? How would you react to someone calling you a born-again Christian? Do you understand why I say it is redundant? Why do you think it is so popular if it is redundant? How do you think “born-again Christian” came to mean something different from just a “regular” Christian? You might even talk about other popular redundancies, such as “committed Christian” and “Bible-believing Christian.” What are some others? Why do we use them?
4. In the study, I try to make the point that being “born from above,” as is the case for all Christians, is not about adding something we lack or improving us or fixing us. It isn't even a complete makeover. Maybe a do-over is closer to the idea. As Paul puts it, we are “new creations – everything old has passed away, everything has become new.” How might we make this new birth seem more concrete to us, more real? How do we proceed with making our thoughts, words, and actions conform to the born-from-above us? How do we avoid letting this slip into some variant of another self-help scheme? What are some practices we could engage in that would help us become the people into whom God has already made us?

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<sup>3</sup>From an interview in the Jan/Feb 2010 issue of *Bible Study* magazine, p. 13.

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, 1 Corinthians 14:1-19</b> Paul tells these Christians that the gift of tongues speaking is to be used to build up the church</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, 1 Corinthians 14:20-25</b> Paul then tells these Christians that the gift of tongues speaking has to be restrained in public so people don't think they are crazy. What sort of witness to Christ would that be?</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, John 3</b> The full chapter on Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Galatians 5:13-26</b> The true meaning of Christian liberty; living in the Spirit</p>
<p><b>Friday, 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:10</b> We are new creations in Christ and we have been given a ministry of reconciliation. We are to be "ambassadors of Christ." If only, more Christians remembered that 24/7!</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

