Hi,

Not much in the way of updates today.

* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

I thought we’d turn to an oft-misunderstood piece of Christian theology today. Are you a born-again Christian? The answer is a bit different from what you might think.

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

**Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”**

*In the night*

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. An important man. A man with much to protect. He had heard the strange story of how a man from Nazareth, named Jesus, had changed water into wine during a large wedding party in Cana (John 2:1-12). And Nicodemus knew that Jesus was the cousin of that wild man, John, who had been baptizing people out at the Jordan River. But Nicodemus’ world had been rocked during the most recent Passover Festival in Jerusalem. There, this Jesus from Nazareth had charged into the temple courtyards one morning, turning over tables and generally disrupting the sacrificial industry for a short while (John 2:13-22). In the days following, Jesus had astounded people with healings and other miracles. He had taught with an authority beyond that even claimed by the Pharisees. “Who is he?” the crowds asked. Nicodemus wondered himself. Feeling his heart strangely warmed and his mind perplexed, Nicodemus decided to approach Jesus, seeking some sort of explanation. But Nicodemus couldn’t just walk up to the man; he had a reputation to protect. Already, some of the Pharisees were talking about the need to confront Jesus. Fearing the consequences of a meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus took the safe route. He went to Jesus at night -- so no one would know.

Later, Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus as perplexed and confused as when he arrived. What did Jesus really meant by, “You must be born from above”? Jesus had even seemed amazed that Nicodemus had *not* understood these things! How was Nicodemus to make sense of what Jesus told him? How are we?

*Born of water and Spirit*

Jesus berates Nicodemus for not understanding when he should (v. 10). After all, he is a Pharisee, a supposed expert in Hebrew Scripture. Nicodemus should understand that when Jesus speaks of being “born of water and Spirit” he is calling on common OT imagery of cleansing repentance and God’s life-giving spirit being poured out on the people of God (see esp. Ezekiel 36:25-27). Jesus isn’t speaking to Nicodemus about Christian baptism, as is often supposed. How could Nicodemus be expected to understand a practice that didn’t even exist yet? Further, entry into the kingdom is not given or denied on the basis of baptism.

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.

*A bit more on “born again” and “born from above”*

Verse 3 in today’s passage gave us the phrase “born-again Christian.” The Greek word here, *anōthen*, can mean either “from above” or “again.” Nicodemus takes Jesus to mean “again” for he asks how someone could revisit Mom’s womb and be born a second time. Yet, Jesus insists to Nicodemus that this new beginning, this regeneration is the work of the Spirit, who comes from above.1

Though John’s other uses of *anōthen* in the gospel all clearly mean “from above,” here he almost certainly has in mind a double meaning, as John does with some other words when there is a point to be made. Christians are both “born again” and “born from above.”

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are made new. Paul writes, “If anyone is in Christ – new creation! The old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are “born of God” and have “become children of God” (John 1:12-13). This generation of new life is a complete, total, radical transformation of our whole being. “Born again” is an apt and dramatic analogy.

But this new birth is also a birth “from above.” This is God’s work, specifically the work of the Holy Spirit. When we come to faith in Jesus, God’s Spirit, dwells in us. Paul writes, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Paul isn’t talking about going to your fitness club or staying on your diet. “Body” (*soma* in the Greek) refers to the total, whole person.

The second birth is a birth from God, “from above.” And it is a birth given to all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, who trust him completely. The phrase “born-again Christian” is redundant. All Christians have been born again and from above.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott