

## 6. Born Again: A New Heart

Two transformations at the heart of Christian life: the individual-spiritual-personal and the communal-social-political that are indissolubly linked. The Bible, its vision of our life with God, and its understanding of salvation is both *personal* (our relationship with God as individuals) and *political* (our life together as societies and justice). Borg will use "born again" in a way different than conservative and fundamentalist Christians.

### Born Again: Its Centrality in the New Testament

Story of Jesus and Nicodemus in third chapter of John is rich in symbolism, missed connections and double-meanings.

- *Symbolism*: Nicodemus coming at Night to the one who is Light shining in the darkness.
- *Missed connection (?)*: Jesus responds by changing the subject (or does he know what Nicodemus is really meaning or want to talk about?)
- *Double-meaning*: "night"—literally after sunset + being in the dark by not understanding or not being enlightened. Greek for "born from above" also translated "born again" or "born anew". John intends *both* meanings. Born of the Spirit. Darkness of womb to bright light of, birth to, air (Spirit)-breathing world.

### Born Again: Dying and Rising

Death and resurrection is utterly central in early Christianity and the New Testament. Personal transformation process of death to old way of being and being to a new way of being centered in the sacred, in God.

- **Dying and Rising in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke):**  
Follow Jesus on path of death to resurrection ("*the way*"). Carefully structured central section of Mark is the story of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Three predictions of his "passion" (death and resurrection) are paired with teachings about following Jesus. Jerusalem is place of death/endings/tomb and resurrection/beginnings/womb. Artistry of Mark to frame central section with healing of blindness of man of Bethsaida (at beginning) and Bartimaeus (at end).
- **Dying and Rising in Paul's Letters:**  
Metaphor for the personal transformation at the heart of Christian life. Paul's internal crucifixion on road to Damascus and rising to a new Paul in whom Christ lives. Dying and rising correlated with ritual of initiation called baptism, symbolizing internal transformation. This is also the life to which the community is called. New communal identity subverts sharpest boundaries of Roman and Jewish social world.

Being in Christ, we all are reconnected to God, the one who is beyond and beneath death and life and more than the physical dimension and appearances. The cross is a symbol of the process of personal transformation at the heart of Christian life.

- **Dying and Rising in John:**

Image of death and resurrection as the way to new life. Jesus is "*the way*" made flesh, the path embodied in a life. Dying and rising is the only way to God. That is what John 14:6 means. "*The way*" is not about believing certain doctrines about Jesus to be saved. "The way" is what we see incarnate in Jesus: path of death and resurrection as the way to rebirth in God. Jesus' life and death are the incarnation of a universal way known in all of the enduring religions.

- **The Cross and Being Born Again:**

Cross embodies "the way": path of transformation, the way to be born again. This path is at the heart of the Christian life.

Way of the cross involves dying to an old identity and way of being and being born into a new identity, raised to a new way of being that is centered in God.

### **Born Again: Why We Need This**

Early in our lives we become self-aware and aware that the world is separate from ourselves. This involves a separation from God—a diminishment of an experiential sense of God from K through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Gives rise to the self-centered self. Garden of Eden story is *our* story growing up. We cannot develop into mature human without self-consciousness, yet this natural development is a "fall".

In the process of socialization, our identity and way of being are shaped more and more by the "world". In our culture, we measure ourselves against *appearance, achievement, and affluence*. We fall farther into the world of separation and alienation, comparison and judgment of self and others.

We become blind, self-absorbed, living in bondage (Egypt) and exile (Babylon), sometimes becoming the oppressor as well. As a group we are capable of boundless, immense evil.

We need to be born again, return from our exile and be freed of the bondage of our individual and collective selfishness. Be born into an identity centered in the Spirit, in Christ, in God. Become fully the person God created us to be.

### **Born Again: The Process**

For some the born again experience is sudden and dramatic. For most it is a gradual, incremental process. In the Christian life, aging-maturing, if not interfered with has a way of deepening our centering in the Spirit. We begin to experience the self-forgetfulness that accompanies a deepening trust in God.

This process of personal spiritual transformation is central to the world's religions. When Jesus is seen as the incarnation of a path universally spoken about in the enduring religions, the path we see in him has great credibility.

## **Born Again: Intentionality**

Being born again is the work of the Spirit. We can't make it happen but we midwife the process. Spirituality is midwifery combining awareness, intention and practice.

- *Becoming conscious of our relationship with God:* become aware of a relationship that already exists.
- *Becoming intentional about our relationship with God:* paying attention to the relationship. Spend time in it, attending to it—worship, community, prayer, scripture, devotion.
- *A deepening relationship with God.* Paying attention to this relationship transforms us.

One of the central purposes of our life together as a Church is to midwife and nourish the process of this transformation, of being born again (and again and again).

## **The New Life**

Being born again begins a new life, entry into a different kind of life that is reconnected with God. A life marked by:

- *freedom* from the voices of all the would-be lords of our lives;
- the *joy* of the exuberant life;
- the *peace* of reconnection to what is, the peace that passes all understanding;
- *love*—the love of God for us and the love of God in us.

These are the "fruits of the Spirit".

Paul's love = Jesus' compassion. For Jesus, the primary quality of a life centered in God is compassion. Compassionate: life-giving, nourishing, embracing. Growth in compassion is the primary quality of life in the Spirit and it is the primary criterion for distinguishing between genuine born again experience and a false one. "By their fruits you shall know them."

## **Questions**

1. In what ways is "born again" in the emerging paradigm different from what is found in the earlier paradigm? In what ways is it the same?
2. How is "born again"—the process of dying and rising—described in the Synoptic Gospels, in Paul's letters, and in the Gospel of John? What common process or unifying themes connect these three parts of the Christian testament to each other?
3. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." How can this statement by Jesus in the Gospel of John be inclusive of all enduring religions and not a statement that Christianity is the only true religion? What is "the way"?
4. How is our comparing our appearance, achievement, and affluence against others a bondage? In what ways do we use the comparison or competition to oppress others?
5. Why do we *need* to be "born again" in the way Borg describes?

6. How would you describe your changing relationship with God throughout your life? Has it deepened, stayed about the same, or grown more distant?
7. What things or practices do you do to help deepen your relationship with God?
8. What does the Church do to help deepen your relationship with God? In what ways does the Church hinder your relationship with God?
9. What could the Church do to help deepen your relationship with God?
10. What "fruits of the Spirit" do you see in your life now?
11. How would you know that a person's claim of transformation by the Spirit was genuine—truly the work of the Spirit? How would you describe such a person?