



New Birth as a New People: Spirituality and Community in the Fourth Gospel

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In John 1:12 the Fourth Evangelist writes, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." The expression "children of God" is a good metaphor with which to begin our discussion of spirituality and community in the Fourth Gospel. When one becomes a child of God, one is given a *new identity*, "born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (1:13). When one becomes a child of God, one also enters into a *new community*, the community of those who are able to say, "We have beheld his glory" (1:14). A new family is formed of the newly born children of God (cf. 20:17). Thus, through belief in Jesus' name, *we* become a new people and *I* become a new person.

I. TRANSFORMATIVE NEWNESS

The two concerns of *new identity* and *new community* lie behind most current discussions of spirituality. Individual Christians and Christian communities both yearn to experience the fullness of new life offered by God in Christ. The Fourth Evangelist gives eloquent expression to this fullness of life in 1:16, "And from his fullness have we all received grace upon grace." The gift of grace upon grace has made all things new, and this gift of transformative newness is the key to spiritual and communal wholeness. We have been given the chance to become God's children, to live lives in which brokenness is healed by grace.

The Fourth Evangelist cannot celebrate God's gift of grace and new life without a note of tension and disappointment, however. Those who receive Jesus and become children of God are only one part of the story. There are others who do not recognize Jesus for who he is and do not receive him: "He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not" (1:10-11). This note of tension and resistance is not present only in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. Rather, these opening verses are programmatic of the response

Jesus receives throughout the gospel.¹ In many of the Fourth Gospel narratives, Jesus encounters people who, for a variety of reasons, will neither embrace nor be embraced by Jesus' offer of new life and do not become God's new children (cf. the conversation between Jesus and his opponents in chapter 8).

Such resistance is not new in the life of God's people. The Old Testament knew this resistance and stubbornness as hardness of heart (e.g., 1 Sam 6:6; Ps 95:8; 2 Kings 17:14; Ezek

3:7). Indeed, the Fourth Evangelist uses the hardness of heart metaphor as a judgment against those who do not believe (see his citation of Isa 6:9-10 in 12:40).²

Hardness of heart, which is narrated in the biblical narratives, is also known in our experience. At the same time as contemporary Christians affirm that we are called to live as new creatures in a new creation, we are also beset by a great fearfulness in the face of that call.³ We are afraid to embrace newness, to accept transformation, because such acceptance would mean letting go of the things that defined our lives before newness was offered. We stubbornly cling to our definitions of life, because we are afraid to accept God's offer of new identity. We are afraid to admit that the way things are and have been has left us on the brink of despair, in desperate need of the grace upon grace that is offered. In our fearful resistance we thus harden our hearts to God's future, but the deeper and sadder truth is that we also harden our hearts to God's present.

We have devised many ways to mask our hardness of heart and to cope with our fearfulness. We may live out of a moral absolutism that allows only clear-cut answers to all of life's problems and thus tries to strong-arm fear.⁴ Or we may try to "keep back the night" by unceasing bursts of activity, convinced that if we are busy enough we will not have time to be afraid. Or we may retreat into a private, inner world to which we forbid fear access. Or, perhaps most frequently, we live in a state of perpetual numbness, thereby making ourselves immune to fear and pain,⁵ but also closing ourselves off from the gift of new life.

There are thus two poles in any discussion of spirituality. The first is the yearning for wholeness, the yearning to be reborn as children of God. The second pole, however, is the resistance to wholeness because of fear. If we are to

¹C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1953) 402, has noted the relationship between 1:11-12 and the pattern of rejection and acceptance in the basic structure of the Fourth Gospel.

²See also the use of Isa 6:9-10 in Matt 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; Acts 28:26; Rom 11:8.

³For a discussion of the place of hardness of heart in Christian experience, see Edmond LaBeaume Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Doctrine of Sin* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955).

⁴A frightening example of a world that operates according to extreme moral absolutes can be found in Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986). Although the world created by Atwood is fictitious, its points of contact with our "non-fictitious" world are chilling.

⁵In his recent book, *The Nazi Doctors* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), Robert Jay Lifton documents all of these modes of behavior—moral absolutism, constant activity, inner retreat, and numbing—as ways in which Nazi doctors worked within and contributed to a system that equated killing with healing. The example of the Nazi doctors is obviously an extreme case, but it does demonstrate powerfully the human capacity to create and function in false worlds.

claim the new identity as God's children that is ours by virtue of our baptism,⁶ then we must be honest about both the offer of new life and hardness of heart. We must believe that newness is possible, that grace upon grace has been given, but we must also be starkly honest about our recalcitrance. Hardness of heart is nothing new to God, and if there is to be any chance of new life, we must allow God to meet us where we are and not hide from God's grace in stubbornness and fear. We must trust God's power for life to work even among the likes of us, hard-hearted and stiff-necked.⁷ The true sign of the fullness of God's gift of grace may be that God's grace can form new persons *even in the face of* our resistance.

II. BEING BORN AGAIN/FROM ABOVE

The meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:1-15 dramatizes these two poles in our life of faith.⁸ In Jesus' words in this text we find the offer to be a child of God, and in Nicodemus' response we find resistance and recalcitrance.

Unlike many of the other characters whom Jesus meets in the gospels, Nicodemus is neither nameless nor faceless. He is a man who has both a name and credentials: he is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews (3:1). Moreover, when Nicodemus first speaks in 3:2, he does not speak only for himself, but speaks also for those whom he represents ("we know..."). Thus Nicodemus is a man for whom *identity* and *community* are closely bound. The first hint of his resistance may be found in his coming to Jesus by night. The man with a public identity does not want to be public about his conversation with Jesus (cf. King Zedekiah and Jeremiah in Jer 37:16-21). Nicodemus does not want to put either his identity or his place in the community on the line.

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus opens with Nicodemus' declaration that Jesus must be a teacher from God if he can do signs. Nicodemus' statement appears to be a positive affirmation of Jesus' identity by a representative of official Judaism. Yet in 2:23-25, the verses immediately preceding the Nicodemus text, the Fourth Evangelist has explained that Jesus would not trust himself to those who believe merely on the basis of signs. Nicodemus' knowledge and perception are therefore not as sure as he assumes. As if to test Nicodemus' knowledge, Jesus' response to Nicodemus is to offer a teaching. Jesus is providing Nicodemus with the chance to show that he can see and comprehend beyond the level of signs.

The teaching that Jesus offers in 3:3 is the generative metaphor for the whole dialogue: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, one cannot

⁶For a helpful recent discussion of the relationship between baptism and Christian identity, see Lucy Bregman, *Through the Landscape of Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

⁷L. Bregman, *Landscape of Faith*, 15-17, notes that contemporary Christians frequently operate with "unrealistic models of what 'saved' persons are like," in particular equating newness with a kind of childish and unreal innocence and inexperience. She argues persuasively that in discussions of spirituality, we must "let God be God" and God must "let me be me." That is, we must trust that God's grace is powerful enough to handle "real adults with real adult problems."

⁸For a more detailed exegetical discussion of this text, see Gail R. O'Day, *The Word Disclosed* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1987) 16-28.

see the kingdom of God." This verse centers around two expressions, to be born anew and to see the kingdom of God.

1. The expression "born anew" is much more complex than the use of it in contemporary North American Christianity would indicate. The complexity stems from the Greek word *anōthen*, which means both "from above" and "again, anew." The word *anōthen* is a word with an innate double meaning, and the Johannine Jesus intentionally superimposes both meanings here.⁹ This double meaning is lost in most English translations, however, which opt for the one meaning, "anew," and at best supply "from above" in the footnotes (e.g., RSV, NEB). This procedure establishes one meaning as primary and the other as secondary, and makes it impossible for the reader to hear both meanings sounding together. Unless we recognize the intentional (and unavoidable) verbal ambiguity in the expression "to be born *anōthen*," we will not be able to understand the richness of the new life Jesus offers. The double meaning of

anōthen underscores that the newness of which Jesus speaks cannot be contained or comprehended by any simple or preexistent categories. He speaks of a newness that challenges even the conventional capacity of language.

Recognition of the double meaning of *anōthen* is imperative for understanding fully Nicodemus' misperception of Jesus' words. Nicodemus hears only the one level of meaning, "born again," and it is to that meaning that he reacts in 3:4. Nicodemus' knowledge of physiology and the life cycle tells him that what Jesus speaks about must be impossible, so he reacts with disbelief and rejection. On the level that he understands Jesus, Nicodemus' words are correct. It is impossible to reenter one's mother's womb and be born a second time. But that is not what Jesus' words mean. Jesus' words bespeak a radical new birth, generated from above, but Nicodemus' language and imagination are not stretched enough to hear this offer.

2. We are familiar with the expression "the kingdom of God" from the Synoptic Gospels, but the expression occurs only in the Nicodemus text (3:3, 5) in the Fourth Gospel. In its juxtaposition with "born *anōthen*," we see the Johannine Jesus using a new metaphor (born *anōthen*) and a traditional metaphor (kingdom of God) to speak of newness of life. "Kingdom of God," like "to be born *anōthen*," has both spatial and temporal dimensions. "To be born *anōthen*" speaks both of a time of birth (again) and the place from which such birth is generated (from above). The "kingdom of God" speaks both of the time of God's reign and the place of God's realm.

The invitation to see (or enter, 3:5) the kingdom of God is an invitation to experience and live in the newness of God's reign. The prerequisite for participation in the kingdom is that one be freshly born. One's accomplishments and credentials will have no meaning unless one is born *anōthen*.

The words of 3:3 are an invitation to new identity and new community, much like the words of 1:12. The invitation to be born *anōthen* is an invitation to new identity, to become a new person as a child of God. Human life will not be

⁹The double meaning—"from above" and "again"—is possible only in Greek. There is no Hebrew or Aramaic word with a similar double meaning. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (Anchor Bible 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 130.

determined, despite Nicodemus' protests in 3:4, by blood or the will of the flesh, but by the will of God (1:13). The invitation to see and enter the kingdom of God is an invitation to new community, to serve in God's kingdom with all those freshly born.

As noted earlier, Nicodemus' reaction to this invitation and promise is to protest the terms of the invitation and thus resist the promise. Nicodemus' resistance is captured in the first words that he utters in 3:4, "How is it possible...." Nicodemus knows how life should, and from his perspective, *must* be ordered, and unless Jesus' offer of life will fit into that order, Nicodemus can only respond with words of impossibility. Nicodemus attempts to restrict Jesus' offer of newness to his own terms. If the offer to be born *anōthen* is allowed to have its say, it challenges too much of what Nicodemus accepts as settled. His imagination is not prepared for the newness Jesus offers, and so he clings tenaciously to his categories of the possible and impossible. Throughout this text, Nicodemus' resistance is expressed in terms of what is possible or impossible (cf. 3:9). As we shall see, unless one is able to allow God's possibilities to reshape

and redefine human possibilities, newness of life will never be embraced.

III. BIRTH BY WATER AND THE SPIRIT

In 3:3-4, then we find the pattern of Jesus' offer of new life (3:3) met by Nicodemus' resistance (3:4). Jesus will not be silenced or sidetracked by Nicodemus' response, however, and in 3:5-8 he repeats his offer of new life.

1. Jesus' words in 3:5 provide a fresh interpretation of "to be born *anōthen*": "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, one cannot enter the kingdom of God." Jesus has heard Nicodemus' one-level interpretation of *anōthen*, and now attempts a fresh set of images to move Nicodemus out of his misunderstanding.

The expression "born of water and the Spirit" must be interpreted carefully. There is no doubt that for the reader of this gospel in the Johannine community, the reference to water and Spirit would have been heard as a reference to new birth through baptism.¹⁰ Since, however, an allusion to baptism would be both a theological and literary anachronism within the context of the narrative of John 3 itself, one must ask whether this sacramental allusion is the only way to make sense of the reference to water and Spirit. That is, the narrative presupposes a listener, Nicodemus, who would hear these words independent of any knowledge of Christian baptism. Are Jesus' words about new life through water and the Spirit comprehensible *before* the baptismal referent is added?

The answer to this question is "Yes." First, the outpouring of the Spirit as a sign of new life in the new age is a frequent image in the Old Testament (e.g., Joel 2:28-29; Isa 32:15). The same combination of water and Spirit as occurs in John 3:5 also occurs in the Old Testament (e.g., Ezek 36:25-26; Isa 44:3). Thus we see that Jesus is drawing on traditional images of generation by the Spirit in his

¹⁰For a review of the scholarly debate around the baptismal referent here, see R. Brown, *John*, 141-144.

words on new birth. He is using what is *known* to move his readers to what is *new*.

Second, Jesus' words about birth from water and Spirit. are comprehensible without the baptismal referent if we attend carefully to the verb "born" (the passive of *gennaō*). In 3:4 Nicodemus has drawn Jesus' attention to the birthing process with his misinterpretation of Jesus' words in terms of one's mother's womb. The birth that Nicodemus envisions, the exit from the mother's womb, is quite concretely a birth out of *water*. The breaking of the waters of birth announces the imminent birth of a child. In 3:5, then, Jesus plays on Nicodemus' womb imagery to say that the new birth of which he speaks will be of water *and* the Spirit. Nicodemus' traditional categories of birth are too limiting for the new birth of which Jesus speaks.

The new birth will both contain and transform all prior experience and categories of birth. The reference to water and Spirit means that the new birth can be limited neither to the physical rebirth that Nicodemus seems to envision, nor can it be identified with some form of psychological, internal readjustment of human nature. Jesus speaks of a new mode of new life which both encompasses and transcends these two options. A new life will be born, no longer only from water, but from water and Spirit.

We see, then, that the words "born of water and the Spirit" do have a coherent meaning before the baptismal referent is added. The addition of the baptismal referent is, however, a

legitimate move on the part of the Christian community, because it is in continuity with the images of birth and new life contained in the text. The early church understood baptism to be the concrete actualization of Jesus' promise of new life and identity.¹¹

2. In 3:7 Jesus repeats his words about new life, this time in a warning to Nicodemus: "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born *anōthen*.'" Jesus has already encountered Nicodemus' resistance to his offer (3:4), and now he warns Nicodemus that resistant amazement and consternation are not the appropriate response. Nicodemus must be willing to embrace Jesus' words, even though they move beyond the epistemological categories out of which he operates. Jesus' offer of new life cannot be limited to what Nicodemus knows.

The image of the wind/spirit (*pneuma*) in 3:8 points to the danger of defining life and restricting possibilities according to what we can know and control. Nicodemus cannot know the whence and whither of the wind; yet the mystery of the wind does not diminish the wind's power and reality. The wind blows where it will, and our part is to hear the sound of it, not to attempt to dictate and control its comings and goings. As is true of the wind, "so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." We can no more control and contain Jesus' offer of new life than we can contain the wind. We can embrace the offer of new life and be born *anōthen*, or we can spend our days in resistant amazement, weighing the odds and the costs.

¹¹The link between new life and the sacrament of baptism is frequently overlooked in contemporary born-again Christianity, which gives priority to the personal conversion experience and downplays the power and function of the sacrament and its communal aspect. See Eric Gritsch, *Born Againism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 91-102.

3. Nicodemus' response to Jesus' offer of new life falls into the latter category—resistant amazement, consternation, confusion. His question in 3:9 is literally, "How is it possible for these things to happen?" He restates his protest of 3:4 and reveals that he either cannot or will not let go of his categories of the possible and impossible in order to be responsive to the new categories of life offered by Jesus. New life is available to Nicodemus, and he can only say, "How is it possible?"

One hears in Nicodemus' incredulous question an echo of Sarah's laugh in Genesis 18:12. In that story, Abraham and Sarah are also offered new life, in the form of the end of barrenness and the birth of a son. But Sarah, like Nicodemus, knew all about physiology and the life cycle and laughed at the "impossibility" of God's offer. Sarah's laughter is met by these words of God, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen 18:14). Is anything impossible with God? The birth of Isaac, at the appointed time and according to the promise (Gen 21:1-7), proves that what is possible with God will not be restricted to human notions of the possible and impossible.¹²

The offer of new life out of barrenness that was made to Abraham and Sarah is now repeated in a new form for Nicodemus, "You must be born *anōthen*." Nicodemus is offered newness of life, an end to the barrenness of his former way of life, but to embrace it he must let go of the categories and contentions that tell him such newness is impossible. Nicodemus can live according to human categories of the possible and impossible, or he can live according to God's categories of the possible and impossible. Human categories of the possible result in barrenness, hopelessness, fear, and death. With God, however, "All things are possible" (Mark

10:27; cf. 9:23; 11:22-24; Luke 1:37). Nicodemus is asked to risk embracing the “holy possibility” of God.¹³

In conversations about spirituality and spiritual renewal, we are asking about how it is possible for the lives of persons and communities to be transfigured by God’s act in Christ. The particular question that the text of John 3 puts before us is whether indeed we will *allow* our lives to be transformed by God’s possibilities. Will we allow God’s power and promise for newness to have full reign in the transformation of our lives, or will we define the places and pockets where God’s newness is allowed to enter? Will we establish what is and is not possible, or will we relinquish such determinations to God’s “impossible” hopes? Will we embrace the chance to be born *anowhen*, or will we join Nicodemus in asking, “How are these things possible?”

IV. IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY THROUGH THE CROSS

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:1-9 follows this pattern:

¹²For a discussion of Genesis 18 and its redefinition of what is possible, see Walter Brueggemann, “‘Impossibility’ and Epistemology in the Faith Tradition of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18:1-15),” *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 94 (1982) 615-634.

¹³Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 63, writes that the task of the sermon is “to hang the holy possible in front of the mind of the listeners.” This is also what this text is about—to move the listener/reader from the human possible to the holy possible.

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- v. 3 Offer of new life
- v. 4 Resistance to new life
- vv. 5-8 Offer of new life
- v. 9 Resistance to new life

The story seems trapped in an endless cycle of resistance and rejection. After 3:9, however, there is an important turn in the narrative. Nicodemus recedes from the story, and in 3:10-15 we have only the voice of Jesus. The voice of resistance is not allowed to have the last word. Instead, Jesus’ offer of life (and of himself) will have the last word. The full pattern of John 3:1-15 is thus completed by adding:

- vv. 10-15 Offer of new life.

Jesus’ words in 3:10-15 take on a different tone from the words of vv. 1-9. He no longer uses the metaphors of *anowhen* and the kingdom of God, but instead speaks of his death on the cross (3:13-15). These words about Jesus’ death help to interpret the earlier metaphors. The offer of new life, “to be born *anowhen*,” has only one source—Jesus’ offer of his own life. Jesus’ offer of *his life* through his being lifted up on the cross makes *new life* possible. To be born *from above* is to be born *anew* in the lifting up of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus’ death on the cross is the final determination of both new identity and new community. The Son of man must be lifted up, so that “whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” To have eternal life is to live life no longer defined by blood, nor by the will of the flesh nor by human will, but by God. To have eternal life is to have a new identity as a child of

God. This new identity makes it possible to move into new community.¹⁴ Those who are born *anōthen* are able to join in the first person plural pronoun of 3:11 and say, “We speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen.” The cross of Jesus gives us new life to serve the impossibilities of God’s kingdom.

The power of Jesus’ offer of new life, made available in the cross, will not be silenced by resistance, doubt, and fear. The epilogue to the Nicodemus story aptly demonstrates this (19:39-42). At Jesus’ death, even doubting and resistant Nicodemus is empowered to act in faith. Nicodemus assists in the preparation of Jesus’ body for burial, anointing him with spices, binding the body, and laying Jesus’ body in the tomb. Jesus’ death opens Nicodemus to the possibility of new life. Grace and newness of life are made available even to those who try to say no. God’s possibilities will triumph and work transformation.

In John 3:1-15 we see that Jesus invites us to be freshly born. The new possibilities for life come finally from Jesus’ death on the cross (3:15). There is a reticence in mainline denominations to speak about being “born again,” and with some good reason. The appropriation of that expression by many fundamentalist groups and its use in American secular culture have turned the metaphor “born again” into a rallying cry for Christian privatism and traditionless faith.¹⁵ But to abandon the “born again” metaphor and surrender it to such

¹⁴For a discussion of the individual, communal, and ethical dimensions of new birth in the John 3 text, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 131-138.

¹⁵For a helpful overview of born-again Christianity, see E. Gritsch, *Born Againism*.

sectarian uses is a great loss for mainline churches, because Christian life and spirituality are indeed about being born anew. The gospel offers us the chance to become children of God, to take on transformed identities and live and serve in a transformed community. The gospel word of hope and promise is that through Jesus’ death on the cross we have been offered new life. We are invited to be freshly born as children of God, children of the cross.

Our personal lives and our lives lived in community will never be transformed, will never move from brokenness and fear to wholeness and hope, until we can listen again to Jesus’ promise of new birth offered in this Fourth Gospel text. We must stop asking, “How is it possible?,” and instead affirm that God’s grace can make even the hardest of hearts new. Jesus’ gift to us, offered with his own life, and Jesus’ hope for us is that we will become newborn babes (cf. 1 Peter 2:2), invited to see and enter the kingdom of God.