

Wading In The Water of John

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["Shallow enough for a child to wade in and deep enough to drown an elephant."](#)

So goes a description of the Gospel of John, attributed to Rev. Charles Spurgeon. John's Gospel remains a favorite of millions, yet it continues to confound scholars. Its nuances, double meanings and symbols are familiar even to new converts, but puzzle old preachers like me. For the next several posts I will take you wading with me and pray that you do not drown with this old [pachyderm](#). Lets start with this very familiar quote:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. - Jhn 3:16 ESV

The quote is from a discourse by Jesus with Nicodemus, a member of the [Great Sanhedrin](#), the 71 judges of the Jewish supreme court of that day, meeting in Jerusalem.

Though there is no clear source of information about this [Nicodemus](#) outside the Gospel of John, the [Jewish Encyclopedia](#) and many Biblical historians have theorized that he is identical to [Nicodemus ben Gurion](#), mentioned in the [Talmud](#) as a wealthy and popular holy man reputed to have had miraculous powers. Christian tradition asserts that Nicodemus was martyred sometime in the first century.

When Nicodemus came secretly by night to visit with Jesus, he called this young man *Rabbi*, a title of great respect that means *my honorable sir*, similar to the modern *Reverend*. Normally a Rabbi was trained in a theological school and formally ordained or certified as a teacher. Since Jesus was neither formally trained nor ordained, the title offered by such an esteemed leader was most unusual. Yet this respected judge saw Jesus as a teacher (John 3:2). As Matthew makes clear, others gave him the same title out of respect, but sometimes in mockery (Matt. 12:38).

Nicodemus goes even further as he acknowledges Jesus to be sent by God. He has concluded that Jesus' *signs* point to God being with him. For a [further discussion of Jesus' signs](#) see an earlier post in my blog. John emphasizes that Jesus was not a mere teacher come from God. No indeed. He was *Immanuel*, God with us. All the signs pointed to this fact. Nicodemus obviously was not prepared to acknowledge such an astounding claim. No mere man could ever

make such a claim. It was blasphemy at the highest level, a crime so heinous that it deserved death (Matthew 26:63-66). No man dare claim to be the Messiah *and* the Son of God. By such a claim Jesus made himself God (John 10:33). Anyone uttering such blasphemy must surely be put to death. This was the law of the land and ultimately the judgment of the Sanhedrin as they dragged Jesus before the Roman Prefect, demanding his death (John 18:31).

Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death. - Lev 24:16 ESV

Nicodemus may have acknowledged Jesus as a Rabbi, but he did not at that time recognize him as the Son of God. He was not prepared to give him a divine title or to recognize the mystery of what we Christians later called the Trinity, the fact that God is three persons and yet remains but one God! To acknowledge this is indeed to wade into water deep enough to drown any elephant or as Jesus said,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." - Jhn 3:3 ESV

No Such Thing As Deciding To Follow Jesus!

American economist [Alan Greenspan](#) is purported to have said, "I guess I should warn you, if I turn out to be particularly clear, you've probably misunderstood what I've said." As you read the Gospel of John, you often feel that Jesus uses the same approach. It seems he uses words that send us in one direction, but he really wants us to go in another. And, as the familiar saying says, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll end up somewhere else." That's what was going on in the conversation he had with the respected judge Nicodemus who came to talk with him one night. When Nicodemus called Jesus Rabbi and one sent from God, Jesus said,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." - Jhn 3:3 ESV

And Nicodemus completely misunderstood what Jesus said. Its that little word *again* that threw him off. In the Greek language the word is *anohthen*, a complex word with a couple meanings. The first part of the word, *anoh*, is used three times in John's Gospel, always referring to up, above or to the brim. So we read

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them *up to the brim*. - Jhn 2:7 ESV

He said to them, "You are from below; I am *from above*. You are of this world; I am not of this world. - Jhn 8:23 ESV

So they took away the stone. And Jesus *lifted up* his eyes and said,
"Father, I thank you that you have heard me. - Jhn 11:41 ESV

The second part of the word, the suffix *then*, generally means things are moving,
as in . . .

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not
know where it comes *from or where* it goes. So it is with everyone who is
born of the Spirit." - Jhn 3:8 ESV

Put the two parts together and you literally have a complex word that means *from
up or from above*. This is always always what the adverb *anohthen* means in
other contexts. For instance, when Jesus spoke to Pontius Pilate about his
authority as Roman Prefect he said

"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you
from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater
sin." - Jhn 19:11 ESV

Ah, but Nicodemus misunderstood. He grabbed hold of a secondary meaning of
the word. He felt that Jesus was saying you must be born *again*. We have a
similar expression. We say, "OK, lets take it *from the top*." That means, "Lets do it
again." And this is what Nicodemus heard, ". . . born *again*." And in so hearing he
revealed his natural inclination to believe that in spiritual matters it all starts with
ME! That's why he wondered how anyone could pull that off. Notice his focus on
himself as he asks,

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a
second time into his mother's womb and be born?" - Jhn 3:4 ESV

We still do the same thing to this very day as we use the very familiar expression
born again Christians. Behind that expression is the assumption that in order for
rebirth to happen you must make some kind of decision, as in the [familiar hymn
from India by S. Sundar Singh](#),

I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.

Though I may wonder, I still will follow;
Though I may wonder, I still will follow;
Though I may wonder, I still will follow;
No turning back, no turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me;

The world behind me, the cross before me;
The world behind me, the cross before me;
No turning back, no turning back.

Though none go with me, still I will follow;
Though none go with me, still I will follow;
Though none go with me, still I will follow;
No turning back, no turning back.

Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
No turning back, no turning back.

But, but, but . . . That's not what Jesus said! You, Sundar Singh and all those singing with you did not decide anything. You could not. Nor can anyone—*anyone*—any more than can a baby decide when he or she wants to be born or from which parents. This decision is made elsewhere. So it is with this spiritual born again business. It is *not* born again. It is always born *from above*! If you doubt that, read the entire third chapter of John very, very carefully.

Royal Priests

Back to Jesus' conversation with the Sanhedrin member Nicodemus, recorded in John 3:1-21, especially our Lord's comments about being reborn.

My maternal grandmother used to tell us grandchildren that we are descended from British royalty. Of course, we all thought that a big joke. Anyway, as Americans who cares? And yet . . . it was kind of fun to imagine what that might mean. Her maiden name family was Brommel or Brummell—I never discovered how to spell it correctly. A brief Google search reveals that the Brommel family did indeed come from England and spelled the name in various ways, including Bromell, Bramhall, Bromhale, Bromhal, Bromehall, Brumel, Bromhill, etc. Further, Richard Bromwell came to Maryland in 1674 and Anne Brumwell arrived in Virginia in 1703, along with thousands of others with similar names.

Grandma like to say that we were descended from [George Bryan Brummell](#) (1778-1840), commonly known as "Beau" Brummell. He's the guy credited with introducing the modern men's suit, worn with a tie. It was a mode of dress that rejected overly ornate fashion in favor of fitted and tailored clothing with dark jackets and full-length trousers rather than knee breeches and stockings. Ta dah! I suppose that one day I'll have to research the validity of

Grandma's fancy.

From Biblical times to the present birth status has been important. In fact, in Biblical times birth status was the single most important factor in determining a person's worthiness of honor. Such honor usually remained with a person for life. So if Jesus was talking about being born *again* (a meaning of the Greek adverb *anōthen* assumed by Nicodemus), such an event would be truly life changing. How could this be? One surely could not enter his mother's womb *again*.

However, as I pointed out in yesterday's post, Jesus spoke instead of being born *from above*. That means being born of God's realm or kingdom. It means to become in truth a child of God. And such a birth raises one to the highest possible status, far above royalty or kings and queens of any sort. And all the children born of such a father would likewise be princes and princesses. Later on, the Apostle Peter does in fact make such a claim for all followers of Jesus Christ as he writes,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. - 1Pe 2:9-10 ESV

The status of priest or *kohen* in Hebrew was [originally conferred on Aaron, Moses' brother](#), and his sons as an everlasting covenant (Exodus 28:1-4). To be born into this family put you into the highest status level, especially since the priests were those who performed the ritual duties of the temple, praying for the people and offering sacrifices.

Jesus was not a descendant of Aaron's family. He was of the family and lineage of Judah. However, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews affirms that Jesus' priesthood is superior and more ancient than the Levitical priesthood of Aaron's family. He is of [the priesthood of Melchizedek](#) (Genesis 14:18-20 and Psalm 110:4). You may read about this in Hebrews 5:1-10 and 7:11-19.

Note also that Peter calls Christians a chosen race of *royal* lineage. This fits in, of course, with Jesus' own lineage, recorded in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 1:26-35. He is of the royal family of David and has inherited David's throne and kingdom of which there will be no end. All born *from above* and *again* into that family share in the highest possible status of both priest and king or queen, or as Peter says, the royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession.

I did not choose to be born into my Grandma's family, if it is indeed true that I am descended from the Brummells. What is vastly more important and of eternal significance is that I was chosen and given rebirth into the family of Jesus of Nazareth, son of David and Son of God. This happened in my baptism, as Jesus says,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." - Jhn 3:5-8 ESV

If you, my brother or sister, have been born of the Spirit you know what Jesus means. If you have not, I pray that you will receive this blessing. Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" I shall try to explain it further.

The Water Is Getting Deeper And Deeper

There are some conversations that simply will not go away. I find myself thinking about them over and over again. What did he mean when he said that? Might he have responded in another way? So it is with the conversation between Jesus and the learned Pharisee Nicodemus. The implications are so profound that I must persist.

Nicodemus could not grasp what Jesus spoke about when he said one must be born again (or better *from above*) in order to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3-5). By the way, John quotes Jesus speaking about the kingdom of God only in this conversation. Beyond that, there is no mention of God's kingdom in John's Gospel.

A word about *seeing* as John uses it. In John's first chapter Philip invites Nathanael to come and *see* Jesus. So he does and when he comes Jesus tells him, "When you were under the fig tree, I *saw* you." This comment so impressed Nathanael that he at once declared Jesus to be the true Son of God and King of Israel, all because Jesus *saw* him under the fig tree. That, said Jesus, was a small thing compared to what Nathanael would one day *see*, namely heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man (John 1:43-51).

Obviously *seeing*, in Jesus' usage, involves a lot more than seeing somebody standing under a fig tree with your eyes. One day Nathanael would see heaven opened and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. That is an open allusion to Jacob's vision at Bethel as he fled from the wrath of his brother

Esau. In his dream Jacob heard the LORD tell him that He is the God of Abraham and Jacob's father Isaac (Gen. 28:11-17). Jesus' point: one day Nathanael would gain insight and an inner conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed that very LORD (YaHWeH), the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the children of Abraham. He would believe in his heart that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us in human flesh.

This is also what Jesus says to Nicodemus. Our God reigns. His throne is in heaven and He laughs at puny earthly kings who try to storm against Him to overthrow Him. Moreover, the LORD, has set His King on Zion and given him "the ends of the earth" as his possession. All earthly kings are wise to serve the LORD and His Son lest they kindle His wrath (Psalm 2:1-12).

But who is this King and how does He reign? N.T. writers and Jesus refer to Psalm 110:1-7, another of King David's psalms (Matthew 22:42-46). When His authority was challenged, Jesus pointed out that all Jewish teachers agreed that the Messiah or the Christ, the anointed one, would come from King David's lineage. "How is it then," asked Jesus, "that David, in the Spirit, calls his son (his descendant), his Lord?" Further, this Lord is given all authority in heaven and earth, because he sits at the LORD God's right hand and is declared by the LORD to be an eternal priest after the order of Melchizedek.

These are but two of the many, many references in John's Gospel to the divinity of Jesus, God's Son, the One with all authority in heaven and earth, the One who is the Word made flesh (John 1:1-14). Those who receive Him, John writes, are children of God, new born or reborn, not by human decision or human flesh, but born of God. This new birth is God's doing. It is He who gives the reborn their rights and high status as children of God (John 1:12-13). So this is what Jesus refers to when he tells Nicodemus,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. - Jhn 3:5-6 ESV

I do so pray that you are not getting into [water too deep for you](#), for there is much, much deeper water yet to come as we continue our meditation upon Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1-21.

Water, Word And God's Spirit

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

So goes the famous words from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#). The mariner and all onboard waited in vain for a wind to blow that would take them to land where they might find drinking water. Without water to drink only death awaited them.

And every tongue, through utter drought,
Was withered at the root;
We could not speak, no more than if
We had been choked with soot.

Through water God's Spirit brings new birth, new life, new hope, said Jesus in His nighttime conversation with Jewish Sanhedrin member Nicodemus.

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. - Jhn 3:5-6 ESV

Nicodemus knew of the importance of water in the history and in the rituals of Israel. By water the LORD had rescued them from slavery in Egypt as Pharaoh's armies were drowned in the Red Sea (Exodus 15:4). When nothing but desert threatened the LORD twice gave them water from a rock Moses struck with his rod at the LORD's command (Exod. 17:6; Num. 20:8-11). Water was used to clean clothes, to wash feet, to sprinkle on dwellings, to pour on unclean people, on altars, etc. (e.g. Lev. 8:6, 21; 11:32-38; 14:6-9, etc.). The waters of the Jordan river parted when Israel finally marched into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:15-17), "and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan."

Every year the people celebrated their Exodus journey from slavery to freedom during the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles in the seventh month in the Jewish calendar (Sept.-Oct.), the time of the year when the fall harvest was gathered (Deut. 16:13-16). For an entire week they lived in booths (*sekhakh*) as they

praised their LORD for bringing them safely through the wilderness to their prosperous land and for giving them another year of His blessings. On the eighth and final day of the feast, the high priest, in a great processional made up of priests and thousands of worshipers, descended from the Temple Mount to pause briefly at the Pool of Siloam. A pitcher was filled with water, and the procession continued via a different route back to the Temple Mount. Once back in the Temple, with great ceremony the high priest poured the water out of the pitcher onto the altar.

In this way the people were reminded of God's continued blessings and deliverance from slavery and death. This ceremony was also intended to invoke God's blessing on the nation by providing life-giving water for the coming year. In Israel rains normally stop in March and there is little or no rain for almost seven months! If God did not provide the "early" rains in October and November, there would be no spring crop, and famine would again be at the doorstep. On the last day of that feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out,

"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. - Jhn 7:37-39 ESV

As God provides water to quench thirst and grow crops, so He gives His Spirit to bring new life to all His children. In this way water and the Spirit are intimately tied together. This is the new birth that Jesus speaks about in His conversation with Nicodemus. Of course, it is not the water itself that gives new birth. By itself water cannot work such a wonder. It is the Spirit of the Living God at work in the water, the Spirit speaking God's life-giving Word, the Word that glorifies Jesus. And how does the Spirit glorify Jesus in the hearts of those upon whom water is poured? The Spirit tells those so washed (*baptizein* in Greek) that Jesus has taken them with Him into death and from death to life eternal. He has gathered them together and brought them safely out of bondage and slavery. Now He is leading them through the wilderness of this world to the security of the promised land.

We have adopted the Greek word *baptism* to speak about this wondrous creative activity of God's Spirit.

There Is But One Baptism

As noted earlier, the more we ponder John's Gospel [the deeper gets the water](#). In previous postings on Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, the Pharisee and

member of the Sanhedrin (John 3:1-17), we learned about the work of the Spirit in the water of *baptism*, a word Christians borrowed from the Greek. Jesus' incarnation is a type of baptism. Just as the Word (logos in Greek) 'became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14), so in Christian Baptism the Spirit becomes water and dwells among the community of believers. Martin Luther explains this [in his Catechism](#):

Water doesn't make these things happen, of course. It is God's Word, which is with and in the water. Because, without God's Word, the water is plain water and not baptism. But with God's Word it is a Baptism, a grace-filled water of life, a bath of new birth in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul said to Titus in the third chapter :

"But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people." - Titus 3:4-8 ESV

Here's what Jesus Himself says about His baptism when James and John asked for permission to wield power in Jesus' kingdom by sitting or exercising His authority from his right and left hands:

Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." - Mar 10:38-40 ESV

Indeed all Christians acknowledge that they share in Jesus' baptism, for there is but one baptism, namely the baptism of Jesus. Paul reviews this in his letter to the Ephesians as he urges his readers to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace:

There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. - Eph 4:4-6 ESV

This bath of new birth in the Holy Spirit that Jesus and His apostles write about, this outpouring of the Holy Spirit that creates a new life within, is a creative act of God's Spirit, an act that unites us to Jesus and His baptism. Over and over the Apostles write about and teach this mystery.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit. -1Cor 12:12-13 ESV

. . . in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. - Gal 3:26-28 ESV

And what is Jesus' baptism that brings rebirth? It is His incarnation, His union with all mankind as truly a man, born of Mary. And why this union? As the ancient prophets foretold, to carry our burdens and bear our guilt, to be wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isa. 53:4-12). On the cross of Calvary He completed that work. So John records Him saying from the cross,

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. - Jhn 19:30 ESV

In the water of Baptism the Holy Spirit speaks God's Word of completion. The work of salvation, the task of gaining forgiveness for all men's sins is finished, come to an end, concluded, fulfilled and wrapped up. Jesus has joined Himself to us and to all mankind. He has made the punishment we deserve for our sins His own. Now the Holy Spirit announces to us in our baptism that we have both died with Christ and risen with Him to new life. Paul summarizes this:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. - Rom 6:3-5 ESV

All baptized in the Name of the LORD (Psalm 148:13, Phil. 2:9), the Name shared by every person of the Trinity, the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit—all share in the life of Christ, the life that cannot end. They will, therefore, certainly share in Jesus' resurrection.

Having said this, I acknowledge that we are now swimming in rather deep water. The water will get even deeper as we discuss the gifts of the Holy Spirit and

untangle the confusion about so-called water baptism versus Spirit baptism, etc.
But that must wait for another time.