

ADVICE TO NICODEMUS RECONSIDERED

Untangling What We Must Do To Be Born Again

I. Introduction: Born Twice

In the opening book of Genesis, the Bible¹ has God creating heaven and earth. In the first chapter, humanity is collectively created “in the beginning” in the image of God.² In the second chapter, humanity is individually formed on earth from the dust of the ground.³ Reconciliation of the two accounts is our key to interpreting not only the Bible creation narrative, but also the purpose of our life on earth.

Humanity’s primordial creation, in the image of God, is the begetting of our Spirit in heaven, even Christ in us, “Who is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of every creature” (Colossians 1:15, John 1:4). Humanity’s generational creation on earth is from the dust of the ground, in whom the LORD God breathes the breath of life, that we may become living souls (Genesis 2:7). However, as exemplified by Adam and Eve, we fall short of reconciling our embodied souls on earth with our Spirit dimension in heaven—the Son of man. And, as foretold by God, we die⁴ to our birthright—our divinity and key to Heaven.⁵

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water
and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

John 3:5

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are from the KJV.

² “So God created man in his own image...male and female created he them” Gen 1:27; “God is a Spirit...” Jn 4:24

³ “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground...” Gen 2:7

⁴ “But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” Gen 2:17

⁵ “And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven” Jn 3:13

II. Humanity's Fall From Grace

In our creation on earth in the second chapter of Genesis, we are given physical form, self-serving natures and free will. Adam and Eve justify their own desires and set aside God's guidance, in what has come to be known as "The Fall."⁶ However, contrary to appearances, "The Fall," is for our benefit, not our demise. In not instilling obedience to God in humanity, God has allowed humanity to come to know, develop and explore their individual inclinations and character. By that standard, "The Fall" enables us to come to know ourselves. More so, as we come to see and discipline the self-centered side of our individuality, learn to open our hearts and minds to the welfare of others, and become attentive to instruction and guidance by the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, the abruptness of our fall, our almost instantaneous collapse from being "very good" to having creation "cursed" for our sake, occurs in short order. Incredulous, the reader is puzzled over God's apparent lack of foresight and inauspicious grand plan (Gen 3:17-19). The narrative tilts to evidence humanity going awry, being cut off from the tree of life and, what we thought would be our glory,⁷ becomes our condemnation.

Rather than following God's guidance (Gen 2:16-17) we, like prodigal sons and daughters, set aside God's image for us, and pursue our own way, even our own redemption through repentance,⁸ obedience,⁹ and surrogates.¹⁰ But we all fall short—we fail to be the face of the image God has for each of us (Romans 3:23). What is achieved is humanity without divinity: acquainting us with ourselves. We need to freely lay down "our" life,¹¹ and allow God to redeem the plan he has for each of us.

⁶ "...thou [shalt] return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" Gen 3:19

⁷ "...ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" Gen 3:5

⁸ "Repent ye therefore...that your sins may be blotted out..." Acts 3:19

⁹ "...for charity shall cover the multitude of sins" 1 Peter 4:8

¹⁰ "...Christ died [in us because of our sin, vs.] for our sins..." 1 Cor 15:3

¹¹ "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" John 15:13

III. How One May Be Born Again

Without exception, the only way we may see the kingdom of God is by dying to our flesh and blood selves in this life, that our image-of-God self may be established in us for eternal life.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.”
John 12:24-25

Believing in, and having faith in Jesus Christ is at the top of most of our lists for having everlasting life (John 3:16). However, given Christ’s admonition, our being born again—resurrecting the Son of man in us—must precede our seeing the kingdom of God and entering the kingdom of heaven. (John 3:5)

“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
John 3:3

In falling short of resurrecting the Son of man in us, our image-of-God creation, our beliefs and faith remain mortal beliefs and faith, at best biblically inspired, or divinely revealed, but always interpreted and understood with mortal faculties. To overcome our mortal deficiencies, we must be born a third time. If we die to our “dust of the ground” self, our “old man” self,¹² then our Son of man self may be resurrected in us for newness of life, even eternal life.

“And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, *even* the Son of man which is in heaven... so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”
John 3:13-15

In the Gospel of John, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews, comes to Jesus at night to question him privately. Before hearing a question, Jesus proclaims to him, “Verily, verily, I say

¹² “...our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed...” Rm 6:6

unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Incredulous, Nicodemus searches haplessly through mental images for the possibility of a physical rebirth.¹³ And the reader may erroneously look with confidence at baptism for the Spiritual rebirth of his or her flesh.

Answering himself, Jesus continues, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). While repentance and baptism address our being born anew of “water,” our being born of the Spirit comes only from God. Not only must God rebirth Christ’s Spirit in us—the Son of man—but we must also “die to the old man,” as the Apostle Paul expresses it.¹⁴ Our being born again is thus neither a new physical birth, as Nicodemus imagines,¹⁵ nor the rebirth of a repentant self, as baptism offers,¹⁶ but the lifting up in us our primordial creation—the Son of man: “That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:15).

“And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that . . .
came from heaven, even the Son of man...”

John 3:13

IV. Humanity’s Fallen Status

Historically, Adam and Eve’s fall in the Garden of Eden is associated with original sin, even “our” fall and “our” sin. It is also associated with humanity’s disobedience and guilt for not faithfully following God’s guidance, commandments and laws as

¹³ Witenton, Michael R, “Nicodemus’ confusion is typically interpreted as genuine misunderstanding—evidence that, despite his best efforts, this poor Pharisee remains in the darkness” (John 1:5, 3:19); *The Dissembler of John 3: A Cognitive and Rhetorical Approach to the Characterization of Nicodemus*, *JBL*, 135, no. 1 (2016) p.152; pp. 141-158

¹⁴ “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom 6:6)

¹⁵ John 3:4; “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” (John 3:6)

¹⁶ John is explicit: no amount of cleansing/repentance/forgiveness will suffice for the Spirit being born in us again (John 3:15)

we come to know them, even failing to come to know them, and leaving them undone. Ironically, our sinfulness is at the top of the list of our attributes, following our creation in the image of God. (See John Calvin's "Five Points" and others' lists where our "inability" to not sin, as a consequence of the fall, heads the list.)

Addressing Nicodemus' perceived need to witness the kingdom of God, even to vouchsafe his eternal life, Jesus responds by putting Nicodemus on notice: unless he is born again, he cannot see the kingdom (Jn 3:3). Perhaps crestfallen, given his status as a ruler of the Jews, Pharisee and "a master of Israel" (Jn 3:1, 10), Nicodemus lamely offers objections to the possibility (Jn 3:4).

Jesus replies: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (Jn 3:5-6). Nicodemus' physical birth is not in question, his loss/lack of being Spiritually born is. He must be born again to the Son of man, that God's Spirit may guide him, and lead him in the way he must go.¹⁷ Like Jesus in the desert being tempted of the devil (Mt 4:3-11), we need the Spirit dimension to be in us, and we need "ears to hear," that we may answer the devil as we are guided by the Spirit and prevail over the devil. (See Genesis 4:7: "...thou shalt rule over him.")

We need to die to our self-serving self, whose guidance beguiled us in The Garden, that our primordial birthright, The Son of man, might instead rule us of our own free will.¹⁸ Thus, in choosing to "die to the old man," as the Apostle Paul relates it,¹⁹ or our corporeal self, as the parable of the two masters in the Gospel of Matthew relates it (Mt 6:24-34), we choose to have Christ in us to lead us in the way God would have us to go that we may be one with the Son of man.

¹⁷ He must be reborn to the Spirit of God: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." Mt 5:48

¹⁸ "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up;" Jn 3:14

¹⁹ "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin." Rm 6:6

V. Humanity's Born Again Salvation

Like Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, our "old man" is to be an offering to God.²⁰ And, like Abraham, it is our faith to carry out the sacrifice that is imperative.²¹ We are to be, as the Apostle Paul exhorts us, "crucified with Christ," whereby it is not our "old man" that lives, but Christ that lives in us:²²

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."
Romans 8:1

The imperative to "die to the old man"²³ and the injunction to be "born again" are clear: we are to be born again to our primordial creation—Christ in us—that we may become a corporeal embodiment of Christ, even the Son of man, who Christ indwells, and to whom we may be reconciled, according to God's image for us.²⁴

"...but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified
...by the Spirit of our God."
1Cor 6:11

The fruit thereof is a family. God has created for Himself and for us a family. They are the host of believers, the individual members whose personality and faith endear them all to us, a cornucopia of friends and kin.²⁵

²⁰ "And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven...And said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad...for now I know that thou fearest God..." Genesis 22:1-18

²¹ "And in thy seed shall all the nations be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice." Genesis 22:18

²² Galatians 2:20

²³ "...they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh..." Galatians 5:24

²⁴ "...he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world."
Ephesians 1:4

²⁵ The "Pauline-Augustinian concept of the moral identity and unity of Christ the Head with his redeemed brethren as members of His One Body, through the grace of Adoption." "Meister Eckhart's Teaching on the Berth of the Divine Word in the Soul," Karl G. Kertz; *Tradition*, Vol.15 (1959) p.350, pp.327-363, JSTOR, Org/stable/27830389, page count: 37.

VI. Conclusion: Creation a Three-fold Process

The opening Genesis creation account of humanity is two-fold and appears at odds: our creation in Spirit—in the image of God,²⁶ and our being formed in flesh—from the dust of the ground.²⁷ A third creation account follows in the Gospel of John—our being born again to the image of God,²⁸ to whom we had died when we chose to do what was right in our own eyes, like Adam and Eve.²⁹

The chagrin the reader may feel by the incongruity of the primordial and generational creation accounts in Genesis is reconciled in the letter from the apostle Paul to the Colossians. Here we see Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the first born of every creature.”³⁰ As such, we were able to be in the image of God through having Christ in us until “our fall,” when like Adam and Eve we die to having Christ in us, by not recognizing Christ in us as our Lord.³¹

It is through rebirth, reestablishing the primordial “us” in our creation³²—with Christ in us—that being in God’s image is possible for humanity. Consequently, rather than the creation narrative being just a redaction of diverse accounts depicting a “heavenly” creation and an “earthly” creation,³³ the narrative lays out both the underpinnings of our creation—God’s divine purpose and will—**and** our *raison d’etre*—our reason for being, even the purpose of our lives. Therein the creation narrative establishes both who we are to be—in God’s image—and how we are to be in God’s image—through embodying Christ in us—like the Son of man—being sons and daughters of God.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Gen 1:26

²⁷ *Ibid.* Gen 2:7

²⁸ *Ibid.* John 3:3

²⁹ “...in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” Gen 2:17

³⁰ Colossians 1:15

³¹ *Ibid.* Gen 2:17

³² “And God said, Let **us** make man in our image” Gen 1:26

³³ Wegner, Walter, *Creation and Salvation, a Study of Genesis 1 and 2*, Concordia Theological Monthly, 37 no 8 Sep 1966, p.520-542.