Sunday, March 13, 1977
SAME QUESTION, DIFFERENT ANSWERS!
John 3:1-8

The term “born again” is now heard frequently in conversation; is seen in newspapers and magazines, and on radio and television. A recent bestseller book by Charles Colson has the title, “BORN AGAIN.”

Last week in a national newspaper there was an article about Pat Booth, a 38-year-old Dallas businessman who now puts out a directory of “born again” Christian businesspersons. This directory, one of several such books nationwide, has yellow paper like the telephone company’s directory of businesses, has similar listings and advertising displays, even a similar picture of the downtown Dallas skyline on the front cover. But there’s a difference. All advertisers are required to sign a contract that asserts: “Advertiser herewith acknowledge the fact that he has accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and is trusting in him alone for forgiveness of sin and knows that he is a born-again believer.”

However, a foreword in the book warns that all of a Christian businessman’s employees may not be Christians themselves; that his prices may not necessarily be lower; and his work may not be better.

Recently, I came across an editorial in a church magazine in which the editor told how during the time between Jimmy Carter’s election and his inauguration, a reporter from a secular paper called to secure the names of a few “born again” Christians. The editor said the staff of the magazine was about to begin to search their files for persons who would fit the category of “born again,” when suddenly the absurdity of the question hit them. Within the Christian Community no one has the right to claim exclusive use of the term “born again.” The new birth is a New Testament concept, an experience that comes in varied ways to those who identify themselves as Christians. In the best use of the term, “born again” describes a person whose life is governed by a New Testament faith.

That’s correct! The term born again grew out of a meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus as reported in the Gospel of John in the New Testament. In our scripture lesson this morning we read that story.

Nicodemus, a Jewish religious and political leader, had heard about Jesus and some of the miracles he had performed, Nicodemus also knew that Jesus was a controversial figure among the Jews. Thus, he met Jesus secretly at night. He had some questions he wanted to ask.

Although we do not know exactly the questions which Nicodemus asked, we can tell what the main question was by the answer which Jesus gave. Nicodemus had asked, “What must I do to enter the Kingdom of God, or what must I do to come into eternal life?” Jesus answered, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

At first Nicodemus did not understand that Jesus was talking about a spiritual rebirth, so Jesus had to explain further what he meant.

The important point is that Jesus gave a specific answer to a specific question. However, when other people asked Jesus the same question, he gave a different answer. We’ll see why in a moment.

The Gospel of Luke reports that one day a lawyer asked Jesus the same question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asked a question in return: “What is written in the law?” The lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” “You live answered right,” Jesus said, “Do this and you will live.” “And who is my neighbor?” asked the lawyer. Then Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to point out that any person in need is one’s neighbor, even people we don’t like. Same question, different answer!

The Gospel of Luke also reports that one day a ruler asked Jesus the same question, “Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to this man, “You know the commandments: do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and your mother.” And the ruler replied, “All these I have observed from my youth.” Then Jesus said, “One thing you still lack, sell all that you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me.” But when the man heard this, he became sad, for he was very rich. Jesus said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God.”

In each case the same question was asked, but it got a different answer. In these last two instances, there’s nothing about being born again. What puzzles me is that some people insist on building their whole case for becoming a Christian on the passage from the Gospel of John where Jesus tells Nicodemus to be born again. Some people then go on to say that each person must have a particular kind of new birth experience otherwise he or she cannot enter God’s kingdom and have eternal life. But we could just logically choose one of the two incidents from the Gospel of Luke and say for example, that unless an individual sells all that he or she has and gives the proceeds to the poor, that person cannot enter God’s kingdom. Then we would have not born-again Christians, but “sell-all-you-have” Christians. There aren’t too many of those around!

What we forget in all of this is that in each case Jesus gave a specific answer to a specific person. He tailored his answer according to what was the barrier in that person’s life. I wonder what Jesus’answer would be to each one of us if we asked him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life or to enter God’s kingdom?” It might not be any of these three answers we have just noted, but something entirely different.

Jesus might say for example, “You have to quit your job and get a different one because your present job is ruining your life and has become a block between you and God and between you and your family and friends.” Or the answer might be, “Lose weight,” or “quit mistreating your employees,” or “Give up golf.”

Actually, what these passages from the Bible show is that Jesus was a superb spiritual counselor. When someone came to him with a question about how to get connected with God and the spiritual forces of the universe, Jesus first pointed out the blocks or barriers in that person’s life which had to be removed. Every one of us has some of these barriers either internally or externally.

I saw a cartoon the other day which showed a physician standing at the beside of a patient and the patient’s wife was standing there also, the patient was looking very upset and sour. The doctor was saying to him, “You should take it easy for a while Mr. Harner. You’ve been infected by the virus of hate.”

We're not always aware of the barriers within us that are blocking God's spirit or God's love. On the other hand, many of us are willing to let God's spirit and love enter our lives, but we want to reserve one little corner of our life where we keep God out. We don't want God messing around with how we use our money, or with the hate we harbor. We can consider ourselves "born again" Christians and still have God's spirit blocked out of a part of our lives. Jesus knew this. That's why he gave different answers to the same question.

In the case of Nicodemus, he was so tied to the old way of seeing the world and of seeing God, that he was blind to the Kingdom of God here and now. He was willing to partly believe in Jesus because of the signs and miracles he had heard about. But he was not yet willing to give himself over completely in faith. So, Jesus used the phrase, "You must be born again." Jesus was saying, "You've got to start over. In the native language which Jesus spoke the word for born again is an expression which means to become like a child, which is to say, to change one's thoughts and habits, and become simple like a child and start all over to learn anew.

In the case of the lawyer who asked the same question as Nicodemus, Jesus pointed out to him that the block to his spiritual growth was that he was not willing to be a neighbor to people he didn't like or who were different from him. He was filled with racial prejudice. So, Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan to illustrate what had to be done.

In the case of the young ruler, Jesus could quickly see that his wealth, his money, and property were barriers in his life. Until he got rid of that he would never be able to give himself over to God's kingdom.

We all have our blocks or barriers, and when we get rid of them, often some new ones enter our lives. There are little or big corners of our lives where we don't want God to enter. We need the discipline of the Christian community to point out these blind spots to us.

The different answers to the same question which Jesus gave also show us that we enter God's kingdom in various ways. We are born again in different ways. For some it is a traumatic experience and highly emotional. Charles Colson in his autobiography describes his experience as a "sensation of water surging through my whole body...cleansing and cooling as it went." His tears were of release as he surrendered his will to God and for the first time in his life, he knew he was not alone at all.

C.S. Lewis whose book, MERE CHRISTIANITY, influenced Mr. Colson more than anything else, describes his coming to God in quite another way. He found. himself gradually over a period of time drawn by the reasoning of his mind and finally thought his way through to the ultimate answer. In describing it in his autobiography, he said, "Emotional is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a person, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake."

Another person describes his turning point this way: "I simply made a declaration to Jesus Christ that I was going to relinquish as much of myself as I could to as much of Him as I knew. There was no lightning bolt for me. But I came to a peace, a feeling that if I make it fine, and if I don't, that's okay too. You put your relationship with God first — not money, power, or whatever you please."

There is no one kind of experience that is more valid than another in our turning our life over to God. We're each different persons, experience things differently, and have different blocks or barriers in our lives that need to be removed.

The more dramatic conversion experience more often than not occurs either among those without a church background or those whose lives face a major crisis because of family problems, crime or illness. For those who grew up in the church, the experience usually is a quiet one — a sort of reaching a particular point in a long-term spiritual growth or development.

Some people who are dedicated Christians never have a par-ticular conversion experience they can pinpoint. This was true of Jesus'12 disciples. Senator Mark Hatfield said, "I can't say I was ever saved through a mystical experience. It was an ongoing transformation." He had grown up in church. When he was teaching in college, some students told him they were praying for him. It so impressed him that he pagan praying and reading the Bible regularly.

"It was a gradual displacement of ego, a moving away from the desire to serve just myself. I am still moving," he said. That last statement is a key point. All of us need to keep growing and developing spiritually. None of us in this life ever get to the point where we can say, "Now I've got it all. Our spiritual lives have to be continually nourished and practiced. New barriers sneak into our lives, new sins, new blind spots."

All of us need to be as open as possible to receiving God's Spirit into our lives. It is the center of all religion. Whether one calls it being born again or somethi.ng else is not important. The power is there and available, and we need it. Sooner or later, we run into some situation which is difficult, tragic, perilous and that asks more of us, more power than life ever asked before. If God is with us, then life need not defeat us. We need not crack up.

Too often for most of us, when we think of conversion or of turning to God, we commonly think of prodigals suddenly turning homeward, of drunkards recovered from their alcoholism. Such miracles of personal renovation do take place, but some of the most notable conversions are of another kind — church members who have never doubted Christianity, who have for years been acquiescent in it and observant of it in its outward expression, who suddenly make a great discovery — it works! It actually works! This is what the Bible means by entering God's kingdom or entering eternal life. When translated into terms of daily life as a resource of inward power, overcoming fear, reinforcing courage, making one an adequate personality equipped for life, able to do what one ought to do and to endure what one just stands, it works! God grant some such conversions here today. Amen.