Book 9

Sunday July 27, 1980

"BORN AGAIN AND GROWING UP" Ephesians 4:1-6, 15-16

A few weeks ago, a feature article appeared in the Wall Street Journal with the headline: "OLD-TIME RELIGION, AN EVANGELICAL REVIVAL IS SWEEPING THE NATION, BUT WITH LITTLE EFFECT." Below that a sub-head stated: "Millions Quit Main-Line Churches for 'Born-Again' Groups that Focus on Inner-Self."

Listen to the first few sentences of the article. "The spirit of religious awakening is once again moving across the land. But unlike a similar Great Religious Awakening two and one-half centuries ago that helped sow the seeds of the American Revolution, the current evangelical revival has so far sowed little except curiosity among non-believers and self-doubt among the faithful."

"Over-all, one out of every three Americans says he or she has been born again, according to a recent Gallup Poll. And every week, television evangelists claim to reach an estimated 128 million viewers."

"As impressive as these statistics are, the movement has affected American society far less than did the Great Awakening of the mid-1700's which marked the beginning of a new era, not merely of American Protestantism, but in the evolution of the American mind, according to Perry Miller, the historian."

Whether or not this country is in the midst of some kind of religious revival is certainly debatable. Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits," and the fruits of this so-called revival are few.

Furthermore there are some issues and emphases within this so-called revival which need to be looked at very carefully, lest they lead us astray in our own Christian pilgrimage.

1. First, the emphasis has been almost totally on "personal salvation," which too much copies the secular world with its accent of the "me" generation. It may surprise some to learn that Jesus Christ never talked about "personal" salvation. The word "personal" is not used once in the entire Bible. Jesus asked people to follow him. He

calls us to a life of self-giving love on behalf of others. He does promise that in the process we will find new meaning in our lives.

2. Second, the emphasis has been too much on the experience of being "born again," and too little on our continuing transformation as Christians as we grow in the faith. In addition, the term "born again" is now being defined in a very narrow sense. It has become a kind of code phrase with a highly specialized meaning. Thus the term is most often applied to individuals who have had some kind of emotional or dramatic conversion so that one can say "on December 13, 1976, I was born again and became a Christian." Certainly individuals can and do become Christians in this way, but individuals also become Christians in less dramatic ways as well.

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 or metaphor, an experience that comes in varied ways to those who identify themselves as Christians. Each person who claims to be a Christian has been "born again' in one way or another.

Actually, the term "born again," or "born anew" has its origin in one story from the Gospel of John in the New Testament. One night a man named Nicodemus came to see Jesus. He had heard about Jesus and some of the miracles he had performed. Nicodemus also knew that Jesus was a controversial figure among the Jewish leaders in particular. Thus he met Jesus secretly at night.

He had some questions he wanted to ask. Although we do not know the exact words of the questions, we can infer what the main questions were from the answers which Jesus gave. Nicodemus asked: "What must I do to enter the Kingdom of God," or "what must I do to find eternal meaning in my life here and now," Or maybe he asked the question like this: "How can I come to a new understanding of God and God's purposes in my life and the life of the world?"

Jesus answered, "Unless one is born anew, 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.

This is the only incident in the Bible where Jesus used the term, "born anew," When other people asked Jesus the same question, "What must I do to enter the Kingdom of God, or see the Kingdom of God, or find eternal meaning in life," Jesus gave different answers. To some he said simply, "Follow me." To another he said, "Sell all you have and give the money to the poor and then come follow me." To yet another person who asked the same question, he said, "Go and love people in the same way as the Good Samaritan loved people." Maybe we should therefore have in addtion to "born-again Christians," "follow me Christains," "sell all you have and give to the poor Christians, and "good Samaritan Christians."

For some, becoming a Christian is a traumatic and highly emotional experience and that's all right. For others, it is a more gradual happening. 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 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 a different way. He found himself gradually over a period of time being drawn by the reasoning of his mind and he 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 a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake." Many people who are dedicated and committed Christians never had a particular conversion experience they can pinpoint. This was certainly also true of most of Jesus' original twelve disciples. They were for the most part, "follow me Christians."

To be a Christian then means to be one who has a whole new outlook on life, a different way of seeing the world, a new way of understanding God and a new way of seeing other human beings. We can't get this total new outlook all at once. I know of no one who can become a fully mature Christian spontaneously. St. Paul even after his dramatic conversion and his knowledge of God through his

Jewish background, still took many years to mature as a thoughtful Christian. Quite a contrast to a man I sat with at a dinner not long ago. He had just become a Christian a few months earlier and he already had all the answers to the most difficult questions of life and faith and politics.

Becoming a Christian does involve a turn-around in our lives which can happen gradually or more quickly, but in addition to be born again, there's also a growing up which follows. That's why the writer to the Christians in Ephesus reminds them, "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."

Like the twelve steps in Alcoholics Anonymous which give a kind of outline and guide as one turns from a drinker into a non-drinker, we Christians also go through a series of steps which never are totally completed as we are born anew and continue to grow and mature as Christians. Here's a kind of check-list of a Christian's twelve steps.

1. We admitted that we cannot live our lives by ourselves. Without God, our lives have no eternal meaning.

2. We came to believe that there is a God who loves us and forgives us and whose love is most uniquely revealed in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

3. We made a decision to turn our lives over to God and to be as open as possible to receiving God's Spirit and love into our lives. Since God is most completely revealed in Jesus Christ, our decision is to become followers of Jesus Christ and to see God, the world and others as Jesus saw them.

4. Like Jesus Christ, we begin to see the creation as one--all human beings are our brothers and sisters and God loves us all equally. We come to know more deeply that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son. We do not pray, "My Father who art in heaven," but "Our Father who art in Heaven."

5. Like Jesus Christ, we begin to have a special concern for the poor, the hungry, those who are sick and those

who are in jail and in prison. We have a special concern for the oppressed and the outcasts because we know that "as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

At the same time, all of our prejudice against people of other races, against people of other political persuasions, against anyone different from us, begins to disappear. We realized as Paul wrote to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Before our new birth, we loved only those who loved us, but now we are growing in our love and we are coming to love our enemies as well as our friends. We know that "anyone who says he or she loves God and hates another human being is a liar."

6. We are also beginning to learn that the meaning of life is not to be found in the possession of wealth, or power, or any kind of materials. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there will your heart be also."

7. We become more and more inclusive and less and less exclusive. We no longer spend our time judging people--seeing the speck in their eye, but not seeing the log in our own eye. We do not return evil for evil, but return evil with good.

8. Not only does our relationship with our brothers and sisters of the human race continue to grow and mature, but also at the same time our relationship with God continues to grow and mature. More and more we spend some regular time in private in meditation and prayer, and also are regular in our participation in public worship with other Christians. We ask God to remove our shortcomings and mistakes, because we know we constantly lapse into our old life, into our old way of seeing the world. We too easily are conformed to this world.

9. Because of our prayer and worship disciplines, we more and more trust God, knowing that everything works together for good for those who love God. We are able to let go, to relax the grasping hand, because we know that all things in this world go away. Only God is eternal. "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." "Lord thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations."

10. More and more we find ourselves working for justice and peace in the world.

11. In our personal lives we are discovering the fruit of having the Spirit of God present in our lives and in control of our lives. "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

12. In our practice of the presence and of the love of God and neighbor, we more and more are coming to understand the more excellent way, and we seek to bring others to know God through Jesus Christ.

We know as Saint -Paul wrote, that if we speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, we are a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. We know that the love of the Christian is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude. Christian love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends!

When we were children, we spoke like children, we reasoned like Children, but when we became adults, we are to give up childish ways. We areto grow up into Christ.

So being born again is never enough, it is only the first step. All of us need to keep growing and developing as Christians. None of us ever gets to the point in this life where we can say, "Now I've got it all." Our spiritual lives have to be continually nourished and renewed. We need to be born again and growing up. Amen.