

## Nicodemus

It's been years since I've seen Princess Bride, but it's become a cult classic, particularly among Gen X'ers. There are multiple lines from the movie that have become social media memes.

One of the best known is when Inigo Montoya says to the evil Vizzini, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

That I think is true of the phrase born again. In our translation it says born from above and in a couple of others it's born anew.

But most translations say born again. The Greek can be translated any of those three ways. And they all come to mean essentially the same thing. But this born-again thing has been co-opted by certain branches of the Christian church and has come to mean something I don't think Jesus ever meant.

I do not think it means what they think it means. Wanting to maintain harmony between the different forms of Christianity, we might ask, does it really matter that much? In this case, in fact it does matter. It's the difference between a beautiful passage of promise and love versus a passage that becomes a threat.

The passage all too often creates a group of insider Christians who are born again, by their definition, and those who are not.

There are lots of sad things that have come out of what some of American Christianity has come to stand for. One of my candidates for the saddest is what's happened to this passage.

Here's what I fear this passage has come to mean in many people's minds:

Yes, God so loved the world that he sent Jesus. But this God who loves you so much will apparently send you to eternal torment in a place called hell if you don't believe. And that belief is typically characterized by a specific time and place where you were born again – where you verbally accepted Jesus as your personal lord and savior. And usually there is a checklist of other things you must say you believe to be "in."

But I do not think this passage means what they think it does.

But if that's true, then what does it mean?

Let's first talk about belief. In our analytical and logical way of thinking, belief has mostly come to mean intellectual agreement with something, or acceptance of a particular doctrine as the truth.

But that's not what belief means in John – or any of the gospels really.

Belief is not a checklist of facts. In John's gospel, belief is about relationship. It's about joining spirit to matter and heaven to earth. It's about Jesus coming to set up camp with us. It's like saying you believe in the person you are going to marry – you believe they are who they say they are, you believe they'll do what they say they'll do and you're willing to stake the rest of your life on that. Belief is about falling in love.

It all goes back to John's view of incarnation. In John's gospel, incarnation is the first moment of salvation. When John 3:16 says for God so loved the world, it means how God loved the world. And incarnation is how God loved the world.

And because Jesus is incarnate in each one of us, that salvation is unique and particular to each of us – our relationship with Jesus is unique and particular. But because Christ is incarnate everywhere in the world, the salvation of each particular aspect of creation – of each particular person – is joined to that of the rest of creation. This relationship is not just a Jesus and me relationship.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit theologian and scientist. His work has influenced many 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologians in their work to find unity in science and religion.

He used the term Christification. Through our creation by the Word, all creation is in some sense Christified. But by Jesus' incarnation, resurrection and ascension, our bodies have become Christified.

For God so loved the world, God Christified it. God joined the Spirit of Christ to the matter of our bodies...and to the matter of the whole world. Being born of water and the spirit is not about changing forms from flesh to spirit. It's about uniting body and spirit – the spirit becomes incarnate in our bodies. Our flesh becomes enlivened by the spirit.

So, all this means that verse 18 isn't about going to hell when you die if you don't believe. John never talks about hell. In John's view, condemnation is about being disconnected from that incarnation of God in the present...it's about being disconnected from that relationship.

That relationship does stretch on into eternity, but we are missing way too much if we think this time and place is just something to be endured until we die. We have eternal life now.

So, let's kind of pull this together. In light of John's view of belief as a relationship that joins the Spirit of God to the world, and in a very particular way to our bodies, what does this mean for us? And what does it mean to be born again, or born anew, or born from above?

Well, in Teilhard's words, it means we are Christified. We are made new creation through Christ. We are made new to live in the light – to be light...to other people and to the rest of creation.

We are made new to see Christ in other people...all people. Because John's gospel is so much more expansive than we like to think.

And we are made new to live in the Kingdom of God. In John's gospel, the term Kingdom of God is a community living in relationship with God in the here and now. It's about eternal life here and now.

So what do you need to do to get this eternal life...to be born again? Nothing. It's been done. By Jesus....by his incarnation...by the joining of his spirit to your body, heart, mind and soul...by the joining of Jesus Christ to all of the world, human and non-human, through the act of creation and through the incarnation of Christ...the Christification of the whole world.

But then we are drawn to live in response to that. We cultivate an awareness of Christ's presence in us and in others by prayer and meditation. We live knowing that our well-being is tied to the well-being of every other person on the planet.

We live knowing that our well-being is tied to the well-being of the non-human creation. We live knowing that through Christ's incarnation, God is drawing all creation to unity and well-being, and our choice is to work in the that same direction or not.

We live knowing that God may have some surprising things in store for us when we live by that spirit – the wind blows where it will. We can see evidence of that wind of the spirit in lives made whole and whole communities lifted up.

This way of life will have very concrete outcomes because incarnation means bodies matter. It means looking to the bodies that are most vulnerable...low income people, people struggling to make ends meet, people of color, the LGBTQ communities, the sick, those with disabilities, the mentally ill, people in prison, the just plain odd.

And it means looking to creation – to recognize the breath of God in the trees, rivers, animals, insects even. It means knowing deep in the fiber of our being that our well-being is tied to theirs.

In Christ, we have born anew...born again...born from above. We have been made children of God. We are invited to fall in love with the God who is already so in love with us.