

## “Busy Being Born”

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John 3:1-8 = born from above

**B**ob Dylan led me to Jesus. I’m not at all sure it was intentional, but Bob Dylan did show me the light. Like so many in my generation, Dylan was the rock poet and secular prophet who gave voice to a longing which leads to God.



Bob Dylan, long before his born-again albums, in his 1965 song “*It’s Alright, Ma,*” one line in the second

stanza says:

“That he not busy being born / Is busy dying.”

Dylan must have been channeling Jesus in John 3:3: **“Unless someone has been born from above, they won’t be able to see God’s kingdom.”**

Dylan gets it. Clearly Nicodemus does not, even though Jesus explained it quite plainly. Nicodemus for a leader of Israel must have been pretty dull.

**W**hen Nicodemus made his secretive night visit, he made the same mistake the King James translators made. Jesus in John 3:3 responds with that memorable phrase the King James translates rather inaccurately as “born again.”



The Greek terms used here could mean ‘born again’ but really reads literally ‘born from above.’ Nicodemus seems to miss completely the plain meaning.

Here the conversation begins to border on the absurd. **“Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb?”** Even when Jesus patiently explains that he does not at all mean “born a second time” but rather that one must be ‘born from above’ in order to enter God’s kingdom.”



Nicodemus is still stuck. “How can these things be?” Nicodemus isn’t the only one to misunderstand here. Many sincere, devoted believers make the same mistake by holding too literally to this ‘born again’ language. Brian Stoffregen, Lutheran pastor in his online commentary says it this way:

“[B]eing born from above is not something we do. It is something done to us (by God).

[B]eing born the first time was not something we did. Our physical births were caused by powers far beyond our infantile abilities and understanding. Being born is something that happens to us from powers outside of ourselves.”

We have to take that image seriously... “Both the grammar and the imagery of birth indicate that it is something God (the one “from above”) does to or for us.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, being “**born from above**” is not something we choose, but God chooses; not something we do, but God does ~ thus a gift!!

Nicodemus just does not get this simple idea.

Jesus is clear: being born of the Spirit enables a person to live in God’s new age. In so many parables Jesus paints a picture of God’s kingdom using the metaphors of his day and culture. How do we translate this into our time and place? What would living in the kingdom look like today?



Ibu Ngahingsi was our cook and a good one, diligent, smart, when I worked with the Christian community in Indonesia. We called her affectionately Bu Nih, or “Mother Nih.”

Bu Nih was a Muslim, a second wife to an abusive husband with four wives and mistresses to boot. Four wives who supported him, but he never seemed to get around to helping his wives and many children financially or otherwise. Bu Nih cared for her aged mother and a son Dahma. By working hard she just

barely kept their heads above water, what with her husband's demands to support his gambling and carousing.



Bu Nih became a follower of Jesus. The day she was baptized with her son was a truly transcendent experience. I would love to take credit for her conversion, but it is the indigenous Christians who deserve all the credit.

Her conversion came about slowly, deliberately through the neighborhood outreach of the local Javanese church. They offered neighborhood based classes in Christianity, support groups and prayer groups. Bu Nih attended, was attracted by what she saw and eventually converted.

I wondered why she became a disciple. It was certainly not for prestige. In the Muslim-dominated community's eyes she lost what little standing she had when she converted. Leaving her tradition and majority status to join a minority, and a persecuted minority at that.

**I** learned an important truth about the faith: choosing for God's kingdom does make a difference, a big difference. In God's community her gifts are celebrated, her personhood respected. She is accepted as a new person, newly born from above.



She is no longer seen as the second wife of an abusive husband. She is no longer viewed as an uneducated, urban peasant woman with a bleak future. She is no longer just a cook. Bu Nih is now a child of God, a person in God's community with dignity, respect and loved. She knows because, Jesus said:

**“This, you see, is how much God loved the world: enough to give the only, special son, so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God's new age.”**

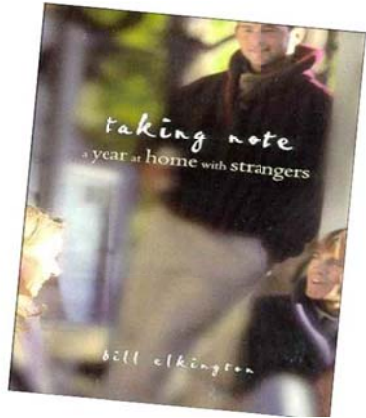
She entered God's new age. She is no longer viewed from a human perspective but she is viewed from the perspective God views her **“from above.”**

Who would not joyfully make the same exchange?!

Bu Nih is busy being born!! Nicodemus, we suspect, was not. Perhaps all the baggage of being a person of status in this world holds Nicodemus back from being “**born from above.**”



**Y**et I hear some saying, that's then and we're here now. How do we translate this into our time and place? What would living in the kingdom look like here in Gaithersburg? Today?

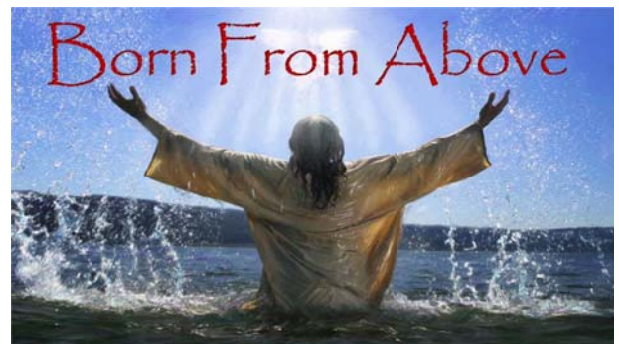


A friend of Susan's, Bill Elkington had been away from the church for many, many years. Jaded and outside faith circles, he's a good example of a person with a spiritual side but alienated from organized religion. When Bill and wife Pat were invited by a couple from an Episcopal Church to visit the fellowship group they held in their home, with real trepidation they finally did attend. Bill and Pat quickly discovered, as Bill describes it just “how extraordinary these ordinary people are.”<sup>2</sup>

Bill grew comfortable with the group and as he relaxed and let himself into this community, his faith began to renew. Indeed, so comfortable with the group that he wrote a book describing the life-affirming and life-changing experiences in a group trying to live out the faith together. It became the nursery for a renewed walk with the LORD. It became the catalyst for being 're-born from above.' Yet again coming into God's community makes a big difference, a quality difference in one's life.

**J**esus is right. Using Dylan's phraseology: if we are not busy being born from above, we are passing away.

Are we a congregation where the unaffiliated and those injured by life and organized religion can find themselves nurtured and encouraged? Do we project the wonders of God's realm in such beautiful, tangible terms that a Bu Nih or a Bill Elkington would joyfully spring to enter it? Interestingly enough both of these individuals' returns to faith involve a small group experience. Small groups are particularly effective at this. That is why small group ministries are essential for a healthy congregation.



Are we each busy being born from above? If we aren't, we know from both Jesus and Dylan that we are slowly, imperceptibly perhaps, but dying spiritually we are.

Instead seek the LORD. Endeavor always to keep the lines of communication open with God; seeking to enter God's kingdom; diligently building God's community here in our community; being born from above; always ever growing in faith by persistently and perpetually seeking to be reborn again and again and again; until we are the persons God wants us to be.

Being born again....yet again....for the very first time.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john3x1.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Bill Elkington, *Taking Note: a year at home with strangers*. introduction, p. 14