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John 3:1-8

Ockenga Fellows Retreat 1: Are You Born Again?

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Pre-Introduction:

This is the first of several sermons throughout the next **two years** in which I will **reflect** on what I learn at the GCTS Ockenga Fellows retreat. The Gordon-Conwell Ockenga Institute is named after the seminary's first **President, Dr. Harold John Ockenga**, and exists to help the church bring about **cultural renewal** and **transformation**. Our first session was on the **Great Awakening** and **Ministry in New England**, so I look forward to sharing some of what I learned in this sermon.¹

Introduction:

Why are you here? Why have you come to church **tonight**? Did you come because your friends are here? Did you come because your **boyfriend** or **girlfriend** or **parent** asked you to come? Did you come for the **music** or the **sermon** or because you think **church is important**? I come for the **cheese** and **crackers**.

A **man** named **Nicodemus** once visited Jesus under **cover** of **darkness** to find out **who Jesus is**. He was a **Pharisee** and “a member of the **Jewish ruling council**.” Nicodemus was an **intelligent** man, a man who knew the **Hebrew Scriptures** (what we call the **Old Testament** today), a man who had **standing** and **authority**. I think it's fair to say that he was probably a **good man** too. We would call him “**open-minded**” today. Many of the Pharisees **brushed Jesus off**, but Nicodemus doesn't do that. He goes to Jesus because he wants to know who Jesus really is.

Do you see a **little of yourself** in Nicodemus? Are you interested in who Jesus is? Are you intelligent, at least moderately so? Are you a good-person? Are you open-minded? If yes, then **can I say this** of you?...

You've come to Jesus wondering who he is. (v1-2)

You've come to church to find out **who Jesus is**. And maybe if you already believe in Jesus you've come to church to **remember** who you think Jesus is. But there's **one problem** with Nicodemus. He is **spiritually blind**. Nicodemus came at “**night**.” By including this **detail** the author of this gospel, John, isn't just recording **when** it happened, but telling us a little something about the **spiritual state of Nicodemus**.

Why do we do things at **night**? Because we don't want people to see us. When we were **teenagers** my **brother** and a **couple friends** and I got dressed up in **camouflage** and tried to sneak from one end of my **hometown** to the other end of town under **cover of darkness** without anyone seeing us. People spotted us in the first **thirty seconds**. Nicodemus doesn't want to be seen. But that **night** isn't just on the **outside**. It's **inside** too. Nicodemus's **heart is dark**. He's **spiritually blind** (John 11:10). He doesn't know **who** Jesus is.

John 3:1-2 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” (NIV®)

Nicodemus doesn't come **outright** and say it, "**Who** are you Jesus?" but you can see it **implied** in his statement. "Rabbi, we know you are from God because you do miracles... but who are you really?" Have **you** ever asked Jesus that, "Jesus, **who** are you really?" I hope you're **asking it right now** because Jesus is going to answer you **different** than you expect. Do you want to hear how Jesus **answers** Nicodemus?

To get into God's kingdom you have to be born again. (v3-4)

John 3:3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." (NIV®)

Instead of telling Nicodemus who he is Jesus **calls him out**, "Nicodemus, you've **got it all wrong**. You think you've **figured me out** but you don't know **what it's all about**." It's like Jesus is **pointing** at you and saying, "You've got it all wrong. You don't know **half** of what you think you know." Most of us assume if we're **good people** we'll go to heaven. Nicodemus assumed that because he was **born Jewish** and knew the **Scriptures** that it would **turn out okay** for him, but Jesus says you have to be "born again" to see God.

If you're a **normal human being** like Nicodemus you probably think that's the **most ridiculous statement** you've ever heard.

John 3:4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" (NIV®)

Last week I went back to the **seminary** I attended, **Gordon-Conwell**, to participate in the **1st of seven** retreats as part of the **Ockenga Fellows program**. At this retreat we discussed **ministry in New England**. One of our teachers shared a study (that although is **now dated** is interesting).

"Fewer people in New England say they have had a "born again" experience - 16.5% compared to 36.5% for the nation. (General Social Surveys, 1972-1994)."²

Monica told me that once when she invited one of her **coworkers** at her old job to **Christianity Explored**, the woman took the **invitation**, read it over, looked at Monica in **horror** and said, "You're not one of those **born agains** are you?" To which Monica said, "**Yep, I am...**" It was awkward.

Now the Ockenga study didn't define what born again means. They say it's some kind of "**experience**" but the **Barna Group's 2015 State Report of Massachusetts** says how many people are "born again" in Massachusetts and they **define** it.

"Born again: say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and believe that, when they die, they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their savior."³

They report **22%** of **Massachusetts** considers itself "born again" in comparison to **41% nationwide**. That means that roughly 1/5 people **consider themselves** born again Christians, which is **actually kind of encouraging** to me. But is that what **Jesus means** by being born again? This is what I think Jesus means.

The Holy Spirit must completely cleanse and transform you from the inside out. (v5-7)

John 3:5-7 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' (NIV®)

That seems a little **confusing**. Let me explain. In **verse 5** Jesus says you have to be “born of **water** and the **Spirit**” and then in **verse 7** he tells Nicodemus that he shouldn’t be “**surprised**” by this. Because Nicodemus knows the **Hebrew Scriptures** well (the **Old Testament**), he should know that the **prophet Ezekiel foretold** being cleansed by water and the Holy Spirit.

Ezekiel 36:25-27 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (NIV®)

You don’t have to be **baptized** with literal water to be born again. Water is a **symbol** of God’s **cleansing power** and the **Holy Spirit** brings God’s **transforming power**.⁴ Here’s **my definition** of what it means to be born again.

To be born again is for the Holy Spirit to come and dwell in you, cleanse you of your sins, and to completely transform you from the inside out through faith in Christ Jesus.

To be a **true Christian** God’s Holy Spirit has to **enter into you**, cleanse you of your sins, and **change your heart**, which leads to your whole life being changed—or what we call “being born again.” I don’t think Barna’s definition of being born again is wrong. We **must believe** in Jesus Christ and his **death** and **resurrection**. But we can’t separate that from the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit **gives us faith in Christ** and works through **the faith we have** to give us a new spiritual birth—to change our lives.

The Greek word for “again” in “born again” (v3) can also mean “**born from above**.” You need the Holy Spirit to **come down** from heaven and turn you into a **heaven-bound creature**. I want you to **ask** yourself. **Am I born again?** Has the Holy Spirit come and cleansed me of my sins and is he completely transforming me from the inside out? Elsewhere the **Bible** tells us that those **who are born again**:

- Do what is right (1 John 2:29)
- Turn from their sins and to God (1 John 3:9; 5:18)
- Love one another (1 John 4:7)
- Overcome the world by faith in Jesus (1 John 5:4-5)
- Believes Jesus is the Messiah — God’s only chosen Savior. (1 John 5:1)

Do you obey God? Are you **turning** from your sins? Do you **love** one another? Do you have **faith** in Jesus? Do you **believe** he’s the **only way** you can be saved? These are all **signs** of being born again.

As part of the **Ockenga program** we read a **biography** of **George Whitefield**, who was the greatest preacher during the **first Great Awakening** in **England** and the **Colonies** in the **1730s and 40s**. If there’s one **central message** of his preaching it’s that **you must be born again**. Whitefield preached in a time when people had **forgotten** the importance of the **heart**. They had begun to just go through the **religious motions**. If they **went to church** and were **good people**, surely they were safe, right? **No!** Whitefield boldly told them that the Holy Spirit had to completely transform their hearts from the inside out.

This was a **radical message** for that day. The message of the “new birth” completely **captivated the whole country**. When George Whitefield preached **thousands** came to hear him. When people heard George Whitefield was going to preach, they would leave their **plows** in the **field** and **ride** as fast as they could to find him. Whole **plumes** of **dust** would gather in the sky from all the **people** and their **wagons**. And when he

preached people **wept** and **cried out** as they realized how **sinful** they were and their need to be **born again**. And once this message arrived people wanted to **hear more**.

There's one story of a **pastor in Scotland** who was kind of a **boring preacher**. He didn't attract large crowds. But his church heard about the message of being born again and he began **preaching on it**. Whitefield came and preached and they experienced a revival.⁵ That's why I'm trying it today! I wanted to share a **few paragraphs** from one of George Whitefield's sermons called ***On Regeneration*** from **2 Corinthians 5:17**. Regeneration is the **theological term** for being born again by the Spirit. In this sermon Whitefield talks about **Nicodemus** coming to Jesus and **explains** why we have to be **spiritually reborn**.

For, supposing we were, as Nicodemus ignorantly imagined, to enter a "second time into our mother's womb, and be born," alas! what would it contribute towards rendering us spiritually new creatures? Since "that which was born of the flesh would be flesh still;" we should be the same carnal persons as ever, being derived from carnal parents, and consequently receiving the seeds of all manner of sin and corruption from them. No, it only means, that we must be so altered as to the qualities and tempers of our minds, that we must entirely forget what manner of persons we once were. As it may be said of a piece of gold, that was once in the ore, after it has been cleansed, purified and polished, that it is a new piece of gold; as it may be said of a bright glass that has been covered over with filth, when it is wiped, and so become transparent and clear, that it is a new glass:⁶

Whitefield is saying the Holy Spirit **completely transforms** our lives. He goes on to **apply** what it means to be born again. He says you can be committed to **public** and **private prayer**, taking the **Lord's supper**, and even **fasting**, but although those things are good, what matters is being born again by God's Holy Spirit.⁷ You can even be a **moral** and **good person** and **call yourself a Christian, never hurting anyone**, but that doesn't mean you're born again.⁸

We may indeed depend on the broken reed of an external profession; we may think we are good enough, if we lead such sober, honest, moral lives, as many heathens did. We may imagine we are in a safe condition, if we attend on the public offices of religion, and are constant in the duties of our closets. But unless all these tend to reform our lives, and **change our hearts**, and are only used as so many **channels of divine grace**; as I told you before, so I tell you again, Christianity will profit you nothing.

In other words, we don't practice **religion** for **religion's sake** or to be good people. We read our Bibles and pray and go to church to encounter the living God, and have the Holy Spirit change our lives.

Let each of us therefore seriously put this **question** to our hearts: Have we **received the Holy Ghost** since we believed? Are we new creatures in Christ, or no? At least, if we are not so yet, is it our daily endeavor to become such? Do we constantly and conscientiously use all the means of grace required thereto? Do we fast, watch and pray? Do we, not lazily seek, but laboriously strive to enter in at the strait gate? In short, do we **renounce our own righteousness**, take up our **crosses** and **follow Christ**? If so, we are in that narrow way which leads to life; the good seed is sown in our hearts, and will, if duly watered and nourished by a regular persevering use of all the means of grace, grow up to eternal life.⁹

We don't want to place our confidence in **religious rituals**, but we continue to do them as a pathway to **knowing** and **experiencing God**. So my challenge to you is the same as George Whitefield's challenge to his listeners. **Examine** your heart to see if you're seeking Christ Jesus. Search inside for the Holy Spirit's working in you to bring you to **repentance** of your sins and **faith** in Christ Jesus. *The Holy Spirit must completely cleanse and transform you from the inside out.*

Some of you are listening to this sermon and you are Christians, and you'd like to see a **revival** like the one Whitefield saw with thousands of people coming to Christ Jesus. Is it **possible**? Our last verse says this:

John 3:8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (NIV®)

God's Spirit can change us. (v8)

The word for "wind" and "Spirit" are the same Greek word, "**pneuma**." Just like we can't see the wind but can experience the wind as it **blows** all around us, **whipping our hats** off and making our **noses cold**, so we can feel the Holy Spirit as he changes us from the inside out. In some ways the work of the Holy Spirit is **incredibly subjective** because the work is on the inside, but we can see the **outward effects** as we watch a **person grow** and **change** and become a little more **like Jesus**.

God's Holy Spirit can change a person's life. God's Holy Spirit can change a **city's life**. I believe God can **start** a revival here in Westford with **just one person**. **Are you the one person?** Are you someone who needs to be **born again tonight?** If yes, **right now** as I'm talking or when I pray the **closing prayer** come sit in the **front row** and we'll have a **conversation**. No one will **judge** you. We'll **rejoice** with you! Come on down. We don't bite.

While you're **debating** that inside your **head** I want to address **Cornerstone**. Notice the **last line**, "So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." There's something **uncomfortable** about that. If the Holy Spirit is this **mighty wind** that comes and goes and is full of **God's power**, shouldn't **we** be a little more **like that** too? It's **easy** to get **locked** into a **routine ministry** inside these **four walls** and to forget **the power** the Holy Spirit has to **blow afresh** in our community. God can bring **revival**, but it's going to require us **following him** as he blows **out** into our **town**, **out** into our **frontlines**, out from these **four walls**. If you want to experience the power of the Holy Spirit anew, you can also come on down and sit in the front row and we'll pray during the **closing song**.

If you need to be born again, **come on down**. Come sit in the **first** row of chairs. You can even come down while I'm **praying**. Nobody will judge. *The Holy Spirit must completely cleanse and transform you from the inside out.* Let's pray.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to [sermons](#) or to read [our story](#).

¹ The Ockenga Institute <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/index.cfm> “Central to the vision of Dr. Harold John Ockenga, a founder and the first president of Gordon-Conwell, the Harold John Ockenga Institute exists to equip the Church for renewal, global outreach and cultural transformation. The Harold John Ockenga Institute lives out its mission by extending the vision and capabilities of Gordon-Conwell through two major departments: The Shoemaker Center for Church Renewal and the Hispanic Ministries Program.”

² GCTS Ockenga New England Research Projects vis Dr. David Horn. Ockenga Fellows program September 2018.

³ Barna: Massachusetts State Report 2015 with comparative data from the Northeast region. Copyright 2014-2015 by Barna Group. All rights reserved.

⁴ NIV Zondervan Study Bible. General Editor D.A. Carson. 2015. Kindle Edition. Located 245453. John 3:5 footnote.

⁵ Kidd, Thomas S. *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father*. Yale University Press. New Haven & London. Published 2014. Page 162.

⁶ Whitefield, George. *The Collected Sermons of George Whitefield* (Kindle Locations 12465-12473). Jawbone Digital. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Whitefield, George. (Kindle Locations 12550-12553).

⁸ Whitefield, George. (Kindle Locations 12559-12561).

⁹ Whitefield, George. (Kindle Locations 12582-12590).