
You Must Be Born Again

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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Does it make a difference whether you were born in South Carolina or in California? Does your place of birth affect your personality? Does it tell others something valuable or essential about who you are?

Most of us would answer this question, "Yes, of course it does." We often use a person's place of birth as a kind of tag, a handy label, which we can use to identify the way he thinks, or the way she acts. We notice where a person was born, and we call her a native South Carolinian, or we call him a native Californian.

Well, I believe that way of thinking is nonsense. Here's why. When I moved in 1985 to Summerville, South Carolina, the local newspaper wrote a pleasant article about the new priest. The article was kind and harmless except for one item. The first paragraph identified me as a "native Floridian."

When I read that, I was horrified! Nothing against Florida, but I have always thought of myself as a native Georgian. Both my mother and father had generations of ancestors from Georgia. I was raised, almost my entire childhood, in the same house on a farm in Georgia, close to the Georgia soil. I am from Georgia. Nothing against Florida; I'm just not from there!

Nevertheless, the truth is, I was physically born in Florida. My father spent some time in the Air Force, and during his year or so at Tyndale Air Force Base in Panama City, Florida, I was born. By the time I was one and a half, we were on a farm in Georgia. I do not remember Panama City at all, and I do not want to remember Panama City. I have never had an urge to visit the place.

I refuse to believe, maybe a little too stubbornly, that the mere place I was born has an effect on who I am. Now, the place I was raised sure has an effect. The way I was raised sure has an effect. Who my parents are may have an effect. But I regard the actual place of my birth as a kind of accident.

Jesus, I believe, might take this line of reasoning even further. He, too, was not born in his hometown. And he talked about how one's spiritual birth is far more important than one's physical birth. He talked about being born again.

Truly, what Jesus says about being born again might upset those of us who put great stock in genealogies, or where we were born, or those of us who worry about being called a native such-and-such. Jesus' answer to Nicodemus, late one night in Jerusalem, put the matter quite simply.

Nicodemus, one of the respected leaders of the Pharisees, had come to Jesus with a sort of hesitant curiosity. Remember that Nicodemus was an important figure for the faithful Pharisees, who were also like a great family. They knew who each other's ancestors were. They knew where each other was from. In the presence of Jesus at night, almost in secret, Nicodemus doesn't even ask a question at first. He simply remarks that Jesus seems to come from God.

Jesus responds to the curiosity with an equally curious remark about where people might come from. "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Yes, most of us today have heard the remark before. We've heard the phrase translated as being born again. I daresay when many of us hear that kind of talk, we imagine big, revival tents and slick, syrupy altar calls. We think of quick and shallow religious experiences which may not quite be our cup of tea.

Thus, we dismiss the term. That's too bad, because Jesus is talking about, today, what may be the most important discipline of the Christian life. He is talking about defining our identity not by earthly standards, but by spiritual standards. He agrees with us that our births are important. Our place of birth, how we are born, is indeed important. It's just that Jesus wants us to be born entirely anew, from above, our identities shaped by something other than who our ancestors were or the place where we were raised.

Where were you born? Have you been born again? Have you been born from above? I hope so. I hope you have been born again. I hope you have been born of the spirit, again and again and again!

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