

SO YOU ARE BORN AGAIN!

Today's Text: Jn 3: 1- 21

Extracts:

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, *unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” [Jn 3: 1-5]

Bunji Garlin Alvarez is a 32-year old Reggae Soca artist from Trinidad & Tobago (Caribbean).¹ He is a four-time winner of the Trinidad Soca Monarch competition, a highly coveted prize for the band whose songs receive the most air play during the internationally attended annual carnivals. Bunji is also well-known for his dreadlocks that form part of his trademark with his fans worldwide. However, on Monday, 28 March, 2011, he went into a barbershop and cut everything off! When his new look appeared on the Internet, it made waves among his fans. Asked by reporters the whereabouts of his hair, he said, “It’s no longer on my head.” He added that he had thought deeply about it in recent times and finally decided to cut his hair. His wife accompanied him to the barbershop and his daughter greeted him “normally” when he returned home.

The idea for change began inside Bunji. He decided on a new look and a new attitude. He went ahead and did it. But what does that really mean? Bunji will still sing his Soca tunes but will cutting his hair change the lyrics of his songs? Being born again raises similar questions. You become a new creation in Christ by the baptismal rituals and ceremonies in your church. But how many people really give up their sinful past? In this week’s Bible text, Jesus had an interesting conversation with a top Jewish leader on what it really means to be born again. So, are you truly born again? Let us find out from this week’s challenging study.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: Nigel Telesford, “Bunji cuts off his dreadlocks,” *Trinidad Express*, March 29, 2011; http://www.trinidadexpress.com/news/Bunji_cuts_off_his_dreadlocks-118820974.html and “Bunji Garlin,” From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunji_Garlin

1. Background: Jesus confounds a top Jewish religious leader

I was watching recently a religious programme on cable television. At the end, the speaker asked viewers who needed to be saved to stretch their hands towards their TV sets and pray with him. At the end of it all, he said to them, “You are now born again!” Is that all it really takes to become born again?

In this week’s Bible text, a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus by night [Jn 3: 1]. He was said to be a ruler of the Jews, suggesting that he was a prominent religious man in society. Did he come at night so as not to be seen by his colleagues or was that the only time he had to see Jesus or did he want to know more about the Lord’s new doctrine? We may never know but the subject that Jesus plunged him to discuss suggests that the Lord perceived that the ruler was desirous to know more about Him. He began by commending Jesus, saying, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” [v. 2].

The answer that Jesus gave baffled Nicodemus. Jesus told him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, *unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” Jesus complicated his confusion by adding, “*Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” [vv. 3-5]. Let us pay attention to the following:

a) *What is the kingdom of God?*

Jesus spoke of the born again person seeing and entering the kingdom of God. What is it? Sometimes, we see a differentiation between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God [Matt. 19: 23-24] or they are used interchangeably Lk 18: 24-25]. Jesus taught at the Sermon on the Mount, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” [Matt. 6: 33]. On another occasion, when the Pharisees asked Him when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus answered, “The kingdom of God is within you” [Lk 17: 20-21]. Writing to the Romans, Paul said that the kingdom of God is not about food and drinks “but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” [Rom. 14: 17]. A person who has the kingdom of God is said to be the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in him or her [1 Cor. 3: 16]. Therefore, *the kingdom of God is a spiritual state* while the kingdom of heaven is a physical place where God’s throne is. That implies that *to enter the kingdom of heaven, you must have the kingdom of God. Only those who are born again can have access to both.*

b) *Access is by choice, not by chance*

Nicodemus asked Jesus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered

him, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” [Jn 3: 4-5]. In other words, the new birth is unlike the first birth. You were born by chance into the family or race or country to which you belong. You are male or female, Jew or Gentile by birth. It was not of your own making. The second birth, on the other hand, is **by your own voluntary choice**. You cannot be forced to do it. That is why you are expected to have your water baptism after you have attained the age of reason. That way, you cannot complain that your parents or teachers forced you to become a Christian.

c) *It can only be understood by faith, not by empirical proof*

Jesus told Nicodemus, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” [vv. 7-8]. That suggests that if you want to understand it before you go forward with becoming born again, you may never have the answers. That is because it is based on faith, not facts. For some people, what they cannot prove does not exist.

For example, when Thomas, one of the twelve apostles, was told that Jesus had risen from the dead, he refused to believe, saying, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” Eight days later, Jesus reappeared to them and challenged Thomas to have his wish. He fell down and worshipped Jesus, saying, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus told him, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” [Jn 20: 24-29]. ***The vast majority of born again people over the past two thousand years have never seen Christ in person and yet have believed.***

d) *It is from heaven not from below*

When Nicodemus asked Jesus, “How can these things be?” He replied that He was not talking about earthly things but heavenly things. He added, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” [Jn 3: 9-13]. That implies that you can only be born again from above (heaven) and not from below (earth). Therefore, only a person who has come from heaven can speak of heavenly things. That only person is Jesus the Christ. It is not surprising that only Christians can talk of being born again.

Those who have tried to build their knowledge and practice of true worship on human philosophies have wound up with either the tower of Babel [Gen. 11: 1-9] or idol worship of heavenly bodies, such as the sun or the moon or an unknowable God [Acts 17: 16-23]. Even a figure of

Jesus is not enough. For example, the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness was supposedly a figure of the crucifixion of Jesus [**Jn 3: 14**]. But the children of Israel thought the power was in that bronze serpent and they began to worship it as a god until it was destroyed during the reign of king Hezekiah [**2 Kgs 18: 4**]. Jesus is real and He comes from heaven!

e) *It is only by grace, not by own effort or works*

Being born again is by grace not by our own efforts “for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” [**Jn 3: 16**]. Faith in Jesus is neither blind nor reckless. It is ***based on truth, that is, an invariant reality***. That is why Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever [**Heb.13: 8**]!

The decision not to choose Jesus has its price because whoever “believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” Such a person has traded the light that God brought to the world for the darkness of this world [**Jn 3: 17-19**].

In general, it is a misnomer to call yourself a Christian when you are not born again. For example, it was in the church at Antioch that disciples were first called Christians. It consisted of people who “believed and turned to the Lord.” When Barnabas came and saw the grace of God there, he was glad. Then, he went to Tarsus to bring Saul to Antioch and they spent a whole year there, teaching a great many people [**Acts 11: 19-26**]. So, what do we expect to see in you as evidence of being truly born again?

2. Evidence of being truly born again

Here are some marks that you have to show (among others):

a) *Water baptism*

Water baptism is a very essential mark of being born again because of what it represents. First and foremost, Jesus ordered it when He commanded His disciples to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” [**Matt. 28: 19**]. While on earth, Jesus Himself (through His disciples) baptized people [**Jn 4: 1-2**], just as John the Baptist did. On Pentecost Sunday, after Peter’s sermon, “those who gladly received the word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them” [**Acts 2: 41**]. In the home of Cornelius, as Peter was still preaching to the Gentile listeners, the Holy Spirit fell upon them and they began to speak with other tongues, Peter said, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized

who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” They were baptized soon after [Acts 10: 41-48]. In the early church at Philippi, worshippers on Sabbath day went out of the city to the riverside “where prayer was customarily made” [Acts 16: 13]. You can be sure that baptism was the major reason for going there. Therefore, water baptism is a necessary mark of being born again.

Water baptism is a covenant ritual. It marks a turning away from a life of sin and a turning to a new life in Christ Jesus. Such a change is well captured in the words of the prophet Ezekiel where he wrote [Ezek. 36: 25-28]:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and ... you shall be My people, and I will be your God.

In her testimony, *I Dared To Call Him Father*,² a Pakistani Muslim that was directly converted to Christianity by Jesus Himself underscores the significance of water baptism in her conversion. One day, Jesus came and stood before her. He told her, “It is time for you to be baptized in water, Bilquis.” She writes:

I knew that the significance of baptism is not lost on the Muslim world. A person can read the Bible without arousing too much hostility. But the sacrament of baptism is a different matter. To the Muslim this is the one unmistakable sign that a convert has renounced his Islamic faith to become a Christian

Therefore, the only way you can show God and man that you are a new creation in Christ is to get water baptism.

b) *Confirmed by the Holy Spirit*

Holy Spirit baptism is the spiritual confirmation of the physical water baptism exercise or an indication that you are due for water baptism. For example, after Jesus had been baptized by John, the onlookers saw the Holy Spirit descend on Him like a dove, and a voice came down from heaven, saying, “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased” [Lk 3: 21-22]. That was what the disciples also received on Pentecost Sunday [Acts 2: 1-4], whereas many of them had received water baptism some three years earlier under John the Baptist or Jesus [Jn 4: 1]. In the case of Cornelius and his household, as we had earlier seen above, the Holy Spirit

² Bilquis Sheikh with Richard H. Schneider, Baker Book House (1978), pp.70-71

falling on his hearers indicated to Peter that they were due for water baptism [Acts 10: 47].

In addition to falling on new converts, the Holy Spirit can also be received through laying of hands. For example, after Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, a disciple sent to him by Jesus laid hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Soon after, scales fell off Paul's eyes and he received back his sight and "he arose and was baptized" [Acts 9: 17-18]. In the church at Ephesus, Paul came across about twelve disciples who had received only the baptism of John. He asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They replied, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." After preaching Jesus to them, "they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied" [Acts 19: 1-7].

c) *Thereafter, remain the temple of the Holy Spirit*

The word of God says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" [2 Cor. 5: 17]. It adds, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For ***the temple of God is holy, which temple you are***" [1 Cor. 3: 16-17]. Therefore, by your spiritual fruit, manifested as "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [and] self-control" [Gal. 5: 22-23], let the world see and know that you are in deed born again. Everything else is showmanship and self-deceit!

It is instructive that Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea took the body of the crucified Christ from the Roman authorities for burial [Jn 19: 38-41]. ***The one who came by night when Jesus was alive came out boldly by day for His body after His death. He in deed understood what Jesus had taught him about being born again!***

3. Conclusion: Take a stand!

Thank God you have accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour. But have you- really? Have you received water baptism? Are you now Spirit-led, that is, living in accordance with the word of God? It is not everybody who has a driver's license or permit that is called a driver! That you are called a Christian does not make you born again. It is not about religion but about your personal relationship with God by Christ Jesus.

Take a stand! Are you truly born again?