
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Baptism

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I feel your pain. It is surprisingly upsetting to be peppered with questions about whether you have been “saved,” or whether you have been “born again.” And, I too sometimes struggle to respond without attacking my attacker.

Who knew it could be so annoying for someone to promise to “pray for you!”

Interestingly, I don't think “born again” means what they think it means. Billy Graham popularized the phrase back in the 1970s, when he used it to describe a dramatic, life-changing conversion experience. Unfortunately, he tends to talk about as if it's something we do for ourselves.

The idea, of course, comes from the story of Nicodemus. Jesus declares, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” But, Nicodemus doesn't get it. “Can one enter a second time into the mothers womb and be born?” he responds.

Nicodemus is not alone. When conservative Christians became more politically active around issues like abortion and gay marriage, liberals began to take up his cause. Bumper stickers that said, “Born Once, Doing Just Fine,” and “Born OK the First Time” started growing on the backs of their cars.

It's easy to get caught between these two groups when it comes to talking about faith.

I love your answer that you “got the Spirit” when you were baptized.

The problem with “born again” language is that sells itself as a self-help remedy. But, this is not what Jesus says. Jesus tells Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”

In other words, salvation is not something that we do for ourselves, but something that God does for us. This is what baptism is all about. It's not magic. We are not trying to convince God to do something that he would not otherwise do. It's a sacrament. We are reminding ourselves of a truth about God that we have a tendency to forget.

Billy Graham has helped a lot of people. The story of Louis Zamerini's conversion in *Unbroken* is a good example. But, mistaking salvation as something that we do for ourselves often has tragic consequences.

Understanding salvation as a gift makes it easier, I think, to see others as worthy of the same gift.

The truth is that we don't need to “get right with God” as much as we just need to claim that place that has already been set

for us at the family table.

And, that's what you did, claiming your baptism in the face of accusations that you weren't a Christian because you hadn't been "born again."

Well done.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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