

# New Birth and the Realities of Race

What happens when our understanding of discipleship leads us to a cultural as well as spiritual conversion? **BRIAN BANTUM**

*“No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”*

*“How can this be?” (John 3:3, 9, NIV)*

**W**hen I was fifteen I became a Christian. When I was nineteen I became black.

In both of those moments I was ushered from one world to another, from an old identity to a new one. And yet for many years these conversions felt unrelated. Navigating a life of following Christ was utterly different from navigating the realities of life as the son of a black man and a white woman.

Yet that perceived gap is a consequence of a profound misconstruction of Christian confession and discipleship, of Jesus’s simple but powerful words to Nicodemus, “You must be born anew.” To consider the twin questions of race and discipleship we must go further than questions of civil rights, of affirmative action, of economic inequity. While these are vital aspects of any consideration of race and ethnicity in the United States, as disciples of Christ we come to these questions as persons claimed by Christ and drawn into a dramatic narrative of transformation. What does it mean to be transformed? This question requires not simply an exploration of what we must do, but also of who we are. Such questions cannot be

answered simply through better theology or better policy, but must consider and implicate our own conversions.

Twenty-two years ago I was reborn. I was knit into a community of faith. I was found. If we equate discipleship with conversion perhaps we could end the story there. Surely this is what Jesus meant when he cryptically answered Nicodemus’s question with that strange saying, “You must be reborn.” My soul was renewed, I was saved.

But my life of following Christ would eventually draw me into a difficult reality concerning God’s people—the language of discipleship that brought me into faith often left the reality of race untouched and, even worse, unconsidered altogether. It was not that my race did not matter, but it was never clear what the particularities of my racial life meant for my life as a follower of Christ.

**I**n the early years of my reborn life I was an awkward teenager with a good heart and a deep love for my mother. I didn’t lie (much). I didn’t steal, I didn’t chase girls, I barely cursed. But I was a lost, lost child. My conversion was from a place of isolation to a place of belonging. When I was fifteen I was told my father had cancer; he had only a few months to live. So he moved back in



with my mother (they had been divorced) and there we took care of him. But something else happened.

In those few months I was struck by my father's peace, by his attentiveness, by some healing that was not perceptible in his blood counts or through his chemotherapy. God had restored him, and had begun to restore the relationship between my mother and father, between my father and myself. Only a few months later I presented myself to my father's church to be baptized.

I went on to become a stellar Christian, a stellar Southern Baptist, no less. I could check all the boxes: practiced daily devotions, transferred to a Christian high school, voted for the right candidates. Reconciliation looked like the erasure of difference. What really mattered was the state of

my soul and the declaration that all people could declare the name of Jesus.

In subsequent years I would discover that my entrance into God's transforming work was a continuous journey, not a destination of set belief or practice. Jesus's call to rebirth would draw me into new questions about what had not yet been reborn in my life.

This realization came as a college student when I was reading W.E.B. Du Bois's reflection *The Souls of Black Folk* for an African American history course. In his classic text, Du Bois ponders the question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" Narrating the discovery of his blackness and the

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rejection of his body and his life by white America, Du Bois describes a veil raising, dividing him from the vast white world.

His description struck me to my bones. In the context of that class I came to understand on a fundamental level that I was a black man, that only twenty years earlier I would most likely not have been enrolled in that college or even been given the privilege to wonder what I was going to do with the next five years of my life. A new understanding began to take shape.

But I had a problem. In discovering the significance of my skin color, I also came to understand the complexity of my life—that in growing up with straight hair, loving my white mother, and living in my white neighborhood I was, in many ways, a white boy, and a Southern Baptist white boy at that. I viewed the world through a certain fundamentalism that believed women's places were at home (and especially not in the pulpit) and that God had a preferred political party.

After I'd read Du Bois's words, though, the story of African American life and experience was something I could no longer resist or ignore. I felt called into a relationship and a reality that I desperately needed to discover. So I began to explore the slave spirituals, the legacies of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr., the politics of Malcolm X, the sermons of Jarena Lee. In their stories of discipleship I also saw the realities of race, the power of our bodies, and the deep distortions of a gospel bent into a lynching tree to uphold the illusion of an American dream.

As I read, I found my life knit into their stories of belonging, hope, pain, and exclusion—not just because of my biology, not just because of my black father. Rather, something more was happening, something I would not immediately understand—until my life became wonderfully intertwined with a young Korean American woman. In the same year that I met Du Bois, I met Gail Song. She was in New York, I was in Pennsylvania, and through a mutual friend we began to write letters, then phone calls. There was something in her voice I did not quite expect. In this Korean American woman I heard *soul*.

When I finally met her for the first time after two months of talking and writing, I discovered why. This woman had more soul in her pinky toenail than I had in my whole body. In our subsequent visits, we began going to her church—her Full Gospel, tambourine, double-time drummer, bass thumpin', tongues-speaking, dancing-in-the-aisles church. What I came to discover was that

my Korean American girlfriend was raised in a Pentecostal Korean church, but the space where God spoke to her and where her voice was heard was in a black charismatic church.

And there I remained with her. For a year I simply stood and watched until God literally raised my hands one day in worship and I found myself crying in the freedom of being bound to God. So there we stayed, not because it was intellectually rigorous or because the worship was especially good but because I loved Gail. Slowly I came to realize that I would not be whole without this woman and without these people.

In the next twenty years the books I read of African American Christian reflection, as well as those gospel songs and rhythms, would become not merely novel curiosities but vital aspects of who I understood God to be. Through this Korean American woman I entered into the realities of Asian American life, its perplexities and promise. But in Gail I also came to understand more fully what it meant to be black in America. In her worship, in her spirituality, in her freedom and compassion, I felt and heard the spirituals and the incarnation of black life in ways I had not known before. Through her life I came to discover my own connections and possibilities as one bound to the story of African American life.

This has meant more than simply an appreciation for different perspectives. Life with Gail has meant a life where kimchee is not something I tolerate for her, but something I need for me to be me, for me to be whole. Because she is of my flesh, I am bound not only to her, but also to her people and their struggles and their hopes. In being bound to Gail I am now bound to the realities and struggles of Asian Americans as well.

I may have entered the baptismal waters as a white Southern Baptist, but I am emerging from the water a black charismatic, not because of my skin, but because of the realities of relationship my new birth began to bind me to. While I had surely been reborn when I was sixteen, my birth was not finished, is still not finished.

And yet I worry. I worry that too many of us believe that Jesus was urging Nicodemus to a singular event rather than a life of *being* born, a life of *being* new.

What must we do to overcome the segregation of our Sundays? Educational initiatives, reading lists, church exchanges, and mission trips are but a few ways that congregations have sought to address this question. We try to celebrate all

cultures and races as made in God's image even while living into Paul's proclamation that there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free. At times, these ends may seem contradictory. Even so, for the many programs we engage in, for the ways education has introduced the stories of varied cultures and sought to celebrate racial and ethnic difference, our churches scarcely look different than they did fifty years ago. Where do we go from here?

For many, racial reconciliation has often been framed within the language of justice and injustice, highlighting the racialized separation of churches and the church's failure to advocate for those who are marginalized and oppressed. The aim of racial awareness programs (where participants are exposed to the stories of racial oppression) is to help us all to see these realities and confess their centrality to the work of the church. These are vital contributions for forming a people of God and participating in God's just activity in the world.

But such programs can also hold within them a temptation. Can our programs and initiatives, in some ways, mimic Nicodemus's question to Jesus, "What must we do?" We so often want a set of prescriptions, a set of steps that will allow us to live into God's reconciling work. While it is indeed important to ask that question, by staying there we risk glossing over Jesus's response: "You must be reborn." In our desire to be faithful we turn God's reconciling work into a new set of levitical laws, of dos and don'ts.

If we consider Jesus's response to Nicodemus as words that fundamentally mark the *totality* of our lives—not simply our spiritual state of being—we are confronted with a daunting possibility: that Nicodemus's life (and ours) must testify to a miraculous transformation of identity, and that this transformation includes the reconfiguration of our racial and ethnic identities.

While the words of Nicodemus are often read as a question about our spiritual rebirth, they are also important as we deal with the difficult question of race, ethnicity, and identity. Many churches (white and non-white alike) are asking, in the midst of change and shifts in demographics, which aspects of our identity must we hold on to in order to remain ourselves. How do we maintain our identities in Christ? Who should we be? Yet often these questions are secondary to our questions about discipleship, about living into new birth and new life.

The Gospel of John's description of the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus offers important insights into our contemporary racial imagination and what rebirth could mean in relationship

to racial and ethnic identity. In my own life, as a mixed-race man, I have found that conversion is not merely a spiritual reality but one that permeates the entirety of who I am and who I believe I should be. Could it be said that discipleship in our contemporary society is not only about spiritual conversion, but cultural conversion as well?

What, in fact, would cultural conversion look like? Is it a better understanding of the "other"? Is it recognizing America's tragic and horrific legacy of slavery and oppression? These are both important steps, steps that the Evangelical Covenant Church purposely incorporates into the formation of its ordained clergy and incorporates into the structures of its denominational identity. But if this is the case, what prevents our denomination or the wider church from embracing a beautiful new multicultural reality? Why do our churches remain so segregated?

To re-imagine this question, let us begin with a closer consideration of identity and how Jesus reconfigures identity in those

who are born anew in him. In considering these shifts in the context of discipleship, we might also begin to imagine new ways forward on the questions of race and ethnicity in the church. We must consider the significance of conversion, of names, and of being a people.

Jesus's words to Nicodemus that speak of a new birth highlight not only a shift in how we think about the world, but a shift in our very name. To be born anew is to incorporate a fundamentally new relationship of who we understand ourselves to be. God is our Father and our Mother. By saying this we are not suggesting an abstract fidelity to a force of nature. By saying, "we are reborn," we suggest that our name derives from YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Mary.

To say we are reborn is to reconsider the significance of who names us, of who we belong to. The power of rebirth becomes clear in Jesus's own birth as God becomes eternally bound to humanity by *becoming* us. In the incarnation Jesus has taken on the name "human," making it a part of who he is and who he will be. As such his relationship to humanity is a new relationship that opens God's life to the realities, the vulnerabilities, and the joys of being a particular human being.

Jesus's words to Nicodemus suggest that our rebirth comes from living into this reality, by allowing our name to become intrinsically bound

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to God's to the extent that we cannot understand ourselves apart from God. Our identity, our rebirth, is a life radically *with* God. To call ourselves "Christian" is to make this claim, that we are each a new person, that our life originates from God and leads to God, and that we cannot think ourselves apart from God.

In being born anew with Christ, in taking on his name, we are also incorporated into a new people. We are incorporated into the people to whom this God became bound through words of promise, through miraculous acts of mercy and justice, and through the intimate encounter with a Jewish girl named Mary. Christ is not born apart from a history or apart from a people, but as he takes on our name he also takes on a particular name of a particular people. Jesus takes on the condition of marginalization, and he performs the sacrificial and liturgical life of a Jew, one set apart

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to declare God's presence and desire for the world.

If we are "in Christ" we find ourselves *in* a particular people, drawn in through practices of washing and eating, praying and singing,

reading and hoping. These rhythms have their source in the cultural reality of a Jewish people. To be born anew is to discover ourselves in a new family, with new rhythms and new stories that we do not quite know, but must live into.

**I**n the church, baptism is the sign of this new life. Baptism initiates, signifies, and marks the death of some parts of our life and our entrance into a new life with Christ. Entrance into the water is our identification with Christ's descent into our lives and into death itself while our rising is taking the first breath of a new life and beginning to discover the world anew.

Herein lies our challenge. When we rise out of the baptismal waters, so much of our lives remain the same, especially the racial and ethnic constitution of our lives. Sure, we may engage in local or global missions or hear stories of Christians from other parts of the world, but how much of our lives really becomes intertwined with different people because of our baptism and our life within the church?

The reasons for this are many, but the solutions will not come from simply reading more books or

engaging in more programs. The challenge is not simply one of methods. Rather, it is that we do not go far enough in our understanding of what baptism *does* to us. The reality is that our racial and ethnic identity often remains untouched by our baptismal transformation. We do not see our racial or ethnic identity as something that needs to be subject to the same kind of transformation as our vocation, our marriages, our parenting. Why not? If Christ calls us into his life and death and resurrection, God is also calling us to the possibility that every aspect of who we are must be subject to new possibilities.

God is calling us into a transformation of our names, into a transformation of our people desiring us to be incorporated into new ways of speaking, new ways of eating, and new ways of imagining what our lives together look like in Christ.

While our baptism is surely the mark of new life in Christ, of our salvation, and of the assurance of peace with Christ, our birth is not finished in that moment either. Yet too many of us believe that Jesus was urging Nicodemus to a singular event rather than a life of being born, a life of being anew. By focusing our salvation, the totality of our eternal life, on a singular decision that affects our soul alone, with our bodies as mere trailers along for the ride, we overly circumscribe Jesus's words to Nicodemus and to us. In so doing, we seem to seek the rebirth in Spirit, without the water. But Jesus says, "Unless you are born again of water *and* Spirit." Somehow the material is important. Our bodies are important.

Jesus says what is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit. And yet Jesus is both of these. The Word became flesh, the Word condescended to our condition, and took it upon himself. The Word was a body that gives birth to us. In the reconception of humanity that is the incarnation, our bodies and our lives are taken up into Christ. Our cares are swept into Jesus's cares, our bodies are bound to those Jesus is bound to. Yes, these began with the Spirit—the Spirit's provocation, the Spirit's cleansing, the Spirit's conviction—but it does not come without water, without the admixture of blood and pain, and pushing and sometimes wondering why are we doing this at all. Birth means change.

Our new birth means we become Jesus's disciples, and in following Jesus we become new people. The journey of discipleship changes us. It grafts us into others who are not like us. It takes us to places where we thought only strangers dwelled, and it brings us to people we like

much better in theory than in real life. This is not incidental to the gospel. This is the substance of the gospel: the one who was far has come near.

In our culture we have tamed the scandal of Jesus's words to Nicodemus. We have reduced the question of Jesus's life to a spiritual mind game of belief, as if the real question is how do we "know." We have reduced the question of birth to a question of truth to be affirmed or denied, as if that is all we need to settle our place in the kingdom and hoping that racial reconciliation will become a natural byproduct of this belief.

We have done so because in our hearts we do not want to face the bloody, painful, beautiful fact of birth—that salvation is a material reality. By trying to tame Nicodemus's question, what we do not realize is that we become the Pharisee. We do not anticipate transformation, but instead we see only impossibility because we cannot imagine what it means to change, to become something different than what we have known, who we have known, or where we have lived.

But here is the question Jesus puts forward in his response to Nicodemus—the question is not whether or not you *can* become something new. The question is whether you will open yourselves to the material possibility of becoming new—of grafting your mind, your tastes, your bodies, your politics on to a people you did not know, subjecting yourself to their ways until one day you realize that you cannot live without them, until you realize that you will eat kimchee even if your Korean American wife is not with you.

Will you see brothers and sisters in the faces that seem such a minority in your town or city? Will you enter into their stories, their struggles, their triumphs? Will you hear the voices of those whose concerns and perspectives are very different from your own? If Jesus truly did conceive us in that tomb, if his body arose, what differences between us can render our conversion, our transformation impossible?

If we are in Christ, all of us are born anew and are being born anew. To consider this newness apart from the realities of our culture, our language, our race, our gender is to resist the water, to keep some part of our body and life from getting wet. Let us as a people become fully immersed in the life of Christ so that we might be fully immersed into the lives of one another. In doing so, we may be surprised to discover what is born anew in us all.

We must consider these questions around race and ethnicity not merely as gestures of political correctness or moments of "white guilt" or "cultural pride." The reality is that all races and ethnicities in the United States are incorporated into processes of racial formation. We must reflect seriously on the presumptions and exclusions we make regarding who we believe we belong to and who we want to join ourselves to.

The process we as individuals go through in understanding why we resist change is similar to the process churches must go through. To propose a step-by-step course of action is unhelpful for the steps themselves often become idols. The reality is that many of the challenges posed by racial and ethnic divisions are particular to a neighborhood or region or area. We as churches must begin to wrestle with what we are open to and what we are not open to. What are we willing to change, and what are we hesitant to change?

In articulating those areas where we are hesitant, are we willing to ask difficult questions about ourselves? Are we willing to commit the financial resources, hire the pastoral staff, and make the political commitments necessary to truly bind ourselves to people who are different from us? The reality is that every neighborhood in America has been confronted by these kind of questions, but too often we choose safety or isolation because of assumptions we make about what we believe is "natural" to us.

What would it look like for churches to ask, "Who do we want to be?" and, "Who do we *not* want to be?" If we are honest as congregations, our notions of who we don't want to be will speak as much about our identity as who we say we want to be. The question for the church is whether or not we are willing to venture into community with those we see as different. This will be different for every community and will require unique skills and practices to negotiate these questions. Can we move to this point without beginning to imagine our own journeys of discipleship as intertwined with the realities of our bodily lives? This is a question for us all if we take on the name of Christ. If we are willing to enter into these possibilities, we may be surprised by the wonderful, strange-looking children born in our midst, and we may find ourselves in the world in a new, scary, wonderful way children of God. ■