

Radical new birth

By [Ron Adams](#)

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I was not raised in the Mennonite church; I came to it later in life. It was primarily the commitment to nonviolence that drew me in, though I soon learned that there is more to like about being a Mennonite than that.

One of the things I admire about Mennonites is their respect for history. Mennonites remember. They tell and retell their stories, so that even new transplants like me come to consider them their own.

This is especially true of the stories of the martyrs of the 16th century. They remain central to Mennonite identity. These stories both reflect and shape the way Mennonites understand their relationship to the world around them. Through their telling, Mennonites learned to be wary of the state—and of other Christians as well.

Over the centuries that wariness has faded, particularly in terms of our relationship to the broader Christian church. Mennonites are much more ecumenically engaged than was once the case. But we still think of ourselves as being in and not of the world, as separate from the world around us. That separation was once marked by language, clothing, and communal living. While those distinctions remain among the most conservative Mennonites, others have left those distinctions behind. We now speak and look and live like our neighbors. We fit in.

In my opinion, the loss of those external markers has blurred the boundaries. Along with much of the rest of the U.S. church, we have become quite comfortable in our identity as citizens—and less clear about how that identity differs from that of being a Jesus-follower.

These questions of separateness and identity come to mind when reading this Sunday's Gospel reading. Jesus tells Nicodemus that entering the reign of God requires "being born from above." One must be born a second time.

The first birth was one of the flesh, and what is born of the flesh remains flesh. The second birth, however, comes through water and Spirit. What is born of the Spirit is spirit. This second birth, then, changes everything. The one who is born of the Spirit is no longer identified only by her human, fleshly, parents. She is identified as a child of the Spirit. And from that moment on, her allegiance and obedience are given to the Spirit, even if that means leaving her human family behind.

What Jesus is describing is a radical disjuncture, a breaking with what came before in order to enter into the future God is creating. As a Mennonite, I understand that exchange as being much more than a change of mind or a reordering of my theology. Having been born again, I am no longer who I once was. I am a new creation—and not only in that moment of rebirth, but forever. From that moment on, I am called to live differently, to behave differently, than I once did. I am called to be different from the world around me, from the old way of being in that world. I am called to not only be born of the Spirit, but to then live in the Spirit.

Living in the Spirit means loving God with our whole selves, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. It means learning to love our enemies, and to resist evildoers by turning the other cheek. It means caring for those who are marginalized by the world, and doing what we can to bring justice to the oppressed. And that's just the beginning.

Life among the Mennonites has helped me see that what Jesus is talking about in John 3 is exchanging one life for another. Remaining in the world, but no longer being of the world. Loving the world and seeking its peace, but not surrendering ourselves to the powers that be. Naming Jesus as Lord, not Caesar. As people born of the Spirit from above, we are called to live in ways that reveal who our true Parent is.