



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

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Born Anew

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Based on John 3:1-21

I am Nicodemus. I am a Pharisee and a Ruler of the Jews. It is my responsibility both to keep the Law and to see to it that the people keep it as well. I attach a great deal of importance to my position. I am both an example to the people and an enforcer of the Law. I don't ever want to say or do anything that might reduce my influence, or cause any negative reactions among the people.

That's why I chose to go and talk with Jesus that night.

Even as I was going to see Jesus, I was surprised at myself. He was just an itinerant preacher, like many others throughout Palestine. Why should I waste my time? Why was I so powerfully moved to make this visit? I reasoned that it wouldn't do any harm, and it just might confirm that I was doing all I needed to do to meet my responsibilities as a Pharisee and a Ruler of the Jews.

I was aware that Jesus was causing more of a stir than the other itinerant preachers and was attracting a much larger following. I owed it to myself to be informed about him – at least, that's what I told myself. Actually, some of the things he is reported to be teaching intrigued me and stirred my thinking. Some of it sounded harmless enough and might even be helpful. Some of it sounded contrary to the teachings of Judaism and might even be blasphemous. If it is, I ought to have first-hand information, both to satisfy myself and to be able to carry out my responsibilities. For these reasons, I told myself, I made the decision to go and talk with him. I'm not at all sure why I thought I needed to be secretive about it. But secretive I was as I slipped from dark shadow to dark shadow along the way to where he was staying. I even felt quite uneasy about talking with him and rehearsed what I would say to him.

As it turned out, I didn't need to feel so uneasy. I was at ease almost at once. Jesus impressed me as a calm, serene, and secure person. He wasn't at all what I expected – and certainly not like any of the itinerant preachers I had previously encountered.

How I actually began the conversation surprised me as much as the fact that I had come to see Jesus at all. "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."

"Rabbi...!" "...come from God.!" Before I saw him, I hadn't thought of him that way at all. He was just a dime-a-dozen itinerant preacher, even if he was saying some unique things. What happened to me that I addressed him that way?

I don't know for sure, but when I saw Jesus, something about him told me that he was not like the other itinerant preachers. In fact, he wasn't like anyone else that I had ever known. His first words to me confirmed that. "Truly I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

For a split second, I thought Jesus' response was completely off target. And then I realized that he had honed in on one of my deepest concerns. The Kingdom of God was my goal in life. I was obedient to the Law, kept all the observances, and did all the things to cleanse and purify myself to make sure that I would enter the Kingdom of God. And Jesus was saying to me, "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." How different from anything I had heard or believed.

How can a person be born anew when is old? Obviously, I had been born – many years ago, in fact. I can't be born anew. I can't go back and do it all over again. Besides, what does any of that have to do with the Kingdom of God? Everyone knew that keeping the Law, and doing all the right things, was how you earned the right to enter the Kingdom of God. Born anew? What was he talking about?

Of course, I asked Jesus what he meant. If I had thought, I might have anticipated his answer.

"If you expect to enter the Kingdom of God, you must not only be born physically, but also spiritually. And being born spiritually brings just as radical a change in your life as being born physically. Do you understand?"

As a matter of fact, I didn't understand.

I thought about what Jesus had said, but couldn't really sort it all out. Born again – renewed – transformed – the old forgotten as completely as any memory of the time before I was physically born. Do you wonder that I was puzzled?

Jesus continued to talk. He said that he was the Son of man; that God had sent him into the world; that whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

Eternal life? Is eternal life the same as entering the Kingdom of God? We Jews certainly believed so. And what does eternal life have to do with being born anew?

Jesus elaborated – seeming to have inside information on the intention of God. This grated on me, for I have always believed that we Pharisees had the clearest understanding of God's intention for the world – especially for us Jews. How could Jesus know more about it than we?

We understood clearly that eternal life was the product of keeping the rules. Those who did not keep them would certainly be judged, condemned, and barred from having eternal life or from entering the Kingdom of God. We had no intention of rewarding disobedient people by letting them enter the Kingdom of God.

But Jesus didn't seem to be talking about the Kingdom as a future reality. He wasn't even saying anything about rewards and punishments. He was expressing concern about the present world. He was saying that he was Son of man; that God had sent him

into the world; that people were to believe him; and that God wasn't interested in condemning the world, but in saving it.

Saving it from what?

I, of course, knew about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. The people of Israel needed to be saved from the effects of the snake bites. When people looked at the bronze snake on the pole, they believed and were saved from death from the bite of a poisonous snake.

Was Jesus saying that to believe in him meant not to die? Is that what eternal life means?

For a few moments, I thought I had it all sorted out. We Pharisees certainly believed in the possibility of eternal life. For me, it was the same as the reward of the Kingdom of God. But all that has to do with what happens after one dies. All of a sudden, I knew that I didn't have it sorted out at all.

Born anew? Believe in Jesus? Have eternal life just by believing in him? God so loved the world? There were more questions than answers.

Then I got caught up in some more of Jesus' words. Things like, "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." There it was again – "saved".

And then, there was that bit about not believing being the basis of condemnation. It isn't as if somebody else condemns me, but what I believe does. That makes sense. If Jesus is the one through whom the world is saved, and I don't believe that he is, then, of course, I am condemned and I determine my own condemnation.

There was more. "The judgment," Jesus said, "is that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." I have a choice – light or darkness – good deeds or evil. My choice determines how I live my life. I can see how that goes together.

From what Jesus is saying, though, the key is believing in Jesus.

What am I to believe about Jesus? That he is the son of God? I am also a son of God. That there is some magic involved? That he takes responsibility for my life? That there is some kind of power in his name? What am I to believe?

Maybe Jesus is telling me about a way to look at my life now. Maybe he is saying that all the ingredients for eternal life are already present and available to me, and that he, himself, is living them. Maybe he really is underscoring that eternal life is here and now – not just a future reality.

I thought about those ideas, and, with them, what Jesus had said about judgment. I knew what judgment was. We Rulers of the Jews sat in judgment often. The accused was brought before us. His infractions of the Law were cited. We passed judgment on him according to the Law.

But Jesus was saying that people choose their own judgment. Light, through Jesus, has come into the world, and people, because they choose evil deeds, also choose to remain in darkness. This was certainly a different kind of judgment that I knew or understood. It was judgment as the choice of the person, not as the finding of the court. My own choices and my own deeds bring their own judgment and condemnation.

As I thought about what I was hearing, it seemed to me that Jesus was saying that he had made the choices that were eternal life – and that believing in him meant that I was making the same choices about my life.

One thing was very clear. Jesus was not seeing eternal life as a future reward for right living now. He was saying instead that right living now – whatever that was – is eternal life.

How different that is from what I have been taught all my life. We Pharisees – Rulers of the Jews – believe that the objective of this life is to obey the rules well enough to get into heaven when we died, and that would be eternal life. It had never occurred to me that eternal life and the Kingdom of God could be in terms of the way I lived this life, and not a reward at all.

The interview with Jesus was over, but I was a long way from being through with it. If I choose to believe what he has told me, my outlook on life is going to be very different than it has been. Even if I do not choose to believe him, my life won't ever be the same. I don't think I can ever again self-righteously pat myself on the back for religiously keeping every detail of the Law, and think that I will be properly rewarded after I die. I don't think that I can ever again be a judge in a court of Law without wondering what is really going on in the life of the defendant. What, in addition to the question of his breaking a Law, needs to be taken into account? What do I need to say to him to open to him the possibility of a better life for him right now? What do I really do with what Jesus has said to me? Everything that I have ever believed is in question.

“You must be born anew.”

“Whoever believes in the Son of man has eternal life.”

“...that the world might be saved through him.”

“Light has come into the world.”

“People love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil.”

“He who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.”

Jesus has suggested a different outlook on life, and a different reason for living my life the way I do. It seems to me that he is telling me that the Kingdom of God is now; that eternal life is in terms of both my intentions and my actions right now; that he has modeled that intention and that life for me; and that, to believe and practice what he has said and how he has lived is to be so radically different that it is like being born anew.

Jesus is right. Everything he has said and suggested to me is so different from what I have always believed that to embrace it is to make a radical shift in my beliefs and in my life. I don't know if I can do it. I don't know if I want to. I certainly had no idea that my decision to pay Jesus a visit would have this result.

One thing is for certain. I won't ever be able to look at my life as I have in the past. Nor will I ever be able to put off on something or somebody else the responsibility for the decisions I make, and the way I live.

When I believe Jesus – if I ever do – I will be born anew. There's no doubt about that.