

May 3, 2009 John 3:3; Philippians 1:6 “Creative Framing” by Richard Boatman

“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

John 3:3

“I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” Philippians 1:6

One evening our confirmation class was discussing Methodist founder John Wesley. For fourteen years as an Anglican priest he preached *about* Jesus, but struggled to really *know* the Lord. Witnessing Moravian Christians respond in peace and confidence during a violent storm at sea, Wesley wanted what they had. In a Bible study at Aldersgate Street in London, he would soon find it. The Holy Spirit descended on him and he journaled, “My heart was strangely warmed.” He realized for the first time that Christ had not just died for the world but for him. With a new faith and enthusiasm, Wesley began preaching salvation by faith in Christ accompanied by an assurance, a witness of the Spirit that we are God’s children. Church after church closed their doors to him. His message was too emotional for the stoic and reserved Anglicans. At this point I tried to explain to the class that the Anglicans or Church of England said all the right words and went through the right motions, but they had no vitality in the Spirit, nothing that brought their ritual to life. I didn’t think I was quite getting through, and then one of our confirmands explained it with a great analogy. She said, “It’s like having a cake mix with all the right ingredients, but until you add the water or oil and bake it, it doesn’t come to life as a cake.” That was it! All this church ritual is just dry cake mix without the Spirit. But when the Holy Spirit is added, the glory of God begins to take form in our lives.

That’s what Jesus was trying to explain to Nicodemus the Pharisee in the third chapter of John: “...no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” We can be steeped in the “cake mix” of religious ritual and still not see the kingdom. We cannot see until the Holy Spirit makes it alive to us. When we are born again or literally, born from above, we are given new eyes. We start seeing the kingdom of God.

By kingdom, I am really referring to the realm or dimension of God. Being born from above is experiencing the birth of this new realm within us. Songs like *Blessed Assurance / Jesus is mine* or *Praise Him, Praise Him / tell of his excellent greatness* or *To God Be The Glory / great things he hath done* speak of this new birth, this new way of seeing. Ironically, these wonderful hymns referencing

spiritual sight were written (along with 8000 others) by a blind woman, Fanny Crosby. Though becoming blind shortly after birth, this dynamic Methodist woman saw things many others would never see. Her life was no stale cake mix of ritual blindness. The oil and water of the Holy Spirit had allowed her to see the kingdom of God. “I see,” said the blind man, or in this case, the blind woman.

But seeing the kingdom is but the beginning. Having the water and oil of the Spirit mix within us the spiritual “cake mix” of the new creation is but the first step. If our conception of faith is that we just have to “accept Jesus” and then wait until we die to go to heaven, the daily influence of the kingdom of God will be sadly missing. Let me make it simple and clear: *accepting Jesus* or *believing in Jesus* means we follow him *now*, on earth, in and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

When someone signs up for military service, the recruiter doesn’t say, “Okay, you’ve accepted the military way, now just live your life and someday we’ll call you to where you’ll serve.” No, you have to spend time in training. Now the training will never fully mirror what life will be like at your assigned duty. And yet, the training prepares you for this life where you’ll serve in a far superior way than if you had no training at all.

Philippians 1:6 says, “He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” Notice it does not say, “He...will complete it *at* the day of Christ Jesus,” but “*until* the day of Christ Jesus.” If we confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, this is no magic ticket that we just hold until we “cross over.” No, training camp began when we received the realm of God’s kingdom in and through the person of Jesus Christ. You and I are now in a Holy Spirit process of being matured, completed.

That’s why the means of grace, the windows into God’s transforming presence are so important. Prayer, Bible meditation, examining our motives, works of compassion, fellowship, worship—these are means by which God forms us or completes the kingdom work in us. “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” is part of our daily training. The kingdom realm has begun in our lives. With every surrender of attitude, with each confronting of deception or injustice and resisting of temptation, with that clear choice to forgive, with those selfless actions towards others—these are all elements of the kingdom coming in us. While this completing of God’s work in us will not fully reflect the glory that we will one day know any more than a bonfire fully mirrors a forest fire, it is the same essence of glory that works in us, training us for our part in the “new heavens and earth.”

Ten or eleven years ago I talked to a carpenter where I served in Reinbeck. I sensed the call of God on his life for some type of formal church ministry. He started back to school. Tired out brain cells were awakened and stretched. A year later he was given a small rural United Methodist church in Fremont, Iowa. For months I'd get a call almost every Saturday night. There were traces of panic and frustration in his voice as he struggled with the passage he was preaching on in twelve hours. As he grew, as grace completed its work in him, the phone calls grew further apart. He has now faithfully served this Fremont congregation for nine years. On Saturday, May 9th Larae and I will proudly watch him graduate from seminary. Sadly, his parents and brothers will not be attending. They place no value on the incredible work of grace in his life. But even this lack of support all along his journey has been used to mature him. "All things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

God is completing a work in us. God is finishing a work in you. The Spirit is moving you and me to become the picture God has for us in Jesus Christ. God does not focus on where we are but on who we are becoming. Listen to Hebrews 11:3: "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (KJV). Within God's very being, the worlds were conceived and framed and then God spoke into existence what was within. God also holds within and creatively frames the picture of you, the Church, and the cosmos. Our Lord blesses us and speaks this forth this picture as he "ever lives to make intercession for us." We are being formed into Christ's image, being made fit for the kingdom realm.

Baptism, communion, confirmation, weddings, hymns, readings, solitude, silence, fasting, worship—all these things can be dry cake mix just filling up space in the hardened cardboard box of our lifeless souls. Or, by the water and oil of the Spirit, these same things become ways in which we cooperate with God's work of grace, God's call to us.

Some time ago, my daughter Mandy was an attendant at a wedding. Our grandson Kadyn was sitting in the crowd with another of his grandparents. During a silent part of the service, my daughter began hearing the quiet and then progressively louder sounds of a LeapFrog game system. Before it was finally shut off, the repetitious electronic call became so loud that everyone was looking at Kadyn and his grandma and then at Mandy who was helpless to intervene. The grandmother had moved her leg, stepped on her purse and accidentally turned on the LeapFrog that was buried inside it. After she finally found it and got it shut off, then

everyone heard Kadyn say, “I’ve got to go to the bathroom.” It was a wedding to remember.

Like that grandmother’s purse, there is often a voice buried deep within. The voice of God calls us, but it is often muffled by the incessant noise and clutter of our lives. It grows louder and sometimes comes at inopportune times. But we never know when it will be “shut off,” so it behooves us to respond when we hear it.

And when we do hear it and respond marvelous things happen. I think of Toffie and Wynona, a young couple in Evansville, Indiana who were submerged in the local drug culture. Though at first distant, God’s call became loud and clear and they were gloriously delivered from a life of darkness. I think of Vern and Marilyn, an older couple in southeastern Iowa who were in the throes of religious legalism. They were judgmental and wouldn’t give people, even Christians, a second chance if they were wronged or didn’t like the way something was done. Through the hardness of their religious tower, they heard our Lord’s saving voice. They were delivered from the dry cake mix of religion and became hearts filled with the compassionate and healing oil of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism, confirmation and all the other means of grace are a wonderful opportunity to cooperate with our Lord’s ongoing work of preparing us to live forever in the “new heavens and earth.” Whether today’s confirmation has been an exercise in handling dry cake mix or a living ritual of the Spirit that works as a benchmark for lifestyles of daily living in and for the kingdom realm remains to be seen. It is jokingly said of the church in Norway, that if you need to get rid of squirrels in the attic, confirm them and then you’ll never see them again. It is a sad parody of the abysmal understanding of both confirmation and the kingdom of God.

God would complete his work in us. He has creatively framed the picture of us into which we are growing. But we must cooperate with this call, weathering the storms of adversity, temptations and distractions in order to be fully trained as new creations, readied for life in the kingdom. As Bishop N.T. Wright says, *God’s kingdom [has been] launched on earth as in heaven, generating a new state of affairs in which the power of evil has been decisively defeated, the new creation has been decisively launched, and Jesus’ followers have been commissioned and equipped to put that victory and that inaugurated new world into practice.*