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The Birth of the Word in the Soul

by Douglas Burton-Christie

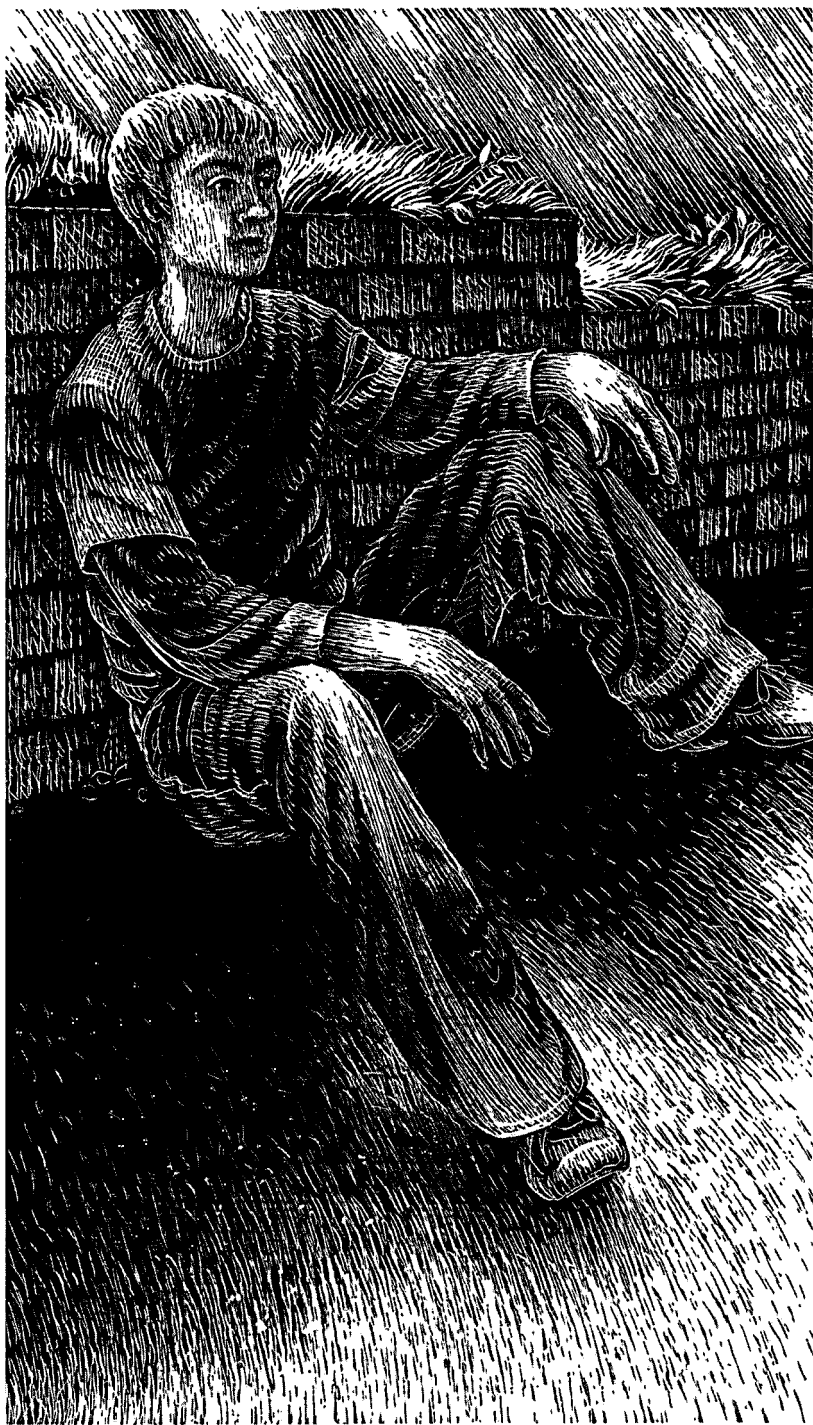
God cannot give a little: [God] must give either everything or nothing. [God's] giving is utterly simple and perfect, undivided, and not in time but all in eternity.¹

—Meister Eckhart

I WAS SITTING looking out the window of the bus, gazing absentmindedly at the clouds. The retreat was over and we were now on our way home. Some of my friends were asleep, tired from the late nights and long conversations. Others were talking in low voices about what had happened for them during the weekend, how they had been touched, how their faith had been changed, deepened. I was not part of these conversations. Nothing had happened to me this weekend. Nor, if I were being honest, had I wanted anything to happen. I had gone on this retreat as a kind of dare, to demonstrate to my friends that nothing they or anyone else could do would affect me, would lead me to open myself to God. I did not need God, at least not the God who they spoke about all the time. They were my friends and I respected their commitment to their faith. But it was not something I wanted any part of. In truth, I did not understand what it meant to have faith, or what it meant for them to live in faith.

Had I ever known? I am not sure. I was raised Catholic and participated in every meaningful part of a young Catholic's life: I was baptized, received first communion, and was confirmed.

¹Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. M. O'C. Walsh (Boston: Element, 1979), Sermon 13:109.



I went to Catholic schools and even served for many years as an altar boy. Surely, some sense of faith, some feeling for God had been instilled in my soul during that time. I think it had. But somehow it faded and I lost hold of that thread. I could not really say who or what God was or how I imagined my own life to be connected to God. I was occupied with so many other things during this time—girls, sports, parties, school, my first motorcycle. I had all I needed and did not see the point of including faith as part of my life. It was simply opaque to me.

Still, I was drawn to a circle of friends for whom faith was crucial. I still do not understand this very well, for they were in many important ways so different from me, so unlike most of my friends. It helped that they were not pious, or strict in the way that some of the nuns who had taught me at Catholic school had been. To the contrary, they were vibrant, alive, joyful. I felt these qualities deeply and was drawn to these new friends because of them. Still, I had no real sense of their world, or why they were the way they were. Faith seemed to be for them a living thing, something like a pulse that shaped everything in their lives. Also, it was for them a framework of meaning, a way of understanding themselves, God, and the world. I had none of this, not the life pulse nor the framework of meaning. I think I resented them for it. And I was determined to resist them, to show them that I could live my own way, even if beneath the surface I was really not so sure of my way or where I was going.



IT WAS WITH these confused, ambiguous feelings that I embarked on that weekend retreat in the mountains outside Los Angeles. I was full of bravado as I boarded the bus to go up to the retreat center; I was going to do this on my own terms. And as the retreat unfolded, I maintained this tone, not as a conscious act of defiance, but more as an unconscious gesture of resistance. I sensed that there was something compelling at the heart of this whole experience and I was both drawn to it and afraid of it. I suspect I knew, in the way one can know something without being fully aware of it, that to open myself to this

world of faith would cost me something. It might give me something rich and beautiful, but it would certainly cost me—perhaps something as precious as my hard-won but fragile sense of self. So I protected myself. I attended the talks and listened, but did not really grasp what was being said. I observed my friends as they opened themselves more and more to the mystery of the faith at the center of their lives. I was completely outside all this. I could neither understand it nor participate in it. And while I was relieved at having been able to resist the force of this faith that I perceived more and more as a threat, I was also disappointed. I wanted it more than I realized, more than I was willing to admit to myself.

*What
was this
hunger I
felt?*

This, I think, helps to account for my wistful mood that Sunday afternoon as I sat on the bus heading for home. I had survived the weekend. Nothing had changed. I had successfully resisted all attempts to win me over to a life of faith. But I did not feel happy. Instead I felt uneasy, agitated, confused. I had become aware of a strange longing for something I could not name. Was it faith? I could not really say. I still could not really make sense of faith, or grasp what it might mean to believe in God, at least in the way my friends described it—a compelling, encompassing sense of love and belonging at the center of their souls. Certainly my own life was not bereft of love. Then what was this hunger I felt? And how did one feed such a hunger? I had no idea.

I was only partially conscious of these things as I sat on the bus that day listening to my friends talk about their experience of the weekend. But the feelings and questions were strong and touched something deep inside me. If I were to try to say what it was, I would describe it as a dawning awareness of my fragility and need. Had I really been completely unaware of this? I suspect not. But now, it was becoming clear and palpable.

Then something strange happened. I felt what I can only describe as a strong sensation of warmth coursing through my body. No conscious thought accompanied it. Indeed I had lost the thread of my friends' conversation some moments before. I was now completely in the grip of this sensation—a feeling of warmth as if a fever was coming on. But I knew I was not getting sick. It felt completely different than that.

A few moments later, the bus pulled off the highway and into a rest stop. It was the halfway point on the trip home. I was

one of the first ones to get off the bus and I wandered over and sat down against a brick wall a few feet away. I needed to think about, or rather feel, what was happening to me. Sitting against the wall, with the late afternoon sun pouring down on me, I watched as my friends and classmates climbed down off the bus. It was extraordinary. I found myself gazing at them, drinking in their faces. And I was aware of only one thing: their beauty. Each one of them appeared to me radiant, bathed in a kind of light. This was noticeably different from my usual way of perceiving people—more critical, more aware of their flaws and foibles—and I sensed the difference without being able to account for it. In that moment, I saw only their goodness, their beauty. They were transfigured.

I cannot remember clearly what followed from this experience. Climbing back on the bus, I was utterly absorbed in my own thoughts and feelings about what had happened to me. I did not understand the experience, but I wanted it to linger and deepen. I felt the need to protect it. So I withdrew into myself. All the way home, I remained quiet and absorbed in my thoughts.

By the next day, the sharp intensity of the experience had diminished a little. But I could still feel it. I was still *in* the experience and it was still working on me. I was aware that something had changed, that *I* had been changed. But in what way? What was it that had happened to me? And what was I being asked to do in response? I felt the urgency of these questions, but had no way, at least initially, of answering them. I sensed that if I were to enter into this experience more deeply and live into it more fully, I would need to understand it better. But there was something more primary that claimed my attention in those early days: the need to give myself over to cherishing and honoring the experience—which is what I did in the days and weeks that followed.

Even all these years later, I am not sure how I grasped the importance of this simple gesture of attention. But I knew that I needed to let the experience take root in me, gestate according to its own life and rhythms. And I sensed also that it was important to refrain from trying to name or explain it too soon. The new community I was gradually entering had a ready language for describing this experience: it was a spiritual rebirth, an encounter with the Holy Spirit. I appreciated the power of this language, and I was open to interpreting my experience

through this lens. But the extraordinary force of the experience itself seemed to me to transcend language and concepts—even the beautiful language of the Gospels—and to invite a restraint, a reticence in trying to account for or explain it. Honoring the experience, it seemed to me, meant letting it reveal itself on its own terms.

In time I came to embrace my emerging identity as a Christian, and the language of the Christian tradition became increasingly meaningful to me as I lived more deeply into the beauty of this experience. But I had to feel my way into it slowly. I was like a child coming into the world of speech for the first time. Gradually I was finding language to express my experience. But I had to test the words continuously against the experience, find language that seemed adequate to it, capable of carrying the full weight and beauty of the experience. Often this meant retreating into silence, into a still place beyond language.



THIS SUBTLE DANCE between language and silence has been unfolding within me ever since. I have come to understand it as crucial to the meaning of that early experience, as well as to the meaning of every subsequent moment in my life when I have stood on the threshold of a new awareness of my life in God. From the perspective of eternity, these moments are all the same moment. This is a lesson I have learned from the great German mystic Meister Eckhart, who has helped me to see and understand the profundity of what I experienced all those years ago on that bus, and the hidden meaning of every moment since. These are all part of a powerful and astonishing process of coming to awareness that Eckhart describes as the birth of the Word in the soul.

“In the midst of silence there was spoken within me a secret word” (see *Wisd. of Sol.* 18:14–15). This text from the book of Wisdom is the seed out of which one of Eckhart’s most compelling meditations on the mystery of God’s birth in the ground of the soul emerges. It arises within a cycle of Christmas sermons in which he considers the meaning of God’s self-revelation in the incarnation of the Word in Christ. “Here in time,”

he says, "we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in time, in human nature."² The Feast of the

*We
are alive
in God, in
eternity*

Nativity provides Eckhart with an opportunity for reflecting on and celebrating the mystery of the Incarnation.

But in typical fashion, he immediately moves toward a consideration of the mystical heart of this mystery, the "eternal birth" which is not and cannot be circumscribed by time or place, but which God "bore and bears unceasingly in eternity." The birth of the Word in the soul is eternal because God is eternal, without beginning or end. It is outside of time, although we experience it in our temporal existence as part of time and history. But where in the soul does God utter this word? Where does the birth take place and where is the soul receptive to this act? These are the questions Eckhart addresses by employing his own distinctive imagery to "locate" the mysterious outpouring of God's Word in our experience. "[I]t is," he says, "in the purest thing that the soul is capable of, in the noblest part, the ground—indeed, in the very essence of the soul which is the soul's most secret part. . . . Here God enters the soul with His all, not merely with a part. God enters here the ground of the soul. None can touch the ground of the soul but God alone."³

Eckhart makes it clear that there is nothing more important than this: "[A]wait this birth within you," he says, "and you shall experience all good and comfort, all happiness, all being and all truth. If you miss it, you will miss all good and blessedness. . . . [W]hatever comes to you in that [birth] will bring you pure being and stability, but whatever you seek or cleave to apart from this will perish. This alone gives being—all else perishes."⁴ There is something stark and unyielding in these words. Here is an almost Buddhist reminder to his hearers of the impermanence of all being, and of the need therefore to detach ourselves from everything that is not God. It is God after all that is at the heart of this experience, the gift of God present at the center of one's life. It is a revelation of what, until that moment, had been unknown, hidden. "The nature of the word," says Eckhart, "is to reveal what is hidden. It revealed itself to me and

²Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, Sermon 1:1.

³Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, Sermon 1:3.

⁴Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, Sermon 2:15.

shone forth before me, declaring something to me and making God known to me, and therefore it is called a word.” Still he acknowledges that for all this, it remains difficult to say what the word *is*, to grasp the immensity of this gift: “[W]hat it *was*, remained hidden from me,” he says. “That was its stealthy coming in a whispering stillness to reveal itself.”⁵

There is a profound theological intuition at the heart of Eckhart’s vision: that everything God pours forth into the Word—the very essence of divinity—is also being poured forth into our lives.

*As surely as the Father in His simple nature bears the Son naturally, just as surely He bears him in the inmost recesses of the spirit, and this is the inner world. Here God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground. Here I live from my own as God lives from [God’s] own.*⁶

THIS IS a staggering claim. It seems audacious, even arrogant, to suggest that we live out of the same source or ground as God. It is dizzying, as though you suddenly emerged from a fog and found yourself standing at the edge of a great precipice that you did not know was there. And yet for Eckhart, this vision of God pouring out everything into the ground of our souls is ultimately a source of comfort and delight.

*[W]hatever [God] gave [the Son] [God] meant for me and gave it to me as well as to [the Son]. I except nothing, neither union nor holiness of the Godhead nor anything else. All that [God] ever gave [the Son] in human nature is no more alien or distant from me than from him, for God cannot give a little: [God] must give either everything or nothing. [God’s] giving is utterly simple and perfect, undivided, and not in time but all in eternity. Be assured of this as I live: if we are to receive thus from [God], we must be raised up in eternity, above time. In eternity all things are present.*⁷

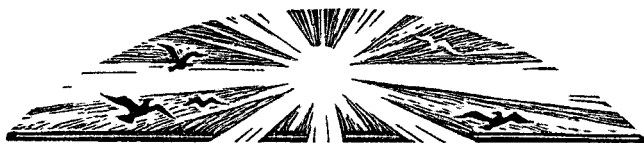
To open oneself to the birth of the Word in the soul is to recognize that everything has been given to us, is being given to us through the gift of the Word. It is to realize that we are alive in God, in eternity. This is an utterly simple and encompassing

⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, Sermon 1:9.

⁶ Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, Sermon 13(b):117.

⁷ Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, Sermon 13(a):109.

vision of reality, breathtaking in its sweep, both comforting and thrilling in what it suggests about who we are and what our lives mean at the ground of our existence.



GOD CANNOT give a little.” This truth has become deeply consoling to me and has become a beacon for all that my life in God, indeed our shared life in God, means. Still, it is not easy to take it in, to accept that everything has been given to us in God. Years ago, I was stirred awake by the presence of something immense and mysterious that seemed at once to be rising up from within me and entering into me from without. I still hesitate to name or describe it. But this has less to do with any sense of uncertainty about its truth than with my desire to honor its awesome, mysterious beauty. “[I]n the purest thing that the soul is capable of, in the noblest part, the ground—indeed, in the very essence of the soul which is the soul’s most secret part . . . [h]ere God enters the soul with His all, not merely with a part.”⁸ No wonder we fall silent. Here is everything we long for, God poured forth in the ground of the soul not once but always. To be born, to live out of this ground, is the great gift of our existence.

⁸Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, Sermon 1:3.