

## POINTS TO PONDER

<sup>3.1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (or anew, or again).' <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'"

— *John 3.1-4*

"Jesus was a Pharisaic Jew. In mentioning that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, it indicates that he was one who had similar theological views to Jesus. He therefore is not a theological opponent, but rather is like-minded. This is important given his misunderstanding of Jesus. We often assume that he had a different set of basic beliefs than Jesus, but this was not the case. This is internal, not external, opposition that Nicodemus represents – as when people within a particular denomination argue with one another, rather than those who represent different denominations or religions.

What is curious is that Nicodemus is also said to be a leader of the Jews, and therefore is one who has had educational training in the scriptures and law. This fact is important to our understanding of Nicodemus in misunderstanding Jesus. It is not that he is ignorant of what Jesus' words could mean because a lack of education, but rather that he knowingly and willfully chooses to misinterpret the words so as to caricature Jesus' words in the worst possible light.

"Anothen" is a Greek word that can mean "from above," "anew," or "again." Jesus said those who will see the kingdom are born "anothen." Nicodemus undoubtedly knew this word's various meanings as a religious leader. And yet, he decided to interpret the word in a way that would make Jesus seem ignorant or crazy; the one meaning that made the least sense. Nicodemus chose to interpret it as "again" rather than "from above" or "anew," the latter two connotations which would make perfect sense. In doing so, he attempts to make Jesus look ludicrous – while, in actuality, making himself look so. Honestly, would anyone think that Jesus was literally saying we needed to be born again through our mother's womb? It would be absurd to think this is what he meant. And yet, Nicodemus pretends that this is what Jesus meant.

What Nicodemus does is what is known in logic as a "straw man" argument, where we interpret another person's words in a weak or easily refutable way. We see people do this incessantly in social media and routine conversations in our polarized society. Why? Why give someone's words the weakest meaning rather than the strongest? To think that by doing so that one wins an argument? To make them look stupid? To mock or ridicule them? Because one is simply too lazy and credulous to do a more empathetic and investigative interpretation of another's words?

To interpret another's words in this way is disrespectful toward the other person at the minimum, and is a sign of one's own lack of intellectual integrity and moral character. It reveals that Nicodemus' initial words of praise to Jesus were a façade. To offer the most ridiculous meaning to another's words is an intentional, even if unconscious, slight or microaggression to the other person. It reveals an antagonism towards Jesus that he had attempted to hide by his perfunctory compliment to Jesus as a teacher who had come from God. It is what manipulative people do to try to set up someone to think that they are a well-intentioned person when in reality they are trying to entrap the person in some miscue that they can then use against them. The gospel writer alerts the reader to this in claiming that Nicodemus came to Jesus "by night" – an allusion to the deviously scheming motive of Nicodemus.

Jesus correctly reads Nicodemus' behavior and timing immediately; before he even replies to Nicodemus' ruse in calling him a Rabbi that has come from God. He understands that Nicodemus comes not as a friend or soul companion, but as one who is looking to gather more information about Jesus so as to better oppose him. And so Jesus reverses the set-up Nicodemus has for him by inviting Nicodemus to consider a

simple spiritual truth, which he could either interpret correctly, or perversely. When Nicodemus chooses the latter interpretation, Jesus has confirmation of Nicodemus' motives towards him. Only one opposed to him would choose to interpret his word "another" in a way that made Jesus sound bizarre.

Nicodemus pretends that he is genuinely inquisitive, and asks Jesus how it is possible for someone to reenter one's mother's womb to be born again, but such a willingness to think the worst of Jesus' words identifies that his intentions in being there are not for the purpose of his spiritual edification.

Have you ever considered people intentionally misinterpreting your words as a form of disrespect? How might we best deal with those who refuse to give us the 'benefit of the doubt' in interpreting our words in the best possible way when they assume the worst possible meaning?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/1/2023*

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above (or anew, or again)."<sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'"

— *John 3.5-8*

"Jesus' reply interestingly is one where he gives Nicodemus the benefit of the doubt, which Nicodemus had not done for him. In saying that we need to be born both of water and of Spirit, Jesus is affirming Nicodemus' insinuation that we are all born of the water of our mother's wombs, but that the birth of the Spirit is a different kind of birth. He repeats the word "another" with its multiple meanings to give Nicodemus another chance at getting the interpretation correctly.

Yet, Jesus is letting Nicodemus know that he is on to him in further stating the comments in verse 8. In both Greek and Hebrew, the word for 'spirit' (i.e., pneuma) also means 'breath' and 'wind.' As he had used 'another' as a word with multiple meanings, so too does he use 'pneuma.' The saying about the wind/spirit/breath blowing where it chooses with us hearing the sound of it without knowing where it comes from or goes to is likely a colloquial saying known to the people of that time. Jesus uses a familiar truism to articulate a much more complex meaning here.

We might understand that Jesus is, once again, making multiple points in a single utterance. If we interpret 'pneuma' as wind, as the English translators have done, it refers to a common experience of us hearing and feeling the wind without fully knowing where it comes from or goes. This sets up the next sentence where he identifies that the same reality is true for those 'born of pneuma;' thus explicating his prior point with an analogy from nature.

However, if we interpret 'pneuma' as Spirit, then the point goes deeper in stating that the Spirit blows on whomever it wills, and that those on whom it blows may not know from where that Spirit has come from and where it may lead one. This could be seen as making several additional points, such as: the Spirit blows on some and not others; the Spirit guides us into the mystery of life; the Spirit guides us according to its values, and our following those values may lead us in directions we may not see coming. Hence, if this interpretation is accepted, then Jesus is delving into much deeper spiritual terrain and is trying to teach a master class lesson about the Spirit.

Yet, if we interpret 'pneuma' as breath, then we may see this as a subtle critique of Nicodemus and why he has come to see Jesus. It may indicate that Nicodemus blew into Jesus' presence with a 'breath' of hot air in giving him false praise for a hidden scheme, and that while Jesus heard the 'sound' of Nicodemus giving him a compliment, it still remains to be seen where the motive of that compliment came from and to where it is leading – i.e., where Nicodemus is leading his breath (viz., his words) to go in arriving at a particular destination (e.g., spiritual edification of himself, entrapment of Jesus, etc.).

Of course, Jesus may mean all of these things simultaneously, which would be pure genius if he did. How do these suggested possibilities reframe the way you think about this story? What life lessons can we take from the story given the variety of interpretations?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/1/2023*

"<sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup>'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not give assent to our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not discern, how can you discern if I tell you about heavenly things?"

— *John 3.9-12*

"Nicodemus feigns ignorance, but Jesus isn't having it. Jesus finds it incomprehensible that a teacher of Israel would be unfamiliar with the word plays he is making on 'anothen' and 'pneuma,' and on the truths he is trying to articulate. Jesus goes from giving him the benefit of the doubt to calling him out and indicting him for his facile rejection of what any teacher would know. He can pretend ignorance, but Jesus knows better where his heart lies; and that it is lying now. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has explained his point sufficiently, and that Nicodemus is simply refusing to see what is obvious to anyone who has either an education or any experience in the world. Jesus sees through his charade and essentially tells Nicodemus that if he can't even understand that obvious, then how will he ever be able to comprehend deeper truths.

This is an interesting vignette in the testimony about Jesus' life. We often hear Jesus speaking to people with understanding and compassion, healing and helping them in whatever ways he can; and yet here, though he at first gives the benefit of the doubt to Nicodemus, he doesn't extend the conversation with him. Jesus apparently does not regard it as being fruitful to engage Nicodemus once he has proven that his motive is impure. From this point onward in the chapter, Jesus appears to be talking to his disciples rather than to Nicodemus. He doesn't cast Nicodemus out, but neither does he address him specifically. He knows his words will be wasted on one who is intentionally trying to misunderstand him. Had Nicodemus simply been uninformed, there is little doubt that Jesus would have gone on to explicate his point. But since Nicodemus is being obstinately obtuse, he dismisses direct conversation with him and turns his attention to the disciples."

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/1/2023*

"<sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heavenly realms except the one who descended from heavenly realms, the Child of Humanity (i.e., Son of Man). <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Child of Humanity (i.e., Son of Man) be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever trusts in the Child of Humanity (i.e., Son of Man) may have enduring life. <sup>16</sup>'For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Child, so that everyone who trusts in the Child's ways may not perish but may have enduring life. <sup>17</sup>'Indeed, God did not send the Child into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be liberated through emulating the Child. <sup>18</sup>Those who trust in the Child's ways are not condemned; but those who do not trust are condemned already, because they have not trusted in the character of one who could only be a Child of God."

— *John 3.13-18*

"We've heard it said that people only understand up to the level to which they understand. If someone is speaking to them truths which they have not discovered or experienced in their own lives, they will likely interpret what they hear in accordance with their own level of understanding. This may be what Jesus is saying in verse 13, where his point would then be that unless you have understood and experienced heavenly values and virtues for yourself, then you won't be able to appropriately interpret those values to others. This seems to be an indictment against Nicodemus who can't seem to understand Jesus because he has no familiarity with the character of Jesus.

Jesus uses a phrase 'son of mankind' which I have paraphrased as 'child of humanity' so as to reduce the sex-specific language that was used at that time and invite a more sympathetic understanding of Jesus' meaning. Son of mankind was an ancient conception in Jewish thought that indicated one who would come to judge the world. Whether this was as a top-down sort of judgment (which is how many have treated it), or rather a spiritual edification and growth model where we are to see our own behaviors in light of one who displays and lives by God's values (which is how I believe Jesus intended it), the idea is that the son of man would come before the Messiah, or might actually be the Messiah, in order to pave the way for the Messianic Age – where people would change their ways, and become the people God had always intended them to be.

Jesus' reference to the child of humanity is not necessarily self-referential, but most certainly is advocating that the child of humanity, either as a social truth/phenomenon or as a person, is present and active now in their culture and time. Judgement is being given on the ways of the religious leaders of Israel, and on the people who follow them, for whether they are living up to God's values or not. Jesus is essentially claiming that they are not; to which the rest of the gospel bears witness.

Jesus reminds his listeners of how Moses delivered the Israelites from being victimized by the venomous serpents in the wilderness after their fleeing from Egypt and before their entry into the Promised Land. He did so by lifting up a staff of a serpent in front of the people as a means of showing that the serpents had no ultimate power over them. Jesus then claims that the child of humanity will also be lifted up for all to see, putting the lie to the ways of empire, and revealing that God's ways are the ones that lead to enduring life. To trust in the child of humanity is to also follow in God's ways for one's self.

While even modern theologians have suggested a 'literal' interpretation of John 3.16 of Jesus being the only child of God, this flies in the face of Jesus' own theology where we are all the children of God. Jesus would not see himself as God's only child, but made explicit on numerous occasions that we are all God's children; and that whatever he did, we were to go and do likewise.

John's gospel was written well after the synoptics and this account of the story of Nicodemus and of these sayings of Jesus are found only in his gospel. John's gospel is far more intentionally theological than the synoptics, and his intention was to identify Jesus as both the Son of Man (the one who judges the world by his life) and the Son of God (one who has accepted and lived out an important task from God by following God's own ways). This is far more doctrinaire than we see Jesus being in any other gospel, and thus is more likely a reflection of John's ruminations about Jesus than how Jesus thought of himself.

Yet, there is mytho-poetic truth in these words that is consistent with Jesus' own theological understanding. Jesus believed that God loved all the world, not just Jewish people. Jesus also believed that God wanted the whole world to adopt God's own values and virtues; not so as to control them, but to help them to live into the freedom of blessing that such values and virtues would entail. For Jesus, the child of humankind is an understanding of how we are to all be judged in accordance with our own lives being consistent with God's ways. If we follow in the ways of that concept that reveals who God truly is, then we ourselves will be liberated from a life of vice and sin to the freedom of a life of virtue and unity with God.

Furthermore, while the child of humankind, Jesus believed, is 'sent' (i.e., made manifest) by God to reveal how our conduct accords or not with God's ways, the purpose is not to condemn but to liberate. God wants us to learn from our mistakes, and so gives us a chance to see our own behavior in relation to the behaviors God would have us to do. This is so we might repent and turn back to God's ways; thus, our emulating the nature of the child of humankind. Taken in context of Jesus' words to Nicodemus, Jesus regards us all as being able to learn from the child of humankind and for us all to become children of God. We are born of water, as children of humankind, and we are also to be born of Spirit, as children of God.

When we trust in the spiritual and ethical standard represented by the child of humankind, we reveal that no condemnation exists for us; for our ways have been changed in accordance to God's ways. When, however, we have rejected that standard, and substituted earthly standards in their stead, then we, by our

very choice, as well as the behaviors that follow from those choices, reveal that we are condemned by the standard which we have rejected. God doesn't condemn us; we condemn ourselves by how we act counter to God's liberating ways.

To "trust in the character of the only child of God" thus is not about believing in the only person whom we believe best exemplified God's character, but rather it is to trust in the values and virtues of God; which is the only way we can all genuinely be children of God. This way of thinking about this passage seems to accord much better with Jesus' own theology and understanding of God than with the church's understanding of Jesus as the one who saves us. We must recall that he asked us all to be disciples, for us all to follow in his ways, and for us all to go and do likewise. His focus was on changing our behaviors and lifestyles, not our beliefs and religious piety. He wanted us to behave rightly, not merely believe rightly.

Ironically, the history of the church has often been one of, like Nicodemus, misinterpreting Jesus by assuming a weaker position that he supposedly affirmed rather than the stronger one which is evident by his words and example. The church has believed in the purpose, character, and spirit of Jesus to be one of taking our sins away from us if we believe in him the person; whereas Jesus' own understanding is that his purpose, character, and spirit was one of showing us the way of how we could do that for ourselves if we would only follow in God's ways.

Might the story of Nicodemus be an addition to the gospel accounts in having seen how people were going astray in believing in Jesus the person, and not in living by his values and virtues? Might it be, written decades after the synoptics, John's account of showing the hypocrisy of those 'followers' that proclaimed Jesus to be a great teacher from God who saves us from our sins, while not saving themselves by being willing to understand and live by what he actually said and did? How does the church today need to change in order to better live by the way of Jesus, rather than merely give testimony to Jesus?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/1/2023*

"<sup>19</sup>And this is the verdict, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

— *John 3.19-21*

"John's gospel has the hindsight to see how, over the decades, people were falsely claiming to be followers of Jesus; as well as identifying reasons why those who outrightly rejected his teachings and ways did so. The verdict was in, and what is clear is that, for likely multifarious reasons, the way of life Jesus taught to the world has been rejected by the world. Granted, there were genuine followers in Christ's way; but, on the whole, humanity has rejected his light of love, justice, and peace which epitomized his vision of how we should all be in relationship to one another. Despite showing humanity the right ways, they have instead remained faithful to their evil deeds.

Moreover, they have dismissed and rejected the truths that Jesus taught, for to admit to their validity would shine light on their own waywardness from those truths. Those who don't want others to see the wrongfulness of their actions will inevitably hate and condemn those whose values expose their deeds as evil. Is it little wonder that books are being banned today to hide the history of slavery and racism in this country for those who don't want their privileges, derived from these evil systems, to go away? If we educate people as to the truth of our history, might they not end up rejecting the very systems, still in place, that privilege some at the expense of the many?

John has witnessed the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a century of unfaithfulness disguised as faithfulness of those who have interpreted, like Nicodemus, Jesus words in ways that serve their own purposes rather than God's purposes. And, likewise, he has noticed the few who have come to the truth and the light of Christ, and have revealed by their changed lives and deeds that they have acted as God would have them do.

Notice that even in John's gospel, the gospel used most by those who interpret Christian faith from the perspective of mere belief rather than a lifestyle change, he stays true to Jesus' own theology that it is our "deeds" and not our "beliefs" that reveal if we are living by God's ways.

When many Christians today stop reading at John 3.16, so as to give credence to their weakened interpretation of Jesus' words as a "belief-centered" faith, John continues in these verses immediately following that statement to emphasize that belief/trust (GK: *pistis*) is not about mere cognitive assent to propositional statements about Jesus, but rather is about a whole-being transformation of us so that we come to take on Jesus' character for ourselves.

If we let Christ's light shine through us via our virtues and values that we live out in deeds every day, what are some specific ways we can let that light shine? Does this mean we need to not only do good deeds ourselves, but also encourage others and our whole society to do good deeds? Since we, too, are likely to meet up with many Nicodemuses in our world, even as Jesus did in his, how can we respond to them in both showing them the light of Christ, but also pointing out how they are interpreting scripture for their own purposes and not God's? What methods might we need to employ to do this?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/1/2023*