

Jesus and Nicodemus

There's a phrase that you're all familiar with, I'm sure, but which deserves to be examined -- the phrase "born again Christian". When you hear the statement, "She's a 'born again' Christian", do you think the person is talking about someone who believes that Jesus was God's Son and that He died for our sins, or do you think that they're describing a person who is some kind of fringe religious fanatic, someone you shouldn't trust your children with. "Born again Christian" seems to suggest that there are at least two kinds, Christians and born again Christians and so you need this qualifying phrase, this "born again" phrase to describe one group that's distinct from the rest.

Here's one on-line definition that I found amusing -- you really can find anything on the internet! "Born again Christians are people who have found God later in life. This results in a strict holier-than-thou adherence to a culty faction of the religion rather than worrying about being a good person." There are lots of similar foolish statements on the web, displaying a general lack of understanding or anything like a helpful insight.

Where does this concept come from? Why do we even use a phrase like "born again" in relation to Christian faith? It goes back to a conversation Jesus had one night with a Pharisee, but not just any Pharisee -- this one was a member of the ruling council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin, which was composed of 70 men, some of whom were Pharisees, some Sadducees and high ranking members of the families of the priests. The story is found in John 3 and contains one of the most famous verses in all the Bible, John 3:16. But let's start at the beginning:

After dark one evening, a Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came to speak with Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are proof enough that God is with you."

I was struck as I read this opening paragraph again that Nicodemus says, "We all know". In the NIV it simply says, "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God," but the force of it is to imply that Nicodemus is far from alone in his conviction about who Jesus is. There were a number of leading Pharisees who believed that Jesus was sent from God and they have been convinced by the miracles that Jesus performed.

Jesus replied, "I assure you, unless you are born again, you can never see the Kingdom of God."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?"

Let's have some sympathy for Nicodemus. He was trained in the fine art of legal interpretations. He studied the law given to the Israelites through Moses and all the many interpretations of the law written by rabbis over hundreds of years. His forte was

not in the area of the workings of God's Spirit. The imagery that Jesus used surprised him, threw him off the track. He had just confessed to Jesus that he was one of at least a few of the Jewish leaders who believed in Him and I'm sure he expected Jesus to respond to that in some way . . . instead, Jesus responded to Nicodemus in a very unexpected way.

But Jesus wasn't playing games with this learned man; He wasn't messing with his mind. He was bypassing a lot of talk and getting right to the heart of what Nicodemus needed to hear. Nicodemus had a kind of knowledge, what we sometimes refer to today as "book knowledge". He knew the theory because he had spent his life studying the Scriptures, studying the laws of God, trying to understand God's purposes and His ways from the book that had been passed down for so many generations. In terms of knowing God's laws, he was a mature man, but in terms of the Spirit -- well, he hadn't even been born into that. Head knowledge is not everything in the Kingdom of God -- there has to be a change in the heart, in the place where our will chooses a certain path, and that change is here described as being born again. Listen as Jesus speaks into Nicodemus' confusion:

The truth is, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven. So don't be surprised at My statement that you must be born again.

Jesus is clearly making a contrast between physical life and spiritual life. "Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven" illustrates this contrast perfectly. Many commentators have argued that being born of water has something to do with baptism, but that would be an absolute mystery to Nicodemus, who would have no grid for Christian baptism -- this rite hadn't begun yet. Jesus had already confused his visitor enough; He was now trying to teach him about the Holy Spirit, as we will see in the verses that follow.

The key to understanding this expression comes from the writings of the rabbis from Jesus' day and earlier - and from other ancient sources where the words "water", "rain", and "dew" are used as an image for simple human procreation. It's likely that a rabbi like Nicodemus would have understood it as humans making human babies and it fits the context perfectly, especially the clarifying sentence that comes right after -- "humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven."

So, what would Nicodemus have heard Jesus say in response to his question, "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" He would have heard, "Just as you had a physical birth, so you also need a spiritual birth in which the new life from heaven can enter your life here on earth." Jesus goes on from there:

"Just as you can hear the wind, but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit."

"What do you mean?" Nicodemus asked.

Jesus replied, "You are Israel's teacher and yet you don't understand these

things? I assure you, I am telling you what we know and have seen, and yet you won't believe us.

I spent a few years of my life -- first full-time and later part-time, studying the Scriptures in an academic environment. I believe that people who teach in an academic setting like that are not entirely comfortable with the wind blowing wherever it wills. They are not entirely comfortable with the idea that you can't know where something comes from and especially that you can't know where it is going. They teach what can be known and which can, for the most part, be understood -- and that is the Bible, God's revelation to us. But to teach about the Spirit, about the new life from heaven, is to teach about that which cannot be fully understood. Human beings can't determine what God the Holy Spirit is going to do next, nor can we fully grasp why He does what He does.

Nicodemus was an intelligent man who was one of 70 chosen to be a ruler over the Jewish people. He had spent his lifetime studying the Scriptures, memorizing them, learning the views of the various rabbinic schools, understanding the subtle shades of meaning that might cause sharply divided opinions among them. And Jesus calls him "Israel's teacher". There is a definite article right before this title, "THE" teacher of Israel, which suggests that Nicodemus had some official position as a preeminent instructor in the things of God.

He was a man of importance, a man who was taken seriously by the others on the Sanhedrin. The teacher didn't teach where the wind comes from or where it goes. The teacher told the people what the law said, what it meant and what they must do to obey it. Israel's teacher wasn't ready for the idea of being spiritually reborn, nor was he ready to receive the new life from heaven, but Jesus told him that no person could enter the Kingdom of God without this second birth.

What does that say to you? To me, it says that the Christian life can't be contained in a few creeds, or doctrines. It can't be limited to what we know from the Scriptures, but it must always involve interaction with the Living God. Our faith is not one of mere book learning, but of life-giving presence. Our God is with us, not just in the sense of being on our side, but He is present with us, imparting to all who believe the new life from heaven.

The Kingdom of God is not a matter of head knowledge and the person who gets the best score on the biblical knowledge quiz gets in. Entrance into the Kingdom of God is gained by the person who has been spiritually reborn. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "I assure you, unless you are born again, you can never see the Kingdom of God."

Let's continue with the rest of the passage, noticing that Nicodemus has nothing else to say ... this is a monologue from Jesus:

But if you don't even believe me when I tell you about things that happen here on earth, how can you possibly believe if I tell you what is going on in heaven? For only I, the Son of Man, have come to earth and will return to heaven again. And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness so I, the

Son of Man, must be lifted up on a pole, so that everyone who believes in me will have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. There is no judgment awaiting those who trust Him. But those who do not trust Him have already been judged for not believing in the only Son of God. Their judgment is based on this fact: The light from heaven came into the world, but they loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. They hate the light because they want to sin in the darkness. They stay away from the light for fear their sins will be exposed and they will be punished. But those who do what is right come to the light gladly; so everyone can see that they are doing what God wants.

Jesus assures Nicodemus that He knows what He's talking about, that He Himself both knows and has seen what He's describing and then He calls for faith. He asks Nicodemus, in various ways, to believe what Jesus is telling Him.

"If you don't believe me ... how can you possibly believe?" "... everyone who believes in Me will have eternal life" "He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish" ... "There is no judgment awaiting those who trust Him, but those who do not trust Him have already been judged for not believing."

In other words, "Nicodemus, if you will put your trust in Me, you will escape judgment. Nicodemus, if you will believe in Me, you will have eternal life." There is a great promise in this passage, one that has resonated with millions of people around the world, and we'll come back to that in a minute. But notice the other side, the side of disbelief, of refusing to trust Jesus. The Lord says that this unbelief comes as a choice, a preference, for evil, a choice to sin.

The images of light and darkness are strong themes throughout the gospel of John. In the first paragraph of the gospel, in verses 4 and 5, we read:

Life itself was in Him (in Jesus), and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines through the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish it.

The next paragraph describes John the Baptist as being a witness to the light. In healing the blind man in John 9, we hear Jesus saying that while He was in the world, He was the light of the world and in the chapter before he announced to those who were listening:

I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.

In chapter 11 Jesus again comments on the danger of stumbling in the darkness and in chapter 12 He calls for people to "believe in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of light." Right after that verse, John says that most of the people did not believe in Him and then closes the book on Jesus' public ministry with the Master's final declaration to the crowds:

I have come as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in Me will no longer remain in the darkness.

What is the connection between this teaching on light and darkness and Jesus' earlier conversation with Nicodemus? I think that Jesus is appealing to Nicodemus, telling him that there's no reason not to trust Him. This ruling rabbi has lived his life to honour his God, but that's not what is necessary -- the thing he needs now is to believe that this Jesus has been sent from God, that He preaches the truth and that He has a legitimate offer that Nicodemus needs to respond to. Will he put his trust in Jesus? That's the entry point to the life in the Spirit that brings us into the Kingdom of God. The key is faith.

And Jesus makes it easy for his visitor: He is really asking Nicodemus to decide whether Jesus represents the light or the darkness -- and anyone who had seen Jesus work miracles or heard Him teach should have no difficulty deciding that He was light in the darkness. The only reason for rejecting Him was sin. That sin could be the Pharisees' pride and protection of their position in the Jewish religious culture. That sin could be having greater concern for the wishes of the powers in Rome than fear of the Lord. That sin could be presumption in having greater faith in the rabbis' interpretation of the law of Moses than they had in Jesus . . . but the result was always the same. Their sin resulted in unbelief and rejection of the Christ, their Messiah.

So, let's look back at this encounter and see what it might be saying to us. What can we apply to our own lives from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus?

1. There is something mysterious about life in the Spirit. As much as we love a simple formula, a straight-forward cause and effect, Jesus says we're talking about the movements of the wind -- you can't know where it comes from or where it is going. He says this in plain language: "You can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." No, but you can understand why -- it is clearly an experience that comes in response to faith. You can't produce it through human effort because it comes from heaven. You can't pretend to be born again in the Spirit because the life that comes is the new life of the Kingdom of God. Beyond that, there is mystery, the Presence of God in the life of a believer is wonderful, it's powerful, and it's more than we can explain. Scripture talks about the potential for us to grieve the Spirit and in another place to 'quench' the Spirit. There are consequences to these things that we can't easily understand. This is a relationship between God and human that can't be explained or defined any more than you explain or define a marriage. You can wound your marriage partner with a word, but can you explain the hurt away? You can melt the coldness that comes between you with love and forgiveness, but can you explain where the pain went? Life in the Spirit is a gift and it brings the life of heaven into our earthly existence - let's be thankful for it and embrace fully what God offers us.

2. Secondly, and this builds on the first, the Christian faith is meant to be experienced, not just understood. Jesus told a scholar, a man devoted to the teaching of Scripture, that he had to be born again, that he had to receive the life of the Spirit if he was going to enter the Kingdom of God. He was saying to Nicodemus that all his learning was not enough and we need to hear that, too. It's not all about a book to be read, but about a life to be lived. It's not "out there" so much as it's "in here". "Do you trust Me?" Jesus asks us. "Do you believe that My sacrifice on the cross is enough to pay for your

sins? Do you trust Me to carry you through the toughest circumstances of life? Do you believe that I love you?" It's important how we answer these, for Jesus says, "There is no judgment awaiting those who trust (Me)."

3. Third application is what we do with this division that Jesus so clearly makes between darkness and light. Do we live our lives in the darkness of disobedience and unbelief or do we live in the light of humble worship and submission to His will? Do we live as close to the edge as possible, loving the world with 49% of our heart and loving Jesus with 51%? Jesus says that we can't walk without stumbling if we're walking in the dark. He says, "Leave all that behind and come walk with Me -- all who put their trust in Me will no longer remain in the darkness." Again, this gracious invitation of Jesus to leave behind the corrupt and hurtful ways of this world and walk with Him in the light that leads to life. The reason for staying in the darkness is that we love it, we love our sin, we love to be independent from God, we love evil. If that's not your love, then leave it! Walk in the light where Jesus is -- you can see where you're going!