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When Religion Is Not Enough

Reading: John 3:1-15

Nowadays we hear a fair amount about so-called "re-born Christians". I am never quite sure how to respond when I hear the term. For years, I emphasised the importance of being born again to people who were unfamiliar with the concept. Now, almost everyone (in our society) knows a "re-born Christian", either at work, or in their wider family. Quite frankly, I am often a little nervous when a person tells me they know somebody who makes this claim. I hold my breath, wondering exactly what the person's exposure to "re-born Christians" has been.

In a way I wish we could change the term. It has even become popular in a non-religious context. It is used to describe makeovers in the secular world. People are said to reinvent themselves and sometimes we hear of 'born again' politicians, actors, sports stars and businesspeople. But the term is an important one in the New Testament. It occurs in several places and the thought is often found, even when the term is not employed. We cannot ignore it and shouldn't try to change it.

So let's see how it was used by Jesus himself. To do so we must eavesdrop on one of the most enlightening discussions in the Bible.

A Man with Something on his Mind

There were no street lamps in the city of Jerusalem in the year 30 AD or thereabouts. But the city is situated high up in the central highlands. The air is clear. The evenings are cool. It was Passover, so the full moon was casting its silvery light over the entire region. A well-known man was making his way through the narrow streets. He knew the layout of the city well. It was clear enough for him to see exactly where he was going, but not clear enough for him to be recognised by anyone whom he might meet on the way. Just as well, because he wanted his visit to be a private matter. Sunset in Jerusalem is at about 5.30 pm at this time of the year, so it must have been at least 6.30 or even later. This man had something important on his mind. In all probability he had made an arrangement to meet with the rising star from Nazareth who had

been teaching in the temple and performing the most amazing miracles.

Some of his colleagues were sceptical and derisive but he wanted to know first-hand what Jesus was all about. In particular he wanted to discuss the Kingdom of God, about which both John the Baptist and Jesus had been talking. Like many of his contemporaries, Nicodemus was keenly waiting for the coming kingdom.

John's Design

There's much more to this nocturnal meeting than meets the eye. There were no chapter divisions in the original manuscripts. They were inserted later to make for easy reference. But this particular chapter division does not help us here. Let me tell you why.

In introducing Nicodemus at this point, John is following a definite design. You may recall that I mentioned that, in some respects, John's Gospel resembles a painting. Like an artist, John sketches the background - "He was in the world and the world was made by him, and the world did not recognize him. He came to his own but his own did not receive him." (1:10-11) Against this background of hostility, opposition and unbelief, John parades a number of men and women who place their trust in him - "But to as many as received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." (Jn. 1:12)

See how he does it here. At the end of chapter 2, he tells us that many who saw the miraculous signs professed faith in Jesus. But he adds: "Jesus would not entrust himself to them for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in man."¹

Chapter 3 leads straight on. The same word, (*anthropos*), is used but this time without the article. The translators have inserted the word "Now", at the beginning of chapter 3, to make the passage read smoothly. Actually the word is *de* and it is used here to link the account of Nicodemus' visit with the preceding passage. It can be translated "and" or "but". Here it is probably used in the adversative sense to mean "but".

Can you see what John is doing? He tells us that Jesus did not need man's

¹ That is the sense of "a man" in 2:25. The definite article is used in both references to man in verse 25 and refers to mankind in general.

testimony about man, for he knew what was in man. He would therefore not commit himself to those who "believed" in the superficial sense of the term. *But* there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus. John is going to mention him 3 times in his Gospel - and we shall be able to trace his progress. Right now he is introduced as one of those people in the foreground, who would receive him and become a child of God - "born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God".

Nicodemus' "Pedigree"

So, let's have a good look at this man Nicodemus. We do know quite a bit about him.

He was a *Pharisee*. The Pharisees get some bad press in the New Testament. Many of them were self-righteous and some of them were hypocrites. They were heavy traditionalists and they were extremely legalistic. They were meticulous in their observances, and often they could not see the forest for the trees. But they believed in God and in such important teachings as the resurrection of the dead. They were not prepared to compromise their beliefs and they were dedicated to the service of God. There were a number of "good" Pharisees around. Remember Paul was a Pharisee and so was Gamaliel.² No doubt Nicodemus fell into this category. He was a champion of biblical orthodoxy and a very fine man.

He was a member of the 71 man Jewish Ruling Council or Great Sanhedrin. It is interesting to consider the criteria applied for selection to this august body.³ You had to be regarded as physically and morally blameless. You had to be middle-aged. You had to be learned in both secular and divine law. You had to speak several languages. You needed to be able to prove your pedigree - that you were the descendent of a Levite or a genuine Israelite. You had to declare that you had never flown pigeons to entice others. (I'm not quite sure how you do that - entice others by flying pigeons). You must also declare that you had never dealt in the produce of the sabbatical year, that you had never taken interest on a loan, and that you had never played dice. Then you needed to have served as a judge in your home town and on the Small Council that met at the

² Gamaliel was the respected teacher of the law who stood up in the Sanhedrin and advised his colleagues not to put Peter and the other apostles to death. (Acts 5:33-39)

³ Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 382-400; J Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, Vol. V (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 73-75

entrance to the temple hall. Only then might you be appointed to the Great Sanhedrin. It was a rare honour, reserved for the best and the wisest in the land.

It is interesting that Jesus refers to him as '*ho didaskalos tou Israel*' - the teacher of Israel. The NIV renders his words, "You are Israel's teacher". It appears that Nicodemus was a highly respected teacher - perhaps regarded by some as *the* teacher of Israel at the time.

At Night

And here he is talking to Jesus. John makes special mention of the fact that he came to Jesus *at night*. Some see this as a by-the-way comment that has no particular relevance. He came to Jesus and it happened to be at night. I think that there is more to it than that. In chapter 19, John tells us that Nicodemus accompanied Joseph of Arimathea to anoint of the body of Jesus. He refers to him, not without significance, as the man who earlier had visited Jesus *at night*.

It seems to me that Nicodemus *chose* to come to Jesus under cover of darkness. Sure, it would give him time to speak to Jesus in private without the gasps of onlookers: "Wow, look who's talking to Jesus. Perhaps the rulers themselves are coming around." But, more importantly, he probably preferred not to be openly identified with the young, controversial teacher. For a man of his reputation and connections, privacy was preferable.

There's even more. John loves symbolism. Light and darkness feature prominently in his Gospel. Remember how he speaks of Jesus in his prologue: "In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it." (1:4-5) There are other references to darkness and to the night in John. When he encountered a man who was born blind, Jesus explained to his disciples: "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (9:4-5) Later he again spoke to his disciples about the danger of stumbling when one walks at night. (11:10) One of the most telling uses of this symbol was when Judas left the upper room to arrange for Jesus' betrayal. John records: "As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out." And he comments, significantly: "*And it was night.*" (13:30)

I wouldn't stake my life on it, but I think John is drawing our attention to the

symbolic significance of a man whose journey began at night but who came out into the day.⁴ Be that as it may, Nicodemus chose to come to Jesus at night. It was private; it was secretive; it was safe.

The Dialogue

Nicodemus is a gentleman. The man is a theologian of note. He has spent hours and hours in study. To be as respected a teacher as he was, he must have had a sharp mind. He had standing and he would have been at least 15 years older than this man who has appeared out of nowhere. Yet his approach is polite. He addresses Jesus, who had never been to "seminary", had no letters behind his name, and had no ministerial credentials, as - "Rabbi - Respected Teacher". "We know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing, if God were not with him."

This was Nicodemus' preamble. He was about to ask a question about God's kingdom and possibly about Jesus himself and his relation to it. The Lord did not ignore that question but anticipated it. These conversations could be unnecessarily time-consuming as the parties to the dialogue tip-toed around one another. Jesus needed to get to the all-important point at the *beginning* of the conversation, not at the *end* of it.

There would have been an understandable assumption in Nicodemus' mind. He was sincere and open. Here's how he was thinking. He assumed he was on the right track. It was accepted that when God's kingdom did arrive, all Jews would share in its benefits. And if anyone was going to make it, Nicodemus was. He was not being particularly self-righteous by assuming this. He could see the need for more information and for a better understanding. And he must give this new teacher a fair hearing. (In this respect he was much better than his colleagues on the Sanhedrin). So, he approaches the conversation from the vantage point of an orthodox teacher. He uses the first person plural: "Rabbi *we* know that..." Possibly he saw himself as representing other like-minded colleagues. He must examine the teaching and scrutinize the teacher. He knew he was not perfect in the absolute sense of the word, but he was doing his very best. Like Paul he could no doubt say, "As for legalistic righteousness, faultless." (Phil. 3:6) He would have assumed that he was morally and spiritually competent, ready for the kingdom when it arrived.

4 Cf. Rom 13:11-14; Col 1:13; 1 Thess 5:4-5; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 21:25

Jesus must have looked Nicodemus in the eye. "I tell you the truth," he said. In the original, there is a double "Amen" before the statement.⁵ This was a way of underlining its veracity and its importance. "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."⁶ Nicodemus was taken aback. This was unfamiliar terminology. The "no one" was absolute; there were no exceptions. This was radical language and it contradicted the whole thrust of Pharisaic theology. "Born *again*? Surely not!

Nicodemus was not nearly as obtuse as some have assumed. This was a normal way of conducting a dialogue. If a statement was novel or sounded far-fetched, you took that statement at face value and raised your objection, so inviting further comment. "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Nicodemus' objection elicited an elaboration. Again, there is the weighty double amen. "I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and spirit." Needless to say, there has been a great deal of discussion about the precise meaning of "water" in this statement. Let me just mention the options:

- Some believe that the reference was to Christian baptism. I think that is highly unlikely in this context. We know that water baptism is not a condition of salvation. (The implication here is that the author wanted to make a point about baptism and therefore put words into Jesus' mouth).
- Others believe it refers to the baptism of John the Baptist. In other words, when referring to the kingdom, Jesus alludes to the baptism of repentance practised by John the Baptist. He insists that, in addition to repentance, as preparation for the kingdom, one needs spiritual renewal. This certainly fits the context better, but it is hardly likely. John's baptism cannot be a condition for everyone and Jesus' stipulation is an inclusive one - everybody needs to be born of water and the spirit to enter the kingdom.

⁵ It reads literally, "*Amen, amen, legō soi* – Amen, amen, I say to you."

⁶ The word *anōthen* can be translated "again" or "from above". Either translation would be valid when speaking of spiritual birth, but "born again" is probably better in the context of this dialogue.

- Still others think that two births are referred to here. Water refers to the first birth, that is, to the amniotic fluid associated with natural birth; Spirit refers to a second spiritual birth. Just as natural birth opens us up to the sensory world, so spiritual birth opens us up to the spiritual world. The following statement seems to lend support to this view: "Flesh gives rise to flesh but the Spirit gives rise to spirit." (3:6) This interpretation sounds interesting, but it is a little unnatural. I think one birth is in view in verse 5, not two.
- To my mind, Jesus is referring to a change already spoken about in the Old Testament. He expected Nicodemus to understand what he was talking about. (3:10-12) In Ezekiel, for example, there is a passage with which Nicodemus would have been familiar:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; ... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees..." (Ezek 36:25-27; cf. Je. 31:31-34).

We don't need to dwell on this here, other than to say that Jesus is speaking about a birth that takes place in the human spirit and is effected by the Holy Spirit.

Regeneration

I shall need to return to this passage next week. Right now it is important that we briefly examine this important teaching on regeneration or "being born again". There was one crucially important truth that had not occurred to Nicodemus. He knew he was physically alive, and he assumed he was spiritually alive. It never occurred to him that he might be physically alive but spiritually dead. In effect, Jesus said to him: "There can be no life without birth. Nicodemus, you can't live until you are born!"

What we have in this conversation is a threefold insistence in the strongest of terms.

"No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

"You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You (pl.) *must* be born again.'"

This is the first time we encounter this terminology, but it is not the last! (cf. Titus 3:5; I Pet.1:3, 23; I Jn 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). In addition, the idea is present even when different terms are used. We are described as a new creation, as having been brought to life in Christ and as having a new nature. (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2: 4-6; Rom. 6:5-10; 8:10)

In books on Systematic Theology, there is usually a chapter entitled "Regeneration". That's the theological term for "being born again". Some people think that regeneration is a synonym for "conversion", a way of saying the same thing but using a different metaphor. But the focus is quite different. Conversion speaks of a change. The "change" may be a naturalistic change. A person may come to a fresh insight and reform. In the case of genuine Christian conversion the change is supernaturally induced as God transforms a life. It involves a change in attitude and in conduct.

Regeneration is more than that. It is the impartation of new life. As such, it is always what God does! True conversion may well occur simultaneously, but logically it is the *result* of regeneration.⁷ God imparts new life to us and, in consequence, we experience an inward change which manifests itself in our conduct. The simplest definition I have heard describes regeneration as "the impartation of spiritual life to one who was spiritually dead".

Exactly how this occurs we do not know. Some have attempted to explain it in terms of a dormant human spirit. In other words, they see a vital part of our humanity - that part which enables us to relate to God - as functionally inoperative or defunct (as a result of the death mankind experienced at the Fall). God's Spirit brings that which is dormant to life and suddenly a whole new world opens up. I'm not so sure we can be, or need to be, as specific as that. Nicodemus was mystified as to how this rebirth might take place. Instead of

7 A. H. Strong suggests that a genuine spiritual conversion is what takes place when regeneration occurs. Regeneration is what God does in us and conversion is the result. They are distinct but simultaneous and inseparable. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1907), 809 ff.

trying to explain the "mechanics" of the rebirth - which part of our being is quickened, Jesus asserted the "marvel" of it all: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (3:8)⁸

Rather than attempting to specify precisely what happens, we should focus upon the experiential effects of the rebirth. Let me identify what, to my mind, are the three most evident marks of the rebirth:

- There is a new *spiritual* dimension in your life.
When you are born again, you experience the reality of the fatherhood of God. "God" may have been a title you gave to the Supreme Being, and "Father" may have been an idea you attached to God. But through the new birth, you don't just know about God as Father, you experience the reality of his fatherhood. It's as though something is 'there' that wasn't there before. You receive "the Spirit of sonship and by him (you) cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with (your spirit) that (you) are God's child." (Rom 8:15-16) Something has been awakened in you and you are alive to God. (Rom 6:11)
- There is a new *cognitive* dimension in your life.
You have an ability to understand spiritual reality. From a purely conceptual point of view, people can study truth, grasp theological facts, and even articulate them. All this can be done without actually *appreciating* the truths under consideration. Sadly this is true of much theological study. The facts can be known and yet not appreciated. Imagine a person who has no taste buds and no sense of smell. She can eat but cannot enjoy the taste or the aroma of the food. Suppose she has never had the benefit of those two senses. She may read all about food in cookbooks and hear others extol the virtues of a sumptuous meal. She may even join in a culinary discussion on the basis of her reading. A good intellect and excellent vocabulary may enable her to discuss the flavour of the food. But her knowledge of it is lacking a crucial

⁸ Interestingly, both the Hebrew and the Greek words for spirit (*ruach* and *pneuma*, respectively) also mean "breath" or "wind".

dimension. Similarly, a man born blind may imagine colour and form, but he would be wasting his time visiting an art gallery. Were he to do so, overhearing others discussing works of art may add to his frustration.

It's all about the faculty to appreciate spiritual truth. It is assumed that all people have it, but they do not. Grasping concepts and ideas is one thing; genuine spiritual comprehension is another thing altogether. That's what Paul was speaking about when he said, "The natural man (the *psuchikos* - the 'soulish' man) does not receive the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." (I Cor. 2:14) The good news is that "we have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us." (I Cor. 2:12) It's as though you are discovering truth for the very first time. The Bible takes on a brand new significance.

- There is a new moral *dimension* in your life.

Each of us is brought up in a society with certain moral norms. We may seek to live by them or we may ignore them. But, whether the morality that is communicated to us has a religious base or is purely societal, the standards are external to us. When one is born again, an important thing happens. God does something in our innermost being. Jeremiah says the God writes his law on our minds and writes it on our hearts. (Je. 31:33) John explains, in his first letter, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God." (I Jn. 3:9)

A. H. Strong gives us an alternative definition of regeneration. He says, "Regeneration is that act of God by which the governing disposition of the soul is made holy ..." ⁹ That's why we can commit sin - we are not perfect yet - but we cannot enjoy living in a state of sin. Sure, the believer sometimes sins, but opposition to sin is the ruling principle of his/her life. The important thing here is to realise that this new moral impulse comes from the inside.

A Happy Ending

There is a happy ending to this story. We have already seen that Nicodemus

⁹ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 809.

approached Jesus at night. We are left, at the end of this account, with a polite but somewhat mystified and incredulous teacher. He must have felt the force of Jesus' words, "You are Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things? I have spoken to you (pl.) of earthly things and you (pl.) do not believe; how then will you (pl.) believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (3:10, 12) We are left at the end of that account with the question: Would Nicodemus seriously consider what Jesus had said, or would he write the young teacher off and dismiss his teaching as unorthodox?

We encounter Nicodemus again in chapter 7. Jesus was teaching in the temple and members of the Sanhedrin instructed the temple guards to arrest him. They returned empty-handed and the infuriated authorities asked, "Why didn't you bring him in?" All they could say was, "No one ever spoke the way this man does!" The chief priests and Pharisees were peeved and spat out an insult: "You mean he has deceived you also? Has any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law - there is a curse on them." Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" This elicited a derisive comment from his fellow councillors, but Nicodemus was beginning, however tentatively, to nail his colours to the mast. In fact, given the temper of the Sanhedrin, a stand of this nature took some courage. (7:45-52)

Our last sight of Nicodemus is in chapter 19. The Sanhedrin has finally got its way and Jesus has been executed. Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus, and a member of the Sanhedrin, has approached Pilate for permission to bury his body. He was accompanied by none other than Nicodemus. John comments, significantly, that Nicodemus was the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. He brought a large quantity of aloes and myrrh and they anointed the body of Jesus. Think of it. The man who tentatively approached Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, before hostility had hardened into a plot to kill him, is now openly identifying with him. Jesus is now not just an uncredentialed and controversial teacher but a convicted and condemned impostor, found guilty of blasphemy and sacrilege. He has been cursed by the Jews and crucified by the Romans. By identifying openly with the crucified Jesus, Nicodemus has everything to lose and nothing to gain. I can only think that he, like Joseph of Arimathea, had become a disciple.

Conclusion

But, let's get back to the first discussion. It's impossible to listen in on that conversation and be in any doubt about Jesus' intention. His insistence is as valid as it ever was. And he could not have been more emphatic. His double amen underlined the importance that he attached to what he had to say. Three times he insisted that every single one of us needs to be born again. And he declared this great imperative, not to some immoral or irreligious derelict, but to the most cultured, respected religious enquirer ever to have approached him. In one sense, it's very simple. There can be no life without birth. "You must be born again!" It applies across the board.