



The Gospel of John

“The Word Became Flesh”

John 3:1–12

November 24, 2013

Introduction

In many evangelical churches today, there are people who will outwardly identify with Christ, but inwardly they have never been genuinely converted. Because they cling to a false profession, they fool themselves into thinking they are on a narrow path that leads to life, when in fact they are on a broad path that leads to destruction (Matt 7:13–14). To make matters worse, their self-deception is often reinforced by well-meaning but undiscerning Christians who naively embrace them as true believers. Such confusion is often propagated by watered-down pseudo-gospels that are preached from many pulpits. This kind of cheap Christianity where no one’s faith is to be questioned has left a devastating wake in many churches. But Jesus’ own ministry provides a stark contrast to this kind of confusion. He refused to compromise on the truth. Jesus actually turned away more who came to Him than those He actually received. He wanted total commitment. As a result of this uncompromising demand, many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore (John 6:66). He repeatedly warned His followers of the dangers of a superficial or spurious faith. This is the very issue He confronted when one superficial believer named Nicodemus came inquiring about Him.

The New Birth (3:1–36)

When it comes to the Christian life, there is no doctrine which is more fundamental, more crucial for individuals than the doctrine of the new birth. Being “born again” is what makes a person a Christian. Without this new birth, people have no claim to the things of God or the promises of eternal life beyond.

The Interview with Nicodemus (vv. 1–21)

Here we see an example of what John meant when he told us that Jesus “knew all men” (2:24). Jesus is able to go right to the heart of Nicodemus’s problem. Nicodemus was one of those who superficially believed in the signs Jesus performed, but not in Christ Himself. Instead

of affirming his profession, the Lord refused to accept Nicodemus's faith. Jesus instead pointed him to the life-transforming nature of *true* saving faith.

The Inquiry (vv. 1–2)

Nicodemus belonged to one of the Jewish sects called the Pharisees. The name literally means “separated ones.” Their beginnings can be traced back to a movement of Jews in the Maccabean period who opposed attempts to introduce Greek Hellenism into Jewish culture in the second century B.C. The Pharisees were mostly laymen, but their leaders were primarily scribes who interpreted the Scriptures according to the oral law — the “tradition of the elders,” or Halakah, which they held was as ancient as the written Law. This Halakah was written down in the Mishnah in the 2nd century A.D. and was eventually incorporated into the Talmud. At their core, they were fundamentally legalists who tried to reduce life to a system of rules that covered every possible circumstance. Their leaders were scribes and rabbis who laid the foundation for the rabbinic Judaism of the Middle Ages and today. The Pharisees firmly believed in the resurrection and thus would frequently clash with the Sadducees. The “Jewish ruling council” was the Sanhedrin. It had internal control over Jewish affairs, having both legislative and judicial authority. (Think of it like a combination between Congress and the Supreme Court). Nicodemus was also part of this ruling body.

The fact that Nicodemus was a part of the Sanhedrin probably explains why he came to Jesus at night. He might not have wanted his coming to imply the approval of the entire Sanhedrin, nor did he want to risk the disfavor of his fellow members. But the important point is not *when* he came, but rather *that* he came at all. Though coming to Jesus does not always guarantee salvation (cf. the rich young ruler, Luke 18:18–23), it is a necessary beginning.

The Discussion (vv. 3–21)

Nicodemus had not actually asked a question in verse 2, but the implication is that he wants to know who Jesus is. His inquisitive mindset was much the same as the delegation sent to John the Baptist (1:19–27). “We know you are a teacher who has come from God, but who are you? A prophet? The Messiah?” Rather than answering this implied question directly, Jesus instead focuses on Nicodemus's real need: understanding the new birth.

The New Birth is Essential for Entering God's Kingdom (vv. 3–12)

The “kingdom of God” is the future messianic or Millennial Kingdom, which we learn from the other gospel accounts was announced by both John the Baptist and Jesus (Matt 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:43–44; 8:1).

The word “again” (v. 3) comes from the word *anōthen* (ἀνωθεν), which is a homonym and can have three meanings in the original Greek:

- 1) “again” (cf. Gal 4:9)
- 2) “from above” (cf. John 3:31; 19:11, 23)
- 3) “from the beginning” (cf. Luke 1:3; Acts 26:5)

It is universally agreed that it means either “again” or “from above” in this verse. Most likely, Jesus meant “from above” — this is how the word is used in every other occurrence in John’s gospel, and verse 5 also suggests this meaning. However, Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus to mean “again.” In other words, Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he must be born *from above*, but Nicodemus mistakenly thinks that Jesus is saying he must be born *again* — a second time.

“Born from above” (or “again”) is a metaphor for the theological doctrine of regeneration (Titus 3:5). Another metaphor for this same doctrine is “new creation” (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17).

In order to correct Nicodemus’s misunderstanding, Jesus explains that the kind of birth He is referring to is one that is “of water and the Spirit.” Commentators have suggested several views to make sense of this phrase “born of water:”

- A) Some believe that this is a reference to either John’s baptism or Christian baptism. These views are incorrect. There is no further reference to water or baptism in this passage, only the work of the Spirit. Furthermore, this view would make mandatory a rite which, in John’s case, was superseded by Christian baptism. But Christian baptism had not even been instituted at this point, and so there is no way Jesus could be expecting Nicodemus to know this. Additionally, the rest of the New Testament teaches that baptism is not necessary for salvation.
- B) Others see this as a reference to natural birth. This view is also incorrect. It understands the water to refer to the amniotic fluid that breaks from the womb shortly before childbirth. However,

there is no reference in the Bible or other ancient literature that equates “water” birth with physical birth. Also, it is redundant in that it states the obvious. It would have Jesus explaining in verse 5 that in order to be born from above you must first be born physically. But notice the parallel structure of verses 3 and 5. “Born from above” in verse 3 is replaced by “born of water and the Spirit” in verse 5. To be “born from above” is the same thing as to be “born of water and the Spirit” and thus cannot mean to be born physically. Notice the parallel structure:

3:3 “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born **again (from above)**,
he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

3:5 “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born **of water and the Spirit**,
he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

∴ born **again** = born **of water and the Spirit**.
 born **(from above)** = born **of water and the Spirit**.

C) Still others see “born of water” as a reference to the Word of God. This view is also incorrect. “Water and Spirit” would seem to be a single concept. John’s gospel has no emphasis on the use of the Word of God in regeneration, and every other non-literal use of the term *water* in the gospel speaks of imparting spiritual life (e.g. 4:14).

D) A final group understands water and Spirit to be used symbolically for the work of the Holy Spirit. Water is used symbolically of the Spirit in John 7:37–39. Water may speak more specifically of the cleansing from sin associated with the work of the transforming Spirit. The combination of the terms *water* and *Spirit* is commonly used in the Old Testament for the work of the Spirit. One of the strongest arguments for this view is found in verse 10. Jesus rebukes Nicodemus because, as Israel’s teacher, he should have known about the Old Testament teaching on the regenerating work of the Spirit. The specific passage Jesus had in mind is probably Ezekiel 36:25–27. Notice the terms **water** and **Spirit**:

“Then I will **sprinkle clean water** on you, and **you shall be clean**;
I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.
I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will

take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”

What Jesus is telling Nicodemus in verse 6 is that spiritual birth can only be accomplished by the action of God’s Spirit. The principle here is that all forms of life reproduce after their kind, i.e. like generates like. The word *flesh* means human nature as in 1:14. Just as only human nature can beget human nature, so also only the Holy Spirit can effect spiritual transformation. There is something mysterious about the Spirit’s work in regeneration. In order to help Nicodemus, Jesus draws an analogy from the wind in verse 8. This is a good analogy because the Greek word for spirit — *pneuma* (πνεύμα) is another homonym and can also mean “wind.” It is beyond a human being’s ability to control or fully understand. We can see the wind’s effects but not the wind itself. Such is also the case with the Holy Spirit’s work in regeneration. We can’t see regeneration with our eyes, but we can see its effects — spiritual fruit and a transformed life.

Unfortunately, Nicodemus had no understanding of the necessity of regeneration. Judaism had essentially become a religion of works, as Paul’s epistles bear witness. But the Old Testament was not unclear about these things (Ezek 36:25–27; Isa 44:3–5; cf. Ezek 37:1–14). Notice some other statements from Ezekiel:

“Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh.”
~Ezekiel 11:19

“Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel?”
~Ezekiel 18:31

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”
~Ezekiel 36:26

Starting in verse 11, we hear no more from Nicodemus. The dialogue becomes a monologue. Each “you” and “we” in this verse is plural. Jesus is not only speaking to Nicodemus, but to the entire Sanhedrin — “I tell *you*...” and the entire Jewish nation — “*you people* do not

receive...” The “we” in this verse encompasses Jesus, His disciples, John the Baptist, and the Old Testament prophets — all of whom bear witness to the truth about the Holy Spirit’s work in regeneration. The Jewish people did not accept the testimony of Jesus and His true followers, and their unbelief was perpetuated by their spiritual ignorance.

Jesus’ pointed rebuke in verse 12 shattered Nicodemus’s self-righteousness. His shallow profession of Jesus as a teacher sent from God (v. 2) was meaningless, as was his misconstrued understanding of salvation (v. 10). We might be tempted to think that “earthly things” refer to the physical elements like wind, water, and natural birth; while “heavenly things” would point to the new birth. But it’s hard to fathom Nicodemus not believing in the physical elements. His problem was the new birth. Notice, therefore, what the terms refer to:

Earthly things = the new birth (i.e. that which occurs on earth)
Heavenly Things = eschatological, future things (coming kingdom, etc.)

Because of his refusal to believe, he could not even fathom the earthly truth of the new birth, not to mention the heavenly realities of future things like the coming kingdom of God.

There were two sides to Nicodemus’s unbelief. Intellectually, while he acknowledged Jesus to be a teacher sent from God (v. 2), he was unwilling to accept Him as God. Spiritually, he was very reluctant to admit that he himself was a helpless sinner. That was unthinkable for proud members of the Pharisees — the self-righteous, self-confessed religious elite of Israel. Furthermore, he was a privileged member of the Sanhedrin and thus viewed as a prominent spiritual leader by the people (v. 10). To humble himself enough to admit that he was in spiritual darkness and needing to come to the light of true salvation and righteousness (vv. 19–21) would have been to confess his sinfulness and lack of righteousness. Like many who were impressed by Jesus’ miracles (2:23–25), Nicodemus refused to commit himself to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Although nothing in this passage suggests that Nicodemus was converted that evening, he never forgot his conversation with Jesus. Later he boldly defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin (7:50–51), and helped Joseph of Arimathea prepare His body for burial (19:38–39) — actions that indicate the presence of genuine faith in his life. Sometime after that memorable evening spent with

Jesus, but before the crucifixion, Nicodemus came to understand God's sovereign grace and experience the reality of the new birth.

Conclusion

Just as Jesus challenged Nicodemus with the need for spiritual regeneration via the new birth, such is also the case for us. If we have not been born from above, we will never be able to see or enter heaven and Christ's coming kingdom. Nor will we be able to comprehend the truth of such things. For each and every believer, the road to heaven begins with being born again — admitting that we are sinners and that Christ died on the cross to remove our sin and guilt and give us everlasting life (3:16).

Perhaps you have been living with a superficial faith like Nicodemus — refusing to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and trusting in your own righteousness to save you. That kind of shallow belief will fail. But don't think the door of salvation has been closed. Just as Nicodemus later came to true faith in Christ, so also you are being given a second chance today! As long as you still draw breath, there is hope. But don't wait — none of us is guaranteed a tomorrow here on this earth. Now is the time to humbly believe in Christ, repent of your sins, and accept Him as your Savior. If you commit yourself to Him, He will also commit Himself to you.

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” ~John 6:37

~AWB