

A Feasting on the Word™ Commentary

Feasting on the Gospels

John, Volume 1
Chapters 1–9

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John 3:1–8

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.* ²He 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.”

Theological Perspective

The life of faith is born of the Spirit (v. 5). It is not something we manufacture for ourselves. It is not an achievement for which we can take credit. Like birth, the new life of faith is a mysterious gift. It is a birth from above. The Greek word translated “from above” (v. 3) can also mean “again,” which is how Nicodemus initially understands Jesus’ call for a new birth (v. 4). What sense does it make to be born all over again? How is this possible for someone who has already “grown old”? There is nothing unreasonable about Nicodemus’s questions. Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus’ teachings elicit one misunderstanding after another, as his hearers try to make sense of his appeals to the things of ordinary life—birth, water, bread, light, sheep—to talk about God’s extraordinary love and grace. “Flesh” does not have negative connotations in John, as it often does in Paul’s writings. To be “born of the flesh” (v. 6) is simply to receive God’s gift of physical life. To be “born of the Spirit” (v. 8) is to receive God’s gift of eternal life, a transformed mode of life that begins already now.

The Spirit is God’s power and life operating in creaturely existence to transform it; but how and where is the Spirit at work? Christian theology affirms a double-edged view of the Spirit. On one

Pastoral Perspective

Nicodemus comes to Jesus “by night.” When Nicodemus later appears at Jesus’ tomb, John makes it a point to remind us of this: “Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came” (19:39). Is Nicodemus afraid of the ramifications of being seen with Jesus? Perhaps. Perhaps the Gospel is providing us with a portrait of what takes place when an insider, a church member, a pastor, comes face to face with Jesus, “the light of all people” (1:4). When read through this lens, the story of Nicodemus’s darkened encounter with Jesus can open the reading community to an as-yet-unimagined future.

One of the gifts, and burdens, of this text is its familiarity. For many, the words “born again” have become a slogan, a badge of honor, a tool to distinguish insider from outsider and saved from lost. It means that the pastoral challenge in faithfully hosting this text is, at least, twofold. On the one hand, those who are confident in their understanding of the passage because they claim a born-again experience will benefit from an invitation to have their eyes opened all over again. On the other hand, those who have closed their ears to the text after too many “Have you been born again?” inquisitorial questions may be surprised by what they discover upon being invited into a close reading of the narrative.

* See “The Jews’ in the Fourth Gospel” on pp. xi–xiv.

Exegetical Perspective

This scene opens with immediate reference to a particular Pharisee, a “leader of the Jews” called Nicodemus. John frequently portrays the Pharisees as foils who challenge Jesus’ authority. Those who read the Gospel in sequence will have noted that in John 1:19, John emphasizes that “this is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’” A few short verses later, he adds that “they had been sent from the Pharisees” (1:24). Thus the Pharisees are introduced early in the narrative in a questionable light. That John specifically identifies Nicodemus by name signals the importance of this particular Pharisee in John’s Gospel. Nicodemus will have a recurring role in this Gospel and in some ways will defy John’s typical image of a Pharisee.

Although they are certainly not alone in this regard, the Pharisees are often portrayed by John in terms of their ignorance, which is thematic in a Gospel whose prologue declares that the *logos* “was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him” (1:10). In John 2:18–21, Jesus is questioned by “the Jews,” that is, the Judean leadership at the temple, who misunderstand the meaning of his answers. Nicodemus will demonstrate a similar level of ignorance, but John casts him in a decidedly more benevolent light.

Homiletical Perspective

Nicodemus is a patron saint for preachers who have lots of questions. Why did you not pay more attention in seminary—especially during the class on change and conflict? Should you have become an Episcopalian when you had the chance? Why did you fail to nail down the vacation policy with the personnel committee? What would you do differently if you could rewind your life? What would you change if you could be born again? If I could start all over, I would skip junior high football, the last five minutes of my first date, and the second semester of Hebrew. I would read more Jürgen Moltmann and less Dear Abby, skip the *Beverly Hillbillies* in favor of PBS, and listen to more Ray Charles and save the \$6.00 I spent on a Bee Gees album.

Every once in a while the people in our congregations realize that their lives could be different and plan to turn over a new leaf. They make a list of everything that has to go, everything that will not be part of their new life, and a list of everything they are going to do more of—exercising, reading great books, spending time with the people they love. Their new resolutions work for a while, maybe for a couple of days. They also have moments when they realize that even if they could stop doing everything wrong, even if they did everything right that they wanted to do right, even if they kept all the rules that

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Theological Perspective

hand, the Spirit is like the wind, which “blows where it chooses” (v. 8). (In Hebrew and Greek, one word means both “spirit” and “wind.”) The Spirit is loose in the world in surprising and disruptive ways, transcending human understanding and control. No human rules or traditions can contain the Spirit. Like fire, the Spirit is powerful and unpredictable, bringing light and warmth to cold and dark places. The Spirit’s reach is universal. No corner of creation is off limits to the Spirit’s transforming power. Kalbryn McLean calls the Spirit the “wild child” of the Godhead.¹

On the other hand, the Spirit has an institutional affiliation, as the One who both indwells the church and is given through the church as a means of grace. The concrete rituals and practices that structure life in the Christian community are “habitations of the Spirit,”² places where the Spirit transforms us personally and corporately. The Spirit’s power is channeled through prayer and sacraments, through acts of mercy and outreach, even through potlucks and communal governance. John 3:5 says that new life comes through being born “of water and Spirit,” likely a reference to baptism. In and through the church’s practice of baptism, the Spirit is at work bringing new life. Through the things of earth—water, bread, wine, oil—comes new life from above. These two edges of Christian teaching about the Spirit, the “wild child” and the institutional, should both be affirmed, not set in opposition to each other.

Nicodemus brings an impressive set of institutional credentials to his nighttime meeting with Jesus. He is a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest governing body of the Jewish people (v. 1). He is “a teacher of Israel” (v. 10), a keeper of its rituals and practices. The arrangement of John’s Gospel invites us to contrast Nicodemus with the next person Jesus engages in conversation, the Samaritan woman in John 4. The contrast is not flattering to Nicodemus. Unlike Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman is female and unnamed. Even worse, she is a morally disgraced member of a theologically suspect group. She has zero religious capital. Yet she meets Jesus in broad daylight (4:6), rather than in the dead of night, and immediately has the courage to give public testimony about him to her own people (4:39). Through the mysterious work of the Spirit, she is born from above.

1. Kalbryn A. McLean, “Calvin and the Personal Politics of Providence,” in Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones, eds., *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 122.

2. Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 63–64.

Pastoral Perspective

Nicodemus, the religious leader, assumes that he is enlightened: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God” (v. 2). In response, Jesus points to his blindness: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (v. 3). Nicodemus is in the dark. The transformative voltage that flows through this text puts at risk the status quo of any reader, or reading community, who comes to it assuming sight. Seeing the kingdom of God and therefore seeing how one’s citizenship is to be lived in the new world of God’s rule will, says Jesus, require a rebirth, a radical break, a new identity.

This is, of course, more easily said than done. Those who are prepared to take the risk of a new birth are, most often, those who admit that they are in the dark, in trouble, lost. This is the reason that 12-step groups begin with an admission of powerlessness and a turning over of life to a higher power. Sobriety will require something other than simply trying harder. It will require a radical reorientation of life “from above.” Perhaps such insight into our own blindness is the first sign of rebirth.

Nicodemus does not get it. He is a literal reader. Metaphors are beyond him. He wants to know how it is biologically possible to reenter the womb of his mother. The text assumes that Jesus is not easy to understand. His way of seeing and of speaking confronts our assumptions and expectations. It is not easy for a religious leader like Nicodemus to understand Jesus. This is oddly reassuring. As church leaders we too often struggle to understand the gospel. Sometimes we simply continue to trumpet our misunderstandings, rather than prepare ourselves for the new life Jesus intends. We assume that our rebirth to newness has already taken place when we are, even now, standing alongside Nicodemus in the dark.

Jesus moves the conversation from the question of seeing to that of entering the kingdom of God: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (v. 5). It is one thing to see what is needed. It is another thing to do it. How often this is true for the church. We see the way of Jesus. We hear his command to forgive. We are drawn to his walk with the poor, the outcast, the marginalized. Still, we find old habits, family patterns, and cultural norms beyond our power to break and change. We see but cannot dare to enter the new world that is the kingdom of God.

Entry into the kingdom of God, Jesus says, requires birth of water and Spirit. A Gospel that has begun with Genesis—“In the beginning was the Word” (1:1)—now reminds its readers of how God begins

Exegetical Perspective

It is noteworthy that John presents Nicodemus as a religious leader who is positively disposed toward and genuinely interested in learning more about Jesus, whom he addresses, as do Jesus' disciples, as "Rabbi." Nicodemus not only acknowledges the "signs" that Jesus performs, he speaks for more than just himself when he acknowledges their significance: "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" (v. 2). Still he has questions, which should not come as a surprise in a Gospel that contends that signs alone are inadequate for understanding Jesus (20:30–31).

Nicodemus approaches Jesus "by night." Some see in this reference the implication that Nicodemus seeks Jesus out secretly, that is, only by cover of darkness. Others read it as indication simply that Nicodemus is yet "in the dark" about Jesus. Perhaps the most direct path to John's meaning is the one laid out in John 3:19–21, where the author writes,

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.

By coming to Jesus as he does, Nicodemus the Pharisee is illustrative of one who does "what is true" and whose deeds are "clearly seen." He comes in darkness to Jesus the light. Although he does not immediately grasp all that Jesus teaches, he approaches the one he calls "Rabbi" in all sincerity.

Jesus meets Nicodemus's humble greeting with an unsolicited lesson on the kingdom of God that recalls the birthing imagery introduced in John 1:12–13 and underscores the necessity of being born "from above." Although the term *anōthen* can be translated as either "from above" or "again," the former meaning makes most sense here, as the contours of John's Gospel adhere to the binary separation of the realm above from the world below. When Nicodemus, understandably confused, asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (v. 4), Jesus speaks to Nicodemus not about rebirth but about new birth from above, that is, from the realm of the Spirit. To be "born of water and Spirit" (v. 5), with water serving as a probable allusion to baptism, is to be born anew, not again.

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they made for themselves, something would still be missing.

Our churches include people who like Nicodemus keep the rules, but know something is still missing. This story offers an opportunity to encourage them, like Nicodemus, to take their questions to Christ. Jesus and the disciples are sitting in an olive grove after a busy day and a long walk. They have finished dinner—fish again—when they hear Nicodemus making his way up the hill, twigs snapping under his feet. Nicodemus is uncomfortable being there so late at night. Jesus gestures for him to go ahead. How do you begin a conversation with Jesus? Nicodemus starts, as debaters often do, with a compliment, "Jesus, we know that you are a remarkable person with rare gifts for teaching. You do extraordinary things." He is having trouble getting to what he wants to ask. Jesus thinks it is too late for a long, drawn-out analysis, so he cuts to the chase: "What the whole thing boils down to is that unless you are born from above, you might as well give up."

This is not the response Nicodemus is expecting: "I came here for a serious conversation at considerable risk to my reputation, and you start posing riddles. What do you mean? How are you supposed to be born again when you are pushing retirement age? How can you be born from above when it is a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning?"

Jesus explains, "The wind blows where it will, and you hear it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. That is how it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Jesus is playing on the word *pneuma*, which means both spirit and wind. God's Spirit is as uncontrollable and unknowable as the wind. The new life that Jesus has in mind is elusive, mysterious, and entirely God's doing. The incomprehensible wind of the Spirit blows where we do not see. People experience God's grace in more ways than we understand. We worship a wind that blows where it will.

We preach new life that is not about knowledge or accomplishment, but about the uncontrollable wind of the Spirit. Being born from above is not the same thing as acting like a nicer person, learning more, or working harder. We cannot give ourselves a new start. No one can enter the kingdom of God, or even see it, without being born from above, of water and Spirit (vv. 3, 5). If everyone in the world read the Bible, joined a church, and said hello to their neighbors, if we were all as good as Nicodemus, something would still be missing. Life is a mystery beyond our understanding, a gift that only God can give.

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Theological Perspective

It has been tempting for Christian interpreters (especially Protestant ones) to see Nicodemus's institutional affiliations as a barrier to the work of the Spirit. On this reading, the Spirit spurns the "legalism" of Pharisees like Nicodemus and blows into unlikely places, like the life of a disgraced Samaritan woman. This classic move in Christian anti-Judaism does justice neither to Nicodemus nor to Christian understandings of the Spirit. Nicodemus appears two more times in John's Gospel, once to defend Jesus' right to a hearing on the basis of Jewish law (7:50–51), and one last time to anoint and prepare Jesus' body "according to the burial custom of the Jews" (19:39–40). Nicodemus never abandons the rituals and practices that structure life in his religious community. In and through them the Spirit blows, creating space for Nicodemus to find and express his devotion to Jesus. Jewish burial customs become habitations of the Spirit. Through the things of earth Nicodemus is born from above. His journey, which begins in darkness and incomprehension, ends in faith.

"Do not be astonished" (v. 7), Jesus says to Nicodemus, about his need for new life. To the church, Jesus says, "Do not be astonished at the many ways this life 'from above' comes. Do not be astonished when ancient traditions become habitations of the Spirit. Do not be astonished when the Spirit shows up in new and disturbing places. However and whenever faith and new life appear, know that they are 'from above,' gifts of the Spirit. Give thanks for all the gifts of the Spirit." As Hildegard of Bingen declares, the Spirit is "radiant life, worthy of praise, awakening and enlivening all things."³

AMY PLANTINGA PAUW

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again. New creation begins with the wind/spirit/breath of God sweeping over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2). The waters are storm waters of trouble. They are like the waters of the Red Sea that God holds back so that the people can pass through. They are like the storm waters of Galilee that Jesus calms in the face of the disciples' fear. They are like the baptismal waters in which, says Paul, we drown to our old way of life and rise to walk with Christ in "newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Rebirth—whether personal or congregational, cultural or political—requires a break, an ending, a risky journey to new life.

No wonder Jesus says that this birth must come from above. This is not the kind of transformation that can be programmed or taught. Its source and activity is mysterious—as unpredictable as the wind. Nicodemus is not told what to do in order to be reborn, because rebirth is beyond his control. It is the inexplicable, incredible gift of God.

In this regard, rebirth is no different from birth itself. It is beyond our control. It comes through the waters of the darkened womb. It is reliant upon the divine gift of breath/spirit. The eyes to see and the power to enter the world we are born into are given to the newborn freely, as gifts. Could it be that the personal rebirth we long for, the rebirth of the dying church we know and of the troubled world we inhabit, is the great gift of God in Jesus Christ for those with eyes to see?

EDWIN SEARCY

3. Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies, eds., *Hildegard of Bingen: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1990), 118.

Exegetical Perspective

Birthing imagery captures the Gospel's thematic emphasis on the role of the *logos* in creation: "In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (1:1–3). By expanding upon the prologue's initial references to the life that comes from the *logos*, John makes clear that the creative activity of the *logos* is ongoing. Jesus' use of the second person plural, "you must be born from above" (v. 7), not only responds to Nicodemus's use of the first person plural (v. 2); it also recalls the prologue's concern for humanity writ large, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (1:3b–4).

The first sign that Jesus performed—changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana (2:1–11)—served to illustrate astonishing transformation and abundance. Here in chapter 3, Jesus' first extended teaching in the Gospel emphasizes human transformation. Jesus presents an understanding of new life as that which is both abundant and rooted in and generated by the Spirit. Being born anew cannot be compelled, controlled, or managed by human initiative. As John writes, "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" (v. 8). Using the same Greek word, *pneuma*, for both wind and Spirit, John evokes the image of the wind or Spirit of God that "swept over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2) at the opening of the first biblical account of creation. John's message is clear: the *logos* and Spirit who brought life into being at the very beginning of all things continue to bring new life to all humankind. The creative and life-giving work of God is powerful, unpredictable, and ongoing.

MARY F. FOSKETT

Homiletical Perspective

Any life we know comes as a gift of God. Hope and joy come from God. The same Spirit who gave life in the first place gives life over and over again.

What does it mean for us to preach about being "born from above"? Perhaps in your church there are two women who seem to have similar lives, but the first is incredibly overworked. She is a legal assistant, married with two teenagers. She is tired most of the time. She teaches a children's Sunday school class, and is tired of that too. She feels burned out in just about everything. The second woman does not feel trapped. She works as an office manager, divorced with two small children. She is busy, but she finds time to teach an adult Sunday school class. She enjoys life and the people around her.

The two women's lives are alike in most respects, but the first woman thinks hers is dull, and lives out of a sense of duty. Maybe the boredom she feels is the Spirit calling her to a better way, but she does not recognize it. The second woman thinks of her life as a gift, and lives out of gratitude. Pinning down the difference between the two women or the ways in which we play both parts is hard, but it has something—or everything—to do with the hope of being born from above. The change we want and the life we need are gifts from God.

When we feel burned out and feel no joy, we should ask God to be born from above. We should preach that the dullest day given to God has meaning. The emptiest week committed to love has purpose. The most hopeless life given in faith finds hope.

BRETT YOUNGER

John 3:9–15

⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Theological Perspective

John 3:9–15 presents two teachers talking to each other about matters of faith. Jesus is “a teacher who has come from God” (3:2), and Nicodemus is “a teacher of Israel” (v. 10). It would be more accurate to say that one teacher is talking over the head of the other. Nicodemus is having a hard time following Jesus’ lesson. It is easy to sympathize with Nicodemus’s plaintive question in verse 9: “How can these things be?” He has tried, to no avail, to follow Jesus’ lesson about birth and wind in verses 3–8. Even “the earthly things” (v. 12) are too hard for him to understand. This “teacher of Israel” is out of his league, and he knows it.

Nicodemus is not alone. When it comes to understanding matters of faith, we are all out of our league. Karl Barth encouraged his fellow theologians not to take themselves too seriously. He wanted them to recognize the humor in all human attempts to understand the things of God. He imagined the angels’ giggling about his prodigious theological efforts, and the relief of one day being able to dump his enormous *Church Dogmatics* “on some heavenly floor as a pile of waste paper.”¹

In verses 11–12, Jesus the teacher seems exasperated with his student. We speak of the truth that

1. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 489.

Pastoral Perspective

“How can these things be?” Nicodemus speaks for a wealth of insiders and outsiders who wonder at the impossible possibility of a new future. How is real newness possible? It is a question that saps the energy of lone souls in despair, of congregations in decline, of families in dysfunction, and of peoples under oppression. Nicodemus names Jesus “a teacher who has come from God” (3:2) but this teaching is more than he has bargained for. It is one thing to be taught to live a more faithful life. It is another thing to learn that the future calls for rebirth “from above” (3:7). Those who know too well what it is to endure cycles of abuse and those who witness the continued degradation of the planet by human consumption wonder with Nicodemus how anything truly new can be.

Jesus appears surprised: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (v. 10). Jesus imagines that Nicodemus should be well schooled in the rebirth of a people. From the barren future of Abraham and Sarah to the grinding oppression of Pharaoh’s system and the dry bones of utter loss in exile, the memory of Israel is well stocked with stories of impossible newness from above. After the long season of Christendom, the church we know also has fallen victim to the amnesia that affected Nicodemus. Teachers of the church often find that they too do not understand

Exegetical Perspective

This passage records the second portion of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus once again initiates the conversation with a question, but then falls silent. Clearly puzzled by Jesus' teaching about being born from above by water and Spirit, he asks Jesus, "How can these things be?" (v. 9). It is difficult to determine the precise tone of Jesus' retort. On the one hand, it is clearly meant to challenge Nicodemus. On the other hand, it acknowledges Nicodemus's seemingly considerable stature in the community. Translated literally, Jesus' designation for Nicodemus could be taken as titular. He asks, "You are the Teacher of Israel [*ho didaskalos*], and you do not know these things?" Even as he admonishes Nicodemus for his lack of understanding, he recognizes Nicodemus's importance as a teacher among those to whom Jesus himself has been sent (1:31). Most importantly, John uses the brief exchange to turn the reader's attention to the extended monologue by Jesus that immediately follows. Nicodemus effectively disappears from the scene when Jesus' monologue begins (he reappears twice more in the Gospel, in 7:45–51 and 19:39–42). The author's primary interest is in readying his readers to listen to Jesus as if he were no longer speaking to Nicodemus, but addressing them instead.

The passages that follow, 3:11–15 and 3:16–21, outline key aspects of John's understanding of Jesus'

Homiletical Perspective

Nicodemus has a complete set of *Feasting on the Gospels* on his shelf. He is one of us. Nicodemus is chair of the religion department and a mover and shaker in the ministerial association. He has a blog called "Religion for Grown-ups." Being a professional expert on God is good work if you can get it. Nicodemus is adept at articulating the intricacies of religion and detecting the logical shortcomings in other people's faith. Yet, like the rest of us, if he does not understand that life is God's gift, then he had better start over again. Nothing is more basic than knowing that God is a wind beyond our understanding. None of us is an expert on the Almighty.

Nicodemus's coming to see Jesus is surprising, because as far as the ministerial association is concerned, Jesus is a troublemaker. His only status with the local clergy is as a pain in the neck. Just last week he kicked over some tables during a big stewardship campaign at the temple. Nicodemus knows that there are social risks in coming to see Jesus; so he decides that with his reputation to uphold, it might be smart to pay his visit at night. As a result of his decision, many preachers have been unable to resist the temptation to title sermons on this story "Nic at Night." Nicodemus is a good person, who does not do the things you are *not* supposed to do and does the things you *are* supposed to do.

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comes from God, he says to Nicodemus, and we testify to what has been revealed. You have read the Scriptures. Why is this teaching so hard for you to receive? If you cannot grasp the basics, how are you going to handle the more advanced subjects? Nicodemus has undoubtedly read the Scriptures, but he is still having a hard time connecting the dots. Again, it is easy to sympathize with Nicodemus's perplexity. Like the Christian poet George Herbert, we long to know how all the lights of Scripture combine, so that we can see "not only how each verse doth shine / But all the constellations of the storie."²

In verses 13–14 Jesus provides Nicodemus with two guide stars in the biblical constellations: Moses and Woman Wisdom. The role of personified divine Wisdom in Proverbs and the deuterocanonical writings is to teach humanity "heavenly things" (v. 12) and lead them to abundant life. As Wisdom declares about herself in Proverbs 8:35, "whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD." More than any other Gospel, John aligns Jesus with the figure of Woman Wisdom (see Prov. 30:4), "who descended from heaven" (v. 13) to offer light and truth to humanity. When Jesus, the Son of Man, "has ascended into heaven" (v. 13), this will mark a return to his heavenly origins.

In verse 14 Jesus teaches Nicodemus about the significance of his upcoming death on a cross with a story about Moses from Numbers 21. Israel is crying out in the wilderness for deliverance from a plague of deadly serpents. God tells Moses to craft an image of a serpent and lift it up on a pole. Paradoxically, all who look upon this symbol of death find healing and life. Jesus too will be "lifted up" (v. 14), on a cross, a symbol of death. Through his death, he becomes the source of life and salvation for all (12:32). When Moses wrote about God's gracious acts of healing and deliverance, Jesus says later, Moses "wrote about me" (5:46).

The ascension and the crucifixion are difficult lessons. We can imagine Nicodemus responding to Jesus' mysterious teachings about these "heavenly things" yet to take place with the same question he had before: "How can these things be?" Christians living on the other side of the crucifixion and ascension of Christ often have Nicodemus's question too. Even the best teachers among us need remedial help to grasp the heavenly mysteries. We long for our teacher Jesus to open our minds to

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these things. Being "born again" is regularly reduced to a one-time personal experience of the individual, when it holds the promise—and threat—of radical renewal for whole communities being born anew into the kingdom of God.

Now Jesus enters the witness box. The dialogue with Nicodemus gives way to Jesus' singular testimony. The encounter is no longer framed as teacher and student. Nicodemus slips quietly off the stage of the text until later in the Gospel (7:50; 19:39–40). Now we, the reading community, become the jury who must weigh the evidence before us. Jesus swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth: "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen" (v. 11). This is the foundation upon which our life together will be lived. This is how we will know it is true. We will know it is true because we witness the testimony of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and judge it to be the truth.

Trusting in Jesus to bring new life is not easy for jurors who witness strong countertestimony from a "real world" in which rebirth is an impossibility. Such countertestimony is often convincing, even to those who long to place their trust in Jesus. It saps courage for change, drains energy for risk and sacrifice, feeds the twin cancers of apathy and despair. Jesus notices the jury's hesitancy, the heads shaking "no" in response to his vision of life born from above (v. 11). The reception of Jesus' testimony as the truth—as a faithful depiction of the real world in which we live—is a critical pastoral issue facing the church, whether gathered in worship or scattered in mission. This is the reason that congregations benefit from honest testimony in which doubt and uncertainty are safely given voice. Witnesses are to be protected in God's sanctuary. Their proclamation is not censored. In this way the community comes to trust the testimony that says yes to Jesus and confirms the truth of his way.

Jesus pushes on. His testimony about rebirth has been "about earthly things" (v. 12). Now he will tell the truth about "heavenly things." First he has testified that the kingdom of God requires human beings to be born from above into a new world. Now he says that there is One who has bridged the chasm between heaven and earth: the Son of Man. Here we receive the two most audacious claims of Christian faith: that Jesus is "descended from heaven" (v. 13) and that broken, flawed, sinful humankind can be reborn, saved, made new. We will not be surprised if the jury—whether outsiders or insiders—often arrives at a verdict of disbelief.

2. George Herbert, "The Holy Scriptures (2)," in *The Complete English Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 52.

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identity and purpose. In the first of these two units, Jesus makes use of both first- and second-person plural address: “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony” (v. 11). Although the precise meaning of the “earthly” and “heavenly” things to which Jesus refers in John 3:12 is unclear, the meaning of the contrast between the two is not. The dualistic language places Nicodemus not only among those persons who do not understand Jesus, but among those who do not believe or accept him. Where Nicodemus initially appeared as earnest but lacking insight, he is now cast as resistant. The change in tone is abrupt and surprising, especially since John resumes his more benevolent portrayal of Nicodemus later in the Gospel (7:45–51; 19:39–40).

To a large degree, then, John 3:11 seems to be speaking less to the unfolding story of Jesus in his day and more to some tension in John’s historical context, a tension rooted in differences in belief within John’s own community or between his group and outsiders. John seems to be speaking through the figures of Nicodemus and Jesus in order to represent differing religious perspectives. Jesus’ point of view aligns with the religious perspective of John and his community, while the position that Jesus characterizes through his use of the second person plural (“you,” vv. 11–12) conveys the writer’s generalizing take on those who refute the claims to which he and his community adhere. John uses the scene to draw a sharp distinction between those within and without his religious community. What then follows points to the Johannine understanding of “heavenly things” (v. 12), that is, to God’s purpose in sending Jesus into the world.

John 3:13 indirectly but effectively identifies Jesus as the Son of Man and clarifies what distinguishes him from all others: “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” Jesus is the only one who has ascended into heaven, precisely because he is the only one who has come from heaven. Charles H. Talbert observes that John draws a clear contrast between his understanding of Jesus’ uniqueness and those ancient Jewish and Christian traditions that held that Moses or Isaiah had themselves experienced heavenly ascents. Philo, for example, refers to Moses’ ascent into Mount Sinai as “the calling above of the prophet,” and “a *second birth* better than the first . . . or, as we have said, the *divine birth*” (*Questions and Answers on Exodus* 2.46). As Talbert notes, “Here Philo contrasts the first birth from the earth

Homiletical Perspective

Nicodemus visits Jesus because he knows that there has to be more.

Nicodemus’s last words to Jesus make him sound like all of the ministers who are not sure how to begin anything we are not in charge of: “How can this be?” Jesus sounds surprised, “You are a teacher, and you do not understand this?”

Most preachers recognize Nicodemus. We have treated our opinions as God’s. Sometimes we speak about God as if God is no harder to understand than anyone else. We have beliefs that we have held for so long that we think that if they are not God’s, they ought to be. We begin to believe that if we do not know something, then it does not matter. We share Nicodemus’s ability to judge what others think on the basis of how close it is to what we think.

Like Nicodemus, we can speak truth without feeling the Spirit, but we also have moments when we hear the one who descended from heaven. We, like others in our congregation, experience this difference as we gather as a church. Sometimes we go out of habit. At other times, the people who care for us bring us into God’s goodness. We see the difference in how we serve. Sometimes we do good because we want to think of ourselves as the kind of people who do good. At other sacred times we care for others because God’s love flows through us. We see the difference in how we give. Sometimes we figure out the smallest amount we can give without feeling guilty. On other blessed occasions we realize that what we give away is the best money we spend. We see the difference in how we treat the people closest to us. Sometimes we stay with them only because we have promised to. At other times we ask God to help us love them more each day. We know the difference when we come to worship. Some Sunday mornings we tell ourselves, “It’s only an hour.” However, there are also moments when we feel the gentle breeze of God’s Spirit.

God will lead preachers away from Nicodemus’s assumption that we can know and control it all and lead us toward heavenly things. The writer of the Gospel of John says this hope is like the strange story in Numbers 21 with the copper snake. Christ is lifted up so that all can see the hope of God. The cross, the Son of Man lifted up, reveals the depth of God’s mercy for all of us who are snake-bitten by the power of death. Unlike the author of the Fourth Gospel, most Old Testament scholars protect their reputation by ignoring the snake story. The ones brave enough to comment work hard to make it clear that the writer of Numbers is not saying that the snake heals anybody. The people’s decision to

John 3:9–15

Theological Perspective

understand the Scriptures, as he did for his first disciples (Luke 24:45).

Fortunately, eternal life in Jesus (v. 15, following the NIV translation) does not require perfect understanding, but simply belief. In her “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” Simone Weil notes that we do not start with an intellectual verification of heavenly things, and then proceed to belief. Faith starts in the dark, without light, just as Nicodemus’s encounter with Jesus did (3:2). Faith does not depend on certitude and understanding—these are the fruit of faith, not its precondition. Trusting our teacher Jesus, we take the leap of faith before we can see exactly where it is all going to lead. Spiritual certitudes “are arrived at by experience,” Weil insists.

The Israelites dying of serpent bites in the wilderness (Num. 21:6–9) did not first understand how a serpent on a pole could save them, and then put their faith in God’s surprising mode of deliverance. They first trusted that God would deliver them, and their experience of being healed led to certitude about the efficacy of Moses’ strange action of lifting up the serpent. Likewise, we do not have to understand the cross and ascension of Christ before we can be saved by them. There are no honors students in the school of Christian discipleship. Our confidence is in God, not in the strength of our intellects. Yet spiritual progress is possible. Trusting God, we can grow in the life of faith. As Weil insists, “the best support for faith is the guarantee that if we ask our Father for bread, he does not give us a stone.”³

AMY PLANTINGA PAUW

Pastoral Perspective

Disbelief comes with a cost. Disbelief leaves those who do not trust Jesus’ testimony living in the status quo, the rat race, the real world in which new life “from above” is, by definition, impossible. Belief in him, on the other hand, will lead to life “from above.” The One who has descended from heaven must be “lifted up,” just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (Num. 21:9). The text prefigures the lifting up of Jesus on the cross and from the grave so that a world poisoned by the powers of death may be healed, saved, reborn. Trusting the Son of Man who is lifted up will result in life with a capital *L*, new life lived in the real world of the kingdom of God, life that is eternal.

This language is thick. John’s Gospel is at once accessible and inaccessible, familiar and unfamiliar, clear and opaque. For many, the word “belief” has come to mean accepting certain statements about God as true. When communities are learning to live this text, they will need to redefine belief that leads to eternal life as risky, courageous trust in Jesus to lead his people into a new way of being. Then eternal life will not be defined by chronological time and restricted to life after physical death. Then eternal life will describe the time on either side of death when lives are lived on the cruciform path of Jesus. Then believing in Jesus will not lead those who entrust their lives to him on a path out of the suffering world. Instead, trust in the testimony of Jesus will lead believers into the suffering world as witnesses who have seen the shape of life eternal. Their lives and deaths will then testify to the newness that lies on the other side of dying to the ways of the world and being born from above into the way of Jesus Christ.

EDWIN SEARCY

3. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), 107.

Exegetical Perspective

with the second birth from above.”¹ John’s Gospel opposes such reasoning and contends that the only one who can ascend into heaven is the one who is born of the realm above. Therefore, by extension, readers are to understand that the new birth from above that John 3 describes owes itself not to the spiritual knowledge and heavenly ascent that a human person attains, but to the activity of the incarnate Word (*logos*) and Spirit of God.

John then proceeds to focus his reader’s attention on the integral relationship that he sees between divine initiative and human belief. He emphasizes not heavenly ascent, but human assent, when Jesus says, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (vv. 14–15). Jesus alludes to the biblical story of how the Lord told Moses to make a bronze image of a poisonous serpent and raise it up high with his staff so that the Israelites who had been bitten by venomous snakes in the wilderness could gaze upon the image wrapped around Moses’ pole and be healed (Num. 21:8–9).

The analogy points to Jesus as the one who is to be lifted up, not on a pole or staff, but on the cross. The meaning for John is clear: those who gaze upon the incarnate *logos* and believe him to be Son of Man will find eternal life. John casts the cross itself as an instrument of healing. No wonder, then, that this Gospel refers to the crucifixion as the “hour” in which Jesus will be glorified (2:4; 12:23). For John, Jesus’ death is analogous to that of the Passover lamb. It provides liberation from death to those who believe. In this manner, John attaches the creative activity of the Spirit and the concept of new birth to human belief, a motif that he develops further in the passage that follows.

MARY F. FOSKETT

Homiletical Perspective

look is what matters. When people look to God, they find life. The cross does not heal so much as the love behind the cross heals. Whoever believes in this love will find their way to eternal life. Jesus leads us to preach heavenly possibilities.

The Gospel of John does not tell us what Nicodemus felt as he left Jesus that night, but after Jesus died, Nicodemus came to the cross and cared for Jesus’ body. Nicodemus did not understand God, but somehow the wind beyond his understanding led him to hope.

A retired minister lives in a cottage in New England on the side of a mountain. He can see forty miles to the east. There is a mountain range to the west, and there are two lakes in the distance to the south. One Sunday evening a congregation from nearby comes to have a sunset vespers service there on the mountaintop. As one woman looks at the view, she begins crying. The minister leans over and quietly says, “It is a lovely view.” She replies, “No. You do not understand. I have lived within twenty miles of this view all of my life, and I never knew it was here.”

We can preach things that are accurate, but if we do not preach the one who has been lifted up, the one who brings life, the one who is hope, then we are like someone twenty miles from a gorgeous view who never climbs the mountain.

BRETT YOUNGER

1. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John. A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (London: SPCK Publishing, 1992), 100–101.