

## What Good Teachers Remember

John 3.1-15

Thesis: on the way to “repairing the world,” good teachers don’t forget it’s the human heart which must first be fixed.

*Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand . . . ?”*

For much of the past month I have been trying to make sense of the story of Nicodemus, the Pharisee and Sanhedrin master who came by night to inquire of Jesus. The story comes to a close in John 3.16 ff., which is central to the church’s historic understanding of the gospel. But the narrative that forms the introduction to that “miniature gospel” has always been a puzzle.

For example: since Nicodemus gives Jesus a compliment, why doesn’t Jesus say thank you? Why doesn’t he at least return the compliment, as he did in Mark 12.34? There a scribe commended Jesus for answering his question about the greatest of the commandments. And Jesus said to the man, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Here, however, Jesus hints that Nicodemus is a *long way* from the kingdom. “Unless one is born anew, he cannot *see* the kingdom of God.”

But Nicodemus hadn’t asked about the kingdom! In fact, all he did was make a fairly harmless statement, intended to flatter both himself and Jesus: *Rabbi, we know (“we” meaning we in the Sanhedrin who are real rabbis, with our robes and our seminary degrees and our positions of privilege) . . . we accept that you are also a rabbi come from God (even if you are un-degreed and unlearned), because we cannot deny that you are a great worker of miracles.*

It was a verbal bouquet, a testing of the waters, a nice thing for a city rabbi to say to a country rabbi. So why did Jesus ignore it, and then bring up the apparently unrelated subject of the *kingdom*?

Another question. While Nicodemus speaks very directly, Jesus responds indirectly, even mysteriously. Even though in the Hebrew scriptures spiritual transformation is taught in several places,<sup>1</sup> “born again” isn’t a term you find there. So *how does such a thing happen?* That’s what Nicodemus asked, and it seems a natural and understandable question.

Yet Jesus responds as if new birth is something so obvious that Nicodemus is negligent for overlooking it. *You call yourself a teacher of Israel, and all of this is new to you?* (Nicodemus must have felt as if the tables were turned, he was in the midst of his doctoral orals, and doing badly.)

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<sup>1</sup> Eg. Ezekiel 36.25-27

So I find the entire picture pretty confusing. It may be that you would say to me what Jesus said. *Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand?* (NRSV). Yes, I am a “teacher of Israel.” But so is everybody in this room that we’ll honor at brunch this morning. That’s everybody who stands at the head of adult departments and everybody who sits (on the floor, perhaps) among youth. It’s everybody who kneels at the side of little children and takes up these sacred stories and tries to make sense of them.

For we are all spiritual Israel, the “Israel of God,” the people who by faith in the Jewish Messiah are grafted into Israel’s “cultivated olive tree.”<sup>2</sup> *And that is why it is vital that we understand what it is that Jesus thinks this master teacher Nicodemus is missing.* For it may be that we, who are also teachers, could be missing the same thing.

Today the Christian spiritual and intellectual climate is focused intently upon the very thing Jesus brought up—the kingdom of God. Check the religious section of the bookstore, and you’ll see volume after volume on that subject.<sup>3</sup> And from the first three gospels it is clear that a major feature of Christ’s teaching was in fact his proclamation of the *kingdom*.

In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote that the church, at different times in its history, has focused upon different themes. During the early centuries the church was “Christocentric,” meaning that the person of Christ was the preoccupation. The Middle Ages up to the Reformation was “ecclesiocentric,” meaning that the *ecclesia*—the church itself—got most of the attention. Now at the opening of the Third Millennium we are becoming what Benedict calls “regnocentric.” We are focused not so much upon the church, or even upon the Lord, as upon the reign—*God’s kingly reign*.

If that is true, we couldn’t be more kingdom-centered than pious Jews in the First Century. That is why Jesus took the opening statement from Nicodemus and inferred that it was the kingdom of which he spoke. For “he knew what was in man” (John 2.25), and he could see that this was where Nicodemus was headed.

Devout Jews expected a coming king, a Messiah. They anticipated that he would descend directly from God, that he would be a worker of great miracles, and that he would restore the ideal Davidic kingdom to God’s people. Said Nicodemus, “We know you’re a teacher from God—nobody could perform such great works otherwise.” Probably he and others in the Sanhedrin had debated among themselves whether the extraordinary young Galilean rabbi could possibly be The One who was long promised.

In our 21st Century *kingdom-centeredness*, we find ourselves once again living in the high expectation of the coming reign of God. Most Christians aren’t looking for the kingdom to be restored to Israel. Rather most seem to be looking for the world to be restored to something resembling its right mind.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 11.24

<sup>3</sup> A recent search of christianbook.com revealed 93 separate titles dealing with the kingdom of God.

For many, it has become less important to challenge the world to confess faith in Christ, and more important to persuade it to seek peace, justice and compassionate dealings among peoples. Some reason that it isn't helpful to press the claim that Jesus Christ is Lord of the earth (since that is thought to divide people), while they do believe it is vital to reclaim the earth itself, from its bondage to those who would spoil its beauty and waste its resources.

In all of these ways (so it is thought) the earth and the world will be saved for the coming generations, and we will have discharged our duty to be stewards of the whole creation.

The bottom line: just as people in the time of Jesus were looking for *the kingdom to come on earth*, so are many of us in our own day. But there is this difference: whereas people then were looking for a King to appear and usher in his kingdom, many of us nowadays visualize a kingdom with no clear reference to the King.

Jesus, however, has a word for both of us—for those like Nicodemus, dizzy from imagining the new age might be dawning. And also for us today, who are beginning to look for the same thing. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above  
 . . . no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

Nicodemus had begun the conversation that dark evening by suggesting his ambition for the kingdom of Israel, but also by implying his eagerness for the true kingdom—the rule and reign of God. Jesus had responded directly and even bluntly. Despite being a notable teacher—a master of Israel—Nicodemus was getting the cart before the horse. For “Except a man be born again, *he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (KJV).

When I finished high school in the late sixties, everybody said what a fine group of graduates we were. How we would go out and change the world. I would lay odds that rare have been senior classes that have not sat in caps and gowns and considered, with a mixture of pride and heavy responsibility, whether they might indeed be that chosen generation which would roll up their sleeves and set their minds and hearts to become world-changers, repairing the damage that had been done by all who went before.

Think of the privilege that Nicodemus had. If today's church were to obtain an actual audience with the Savior, what would we say? We wouldn't be as non-committal as Nicodemus, for we would know with whom we were speaking. But we might take the conversation in the same direction.

We might express our sense of heavy responsibility that we are Christianity's graduating class. We are the generation upon whose shoulders the future of the planet rests. And so we look forward to starting a social and political revolution, to renewing the planet, to bringing about a better, brighter, fairer and more peaceable world. A world such as Our Lord spoke about when he prayed, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth.”

But should we suppose that Jesus would respond to our enthusiasm differently than he did to Nicodemus? Or would he listen to all of our plans and dreams and ambitions, and then say something just as blunt and direct, something that would shake us to the foundations and render us speechless? Would he implicate us also for *missing* something?

Nicodemus had indeed gotten the cart before the horse. Oh, he was a teacher of *Israel*. He was nobody's fool. He had a sense of God and cared about God's will, and he recognized the existence of substantial injustice and untowardness in the world. He longed for the day when everything would be "put to rights." What he forgot, however, is that well before the world will be made right, *the human heart itself must be made right*.

This is what Jesus was talking about when he spoke of a new birth. Certainly not starting over from your mother's womb. Not something physical, but something spiritual, engineered from above, sent from God. A Spirit-wrought change of heart, enabling a man to discover the root of all problems within humanity itself, within the sin and rebellion that reign in the human spirit. A change of heart, making it possible for a woman to submit her sin and rebellion to the One with authority to cancel it and cure it.

If you follow Jesus carefully as he describes the new birth, he uses words and images that may seem confusing. Yet he arrives at the clearest and simplest expression of the gospel that we find in the New Testament: "the son of man [must] be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." The crux of the matter, therefore, isn't birth but parentage. To be born again bears no reference to an earthly mother. It means to recognize, through Jesus the Son, your heavenly Father, and then to learn to live in complete faith and dependence upon Him.

I see nothing in the Bible that suggests that Christ, when he comes again, will expect to find his Father's kingdom fully come. What he will be looking for is *faith*—faith in his own redemptive work, and obedient trust in his Father, a trust which has been planted and carefully nurtured by good teachers within his church.

What is this place where you teachers work, after all? Is the Sunday School a school of mission, where pupils and teachers attempt to mine kingdom-building principles from the Bible, and then apply them to the world? Or is the Sunday School a factory of faith, where the reality of Jesus and his redemptive work are discovered, where faith is cultivated, and where hearts are changed? Surely, at the end of any Lord's Day, the Sunday School is both. Faith and kingdom-mission are interwoven. But *the horse must precede the cart!* For "Except a person be born again, he cannot *see* the kingdom of God."

Over the years of my ministry, one of the truly great Christians I have known was the late Jaymie Norris. Jaymie was a serious believer in Christ, conscientious, clear-eyed, concerned and committed. I don't know if he ever taught Sunday School, but he would participate in Bible study and ask important questions, and provide mature and thoughtful answers. He would faithfully attend the needs of his church, and stand by any organization or ministry that aimed to bring the light of God's Word to a dark world.

There came the day when Jaymie lay in the Hospice unit at Cone, and God seemed to say, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.”<sup>4</sup>

Before he departed, Jaymie voiced one last concern. It related to his observation that our generation is growing more and more ineffective at communicating to the generation to come what spiritual rebirth really means. Borrowing his words from those of the Lord in Luke 18, he whispered, “*When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?*”<sup>5</sup>

That, after all, is what the Lord will be looking for. Not a perfect and pure world, but a pure heart, born again unto faith. Jaymie was only slightly ahead of his time. Nowadays there are many who worry about the same thing. Everybody, in fact, who worships and loves the Lord, is concerned about spreading authentic faith and redeeming awareness of him and his work.

And teacher, since that is obviously the case with you, you will not want to forget Our Lord’s defining encounter with the teacher Nicodemus. For you are indeed a teacher of Israel. It is vitally important that you understand.

Jesus asked, *Who then is the faithful and wise [teacher], whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Matt. 25.21 RSV

<sup>5</sup> Luke 18.8b RSV, the Parable of the Persistent Widow, a parable on the importance of prayer

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 24.45-46