

Frequent Flier Christians

At the church in which I grew up, we had an altar call most every week. The church had visitors so often that we had a space in each weekly service for them to make a first-time faith decision. The altar call was always worded in such a way that it was open to people who wanted to start a relationship with God, as well as people who wanted to *restart* a relationship with God.

There were a handful of people that went to the altar quite frequently; every couple of months, they would feel the need to restart, after having clearly fallen away from God. We had a few different names for them, like Frequent Flier Christians.

Clearly, they were stuck in a situation where, every now and then, they would hear a sermon that would completely convict their heart, but then they would immediately forget about it until the next time it happened. They lived in a constant state of half-Christianity—half in, half out—not fully committing either way, and ultimately feeling the need to take their "first steps" often and repeatedly.

Nicodemus's dilemma

This is somewhat similar to the predicament of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Pharisees were extremely influential, and their viewpoints formed the orthodox Jewish belief of Jesus's day. The Sanhedrin was a council of Jewish rulers composed of just seventy priests, scribes, and elders, that were a court of justice in all matters pertaining to the Jews.

Nicodemus would have been wealthy and powerful, with a strong reputation and moral standing. In fact, he may have been quite famous. In 3:10, Jesus refers to Nicodemus as "The Teacher (not 'a' teacher) of Israel"—a rather prestigious-sounding title.

Nicodemus was torn between his conscience telling him that he should believe what Jesus says, because of the—in the words of Cyril of Alexandria—"surpassing quality of the miracles" Jesus performed, and his honourable duties as a leader of the Jews. The traditional view of Nicodemus is that he came to Jesus at night so as to enquire of Jesus and pursue his conscience, while preserving his reputation among the Jews. As Cyril puts it, "by coming in secret, he is convicted of being double-minded."

More interestingly, the fact that Nicodemus comes at night can be seen as a literary device. After all, it is later in this chapter that Jesus says "the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."

Darkness is a theological term that pertains to evil and the corruption of humanity, as directly opposed to the light that is in Christ: the light that "shines in the darkness, the darkness that has not overcome the light" (1:5). Thieves come in the night (10:10), Judas betrayed Jesus at night (13:30), and Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. "But if anyone walks at night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him" (11:10).

Jesus's Challenge

But Jesus challenges Nicodemus's half-hearted attempt at following him. He challenges Nicodemus's theology with the ideas of being "born again" (also translated sometimes as "born from above") and being "born of the Spirit." To be born again suggests that one must start life again from scratch, giving up who they once were and leaving everything behind. Nicodemus, as a powerful and wealthy member of Jewish society, thinks he can hold onto that which he treasures and still follow Jesus in the shadows of night.

Jesus's challenge to Nicodemus is to commit fully, abandon his wealth and power, restart his life with a clean slate, and dive into discipleship head first, else he will never see the Kingdom of God. This would have come as quite a shock to Nicodemus. Pharisees at that time believed that all Jews would enter the kingdom of God through the resurrection on the last day. Being born a Jew was all it took to be Jewish, and as long as a Jew did not deny God or commit an act of apostasy, they were guaranteed a place in the kingdom.

Nicodemus's Ambiguity

The passage ultimately ends with a long section of teaching from Jesus (including the ultra-famous memory verse, John 3:16), and we don't find out whether Nicodemus came to understand Jesus's message or not. This passage ends in ambiguity.

Nicodemus does appear two other times in the Gospel of John—once briefly during the arguments surrounding Jesus's trial in chapter 7, where Nicodemus defends the notion of giving Jesus a proper, legal trial, and finally in chapter 19, where he accompanied Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus.

Ultimately, Nicodemus went on to become a somewhat mythological figure in the early church. The apocryphal Gospel according to Nicodemus was pervasive in the 2nd to 5th centuries AD, and appeared in some 400 manuscripts over history, as late as the late Middle Ages, even as a fifth Gospel. Nicodemus was, and continues to be, celebrated in art, literature, and music, as a symbol of a transformation from just one of many potentially antagonistic observers, to a passionate disciple that mourned Jesus as he buried him.

But, in the end, scholars have not always agreed that Nicodemus is such a role model. The details of his life, including his alleged baptism, persecution as a Christian, and expulsion from Jerusalem, are from non-Biblical, apocryphal accounts. Within the Biblical account, his story is shrouded in interpretative mystery.

There are certainly some scholars, such as Michael Chung who argue that Nicodemus, in his words, "ends the Gospel of John with a saving faith," but for many, Nicodemus's fate is ultimately unclear in John's retelling of his interactions with Jesus. Susan Hynen once called him "one of the Gospel's most ambiguous characters." In this chapter, he is shown to have belief in Jesus (3:2) but also unbelief (3:10). He speaks out in Jesus's defence in 7:51, but, as Nicolas Farelly put it, "he speaks so tentatively that his intentions are not entirely clear." At the end of the gospel, his massive generosity at Jesus's burial could imply that he has come to a place of worship of Jesus, or grief and regret that he did not act sooner, but it could also imply that he has misunderstood the lessons and is unaware of Jesus's life after death.

This ambiguity originally frustrated theologians, but more recently, they have recognized that Nicodemus's secret faith from within the shadows is not only deliberately portrayed as inconclusive, but is very much at the heart of this passage's message. Some, such as Cornelius Bennema, have concluded that "John implicitly gives a negative evaluation of Nicodemus's ambiguity" and that "John's implicit message to the reader is that anonymous discipleship or secret Christianity will not suffice."

A Wake-Up Call for Christians

Ultimately, the key lesson in the passage is that one must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God: one cannot be half-hearted, ambiguous, or secret about one's faith. To be born again implies a complete renewal and a fresh start in life—to give up one's old ways and follow a new path; a new life. This is not what one observes in Nicodemus's life, as told by John.

The fact that scholars are uncertain and even disagree about the status of Nicodemus's faith and salvation, even after his three appearances in the gospel, should be an alarming wake-up call for every believer to examine their own life and reflect on their own status. "Have I been born again?" "Have I truly given up my previous ways?" "Would scholars consider me saved were they to examine my own actions?"

Perhaps Nicodemus was ultimately saved, but it would be deeply concerning for him to not know for sure. After all, "faith is the assurance in things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Doubts are natural, but to be wholly unsure of where one stands is worrying at best. As Bennema put it, "to stay in the twilight zone is not acceptable"

The lesson is that, when one is confronted by Jesus and challenged to be born again, one must answer the call and dive into the calling headfirst. Else, one day, two thousand years later, historians may look back on such a person's life and be entirely unconvinced of whether or not they believed in Christ at all.