

## NICODEMUS

Notes for John 3.1-15, 7.45-52

### John 3.1-15

This conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus takes place early in John's Gospel in a section which describes various peoples' responses to Jesus. Our text is preceded by the wedding in Cana where Jesus' disciples come to believe more intensely in Jesus. Following the Cana incident, Jesus cleanses the Jerusalem Temple, an act which is condemned by some and the basis for deeper faith by others. John then summarizes the varieties of people's reactions to Jesus in the three verses which introduce the Nicodemus conversation. Some people, to paraphrase, believe in Jesus because he performs signs. However, because this is not an adequate response. Jesus does not believe (*pisteuein*) in the people. It is against this backdrop of mistrust and inadequate faith in Jesus that John presents the Nicodemus dialogue.

This context helps us understand the significance of verse 2. Nicodemus has formed his opinion about Jesus on the basis of the signs--a dubious situation. Add to this the observation that the reader never learns whether Nicodemus has come to adequate faith. Twice after this conversation John inserts Nicodemus into the narrative (John 7.42-52; 19.38-39) in such a way which leaves the reader curious whether Nicodemus is a genuine disciple or not. Given all of this, it is likely that John is using this dialogue to invite low commitment types into a deeper response to Jesus. The nature of this deeper response emerges in the conversation.

Each section of this text begins with a question by Nicodemus and concludes with an answer from Jesus. These answers begin with the repeated phrase, "Jesus answered..." As to Nicodemus' opening remark which is not technically a question, it seems that Jesus perceives this as an implicit query.

Each of the three structural sections also correspond to a person of the Trinity. The first section makes reverence to God the Father (1-3). The second deals with the Holy Spirit (4-8).

And the final section (9-21) focuses on God the Son. From this we can infer a movement in the text whereby a person comes into the Kingdom of God through the mysterious agency of the Spirit which leads him or her to a believing relationship with Jesus.

#### John 7.45-52

This scene takes place as Jesus teaches at the Temple during the Feast of Booths. The religious officials have sent "officers" to arrest Jesus. The officers, apparently, are deeply impressed with Jesus and return to the Pharisees and Chief Priests empty handed, reporting how impressive Jesus' teaching is. In this context, Nicodemus suggests that the Law guides Jews not to judge without giving a person a fair hearing. Nicodemus is rebuked by his radical peers who are exasperated at the fact that people appear to be more converted by Jesus than willing to arrest him.

#### John 19.38

This scene takes place immediately after Jesus' death. Nicodemus—who is introduced by John as the one who visited Jesus by night—assists Joseph in burial ritual. Nicodemus is credited with bringing 100 lbs. of Myrrh and aloes.

#### Conclusion

John's Gospel never tells the reader whether Nicodemus comes to full or adequate faith in Jesus. This, however, does not detract from what this text teaches about the new birth. The image of birthing--whether for a second time or from above--is a powerful image of the depth of discontinuity from one's past. The wind/spirit image underscores the divine initiative which brings to reality this birth. Finally, the discussion about belief in Jesus makes it clear that the specific action required of the believer is attachment to Christ. This, in turn, constitutes the new birth which is the meaning of "seeing" the Kingdom of God.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. Do you think Nicodemus serves as a model for being "born again?"
2. Do you detect any change or evolution in Nicodemus over these three passages?
3. What if anything do we learn about adequate and inadequate faith in Jesus through Nicodemus?
4. What do you like, dislike about Nicodemus?
5. Identify someone who strikes you as a Nicodemus.
6. To the extent of your awareness of John's gospel, can you name a more satisfactory example of faith?
7. What is implied in the Nicodemus passages in John about the nature of discipleship that is important for us to take away from this study?

