

Examples of Those Who Believed

Is it possible for someone to believe in Jesus and have Jesus not believe in him?

Is it possible to trust Jesus but not be trusted by Him?

Is it possible to think you have genuine faith and actually have a false faith?

In my last sermon on John 2, we noted that while many believed in His name when they saw signs which He did, Jesus did not trust Himself to them because He knew their hearts. There was something wrong with the way they believed.

In chapters 3 and 4 John gives examples of people who come from an inauthentic faith to a genuine faith, those who started believing in Christ in a way for some reasons, but until they had a personal confrontation with Him could not come to genuine, deep faith.

These three examples are extraordinary and illustrate the various ways that the providence of God operates. The first person is Nicodemus, a leading Jew, a member of the Sanhedrin. (That is another way of saying that Nicodemus is a cardinal of the church, a senator, and a Supreme Court justice in one.)

What brought Nicodemus to Jesus was essentially curiosity. He wanted to look at this Man and talk to Him firsthand. He came at night because he was cautious. He was not sure that his concern about Jesus would be understood by his peers and he was not sure he wanted to make an open confession that he was even interested in Christ. But Nicodemus had observed Jesus performing miracles, had heard Him teach and had watched the expressions on the faces of the people who listened and who were touched by Jesus. He saw their joy, freedom and a peace he had never seen before.

The Jewish religion of Nicodemus' day was formal, bigoted and cold. While the other religious leaders acted in this way, Nicodemus thought he was a unique example of the very best in Judaism. He felt no need for change in order to be fit for the kingdom of God.

Jesus was frank with Nicodemus, almost to the point of bluntness. Nicodemus opened the conversation by complimenting Jesus and tried to exchange social pleasantries. Jesus bored through the chitchat and said, 'Nicodemus, you have got to be born again. You must be born anew.'

This must have shocked Nicodemus. First of all this was too blunt for typical social intercourse; secondly, the only people Nicodemus understood to need a new birth were the Gentiles who converted to Judaism. But Jesus said that in the sight of God, even the Jews were as far from the kingdom of God as the Gentiles.

Nicodemus must have had a mixed reaction. On the one hand he was impressed, but he was also offended. He was impressed because as a leader he knew he did not really have time for chitchat and nonessentials. Secondly he was probably complimented because it was an indication that Jesus was taking his visit seriously.

He was surely offended, however, because the first thing that Jesus said to him was that he was

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outside the kingdom of God.

It is significant that Jesus spent time with Nicodemus personally. It would have been very easy for Jesus to tell people that they could listen to His sermons and make up their minds on that basis, but there is no record that Jesus ever did that. When someone, especially an important person like Nicodemus, made the effort to seek Jesus out personally He made time to see the individual.

There is a lesson here which we ought not to overlook: People of influence, wealth, position, keen critical faculties, are not usually won on the basis of mass kinds of approaches and meetings. They have learned to be suspicious about people's grandiose claims. They have seen enough charlatans within just a few years to last a lifetime.

I am sure that Nicodemus was cynical about Jesus, even though he was impressed. Nicodemus' concerns could not be handled as if they were average. Jesus knew that He had to meet his questions and concerns directly and intimately in a private conversation. Christ obviously wanted to impress this deeply religious man with his need for a radical transformation, so He told him he must be born anew.

As the doctrine of being born again (or the "new creation") developed in the church certain insights began to be shaped and clarified. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus, even though all of the external trappings point to a deeply pious person who is committed to the law and who loves God, it is crucial to be born inwardly.

What does it mean to be born from above? Jesus is saying that the center of your life—what you value most, that which you think about preeminently—has to be changed. Jesus is not talking about a personality change. He is not saying that the timid must now become aggressive or the aggressive become timid. He is talking about character—what makes an individual uniquely that person, the kind of thing for which a person will die, his value system. In time, of course, a shift in the center of your life has to work itself out in different behavior. But that is not the key. Christ told Nicodemus that only the Spirit can do this.

It is a miracle. It cannot happen because *you* do something. It must happen because you *respond* to something the Holy Spirit does.

As they read this passage many people get upset about the fact that they have never enjoyed some kind of radical experience. There are many ways that the Holy Spirit can change a person and make Jesus Christ the center of one's life. If you were born in a bilingual home, you would grow up learning both languages at once. Those who do not grow up in a bilingual home must at some point make a decision that they will learn a second language. In making the decision, they choose to enter into an experience.

If you really want a radical experience, leave this country and go to France and live there, not knowing one word of French when you arrive. The kind of shock you get is probably analogous to the instantaneous shock a sinner experiences in becoming converted. That way of becoming converted is not more significant or authentic than becoming converted because you grew up and were nurtured in the church, because you had teachers and parents who always spoke to you of Jesus and tried to show you His love.

Both kinds of people, when they come to an age when they can begin to reflect about their own Christian experience, realize that in the center of their lives they are indeed with Jesus Christ. They are changed. They are different from most other people. They sense a freedom to move and to act that they never possessed before. But either way, they have been converted.

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, He said to him, 'It is not enough to admire Me as a good Man. It is not enough to admire Me because I am a wise teacher. You must be changed. Within your life you must make room for Me at the very center. I must be the Lord of your life. I have to be lifted up in your life even as the serpent was lifted up in the time of Hoses.'

Nicodemus had never anticipated being told this by a human being, who looked just like himself and who, at that moment at least, occupied a significantly lesser position in society. Nicodemus was shaken by that interview. 'What do you think about Me?' Jesus said. 'How do you feel about Me? What will you decide about Me? Not about religion, not about the law, not about your position.'

All other questions are subordinate. What you think about the church, the standards or about the minister—they are all irrelevant. Jesus says that what really matters is what you think about Me. That is the easiest thing to forget when you are a religious person, especially someone whose life is filled with making decisions and judgments which affect the religious life of the church, someone who is privy to the intrigues of organizational life. It is easy for such people to forget that the center of it all is a Person, not an organization, a structure, or an institution.

I have little doubt that that is why Ellen White, in her final address to the General Conference, preached a sermon to the ministers, evangelists and church leaders on John 3. She took as her text, "You must be born again." It is very difficult to keep the personal dimension central in anything. How easily we slip from loving our homes to loving our houses, from loving people within the church to loving the organization which supports the people.

Nicodemus came to Jesus half believing, but Jesus' directness and self-confidence in stating that He must be the center of Nicodemus' life, convinced him that He must indeed be the Messiah. Nobody could ever talk the way this Man did if He didn't have a very clear conviction of who He was.

In the fourth chapter of John we come to another person who, within the space of a few minutes, moved from a kind of half belief to full belief. She was very different than Nicodemus; she was at the other end of the social spectrum. She was an outcast, married five times and divorced, and living with a man who was not her husband. She was so ashamed that she didn't even come to the village well at the same time as the other women. By providence, she came when only Jesus was there.

Again, He took the initiative. He cut away all the trivia and asked the woman for a drink, which completely disarmed her. No Jewish man ever spoke to a woman in public, especially if she were a Samaritan. Then He began to tell her all the details of her life. This was not the day of computers and private investigators, so she knew that He was an extraordinary Person. She flattered Him and said, 'I perceive, Sir, that you are a prophet. Now that a prophet is sitting in front of me, I would like to ask you some questions. There are a couple of theological problems that have really been bothering me. The most important one is whether it is Mt. Gerazim, or Mt. Zion, on which we should worship?'

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Jesus cut her off saying, "You worship you know not what. It isn't a question of where you worship. It is whom you worship."

She replied, "I know these are complicated questions, Sir, but when the Messiah comes He will answer all of these things."

Jesus then shocked her, just as He did Nicodemus, and said, "I who speak to you am He." This all happened within a few minutes. She began her interest in Jesus because she had a theological problem she wanted solved and also because He disarmed her with His unique personality, His willingness to speak to her. But Jesus immediately shifted her attention away from theology as such to Him as a Person. He was so believable, even in that short time, that she left her water jar (a very nice detail provided by John) and ran back to the village. Normally, this woman did not talk to any of the other villagers. However, she knocked on doors and yelled in the streets and got the entire community to come and see this incredible Person. "I think I have found the Messiah," she said.

Jesus stayed two or three days in the village and the testimony of the people to the woman was, "We had heard of Him because of your speaking but it is no longer because of your words that we believe for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

What is central in worship is Jesus Christ. Recently I attended the Teen Sabbath School when the results of a quiz were reported. The teenagers had been asked why they came to Sabbath School. Most of the reasons given were: I like the singing. I like to socialize with my friends, etc. I suspect that many of us would give similar reasons if we were polled.

If the fellowship is important, because it is a way for those who believe in Jesus Christ to come together, that is fine. Socializing in itself is not improper in church. But I was disturbed by the reasons, because they did not seem to indicate that they come because they want to have an encounter with the living Person of Jesus Christ. When most of us come to church, we are more conscious of the people around us (and that may be the fault of the church service; it is not always the fault of the worshipers), of the talking in the balcony (which people keep complaining about to the pastoral staff), or of the many announcements which have to be made. But true worship cannot happen unless Jesus Christ is exalted and made central to what we experience.

The last example is the official who served King Herod. Nicodemus came because he was curious, the woman came by accident, but this man came because he was desperate. His son was about to die unless something miraculous was done for him. He had enough faith in Christ to ask Him to heal his son. Jesus tested him by saying, "Go, your son lives."

The Bible says that the man believed the word of Jesus and put his trust in Him and went on his way. In the Greek, the grammatical construction is in the dative case which means that he went believing but not totally. His commitment was not complete at that point; it was a kind of provisional belief: He told me to go and I have run out of options. If I don't go, what else will I do? So I'd better go.

But then the Bible says that when he got home and was told the hour that the fever broke, he and his whole household believed. The word for belief there in the Greek is an absolute word. What had been a kind of halfhearted faith had changed to a complete faith. Now Jesus could trust Himself to

Nicodemus, to the Samaritan woman and to the nobleman. They had all had a personal encounter and in that encounter, genuine faith had come into existence.

It is not the miracles Christ performs or the wisdom that He shows as such; none of these things is the basis of a genuine faith or conversion. Ultimately it comes because we meet the Person of Jesus Christ and we are impressed with Him. His actions and His words are only important because they are clues to who he is and the kind of Person He is. There is no one else like Him, the Bible says, and until our appreciation of that fact fills us with wonder, admiration and gratitude, we have not been genuinely converted.

May God give us faith in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever.