John 3:14-21

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 so that
everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his
only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. 17 For God
did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through
him. 18 Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been
condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the verdict,
that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were
evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that
his works might not be exposed. 21 But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may
be clearly seen as done in God.

Context

Our gospel selection is akin to walking into the middle of a conversation – and indeed it is. Although Nicodemus has faded from the scene, at least by mention and name, this gospel is part of that dialogue between the Jesus and Nicodemus, one of the leaders of the Jews. John 3:1-21 is often taken as a single pericope by scholars, that is, studied and considered together.

So, what have we missed in the on-going conversation? Nicodemus, a Jewish leader (v. 1), seeks out Jesus. To seek Jesus, as noted earlier (1:38), is one of the first acts of discipleship in John. On the negative side, however, Nicodemus hides his seeking under the cloak of night (cf. the night visit of King Zedekiah and Jeremiah, Jer 37:16-21). This reference to the time of Nicodemus's visit is neither an incidental detail nor an attempt at historical reporting. Rather, it provides a clue to the significance of this story for the Fourth Evangelist. "Night" (*nyktos*) is used metaphorically in the Fourth Gospel to represent separation from the presence of God (9:4; 11:10; 13:30). The symbolic significance of this night visit is confirmed by 3:19-21, which condemns those who prefer darkness to light.

Perhaps Nicodemus was intrigued by Jesus' cleansing of the vendors and money changers from the Temple; perhaps he wondered if Jesus was the long-promised Messiah. Whatever the reason, Nicodemus sensed this was a man of God: "*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you are doing unless God is with him."* (v.2)

A dialogue ensues about entering into the Kingdom of God; it is animated by ambiguity and misunderstanding. Jesus tells him that entrance into the "kingdom" depends on being reborn through "*water and Spirit*" (v.5), which is a birth "*from above*" (v.3). The original Greek at this point can mean either "from above" or "again" (*see notes below*). The double meaning is intentional and becomes a choice for Nicodemus who can choose to think of Jesus and the kingdom in either earthly terms or in heavenly terms. Nicodemus focuses on being born again in earthly terms rather than being born from above.

What begins as a dialogue in verses 1–10 turns into a monologue in verses 11–15 as Nicodemus seems to disappear into the darkness from which he came: *11 Amen, amen, I say to you, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. 12 If I tell you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."*

Commentary

Lifted up to Eternal Life

This section of the Gospel concludes with an impressive statement of the purpose of the death of Jesus. Jesus recalls the incident wherein, when fiery serpents bit the Israelites, Moses was told to make a snake of bronze and set it on a pole (Num. 21). Whoever looked at the bronze snake was healed. And, just as that snake was "lifted up" in the wilderness, so, Jesus says, "*so must the Son of Man be lifted up."*

The significance of the ascension of the Son of Man is elaborated through an OT example (Num 21:8-9). The key to interpreting this analogy between Moses' lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness and the ascension of the Son of Man is the verb (*hypsoō*), meaning both "lift up" and "exalt." (The Hebrew verb *nāsā'* has a similar double meaning; see the pun based on this verb in Gen 40:9-23.) Once again the Fourth Evangelist asks the reader to hold two meanings together simultaneously. As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross. The double meaning of *hypsoō* implies, however, that the physical act of lifting up is also a moment of exaltation. It is used of Christ's exaltation (Acts 2:33) and again in a compound (Phil. 2:9). It is part of John's aim to show that Jesus showed forth his glory not *in spite of* his earthly humiliations, but precisely *because of* those humiliations. To the outward eye this was the uttermost in degradation, the death of a criminal. To the eye of faith it was, and is, the supreme glory.

John 3:14 is one of three statements about the "lifting up" of the Son of Man in John (see also 8:28; 12:32-34). These three sayings are the Johannine analogue to the three passion predictions in the synoptic Gospels (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33.34; and parallels).

The overlap of crucifixion and exaltation conveyed by v. 14 is crucial to Johannine understanding of salvation, because the Fourth Evangelist understands Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as one continuous event. Verse 14 also contains a key to the theological grounding of the Evangelist's attraction to irony; the cross as humiliation is actually exaltation. This will become especially clear in the crucifixion narrative of John 18-19. The Fourth Gospel is often criticized for having an inadequate theology of the cross, but such criticism misconstrues the Johannine treatment of the crucifixion. As v. 14 makes clear, there is no exaltation apart from the crucifixion for John.

The overlap of crucifixion/exaltation also provides the context for interpreting the role of the ascent/descent language in v. 13 (and 1:51) and the Fourth Evangelist's use of the title "Son of Man." The Fourth Evangelist appropriates the traditional apocalyptic figure of the Son of Man (cf. Dan. 7:13) and invests it with his christological perspective. Ascent/descent language thus speaks of Jesus' relationship to God and to the world. The Son of Man's ascent to heaven is salvific, because he is the one who has descended from heaven, the very one whom the Prologue celebrates.

"[15] *so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life*" makes explicit the salvific dimension of the crucifixion. Jesus' offer of his life through being lifted up on the cross makes "eternal life" (*zōēn aiōnion*) possible for those who believe. "Eternal life" is one of the dominant metaphors in the Fourth Gospel to describe the change in human existence wrought by faith in Jesus (e.g., 3:36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:27; 17:4). To have eternal life is to live life no longer defined by blood or by the will of the flesh or by human will, but by God (cf. 1:13). "Eternal" does not mean mere endless duration of human existence, but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God. To speak of the newness available to the believer as "eternal life" shifts eschatological expectations to the present. Eternal life is not something held in abeyance until the believer's future, but begins in the believer's present. The focus on the crucifixion in 3:13-15 provides the key to interpreting Jesus' earlier metaphors of new birth and the kingdom of God. The offer of new life, "to be born *anōthen*" has only one source—Jesus' offer of his own life. The cross thus makes

sense of the double meaning of *anōthen*: To be born from above is to be born again through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross.

***Given**. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.* Verse 16 provides the link between the two parts of the discourse. It sums up vv. 14-15 by reiterating the salvific dimensions of Jesus' death, but moves the argument forward with its reference to God's love. God gave Jesus to the world because God loves the world.

A first century Jew was ready enough to think of God as loving Israel, but no passage appears to be cited in which any Jewish writer maintains that God loved the world. It is a distinctively Christian idea that God's love is wide enough to embrace all people. His love is not confined to any national group or spiritual elite. It is a love that proceeds from the fact that He is love (1 John 4:8, 16). It is his nature to love. He loves people because he is the kind of God he is. John tells us that his love is shown in the gift of his Son.

The verb translated "give" (*didōmi*) Is regularly used in the Fourth Gospel to describe God as the source of what Jesus offers the world (3:35; 5:22, 26, 36). John 3:16 is the only place in the Fourth Gospel that says God "gave" his Son to the world; the more common expression is that God "sent" Jesus, as in 3:17. (Two Greek verbs meaning "to send" *pempō* and *apostellō* are used interchangeably see 3:17; 4:34; 5:23-24, 30, 36-37; 6:38.) "send" Jesus is more clearly associated with will for the world, whereas *didōmi* seems to used in 3:16 to underscore that the incarnation derives from God's love for the world as well as from God's will.

"World" (*kosmos*) in John refers often to those human beings who are at odds with Jesus and God (1:10, 7:7; 15:18-19). The use of the term here suggests that God gives Jesus in love to all people, but only believers accept the gift. Verse 16 also reiterates the theme of eternal life from v. 15, but advances the argument by naming the alternative to eternal life: to perish. This verse makes clear that there is no middle ground in the Johannine vision. God's gift of Jesus, which culminates in Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, decisively alters the options available to the world. If one believes, one's present is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes.

***Judgment**. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.* God did not send the Son into the world, he tells us, in order to judge it. Elsewhere, however, he says that Jesus did come into the world "for judgment" (9:39). The resolution of the paradox demands that we understand salvation as necessarily implying judgment. These are the two sides to the one coin. Jesus came to bring salvation, but the very fact of salvation for all who believe implies judgment on all who do not. This is a solemn reality, and John does not want us to escape it. Judgment was a recognized theme in contemporary Jewish thought, but it is the judgment of God, and it is thought of as taking place at the last day. John modifies both these thoughts. He does, it is true, speak of judging sometimes in much the normal Jewish way (8:50). But it is quite another matter when he says that God has committed all judgment to Christ (5:22, 27). He goes on to speak of Christ as judging (5:30; 8:16, 26) or not judging (8:15 [but cf. 16]; 12:47), and of his word as judging people (12:48). His judgment is just (5:30) and true (8:16). How people will fare in the judgment depends on their relationship to him (5:24; 3:19). As the cross looms large Jesus can even speak of the world as judged (12:31), and of Satan likewise as judged (12:31; 16:11). Clearly John sees the whole traditional doctrine of judgment as radically modified in the light of the incarnation. The life and especially the death of Jesus have their effects on the judgment.

God's gift of Jesus to the world begins the judgment of the world. Verses 17-21 speak of realized eschatology, meaning that God's judgment of the world is not a cosmic future event but is underway in

the present, initiated by Jesus' coming into the world. God sends the Son into the world in love in order to save the world, not condemn it (v. 17). Yet the very presence of Jesus as incarnate Word in the world confronts the world with a decision, to believe or not to believe, and making that decision is the moment of judgment. If one believes, one is saved; if one does not believe, one condemns oneself unwittingly: *Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God* (v.18)

Living the Truth. *[19] And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. [20] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. [21] But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.* These three verses portray this intricate balance between judgment and decision in the metaphorical language of light and darkness. This language recalls the language and imagery of the Prologue (1:5, 9-10). To love darkness more than light is the same as not believing, and it results in judgment (v. 19).

The translation of *krisis* as "verdict" is an odd choice as the word normally means the process of judging rather than the sentence of condemnation itself [EDNT 2:318]. Faced with the light that has come into the world people may prefer the darkness. John is not saying that God has decreed that people who do such and such things are condemned. It is not God's sentence with which he is concerned here. He is telling us rather how the process works. People choose the darkness and their condemnation lies in that very fact. They shut themselves up to darkness; they choose to live in darkness; they cut themselves off from the light. Why? "Because their deeds were evil." Immersed in wrongdoing, they have no wish to be disturbed. They refuse to be shaken out of their comfortable sinfulness. So they reject the light that comes to them and set their life in darkness. Thereby they condemn themselves.

The way a person acts in the presence of the light is the defining mark of a person's identity. Whether someone is good or evil is revealed solely by the decision he or she makes in the encounter with Jesus (vv. 20-21); it is not predetermined in advance. In the decision of faith or unbelief it becomes apparent what [a person) really is and ... always was. But it is revealed in such a way that the decision is made only now. Christology and anthropology are thus inseparably linked in the Fourth Gospel. Who people are is determined by their response to Jesus. These verses provide a telling conclusion to the Nicodemus narrative. Nicodemus did not believe (3:12); therefore, he remains in the darkness. He came to Jesus at night and will stay in the night.

"*But whoever lives the truth…*" (v.21) is more literally "But whoever does the truth…" We generally speak of "telling the truth." It may be that John's choice of verb is partly due to the need for a contrast with "does evil" (v. 20). But there are actions that are true as well as words. Anyone who habitually performs the actions that can be described as true comes to the light. The deeds of such a person are not those that must be reproved. They are "done in God."

A Reflection from Gail O'Day [554-56]

> In interpreting John 3:1–21, then, it is not enough to say on the basis of the discourse in vv. 11–21, for example, that this text is about faith, decision, and judgment, because that way of interpreting diminishes the full impact of the text. One needs the preceding dialogue, with Nicodemus's misunderstanding and Jesus' repeated offer of new images, to understand what the words of vv. 11–21 are really saying. The interpreter must attend to how John tells this story of Jesus and Nicodemus, how he moves the reader through the give and take between the two characters and thus affords the reader the chance to understand what Nicodemus can only misunderstand. Because the reader has participated in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, the words in vv. 11–21 are heard with more immediacy. Moreover, the reader has read the Prologue and attended to the

witness of John, so that he or she has a wider theological context in which to place those words.

The use of the phrase "born again" in contemporary North American Christianity is instructive in this regard. This expression, which derives from Jesus' use of ἄνωθεν *anōthen* in 3:3 and 7, has become a slogan and rallying cry for an entire segment of contemporary Christian experience. Indeed, the validity of a person's faith is frequently judged by whether one has been "born again." Born-again Christianity also exerts significant influence on discussions of politics and religion in North American culture. Yet this use of the expression occurs in isolation from its context in John 3 and with no attention to the complexities of the word *anōthen*. Rather, *anōthen* is flattened to have only one meaning, roughly equivalent to an individual's private moment of conversion.

Such contemporary Christians thus repeat the same mistake Nicodemus made: understanding the word *anōthen* on only one level. Nicodemus misunderstood the double dimensions of "born again" and "born from above" and so focused on physical rebirth. The priority given to "born again" in contemporary usage of John 3:3 and 7 also misunderstands the interrelationship of "born again" and "born from above" in Jesus' words. To interpret *anōthen* as describing spiritual rebirth through personal conversion can disregard the decisive christological dimension of *anōthen*: birth from through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross (3:15). Contemporary usage of "born again" privileges anthropology over christology. That is, it emphasizes personal change more than the external source of that change: the cross. In Jesus' words in chap. 3, anthropology and christology are held in a delicate balance. That is, one cannot know the meaning of human life without grounding it in the reality of Jesus' life and the corporate dimension of that life. The irony of Nicodemus's response to Jesus' words is unwittingly operative whenever the church operates out of a single-level interpretation of *anōthen*.

By codifying the expression "born again" and turning it into a slogan, interpreters risk losing the powerful offer of new life contained in Jesus' words. Nicodemus and the reader are intended to struggle with the expression "born *anōthen*" in order to discern what kind of new birth is at the same time birth from above. In that struggle of interpretation, the reader is called to listen to all of Jesus' words in this text, not just a few of them. As the reader moves with Nicodemus and Jesus through this dialogue and into the discourse, a fresh and fuller understanding of "born *anōthen*" emerges. "Born *anōthen*" is complicated to interpret because its language and its promise transcend conventional categories. It envisions a new mode of life for which there are no precedents, life born of water *and* the Spirit, life regenerated through the cross of Jesus. If interpreters turn "born again" into a slogan, they domesticate the radical newness of Jesus' words and diminish the good news.

The challenge to interpreters of John 3:1–21, then, is to approach this text openly, not convinced that they already know what the text is about and what its words mean. If interpreters approach the Jesus of this text as Nicodemus approached him, confidently asserting what "we know …" (3:2), they may find, as Nicodemus did, that their certitudes and assumptions stand in the way of the full experience of Jesus this text offers. The Fourth Evangelist invites interpreters to allow the words of this text to play on them. This is a demanding invitation, because if accepted, it means that the interpreter must be willing to be changed by this text, to welcome new life on the terms offered by Jesus in this text. Belief in Jesus (3:16, 18) changes one's life so that one can, indeed, speak of being "born again," not because of an intrinsic change in human nature, but because of the new beginning that comes with a recognition of the full character of God that is revealed in Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that God loved the world so much that God gave the Son as a gift. The God revealed in Jesus is a God whose love knows no bounds and who asks only that one receive the gift. If one receives the gift, one receives eternal life, because one's life is reshaped and redefined by the love of God in Jesus. The words about judgment with which the text concludes (3:17–21) underscore the seriousness of God's offer.

Notes

John 3:3 ***born from above***: The expression *gennēthē anōthen* can be translated as "born again" or "born from above." Some bibles opt for the "again" (TLW), some opt for "again" with a footnote to explain there is an alternative (RSV, NIV, TEV, NASB, ESV, KJV). Other opt for "from above" without explanation (NAB, NJB) or with explanation as to the alternative (NSRV, CEV). It should be noted that the early Christian tradition is decidedly in favor of "born from above."

This double meaning is possible only in Greek; there is no Hebrew or Aramaic word with a similar double meaning. Jesus' words to Nicodemus in v.3 are unavoidably and intentionally ambiguous because of the inherent double meaning of *anōthen*. The ambiguity of meaning is lost in English translations because the translators privilege one meaning of *anōthen* in the text and relegate the second meaning to a footnote at best. This translation strategy communicates to the reader that the footnoted translation is a secondary definition, not an inherent meaning of the word. The translators thus decide for the reader that one reading is primary and the other secondary, when the Fourth Evangelist intends both to be heard simultaneously. Jesus' expression "to be born *anōthen*, to be born from above/again" challenges Nicodemus to move beyond surface meanings to a deeper meaning. When English translations resolve the tension in Jesus' words by reducing *anōthen* to one of its meanings, the challenge to Nicodemus (and to the reader) is lost. The intentional double meaning of *anōthen* must be kept in mind when reading this verse in order to discern Jesus' full meaning and the nature of Nicodemus's misunderstanding.

John 3:14 ***as Moses lifted up the serpent…*** The Jewish understanding of this passage insisted that Yahweh, not the snake, brought deliverance. "He who turned toward it was saved, not by what he saw, but by thee, the Savior of all" (Wis. 16:7); "But could the serpent slay or the serpent keep alive!—it is, rather, to teach you that such time as the Israelites directed their thoughts on high and kept their hearts in subjection to their Father in heaven, they were healed; otherwise they pined away" (Mishnah, Rosh. Hash. 3:8).

John 3:16-21 ***general note***: All are agreed that from time to time in this Gospel we have the meditations of the Evangelist, but it is difficult to know where they begin and end. In the first century there were no devices like quotation marks to show the precise limits of quoted speech. The result is that we are always left to the probabilities and we must work out for ourselves where a speech or quotation ends. In this passage Jesus begins to speak in verse 10, but John does not tell us where this speech ends. The dialogue form simply ceases. Most agree that somewhere we pass into the reflections of the Evangelist. Perhaps the dividing point comes at the end of verse 15. The sentence which ends there has a reference to "the Son of Man," an expression used only by Jesus in all four Gospels. We are on fairly safe ground in maintaining that these are his words. But in verse 16 the death on the cross appears to be spoken of as past, and there are stylistic indications that John is speaking for himself. It seems that the Evangelist, as he records Jesus' words about his death, is led to some reflections of his own on the same subject. That death is God's gift to deliver sinners from perishing. If, after all, they do perish that is because they prefer darkness to light. They bring it upon themselves.

John 3:16 ***gave his only son***: God gave the Son by sending him into the world, but God also gave the Son on the cross. Notice that the cross is not said to show us the love of the Son (as in Gal. 2:20), but that of the Father. The atonement proceeds from the loving heart of God. It is not something wrung from him. The Greek construction puts some emphasis on the actuality of the gift: it is not "God loved enough to give," but "God loved so that he gave." His love is not a vague, sentimental feeling, but a love that costs. God gave what was most dear to him.

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