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Terence L. Donaldson

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Nicodemus: A Figure of Ambiguity in a Gospel of Certainty

Terence L. Donaldson

*Professor of New Testament and Biblical Languages
College of Emmanuel and St. Chad, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan*

Text: John 3:14–21

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus is addressing Nicodemus, that seminary-trained Pharisee who slipped out one night for a little theological one-on-one with the preacher from Galilee, only to find himself feeling like he was a first year theologian all over again, struggling to make sense of a world of discourse that was unlike anything he had ever heard before. When we open the Fourth Gospel, we—like Nicodemus—are ushered into a different world, a world of sharply drawn opposites, where the lines are clear and the alternatives stark. Light and darkness, truth and falsehood, above and below, death and life. John's world is structured according to these sharply defined opposing pairs, and we as readers are urged to line ourselves up accordingly.

Today's reading, especially the latter part of it, is a good case in point. Light versus darkness; doing evil versus doing the truth; the world condemned versus the world saved; loving or coming to the light versus hating or avoiding the light; believing and not being condemned versus not believing and being condemned already. By the time Jesus is finished with Nicodemus, we as readers have been presented with a set of clear and categorical alternatives. Either we believe in Jesus, and take our place in the light, or we don't, and find ourselves consigned to darkness and condemnation.

The Fourth Evangelist is a very subtle and persuasive writer, and unless we are resistive readers of the most intractable sort, we are readily drawn into his world and convinced of its rightness. But when we leave his world and reenter our own (if your experience is anything like mine) we find

ourselves in a world that is much more ambiguous, where the boundary between light and darkness is much less clearly delineated. The world of our own experience, for example, is one where there are many pockets of darkness in the so called community of light; many who have confessed belief "in the name of the only Son of God" have nevertheless shown themselves capable of a depressing variety of deeds of darkness. Conversely, in our day-to-day experience we encounter many who show no inclination to recognize Jesus as the true light, but who nevertheless live lives of generosity, grace and sacrifice—in other words, people who in John's terms should be drawn to Jesus, but aren't.

But this doesn't exhaust the ambiguity or the lack of clarity. Even when we want to live in the light, for example, we find ourselves in a world where even the purchase of a pound of coffee or of a new pair of jeans implicates us in shadowy structures of injustice which we are powerless either to avoid or to reform. Further, most of the choices or decisions that we have to make in the course of a day or of a lifetime seem to be much less momentous or much less clearly drawn than the sharp option between truth and falsehood, light and darkness, with which this passage presents us.

It is at this point that the figure of Nicodemus becomes interesting. For Nicodemus himself is an ambiguous character in John's story. To begin at the beginning: How are we to interpret the fact that he comes to Jesus by night? On the one hand, he himself says at the outset that he has seen Jesus' signs and as a result has concluded that Jesus is a teacher come from God. It is possible then that Nicodemus is to be seen as someone who is leaving the realm of darkness because he has recognized Jesus as the light.

But the positive impression left by Nicodemus' first words are undercut somewhat by what the narrator has just told us at the end of chapter 2: "...many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them...for he himself knew what was in everyone." Seeing signs, as Nicodemus has done, does not necessarily lead to the kind of belief that is required. Further, as the conversation unfolds there is little evidence that Nicodemus is one who has seen the light. He misunderstands Jesus' initial statement, is quickly reduced to befuddlement,

and ends up shaking his head and saying, "How can these things be?" Even though he seems to want to understand, the point of the story seems to be that as a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, and a teacher of Israel, he is almost by definition unable to understand.

If this was Nicodemus' only appearance in the Gospel, we might be inclined to write him off as someone congenitally unable to live in the light. But the interesting thing is that he keeps coming back. The ambiguity remains: He never conforms to the image of what the Fourth Evangelist sees as a model believer; to put it in another way, he is a far cry from the Beloved Disciple. But neither is he left out in the dark.

His next appearance, in chapter 7, is as inconclusive and ambiguous as the first. The chief priests and the Pharisees are scolding the temple police for having failed to arrest Jesus. When the police say, "Never has anyone spoken like this", the Pharisees respond, "Surely you have not been deceived too? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?" At this point our ears prick up, for in chapter 3 Nicodemus has been introduced to us in precisely these words—as an authority and a Pharisee. The stage seems to be set for a dramatic entrance. But Nicodemus' entrance is anticlimactic. Instead of revealing himself as a prime counter-example—an authority and a Pharisee who believes—all he does is to ask for a fair hearing under the law: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing, does it?" (v. 51). Not a ringing declaration of faith; indeed, the Evangelist goes out of his way to describe Nicodemus as "one of them". But still, he is not toeing the party line; his toes, at least, are edging out of the darkness towards the light.

Nicodemus' final appearance in the Gospel happens in conjunction with the burial of Jesus, when he comes with Joseph of Arimathea to take the body away. Again, the significance of this act is left unclear. Joseph is described as "a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews"; Nicodemus is described as the one "who had at first come to Jesus by night". Are we to see this as a belated act of brave decision, Joseph and Nicodemus finally coming out of hiding and taking a stand openly as disciples of Jesus? Possibly; but the case of doubting Thomas shows that the Evangelist is able to make outcomes clear if he so wishes. The absence of any

such clarity in the case of Nicodemus suggests that the nature of Nicodemus' response remains somewhat ambiguous right to the end.

Nicodemus can be described, then, as a figure of ambiguity in a Gospel of certainty. We don't have much time to reflect on this here. But I at least find his presence in the Gospel to be reassuring. As I have suggested, not all of us experience reality in as clear-cut a way as does the Fourth Evangelist. Many people, not only here but also in the churches we are called to serve, are in situations somewhat similar to that of Nicodemus—drawn to the light of Christ, but at the same time with a stake in institutions and structures that, in John's terms, are part of the world set over against Christ. But even though he never seems to measure up to the standard set for him by the Fourth Evangelist, Nicodemus keeps coming back. He asks the dumb question, he takes a modest risk in speaking up for Christ in the company of the chief priests and Pharisees, and finally takes a more substantial risk by carrying away the body of Jesus for burial. He never seems to see the light all that clearly; but he is quite prepared to act on the basis of all the light he has. A modest goal, to be sure; but in the end, perhaps it will turn out to be all that God requires.

We leave this place of worship to return to a world marked by ambiguity, where light is mixed with shadow. Let us continue to seek the light, and to act in faith on the basis of the light we have received. Amen.