

Discuss:

As children there are all sorts of things we believe about our world. Easter bunnies bring us baskets of candy. Tooth fairies dispense quarters under our pillows. Monsters lurk in the closet.

What's one idea you felt strongly about as a child, but formed a different conclusion about as you grew older?

What We Think We Know

Many of our ideas and beliefs are tested as we move from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood. Some of them change over time. Other convictions stick with us. Yet, the farther into our adult years we move, the less likely we become to change our minds.

This is especially true when it comes to what we believe about God. According to the Pew Research Center, most Americans who report having a religious conversion experience are under 24 years of age at the time of conversion.¹ The same study highlights that only a very small percentage of Americans experience a religious conversion beyond the age of 50.

When Jesus encounters Nicodemus, we are told that he is a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish Ruling Council. Jesus refers to him as "Israel's teacher". Clearly he is a man of significant status and influence around Jerusalem. Almost certainly he is older than Jesus. Yet something has sufficiently intrigued him about Jesus' ministry and "signs" (3:2). So much so, Nicodemus seeks him out one evening.

When asked about his powerful ministry, Jesus insists that what he knows of God comes from being "born again" (the greek word more literally means "born from above"). Nicodemus is baffled. Rabbis often spoke of Gentile converts to Judaism as "newborn children", those starting a new way of life. These adult converts were immersed in water as a sign that their impurity as Gentiles had been removed.²

But why would Jesus be speaking about "new birth" to a Pharisee like Nicodemus? What could he possibly mean when he said "You must be born again" (3:7)!?

It seems Jesus was indeed speaking of a kind of conversion... just not the sort Nicodemus had in mind!

¹ You can find the details of this study at <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/27/faith-in-flux/>

² IVP Bible Background Commentary

A Closer Look:

- 1) At the heart of Jesus' exchange with Nicodemus is a question about knowledge. How do we know God and what He is like? In verses 1-2, what does Nicodemus claim to "know"? How might we infer he has come to know it?
- 2) Looking at verses 3-12, how does Jesus describe his knowledge of God? What does he claim as the basis for his knowledge and insight?
- 3) Turn back and read John 1: 9-13. Compare the words and ideas there with those found in this passage. What similarities do you see? How might these verses illuminate Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus here?

Making it Personal:

- 1) Nicodemus struggles to understand what it means to be "born again". What about you? Does being "born of the Spirit" fit your own understanding and experience of knowing God? Why or why not?
- 2) On a personal level, what aspects of Jesus' words here remain harder to understand and apply to your own life?

The Passage: John 3:1-15

John 3:1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."