

**St. Matthew AME Church  
Bible Study  
Monday, October 20, 2008**

**St. John 3:1-21**

A disciple is a messenger of God. The way the disciple presents the message determines to some extent the effectiveness of God's communication to man. Jesus was a creative communicator. He did not use the same approach with every person. He was always ready to relate to a person's frame of reference (the cultural, educational, and environmental factors that shape a person's thinking). In John 3:1-21 he used four word pictures to communicate or evangelize (make disciples) of others.

If we are going to be effective in making disciples we must be able to communicate with people so that they can understand. This means reaching them where they are. Look at how Jesus communicates with people where they are.

**First Word Picture**

Nicodemus was part of the conservative religious establishment, a Pharisee who held a position on the Sanhedrin Council. He came to Jesus by night because he was afraid to be seen with Jesus publicly. But Nicodemus was convinced after all the signs that Jesus had done that there was something special about Jesus. Jesus had created a thirst for new life in this old Jewish sage. But before he could ask Jesus a question about this new life, Jesus gave him the answer, "unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God". (John 3:3) This caused Nicodemus to ask the obvious questions, "how can a man be born when he is old?" Can he be born all over again?

Jesus mentioned three times the importance of being "born again". This had to strike Nicodemus with sense of irony because for the Pharisees the older a man is the wiser, the more learned, and closer to God he is. Jesus plunged a dagger into this attitude, saying in effect, "Nicodemus, you need to start over again".

Because he was omnipotent Jesus understood the thoughts and questions swimming in people's heads. However, because we are not we must take time to listen and learn the questions a person is asking and be prepared to witness when the opportunity presents itself.

**Second Word Picture**

The second word picture Jesus presented to Nicodemus flowed out of the first, "the wind blows where it wills. You hear the sound, but cannot tell from where it comes or where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the spirit". (John 3:8) What Jesus was saying to Nicodemus was, "I don't expect you to understand spiritual birth, it's like trying to bottle the wind, which blows where it wants." But you can tell where it's blowing by rustling leaves, turning of a windmill, windstorm, etc..... Spiritual birth is supernatural; trying to box up the spirit is not only spiritually dangerous it's impossible. Note the Greek word for wind and spirit are the same, "pnuema".

Nicodemus response was astonishment, "how can this be?" (John 3:9) One of the weaknesses in many of us who seek to be disciples is a tendency to want to keep the spirit under control. Because of this we lose the spontaneity that is available to those who are sensitive and flexible to the spirit's leading. A discipler must have neither a fixed idea of what a disciple looks, talks and acts like or a static idea of how to "make a disciple". No program or person will ever make a disciple. Only God makes "disciples. He

uses us as his instruments in the process. The main goal in discipleship is to be Christlike. Only the spirit can make a disciple. Thus a disciple is one who “loves and obeys God, lives with joy, bears fruit and glorifies God”.

### **The Third Word Picture**

In the third word picture Jesus assisted Nicodemus by dipping into some Old Testament imagery to illustrate His previous points. It is strange to us but was full of meaning for Nicodemus. “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven-the Son of man”. (John 3:13) “Son of Man” was Jesus favorite title for Himself. He used it more than eighty times. Nicodemus understood immediately that Jesus was talking of one who was from heaven but who was at that time on earth.

Then Jesus added the heart of the metaphor saying, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life”. (John 3:14-15) This triggered in Nicodemus mind the memory of an incident recorded in Numbers 21. The Israelites were bitten by venomous snakes. Moses was told to make a snake of bronze and set it on a pole. Whoever had been bitten could look at the bronze snake and be healed. Just as the snake was raised up and people were healed, so the Son of Man would be raised up and deliverance would be theirs for the believing.

The way Jesus explained this both captured Nicodemus imagination but more importantly enable him to understand. That’s why when Jesus followed up with John 3:16 Nicodemus was able to follow. These were more than just words to Nicodemus. Jesus teaches up an important lesson as we seek to make disciples. Often when we speak to people in traditional religious language, they nod their heads even though they don’t truly understand what we are telling them. This makes our effort ineffective because we are unable or unwilling to state our message in a way they can understand.

### **The Fourth Word Picture**

The final word picture that Jesus gave Nicodemus is one of light and darkness. (John 3:19-21) In this illustration Jesus makes clear that those who desire to know God will come to the light; all others will remain in darkness. Each of the previous illustrations was a way to give Nicodemus the opportunity to make a decision. That’s what we are about, getting people, persuading people, influencing people to make a decision.

Reading the text it would appear that Nicodemus did not make a decision. Even more surprising is that it appears that Jesus did not press for one. Another important lesson to learn; Jesus didn’t press Nicodemus for a snap decision because Jesus does not always want and it is not always good to make a snap or fast decision. If Nicodemus had chosen Christ, it would have meant an abrupt end to life as he had known it. His family would have disowned him; he would have been excommunicated from the party of the Pharisees, removed from the Sanhedrin Council and dismissed from the synagogue. Nicodemus would have been a traitor and an outcast.

Jesus did not want Nicodemus or us to make emotional decisions that can not seriously be lived out in the long run. This is important because when somebody makes a decision to follow Christ they are not at the finish line but the starting line.

God wants us simply to tell others about Christ in a way they can understand, allowing the Holy Spirit to take care of the rest. When we read the Bible we see that while Nicodemus did not make a snap decision, he did make a decision for Christ, became a disciple and in fact was one of those who claimed the body of Jesus at His crucifixion. Those to whom we witness may not make an instant decision but may in their own time come to Christ.