

Corrected by Jesus (John 3:1-17)

Jesus' response to Nicodemus takes the form of a mild rebuke.

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The encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus features one of my favorite moments of Jesus subtly correcting an interlocutor in all of scripture.

Nicodemus, the Pharisee who comes under the cover of night to visit the upstart teacher Jesus, opens with what we must assume is a sincere compliment: “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.”

This statement is, among other things, a statement about evidence and optics: Nicodemus is saying that he has witnessed Jesus in action (“signs”) and thus, on the basis of that evidence, believes something about Jesus’ identity.

The subtlety of Jesus’ correction comes in his staying with the notions of seeing and belief but moving them into a new key: “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (or “born from above” in some versions).

In other words, Nicodemus’s attempted praise of Jesus takes the form of, “I have seen, and therefore I believe about you (that you are the Son of God).” Jesus’ response, though, takes the form of a mild rebuke. Nicodemus has not yet seen, not simply because he has not been born again/from above but because he does not in

fact know what he is being invited to see when he looks upon Jesus: not just the identity of a singular teacher but the kingdom of God in its fullness.

This is consistent with Jesus' continued downplaying of the significance of his own miracles throughout the gospels, and here we get a deeper clue as to why: not only is Jesus presumably interested in a faith that is not dependent upon the sorts of "signs and wonders" that Jesus (as well as many other wandering teachers of the period) can perform, but he is also interested in reorienting Nicodemus's vision and ours so that we have a new perspective—not just on what we see in Jesus but on what we seek to see.

If we are looking to Jesus to learn something about Jesus' own identity, that is one kind of optical project. If we are looking to Jesus to learn something about the kingdom of God, however, then this is a refocus—and one that Jesus tells us to begin with by looking first to the margins, to the poor, to the humble.

In his Berlin Christology lectures, Dietrich Bonhoeffer maps a unique Christological cartography based on the notion of "Christ the center." On the one hand, Bonhoeffer posits, Jesus the Christ stands at the center of our faith. On the other hand, Jesus chooses to stand not at the centers of power but at their margins: with those who are oppressed by configurations of power as they stand. Thus, for a Christian, the center is *at* the margins. This is the sort of subtle reframing hinted at by Jesus in his engagement with Nicodemus, and—we may believe—born witness to in all of Christ's work hence.