

The Gospel of John (50) **Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles (5)**

Introduction:

It is our intention today to complete our study of John 7, which records the Lord Jesus at the Feast of the Tabernacles in Jerusalem. Verses 40 through 52, which we will consider in some detail, complete this episode. But in order to retain the context of these verses we will begin reading at verse 37 and following, which record our Lord Jesus declaring His principle message to the gathered people on the last day of the feast. And so, let us read John 7:37 through 52.

³⁷On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. ³⁸He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." ³⁹But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

⁴⁰Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, "Truly this is the Prophet."
⁴¹Others said, "This is the Christ."

But some said, "Will the Christ come out of Galilee?" ⁴²Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?" ⁴³So there was a division among the people because of Him. ⁴⁴Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him.

⁴⁵Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why have you not brought Him?"

⁴⁶The officers answered, "No man ever spoke like this Man!"

⁴⁷Then the Pharisees answered them, "Are you also deceived? ⁴⁸Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? ⁴⁹But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed."

⁵⁰Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, ⁵¹"Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?"

⁵²They answered and said to him, "Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee."

As we consider this passage we will give our attention to the following:

1. The promised gift of the Holy Spirit (7:37-39)
2. Varied proposals to the identity and role of Jesus (7:40-44)
3. The failure of the "officers" to take Jesus (7:45-49)
4. Nicodemus' appeal on behalf of Jesus (7:50-52)

I. The consideration of the passage itself

A. The promised gift of the Holy Spirit (7:37-39)

We addressed our Lord's words in these verses last Lord's Day. The Lord Jesus used the last day of this Feast of the Tabernacles in order to present Himself as the One to whom the feast anticipated, even the Messiah, who would inaugurate the promised kingdom of God. The one who is thirsty, that is, the one who truly desires to know God and be received by Him into His kingdom, may believe on Jesus in order to

receive the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. The one who believes on Him has his spiritual thirst satisfied. But then he in turn becomes a source for abundant “living water” for others. For having come to Christ in repentance from sin and faith in Him, believers not only receive their own forgiveness of sins and eternal life, but they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, that the Lord Jesus gives to every one of His own that are in His kingdom. They then become sources of life to others, as they tell of the Savior who had loved them and bestowed His mercy and grace upon them.

This gift of the Holy Spirit would enable each believer in Jesus Christ to become a spring of life-giving water to others in need. In other words, the Lord purposes to use His people to reach other people with His life-giving power and presence as they make known to others the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so, not only will every true believer receive full satisfaction for his spiritual longing, that he will have his need fully met in his complete and eternal well-being, but in addition he will become a source of spiritual blessing to others. Through his prayerful concern, his words of life that he speaks to others, his good works that cause others to see the reality of the life of God in his soul, the water of life will flow into the souls of others for their everlasting benefit and soul satisfaction. By coming to Jesus Christ in faith, the believer will have enough true “life” for himself and more than enough for others as well.

Here is a good description of their blessing to the world that will be revealed on the Last Day:

That day alone shall reveal the amount of good that every believer is made the instrument of doing to others, from the very day of their conversion. Some do good while they live, by their tongues; like the Apostles and first preachers of the Gospel. Some do good when they are dying; like Stephen and the penitent thief, and our own martyred Reformers at the stake. Some do good long after they are dead, by their writings; like Baxter and Bunyan and M’Cheyne. But in one way or another, probably, almost all believers will be found to have been fountains of blessings. By word or deed, by precept or by example, directly or indirectly, they are always leaving their marks on others. They know it not now; but they will find at last that it is true. Christ’s saying shall be fulfilled.¹

Before we move on, I would like us to consider the meaning and implications more carefully of **verse 39**, which is John’s explanation of the gift of the Holy Spirit. John wrote of Jesus’ words of promise: ***“But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”*** John gave explanation of the promise of Jesus by saying that it would be a future realization in the experience of believers. He was referring, of course, to the event of Pentecost, when the enthroned Lord Jesus in heaven sent the Holy Spirit upon each and every one of His disciples, everyone who had believed on Him. But Pentecost could not happen until after Jesus was “glorified.” And here in John’s Gospel, for Jesus to be glorified is for Him to be lifted upon His cross. “Notice that the cross is referred to in terms of glory, not of shame.”² But we should also see His glorification as one movement from the cross through the grave, unto His resurrection, ascension, and exaltation as King of kings and Lord of lords.

As we stated last week, here the coming of the Holy Spirit is not a direct reference to the regeneration of sinner, when the Holy Spirit causes a spiritually dead sinner to come alive spiritually, which then shows forth in his belief in Jesus Christ the Lord, his repentance from sin, and his desire and commitment to live for Christ and serve Him among His people. The work of regeneration, or the new birth, is the experience of every person throughout history, both in Old and New Testament times, that came to salvation by God’s grace through faith. But this gift to which Jesus was speaking, the gift of the Holy Spirit, is the promised gift of every believer under the new covenant that God has established with New Testament (covenant) believers in Jesus Christ--this gift had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been glorified. The gift of the Holy Spirit both empowers the Christian for witness, and the gift of the Holy Spirit empowers the true Christian to live the Christian life. In other words, this gift of the Holy Spirit is the means by which King Jesus enables every one of His disciples—true Christians—to live holy lives before Him. This is a special enablement that the Lord gives to every one of His people in this gospel age. As Christians we have far more

¹ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 2 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 44f.

² Leon Morris, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 427.

ability in this kingdom age to live holy lives before the Lord than any of the saints were capable under the old covenant prior to the glorification of Jesus Christ.

That every Christian has the Holy Spirit which brings about his sanctification was stated and explained by the Apostle Paul in **Romans 8:1-17**. As we read these words, consider the privilege and capability that the Lord gives us through the Spirit that those formerly under the law never possessed or enjoyed.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴*in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot*. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹You, however, are not in the flesh *but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you*. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹*If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you*, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

¹²So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die, *but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live*. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Paul declared that those who had been under the Law of Moses as a covenant during the days of the Old Testament, could not order their lives according to the law of God. They were incapable of doing so. But those in Christ, in this new covenant age, have the gift of the Holy Spirit that enables them to live according to God’s law. The Holy Spirit gives the believer both the desire and the ability to order his life according to the righteousness of God’s law. Every true Christian has the Holy Spirit and therefore has the resources given to him by God in order to live a sanctified life before God. Of course this does not deny that the ability and success of the true Christian to live a life of holiness takes place with great difficulty and struggle. But the promise of God is true that every true Christian in this church age has the Holy Spirit to enable him to live a life of righteousness before God.

Now this has implications for how we define the nature of the local church of Jesus Christ. There are those who advocate that believers of both the Old Testament era and the New Testament age are all members of the same church of Jesus Christ. Our Reformed paedobaptist friends believe and teach this.³ And in one sense we agree with that claim. Yes, all true believers of all of history are to be regarded as the true, universal church redeemed by Jesus Christ through His life, death, and resurrection. Our confession of faith states this truth:

The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.⁴

³ These would include my good friends in the ministry who are Reformed Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

⁴ **The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689**, Art. 26, Par. 1.

This “church” is called “invisible” for the members of this church cannot be precisely identified in this world, since there are so many who claim to be true Christians who are not.

However, in contrast to the “universal” or “invisible” church, there is a visible people who have been identified as God’s people throughout history. For the most part, in the Old Testament the visible people of God was the nation of Israel. This nation was not comprised of true believers only; rather, the Israel of the Old Testament was constituted a physical nation. People became citizens of this nation through physical birth, signified by physical circumcision of the males. God had given the nation of Israel His law through Moses that was to govern its national life. If national Israel kept God’s law, God’s blessing in the land was assured to them. But God had forewarned them that if they failed to order their life according to His law, then He would curse them and reject them as His people. And of course this is what occurred in history. God brought His judgment upon Israel in history for its failure to keep the Mosaic covenant before God.

But thankfully, God promised that He would not bring an end to that people, but that He would save a remnant of them unto Himself. He would send to this remnant the Messiah who would establish the Kingdom of God and everyone who believed on Him as Lord and Savior would enter His spiritual kingdom. And of course that is the kingdom that our Lord Jesus brought into realization through His ministry, death, and resurrection. And since that time, His kingdom is not entered as in former times through physical birth, but it is only by the new birth that people enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Only those who experience a “circumcision without hands”, an inward work of saving grace, are admitted as citizens of the kingdom of God.

This is one of the reasons that Baptists are to be distinguished from our Reformed paedobaptist friends. Our paedobaptist⁵ friends claim that the *visible* church of the New Testament is the same as the *visible* church of the Old Testament. They teach that the church of the Old Testament was entered through physical birth, if your parents were in the “church” then their children would also be regarded as in the “church”, and in the same way, they teach that the church of the New Testament is entered through physical birth. If your parents are Christians, then you are also to be regarded as members of the New Testament church, because of your parents’ faith.

Here is their definition of the New Testament visible church from the **Westminster Confession of Faith** of 1646:

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), *consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children*: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.⁶

They teach that the visible church should be comprised of adults “that profess the true religion.” Take note, membership is not restricted to those whose lives give evidence of new life in Christ, as we Baptists advocate, but it is open to all who “profess the true religion.” In other words, people are treated and regarded as “Christians” and qualified to become members of the visible church, if they have only been taught rightly and that they claim to believe the “true religion.” But in addition to these who are embraced in the visible church who agree to certain doctrines only, their children are also qualified to enter formal membership in the local church. They become members of the visible church not because of the new life in Christ that they give evidence of having received, but only due to who their parents are, those who “profess the true

⁵ Reformed paedobaptists are those who baptize by sprinkling the infants of believing parents, believing that the child is a “covenant child”, a member of the visible church. Baptists have historically understood the Bible to teach that only those who give evidence of conversion, of true life in Jesus Christ, should be baptized by immersion and then admitted as members of the local church.

⁶ The **Westminster Confession of Faith** of 1646, Art. 25, Par. 2. By the way, take note that this statement declares that there is such a thing as a universal, visible church. As Baptists we would argue there is no such thing. First, there is only the universal invisible church comprised of all the elect through history. And second, there are individual local churches throughout the world, not one *visible* church.

religion.” In short, local church membership is not restricted to true Christians, but membership is open to anyone in the sphere of public profession that believes the right things. It is membership by creed, not conversion, by natural birth, not spiritual birth.

We strongly disagree with our paedobaptist friends regarding who should be allowed to become a member of the visible church. We advocate that only those who exhibit in their confession and life that they know the Lord savingly, that they have new life in Christ, that they have the gift of the Holy Spirit (as we have described), are to be admitted to the New Testament local church. Again, as our confession states:

All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation (i.e. the way they live), are and may be called visible saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted. (1 Cor. 1:2; Acts 11:26; Rom. 1:7; Eph. 1:20-22)⁷

Old Testament Israel was a physical people, who became members through physical birth and physical circumcision. New Testament Israel is a spiritual people, who become members through their spiritual birth, that is spiritual circumcision. Whereas Old Testament Israel could not keep the law of God as its rule of life under the Mosaic covenant, the citizens of New Testament Israel do keep the law of God as a rule of life due to the gift of the Holy Spirit that King Jesus gives to every one of His people.

The point that we are making may be summed up in this way. All true Christians live holy lives through the power of the Holy Spirit that King Jesus gives everyone who knows Him as Lord and Savior. They only are to be admitted and regarded as members of local churches of this New Testament age.

Let us now move on in our passage before us. We read in verses 40 through 44 that there were...

B. Varied proposals to the identity and role of Jesus (7:40-44)

⁴⁰Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, “Truly this is the Prophet.”

⁴¹Others said, “This is the Christ.”

But some said, “Will the Christ come out of Galilee? ⁴²Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?” ⁴³So there was a division among the people because of Him. ⁴⁴Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him.

The text we read is the New King James Version. There is a textual variant in verse 40. The newer translations speak of “some” from the crowd rather than “many” from the crowd in the NKJV. Perhaps there was a scribe at some point in history who desired to have “many” say positive things regarding the Lord rather than just “some.” John probably penned the pronoun “some” rather than “many” when he first wrote this Fourth Gospel.

There were some who had concluded that Jesus was “the Prophet.” **Verse 40** reads, ***“Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, ‘Truly this is the Prophet.’”*** We have spoken of this before. There were varied beliefs and expectations among the Jewish people regarding the coming of the promised kingdom of the Messiah. All believed that God would raise up for them the Prophet that Moses had foretold would come. This is recorded in Deuteronomy 18:15ff in which Moses declared to the people:

¹⁵“The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, ¹⁶according to all you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’ ... ¹⁸I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will

⁷ **The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689**, Art. 26, Par. 2.

put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. ¹⁹And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.” (Deut. 18:15f, 18f)

And so, verse 40 indicates that some thought that Jesus was “the Prophet” Moses foretold would come. In the Greek text of this verse the noun, “Prophet”, is preceded by the definite article, “the”, which indicates they believed Jesus was a specific prophet, even the one Moses foretold would come.

Interestingly, however, not all Israelites believed that this promised Prophet would be the Messiah, but rather, some thought that he would be a prophet of the coming Messiah. They looked for two notable persons to arise, the Messiah and this Prophet. It is very possible that the people John described in John 7:40 believed Jesus to be “the Prophet”, but not the Messiah.

But then we read of some others who did believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Again, John 7:40 and 41 read, “Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, ‘Truly this is the Prophet.’ ⁴¹*Others said, ‘This is the Christ.’*” These believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Christ, the promised King, the Son of David, who would restore the Davidic kingdom to its former glory.

Of course we know that the Prophet whom Moses promised would come and the promised Christ, the King, was one and the same person. Jesus Christ was both the Prophet and the Christ (King). Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit made this declaration shortly after the Day of Pentecost when he preached to the gathered crowd in Jerusalem. He had called unto the people of Jerusalem to repent of their sins for they had crucified the Messiah. Peter declared to them:

¹⁷“Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. ¹⁹Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, ²⁰and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, ²¹whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. ²²*For Moses truly said to the fathers, ‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you.’* ²³*And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’* ²⁴Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days. ²⁵You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ ²⁶To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.” (Acts 3:17-26)

Only those people of Israel who believed and submitted to the authoritative teaching of Jesus Christ, the promised Prophet/Messiah, would be permitted to continue as members of God’s covenant people. All others were cut off from the people of God. By the way, here again we see that the true people of God are so not because of physical birth, but only saving faith in the Messiah qualifies one to be a true member of (spiritual) Israel, God’s covenant people.

We next read of the “officers” returning to the Jewish leaders who had sent them to arrest Jesus. We read of...

C. The failure of the “officers” to take Jesus (7:45-49)

⁴⁵Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why have you not brought Him?”

⁴⁶The officers answered, “No man ever spoke like this Man!”

⁴⁷Then the Pharisees answered them, “Are you also deceived? ⁴⁸Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? ⁴⁹But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.”

We had read earlier that these “officers” had been sent by the Jewish Sanhedrin to arrest Jesus. Verse 35 records, “The Pharisees heard the crowd murmuring these things concerning Him, and the Pharisees and the chief priests sent officers to take Him.” And here we read of their return and reporting back to the Jewish leaders. It would seem by John’s description and depiction of these men that they had failed to arrest Jesus not because they were unable to do so, but because they were unwilling to do so after having heard Jesus speaking to the crowds. All they could say to the Jewish leaders was, “No man ever spoke like this Man!”, which called forth their rebuke and reproof of them.

F. F. Bruce (1910-1990) wrote of the witness of these Jewish temple officers.

Although the actual terminology of witness is not used here, these police officers add their contribution to the cumulative witness borne to Jesus and recorded in the Gospel. The words which they heard speak made such an impression on them that they could not bring themselves to execute their commission and arrest Him. ‘No one ever spoke like Him.’ Such authority (cf. Matt. 7:29), such grace (cf. Luke 4:22), they had never found in any other speaker. Their testimony was expressed in few and simple words, but it has stood the test of nineteen centuries.⁸

I am reading through the newly published Spurgeon Study Bible. The editors interspersed Spurgeon’s comments and sermon notes on different passages. Here at John 7:46 on one side of the page they have a photocopy of Spurgeon’s handwritten notes. On the opposite page they have the same notes typed for ease of reading. Spurgeon gave a sermon on this verse, “No man ever spoke like this Man!” Here is his outline and notes:

The Eloquence of Jesus

John 7:46: “*The officers answered, Never man spake like this man.*”

The testimony is more valuable as coming from enemies. It relates both to His eloquent manner and sacred matter.

I. AS TO HIS MANNER

1. The qualities of the speaker:

Incorruptible truth.

Fidelity: To the young man, to the rich, and to His followers

Boldness: To the people of Nazareth, Capernaum, High Priest.

Zeal: He came to do His Father’s work, and He did it.

Prudence: Could not be entrapped. No premature disclosures.

Wisdom: Confounding His enemies. Suited His discourses to His learner.

Humility: Woman of Samaria. Conversation with Children.

Love: Jerusalem, “Weep not for Me,” “Father, forgive them.”

2. The Characteristics of His style

Simplicity: His discourses, Parables, Figures, to the Poor.

Seriousness: No smile or joke. Rich man and Lazarus.

Earnestness: His whole heart and soul was in it.

Directness: Vineyard, Samaritan woman, Adulteress, Scribe[s] and Pharisees

II. AS TO THE MATTER, “Never man spake like this man.”

1. Important: Soul, Sin, God, Holiness, Hell, Heaven.

2. Joyful: Pardon, Redemption, Restoration, Liberty.

If we compare Jesus with others He excels.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 184.

Moses could preach law, but not gospel; terror, not love.
Noah, preacher of righteousness, not full gospel.
Nathan's personality. He (Jesus) excelled him in other things.
Elijah needed a little gentleness and love.
Jeremiah was all pathetic. Jesus sometimes rejoiced.

Jesus concentrated the marrow of all styles, the jewels of language, and the solemnities of eternity.
Yet, His small success sets forth our dependence on the Spirit. While His character is the model of a minister.

We read in **verse 47** the reaction of the "Pharisees" to these officers. ***"Then the Pharisees answered them, 'Are you also deceived?'"*** These Jewish leaders of the Pharisees associated these officers with the common people whom they assumed had been deceived by Jesus. What we have hinted for us is an attitude of contempt on the part of these religious leaders for those who were not as "educated" and "informed" as they were.

This contemptuous spirit was characteristic of the Jewish leaders toward the people who had embraced Jesus or even those who had been somewhat persuaded that He was a man of significance. This is often true of religious leaders that are void of true life in Christ. They are arrogant and patronizing toward the "common people." One of the most prominent Jewish rabbis of the century before Jesus came upon the scene, Rabbi Hillel, said this of the common people: "No member of the common people is pious."⁹ And the response of these Pharisees toward the Jewish temple "officers" reflects this contemptuous spirit.

They summarily dismissed the report of the officers that Jesus was very impressive and persuasive in His speaking. They said, ***"Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him?"*** (v. 48). To them, that settled the matter. And then they further spoke despairingly of the people: ***"But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed."***

"From the Pharisees point of view, the common people could easily be misled by any plausible teacher, because of their shocking ignorance of the true interpretation of the law."¹⁰

But actually, they were the ones who were ignorant in assuming that none of the rulers or the Pharisees believed on Him. For there was at least one, and he was standing with them, that being Nicodemus. Nicodemus then speaks up on behalf of Jesus.

D. Nicodemus appeals on behalf of Jesus (7:50-52)

These Pharisees had said that none of the Jewish rulers or Pharisees had believed on Him. But they were wrong. There was one standing with them, who was both a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. We read in **verses 50** and **51**:

⁵⁰Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, ⁵¹"Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?"

Nicodemus clearly spoke up on behalf of Jesus. Granted, it was not an overt confession on his part, but it does suggest that Nicodemus had been responsive to our Lord's time, concern, and instruction that He had given him, as recorded in John 3:1ff. And so, here was a man, who was not "of the people", who did indeed know the law, who appealed to the law that they had not been dealing justly with Jesus by condemning Him without a formal hearing from Him. "Whatever might be said of the ignorance of the

⁹ Bruce, p. 185.

¹⁰ Ibid.

common people, here was a man who knew the law and could cite it authoritatively, as befitted ‘the teacher of Israel’.”¹¹

Here is a good depiction of the scene:

Apparently there was no dissenting voice, and this provoked Nicodemus into saying something. There is something dramatic in the way that John introduces this. The leaders denied that any important person believed on Jesus, and Nicodemus immediately spoke up. They condemned the multitude for not knowing the Law, and Nicodemus puts his finger straightway on their own disregard for the Law. John characterizes Nicodemus in two ways, as having formerly come to Jesus and as being one of the Pharisees. It is this double character which causes him to speak in this situation. But though he speaks up in defense of Jesus it is a very cautious line that he takes. He does not commit himself. He does not bear witness as do so many in this Gospel. Yet the temper of the meeting must be borne in mind. Plain testimony to Jesus would undoubtedly have enraged the majority further. Nicodemus may have judged that Christ’s cause would best be served by pointing these angry men to a legal weakness in their position. His question looks for a negative answer. He is sure of his point. He reminds them that according to their law the accused must first be heard in person. The judges must “know” what he does. The implication is clear that these judges do not really know what Jesus does. Nicodemus is of the opinion that they ought not to give sentence until they do.¹²

Here is another assessment of the situation and the role of Nicodemus before these other Jewish leaders. In speaking of the sudden and silent departure of Nicodemus from Jesus back in John 3, **Herman Ridderbos** wrote these words:

But the Gospel does not thus write Nicodemus off. Because the Evangelist (John the Gospel writer) is silent about Nicodemus’ departure and reaction, this first appearance in chapter 3 is open-ended, which becomes clear from his return in 7:52. Even then the Evangelist makes no judgment concerning Nicodemus’ faith. Admittedly, there is an indisputable and very significant connection between these two appearances (cf. 7:5). Again Nicodemus is one the stage as a leader in Israel, this time not just as a scribe but also as a member of the highest court. The idea that with “being one of them” he is described as one of the secretly believing members of the Sanhedrin, or even as the man who was *and remained* one of them, fails to appreciate the entire thrust of the dialogue in the Sanhedrin and Nicodemus’ part in it. It is clear that the Evangelist’s aim is above all to expose the hypocrisy of the members of the Sanhedrin, who as the designated upholders of the law and of justice trampled on one of the most rudimentary principles of the law: judge no one unheard. In that conflict Nicodemus was the one who, as “one of them” and hence as one who was responsible for the administration of justice, became an advocate of Jesus’ rights at the place where justice was to be administered. In that position and on that issue he appealed to universally valid law and not to his personal relationship to Jesus, which can hardly be explained by lack of courage, that of the crypto-believer, supposedly attributed to him by the Evangelist. The issue was not faith, but justice.¹³

But these were angry men to whom Nicodemus was making his appeal. And angry men are often unreasonable men. They believe their opinions are unassailable. However, they lacked humility, which is so necessary in order to have a true desire and ability to question and examine one’s own opinions reasonably in the light of Scriptural truth. We read of their reaction to Nicodemus in **verse 52**: *“They answered and said to him, ‘Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.’”*

The Jewish leaders respond to Nicodemus with a question that expects a negative answer, thus serving to mock his idea and by implication the person who said it. The sharp rebuke is significant in

¹¹ Ibid, p. 186.

¹² Morris, pp. 432f.

¹³ Herman Ridderbos, **The Gospel of John; A Theological Commentary** (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 285.

two ways. First, by drawing a preposterous connection between Jesus and Nicodemus in relation to the place of origin, the Jewish leadership heaps upon Nicodemus cultural shame, since by implication his comments were interpreted to be favorable toward Jesus. This is clearly a combative rebuke, a comment befitting a social challenge. In this way Nicodemus is separated from the Jewish leadership by his fellow authorities. There is no reason to surmise what Nicodemus intended to do, for the Jewish leadership interprets his intentions for the reader... In his first appearance in the Gospel Nicodemus was a challenger of Jesus; in this appearance he is a challenger of his own Jerusalem colleagues, the Jewish leadership.¹⁴

Of course we know that their argument was wholly invalid. For although Jesus grew up in Galilee, He had been born in Bethlehem, the city of David. He was the promised Messiah, the Davidic King.

II. A few words of application

1. Be aware of our own proneness to be unteachable.

The attitude and action of these Jewish leaders is not all that unusual in the religious world, even among those professing to be Christian, even supposedly solid, well-taught Christians. Pride is a major sin, of supposedly religious people, particularly those who may be in authority. But pride will inevitably lead to a fall. “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. (Prov. 16:18). “When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom” (Prov. 11:2).

Pride prevents one from seeing matters clearly and objectively. The need to defend one’s own opinion can become premier to one’s soul, rather than the true desire to pursue and discover truth regardless of what must be exposed as faulty and flawed, even if it is our own opinions and present understanding of a matter.

There is a pride of learning that can close a mind to the truth of Holy Scripture. And particularly long-held beliefs which we have always believed to be true, are very difficult to unseat. This pride of learning looks down on others as ignorant and culpable. There is an arrogance that often accompanies authority, yes, political authority, but also religious authority. May the Lord preserve each of us from this defiling and damaging spirit.

Anger is often a warning signal that one is not capable of assessing matters objectively. “Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools” (Ecc. 7:9). Anger shuts off one’s ability to be objective, to be a thinking person. These Jewish leaders were so wrong, but they were also so angry. The two often go hand in hand, anger leading to and resulting in stubborn defense of ignorance and error.

2. Do not be surprised when you experience injustice, even from those who should be defenders and promoters of justice.

Nicodemus appealed to his fellow Jewish leaders to deal with Jesus according to the principle of law and justice. But they were unwilling to do so. If they could regard and treat the Lord Jesus in this manner, should we be surprised if similar acts of injustice are perpetrated against us? Let us not think so. But thankfully, “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the Day of Judgment” (2 Pet. 2:9). And let us remember the instruction to us, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:12f). As the Lord Jesus said on His way to Calvary, “For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23:31). If they could do what they did to One who was wholly innocent and righteous, why would things of a far worse nature not happen to us?

¹⁴ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 379.

3. Let us be willing to speak up for truth and justice.

To defend truth will only take place if we ourselves love and desire truth. Nicodemus felt compelled to speak up in the presence of intractable men who were bent on condemning and killing Jesus. Nicodemus could not remain silent, but must speak up. We must speak up when we see injustice perpetrated on those who are weak and vulnerable. When error and deceit are popularly promoted, we must stand and speak against that which we have come to see to be wrong. We should desire to be “fellow workers for the truth” (3 John 8).

To do so, however, may come with a cost. I can imagine the reputation and regard that Nicodemus held before his fellow Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin “took a hit” on this occasion. But that is okay. To stand for truth and justice will always ultimately bring credit to us and to our cause. We think much more highly of Nicodemus even though he was thought much less of then by his peers.

4. Let us value those brothers and sisters with whom we share our common life in Christ, those in whom dwells the blessed Holy Spirit.

When we encounter the brethren whom we know to be in Christ, let us rejoice in meeting them and relating to them. They are true family, brought together through Christ to experience and enjoy our family relationships and common Christian experience. Even though we may have differences of views about matters, and even different practices, if they are sound in the Gospel, though we may differ on other matters, let us rejoice with them and for them in Christ. If they have received the same Holy Spirit as we did, then we know that they have the same holy desires and aspirations that we have, for we share in a common life. And finally, since the Lord has so richly bestowed His living water upon us by giving us the blessed Holy Spirit, let us be sources of that life-giving water to others by testifying of the identity and work of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God,
be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17)
