

Steve Turnbull on “The New Humanity.” A Must-Read for Holy Week. Part 1.

Colleagues,

I sat, I listened, I learned. That was a month ago, when Exegete Steve Turnbull took the podium at January’s Crossings conference. Our overarching topic was “Law, Gospel, and Holy Spirit,” with a particular focus on the “double life” of the baptized. Steve’s assignment was to get things rolling with an exploration of John 3, where these things come to the fore in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. What emerged was an angle on John’s Gospel that I, for one, hadn’t spotted before. I shouldn’t be surprised if that’s also true for many of you. So with that in mind, I count it a joy to pass Steve’s paper along. You’ll get it in two pieces, one today, another next week. Now is the time to read closely and drink deeply, especially if you’re planning either to listen or preach at a forthcoming Good Friday service where John’s Passion gets read. Steve is about to crack open the most dramatic moment in that entire account, using the Nicodemus interchange as the springboard that vaults him there. Then, in a deft segue, he’ll help you see at last why the apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7 plays a central role in the trial accounts of the synoptic passions, a useful thing to know on Palm Sunday when Luke’s account is scheduled for reading.

Next week he’ll show us how this shaped the telling of the Gospel in the first century Mediterranean world, and addresses the agony of a world in conflict today. I’ll bet I’m not the only preacher who will borrow from Steve this year.

Steve is a graduate of Luther Seminary and Duke Divinity School,

where he earned a PhD in New Testament studies. He serves chiefly these days as senior pastor at First Lutheran Church in White Bear Lake, Minnesota. He's also a son of the congregation I serve in Greater Cleveland, so I pass his work along not only with joy, but with a twinge of pride as well.

A quick note: in getting Steve's work ready to send via email, I was obliged to transliterate a few Greek words and phrases. Those of you unfamiliar with the Greek alphabet should know that it includes not five vowels, as in Latin or English, but seven: *alpha* (a, as in "ah"); *epsilon* (short e, as in "egg"); *eta* (long e, as in "they"); *iota* (short i, as in "it"); *omicron* (short o, as in "on"); *upsilon* (u, as in nothing we say in English; approximated, perhaps, by trying to collapse the double e of "feet" into the double o of "food"—a French u, as one website [both describes and sounds it out](#)); and finally *omega* (long o, as in "go" or "oh". A challenge in transliteration (swapping English letters for Greek) is to differentiate *epsilon* from *eta*, and *omicron* from *omega*. I'll do it here by using the forms above: e and o for the short vowels, "ey" and "oh" for the long ones.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Nicodemus and the New Humanity

Steve Turnbull

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I think it might be helpful to begin this reflection on the role

of the Holy Spirit in giving us life with a personal anecdote. You know that saying about how there are two kinds of people in the world? Those who believe there are only two kinds of people in the world and those who don't. Well, I've noticed there are two kinds of people in the world when it comes to a morning shower. There are those who get up, get clean, get dry, get dressed, and get on with the day. And then there are those who slide into a cascade of water set to just the right temperature to transmit a gentle warmth to their still slumbering skin and who enjoy every long minute of their water tank draining, time consuming, daily morning ritual. (Can you guess which one I am?) Years ago I had a friend named Joe. He was of the latter variety. He told me one day, "Steve, some people think that their master bathroom includes a shower stall. To me, it's not so much a shower as it is a rehumanization chamber." It's been almost 20 years since I heard that description, and if the good Lord gives me 40 more, I don't think I'll forget it. This is the topic we're going to explore today: the life-giving work of the Spirit as a process of rehumanization.

Have you ever noticed how ambivalent we are about the word "human"? We are conflicted about how to use that word. Our common usage betrays our mixed feeling about what it means to be human. On the one hand, to err is human. (Some of you will think I have erred just now in my pronunciation.) Either way, don't blame me. I'm only...human. This kind of usage reflects our pessimistic view of humanness. Being human is basically what's wrong with us. Other times we can talk about someone as being truly "humane," and we mean it as a high compliment. Or we study the "humanities" because they enrich our selves our our society. Or I wonder if we mean something like this when we say that someone is a real "Mensch." Being human, from this perspective, is not what's wrong with us. It's what we aspire to. I hope to show you today that both of these views are Biblical. What is

needed is to inquire about the relationship between them. Or, more to the point of this gathering, to ask, "How does the Holy Spirit create the humanity God wants from the humanity we are."

And it is my assignment, joyfully received, to take my starting point from the story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in 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.”

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

If you have studied this story before, you may know that John presents this exchange to us as more than a private conversation. Nicodemus stands for more than himself. When Jesus speaks in direct address to Nicodemus, he moves from the second person singular pronoun to the plural. To Jesus, Nicodemus isn’t just a “you;” he’s a “y’all,” a representative figure.

At the opening of the story Nicodemus, along with all that he stands for, approaches Jesus in the darkness of night. Details like this are rarely coincidental in John. All the more so when, in the closing verses of this episode, Jesus teaches Nicodemus, and the Nicodemus in all of us, about darkness and the coming of the light. The light has come into the world, Jesus said, but people have loved the darkness rather than the light. This is

one of those scenes in John that indexes back to John's brilliant prologue, specifically to John 1:9. John wrote in his prologue that Jesus is the true light, which gives light to all people, and he has come into the world, but the world did not receive him.

This word "people" that appears in both passages is a word that we need to explore. We find "the true light which gives light to all *people*" in John 1:9, but Jesus tells us that '*people* loved the darkness rather than the light" in John 3:19. The word translated here as "people" is a word familiar to Greek readers and perhaps also to many who read the New Testament in English. The word is *anthroghpos*, from which we get words like anthropology. It is the word for human beings or for humanity. Not "man" in the gendered sense of the term, that's *aneyr*; not woman, that's *guney*; but "human."

By the end of this episode, humans don't look very good. They love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil. The pessimistic side of our perspective appears justified. And we were set up for this pessimism already at the start of the scene. The very first words of this scene in Greek are *Hey de anthroghpos ek tohn Pharisaiohn*, "there was a human, from among the Pharisees." In a lesser piece of literature than John, or read out of context, this might seem insignificant. The word *anthroghpos* can be used neutrally, without much theological freight. But if we can manage not to be too distracted by the large, pesky number 3 interrupting John's text and tricking us into thinking of this as a cold start to a new chapter, we might also notice that in the last verses of what we now call John 2, Jesus would not entrust himself to the humans who had gathered at the Passover because he knew all things. John 2:24 says, "He did not need any testimony about humans for he knew what was in each human." And then *the very next words*, later designated as John 3:1, say "There was a human, from among

the Pharisees, Nicodemus by name, a ruler of the Judeans.” It’s practically the title of this story. This is a story about humanity. And so far, it’s mostly a tragedy.

But all is not lost. Although Nicodemus cannot comprehend how, Jesus suggests that those born once as *anthrohpoi*, humans, can be born again, from above, by the Spirit. Jesus describes for Nicodemus et al. a new birth, which, as births usually do, issues forth in new life—a new life given by the Spirit. And now we are back at the topic that gathers us here. How shall we understand this Spirit-born life? And in John’s context, I think we are urged to ask, “What sort of life does the Spirit give to our darkened humanity?”

To answer that question, let’s fast forward to John’s final and climactic use of that same term, *anthrohpōs*, in John 19. Jesus is on trial before Pilate. It seems to be his great defeat, the story of his failure for pretensions to Kingship. In fact, the language of Kingdom, ubiquitous in the other gospels, appears in John in only two stories, the story of Nicodemus (3:3), and the story of Jesus’ trial before Pilate. In this scene, John tells the story of Jesus’ gruesome, ironic coronation. Pilate’s goons twist together a crown of thorns and work it down onto Jesus head. They find some purple cloth and drape his would-be kingly shoulders with this would-be royal garb. And just in case anybody missed the point they were none too delicately trying to make, they mock him, “Hail, king of the Jews.” Later they would crucify him under a placard advertising this same charge, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

After this royal mocking Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowd. There has been no time for Jesus to change costumes in the intervening two verses, but John refuses to let even his dullest readers miss the point. Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowd “wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe,” and

presenting the soon-to-be crucified king he says, *Idou ho anthrohpōs*. "Behold, the human" (19:5).

To earthly eyes, this scene would be a no more hopeful picture of humanity than the one painted 16 chapters earlier. Worse, actually. For now the light has shined in the darkness, and the darkness has overcome it. But read in resurrection retrospect, as John intends his gospel to be read, a whole new picture emerges, one visible only to the eyes of faith, and offering those eyes of faith a picture they would not, could not, certainly did not imagine on their own. Here, John tells us, we may behold true humanity. Here we see the truly human one, faithful to God as Israel and Adam were meant to be but never were. Faithful up to and through the point of death. Here now stands the world's first and only truly-human being. Here now is that human being receiving his coronation as the world's true Lord and King.

Humanity and kingship. Humanity and reign. What John has joined together, we would be wise not to rend asunder.

But this is not just an idiosyncrasy of John. The synoptic evangelists do it too. And they add some color to the picture. There are two different, prominent themes in the Synoptics that teach us about the cruciform Lordship of Jesus and the gift of rehumanization. First, there are the Son of Man sayings. John said that Jesus was the true *anqrwpoß*. Both John and the synoptic gospels include Jesus self-designation as the *huios tou anthrohpou*, which we have traditionally rendered as "the son of man," an inevitably imperfect translation for a language in flux. Some have tried again to render it "the mortal one" or "the human being." What's important in translation is that we see through to the word *anthrohpōs* and that we see that Jesus has adopted this phrase from the prophet Daniel.

Daniel's Son of Man appears in a dream described in Daniel 7. In his dream Daniel sees 4 terrible beasts arise to reign and wreak havoc upon the earth. Then Daniel sees another character, a *huios tou anthrohpou* in the Septuagint that most New Testament writers seem to have read and in the language they reflected, a "son of man" in most of our English translations. This son of man is transported upon the clouds into the presence of God, the Ancient of Days, and God confers upon him authority, glory, and sovereign power. It will be his vocation to establish an everlasting Kingdom and to subdue the destructive reign of the beasts.

A few verses later, Daniel is given the interpretation of this dream. Daniel 7:17-18 says, "The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, forever and ever.'" According to the provided interpretation, the Son of Man represents the people of the Most High. They are the ones who are destined to receive the Kingdom and possess it eternally, and to do it as humans.

This vision is an anti-creation and re-creation narrative, highlighting the role of the human one. In contrast to God's Edenic purposes, at the start of this vision it is not human beings who are given dominion over the beasts or who fill the earth and subdue it, but it is the beasts who exercise dominion over the humans and all the earth. This is bad. This may be why the first beast especially is anthropomorphized. The lion with the wings of an eagle is said to stand up on two feet and take the mind of a human. Creation is become chaos because the Kingdom of our Lord has become the kingdom of this world. This is a narrative of dehumanization. But God reestablishes the good of creation as he reestablishes the primordial vocation of his humans, to serve as his vice-regents and to reflect His image as they exercise his dominion over creation, to subdue the beasts,

that chaos will be *kosmos* again. First, Daniel sees, they must suffer, but then they will be vindicated to permanent, benevolent, delegated reign. This second stage of the narrative is a narrative of rehumanization.

This is the destiny that Jesus claims as his when he calls himself the Son of Man. He is the representative who fulfills the vocation of Israel, whose role it was to fulfill the vocation of humanity in the first place. And Jesus seems to use this title in full awareness of the narrative of Daniel's dream. Thus the Son of Man must suffer many things and be killed, and on the third day rise to reign at the right hand of God. These ideas may come to us by the pen of Mark, but we are also right back where we began in John's thought. "Behold, the man," who wears a crown on his head above his purple bedecked shoulders. The one who suffers and dies, later to be vindicated and take up his reign, is the truly human one, God's true *anthropos*, the one in whom the kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.

To be continued...