

## No Fault Religion

(GENESIS 12:1-4 NRSV) *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* <sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

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(JOHN 3:1-17 NIV) *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born*

*of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'<sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"<sup>11</sup> "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"<sup>13</sup> "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup>"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

A few years ago the movie, "Field of Dreams" had me scratching my head. Everybody else seemed ecstatic over its message; but I just didn't get it. "If you build it, they will come." Who will come?

I don't know. Kind of an adult fairy tale, maybe? This Iowa corn farmer hears a voice, and right away begins to build a baseball stadium in his corn field; used up all his money; didn't get his crops in; people called him crazy. But he built it. And the ghosts of all these deceased baseball greats began to appear in his cornfield. And in the final scene, the camera pans back from the baseball field, and you see this line of cars, extending for miles down the country road. He built it; and they came.

I don't know. I guess it's no more unlikely than the story of a Chaldean camel driver hearing the voice of God. "Abram! Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to a land I will show you." And he did it. Pulled-up-stakes-and-followed-the-Spirit; that kind of faith.

In the epistle for today—Romans 4, which we didn't read—Paul says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." (4:3)

Now, contrast the faith of Abram with the religion of Nicodemus: "...no one

could perform the miracles you do if God were not with him." Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus' miracles, which places Jesus about the same level as a street magician. One can build a *religion* around the miraculous—the sensational—the supernatural. One of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness was all about that. But as a foundation for faith, it's inadequate. Nicodemus is one of those curious but cautious persons who wants to make sure he's got it right. Faith, he thinks, is indistinguishable from proof.

Nicodemus was like my late friend who was from another Christian denomination, and never liked visiting our church, because we do communion different—we say the loaf and the cup are "symbolic". And we do baptism different—we immerse. He'd try to set me straight, but because he'd never explored other options—never questioned why his church did things the way they do; he didn't really *know* why he believed as he did. "We're not supposed to question," he'd say. And if I tried to explain why we do what we do, it raised questions in his mind he couldn't answer, and he'd get angry and say, "You're just trying to destroy my faith." ["You started it."]

Nicodemus didn't want faith. He wanted an iron-clad guarantee—beyond a reasonable doubt. He had it all worked out: the proof of Jesus' divine commission was his miracles. But that's not proof. Pharaoh's magicians matched Moses, trick for trick. There's always someone bigger, stronger, faster, more convincing.

Here is the difference between *religion* and *faith*: faith is about risk and commitment—a willingness to pull up stakes and follow where the voice leads. In religion there's no room for risk or commitment. While faith is born out of gratitude, religion is born out of anxiety, and seeks security; and there is security in proof.

To Nicodemus, religion was a matter of purchasing "No Fault Insurance." Tell me the answers. Tell me what to do. Give me the magic words.

How do we get from Nicodemus' "No Fault Religion" to Abram's "pull-up-stakes-and-follow-the-Spirit kind of faith?"

Nicodemus reminds me of Allison. Allison was 16, and "drop-dead" gorgeous. Our youth group had gone a mission trip. Now Allison going on a mission trip was an oxymoron in itself; but that's another story, altogether. She went because on the last day of the trip we were going to "Six Flags Over Texas."

We spent the night in sleeping bags on the floor of First Christian Church in Arlington, and when we got ready to leave for the park the next morning, Allison was the last to get on the bus. She hadn't liked the way her hair looked, so she washed it—again. If had been as old and cranky then as now, I'd have been tempted to leave her. But we waited while she used the blow dryer and the curling iron and sprayed her hair until it was bullet-proof. She got on the bus dressed to kill. She had it; she knew it; and she flaunted it! And she had come to "Six Flags" to find—boys.

I was the Youth Minister, and Allison frightened me. All day long I kept my eye out for her. She wasn't hard to spot. She didn't move around much.

She wouldn't ride the rides with the rest of the group. The lines were too long, and you had to stand in the sun part of the time. She didn't want to sweat out her curls.

She wouldn't ride the roller coaster because it made her scream, and she thought she sounded like a dork when she screamed. Besides, her slacks would get

wrinkled (Hey, it was 1973; nobody'd heard of "grunge"!)

She wouldn't ride the "Texas Chute-Out" because she was afraid she'd throw up. That would be so embarrassing.

She wouldn't ride the log ride because at the end you go down this long slide and there's a big splash, and you get all wet. It would ruin her hair and her make-up.

So, she spent most of the day sitting in the shade, posing—like a piece of cheese on a mouse trap.

At the end of the day, as the kids gathered back at the bus, the girls came, dripping wet, hair sticking to their foreheads, hoarse from screaming on the roller coaster, catsup stains on their shirts; and most of them came hand-in-hand with a boy. There were tender good-byes at the bus door, exchanges of phone numbers, promises to write... And then they got on the bus and gathered in giggling huddles to share their stories.

Allison arrived last; every hair still perfectly in place, slacks still sharply creased, make-up perfect. But she was alone. The other girls had run squealing to stand in the long lines in the sun; they let their hair get wet and their mascara run, and they got back on the bus with telephone numbers, because they had gone where the boys were. Allison hadn't wanted to risk mussing her hair or her make-up, and so her beauty was still intact; she almost glowed. But she sat alone and quiet on the bus, empty-handed, and she'd missed the ride of her life!

Maybe we can move through that story back to the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus speaks of the Spirit that, like the wind, blows where it will, and we can't nail it down. We can't control it. We can't even predict where it will lead. The conversation ends with Jesus speaking of a faith that is much more than safe, rational conclusions drawn from indisputable evidence. A faith that risks trusting in that uncontrollable spirit that calls and says, "Follow me"—and leads, we know not where. Faith is not the content of our beliefs; it is the act of living as if we truly believe what we say we believe.

Somewhere along the line Nicodemus apparently got the message, because John tells us that later, when the Pharisees tried to trump up some charges against Jesus, Nicodemus risked his reputation, asking, "Shouldn't we at least hear him out before we condemn him?" And after the crucifixion, when Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate to request the body of Jesus, that he might embalm it and bury it, John tells us that he was accompanied by Nicodemus.

Apparently, Nicodemus' religion had become faith. *Christian* faith is the commitment of one's life to the One whose death opens the door to the new world of the Spirit. It is an act of surrender—of giving up control—of openness to being led by the uncontrollable wind of God; an embracing of the mysterious newness of God. It's risky. You can be embarrassed. Your dignity and your public image can get soaking wet. You might even get hurt; but that's where the life is. And it'll be the ride of your life!