

The New Birth #1

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, came by night to see Jesus. His confidence that Jesus was a God-sent teacher was based upon the miracles Jesus wrought (John 3:2). There are five witnesses to the truth of Jesus's claims and origin given in John 5: God the Father, John the Baptist, Moses, the Old Testament Scriptures and the miracles of Jesus (John 5:33, 36-37, 39, 46). The purpose of miracles was to confirm (establish, make secure) the words that workers of signs spoke (Mark 16:20, Hebrews 2:3). As touching Jesus, His miracles confirmed that He is the Christ, the Son of God for such were His claims (John 4:25f; 9:35-38; 20:31f). There is no recorded question from Nicodemus for Jesus seized the initiative in this meeting saying, *"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God"* (John 3:3). The text continues, *"Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew. The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit"* (John 3:5-8).

Uncounted numbers of sermons, tracts and commentaries deal with the "New Birth." Many claim to be "born-again" Christians as though there were two "kinds" of Christians: (1) the nominal, but "unregenerated" one and, (2) the "born again" variety of a Christian, obviously superior to the first. Such distinction exists only in men's minds. If one is a Christian he has been born again. If he has not been born again, he is not a Christian. The purpose of these two articles is to study the "New Birth" showing both what it is and what it is not.

"The Wind Bloweth Where It Will"

First it is needful to dispense with mistaken conceptions about the "New Birth." To many, the "New Birth" is a mysterious, unexplainable work wrought directly in the heart by the Holy Spirit effecting in the sinner, "a better felt than told" feeling. Justification for such understanding is based upon Jesus' statement: *"The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit"* (John 3:8). Explanation of this verse is: "The new birth is just like the wind. You don't know where the wind comes from or goes to. You don't see the wind. The new birth is just like that: you

don't know what has happened, you don't see what has happened. You just know IT HAS happened." John 3:8 does not describe the nature of the new birth; it describes the one who is born again: "*the wind bloweth where it will ... so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*"

Verse 6 cannot be separated from verse 8 if one is to understand the "New Birth." "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*" Nicodemus, being a descendant of Abraham, considered that fleshly relationship qualification enough for him to be in the kingdom the prophets had predicted and of which both John and Jesus had announced as near. Jesus reminded Nicodemus that he was in essence two men, an outward, mortal man and an inward, immortal one (2 Cor. 4:16). Like the wind which one cannot see but which exists, the inward man (soul) cannot be seen but it also exists. There is an immortal part of man which was to be born again and such was that to which Jesus referred when He said, "*... so is everyone that is born of the Spirit.*" In the kingdom of God physical relationship count for naught: "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh*" for citizenship in Christ's spiritual kingdom depends upon one's spirit being born anew.

Various explanations abound for verse 5. "*Verily, verily I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*" Some explain that verse is discussing two births: the natural birth (water) and the spiritual birth (Spirit). Some make water and spirit identical, thus saying one must be born of Spirit and Spirit. Most are certain that to be "*born of the Spirit*" means there is a direct operation of the Holy Spirit upon the sinner's heart to create faith and effect great changes in him. All three ideas are wrong.

Two "Births" In John 3:5?

To what does "*water*" allude in John 3:5? Some insist that the "*water*" of John 3:5 is the water of a physical birth, that "*the spirit*" is the "New Birth," thus making not one but two births in the verse. The purpose of such a forced explanation is obvious -- to avoid any reference to water baptism. A simple analysis of verse 3 with verse 5 will show that all the parts of the two verses are parallel, that the "New Birth" mentioned in verse 3 is explained as consisting of two elements, water and Spirit. Consider the following:

- John 3:3: Verily, verily/I say unto thee.
- John 3:5: Verily, verily/I say unto thee.

- John 3:3: except one be/born again.
- John 3:5: except one be/born of water and the Spirit.

- John 3:3: he cannot see/the kingdom of God.
- John 3:5: he cannot enter into/the kingdom of God.

Clearly "*Verily, verily,*" "*I say unto thee.*" "*except one be,*" and "*the kingdom of God*" as identical language say exactly the same thing. True, "*cannot see*" and "*cannot enter into*" are variant in words but who denies that to "*see the kingdom of God*" is the same as to "*enter into the kingdom of God*" describing salvation that comes to him who is born again? Just so the phrase "*born again*" and "*born of water and the Spirit*" are equal to each other in meaning. In verse 5 Jesus simply gave additional explanation of what it means to be "*born anew*": it means to be "*born of the water and the Spirit.*" This many Calvinist commentaries acknowledge although they argue with the implications about necessity of baptism that necessarily comes from Jesus's words. Albert Barnes in his Barnes Notes on the New Testament comments on the verse: "By water here is evidently signified baptism" (p. 276). And although Barnes adds, "and though it, perhaps, cannot be said that none who are not baptized cannot be saved," out of deference to his Calvinistic theology, he could as easily (and accurately) have written: "And though it, perhaps, cannot be said that none who are not born of the Spirit cannot be saved" for both water and Spirit are part of the "New Birth" and in the absence of either, a new birth has not occurred. John 3:5 mentions both water and the Spirit but while mentioning two elements has reference to only one birth. There are not two births in John 3:5.

Water=Spirit?

Some explain the water of John 3:5 as a figurative reference to the Holy Spirit. If so, one might ask what the Spirit in the verse figuratively refers to. Such an explanation is inaccurate for two very significant reasons. First, it ignores one of the basic rules of biblical interpretation: Do not mix figurative and literal language. If water in the text is figurative, i.e. "Spirit," then "Spirit" in the text also is figurative, thus "Spirit"=? Second, it makes Jesus's words nonsensical for He is made to say: "Except one be born of the Spirit and the Spirit." Just as Spirit in John 3:5 is "Spirit," so "water" in John 3:5 is "water."

[Editor's note: This article will conclude in the next bulletin.]

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