

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS  
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And many Explanatory Notes.

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## JOHN III. 1-8

1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter

the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

THE conversation between Christ and Nicodemus, which begins with these verses, is one of the most important passages in the whole Bible. Nowhere else do we find stronger statements about those two mighty subjects, the new birth, and salvation by faith in the Son of God. The servant of Christ will do well to make himself thoroughly acquainted with this chapter. A man may be ignorant of many things in religion, and yet be saved. But to be ignorant of the matters handled in this chapter, is to be in the broad way which leads to destruction.

We should notice, firstly, in these verses, *what a weak and feeble beginning a man may make in religion, and yet finally prove a strong Christian*. We are told of a certain Pharisee, named Nicodemus, who feeling concerned about his soul, "came to Jesus by night."

There can be little doubt that Nicodemus acted as he did on this occasion from the fear of man. He was afraid of what man would think, or say, or do, if his visit to Jesus was known. He came "by night," because he had not faith and courage enough to come by day. And yet there was a time afterwards when this very Nicodemus took our Lord's part in open day in the council of the Jews. "Doth our law judge any man," he said, "before it hear him, and know what he doeth." (John vii. 51.) Nor was this all. There came a time when this very Nicodemus was one of the only two men who did honour to our Lord's dead body. He helped Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus, when even the apostles had forsaken their Master and fled. His last things were more than his first. Though he began badly, he ended well.

The history of Nicodemus is meant to teach us that we should never "despise the day of small things" in religion. (Zec. iv. 10.) We must not set down a man as having no grace, because his first steps towards God are timid and wavering, and the first movements of his soul are uncertain, hesitating, and stamped with much imperfection. We must remember our Lord's reception of Nicodemus. He did not "break the bruised reed, or quench the smoking flax," which He saw before Him. (Matt. xii. 20.) Like Him, let us take inquirers by the hand, and deal with them gently and lovingly. In everything there must be a beginning. It is not those who make the most flaming profession of religion at first, who endure the longest and prove the most steadfast. Judas Iscariot was an apostle when Nicodemus was just groping his way slowly into full light, Yet

afterwards, when Nicodemus was boldly helping to bury his crucified Saviour, Judas Iscariot had betrayed Him, and hanged himself! This is a fact which ought not to be forgotten.

We should notice, secondly, in these verses, *what a mighty change our Lord declares to be needful to salvation, and what a remarkable expression He uses in describing it.* He speaks of a new birth. He says to Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” He announces the same truth in other words, in order to make it more plain to his hearer’s mind—“Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” By this expression He meant Nicodemus to understand that “no one could become His disciple, unless his inward man was as thoroughly cleansed and renewed by the Spirit, as the outward man is cleansed by water.” To possess the privileges of Judaism a man only needed to be born of the seed of Abraham after the flesh. To possess the privileges of Christ’s kingdom, a man must be born again of the Holy Spirit.

The change which our Lord here declares needful to salvation is evidently no slight or superficial one. It is not merely reformation, or amendment, or moral change, or outward alteration of life. It is a thorough change of heart, will, and character. It is a resurrection. It is a new creation. It is a passing from death to life. It is the implanting in our dead hearts of a new principle from above. It is the calling into existence of a new creature, with a new nature, new habits of life, new tastes, new desires, new appetites, new judgments, new opinions, new hopes, and new fears. All this, and nothing less than this is implied, when our Lord declares that we all need a “new birth.”

This change of heart is rendered absolutely necessary to salvation by the corrupt condition in which we are all, without exception, born. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” Our nature is thoroughly fallen. The carnal mind is enmity against God. (Rom. viii. 7.) We come into the world without faith, or love, or fear toward God. We have no natural inclination to serve Him or obey Him, and no natural pleasure in doing His will. Left to himself, no child of Adam would ever turn to God. The truest description of the change which we all need in order to make us real Christians, is the expression, “new birth.”

This mighty change, it must never be forgotten, we cannot give to ourselves. The very name which our Lord gives to it is a convincing proof of this. He calls it “a birth.” No man is the author of his own existence, and no man can quicken his own soul. We might as well expect a dead man to give himself life, as expect a natural man to make himself spiritual. A power from above must be put in exercise, even that same power which created the world. (2 Cor. iv. 6.) Man can do many things; but he cannot give life either to himself or to others. To give life is the peculiar prerogative of God. Well may our Lord declare that we need to be “born again!”

This mighty change, we must, above all, remember, is a thing without which we cannot go to heaven, and could not enjoy heaven if we went there. Our Lord’s words on this point are distinct and express. “Except a man be born again, he can neither see nor enter the kingdom of God.” Heaven may be

reached without money, or rank, or learning. But it is clear as daylight, if words have any meaning, that nobody can enter heaven without a “new birth.”

We should notice, lastly, in these verses, *the instructive comparison which our Lord uses in explaining the new birth*. He saw Nicodemus perplexed and astonished by the things he had just heard. He graciously helped his wondering mind by an illustration drawn from “the wind.” A more beautiful and fitting illustration of the work of the Spirit it is impossible to conceive.

There is much about the wind that is mysterious and inexplicable. “You can not tell,” says our Lord, “whence it comes and where it goes.” We cannot handle it with our hands, or see it with our eyes. When the wind blows, we cannot point out the exact spot where its breath first began to be felt, and the exact distance to which its influence shall extend. But we do not on that account deny its presence. It is just the same with the operations of the Spirit, in the new birth of man. They may be mysterious, sovereign, and incomprehensible to us in many ways. But it is foolish to stumble at them because there is much about those who we cannot explain.

But whatever mystery there may be about the wind, its presence may always be known by its sound and effects. “Thou hearest the sound thereof,” says our Lord. When our ears hear it whistling in the windows, and our eyes see the clouds driving before it, we do not hesitate to say, “There is wind.” It is just the same with the operations of the Holy Spirit in the new birth of man. Marvellous and incomprehensible as His work may be, it is work that can always be seen and known. The new birth is a thing that “cannot be hidden.” There will always be visible “fruits of the Spirit” in every one that is born of the Spirit.

Would we know what the marks of the new birth are?—We shall find them already written for our learning in the First Epistle of John. The man born of God “believes that Jesus is the Christ,”—“does not commit sin,”—“does righteousness,”—“loves the brethren,”—“overcomes the world,”—“keeps himself from the wicked one.” This is the man born of the Spirit! Where these fruits are to be seen, there is the new birth of which our Lord is speaking. He that lacks these marks, is yet dead in trespasses and sins. (1 John v. 1; iii. 9; ii. 29; iii. 14; v. 4; v. 18.)

And now let us solemnly ask ourselves whether we know anything of the mighty change of which we have been reading? Have we been born again? Can any marks of the new birth be seen in us? Can the sound of the Spirit be heard in our daily conversation? Is the image and superscription of the Spirit to be discerned in our lives?—Happy is the man who can give satisfactory answers to these questions! A day will come when those who are not born again will wish that they had never been born at all.

NOTES. JOHN III. 1—8.

1.—[*There was a man, etc.*] The close connection of the conversation between Christ and Nicodemus with the end of the preceding chapter ought to be carefully noted. In fact the original Greek contains a connecting particle, which our translators have omitted to express in our version. The chapter should begin, “And there was a man,” or, “Now there was a man.”—The conversation took place when our Lord “was in Jerusalem,” at the time of the Passover. Nicodemus was one of those who “saw the miracles which Jesus did,” and was so much struck by what he saw, that he sought out our Lord in order to converse with Him.

[*Of the Pharisees.*] The striking variety of character in those who were brought to believe on Christ while He was on earth, ought not to be overlooked. His disciples were not drawn exclusively from any one class. As a general rule, none were more bitterly opposed to Him and His doctrines than the Pharisees. Yet here we see that nothing is impossible with grace. Even a Pharisee became an inquirer, and ultimately a disciple! Nicodemus and St. Paul are standing proofs that no heart is too hard to be converted. The third chapter shows us Jesus teaching a proud, moral Pharisee. The fourth will show Him teaching an ignorant, immoral Samaritan woman. None are too bad to be taught by Christ.

[*A ruler of the Jews.*] The civil government of the Jews at this time, we must remember, was in the hands of the Romans. When Nicodemus is called “a ruler,” it means that he was a chief person among the Jews, probably in high ecclesiastical position, and certainly a famous religious teacher. See v. 10.

2.—[*The same came... by night.*] The fact here recorded appears to me to show that Nicodemus was influenced by the fear of man, and was afraid or ashamed to visit Jesus by day.—The view maintained by some, that we ought not to blame him for coming by night, because it was the quietest time for conversation, and the time when an interview was least liable to be interrupted, or because the Jewish teachers were in the habit of receiving inquirers by night, appears to me undeserving of attention. I am confirmed in this opinion by the fact, that on the only other occasions where Nicodemus is mentioned he is specially described as the man who “came to Jesus by night.” This repeated expression appears to me to imply blame. (John vii. 50: xix. 39.)

How anyone can waste time, as some famous commentators do, in speculating how the conversation between Christ and Nicodemus was reported, is to my mind perfectly astonishing. To hint, as one has done, that Jesus must have told St. John about the conversation afterwards, or that St. John must have been present, appears to me to strike a blow at the very root of inspiration. Both here and elsewhere, frequently, St. John describes things which he only knew by the direct inspiration of the Holy Ghost.

[I do not believe it is “a blow” to “inspiration” to believe that the Apostle John might have been a witness to this meeting, or told of it by the Lord, or told by Nicodemus who became a disciple, and then be inspired by the Holy Spirit to report what he had seen or been told in exactly the words God wanted him to write. See Luke 1:1-4. Editor, Evangelical Tracts, July 2009AD.]

[*Rabbi.*] This expression was a name of dignity among the Hebrews, signifying Doctor or Master. Cruden says that the name came originally from the Chaldees, and that it was not used before the time of captivity, except in describing the officers of the Kings of Assyria and Babylon. Thus we find the names of Rab-saris and Rab-shakeh. (2 Kings xviii. 17.) The use of the word here by Nicodemus, was intended to mark his respect for our Lord.

[*We know.*] Different reasons have been assigned for Nicodemus’ use of the plural number in this place. Whom did he mean when he said “we”? Some say that he meant himself and many of his brethren among the Pharisees.—Some say that he meant himself and the secret

believers of all classes mentioned at the end of the last chapter.—Some say, as Lightfoot, that he meant no one in particular, but used the plural for the singular, according to an idiom common in all languages. He only meant, “It is commonly known.”—I venture the suggestion, that Nicodemus probably used the plural number intentionally, on account of its vagueness, and avoided the singular number from motives of caution, that he might not commit himself too much. Even at the present day people will talk of “we” in religion, long before they will talk of “I.”—Weak faith strives to be hid in a crowd.

[*Thou art a teacher come from God.*] This cautious sentence is an instructive indication of the state of Nicodemus’ mind. He was naturally, a timid, hesitating, slow-moving man. That Jesus was somebody remarkable, he was convinced by His miracles. That He might possibly be the Messiah, had probably crossed his mind, and the more so because he doubtless knew of the ministry of John the Baptist, and had heard that John spake of one greater than himself who was yet to come. But until he can make out more about Jesus, by private conversation, he declines to commit himself to any stronger statement than that before us. The Greek words would be more literally rendered, “From God thou hast come a teacher.”

Lightfoot thinks that Nicodemus here refers to the long cessation of prophecy, which had now lasted for four hundred years. During this long period no one had appeared from God to teach the once-favoured Jewish nation, as the prophets did of old. But now, he seems to say, “Thou hast appeared, as the prophets did in former times, to teach us.”

[*No man can do these miracles...with him.*] This sentence has been justly called an illustration of one great purpose of our Lord’s miracles. They arrested men’s attention. They were evidences of a divine mission. They showed that He who wrought them was no ordinary Person, and ought to be listened to.

I am aware that some have thought that Nicodemus attached too much weight to our Lord’s miracles, and have boldly asserted that miracles are no necessary proof of a divine mission, seeing that Antichrist will appear with signs and lying wonders. (2 Thess. ii. 9; Rev. xiii. 14.) In reply it might be sufficient to remark that our Lord Himself declared that “His works bore witness that the Father had sent Him.” (John v. 36; x. 25; xv. 24.) But I also think that sufficient stress is not laid on the expression, “These miracles that thou doest.” The character and quality of our Lord’s miracles were such as to prove His divine commission. False teachers and Antichrists may be permitted to work some miracles, like the magicians who withstood Moses. But there is a point beyond which Antichrist and his servants cannot go. Such miracles as our Lord worked could only be wrought by the finger of God. I therefore think that Nicodemus’ argument was just and correct.—It is moreover worthy of note that the expression he uses is precisely the same as that used by St. Peter when describing our Lord’s ministry and miracles. He says, “God was with Him.” (Acts x. 38.)

The expression, “God being with a man,” is a common phrase in the Scriptures, denoting the possession of certain special gifts or graces from God, beyond those ordinarily given to men. Thus 1 Sam. xvi. 18; iii. 19; and xviii. 12–14.

3.—[*Jesus answered.*] The question has often been asked, “To what did our Lord answer?” No question was put to Him. What is the connecting link between the words of Nicodemus, and the solemn statement contained in the first words which our Lord addressed to him?

I believe the true reply to these questions is, that our Lord, as on many other occasions, made answer according to what He saw going on in Nicodemus’ heart. He knew that the inquirer before Him, like all the Jews, was expecting the appearance of Messiah, and was even suspecting that he had found Him. He therefore begins, by telling him at once what was absolutely needful if he would belong to Messiah’s kingdom. It was not a temporal kingdom, as he vainly supposed, but a spiritual one. It was not a kingdom, in which all persons born of the

seed of Abraham, would, as a matter of course, have a place because of their birth. It was a kingdom in which grace, not blood, was the indispensable condition of admission. The first thing needful in order to belong to Messiah's kingdom, was to be "born again." Men must renounce all idea of privileges by reason of their natural birth. All men, whether Jews or Gentiles, must be born again, born anew, born from above by a spiritual birth."—"Nicodemus," our Lord seems to say, "If you want to know how a man is to become a member of Messiah's kingdom, understand this day, that the first step is to be born again. Think not because Abraham is your father that Messiah will acknowledge you as one of His subjects. I tell you at once, that the first thing you and all other men need is a new birth."

I am quite aware that several other explanations have been given of the link between Nicodemus' remark and our Lord's opening assertion. I will only say, that the one I have given appears to me by far the simplest and most satisfactory.

[*Verily, verily, I say unto thee.*] This expression, which is peculiar to St. John's Gospel, has been already commented on. (John i. 51.) But it is useful to remark, in considering the verse before us, that the phrase is never used except in connection with some statement of great importance and solemnity.

[*Except a man.*] The Greek word which our version has rendered "a man," would be more literally translated, "any one," or "any person." The change called the "new birth," our Lord would have us know, is of universal necessity. Nobody can be saved without it.

[*Born again.*] The Greek word here rendered "again," might be translated with equal correctness, "from above: *i.e.*, from heaven, or from God. It is so translated in this chapter (verse 31), and in four other places in the New Testament. (John xix. 11; James i. 17; iii. 15, 17.) In one other place, (Gal. iv. 9), it is "again." Many commentators in every age, as Origen, Cyril, Theophylact, Bullinger, Lightfoot, Erasmus, Bengel, have maintained strongly, that "born from above," and not "born again," is the true and better translation of the phrase. Cranmer's version renders it "born from above," and our own translators have allowed it in a marginal reading. My own impression agrees with that of most commentators, that "born again" is the right translation.—For one thing, it seems most probable that Nicodemus understood our Lord to mean "born again," or else he would hardly have asked the question, "Can a man enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?"—For another thing, the Greek words used in four other places where regeneration is spoken of in the New Testament, admit of no other meaning than being "born again," and could not possibly be rendered "born from above." See 1 Pet. i. 3, 23; Matt. xix. 28; Titus iii. 5.

The point is happily not one of importance, and men may agree to differ about it, if they cannot convince one another. Every true Christian is undoubtedly "born from above" by the quickening power of God in heaven, as well as "born again" by a second spiritual birth.

The meaning of our Lord when He said, "Except a man be born again," is unhappily a subject on which there is a wide difference of opinion in the Church of Christ.—The expression at any rate cannot be said to stand alone. It is used six times in the Gospel of St. John, once in the first Epistle of St. Peter, and six times in the first Epistle of St. John. (John i. 13; iii. 3, 5, 6, 7, 8; 1 Peter i. 23; 1 John ii. 29; iii. 9; iv. 7; v. 1, 4, 18.) Common sense and fair interpretation of language, point out that "born again, born of the Spirit, and born of God, are expressions so intimately connected with one another, that they mean one and the same thing. The only question is, "What do they mean?"

Some think that to be "born again," means nothing more than "an outward reformation, or such outward conformity as a proselyte might yield to a new set of rules of life."—This is an almost obsolete and utterly unsatisfactory interpretation. It makes our Lord tell Nicodemus nothing more than he might have learned from heathen philosophers,—such as Socrates, Plato,

or Aristotle; or than he might have heard from any Rabbi about the duties of a proselyte from heathenism to Judaism.

Some think that to be “born again,” means to be admitted into the Church of Christ by baptism, and to receive a spiritual change of heart inseparably connected with baptism.—This again is an unsatisfactory interpretation. For one thing, it seems improbable, that the first truth which our Lord would propound to an inquiring Pharisee, would be the necessity of baptism. He certainly never did so on any other occasion.—For another thing, if our Lord only meant baptism, it is difficult to account for the astonishment and perplexity which Nicodemus expressed on hearing our Lord’s words. Baptism was not a thing with which a Pharisee was unacquainted. In the Jewish Church proselytes were baptized.—Last, but not least, it is clear from St. John’s first Epistle, that to be “born again, born of the Spirit, or born of God,” means something much greater than baptism. The picture which the Apostle there gives of the man who is “born of God,” could certainly not be given of the man who is baptized.

The true view of the expression I believe to be this. Being “born again,” means that complete change of heart and character which is produced in a man by the Holy Ghost, when he repents, believes on Christ, and becomes a true Christian. It is a change which is frequently spoken of in the Bible. In Ezekiel it is called “taking away the stony heart and giving a heart of flesh,”—“giving a new heart, and putting within a new spirit.” (Ezek. xi. 19; xxxvi. 26.) In Acts it is called “repentance and conversion.” (Acts iii. 19.) In Romans it is called “being alive from the dead.” (Rom. vi. 13.) In Corinthians it is called “being a new creature.” (2 Cor. v. 17.) In Ephesians it is called “being quickened.” (Ephes. ii. 1.) In Colossians it is called “putting off the old man and putting on the new.” (Coloss. iii. 9, 10.) In Titus it is called the “washing of regeneration.” (Titus iii. 5.) In Peter it is called “being called out of darkness into light,” and being “made partaker of the Divine Nature.” (1 Peter ii. 9; 2 Peter i. 4.) In John it is called “passing from death to life.” (1 John iii. 14.) I believe that all these expressions come to the same thing in the end. They are all the same truth, only viewed from different sides. They all mean that mighty inward change of heart which our Lord here calls a “new birth,” and which John the Baptist foretold would specially characterize Messiah’s kingdom. He was to baptize not with water, but with the Holy Ghost. Our Lord begins His address to Nicodemus by taking up his forerunner’s prediction: He tells him that he must be “born again” or baptized with the Spirit.—Human nature is so entirely corrupt, diseased, and ruined by the fall, that all who would be saved must be born again. No lesser change will suffice. They need nothing less than a new birth.

[*He cannot see.*] This expression has received two interpretations. Some think that it means, “He cannot understand, or comprehend.” Others think that it means, “He cannot enter, enjoy, partake of, or possess.” The last I believe to be the true meaning of the expression. The first is truth, but not the truth of the text. The second is confirmed by the language used in the fifth verse, and is a common form of speech of which there are many instances in the Bible. Thus we find to “see life” (John iii. 36),—to “see corruption” (Psalm xvi. 10),—to “see death” (John viii. 51),—to “see evil” (Psalm xc. 15),—to “see sorrow.” (Rev. xviii. 7.)

[*The kingdom of God.*] This expression means that spiritual kingdom which Messiah came into the world to set up, and of which all believers are the subjects,—the kingdom which is now small, and weak, and despised, but which shall be great and glorious at the second advent. Our Lord declares that no man can belong to that kingdom and be one of its subjects, without a new birth. To belong to the covenant of Israel with all its temporal privileges, a man need only be born of Jewish parents. To belong to Messiah’s kingdom, a man must be “born again” of the Spirit, and have a new heart.

Luther's remark on this verse, quoted by Stier, is worth reading. He supposes our Lord to say, "My doctrine is not of doing and of leaving undone, but of being and becoming; so that it is not a new work to be done, but the being new created;—not the living otherwise before the being new born."

The unvarying suitability of our Lord's teaching to the special state of mind of those whom He taught deserves observation. To the young ruler fond of his money, He says, "Sell all and give to the poor."—To the multitude craving food, He says, "Labour not for the meat that perisheth."—To the Samaritan woman coming to draw water, He commends "living water." To the Pharisee proud of his birth, as a son of Abraham, He says, "Ye must be born again." (Luke xviii. 22; John vi. 27; iv. 10.)

- 4.—[*Nicodemus saith...How.*] The question of Nicodemus is precisely one of those which the natural ignorance of man in spiritual things prompts a person to ask. Just as the Samaritan woman, in the 4th chapter, put a carnal meaning on our Lord's words about "living water," and the Jews, in the 6th chapter, put a carnal meaning on the "bread of God," so Nicodemus puts a carnal meaning on the expression "born again."—There is nothing which the heart of man in every part and every age of the world is so slow to understand as the work of the Holy Ghost. Our minds are so gross and sensuous, that we cannot take in the idea of an inward and spiritual operation. Unless we can see things and touch things in religion we are slow to believe them.

[*When he is old.*] This expression seems to indicate that Nicodemus himself was an old man when this conversation took place. If this be so, it is only fair, in judging his case, to make some allowance for the slowness with which old age receives new opinions, and specially in the things of religion. At the same time it supplies an encouraging proof that no man is too old to be converted. One of our Lord's first converts was an old man!

- 5.—[*Except...born of water and of the Spirit.*] This famous text has unhappily given rise to widely different interpretations. On one thing only respecting it nearly all commentators are agreed. It is the same truth that is laid down in the third verse, only laid down with greater fulness, in compassion to Nicodemus' weakness of understanding. But what does it mean? The expression "born of water" is peculiar to this place, and occurs nowhere else in the Bible. It cannot be literally interpreted. No one can be literally "born of water." What then does the phrase signify? When can it be said of any one, that he is "born of water and of the Spirit"?

The first and commonest interpretation is to refer the text entirely to baptism, and to draw from it the inseparable connection of baptism and spiritual regeneration.—According to this view of the text, our Lord tells Nicodemus that baptism is absolutely necessary to salvation, and is the appointed means of giving new birth to the heart of man. "If you wish to belong to my kingdom, you must be born again, as I have already said; and if you wish to be born again, the only way to obtain this mighty blessing is to be baptized. Except a man be regenerated or born again by baptism, he cannot enter my kingdom." This is the view of the text which is maintained by the Fathers, by the Roman Catholic writers, by the Lutheran commentators, and by many English divines down to the present day. It is a view which is supported by much learning, and by many strange and far-fetched arguments, such as Gen. i. 2. It is, however, a view which to my own mind is utterly unsatisfactory.

The second, and less common interpretation, is to refer the text partly to baptism and partly to that real regeneration of heart, which a man may receive, like the penitent thief, without having been baptized.—According to this view, our Lord tells Nicodemus that a new birth is absolutely necessary to salvation, and that to be baptized, or "born of water," is one of the appointed ways by which regeneration is effected. Those who hold this view deny as stoutly as any that there is any inseparable connection between baptism and regeneration. They hold

that multitudes are “born of water” who are never born of the Spirit. But they maintain that the word “water” must be intended to point us to baptism, and that by the use of the expression, “born of water,” our Lord meant to defend both John’s baptism and His own, and to show their value. This is the view of the text which is maintained by some few of the best Roman Catholic writers, such as Rupertus and Ferus,—by almost all the English Reformers, and by many excellent commentators down to the present day. It is a view, which to my own mind seems not much more satisfactory than the former one, already described, on account of the strange consequences which it involves.

The third, and much the least common interpretation, is to refer the text entirely to the regeneration of man’s heart, and to exclude baptism altogether from any place in it.—According to this view, our Lord explains to Nicodemus, by the use of a figure, what He had meant when He spoke of being “born again.” He would have Nicodemus know that a man must have his heart as thoroughly cleansed and renewed by the Spirit as the body is cleansed and purified by water. He must be born of the Spirit working on his inward nature, as water works on the material body. In short, he must have a “clean heart” created in him, if he would belong to Messiah’s kingdom. Most of those who take this view, consider that baptism was certainly meant to point to the change of heart described in the text, but that this text was meant to point out something distinct from baptism, and even more important than baptism. This is the view which I believe to be the true one, and to which I unhesitatingly adhere.

Those who hold that baptism is not referred to in this text, are undoubtedly a small minority among theologians, but their names are weighty. Among them will be found Calvin, Zwingle, Bullinger, Gualter, Archbishop Whitgift, Bishop Prideaux, Whitaker, Fulke, Poole, Hutcheson, Charnock, Gill, Cartwright, Grotius, Cocceius, Gomarus, Piscator, Rivetus, Chamier, Witsius, Maastricht, Turretin, Lampe, Burkitt, A. Clarke, and, according to Lampe, Wycliffe, Daillé, and Paraeus. —I do not assert this on second-hand information. I have verified the assertion by examining with my own eyes the works of all the authors above-named, excepting the three referred to by Lampe. On the precise meaning of the word “water” they are not agreed. But they all hold that our Lord did not mean baptism when He spoke of being “born of water and the Spirit.”—Dean Alford, I observe, says that the expression “refers to the token, or outward sign of baptism, on any honest interpretation.” How far it is justifiable to use such language about an opinion supported by so many great names, I leave to the reader to decide! Those who wish to see the view of the text which I advocate more fully defended, will find what they want in Lampe’s *Dissertations* and Chamier’s *Panstratia*.

In adhering to a view of this text which is adopted by so few commentators, I feel a natural desire to give the reasons of my opinion at full length, and I think that the importance of the subject in the present day justifies me in doing so. In giving these reasons I must decline entering into questions which are not directly before me. The value of the sacrament of baptism,—the right of infants to baptism,—the true meaning of the Church of England Baptismal Service, are matters which I shall not touch. The meaning of our Lord’s words, “Except a man be born of water and the Spirit,” is the only point to which I shall confine myself. I believe that in using these words our Lord did not refer to baptism, and I think so for the following reasons.

(a) Firstly, there is nothing in the words of the text which necessarily requires to be referred to baptism. “Water,”—“washing,”—and “cleansing” are figurative expressions, frequently used in Scripture, in order to denote a spiritual operation on man’s heart. (See Psa. li. 7–10; Isai xliv. 3; Jer. iv. 14; Ezek. xxxvi. 25; John iv. 10; vii. 38, 39.) The expression, “Born of water and of the Spirit,” is doubtless very peculiar. But it is not more peculiar than the parallel expression, “He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.” (Matt. iii 10.) To ex-

plain this last text by the tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost, is an utterly unsatisfactory interpretation, and confines the fulfilment of a mighty general promise to one single act and one single day. I believe that in each case an element is mentioned in connection with the Spirit, in order to show the nature of the Spirit's operation. Men must be "baptized with the Holy Ghost," purifying their hearts from corruption, as fire purifies metal, and must be "born of the Spirit," cleansing their hearts as water cleanses the body. The use of fire and water as the great instruments of purification, was well known to the Jews. See Num. xxxi. 23, where both are mentioned together. Chrysostom well remarks that "Scripture sometimes connects the grace of the Spirit with fire, and sometimes with water."

(b) Secondly, the assertion that "water" must mean baptism, because baptism is the ordinary means of regeneration, is an assertion utterly destitute of Scriptural proof. It is no doubt written of professing saints and believers, that "they have been buried with Christ in baptism," and that "as many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Rom. vi. 4; Gal. iii. 27.)—But there is not a single text which declares that baptism is the only way by which people are born again. On the contrary, we find two plain texts in which regeneration is distinctly ascribed, not to baptism, but to the Word. (1 Pet. i. 23; James i. 18.) Moreover the case of Simon Magus clearly proves that in apostolic times all persons did not receive grace when they were baptized. St. Peter tells him a very few days after his baptism, "Thou art in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity,—thy heart is not right in the sight of God,—thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter." (Acts viii. 21–23.) The assertion, therefore, that "water" must mean baptism, is a mere gratuitous assumption, and must fall to the ground.

(c) Thirdly, if "water" in the text before us means baptism, it follows as a logical consequence that baptism is absolutely necessary to salvation, and that all who have died unbaptized since these words were spoken, have been lost. The penitent thief was lost on this theory, for he was never baptized! All infants who have died unbaptized have been lost! The whole body of the Quakers, who die in their own communion, are lost! There is no evading this conclusion, unless we adopt the absurd and untenable hypothesis that the kingdom of God in this solemn passage means nothing more than the visible Church. Where our Lord, in declaring a great general truth, makes no exceptions, we have no right to make them. If words mean anything, to refer "water" to baptism excludes unbaptized persons from heaven! And yet there is not another instance in Scripture of an outward ordinance being made absolutely necessary to salvation, and specially an ordinance which a man cannot confer on himself. A new, regenerate heart is undoubtedly necessary to the salvation of every one, without exception, and it is of this only, I believe, that the text before us speaks.

(d) Fourthly, if we accept the theory that baptism is the ordinary means of conveying the grace of regeneration, that all baptized persons are necessarily regenerated, and that all who are "born of water" are at the same time born of the Spirit, we are irresistibly involved in the most dangerous and pernicious consequences.—We pour contempt on the whole work of the Spirit, and on the blessed doctrine of regeneration. We bring into the Church a new and unscriptural kind of new birth, a new birth that cannot be seen by its fruits. We make out that people are "born of God" when they have not one of the marks of regeneration laid down by St. John.—We encourage the rankest antinomianism. We lead people to suppose that they have grace in their hearts while they are servants of sin, and that they have the Holy Spirit within them while they are obeying the lusts of the flesh.—Last, but not least, we pour contempt on the holy sacrament of baptism. We turn it into a mere form, in which faith and prayer have no place at all. We lead people to suppose that it matters nothing in what spirit they bring their children to baptism, and that if water is sprinkled, and certain words are used, an infant is, as a matter of course, born again. Worst of all, we induce people secretly to despise baptism, because we teach them that it always conveys a mighty spiritual blessing, while their own

eyes tell them that in a multitude of cases it does no good at all.—I see no possibility of avoiding these consequences, however little some persons who hold the inseparability of baptism and regeneration may intend them. Happily I have the comfort of thinking that there is an utter want of logic in some hearts which have much grace.

(e) Fifthly, if “born of water and of the Spirit” was meant to teach Nicodemus that baptism is the ordinary means of conveying spiritual regeneration, it is very difficult to understand why our Lord rebuked him for not knowing it. “Knowest thou not these things?” How could he know them? That there was such a thing as baptism, he knew as a Pharisee. But that baptism was the appointed means of conveying “new birth,” he could not know. It was a doctrine nowhere taught in the old Testament. It is a doctrine, on the showing of its own advocates, peculiar to Christianity. And yet Nicodemus is rebuked for not knowing it! To my mind this is inexplicable. The necessity of a thorough change of heart, on the contrary, Nicodemus might have known from the Old Testament Scriptures. And it was for ignorance of this, not for ignorance of baptismal regeneration, that he was rebuked.

(f) Sixthly and lastly, if it be true that “to be born of water” means baptism, and that baptism is the ordinary means of conveying the grace of regeneration, it is most extraordinary that there is so little about baptism in the Epistles of the New Testament. In Romans it is only twice mentioned,—and in 1st Corinthians, seven times.—In Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews, and the 1st Peter we find it named once in each Epistle. In thirteen of the remaining Epistles it is neither named nor referred to. In the two Pastoral Epistles to Timothy, where we might expect something about baptism, if anywhere, there is not a word about it! In the Epistle to Titus the only text that can possibly be applied to baptism is by no means clearly applicable. (Titus iii. 5.) Nor is this all. In the one Epistle which mentions baptism seven times, we find the writer saying that “Christ sent him not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel,” and actually “thanking God,” that he had “baptized none of the Corinthians, save Crispus and Gaius.” (1 Cor. i. 14, 17.) He would surely never have said this, if all whom he baptized were at once born again. Imagine St. Paul saying, “I thank God I regenerated none of you!” Moreover, it is a startling fact, that this very same Apostle, in the very same Epistle, says to these same Corinthians, “I have begotten you through the Gospel.” (1 Cor. iv. 14.) My deliberate conviction is, that St. Paul would never have written these sentences if he had believed that the only way to be born of the Spirit was to be baptized.

I give these reasons with a sorrowful feeling that to many they are given in vain. But I have felt it due to myself, in maintaining an opinion about a most important text which is not commonly held, to state fully my reasons, and to show that my opinion is not lightly maintained.

Before leaving this subject, I think it right, in self-defence, to say something about the fact, that the view I maintain is not held by the great majority of commentators. This fact undoubtedly calls for some explanation.

With regard to the Fathers, no one can read their writings without seeing that they were fallible men. On no point does their weakness appear so strongly as in their language about the sacraments. The man who intends to abide by all the opinions of the Fathers about the sacraments, will have to swallow a great deal. After all, the very earliest Father, whose commentary on St. John’s Gospel is extant is Origen, who died in 253, A.D. The true view of the text before us, might easily be lost in the period of at least 150 years between Origen’s day and the days of St. John. Tertullian incidentally applies the text before us to baptism, in one of his writings. But even he was not born till 160, A.D., at least two generations after St. John’s time.

With regard to the Lutheran writers, their avowed opinions upon the sacraments make their interpretations of the text before us of little weight. They have a peculiar sacramental theory to maintain when they expound Scripture, and to that theory they steadfastly adhere. Yet even

Brentius on this text confesses that the baptism here signified by “water,” means something much more than the sacrament of baptism, and includes the whole doctrine of the Gospel.—The Roman Catholic commentators are of course even more fettered in their views of the sacraments than the Lutherans, and hardly call for any remark. Their constant endeavour in expounding Scripture, is to maintain the sacramental system of their own Church, and a text like that before us is unhesitatingly applied to baptism.

With regard to our own English Reformers and their immediate successors, their opinions about a text like this are perhaps less valuable than upon any subject. They always display an excessive anxiety to agree with the Fathers. They were anxious in every way to conciliate opponents, and to support their own Protestantism by appeals to primitive antiquity. When, therefore, they saw that the Fathers referred the text before us to baptism, and that at best the point was doubtful, we cannot wonder that they held, that to be “born of water” was to be baptized. Yet even they seem not unanimous on the point; and Latimer’s well-known assertion, that “to be christened with water is not regeneration,” must not be forgotten.—The famous remarks of Hooker, which are so frequently thrown in the teeth of those who take the view of “water and the Spirit,” which I do, are a curious instance of the coolness with which a great man can sometimes draw an illogical conclusion in his own favour, from some broad general premise. He lays down the general principle, that “when a literal construction of a text will stand, that furthest from the letter is commonly the worst.” He then proceeds to take it for granted, that to interpret “born of water” of baptism is the literal construction of the text now before us. Unfortunately this is precisely the point that I for one do not concede; and his conclusion is consequently, to my mind, worthless. Moreover when we talk of a “literal” sense, there must evidently be some limit to it. If not, we cannot answer the Roman Catholic when he proves transubstantiation from the words, “This is my body.”

I believe that for a true and sound exposition of the text before us we must look to the Puritans and Dutch divines of the seventeenth century. It was necessary for men to be a generation further off from Romanism before they were able to give a dispassionate opinion about such a text as this. The early Protestants did not see the consequences of the language they sometimes used about baptism with sufficient clearness. Otherwise, I believe they would not have written about it as they did. To any one who asks for a specimen of the 17th century divinity, I would say that one of the simplest and best statements of the true meaning of the text before us will be found in Poole’s Annotations.

In leaving the whole subject, there is one fact which I think deserves very serious consideration. Those Churches of Christendom at the present day which distinctly maintain that all baptized persons are born of the Spirit, are, as a general rule, the most corrupt Churches in the world. Those bodies of Christians on the other hand, which deny the inseparable connection of baptism and the new birth, are precisely those bodies which are most pure in faith and practice, and do most for the extension of the Gospel in the world. This is a great fact which ought not to be forgotten.

- 6.—[*That which is born... flesh...spirit.*] In this verse, our Lord gives Nicodemus the reason why the change of heart called “new birth,” is a thing of such absolute necessity, and why no slight moral change will suffice. Nicodemus had spoken of “entering a second time into his mother’s womb.” Our Lord tells him that even if such a thing was possible it would not make him fit for the kingdom of God. The child of human parents would always be like the parents from which it sprung, if it was born a hundred times over. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” All men and women are by nature corrupt, sinful, fleshly, and alienated from God. “They that are in the flesh cannot please God.” (Rom. viii. 8.) Their children will always be born with a nature like that of their parents. To bring a clean thing out of an unclean is proverbially im-

possible. A bramble will never bear grapes, however much it may be cultivated, and a natural man will never be a godly man without the Spirit. In order to be really spiritual and fit for the kingdom of God, a new power from without must enter into a man's nature. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

The sentence is undoubtedly very elliptical, and expressed in abstract terms. It is like St. Paul's words, "The carnal mind is enmity against God." (Rom. viii. 7.) But the general meaning is unmistakable. Human nature is so utterly fallen, corrupt, and carnal, that nothing can come from it by natural generation, but a fallen, corrupt, and carnal offspring. There is no self-curative power in man. He will always go on reproducing himself. To become spiritual and fit for communion with God, nothing less is required than the entrance of the Spirit of God into our hearts. In one word, we must have that new birth of the Spirit which our Lord twice described to Nicodemus.

The word "flesh," I am inclined to think, with Poole and Dyke, is taken in two senses in this verse. In the first case, it means the natural body of man, as in John i. 14. In the second case, it means the corrupt carnal nature of man, as in Gal. v. 17.—The same remark applies to the word Spirit. In the first instance it means the Holy Spirit, and in the second, the spiritual nature which the Spirit produces. The offspring of all children of Adam is fleshly. The offspring of the Spirit is spiritual. Neither the grace, nor rank, nor money, nor learning of parents will prevent a child having a corrupt heart, if it is naturally born of the flesh. Nothing will make any one spiritual but being born again of the Spirit.

It must be carefully remembered, in considering this verse, that it cannot be applied to the human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though He had a true body like our own, He was not "born of the flesh" as we are, by natural generation, but conceived by the miraculous operation of the Holy Ghost.

7.—[*Marvel not ..must be born again.*] In reading this verse, the stress ought to be laid on the two last words, "born again." It is evident that the thing which stumbled Nicodemus was the idea of any "new birth" at all being necessary. He felt unable to understand what this "new birth" was. Our Lord forbids him to marvel, and proceeds to explain the new birth by a familiar illustration.

It is a noteworthy and striking fact, that no doctrine has excited such surprise in every age of the Church, and has called forth so much opposition from the great and learned, as this very doctrine of the new birth. The men of the present day who sneer at conversions and revivals, as fanaticism and enthusiasm, are no-wise better than Nicodemus. Like him, they expose their own entire ignorance of the work of the Holy Ghost.

8.—[*The wind bloweth, etc.*] The object of this verse appears to be to explain the work of the Holy Ghost in the regeneration of man, by a familiar illustration drawn from the wind. Mysterious as the Spirit's work was, Nicodemus must allow that there was much of mystery about the wind. "The wind bloweth where it listeth." We cannot account for the direction in which it blows, or for the beginning or extent of its influence. But when we hear the sound of the wind, we do not for a moment question that it is blowing. Our Lord tells Nicodemus that it is just the same with the operations of the Spirit. There is doubtless much about them that is mysterious and incomprehensible. But when we see fruit brought forth, in a manifest change of heart and life, we have no right to question the reality of the Spirit's operations.

The last clause of the verse is undeniably somewhat difficult, —"So is every one that is born of the Spirit." We should rather have expected, "So does the spirit operate on every one that is born again." And this was, no doubt, our Lord's meaning. Yet the form of speech which our Lord uses is not altogether without parallel in the New Testament. For instance, we read, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed." (Matt. xiii. 24.) The

likeness in this case is clearly not between the man and the kingdom. The meaning is that the whole story is an illustration of the kingdom of heaven. So also we read that “the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman seeking goodly pearls,” and might make a similar remark. (Matt. xiii. 45.)

The Greek word translated “wind,” at the beginning of this verse, might be rendered with equal correctness, “the Spirit.” Many think, as Origen, Augustine, Rupertus, Bengel, Schottgen, Ambrose, Jansenius, Wycliffe’s Version, Bucer, and Bede, that it ought to be so rendered. They deny that our Lord brought in the idea of “the wind” at all. They object to it being said of the wind that “it listeth,” and say that the expression cannot be applied to any but a person.

This notion seems to me, as it does to the great majority of commentators, entirely untenable. For one thing, it creates great awkwardness to make a comparison between the Spirit and the work of the Spirit, which we must do if this theory is correct. “The Spirit bloweth,—and so is every one born of the Spirit!”—For another thing, it seems to me very strange to speak of the Holy Ghost as “blowing,” and to speak of the “sound,” of the Holy Ghost, or of that “sound” being heard by Nicodemus.

I can see no difficulty whatever in the expression, “The wind bloweth where it listeth.” It is common in the Bible to personify unintelligent things, and to speak of them as having mind and will. Thus our Lord speaks of the “stones crying out.” (Luke xix. 40.) And the Psalmist says, “The sun knoweth his going down.” (Psalm civ. 19.) See also Job xxxvii. 8, 35.—In addition to this, I see a peculiar beauty in the selection of the wind as an illustration of the work of the Spirit. Not only is the illustration most apt and striking, but it is one which is used in other places in Scripture. See for instance, in the vision of the dry bones, how Ezekiel cries to the “wind” to breathe on the slain. (Ezek. xxxvii. 9.) See also Cant. iv. 16, and Acts ii. 2.—Last, but not least, it seems to me, that Nicodemus’ state of perplexity makes it highly probable that our Lord would graciously help his ignorance by the use of a familiar illustration, like that of the wind. If no illustration at all was used in this verse, it is not quite easy to see how its language would help Nicodemus to understand the doctrine of the new birth.—But if the verse contains a familiar illustration, the whole purpose of our Lord in saying what He did becomes clear and plain.