

THE NEW BIRTH AND THE CONVERSATION WITH NICODEMUS.

BY REV. R. E. NEIGHBOR, INDIANAPOLIS, IND.

It is worth noting that Jesus was content to merely state the *fact* of the new birth. He did not argue it. In this He showed His wisdom; on the other hand, we in doing so probably manifest our folly. For the new birth is in its very nature an *ultimate* fact of God in His action on the human soul. It lies in the region of the experience and not in the region of the understanding. It, therefore, lies necessarily beyond our ability to explain—which is what Jesus did not attempt to do.

The new birth, after all discussion of it, is simply the fact of a divine life in the soul of man. But the nature of LIFE, even in its lower kinds, is the unsolved, and probably the unsolvable, problem of the biologists. None of us know what Life *is*. We can tell a good many things about it; we can observe and study its various manifestations; but we have not yet entered, and presumably we never shall enter, into its secret chambers and resolve its mystery. And such is likewise the mystery of spiritual life. Its origin and nature—how it begins and what it is in its essence—lie beyond us. The spiritual life is as non-understandable as, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the name we give to the impenetrable mystery of the mode of the divine existence. All our rationalizing on either theme is necessarily irrational, for we can know nothing of either beyond the facts themselves. And neither of these facts have we discovered; both have been revealed.

The fact, however, is *certain* because revealed. Beyond the blossom and fragrance of the flower, and beyond the foliage and fruit of the tree, we know that there must be the plant-life; behind the varied activities and changing manifestations of the animal world we know that there

must be the animal life; and behind both of them GOD. Of this we are sure. But that is all of which we can be sure. For life itself, both in its beginnings and its processes, is as inscrutable as the midnight darkness. The theologian is precisely as helpless as the biologist.

So I say Jesus did not, in this matter, give us a theology, but a religion. We, on the contrary, are constantly tempted to sacrifice religion in the interests, or the supposed interests, of our theology. Jesus cared little for mere orthodoxy; we are making it ever a chief concern.

Let us now note that this teaching of Jesus in His conversation with Nicodemus is in true accord with modern science. As in nature there would be no such thing as verdure clothing the barren earth with beauty in the year's springtime, except as the result of a life-energy that defies analysis and which no man can create in his laboratory or anywhere else, so there can be, Jesus asserts, no harmonization of a man's conduct and moral career with those truths, principles, facts, and issues which we have in mind when we speak of the Kingdom of God as established on earth, apart from the possession by him of that spiritual life which, He also says, is the immediate impartation or creation of the Divine Spirit. In the language of the apostle Paul the "eternal life" is the "gift of God," in which statement, be it noted, his thought concerns itself not only with the freeness of the gift but with its *source*. It is the divine Life in the disciple that is ever energizing in him and redeeming him, if he be redeemed at all. And it is nothing other than that. When Paul is accounting for his extraordinary career as an apostle of Christ, he does so by saying that "the love of Christ constrained him," *i. e.*: that the same divine love which was in Christ and which made His life unique with the uniqueness of divinity, was the all-controlling force in himself also—which was only saying in another way what Jesus said to Nicodemus, *viz.*: that the Christian life in its origin, progress, and consummation

is nothing other than the life of God in the soul of man. The energy which carries it through from origin to end, is the energy of LIFE—spiritual, divine life. The mystery of the new birth is thus the mystery of the perpetual re-incarnation of the Divine. But you can no more understand its *method* than you can the conception of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin. Both come under one and the same category—the power of the Highest that overshadows.

You can not explain its rationale any more than you can explain the process by which life, seizing upon the human embryo, produces in the course of fifty or sixty years a Gladstone or a Cavour. But it is quite true that whether it be a Gladstone or a Cavour, a Jonathan Edwards or a Jerry McAuley, the creative life-energy in each of them is GOD—human life in the one case, spiritual life in the other, and both from Himself. “Marvel not that I said unto thee: Ye must be born again,” i. e., born from above or born of *God*.

* * * * *

Nevertheless we are quite astray when we suppose that the supernaturalism which thus inheres in the new birth, interferes in the least with the freedom of our activities or relieves us of personal responsibilities. The farmer plows and sows and cultivates his fields; he pays attention to the changing seasons of the year; he studies the nature of the soils on his farm; and he brings all this knowledge and skill to bear on the various problems of his industry; and as a result he reaps his harvests and adds to his wealth. And he does all this as if there were no God at all. In like manner in the domain of religion, men may repent and believe the gospel and accept the salvation which is freely offered in Christ, and yet remain wholly unconscious of any operation of the Divine Spirit on their minds and hearts. It is not necessary that we should all know even that there is a Holy Spirit in order to His action on our souls. Thank God for that!

In fact, like the twelve men of Ephesus, and most of the saints of the Old Testament, and like the converted little child of today, one may not so much as know "whether there be any Holy Ghost." One does not need to be a botanist to know an apple when he sees it, or to enjoy it when he eats it. Fortunate indeed it is that the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration does not depend upon, nor synchronize with, our knowledge of the Holy Spirit—any more than the blowing of the wind depends upon the science of meteorology or on the Weather Bureau in Washington. It is true that what we call the new birth is entirely the *opus* of God Himself, but the *modus operandi*, because it is His, may lie quite beyond our consciousness of whose it is, just as the thing itself lies beyond the range of our vision and the manipulation of our hands—or of his who may be the subject of it—as far as the springing up of the seed lies beyond the farmer's. The new birth is God's own act, and, therefore, is to us inscrutable. And that makes all theologizing about it well-nigh an impertinence. All you can say about it is that it stands for the origination of that spiritual life in the human soul which accounts for all a man distinctively is or becomes when fitted in character for membership in the Kingdom of Heaven—vegetable *life* in the botanical kingdom, animal *life* in the world of brute creation, spiritual *life* in whoever may be the children of God.

In the allusion of Jesus to the wind that "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," I do not think He refers either to the mystery or to the freedom of the Spirit's action in the new birth, but rather—as attention to the grammar of the sentence will show—to the independent and unconventional character of the conduct of the man who has been Spirit-born, and who thereafter is Spirit-filled and Spirit-led. Such a man will not consent to run in the well-oiled grooves of social

conventions, ecclesiastical formulas, and church programs as matters of dictation by authorities not Spirit-directed. Possibly a good many very nice people in Jerusalem and Judea were shocked by the coarse raiment of camel's hair and the leather girdle of John the Baptist and by his diet of locusts and wild honey, but social conventions could not hold in fetters a man of his type and spiritual independence; and can you imagine what would happen if the prophet Elijah, or even Peter or Paul, or even the gentle John (was he indeed so very gentle?), should come into one of our Sabbath congregations to conduct the service of public worship and to preach the sermon as the spokesman of the Master, and a "program" were handed him with the request that he conduct the service as pre-arranged and *a la mode*? I think possibly he might, but I am also quite sure that he might not. Nicodemus and his class were trained to recognize, and almost to venerate, as sacred the religious conventions, ecclesiastical customs and regulations, and the rabbinical rules of their people, all of which were so alien to the spirit of freedom—free life, free movement, and free service—characteristic of the Kingdom of Heaven. The first assertion of Christ as to a man's relation to that Kingdom is that to "see" it, *i. e.*, to understand and appreciate it, and to "enter" into it as becoming an active participant of it, he must first be Spirit-born; and then second, being in it, he will be Spirit-guided—or indeed, if you please, Spirit-driven, as is written of Jesus Himself. (See Mark 1:12.) Such a man will neither be restrained nor compelled by rules, formulas, and programs made for him by some more or less alien authority, but will be impelled by the free spirit of God which is in him, as the ship at sea by God's free wind fills its sails, or by the engines that throb in its interior.

* * * * *

As to the statement "born of water and of the Spirit," I frankly confess that I do not know what Jesus may have

meant by it; nor do I think we have sufficient or any data for determining with precision what He intended to be understood by it. The report of the conversation which has come down to us is exceedingly brief, and it makes clear only those points in it which it would always be important for us to know. All else lies in greater or less obscurity. I have seen no explanations which to my mind were quite satisfactory. That which takes the reference to be to physical birth would seem puerile, unless we may suppose it to have been suggested by Nicodemus' own remark as to the possibility of entering a second time into one's mother's womb and being born, while that which identifies it with the forgiveness of sin is supported by an array of texts and Scripture metaphors which, I venture to say, would never have been thought of as affording a clue to the meaning of these words except for the pressure of a determination to get *some* meaning either out of them or into them. If the "born of water" means forgiveness, and the "born of the Spirit" means the creation of a new, *i. e.*, a spiritual life in the soul, it might perhaps then be asked (1) whether we ought not rather in speaking of "twice-born men" to say "thrice-born," *viz.*: those physically born, then afterwards born in the act of forgiveness, and then once more born in their regeneration by the Spirit; and also (2) whether one can repent of sin as the condition of being forgiven unless he have already received that new nature which is supposed to be the result of being born of the Spirit, and out of which new nature (as the Prayer Book says), "all good words do proceed," and yet again (3) whether, if there be this double or two-fold birth—one in forgiveness and the other in regeneration—we are to understand that there is, or may be, a movement of the soul in the direction of its salvation which is prior to, and independent of, any divine life in the soul, this divine life being due to the agency of the Holy Spirit?

I cannot but think that by all such exegesis and argumentations as these we simply flounder around in a Serbonian bog of theological metaphysics instead of gratefully accepting what is really a very joyous fact, viz., that in every movement of our souls God-wards, in every act of our Christian life, in our several repentances and our faith, in the trials that discipline us and in the moral victories we achieve, in the service we render and the harvests we garner, GOD is always working in us to will and to do of His good pleasure. The fact is simple enough, however unexplainable in origin and process. The new birth is the life-energy of God manifesting itself under its own laws in the regeneration and redemption of men, and its parable we have in the life-forces of the physical world. It is I who repent, it is I who believe, it is I who battle with sin, it is I who follow Christ—just as though I were alone in it all; yet it is not I after all who do these things but the Christ who dwelleth in me by His Spirit and who is interpenetrating my life with His own.

This to me is the unspeakably precious paradox of the New Testament. It is also the unspeakably precious significance of this revelation by Jesus of the mystery of the new birth from above. It is His own divine life underlying and interfusing my own life in an undistinguishable oneness. It is true that He speaks here, however, only of the beginning of the process, and not of its continuance and ultimate issues. Yet in postulating *life*, whether in nature or in the human soul's redemption from sin, all else within the limits of that life's own laws, is made possible. And may we not add, probable?

* * * * *

To put the matter now in another form. It cannot be supposed for a moment that Jesus did not deal with the utmost candor and frankness with His visitor on that eventful night when He, the young Rabbi from Nazareth, and the scholarly "teacher in Israel," thoughtful and mature in mind, sat and talked together under the stars;

or that He did not sincerely endeavor to put the momentous truth before his mind in such a form as that he could but apprehend it if he would. And we have reason to believe that Nicodemus was sincerely anxious to apprehend it if he could. What, therefore, would Nicodemus, when he turned his face homeward and resolved in his mind what Jesus had said to him, be obliged to acknowledge in reference to that Kingdom of Heaven which was proclaimed as already "at hand" and into which multitudes were even then pressing, providing that what he had heard that night were true? For what Jesus wanted *him* to learn and which He must have made, before the interview closed, as clear as daylight to his mind, if he were at all disposed to deal with himself honestly, must surely be that which He also wants *us* to learn from the record which has come down to us, whether it be in agreement with the traditional interpretations or otherwise.

First of all then, Nicodemus was proud of his race—as all Jews were. Descended from Abraham, he was a child of the Covenant and the heir of all the privileges of his people. But if what he had heard that night were true, none of these things stood him in the slightest stead so far as that Kingdom of Heaven was concerned which was now declared to be "at hand." He might just as well have been born an alien as born an Israelite. Racial descent made no difference. Privileges of birth there were none. Abrahamic descent counted for naught. He would necessarily understand as much as *that*.

But again. He had been circumcised; and we all know what an emphasis of value the Hebrew placed on this peculiar rite which marked him off from the great Gentile world as one of the Chosen of God. It was the sign of his exclusiveness and the symbol of his superiority. Yet according to what this new Teacher had been telling him, circumcision, not a whit more than Abrahamic lineage, would help him or any one into the heavenly Kingdom. One might just as well be uncircumcised. The doctrine

of a new birth meant that “neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision”—as Paul and many another Nicodemus has had to learn. The new birth put all men on the same footing of spiritual equality, and threw down the wall by which the Hebrew had hedged himself about as a person peculiarly favored of Heaven. In respect to the coming Kingdom which John the Baptist had heralded and which Jesus was preaching, circumcision added nothing whatever to Nicodemus’ chances. Strange and bewildering doctrine! Yet that was what the new birth, or the being “born from above,” must surely involve. He would learn *that* also.

Furthermore, Nicodemus was a good man—a moral man, a man of approved character. He was, in addition to this, a devout man. He had honored the Law, offered the sacrifices, kept the prescribed fasts, attended the Temple or synagogue worship, read and revered the Scriptures as the oracles of God. There was no worthier man than he among his people. His reputation was stainless. As of Nathanael, so of him, it could have been said: “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” But what of it? What did it all signify? Even his religion, and his personal piety and purity, went for nothing—along with his circumcision and Abrahamic lineage—as obtaining for him any access into the Kingdom of Heaven. This Kingdom was evidently an extraordinarily exclusive thing—as exclusive as his circumcision. *Its universality made it exclusive.* This is another of the gospel’s paradoxes, and it is one which it is hard for all the Nicodemuses to understand or acknowledge.

Thus this aged and sincerely-minded man felt one foundation after another broken up from under him, and the result must have been one or the other of two things. He would either by the time he reached home have become angrily hostile to Jesus and all His peculiar teaching, or else he would have begun to realize his utter spiritual poverty and be driven to seek relief from his despair.

To this latter alternative Jesus desired, of course, to bring him. This one teaching of the new birth, and on what I may call its negative side, rendered Nicodemus spiritually helpless—as it does every man.

But it goes even farther in this direction. For as Nicodemus pondered what he had heard, he cannot fail to have understood that some sort of new adjustment was necessitated, and that when it was effected it would mean *a change in himself*. For it was he himself who was to be “born again.” It was himself, notwithstanding his Abrahamic descent, loyalty to the Law, circumcision, and personal piety, who was out of adjustment, and not something or some other than he. The trouble after all, whatever it was, was in *him*, and this was the last place where he would have suspected it to be—as it is with all of us.

And last of all, he would inevitably be impressed with the *radical nature* of the change which had to be made. The metaphor of a “birth” would lead him to see this. For the use of this word in such a connection implied that one had to be made entirely over again, become re-made, to start afresh, to get back to the beginning of things. The requirement of Jesus was not reformation, but regeneration; it was not an anticipation of Sam Jones’ “Quit your meanness!”, but the having a new life in which all meanness is at least an abnormality; it was neither a repairing nor a repainting of the old house, but a taking of it entirely down and the building of a new one on another plan and along new lines and on a grander scale. It was a new “birth.”

This, as before said, is the negative aspect of that teaching of which Jesus gave the positive side when He spoke of the necessity of the birth from above by the Spirit of God. Indeed, the doctrine of the new birth, *i. e.*, of a new divine life in the soul, has many modes of presentation in the New Testament, and it is found in every part of it either expressly or by implication. Nor is it absent from the Old Testament, as is indicated by the in-

quiry of Jesus: "Art thou the Teacher in Israel and knowest not these things?" It is a doctrine that goes to the bottom of things in religion, and no teaching seems to me to be more needed—but particularly by that class in our modern society who are represented by the morally upright and religiously pharisaic Nicodemus. It needs, however, to be presented practically rather than theologically or metaphysically, and with that simplicity of statement which is really quite possible when its presentation is controlled by the practical purpose of our Lord in His far-into-the-night talk with his aged visitor.

* * * * *

The man born again, the man spiritually regenerated, is a new type or kind of man. He finds his proper classification in the Christ-category as a new and distinct product of the divine life-energy. His norm is Christ. He is not, therefore, to be classified with the common order or run of men, *i. e.*, with men unregenerate. The lineage of these traces back to Adam; his to Christ, who (in Pauline phrase) is the "second Adam." He is a *new* creation—something entirely unique, because spiritual, in his characteristics.

Can such a man be—or become? Nature again supplies us with the parable.

In its initial instances Life takes such inorganic substances as are found in the soil and by its own subtile, alchemy re-presents them in the form of a growing plant, so beautiful in its leafage, flower, and fruit that we never stop to think of such unlike things as nitrogen, silicon, lime, and so on. A chemical substance is not a living organism; the plant is. Again, Life takes this plant and, tearing it in pieces, reproduces it in a yet higher form—in that, namely, of a living animal—the horse you drive in your carriage, the bird that wakens you with its song, the physical man that walks past your door. It is all very wonderful—so wonderful that I for my part do not hesitate, when you tell me this is nature, to say: No, super-

nature! It is the mysterious alchemy of LIFE. But once more there is another transformation. The merely psychical man is in turn made the basis or ground of a still higher and nobler life. Life, which in every manifestation of it has its *fons et origo* in God, now appears in its noblest and divinest form. The psychical, or in Bible terms “natural man,” is “born again,” “born from above” (and all life is from above, is it not?); and the result is the pneumatic or spiritual man, the man of the Christ-type and Christ-pattern—the man born of God.

It is all very marvellous—as all life itself is, and we cannot eliminate the marvel of it. We watch it at work under its own laws; we see its results; we note its ascent through various gradations; but what it is in itself and how it begins, who shall explain since the Master of Life did not? Behind it is the infinite GOD—this we know, and it is about all we do know or are likely to know.

But this life of the Spirit must be. “Marvel not that I said unto thee: Ye *must* be born again.” Somehow this manifestation of the life of God, viz.: spiritual life, the Christ-life, *must* link itself with the life of man ere he can enter a new environment in the spiritual Kingdom of God. That is clear. There is such a recognizable necessity in the case as should overcome hesitancy as to the doctrine itself. Nothing is more reasonable, and for that matter, nothing more scientific.