

Christ's Conversation With Nicodemus

by Moses E. Lard

The new birth is a fundamental doctrine of Christianity that refers to the process of being born again, or spiritually reborn, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Scripture: Mark 16:16, John 3:5, James 1:18, 1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 5:1

Topics: "New Birth", "Holy Spirit"

Description

Moses E. Lard preaches on the necessity of the new birth as emphasized by Jesus, stating that without being born of water and of the Spirit, one cannot enter the kingdom of God. He delves into the conversation with Nicodemus to explain the components of the new birth, highlighting the importance of understanding the literal meaning of being born of water and the figurative meaning of being born of the Spirit. Lard challenges the common interpretation of 'wind' in John 3:8, arguing that it should be translated as 'Spirit' to convey the act of speaking by the Holy Spirit. He concludes that being born of water refers to immersion and being begotten by the Spirit signifies believing in Jesus Christ.

Transcript

"Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he can not enter into the kingdom of God."--JOHN III: 5.

It is difficult, if not impossible, in the judgment of most professors, to overestimate the importance of the new birth; and when we reflect on the position assigned it by the Savior, this judgment must be felt to be correct. Without it, no man can enter the kingdom of God. Into that kingdom he may desire to enter, may pray to enter, may even think he has entered; but into it he can never go, without being born again. This determines its value.

Now, in whatever the new birth may consist, whatever processes may be necessary to complete it, no matter how many, nor what its component parts, of one thing I am satisfied: its solution must be sought mainly in a well-conducted analysis of the conversation with Nicodemus. If, on examination, this conversation does not suggest its explanation, I shall despair of ever attaining one. Confirmation from other portions of Holy Writ this explanation may receive; but a solution the new birth itself will not receive. The conversation with Nicodemus is the very soil in which the pearl lies buried. [231]

At once, then, I come to consider the great doctrinal statement, in that conversation, which involves the whole subject. It runs thus: "Except a man be born of water, and of the Spirit, he can not enter into the kingdom of God." This statement I regard as presenting us with a complete view of the new birth, as

informing us in what it consists, as comprehending, in other words, the two grand facts which constitute it. In the declaration, "Except a man be born again he can not see the kingdom of God," the Savior merely, propounds the doctrine of the new birth generally, in a statement of the necessity of it; whereas, in the more elaborate statement, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he can not enter into the kingdom of God," he states definitively in what it consists, reiterating the necessity of it. The former statement propounds the doctrine, the latter statement explains it.

Now, unless it should turn out that the Savior has made provision equally for the salvation of those within and those without the kingdom of God, then the necessity of the new birth becomes absolute and overwhelming. If the blessing of remission of sins be limited to those within the kingdom, then neither flight of fancy nor fertility of imagination can exaggerate the importance of being born again. Should it so happen, moreover, that the Savior has, in the declaration now in hand, afforded us the means of knowing what it is to be born again; if he has put it beyond our power to plead unavoidable ignorance in regard to it, pity, Lord, pity the willful blindness of countless thousands who now call themselves the children of God!

The great statement of which I am now treating naturally distributes itself into two clauses, each clause comprehending an integral part of the new birth, and the two [232] parts exhausting it. These clauses are respectively: born of water, born of the Spirit. I shall now attempt to unfold their meaning at length, and in the order in which they occur.

The first question to be settled, and a most important one, is: In what sense are we to construe the expression, born of water? in a literal or in a figurative sense? This question will, perhaps, be best answered by resolving the expression into the two simple members which compose it, and by examining each of them separately. These members are born of and water. To some this division may seem unnecessarily minute. I do not think it so. By thus breaking down the clause into these two simple verbal members, its subjects come singly into view, by which means each can be subjected to a more severe, because a more distinct, examination.

Upon the import of the expression "born of," which all allow to be metaphorical, there exists, I believe, no diversity of opinion, provided only we can settle definitely the import of the term water. Are we, then, to construe this term in its ordinary and literal acceptation, or in a figurative sense? In the latter sense, respond many. Let us now examine the hypothesis implied in this response, which, being concisely expressed in the form of a proposition, is this: The term water is figurative.

But this proposition is only asserted; it is not proved. Before, therefore, it can justly challenge our assent, it must be supported by relevant and satisfactory testimony. This testimony we have a right to demand, yet it has never been adduced, though the proposition has often been re-asserted. In proving the proposition, we should expect to see a course pursued something like the following: We should expect an accurate analysis of the [233] new birth, in which its constituent parts would all be clearly pointed out; we should expect an orderly enumeration of these parts, each being complete without water; we should expect at least a few apt remarks on the grounds and propriety of using the term water in a figurative sense; we should expect to be shown, with remarkable clearness, what thing the term, in its figurative sense, is intended to denote--precisely what it expresses; we should expect to be then shown that this thing, thus expressed, actually constituted one of the previously enumerated parts of the new birth; and, finally, we should expect the whole argument to be strongly summed up, and the results shown to correspond minutely with the great elementary doctrines of salvation as set forth by Christ and his apostles. But have these reasonable expectations been gratified? They have not.

Here, then, I might, on grounds strictly just, rest for the present the discussion of this proposition. I shall, however, proceed to test its accuracy still further, though, in logical fairness, under no obligation to do so.

The term water is figurative. This is a tough saying. Innumerable have been the efforts which have been made to sustain it; yet not the semblance of success has ever crowned one of them. On all lies the stain of iniquity. What, I am curious to know, has ever put it into any head of man to say of the term, it is figurative? The answer is not difficult. The literal meaning of the term stands against those who have so said; stands against their tenets, and shuts them out of the kingdom of God. Hence to accommodate them it must be figurative. This, and no other, is the answer.

But is the term figurative? Then is it so for sufficient reasons, which being assigned, would account for the fact; [234] and these reasons are discoverable. For if no such reasons exist, then is the term figurative without a reason, which, in the case of a term used by the Savior, is inadmissible; and unless discoverable, though the reasons may exist, the effect is the same with us as though they had no existence. It is presumed, then, that these reasons, unless purely imaginary, will be found in some one or more of the following items:

1. The nature of the case, of the new birth;
2. The laws regulating the use of figurative language; or,
3. The sense resulting from a figurative construction.

First, then, as to the nature of the case. This I conceive to be the ground on which chiefly, if not alone, the figurative construction of the term water is to be defended. For if the nature of the case be such that this term can not be, in a literal acceptance, predicated of it, even in part, then is the figurative construction the alternative we must accept. Are we, then, obliged, by a necessity inherent in the nature of the case, to construe the term water figuratively? If not, then must we construe it ordinarily and literally. Now, if any such inherent necessity exist, it must be owing to the fact that the new birth is, in all its parts and circumstances, complete without water; for, if not thus complete, then we need the term water to express the fact. But before we can infer any thing from the nature of the case, we must, of course, know what the case itself is. Here, now, we encounter a serious difficulty. For, until the import of the term water is settled, the meaning of the new birth remains doubtful. This is one of the terms employed by the Savior to describe the new birth. Until, therefore, we settle its meaning, we remain ignorant to this extent of what the new birth is. Hence from the nature of this thing we can infer nothing. [235]

But should it be alleged that we can know, independently of the import of the term water, in what the new birth consists, and therefore in what acceptance the term is to be taken, I ask how? There are but two possible ways. Either we must be able to know it in and of ourselves, and independently of the Word of God, or from passages of Scripture which contain no allusion to water. No one who is not willing to be the dupe of his own fancy, will assert that he can know any thing of the matter in the first-named way. Neither can he know any thing of it in the second, for the only passage in the New Testament, which describes the new birth fully, contains the term water. Hence, till we know what this term means, we shall never know what the new birth is.

Second: As to the laws regulating the use of figurative language. Most words, as is well known to the reader, are capable of being used in two acceptations: a literal or ordinary, and figurative; some even in three: literal, ordinary, and figurative. In many instances it happens that the ordinary import and the literal

are the same, as is the case with the term water; in some, again, the ordinary and the figurative agree, while the literal often differs from both. Hence, in construing a passage, the first thing in order is to ascertain, by the aid of some safe rule, the acceptation in which its terms are to be taken. This rule is, with one consent, allowed to be mainly the sense intended by the writer. But this, though the chief, is not the only means frequently at hand for determining this point. The manner in which a term is introduced often enables us to decide it. When a term is attended by the words like, so, as, with many others, which serve to introduce comparisons and other figures, we at once pronounce the term, so attended, figurative. But where this is not the case, and [236] where the sense does not imperatively demand it, it is both arbitrary and dangerous to construe a term figuratively.

Now, is the term water, in the clause in hand, attended by any verbal sign indicative of a figurative use? Certainly not. Here, then, the inference is conclusive against a figurative construction. But does not the sense of the passage require it to be so construed? True, it is so asserted; but this is precisely the thing which I deny, and which I do not intend shall be taken for granted. But the assertion can not be true; for, on the contrary, it is only when the term is construed literally that the clause makes any sense at all. Construe it figuratively, and you forever hide every vestige of meaning in the clause. Indeed, the real question here at issue is not whether the term is or is not figurative, but whether it has a literal, or absolutely no meaning. The question is not what meaning are men willing to receive, but what is the meaning they must receive, or reject all meaning. Too many, I well know, are not willing to receive the literal meaning; and this is their sole reason for preferring a figurative one. But this is not to make the will of God, but the preference of man, our rule of action.

But let us concede for a moment that the term water is figurative. To what class, then, of figurative words does it belong? Indisputably it is a metaphor; for to this class belong all those words which are used figuratively with no verbal sign to denote the fact. Now, a word is used metaphorically when it is taken from denoting what it ordinarily means to become, for the present, the name of something which it does not ordinarily mean. Still, in all cases, it becomes the name of some real thing, never of nothing. A word, moreover, is used metaphorically because the thing which it usually denotes resembles, in more [237] or less respects, the thing which it is used metaphorically to denote, and because it is wished to suggest that resemblance. Of metaphors there are two classes, determined by the manner in which we discover the meaning of the metaphoric word. To the first class belong all those words which, on being simply heard in their connection, instantly, without any extrinsic aid, suggest to the mind their meaning. To the second, all those words which, on being simply heard, do not instantly suggest their meaning, so deeply is it hid, but have it brought out by some added explanation.

The following may serve as instances of the two classes:

1. The Savior said of Herod: "Go and tell that fox, behold I cast out demons, and I do cures to-day and to-morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected." Here we as instantly collect his meaning as if he had said, Go and tell that cunning king.
2. "He that believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of him shall flow rivers of living water." Here the mind is held in complete suspense, unable to penetrate the mystery in which the term water involves the sentence, until it is added: "But this spoke he of the Spirit which they that believe on him should receive."

Now, to which of these two classes--and there are no others--does the term water, now in question, belong? Not to the latter; for no explanatory clause is added. Neither to the former; for, on being

pronounced, it suggests, on the figurative hypothesis, just no meaning at all. Hence, again from these premises nothing can be inferred in support of the preceding proposition, but, rather, it is felt to be false.

Third: The sense resulting from a figurative construction. This brings me to notice the most objectionable [238] feature in this whole theory; for, not only has the term water been treated as figurative, without a single reason, but, where it has been assigned any meaning at all, it has been a most fanciful one. Surely, my hearers need not be informed that figurative language has meaning no less than literal; nor that an idea is wholly unaffected by the kind of language in which it is conveyed. A thought remains the same whether communicated in literal or in figurative language. But, clearly, he who asserts a word to be figurative, must know what it means; otherwise, if conscientious, he would not venture the assertion. Hence, clearly, must they who assert that the term water is figurative, know what it means. But have they pointed that meaning out? Never; this they dare not attempt.

True, we are told that water is an emblem--an emblem, too, of purification. But the term water, now in hand, is held to be figurative; hence, of course, there is here no water. It is excluded by the very nature of the case; therefore, since there is here no water, there is here no emblem; and since no emblem, nothing emblemized, and hence no purification. Thus this groundless conceit vanishes.

But is the term water figurative? Granted, for a moment. Still, it has meaning. Let, now, this meaning be determined--definitely determined. Next, let the term water be displaced from the clause in hand, but its meaning retained in some fit word. Then let us read: "Except a man be born of [the thing which the term water denotes, no matter what it is] and the Spirit, he can not enter into the kingdom of God." From this there is absolutely no escape. Settle what the term water stands for. Then, of that thing unless a man be born, against him the kingdom of God is forever shut. True, we thus get rid of the water; but whether we thereby ease the way into [239] the kingdom of God, may well be doubted. Still, two things are left, of both of which we must be born. This increases difficulties, not diminishes them; hence, better retain the water. Then only are we true to reason, true to Christ.

Since, then, it is only asserted, not proved, that the term water is figurative; since there is no inherent necessity in the nature of the case for this construction; since the laws of figurative language do not demand it; and since, from such construction, either no sense at all results, or one which does not better the case--since all these things are true, I hence conclude that the term water is construed correctly only when taken in its literal and ordinary acceptance. Hence, when the Savior says, "Except a man be born of water," he means simply and literally water.

What, now, is it to be born of water? On this question I need not dwell long. To be born of, as already conceded, is figurative. Literally, it denotes the event which brings us into natural life; figuratively, then, it must denote an event like it. The two events must resemble each other as type resembles impression, or, if not so exactly, still closely. First, then, we have water given; second, in this a man is buried; third, out of it he emerges. Is not this being born of water? If the reason or the eye may be appealed to in any case to settle either the meaning of a word, or determine the analogy of facts, the question is answered. This is being born of water. But this is precisely what takes place in immersion; hence, I conclude that, to be born of water and be immersed are merely two different names--that figurative, this literal--for one and the same act.

A corroborative item or two, and I am done with the first part of my subject. Water is never present in any [240] act connected with the kingdom of Christ, except one. But in that act it is always present, and never

absent. That act is immersion. But in the expression, "born of water," water is present; hence, it must be in immersion, since it can be in nothing else. Again, it seems that to be born of water and be immersed are identical.

Christ is called the first-born from the dead. This is the statement of a fact, and in it occurs the word born. The fact is Christ's rising from the dead; hence, to arise out of the grave is to be born from the dead. But a man is dead to sin, is buried in the water, and rises out of it. If, now that rising can be called being born from the dead, then is this rising being born of water. If, in argument, analogy be worth any thing, it is decisive here.

If the expression, "born of water," does not signify immersion, its meaning is not determinate. Then, no living man can say whether he is in, or not in, the kingdom of God. But Christ has not left us in doubt on so vital a point; hence, the expression must be determinate, and signifies immersion.

I here terminate my examination of the clause "born of water." The result is submitted to the candid and thoughtful hearer only, but to him with no fear as to the end.

I now proceed to inquire into the meaning of the second division of my subject, namely, "Born of the Spirit." Important as has been the discussion of the preceding division, the discussion of this will be generally felt to be still more so, and I by no means wish to diminish the just interest which may be felt in it.

I shall set out with the assumption, new, perhaps, to many, that the Savior, after stating in what the new birth consists, then proceeds to explain so much of it as is [241] embraced in the clause "born of the Spirit." One thing, at least, will be conceded, that what is here embraced was least likely to be understood, and, therefore, stood most in need of explanation. Upon the import of the clause "born of water" the great Teacher said nothing. Of this Nicodemus needed no explanation. As soon as he learned from the Savior that he spoke not of a literal re-birth, instantly the meaning of the clause would flash into his mind. He would intuitively take the term water literally; this done, and the meaning of "born of" would be at once perceived. But not so with the phrase "born of the Spirit." Of necessity all would be dark here. Of being born of the Spirit, or of being begotten by it, he had no means of information. To him the subject was absolutely new. Not one incident of universal history could shed a ray of light on it. In his case, therefore, an explanation was especially necessary. Hence the assumption that we have one.

With what is here last said, corresponds, as I deem, the next verse; namely, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Hardly can this verse be held to be free from difficulty; not that its difficulty is insuperable, but only that it is not free from it. In the expression, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh," we have the statement of a simple well-known matter of fact. In this statement every word is to be taken literally; nor can any one acquainted with the fact stated misunderstand the terms in which it is expressed. Flesh produces flesh literally, or the one is the offspring of the other. This we know to be so. But the difficulty lies not here. It is in the expression "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit;" or more strictly, perhaps, in the parallelism which we draw between the two expressions. In the expression last cited the word born is not [242] to be taken literally; for in regeneration no personal spirit is produced; that is, the Holy Spirit does not produce the human spirit in the sense in which flesh produces flesh. In regeneration the human spirit is only changed, not produced. Hence, in the second expression, the word born is not to be taken literally but figuratively, as denoting, in general terms, simply a change. Now the difficulty, as I conceive, lies here: In drawing the parallel we make Spirit stand to spirit as flesh stands to flesh, in each case the one producing the other. Clearly this is wrong. Certainly

flesh produces flesh; but Spirit only changes spirit. Here there is no product, at least no product of substantive spirit. Hence in the first expression the word born is to be taken literally, but in the second figuratively. This causes, unless carefully noticed, confusion, and in this we feel the difficulty. But how, it may be asked, do I know this, or from what do I learn it? I answer, from the very nature of the case. In regeneration the human spirit already exists; it is hence not produced. Consequently the difference in the subjects determines a difference in the terms.

But on the supposition that the Savior is now explaining so much of the new birth as relates to the spirit, this is precisely what we should expect him to say. The word born denotes a change. The Holy Spirit is the agent who effects this change: the human spirit is the subject in which it takes place. That which is born of Spirit--the Holy Spirit, is spirit--the human spirit. The Holy Spirit begets the human; that is, effects the change which takes place in it. The whole process embraces four items, indicated in the four following questions: 1. Who effects the change? 2. What is changed? 3. How is the change effected? 4. In what does it consist when affected? These four questions exhaust the subject. Two of them have [243] now been answered--the Holy Spirit effects the change, the human spirit is changed. Only two, therefore, remain to be answered. Of these the Savior, in the following verses, answers only the third; namely, how is the change effected? The fourth is not answered by him in the interview with Nicodemus, but is answered elsewhere in the New Testament, as will be shown in the course of this sermon.

Here it is proper to determine another point before proceeding further. Should we read born of the Spirit, or begotten by it? This depends altogether on the view we are taking of the matter in hand. If we are viewing regeneration as completed, completed in both its parts, completed in water, completed in spirit, then it is proper to say born of the Spirit; otherwise it obviously is not. Whenever the two parts of the process are viewed separately, then, clearly, we should say begotten by the Spirit, not born. The Holy Spirit begets the human, or, more strictly, begets a change in it, prepares it for entrance into the kingdom of God. In this preparation, the Holy Spirit, as agent, merely acts on the human spirit, changing it. The human spirit is not conceived of as coming out of, or proceeding from, the Holy Spirit. Hence begotten, not born, is the proper word. Again: being begotten by the Spirit is the first part of the whole process of being born again. It consequently antecedes the other part, being born of water, and is hence more correctly expressed by begotten than born. Further: as the word born applies to the last act in natural generation, so likewise it applies to the last act in regeneration. This act, in regeneration, is coming out of the water. Hence to it we should apply born, to the other, begotten. Accordingly the verse in hand would, perhaps, be more correctly [244] rendered: That which is begotten by the flesh is flesh, and that which is begotten by the Spirit is spirit. This much must be correct, more than this might not be; it is hence best to say this much, no more. Certainly, in the fifth verse, we should render the original by born, thus: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he can not enter into the kingdom of God." Here begotten is wholly inadmissible, since we can not be begotten by water, but must be born of it. Again, it is not by being begotten simply that we enter into the kingdom of God; it is by being born. In the fifth verse the word denotes the act which translates us into the kingdom. It is hence the act of being born, not of being begotten. In the subsequent verses, however, where the word occurs, it is best to render it begotten. I shall accordingly do so, as already in the sixth.

It will be remembered that we are now speaking on the assumption that after the fifth verse, the Savior proceeds to explain how we are begotten by the Spirit. With this assumption agrees the seventh verse more naturally than with any other. The verse reads: "Marvel not that I said to thee, ye must be born again." When I am speaking to a man, and it is obvious to my eye that he does not understand me; and I

say to him: Wonder not that I should speak to you thus; for what, most naturally, does my remark prepare him? for an illustration or an explanation? If I have already explained myself, clearly it prepares him for an illustration. But if not, then an explanation is expected. Now, in the case in hand, the Savior had submitted no explanation. Most naturally, then, it seems would his remark induce the expectation of one. I hence still assume that the following verse contains one.

The verse reads thus: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence [245] it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

No passage in the New Testament has been so variously and so inconsistently construed as this. Hardly any two men understand it alike. Hence it is cited to prove any thing or nothing, as may happen to suit the tenets of him who uses it. Generally, by the parties of the day, it is held as containing an illustration of the mystery of being begotten by the Spirit. This, I conceive to be the radical misconception which has utterly obscured the sense of this fine passage. Without one solitary verbal mark, in the original, indicative of an illustration, or the slightest ground on which to conclude that one was ever meant, has the verse been assumed to be illustrative, and rendered accordingly. A more unaccountable departure from some of the best established laws of exegesis than its rendering, in some respects, exhibits, I have not met with. And long since, I doubt not, would the present rendering have been utterly discarded, had it not contributed to foster a deep-seated error on the subject now in hand. To any one who is bold enough to think for himself, it is clear that the verse, as it now reads, has simply no appreciable meaning whatever. I shall hence, with no sort of scruple, use whatever means may be at command to free it from darkness.

First, then, in regard to the word which, in our common version, is rendered "wind." This word occurs in the Greek New Testament three hundred and eighty-six times. In three hundred and eighty-four of these it is rendered into English either by the term spirit or by its equivalent ghost. Once, in the book of Revelation, it is rendered "life," where, beyond doubt, it should have been rendered "a spirit." But in not a single case, in the New [246] Testament, except the verse in hand, is it rendered "wind." Now, in translating, one great rule to be observed is this: To translate the same original word uniformly by the same equivalent English word, unless the sense forbids it. No translation is deemed good which violates this rule, none very faulty which does not. Now, since the word in hand, out of three hundred and eighty-six instances, is, in three hundred and eighty-four of them, uniformly rendered by the word spirit, or by a word of the same meaning, the presumption in favor of a similar rendering, in the two remaining instances, is as three hundred and eighty-four to two. And when it is remembered that the sense does not forbid this rendering, this presumption becomes an imperious necessity. For these reasons, therefore, I render the original by the word spirit, understanding thereby, the Holy Spirit.

The leading word thus rendered, and the whole verse is literally translated thus: The Spirit breathes where it sees fit, and you hear its voice, but know not whence it comes and where it goes; in this way is every one who is begotten by the Spirit.

On this passage, three questions arise, namely: What act of the Spirit does the word breathe express? Is it true that we of this day know not whence the Spirit comes, and where it goes? And is the sense of the last clause of the verse complete?

1. What act of the Spirit does the word breathe express? Be it what it may, one thing is clear, in the act something is heard. This word, then, suggests a probable answer to the question. Only when the Spirit speaks, do we hear it. Speaking, then, is most likely the act which the word breathe metaphorically

expresses. With this, moreover, agrees the word voice. The original of this word is a [247] generic term, expressing sound generally; but, when applied to persons, it always denotes the voice heard in speaking. But, in the present case, it applies to the Holy Spirit, a person. Hence, it is legitimate to infer that it denotes the voice of the Spirit heard in speaking. But this voice is never heard, except through prophets and apostles. It is only when in man that the Spirit speaks to him; hence, the act is an act of speaking, and the voice heard, the voice of inspired men. Through these men the Spirit speaks, and, speaking thus, we hear its voice.

2. Is it true of us in the present day that we know not whence the Spirit comes, and where it goes, or is the clause applicable to us? I reply: The clause is not applicable to us of this day, for the reason that, in no intelligible sense, can it be said of us that we know not the whence and the whither of the Spirit. Indisputably it comes from God, and is sent into the saints. But this, though true of us, was not true of Nicodemus. We have light on the point, which he had not. Of him, therefore, the clause was true, but not of us. As yet, the Savior had taught nothing respecting the Spirit; the apostles had taught nothing, and the New Testament was not written. That, therefore, was true of Nicodemus at the time, which is inapplicable to us, and which ceased to be true of him, if he lived, as soon as the Spirit was sent. Hence, in construing the verse, we must construe it as all applicable to him, but as applicable to us only with the clause in hand omitted. In one view only can the clause be deemed applicable to us of the present day. If the Spirit be conceived of as roaming up and down on the face of the earth, in some occult manner unmentioned in the Bible, and unintelligible to man, then may we construe the clause of ourselves. In any other view, it must be held as applying [248] only to Nicodemus, and only when applied to him has it any determinate meaning. The view of the clause here maintained frees the verse from at least half the confusion which lies on it. It is presented as necessary, and as barely disputable, and certainly relieves a passage of Scripture of no small difficulty.

3. Is the sense of the last clause of the verse complete, namely, in this way is every one who is begotten by the Spirit? That it is not, is intuitively felt by every reader. Involuntarily, we ask, in what way? The question implies the incompleteness of the sense; for, were the sense complete, no impulse would be felt to ask the question. Now, in order to render the sense full, and to leave no question remaining, we have to use, in translating, one word more than is in the original. Are we at liberty to do this? Certainly it is often done; but should it be done here? I believe it should; and my reasons for so believing are concisely these: First, as already said, the sense is incomplete without the word. There is, therefore, a necessity for it. Indeed, without it the verse is an eternal enigma. Second, to supply a word not only completes the sense, but gives a sense in strict accordance with what we know to be elsewhere taught. In a doubtful case, these two reasons for a particular conclusion, with none against it, may be generally accepted as decisive. I, hence, decide in favor of the word. Supplying it, and the clause reads thus: In this way is begotten every one who is begotten by the Spirit.

It will be remembered that, in commencing the investigation of the second part of my subject, I assumed that an explanation of how we are begotten by the Spirit, was contained in the following verses. I am now ready to show that this assumption was well taken. In order to do this, [249] I shall omit the clause herein held to be inapplicable to us, merely that I may present, in closer union, the really dependent clauses of the verse. Omitting, as here said, and the whole verse reads thus: The Spirit breathes where it sees fit, and you hear its voice; in this way is begotten every one who is begotten by the Spirit. How, then, is a person begotten by the Spirit? By hearing its voice. Of the truth of this, I feel profoundly convinced, whether the preceding premises necessitate it or not.

In confirmation, however, of the conclusion, I cite the two following Scriptures.

1. "Of his [the Father's] own will begat he us with the word of truth." But the word of truth is what we hear from the Spirit. Now, by this, James affirms we are begotten. The preceding, conclusion, therefore, is true. That to be begotten by the Father and by the Spirit is one and the same begetting, is here taken for granted.

2. "Being begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God." Here Peter declares, in so many words, that we are begotten by the word of God. This word is from the Spirit, and is what we hear. Hence, by hearing, we are begotten again.

4. But when begotten, in what does the change consist? The following contains the answer: "Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ, has been begotten of God." (1 John v: 1.)

From this passage, one of two conclusions indisputably results: Either to be begotten of God is to believe, or this includes that, since every believer is begotten. It is here held that to be begotten and to believe are identical. Hence, when a person is begotten, the change consists in believing that Jesus is the Christ. Here, then, I end the second part of my subject. [250]

Finally, from all the foregoing premises and reasonings, I conclude that to be "born of water" is simply to be immersed; and to be begotten by the Spirit, to believe in Jesus Christ. Few conclusions of men will ever rest on safer grounds, or be better entitled to confidence.

And now to show, in conclusion, that when Christ says, "He that believes and is immersed shall be saved," he only asserts, at the close of his earthly career, what he had, at its commencement, asserted to Nicodemus in different language, I submit the following:

He that believes, and is immersed, is saved, and is, therefore, in the kingdom of God. Hence, he that believes, and is immersed, is born of water and of the Spirit, for, otherwise, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. The only way to escape the force of this pithy argument is to deny that he who is saved is in the kingdom of God. If a man can not be saved, and be at the same time out of the kingdom, the argument is final. [251]

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/moses-e-lard/christs-conversation-with-nicodemus/>

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