

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE II.

BAPTISMAL REGENERATION; AS SUPPOSED TO BE
TAUGHT IN THE WORDS OF JESUS: "BORN OF WATER
AND SPIRIT." JOHN III. 5.

BY REV. HENRY COWLES, D.D., OBERLIN, OHIO.

BAPTISMAL REGENERATION is essentially regeneration by means of the water of baptism — the water being held to be efficacious to the renewing which is expressed by "regeneration."

The question how much this efficacy of water depends on the Spirit of God working co-ordinately with it on the human soul, — whether this dependence be much, little, or none at all, — may be considered as subordinate, and not vital to our present discussion.

The doctrine now to be considered is, that regeneration, including the forgiveness of previously committed sin and the removal of innate or inherited sinfulness, is *by water*, and not *without*; that water when consecrated for the purposes of holy baptism becomes possessed of this virtue. The divine grace either enters into the water, or connects itself with this use of it in baptism. That thus "baptismal regeneration" is irrespective of the mental or moral state of the subject, is obvious from the fact that it takes effect upon infants so young as to preclude the supposition of mental or moral activity.

This doctrine appeared in the church at a very early period. Passing the somewhat unreliable Shepherd of Hermas, the earliest witness is Justin Martyr (middle of second century), whose words are: "We then lead them [the candidates for church membership] to a place where there is water, and then they are regenerated in the same manner as we also were; for they are then washed in that water in

the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit."¹

Neander² speaks of the "prevailing notion of a divine power which was imparted to the water, and a sensible union brought about, by means of it, with the whole nature of Christ for the deliverance of the entire spiritual and material nature of man." In support of this view he quotes Irenæus thus: "As the dry wheat cannot become one mass of dough and one loaf of bread without moisture, so neither can we all become one in Christ without the water which is from heaven; for our bodies through baptism, but our souls through the Spirit, have obtained communion with the imperishable Essence."³

Tertullian on the *effect of baptism*, speaks thus: "When the soul attains to faith, and is transformed by the regeneration of water and the power from above, the covering of the old corruption having been removed, she beholds her whole light."⁴

Neander speaks of the early Fathers (last half of second century) as "confounding regeneration with baptism, and thus looking upon regeneration as a sort of charm, completed at a stroke, by supposing a certain magical purification and removal of all sin in the act of baptism."⁵

Coleman⁶ quotes Irenæus as saying "that Christ came to save all who through him should be regenerated to God by baptism"; and also, that "when Christ gave his disciples this commission of regenerating unto God, he said unto them, 'Go teach all nations, baptizing them,'" etc. "Here," says Coleman, "'regenerating unto God' is supposed to relate to the act of baptizing." "Baptism, according to the *usus loquendi* of the age, was regeneration." Speaking of the element for baptism, Coleman⁷ says: "Several of the Fathers very early advanced notions respecting the actual presence of the Spirit in the water, strikingly analogous to the modern doctrine of transubstantiation. It would seem

¹ Coleman's *Ancient Christianity Exemplified*, p. 271. ² Neander, p. 646.

³ *Ibid.* p. 646. ⁴ *Ibid.* ⁵ *Ibid.* p. 647. ⁶ Coleman, p. 384. ⁷ *Ibid.* p. 395.

that in their opinion this water acquired a spiritual virtue, derived from the real presence of the Spirit residing in the water, or the mysterious blending of the blood of Christ. Similar sentiments were entertained by Luther, and no doubt are the foundation of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, wherever that is taught."

The Book of Common Prayer, — practically the doctrinal standard of the Episcopal church both of England and America, holds and implies this baptismal regeneration in the following several forms: (a) Before the baptism of infants it directs the minister to pray, "Sanctify this water to the mystical washing away of sin." (b) The baptism having been performed he must say: "We yield thee most hearty thanks, most merciful Father, that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit." (c) In the service for confirmation he must say: "Almighty and ever-living God, who hast vouchsafed to regenerate these thy servants by water and the Holy Ghost," etc. (d) In the service for the ministration of baptism to such as are of riper years, the minister is to read the entire discourse between Christ and Nicodemus, and make this inference: "Whereby ye may perceive the great necessity of this sacrament, where it may be had." Whether or not this regeneration must certainly fail to take place when baptism in due form cannot be had, we are left to judge. There seems to be a slight hesitation to express a positive opinion on this point.

These extracts from the Book of Prayer seem to justify the two following conclusions: (1) These standards assume that regeneration takes place by, with, and by means of baptism. (2) Scripturally, this doctrine rests on these words of Jesus to Nicodemus: "born of water and Spirit."

So far as we know, the only scripture ever claimed in its support is this: "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." It is claimed that here water implies and means baptism; so that we have here an explicit declaration that baptism is an

essential condition of regeneration, and must be co-ordinate with the work of the Spirit; apparently of similar if not equal efficacy. Upon this passage, therefore, and more definitely still upon this construction of it, the whole fabric of baptismal regeneration is made to rest.

This construction we hold to be exegetically false. The whole system resting upon it is, therefore, without scriptural foundation.

In reference to the word "water," in the phrase "born of water and Spirit" (Gr.), we maintain, (*a*) positively; It is used as a symbol of moral cleansing, and is designed to qualify the word "Spirit"; the sense being, born by being morally cleansed through the Spirit. (*b*) negatively; That as here used, it cannot have the least reference to the rite of baptism.

The doctrines held on themes so vital in the gospel system ought to rest upon impregnable foundations. No discussion of them should satisfy any inquirer after truth unless it carries him back to the ground principles and laws of interpretation, and shows him that the conclusions reached are really built upon these principles.

Attempting humbly but honestly to walk in this path, we remark, —

All words should be interpreted in view of the circumstances, character, and relations of speaker and hearer. The words now in hand must be interpreted under the light of the fact, that they occur not in a sermon to the whole world in general, but in a private conversation with one man in particular, who came to Jesus by night and alone. This man was a somewhat serious and candid inquirer after divine truth; not a caviller, but a man favorably impressed by the miracles of Jesus, and anxious to learn more from him of God and, apparently, of salvation. It is, therefore, certain that Jesus will meet him with warm and loving spirit, and will open to him the things he most needs to learn, and in the simplest manner possible, considering who this pupil is, and what knowledge he may already have.

Yet farther, this man is a Jew; therefore Jesus will approach him and address him as a Jew. More still; he is not only a Jew, but a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin — a man venerable for his years and for his learning in his own book — the Old Testament scriptures. Yet more; he is by profession a teacher of those scriptures — “*the teacher of Israel*” are the words of Jesus (ver. 10); apparently implying some pre-eminence in rank in this respect. Let it therefore be borne carefully in mind, Jesus assumes confidently that Nicodemus ought to have found in his own book the very things himself had been saying. Art thou by life-long profession the distinguished teacher of Israel, and yet hast not found in these scriptures these things which I have said? We may therefore be very certain that Jesus has spoken to that group of ideas which he might rationally assume to lie in the mind of his pupil; and (one step farther) which Nicodemus might have learned from his own book — the Old Testament scriptures.

We are now prepared to note that Jesus began with the one great condition of citizenship in the kingdom of God; in other words, with the question, What must a man be or do to be saved?

It cannot be amiss to observe that Nicodemus has notions already about “the kingdom of God.” He had read of it in his text-book; had heard of it among his people; perhaps, as one of the masters of Israel, he had taught it. The phrase itself came bodily from the prophecies of Daniel (ii. 44; vii. 13, 14, 27); the idea of their Messiah as a king stands out in bold prominence in by far the greater part of the distinctly Messianic prophecies. The words were the text in the first preaching of John the Baptist, and of Jesus scarcely less: “Repent for the kingdom of heaven [or of God] is at hand.” The Jewish people, when on one occasion led to suppose Jesus to be their Messiah, were about to “take him by force to make him a king” (John vi. 15); and on another occasion they bore him into their city with branches of palm and shoutings of joy and triumph, pro-

claiming, "Hosanna; Blessed is the King of Israel" (John xii. 13). Hence we are quite safe in saying that Nicodemus has opinions about the kingdom of God; has been looking for it as to be set up under his nation's Messiah; and we may presume that, having found "a teacher come from God," who may, indeed, himself be the Messiah, or at least some great prophet who can tell him something new about the Messiah and his kingdom, he waits to hear on this subject.

Observe, moreover, Nicodemus had ideas as to the right of citizenship in this kingdom. Regarding it as a continuation, or perhaps an improved edition of the ancient and model reign of David, he had never questioned his right of citizenship by birth. Was he not born a Jew, of the seed of Abraham, of the same race with the great king David? Was not his name enrolled, and his right of citizenship fully honored and accredited in the genealogies of his people? Certainly he has never thought of any other condition of citizenship save birth,—to be begotten of a Jewish father; born of a Jewish mother. So Jesus shaped his phraseology and borrowed his words from this first and uppermost thought of his pupil. It admits of no question that Jesus chose the figure of birth and said "born" because he would take his pupil precisely where he was, and carry him forward to higher and better views of this truth, more vital than any or every other—the real condition of membership in this kingdom.

Not abruptly, therefore, as many seem to suppose, but by most natural connection with the living thought as well as the most vital want of Nicodemus, Jesus made his first point: "Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." "From above (*ἀνωθεν*)," and not "again," is certainly the primary sense of the Master's word. Etymologically, the Greek—made up of two words one meaning *above*, the other *from*—should have no other primary sense than this. By universal New Testament usage, it can have no other primary meaning. The cases

are of this sort ; “ He that cometh *from above* is above all ” (John iii. 31). “ Thou couldest have no power against me, except it were given thee *from above* ” (John xix. 11). “ Every perfect gift is *from above*, and cometh down from the Father of lights ” (Jas. i. 17). Of the same class are Jas. iii. 15, 17. Other cases in the sense of what is higher in space or earlier in time may be seen in Matt. xxvii. 51 ; Mark xv. 38 ; Luke i. 3 ; John xix. 23 ; Acts xxvi. 5 ; Gal. iv. 9. It should be noted that not one of all these cases will bear the sense of *again* ; *from above* is the only sense admissible. Nor let it be said that Nicodemus understood Jesus to mean “ again ” — a second time ; and therefore we must give his words this sense. It is by no means certain that Nicodemus failed to see the primary sense of the word. His quick thought may have run thus : He says “ born from above ” ; that must imply a second birth ; and this, for an old man like myself, is an absurdity. How can it be ?

Taking no offence at this, whether it were an effort to cast him in an absurdity, or were the mere blunder of a dull perception, Jesus advances with equally solemn averment to a modified and explanatory form of stating the same great truth. It behooves us to note with the utmost care every important point of change in this second announcement. Observe, he does not drop the figure of *birth*, not by any means ; for it lies fundamentally in the great text-book of his pupil, and he sees no occasion to drop it. But he can define the great Agent in this birth more clearly. In his first statement he had only indicated the direction and source whence this Agent came, — “ from above, ” — from heaven. Now he says, instead, “ Born of water and Spirit (ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος). ” Water is here, what some English commentators (e.g. Wordsworth) call, in a good sense, a catch-word ; i.e. a suggestive term, designed to help the hearer to grasp his true idea. Jesus knew that in the great book of Nicodemus the agency of the Spirit was presented under the symbol of water. This was not only common ; but when any symbol at all was used, it was absolutely

universal. It appears in David, in Isaiah, in Joel, and in Zechariah, and, with wonderful pertinence and force, in Ezekiel. We will refer to these cases of usage again shortly. At present the point I make is this: that, throughout the text-book of Nicodemus, water standing constantly in the closest explanatory relation to the Spirit, would naturally carry his thought to those vitally important passages, and help him to grasp the true idea that Jesus sought to teach and impress.

It may be suggestive also to the reader of to-day, to allude to David: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Create in me a clean heart. . . . Take not thy holy spirit from me." (Psalm li. 2, 10, 11) — the same three points which we see in Jesus to Nicodemus; also to Isaiah: "I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thy offspring" (xliv. 8); or to Joel: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (ii. 28, 29); the word "pour" involving the symbol of water. But passing by many passages of the same symbolic character, we call special attention to Ezek. xxxvi. 25-27: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them." Here again are the same three leading points which re-appear in these words of Jesus to Nicodemus — water, the new heart or second birth, and the Spirit as the effective Agent. It would seem there can be not the least doubt that Jesus sought to suggest this very passage to Nicodemus. Virtually we may conceive him to have said: Hast thou not read in Ezekiel of water sprinkled and cleansing; of the new heart and the new spirit, and of the Spirit of God — in his own words, "my Spirit" — put within the souls of men, causing

them to walk in his statutes? Surely you will now understand what I mean by being “born from above”—“born of water and Spirit.”

Here, then, we come into the marrow of our argument in proof that, (1) on the positive side, “water” in our passage is a *symbol of the Spirit’s agency*; and (2) on the negative side, *it has no reference at all to the external rite of baptism*. For the usage of the Old Testament, not of the New, must interpret these words of Jesus. The reason for this is, that Jesus is speaking to a reader of the Old Testament, and not of the New; to one who ought to be familiar with the Old Testament, and certainly was not with the New—the yet unwritten New; who was familiar with water as the symbol of the Spirit’s agency, but who had not yet heard of baptism in its relations to the Holy Ghost; with one who, if Jesus really meant baptism, might have replied with unanswerable force: “Rabbi, there is nothing about baptism in my text-book, not the first word. Besides, thou hast not yet taught even thine own disciples to ‘baptize into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost’; how, then, canst thou reproach me for not understanding about baptism in its connection with the Spirit?” We are reasonably safe in assuming that Jesus never laid himself open to such a rebuke. We cannot be mistaken in assuming that he said nothing to Nicodemus about baptism; but used the word “water” only to help him to recall the more readily what his Old Testament scriptures had said of the agency of the Spirit in the new heart.

Can it be needful to enforce this argument by recalling the reader’s attention to that great law of all interpretation, “Usage gives law to language,” and by urging what may seem a mere truism,—that usage looks backward in time, not forward,—to what has been said, not to what is yet to be said,—in the present case, to the symbol of the Spirit’s agency in the Old Testament, and not to any yet undeveloped institution of the New? We should feel that we owed an apology for what might be deemed an insult to the

reader's good sense, were it not that almost every commentator of the ancient church or of the modern, of the German school or of the English, finds baptism here in the word "water," and not a mere symbol of the Spirit's agency. Therefore we must beg the indulgence of our readers for this attempt to carry back this discussion into the ground principles of all sound interpretation.

Let us advance to other points of the argument.

Jesus ascribes the new birth to *one* agent, not to *two*; to the Spirit only, not to baptism as one, and to the Spirit as another; for his first declaration is, "born from above." This, beyond all question, looks to the Spirit only and alone. Baptism is certainly left out. Yet more; his subsequent statement (ver. 6) following the words "born of water and Spirit," is explanatory, parallel in sense, and equivalent in meaning, with the words "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit" — observe, not water and Spirit, but of the Spirit, — "is spirit." This certainly omits baptism as a co-ordinate agent. We must therefore infer that the central statement, "born of water and Spirit," does not make baptism one of two agents in regeneration. If it does, then this second and explanatory statement gives but half the truth, i.e. cannot be correct. But we are bound to assume its absolute, perfect truth; and, it being of the nature of an explanation, we must the more assume that it gives us a complete as well as a just view of the statement which it explains. It therefore must be held to interpret the words "water and Spirit" in a way that rules out baptism as one of the agents in regeneration. It does not rule out the legitimate sense of *water*, used as a symbol of the Spirit's morally cleansing agency. The after statement, "born of the Spirit," means precisely the same as the former one, "born of water and Spirit," provided you make water merely a symbol of the cleansing power of the Spirit; for in either statement the power is that of the Spirit only.

Moreover, if "water" means baptism, and if, consequently,

baptism is one agent and the Spirit another, then baptism stands first — is put in the foreground, and certainly should not be suddenly dropped out of thought, not only in this discourse, but throughout all Christ's future discourses, never again to be named by either himself or his apostles as standing alongside of the Spirit in producing the new birth. On the interpretation supposed, this omission is totally unaccountable.

Worse yet is the avalanche of new and unanswered questions sprung upon us by interpreting "water" to mean the rite of baptism; e.g. such as these: Do "baptism" and the "Spirit" always go together? Are they naturally and necessarily inseparable? Does either one of the two always imply the presence and efficiency of the other? If not, then what is the moral status of one born by baptism and not born of the Spirit? What is the state of him who has been born of the Spirit but not born by baptism? Again, if these two agents are both requisite, neither being efficacious without the other, then what shall be said of him who has all the Spirit can do for him, but fails to receive baptism before he dies? And, again, so much depending on baptism, is it not at least very supposable that there may be vital conditions as to its mode of administration; the qualifications of the administrator; the sort of water used; the state of the subject in the act of being baptized; not to name numerous other points which perhaps might not create much anxiety if no very special importance attached to baptism, but which would at once rise into towering magnitude if Jesus has really made baptism equally essential with the Spirit in regeneration?

Now the point we make here is, that to spring such questions upon us, and then leave them utterly unexplained, is inexpressibly annoying, distressing, agonizing, to every seriously inquiring mind; and the more deeply we feel our need of following Christ to the very letter, and of fulfilling every condition of entering the kingdom of heaven, the more agonizing will be our suspense and our unrelieved darkness.

In view of this state of facts, we are surely safe in saying, the interpretation which brings out such results of darkness and of agonizing perplexity, is *suicidal*; it seals its own condemnation. For Jesus could not possibly have left Nicodemus in such darkness; could not possibly have opened the door of the kingdom of heaven in this dark, uncertain, unintelligible way; never could have given such an answer to an honest inquirer after the conditions of salvation.

Yet again: if "water" here means baptism in any sense or usage of the term, it must mean baptism in its closest possible relation to the Spirit's work. This must be obvious, and cannot need proof. But the baptism which stands thus related to the Holy Ghost — the distinctive baptism of Christ as contrasted with that of John the Baptist — I indeed baptize with water; he with the Holy Ghost (Matt. iii. 11; Luke iii. 16; Acts i. 5), was yet undeveloped. The doctrine of the Holy Ghost was not brought out in its fulness until shortly before the arrest of Jesus for trial and crucifixion (John xvi., xvii.). The grand commission to "baptize into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" — which itself instituted and therefore dated Christian baptism — was given only after the resurrection. The baptism by the Holy Ghost predicted by Joel and by John the Baptist began on the day of Pentecost. Therefore we maintain that, according to the New Testament, the special type of baptism which stands in closest relation to the Spirit's work dates several years later than this discourse with Nicodemus. Therefore to make "water" in this passage mean baptism is to interpret far in advance of dates, — is to find the usage which shall give law to language not in what goes before, but in what follows long after, not in things known, but in things necessarily then unknown.

A word may be due to those who, making great account of the laws of the Greek language, insist that the figure known as "Hendiadys," — two words for one idea, as exhibited in the construction, the water or washing of the Spirit — lacks support, and is inadmissible, and therefore the sense put upon the word "water" in this Article is unauthorized.

In reply we fall back upon Old Testament usage, as in this special conversation naturally supreme. The use of the word "water" in its relation to the Spirit throughout the Old Testament sufficiently, yea, abundantly, accounts for the sense we have given the word here. It was the very word best adapted to recall the mind of Nicodemus to passages in his book which should teach him the great truth Jesus was laboring to present and enforce.

In view of these various considerations, some entirely decisive even if they stood alone, and all combined and massed being, as it seems to us, irresistible, we conclude that "water" in our passage is a symbol of the Spirit's agency, and has not the least reference to the rite of baptism. Consequently we maintain that the notion of baptismal regeneration assumed to lie in this discourse with Nicodemus, rests on a totally false interpretation, and is therefore utterly null and void. A doctrine based on a false interpretation has simply no basis at all. It is a structure with no bottom underneath, — a mere fancy, mighty perhaps to mislead and decoy souls to their ruin, but of no value in the realm of truth; of no bearing toward the vital things of human salvation.