

The New Birth: Its Nature and Necessity

by F.G. Allen

The new birth is a spiritual rebirth, where one's spirit is regenerated and they become a new creation in Christ, through the agency of the Holy Spirit and Christian baptism.

Scripture: Isaiah 1:18, Matthew 3:11, Matthew 5:8, John 3:3-15, 2 Corinthians 4:16, Ephesians 4:22, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "New Birth", "Spiritual Regeneration"

Description

F.G. Allen preaches on the necessity of being born again to see the kingdom of God, emphasizing the spiritual perception and experience required. He delves into the meanings of 'see' and 'kingdom,' highlighting the spiritual nature of perceiving God's kingdom and the reign of God's principles in our lives. Allen discusses the inward and outward man, explaining the distinction between the flesh and the spirit in the new birth, emphasizing the importance of the spirit being regenerated by the Holy Spirit. He also addresses the elements of the new birth, focusing on the Spirit's agency in conversion and the water's agency in baptism, clarifying that baptism is a spiritual act that symbolizes the inward transformation. Allen challenges misconceptions about baptism, stressing its spiritual nature and its role in the transition from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God.

Transcript

"Except a man be born anew, he can not see the kingdom of God."--(John 3: 3.)

WO words in the text demand special attention. These are "see" and "kingdom." In what sense did the Saviour use the word "see"? Did He mean that unless one is born again he can not, with the natural eye, see the kingdom of God? Evidently not; for the kingdom of God is not a material thing, visible to the natural eye. "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." There are things pertaining to the kingdom of God, visible to the natural eye, such as its ordinances and agencies; but nothing that the unconverted man can not see as well as the converted man. Hence the Saviour could not have meant that unless one is born again, he can not literally see the kingdom of God. In what sense, then, did He use the word? Evidently in the sense of spiritual perception. This includes realization, experience, etc. In this sense the word is often used: "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God." In one sense, every eye shall see Him; but only the pure in heart shall have a blissful realization of His presence. "If a man keep my word, he shall never see death." That is, he shall never experience spiritual death. In this sense we use the word in daily life. We speak of seeing trouble, seeing pleasure, and the like. We mean that we experience these things. The Saviour meant, then, that except

one be born again he can not experience, or enjoy, the kingdom of God.

But in what sense did He use the word "kingdom"? In our language we have two words conveying two distinct ideas--"kingdom" and "reign." But in the Greek there is but one word, in its noun form, for both of these ideas. Hence, qualifying words must [131] determine its meaning. Objectively, it is kingdom; subjectively, reign. That refers to external dominion; this, to the principles of government. When the Saviour said: "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you," He evidently referred to its principles of government. And so we understand Him here. Then, if this be correct, Jesus expressed this grand and necessary truth--that except one be born again, he can not experience the reign of God over the hearts and lives of men, in the principles of His divine government. We say this is necessarily true, because it is based on an unchangeable law of our being.--the principle of congeniality. This principle determines the enjoyment of association both in the church and out; in this world and the next. The presence of God was blissful till Adam sinned, then he hid from His sight. A guilty "conscience makes cowards of us all." The good enjoy the company of the good. The bad seek the society of the bad. The wicked and debased shun the society of the righteous. How, then, could the presence of the Saviour be a heaven to them? The idea is absurd. With such, the depths of hell are preferable to the presence of God.

Some years ago, while travelling in a stage-coach, a preacher had three young men for his companions. They were much elated in spirit. Very soon one drew out a flask and passed it around. On refusing to imbibe, the preacher heard one whisper to another: "I will bet a dollar that man is a preacher, and I would rather be in hell any day than in the company of a preacher." The preacher mentally said: "Young man, unless you mend your ways you will certainly go where you say you would rather be than in the company of a preacher; but the trouble is, you will not get rid of all the preachers when you get there." The enjoyment of these young men went down about ninety degrees for the rest of the trip. Can we enjoy the kingdom of God when we can not enjoy the company of those who are trying to serve Him? It is impossible. Can we expect to enjoy the holy associations of heaven, when we do not enjoy those of the Church? [132]

The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom. Its associations, its enjoyments, its aspirations, its hopes, its promises--all are spiritual. Hence one must himself become spiritual before he can enjoy its blessings and privileges. The reason so many enjoy not the things of the kingdom is, they have not the spirituality of the kingdom. If we do not enjoy religion, it is simply because we have none to enjoy. One enjoys the worship, the work and the sacrifices of the Church. Another finds no pleasure in these things. Why? Simply because the one is converted and the other is not. It is impossible that unregenerate men can enjoy the things of God, in this world or the world to come. The unregenerate in the churches will live and die strangers to the experimental enjoyment of the reign of God in the hearts of converted men. God can not make a kingdom of spiritual enjoyment, here or hereafter, for unregenerate and sin-loving men. Hence Universalism is absurd.

Many seem to think that because they have "joined the church," God should make them happy. Hence they are disposed to blame religion, rather than themselves, for the want of it. God has made no such promise. Happiness is not a gift to be arbitrarily bestowed. It is a consequence. God has graciously provided the means which produce it. If we use them, we shall be happy; if we neglect them, we shall not. Every child of God has his spiritual growth and enjoyment in his own hands. Faithfulness to Christ brings its own reward.

Much of the indifference and failure in the kingdom of God is due to the want of a deep conviction of sin. A light estimate of sin is the curse of the age. A shallow conviction of sin is paralyzing the churches of God. Preachers should be very careful at this point. It is easy to present the plan of salvation, and to defend it against all opposition, but to make men realise the enormity of their sins, and their consequent dependence on Christ, is quite a different matter. We should labor for deep conviction of sin. People should [133] be deeply impressed with the self-denial of the Christian life, before they confess Christ. We should be more concerned about converting than baptising people. The worst place for unconverted men is in the church; and the worst thing in the church is unconverted men.

THE INWARD AND OUTWARD MAN.

When Jesus said a man must be born again, there arose a difficulty in the mind of Nicodemus. He said: "How can a man be born when he is old?" His trouble was due to the fact that he had in his mind the wrong man. Paul makes a clear distinction between what he calls the inward and the outward man: "Though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day." (2 Cor. 4: 16.) "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man but I see a different law in my members [the outward man], warring against the law of my mind." (Rom. 7: 22.) These Scriptures, and many others, recognise an inward, immortal man, in contradistinction to an outward, mortal man. Nicodemus had his mind on the "outward man." Jesus spoke solely of the "inward man." Hence, Nicodemus had reference to a birth of flesh; Jesus, to a birth of Spirit. Consequently, Jesus said: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is of the Spirit is spirit." That is, it is the spirit of man, not his body, is born again. The inward man, not the outward, is the subject of the new birth. The "man" that is born again, is born of the Spirit. Hence, the outward man, or body, is not contemplated in the new birth. In conversion the spirit is regenerated; the flesh is not. The body will never be regenerated, till regenerated from the grave. The fact that the spirit is regenerated and the flesh is not, is the cause of the warfare between the two from conversion till death. Were they both regenerated, there would be no conflict. Before conversion the flesh controls the spirit; after conversion the spirit must control the flesh. "The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary the one [134] to the other." Hence, even Paul says: "I labor to keep my body under." So long as the spirit controls the flesh, one is on the Lord's side; but when he permits the flesh to again control the spirit, he has fallen from his first love.

With the same thought of the inward man in mind, Jesus continues: "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." Whether we render *pneuma* wind or Spirit in this passage, affects not the fact illustrated; though we think "Spirit" is overwhelmingly demanded as a translation. Observe that Jesus compares things, not processes. He speaks of the man that is born again, not of the manner of his birth. The one that is born again is compared to the wind, or to the Spirit of God. The point of comparison is the invisibility of the two things. The inward man, the man born again, is as invisible as the Spirit of God, or as the wind that blows. The outward man, that Nicodemus had in mind, is the man you see. The inward man, that Jesus had in mind, is the man you do not see. That is visible and mortal; this is invisible and immortal.

As a teacher in Israel, Nicodemus should have known that the Messiah's kingdom, when established, was to be a spiritual kingdom. This his Bible clearly taught. The prevailing misconceptions of the Jews concerning the nature of the kingdom, were all due to a misapplication of Bible teaching. For this their teachers were responsible. Since Messiah's kingdom was to be a spiritual kingdom, when Jesus said that one must be born again in order to enter it, Nicodemus should have known that he had reference to a birth

of Spirit, not of flesh. Hence the gentle rebuke.

ELEMENTS OF THE NEW BIRTH.

Having traced that line of thought through, we must now return and notice another feature of the new birth. [135]

In the third verse, Jesus simply expresses the necessity of the new birth. He does not even intimate that of which it consists. Had He said no more, we should have known that the new birth is a necessity, without ever knowing what it is. In the fifth verse he tells us of what it consists. The general statement of the third verse is explained by the specific statement of the fifth. But, strange to say, very many reverse this fundamental principle of interpretation, and try to explain the component parts of the new birth by a passage that says not one word about them.

The new birth is a birth of water and of Spirit. The birth is one; the agencies are two. What, then, is the office of each as an agent in the new birth? We shall consider them separately.

THE SPIRIT'S AGENCY.

The work effected by the Holy Spirit in the new birth is conversion. The whole process of conversion results from the influence of the Spirit. Our faith, repentance, change of heart, hatred of sin, love of God, turning to God in obedience--all are produced by the Spirit of the living God. The process of regeneration is begun, carried on, and consummated, by the Holy Spirit. Hence, to be born again is to be born from above, as the Greek word *anōthen*, here translated "again," implies. But how does the Spirit accomplish this work? Let the Saviour himself answer.

On the night of the betrayal, Jesus said to His disciples: "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him unto you" (John 16: 7). The Comforter here promised is the Holy Spirit, who was to be sent as the Advocate of Jesus. He was to advocate the claims of Jesus to the Messiahship. In order to this grand consummation of the scheme of redemption, it is important to know what he was to do, and how he was to do it. We inquire, first, as to what He was to do for the Apostles; and, second, as to what He was to do for the world. [136]

The Holy Spirit, as the Advocate of Jesus, was to do three distinct things for the Apostles: (1.) He was to teach them all things, and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had taught them: "But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you" (John 14: 26). (2) He was to guide them into all truth: "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all truth" (John 16: 13). (3) He was to reveal to them things to come: "And he shall declare unto you the things that are to come" (John 16: 13). This was to be done by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "But when they deliver you up, be not anxious what or how ye shall speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you" (Matt. 10: 19, 20). Thus were the apostles qualified to advocate the claims of Jesus, and, as His ambassadors, to speak in His stead. They spake as the Spirit gave them utterance. The Spirit spake not from himself, but what he heard from the throne of the Messiah, that He spake: "For he shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, these shall he speak. . . . He shall glorify me; for he shall take of mine, and shall declare it unto you" (John 16: 13, 14). Hence, what the Apostles spoke by the Holy Spirit was only a repetition of that emanating from the throne of the coronated Christ. Thus the Saviour intimates (Matt. 18: 18) that the binding and loosing were first done in

heaven, and then re-enacted on earth. This is what the Holy Spirit did for the Apostles, and how he did it.

But what was the Holy Spirit, as the Advocate of Christ, to do for the world? He was to convince the world of sin, of the righteousness of Christ, and of judgment by Him. at the last day: "And he, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to [137] the Father, and ye behold me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world hath been judged" (John 16: 8-11). The Advocate of Christ convinced men of His righteousness by convincing them that God raised Him from the dead. God would not have raised an impostor. By proving that Jesus had been raised and glorified, the Spirit proved that he had conquered the prince of this world, held dominion over it, and would henceforth judge it in righteousness. In convincing them of these facts, He convicted them of the sin of all sins--not believing on Jesus as the Christ. Thus were the three thousand convicted on the day of Pentecost; and so of all the rest.

There has been much controversy in the religious world as to how the Holy Spirit does his work as an agent in regeneration. Much of this controversy is due to a misconception as to what He does. Many attribute a cleansing or purifying efficacy to the Spirit; and their entire theology, as touching His operations, is framed with reference to this idea. Hence the unconscious babe and the penitent sinner, in ways mysterious and by influences incomprehensible, are alike cleansed from defilement by the Spirit of God. This is strange, when the idea of cleansing is never once attributed to the Holy Spirit in the entire Book of God. It is never intimated that He cleanses anybody from anything. The blood of Christ is the source of all cleansing: "The blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1: 7). The idea of cleansing, in both Testaments, in type and in substance, is ever connected with the blood of Christ: "For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling them that have been defiled, sanctify unto the cleanness of the flesh; how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish unto God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9: 13, 14) "And according to the law, I may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and apart from shedding of blood there is no remission" (Hebrews 9: 22). Other things [138] to which cleansing is attributed are effectual to this end only as they are agencies to bring us to the "fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins." But it is claimed that the "cleansing" efficacy of the Holy Spirit is a distinct impartation. Thus many attribute to the Holy Spirit what the Holy Spirit attributes to the blood of Christ. An unscriptural theory as to what the Spirit does, begets an equally unscriptural theory as to how He does it. The Holy Spirit convicts men of sin; the blood of Christ cleanses them from it. This is the divine order.

But how does the Advocate of Jesus convict the world of sin? By testimony. This is the only way that men can be intelligently convinced of anything: "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall bear witness of me; and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning" (John 15: 26, 27). But how is the Spirit to testify? By speaking: "He shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, these shall he speak" (John 16: 13). But how is He to speak? Shall He speak to the world in dreams and visions? by supernatural manifestations? or by the "still, small voice" of personal revelation? No. The whole volume of inspiration thunders, No! The Spirit speaks through the Apostles: "But when they deliver you up, be not anxious how or what ye shall speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you" (Matt. 10: 19, 20). So it is clearly stated that the Holy Spirit was to convict the world of sin; He was to do it by testimony; He was to testify by speaking, and he was to speak through the Apostles. Thus through Apostolic teaching does the Spirit of God convict men of sin. One cannot know that he is a sinner, and that Christ is his Saviour, but by

this testimony of the Spirit. We can know nothing of salvation or its conditions, except what the Spirit has thus revealed. Consequently when [139] one decides to seek salvation through Christ, however influenced by providential circumstances, and however long since he may have read a chapter or heard a sermon, his knowledge of the thing sought and the necessity of seeking it are wholly due to the testimony of God's Spirit through the truth. But for this, he could have no desire to seek, nor purpose in seeking. Hence every conversion necessarily results from the testimony of the Spirit. Our faith is produced by the divine Spirit: "For how can we believe in him of whom we have not heard?" and how can we hear except as the Spirit has spoken? Every change in the whole process of conversion and obedience to God results from the same divine source. Hence the result of the Spirit's agency in the new birth is conversion.

THE WATER'S AGENCY.

But what connection has water with the new birth? It is unnecessary to notice the many efforts of modern partisans, in defiance of the simplest rules of interpretation and common sense, to make it appear that "water" here does not mean water. To dispose of the matter briefly, I will simply state that "born of water," as a part of the new birth, means Christian baptism. For this I shall give but three reasons.

1. It is a universally admitted principle of interpretation, that words must be taken in their ordinary meaning unless the context or the nature of the case forbids it. Here there is not only nothing forbidding the usual meaning of the word water; but every effort to force upon it some other meaning makes the veriest nonsense.
2. Water has no connection with the religion of Christ, as an essential element, except in Christian baptism. Here water is connected with the religion of Christ as an essential element. Therefore water here means Christian baptism.
3. The great Bible scholars and expositors in all the ages of the Church, have regarded the water of the new birth as Christian baptism. Among these are such [140] names as Alford, Bengel, Stuart, Wall, Bloomfield, Barnes, Wesley, and Summers. Besides, the great bodies of "learned divines" that produced the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, the Episcopal Prayer-Book, the Methodist Discipline, and other important Protestant creeds, have put themselves on record to the effect that "born of water" refers to water baptism. We are not disposed to dispute the scholarship of the world on this question. For these three reasons, to say nothing of others, we feel compelled to accept the water of the new birth as Christian baptism.

Since the Spirit's work in the new birth is conversion, and the water refers to baptism, the Saviour simply said, in other words, that except one be converted and baptised, he can not enter into the kingdom of God. Conversion alone will not take him in. Baptism alone will not take him in. It requires the two, united in one birth, to enter the kingdom.

Perhaps it would be well to remark here that the expression, "kingdom of God," does not mean heaven. It means the Church, or kingdom of God on the earth. We enter the everlasting kingdom by a faithful continuance in well-doing.

The birth of water and of Spirit is one birth. One is not born of the Spirit and then of the water, nor of the water and then of the Spirit. He is born of both at one and the same time. Nor is one part of the man born of the Spirit, and another part of the water. That which is born of the one is born of the other. The same "man" is born of both water and Spirit. Nothing can be born of the water that is not at the same time born

of the Spirit. Apart from that of the Spirit there is no birth of the water. But "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Therefore, that which is born of the water is spirit. That which is born of the Spirit of God is the spirit of man, not his body. Therefore, that which is born of the water is the spirit of man, not his body. Sometimes we hear the crude idea expressed that, in conversion the spirit is born of the Spirit, and in baptism the body is born of the water; and thus the [141] whole man is born again. But this cannot be. The body of the man is not born of the Spirit; and that which is not born of the Spirit is not born of the water. In the new birth there is no birth of flesh. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." But in the new birth there is nothing born of the flesh hence no flesh is born. But man's flesh is his body hence in the new birth his body is not born. We grant that the words "flesh" and "body" are not always synonymous in the New Testament; but in this case Saviour uses the word flesh in the sense of body. Hence, though the body be controlled by the spirit, and brought in subjection to the divine will, and its members consecrated to the divine service, it can no more be a subject of the new birth than is one's gold which he dedicates to the service of God. The body, however consecrated to God's service, is not born of the Spirit; and not being born of the Spirit, it is not born of the water. From all of which it follows with the certainty of mathematics, that the "inward man" not the "outward," is the subject of the new birth in its entirety.

We have seen that the body of man is not born of the water. But the birth of water is scriptural baptism. Therefore, the body of man is not scripturally baptised. This follows with mathematical certainty if the birth of water exhausts the meaning of baptism. Can anything be scripturally baptised that is not born of water? If so, the body may be scripturally baptised. If not it can not be. I have carefully weighed all the objections that have been presented against this position, and have asked a number of our best critics to show a flaw in the reasoning, if any exists; and yet I am compelled to leave it as I first expressed it in the "Disciple of Christ," with the above provision as to the birth of water exhausting the meaning of baptism.

In the classic sense of the word, anything is baptised that is immersed. Immersion alone is classic baptism. But immersion alone is not Christian baptism. Christian baptism demands faith and repentance in the thing baptised. Faith and repentance cannot be predicated [142] of the body. Hence the body is not a subject of Christian baptism. The body is not born of the Spirit; not being born of the Spirit, it is not born of the water; and not being born of the water, it is not scripturally baptised, except on the above proviso.

Some years ago, in a public discussion, a gentleman used the following illustration to show that there may be immersion without scriptural baptism. He took a glass of water, and, holding a nickel over it, said: "Now, I drop this nickel into the water. Everyone says it is immersed; but no one will say it is scripturally baptised. Here, then, is a clear case of immersion, but no scriptural baptism. Therefore immersion only is not scriptural baptism." Of course we conceded every word of it. No one claims that immersion only is Christian baptism. "But," said I, "let us try the illustration a little further. I drop a nickel into the glass of water. You all say it is immersed; but none of you say it is scripturally baptised. I then lay it on the pulpit and pour a little water on it, and you all say it is poured; but none of you say it is scripturally baptised. I then sprinkle a little water on it, and you all say it is sprinkled; but none of you say it is scripturally baptised. So we have here a clear case of immersion, of pouring, and of sprinkling, and yet no scriptural baptism. Do what you will to the nickel, you cannot scripturally baptise it. Why? There is something wrong about the nickel. It has no faith, no repentance, and no love of God. Hence it cannot be scripturally baptised. But, my dear brother, it has just as much of these as any infant you ever tried to baptise. Hence the reason you cannot scripturally baptise a nickel, is the reason you cannot scripturally baptise a baby."

Why is the scriptural baptism of an infant as impossible as that of a stone? Because it is as destitute as a stone of faith and repentance. But an infant has as much faith and repentance as a man's body has.

Hence scriptural baptism can no more apply to a man's body than it can to an infant. A man's body is as [143] destitute of the scriptural prerequisites of baptism as the clothing he has on. Hence scriptural baptism can no more apply to his immersed body than to his immersed clothing.

It is the "inward man," the immortal man, that believes, repents, turns to God, wills to serve Him, is crucified with Christ, is buried with Him, and rises to walk with Him in newness of life. Being thus changed by the Spirit of God, the inward man assumes the mastery over the body, and brings it into subjection to the divine will. The success of the Christian life depends on the regenerated spirit holding the mastery over the unregenerated body. As we strengthen the spirit we weaken the flesh; and as we pamper the flesh we dwarf the spirit. Hence, while the outward man perishes, the inward man grows stronger day by day.

BAPTISM INWARD AND SPIRITUAL.

Much has been said about baptism as an "outward ordinance," a "fleshly ordinance," a "bodily ordinance," etc. These expressions are born of a false idea of its nature. They are not found in the Bible, from the simple fact that the idea is not there. Baptism is no more "outward" than are faith and repentance. The inward man believes, and the inward man is baptised. The outward man does neither. Hence to speak of baptism as an external, fleshly ordinance, is to lose sight of its internal, spiritual nature.

It is often argued that the new birth is from above, as the word anothén implies, and therefore entirely spiritual. This we grant. Every change in the whole process is produced by the Spirit of God, and is, therefore, from above and spiritual. How, then, can baptism be a part? Is it of God or of men? The Saviour asked this question, but got no answer. Baptism as much results from the Spirit as do faith and repentance. Hence it is equally from above, and equally spiritual.

The new birth is a transition process from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God. This is the analogy in the figure--a passage from one state to [144] another. It is evident that God does not pardon one while in the kingdom of Satan. It is equally evident that one cannot get into the kingdom of God without pardon. He must, therefore, be pardoned at the conclusion of the transition from the one to the other. But the concluding act of this process is baptism. Hence we are pardoned the time of baptism.

The new birth is no respecter of persons. There is no royal road to the kingdom of God. Kings and beggars alike must be born again. For this there is no substitute. Our deeds of benevolence and mercy can avail us nothing; we must be born again. Our boastful morality and aesthetic culture go for naught; except we are born again we cannot enter the kingdom of God. Our wealth may control the commerce of the world, but it cannot buy a place in God's favor; we must be born again. The kingdoms of this world may bestow upon us their chief positions, and crown us with tokens of their adoration; but unless we are born again we can find no place in the kingdom of God. [145]

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