

John 3:6–16 — That Which Is Born of the Spirit Is Spirit

The Fixity of Two Natures, the New Birth, New Creation, and the Son of Man Who Is in Heaven

Scripture Reading: John 3:6–16

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 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 canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

The Fixity and Distinction of Two Natures

Verse 6 makes a statement about the nature of things born: that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. This does not teach that something already present in man is worked upon, modified, and gradually improved. It teaches the fixity and absolute distinction of two different things. The flesh remains flesh; it is not improved by grace. The spirit is something entirely new, produced by an entirely different agency.

First John 3 develops this in its characteristic black-and-white manner: the old nature is incapable of doing anything good, the new nature is incapable of doing

anything evil. It is the same perspective here. That which is corrupt begets more of that which is corrupt; that which is incorruptible begets that which is incorruptible. The contrast could not be greater.

Romans 7 confirms the fixity. At the end of that chapter, after the soul has experienced the deliverance spoken of in verse 25, the deliverance does not modify the old nature. Chapter 8:3 defines it as sin in the flesh. The last half of Romans 7:25 then states it plainly: “with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.” Two distinct and opposed things remain — neither altered by the other, neither absorbed into the other. And Romans 7:18 puts the fixity of the flesh without qualification: “I know that in me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing.”

The case of Cain illustrates this from the beginning. By ordinary birth from his parents Cain received a body. But where did the murder come from? Not from biology alone. What is born of the flesh is flesh — fallen nature, with all that that entails since the fall, when sin entered and passed to all men. The flesh begot flesh, with the fallen character of the first man. The principle of 1 Corinthians 15 applies: first that which is natural, and afterward that which is spiritual — stamped upon Cain and Abel, upon Ishmael and Isaac, and upon our own experience.

The New Birth: Not a Marvel, but a Moral Necessity

The Lord says: Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. That must is not a statement of human capacity to bring the new birth about. Man is not morally capable of it — flesh cannot beget spirit. But it is a moral requirement. The person must be born again, not in the sense that he can do it himself, but in the sense that without it he cannot see or enter the kingdom of God. The new birth is brought about by outside agency — the sovereign Spirit acting as the wind, which blows where it will and whose sound one hears without

being able to trace its source or destination.

The Lord expected Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, to know something of this from Ezekiel — God’s promise to remove the stony heart and give a new heart, to put his Spirit within them (Ezekiel 36:26–27). This was not new truth invented at the incarnation. Old Testament saints were saints — holy ones — and that implies the new birth, since what is born of the flesh is flesh. If they were elect, just, saints, and children of God, there must have been an impartation of the divine nature. Peter says we are made partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The same was true of Old Testament believers, though they could not take that place openly or claim it as an objectively revealed ground of faith.

New Birth Is Not the Same as New Creation

A distinction of great importance: new birth and new creation are not the same thing, and must not be confused. New creation was established in Christ in resurrection — the beginning of the creation of God (Revelation 3:14), which began in John 20 when the risen Lord breathed on his disciples. “If any man be in Christ, it is new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17, J.N. Darby). That is not a new creature in the sense of some individual renewal; it is placement in a new order of things established in Christ risen.

Old Testament saints were not in Christ in that sense. Yet they were born of God. Therefore new birth cannot be identified with new creation. What the Lord is speaking to Nicodemus about — seeing and entering the kingdom of God — is an earthly thing, not a heavenly one. The Lord himself makes this clear in verse 12: “If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?” The new birth enables one to see and enter the kingdom of God on earth. New creation is something greater, established on the other side of death and resurrection in Christ.

The Son of Man Which Is in Heaven

Verse 13 contains one of the most extraordinary statements in John's Gospel: "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven." Neither Enoch nor Elijah ascended up to heaven in the sense here intended. The Lord has a divine prerogative that no creature shares — only he who came down from heaven ascends back up. And the Son of man who is in heaven is the striking phrase.

Son of Man is not a title from eternity past. It is a title the Lord took in incarnation, particularly connected with his rejection and his coming reign over all that God has made. Yet here a divine attribute — omnipresence — is attached to him in that title. He was bodily here, speaking with Nicodemus, and he was in heaven. Two places simultaneously — which is the evidence of omnipresence, and hence everywhere. The Spirit of God chooses the most startling way to assert omnipresence: not by using that theological term, but by saying the Son of Man who is here on earth is at the same time in heaven.

This was disputed among the brethren when it was asserted that divine prerogatives do not characterize the Son of Man. The verse refutes that directly. The Son of Man — his human title — is characterized by a divine attribute. This must be received by faith. To explain how it could be would be to reduce the person of Christ to the measure of the human mind, which is itself a variable thing. Faith receives it: divine attributes do characterize the Son of Man, and it would be a serious and fundamental error to deny it.

The connection with John 1:18 is beautiful: the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father; the Son of Man who is in heaven. Two wonderfully connected truths. In his eternal Sonship he is in the bosom of the Father. In his manhood he is the Son of Man who is in heaven. His purpose in making this statement to Nicodemus is to establish his divine competency to speak not merely of earthly things but of heavenly things as well. He knows whereof he speaks,

because he is the Son of Man who is in heaven.

As Moses Lifted Up the Serpent: The Lifted-Up Son

Verses 14 and 15 draw the great parallel: as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have eternal life. The bronze serpent in Numbers 21 was the figure of judgment executed on sin in the flesh — the form of what was sinful, without the sin. The Son of Man lifted up on the cross bore the judgment of sin in the flesh, without sin, so that those who look to him in faith might live. And then comes the verse that gathers it all: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The giving is the cross. The Son of Man who came down from heaven is the only begotten Son who was given. One and the same person — God and man in one — is both the one who came down and the one given.

No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.