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THE  
CHURCHMAN

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JUNE, 1900.

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ART. I.—THE BIRTH FROM ABOVE.

**H**OLINESS is a living element, a living power, a living growth. In holiness nothing is mechanical; everything is functional. No rules, no ordinances, no observances, no self-denials, nothing indeed of any kind which we do of ourselves, and by ourselves, can create in us the life of holiness. These things strengthen and chasten the holy life when once it has been imparted; but they cannot impart, or convey, or create it. The holy life is a divinely created, a divinely conveyed, a divinely imparted life. God alone is Self-Existent. All other life owes its being to some prior life. Science has abandoned the theory of spontaneous generation. It is high time that religion abandoned it also. Till we realize that we cannot begin the good work of religion of ourselves, that God only can begin it,<sup>1</sup> we cannot make even a beginning in holiness. The first clear conviction we need in reference to the life of holiness is that it must spring from a living source; and that source outside itself. The life of holiness is neither self-existent or self-begotten in man. Its fountain is in the living well of God's fatherhood, its root is in Christ the Living Vine, its seed is from God the Holy Ghost.

This law, that life proceeds only from life, is a law pervading every part of the living universe. Everyone knows the difference between a living organism and a dead machine, between a seed and a rule. No number of rules, however excellent in themselves, or excellently observed, can engender life. The prevenient necessity of life is seed. Where there is no seed there can be no life. No skill in mechanical arts, no extent of perseverance in mechanical industry, no amount

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<sup>1</sup> Phil. i. 6.

of strictness in the observance of mechanical rules, can engender life. Life can only flow from some living source, or spring from some living root, or grow from some living seed. It cannot spring from a dry fountain, or a dead root, or a sterile germ. Only by the living God, the God of living holiness, can the holy seed-life be implanted in man.

All holy persons are twice-born persons. They are born, first, in the common way of nature. They are born again, from above, by water and the Holy Ghost.<sup>1</sup> Without this birth from above no one can see the kingdom of God, which is the kingdom of holiness.

It is not our physical, but our spiritual, birth which is the beginning of our spiritual life. It is our spiritual birth which originates in us the faculties of spiritual vision and spiritual discernment. Until we are spiritually born from above, we are spiritually blind and spiritually imperceptive. Seeing physically, yet spiritually we see not; and hearing physically, yet spiritually we understand not.<sup>2</sup> It is the spiritual birth which gives the spiritual eye, the spiritual ear, the spiritual mind to man. As every kind of life must spring from a living source, so life of the spiritual and holy kind must spring from a spiritual and holy source.

The spiritual life is a distinct, generic form of life. And it is a universal law that each generic form of life can only spring from its own proper genus. Birds cannot be hatched from fishes, nor trees grow from birds. Grapes cannot be gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles. We must have vines to grow grapes, and fig-trees for figs. From thistles nothing but thistles can grow; from thorns nothing but thorns. In like manner the spiritual life cannot be born of carnal parentage; that which is born of the flesh is flesh; "that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit."<sup>3</sup> The spiritual life must spring from spiritual seed. The holy life must have a holy beginning. This holy beginning is the birth again from above.

When our Lord made to Nicodemus His great announcement of the heavenly origin of the holy life, we are told that Nicodemus was greatly perplexed. He marvelled. But our Lord bade him "Marvel not." And why, indeed, should he have marvelled? For, as our Lord gently reminded him, the law of the spiritual origin of the spiritual life is only part of the grand creational law from which no manner of life can possibly be exempt. According to the primary and fundamental law written everywhere throughout the universe, one form of life cannot spring indiscriminately from another. Over and over again it is repeated in the first chapter of

<sup>1</sup> John iii. 5.<sup>2</sup> Matt. xiii. 13.<sup>3</sup> John iii. 6.

Genesis that it was part of the creational code that each several genus of life can come into being only "according to its kind"—trees after their kind, birds after their kind, creeping things after their kind, fishes after their kind, beasts after their kind. It is to this creational law that St. Paul makes striking reference in his grand thesis of the Resurrection: "There is a natural body and a spiritual body, and to every seed its own body."<sup>1</sup>

Modern science has promulged no suggestion adverse to this great generic, creational law. For whatever may have been God's original method of bringing into being the first forms of life, whether by separate independent creations or by successive developments from a single primordial germ, all the world knows that after the various kingdoms of life were once established within their present limits, not a single instance of any generic form of life being produced from another and different genus has ever occurred. One species may run very near another, may even intermingle with it and produce specific modifications and novelties; but one distinctive genus of life has never been known in the entire course of biological history to produce life of another distinctive genus. Since the Creation the law has been unchangeable that every generic order of life must have an origin according to its kind.

When our Lord, then, enunciated the law of the spiritual origin of the spiritual life, He was not enunciating any new law, but only attesting and re-enforcing a law which had been in operation from the beginning. The law of generic origins is a law as old as the cosmical universe. In no department of the universe of life can any exception be found. It works everywhere unfailingly among trees and birds and fishes and mammals and man. It works also in each department of man's triune being, alike in his body, and his soul, and his spirit.<sup>2</sup> That which is born of the flesh is carnal, that which is born of the soul is psychical, that which is born of the spirit is spiritual. The psychical cannot be born of the carnal, nor the spiritual of the psychical. The carnal is carnally born, the psychical is psychically born, the spiritual is born spiritually. The soul works through the body as its instrument, but is not born of the body as its origin, although, as far as can be discerned, it is born with the body. The spirit works both through the body and the soul as its instruments, exalting and hallowing both alike. Yet is it born from neither; nor is it born at the same time with the other two. It is born afterwards; it is separately, distinctly, generically

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. xv. 44, 38.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Thess. v. 23.

born, born from above, of water and of the Spirit, as our Lord sublimely announced to Nicodemus.

Nicodemus had already passed through his physical and psychical birth. He had entered into physical life, with its physical senses and physical perceptions; and as far as we can see he had entered upon his psychical life when he entered upon his physical life. The birth of his soul had synchronized with the birth of his body. For although the psychical development in man is, as we know, slower and later than the physical—although the moral and intellectual germ lies in the embryonic state longer than the carnal—yet no sign has been given to us that they do not begin their existence together. At any rate, at the time of his conversation with our Lord, Nicodemus had already entered into the fulness of his psychical life. He had attained a high mental and moral standard. He was a master in Israel and a seeker after truth. He had a psychical and rational belief in God. He also perceived the superhuman beauty and power of the teachings of Jesus. He recognised Him as a Heaven-sent worker of rational and moral miracles. “No man,” he confessed to Jesus, “can do the miracles that Thou doest except God be with him.”<sup>1</sup>

But beyond this Nicodemus had neither the vision nor the faculty to go. And why? Because one thing was still lacking to the completion of his knowledge and understanding of the Christ. Already he understood the Christ rationally, even affectionately. But he could not discern Him spiritually because as yet he was, in the Christian sense, spiritually unborn. The trinity of his existence was not yet Christianly perfected; he was still without the Christian birth from above. And until he was Christianly born—Christianly quickened and vivified and enlightened and endowed—he could neither spiritually discern, nor spiritually know, nor spiritually understand the Christ. Even our Lord Himself could not give to Nicodemus the knowledge which Nicodemus desired to possess until Nicodemus had the faculty to receive it, and this faculty he could only obtain through the process of being born from above of water and the Holy Ghost. Hence the simple and majestic announcement of the Lord Jesus, “Ye must be born again.”

In making this great proclamation to Nicodemus, our Lord was not, let me repeat, unfolding any new fact or any new law. From the beginning it had been a law that all generic life must have its own proper generic source. All that our Lord did was to project this law into the world of spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> John iii. 2.

life, and to foreshadow its operation in the Christian Church. As in His parables, our Lord frequently drew a parallel between physical and spiritual things—saying, for instance, that the kingdom of heaven was as leaven, or as seed growing secretly, and the like,<sup>1</sup> so in His conversation with Nicodemus the main gist is the parallelism between the physical and spiritual life of man. Neither life can be produced mechanically. Each life proceeds by the way of birth. Also in both lives alike the creational law of genus reigns supreme. That which is born of man is human; only that which is born from above is divine.

Great care, however, must be taken lest this simple and luminous spiritual law enunciated by Christ gets confused in our minds with any dark and intricate problems of eschatology. Here no question is raised as to whether that which is born of the flesh is mortal, and only that which is born of the Spirit is undying. Here no question is raised concerning universal redemption, or the duration of Divine punishments, or of salvation and eternal hope out of Christ. It was not our Lord's way to raise such questions as these. His teachings for the most part were of a direct, plain, practical kind. It was Nicodemus who raised speculative difficulties about the new birth. "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Nicodemus's notion of the new birth was not that of a new birth at all, but of an old birth over again. He thought it was being born twice over in the same way to the same kind of life. No wonder that so thinking he marvelled. But our Lord immediately showed him, as we have already said, that all such marvelling was out of place. Here was no dark speculative saying—no bewildering practical difficulty. Here was only a clear restatement of a great creational law, and its Divine application to the kingdom of the spirit and the Church of Christ. The new birth was like every other birth in that it was a birth of life from life, and a birth of life according to its kind. In so far as it was a new birth, its newness consisted mainly in the Divine directness of its origin, and in the fact that it was subsequent to the physical birth. Our Lord Himself did not call it a new birth; he called it a birth from above. The spiritual birth in man is not a new birth in the sense of not conforming to the laws which govern all births. It closely conforms to those laws. It is a birth of life from life. It is a birth answering in kind to its origin. Its origin being spiritual, it is a

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. xiii. 31; Mark iv. 26-32.

spiritual birth. Its origin being holy, it is a holy birth—the first beginning of the life of holiness.

It is in this sense, the sense of conforming to the laws of earthly births, that, in the end of His conversation with Nicodemus, our Lord refers to the birth from above as an "earthly" thing. "If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not," he asks, "how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?"<sup>1</sup> These heavenly things, as the context shows, were things pertaining to the ineffable nature and attributes of God—things such as the presence of the Son of Man in heaven while He was yet also sojourning on earth; things such as the unspeakable love of God in giving His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. These, in their sublime wonder, are indeed heavenly things. They are things transcending all earthly experience, all earthly parallels. There is nothing on earth to which we can liken them, no comparison with which we can compare them. It is not so with the spiritual birth. This birth is a heavenly birth, inasmuch as it is a birth from above. But it is an earthly thing in its conformity with the laws of ordinary births. True, we cannot see its origin. Its whence is invisible to us. But so also is that of the wind. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit."<sup>2</sup> The wind is a natural and earthly phenomenon, notwithstanding the invisibility of its origin and destiny. So also the unseen origin and issue of the birth from above does not prevent its being an earthly and natural thing. This birth takes place in us while we are upon earth, therefore it is an earthly thing. It takes place according to the well-known laws of birth, therefore it is a natural thing. The directness of its descent from God does not make it a supernatural, far less a contra-natural birth. We greatly err when we speak of the direct and immediate workings of God as supernatural. Of all works, those of the Author of Nature are the most natural.

The birth from above, then, is a perfectly natural birth, or, as our Lord denominated it, "an earthly thing." But though an earthly thing, it is not of the earth, earthy. Its origin, not less than its destiny, is the world above—the world unseen. The operation of the spiritual birth is an operation wrought, not by ourselves, but of God. As well might a non-existent child attempt to bring itself into being without the instrumentality of parents as the carnal man to begin in himself

<sup>1</sup> John iii. 12.

<sup>2</sup> John iii. 13, 16.

the holy life without the interposition of the holy God. No form of life can proceed from not-life, no order of life from an order diverse from itself; and so the holy life can only proceed from the living holy God!

It should also be observed, in connection with the birth from above, that a fundamental distinction exists between the beginning of a life and the consciousness of its beginning. The beginnings of life are unconscious beginnings. No child knows, or can remember, when first it physically began to be. Few persons, if any, can remember the beginnings either of their moral or intellectual life. Many can, of course, vividly remember the first great pulse of consciousness in their moral and intellectual life. They can vividly remember the first time they realized to themselves the wondrous motions of the mind, the first time the marvel burst on them that they were thinking, willing, reflecting beings. They can remember, too, the first strange hour in which right presented itself to them as right, wrong as wrong, shame as shame, duty as duty. Such an hour is a grand, light-bringing, revolutionizing hour in the moral life of man. But, as a rule, long before intellect becomes self-conscious, or the moral faculty realizes to itself the splendour of its existence, there has been a considerable duration of preparatory, unconscious, intellectual and moral life. The hidden seed has been living and growing beneath the surface of the soil. It is indeed a great and glorious moment for the intellectual and moral germ when it first breaks through the surface, and first freely breathes the air, and first warmly feels the sun. But even in the womb of imprisoned darkness the intellectual and moral seed was not dead. It was invisibly and unconsciously alive long before it sprang forth into the seen and fuller life of consciousness.

So is it also with the spiritual birth unto the holy life. Its beginning is generally an unconscious beginning. To use again our Lord's own figure, we find from experience that the birth from above is as the blowing of the wind. The wind often begins to blow very softly. Its first waftings are almost imperceptible. So gentle are they that we can scarcely tell whence they come or whither they go. Thus is it often with the first breathings of the Holy Ghost upon the spirits of men. Multitudes of God's holy ones have been utterly unable to tell when their first faint pulse of spiritual life began to beat, when the first unfoldings of the spiritual seed took place beneath the soil, when the first slow risings of the spiritual dawn began to appear in the darkness of their spiritual night.

Sometimes, indeed, the beginnings of the holy life seem as if they were sudden, abrupt, more in the nature of a volcano than a birth. We often meet persons who can remember—

yea, they can never forget—the exact place and hour of the first revelation of the Lord Jesus to their quickened spirit. It was thus, we know, with Saul of Tarsus. Years after the event he remembered distinctly both the hour and the spot at which the dazzling light from heaven shone round about him; and for the first time he consciously heard the voice of the ascended, yet still persecuted, Jesus appealing to his heart. It was nigh unto Damascus, he tells us, and about noon.<sup>1</sup> So likewise has it happened to great numbers of the saints. Their birth from above has seemed to have a clear, conscious, well-remembered beginning. They appear to themselves able distinctly to recall its time and place, its where and when.

Yet upon examination these changes seldom prove to be as sudden in reality as they seem in appearance. The aged Simeon, for example, had long been waiting for the consolation of Israel before he recognised its advent in the infant child Jesus. The three thousand who were pricked to the heart by St. Peter's pentecostal sermon, were, the narrative tells us, just and devout men. They, therefore, doubtless had also been waiting for the Messiah, and had heard the things which had come to pass concerning the crucified and risen Jesus. Being serious persons, they would for weeks have been seriously pondering these things. Saul of Tarsus, too, had not only been blameless as touching his hereditary religion, but he had also been an eye-witness of the blessed martyrdom of St. Stephen, and had consented unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him. St. Stephen's great Messianic apology on the eve of his martyrdom must have sunk deeply into the mind of the young and ardent Saul. So, too, must the heavenly look on St. Stephen's angel-face, and the wonderfully Christ-like petitions: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."<sup>2</sup> As the zealous enthusiast went about making havoc of the Church and haling to prison Christian men and Christian women, the memory of that angel-face and the echoes of those dying prayers must often have haunted him. When therefore Saul the persecutor was arrested by Jesus the persecuted, the name of Jesus was no new name to him. The change from hatred to love, from death-spreading persecution to death-defying devotion, seems at first sight an instantaneous change; yet it would be a superficial study of the phenomenon which neglected to take account of all the

<sup>1</sup> Acts xxii. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Luke ii. 25; Luke xxiv. 18; Phil. iii. 6; Acts ii. 5; viii. 59, 60; xxii. 20.

preceding incidents which heralded it. In a very real sense, of course, all births are sudden. The bursting of the husk, the breaking of the shell, the escape from the womb are comparatively brief operations, but the preparation for them is of much longer duration. So is it, I believe, as a rule, with the birth from above. The heavenly gestation has been proceeding long before we are conscious of it. The escape from darkness into light, from spiritual imprisonment to spiritual liberty, seems a sudden escape. But in reality it has been slow, not sudden. The preparation has been long, although the event appears instantaneous. I doubt if in the whole course of Christian biology a single instance has occurred of the Christian birth from above taking place suddenly, without preparation, without gestation. If any such instances can be adduced, they are analogous to the turning of water into wine without the intervention of grapes, or to the multiplication of the loaves without the prior multiplication of the wheat. They are instances out of the regular course of earthly things. And we cannot too insistently recall and ponder over the fact that our Lord has told us that the birth from above is an "earthly thing" in the sense that it conforms to the regular laws governing births; and one of these laws is that a dark, still, silent, unconscious period goes before the escape into voiceful light, and free motion and glad consciousness. St. Paul himself, in his riper years, dated back the beginning of his Christ-life, not to his blinding arrest near Damascus, but to the period of unconsciousness in his mother's womb."<sup>1</sup>

But whether man's birth from above proceeds in the normal manner and begins in a condition of embryonic unconsciousness, or whether it takes place exceptionally and is conscious from the first, there can be no question that in all instances alike its beginning must be a spiritual beginning—a beginning wholly distinct from that of our physical and psychical life. All truly spiritual persons must, as I have said, be twice-born persons. First, they must be born in the natural way of all mankind; secondly, they must be born from above, in a heavenly and spiritual manner—directly from God Himself. All spiritual life must have a spiritual origin—an origin entirely unconditioned by matter. Material water may be the divinely-ordained vehicle by which this spiritual life is conveyed, as bread and wine may be the divinely-ordained channels through which strength and refreshment flow into it, but its birth is from above and of the Holy Ghost. "All physical and psychical life," says St. Paul, "has its origin from God through the first man, Adam, who became a living soul;

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<sup>1</sup> Gal. i. 15.

all Christian life through the second, or last Adam, who became a quickening or life-giving spirit."<sup>1</sup> Spirit cannot be born of flesh and blood, neither can flesh and blood inherit the kingdom of the Spirit. As the origin of our spiritual life is divine and spiritual, so will its destiny in the end be divine and spiritual also. Every seed has a body of its own. Terrestrial seeds have terrestrial bodies, celestial seeds have bodies celestial, and spiritual seeds will likewise in the end have spiritual bodies. We see not yet, nor shall we ever see in this our mortal state, the full development of the spiritual body born in us from above of water and the Holy Ghost. But constant experience works in us the sure and certain hope of the ultimate development of the spiritual body which was implanted in us at our spiritual birth. For on every hand we see tokens that the spiritual life in man does not grow old with his earthly years. Nay, as the physical bodies of the saints gradually wax feeble and decay their spiritual life gradually waxes stronger and more perceptive. As the outward man day by day perishes, the inward man is day by day renewed.<sup>2</sup> The nearer God's holy ones draw to the gates of physical death, ever stronger grows the strength and brighter shines the light of their spiritual life. This liveliness of man's spiritual powers, up to the very hour of his physical decease, is of itself an intimation of their immortality. Yea, it is immeasurably more than an intimation. It is the expression, the evidence of the working of the immutable law both of the origin and the destiny of every manner of generic life, including the spiritual life of the twice-born man. For as the body which is born of the earth is earthy, and returns to the earth, so the spirit which is born from above is heavenly, and returns to God, who gave it.<sup>3</sup>

JOHN W. DIGGLE.



## ART. II.—THE WITNESS OF THE HISTORICAL SCRIPTURES TO THE ACCURACY OF THE PENTATEUCH.

### No. V.

IT is worth noting that the *Times* review of Professor Cheyne's "Biblical Cyclopædia" contains some caustic remarks on the arbitrariness of the methods by which conclusions are arrived at, and the confidence with which those conclusions are pronounced to be final. The *Times* observes that it seems scarcely worth while to embody such conclu-

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. xv. 45, 46.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Eccles. xii. 7.