

# BORN AGAIN

Vincent Cheung

Copyright © 2006 by Vincent Cheung  
<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted without the prior permission of the author or publisher.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

# CONTENTS

JOHN 3:1.....	4
JOHN 3:2.....	7
JOHN 3:3.....	11
JOHN 3:4.....	16
JOHN 3:5.....	25
JOHN 3:6-7 .....	29
JOHN 3:8.....	33
JOHN 3:9-13 .....	38
JOHN 3:14-15 .....	42
JOHN 3:16.....	46
JOHN 3:17-18 .....	56
JOHN 3:19-21 .....	61

## John 3:1

There is a well-known story in the Bible about a conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. It begins in the third chapter of the Gospel of John, but to better appreciate what happens in the conversation, we should first take a look at the verses that come immediately before chapter 3, since they give us the background against which John presents us with the story.

So we will start from 2:23-25: "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man." Here John tells us that many people have seen the miracles that Jesus did in Jerusalem and so they believe in him. But although they trust him, Jesus, on the other hand, does not trust them. The HCSB is correct where it translates, "Many *trusted* in His name...Jesus, however, would not *entrust* Himself to them."

John gives us an interesting explanation for this, and that is, he says that Jesus did not entrust himself to these people because "he knew all men," and that "he knew what was in a man." It is with this in the background that John proceeds to recount several examples from the life of Jesus showing that the Lord knew the circumstances and even the very hearts and secrets of the people he encountered. He saw their motives, perceived their needs, and even their sins were transparent to him. Then, like a master physician of souls, he would deal with them in ways that precisely addressed each person's unique condition.

In chapter 3, John tells us about the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. This is what we are about to discuss, and so we will come back to it in a moment. Then, in chapter 4, John tells us about an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. This woman is very different from Nicodemus – in fact, they are opposites on many points – but Jesus also sees into her background and her heart. He speaks to her accordingly, and with as much skill and insight as when he deals with Nicodemus in the previous chapter. In verse 29, when the woman returns to her town to tell the people about Jesus, she says, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

After that, in chapter 5, John relates an incident in which Jesus heals a person who has been an invalid for thirty-eight years. Jesus approaches him and asks, "Do you want to get well?" (v. 6). Certainly, the story demonstrates the power of Jesus to heal, and the fact that he performs this healing on the Sabbath carries important implications. But there is still more to it, for if we will keep in mind what John says in 2:24-25, then we will also perceive the significance of what he records in 5:14, where Jesus says to the man who has just been healed, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." Jesus knows this man's background, and he is aware of a connection between his spiritual condition and his physical condition. Jesus does not merely assume this connection, but he perceives it, since he offers a different explanation for "a man blind from birth" in chapter 9. He has supernatural insights into people.

Anyway, at this time we are only concerned with the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, and we see that John makes a strong connection between 2:25 and 3:1. Right after stating that Jesus "knew what was in *a man*," John introduces the first of a series of events in the life of Jesus, starting with Nicodemus, and writes, "Now there was *a man*," that is, Nicodemus, who comes to visit with Jesus.

To read verse 1 in full, it says, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council." Although there is no way for us to know everything about the motives of Nicodemus and the circumstances surrounding his visit, the verse does offer us several details that would shed light on the significance of the things that we will read in the subsequent verses.

The Pharisees are those who have dedicated their lives to a meticulous observance of the Law of Moses. Paul says that they belong to "the strictest sect of our religion" (Acts 26:5). Although their purpose and philosophy appear noble, by the time of Jesus they have become unbearably legalistic.

For example, on the surface they jealously observe and guard the Sabbath. It is to be a day of rest, and in which work is forbidden. However, they have imposed upon it a large number of rules by which they define what constitutes "work" on the Sabbath, allegedly to ensure strict obedience to this law. The problem is that, not only have they added to the word of God, but these rules are such that they subvert the Sabbath itself, defeating its very purpose and intent. In the end, they are not really observing God's commandment concerning the Sabbath, but the rules that they have made and imposed upon the commandment, and which in many ways oppose the spirit and letter of God's intent for such a commandment.

Jesus sees through the sham and says to them, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (Mark 7:9; also 8 and 13). On another occasion, he says, "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:24). By this he means that they are careful to follow certain external rules, especially those that they have created for themselves, and by the observance of which they claim to please God, but at the same time, they would break the greatest of the commandments, and would violate the very essence and weightiest matters of the Law.

This is why Jesus calls them hypocrites. They present themselves as one kind of people when in reality they are the very opposite. Their religion has become external, man-centered, and even man-made. And in following this religious system, they have become self-righteous and self-assured. In reality, God's approval has become irrelevant, since they would justify themselves and one another. Thus in one place, Jesus says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean" (Matthew 23:27).

Now, the external is not unimportant or irrelevant in religion. God's commands pertain to both our thoughts and our actions. But what defines a person's spiritual condition and drives his actions is the heart, his thoughts and his motives. The evil things that come forth from a man's heart are what make him unclean in God's sight (Matthew 15:18-20). Jesus perceives the evil and the malice in the hearts of the Pharisees, as well as their outward disobedience to God's Law. Although they appear extremely pious to some people, and certainly to themselves, their religion is dead. They bring spiritual bondage and condemnation to the people, and they have become the enemies of God.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee. From what we read in chapter 3, as well as his subsequent appearances in the Gospel of John, we can agree that he is better than the typical Pharisee. But still, it is from this background and this mentality that he comes to inquire of Jesus. Also, we can assume that he is at least outwardly religious, that he is respected by the people, and that he is very educated. Later in the passage, Jesus even calls him "*the* teacher of Israel" (v. 10, NASB).

But there is more to him. Verse 1 also refers to him as "a member of the Jewish ruling council." This means that he is a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme ruling body among the Jews. The council is headed by the high priest, and has religious, civil, and criminal jurisdiction over the people. Of course, its power is limited while Israel is under the rule of foreign nations at various times in history, but its authority is nevertheless considerable. Among its powers and duties, the council is responsible to investigate and deal with those whom they suspect to be false prophets and heretics. Other New Testament characters who are also members of the Sanhedrin include Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43) and Gamaliel (Acts 5:34).

In addition, something that John writes elsewhere suggests that Nicodemus must be a wealthy man. Nicodemus also appears in chapters 7 and 19 in this Gospel. In chapter 19, after Jesus had died on the cross, Nicodemus accompanies Joseph of Arimathea to bury the body of Jesus. Verse 39 says, "Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds." Only a wealthy man could bring all of this, and as one scholar comments, Nicodemus brings such a large amount of myrrh and aloes that it is as if he is preparing for a royal burial.

## John 3:2

Then, John continues, "He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.'" With his distinguished background, education, wealth, and power, it is remarkable that he would come to Jesus at all. What is his reason for coming? What is his motive? Does he come to mock Jesus, to test him, to entrap him? From what we read here, it appears that this is not the case, but it seems that he comes to Jesus to inquire of him, to learn more about him and his teaching, to discuss theology with him.

As I mentioned, Nicodemus appears two more times in the Gospel of John, and in both instances he stands on the side of Jesus. We have already read from chapter 19 where he invests his money and effort to give Jesus a proper burial. Previous to that in chapter 7, when his peers are ready to condemn Jesus, Nicodemus warns them against drawing a hasty conclusion, and says, "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" (v. 51). So it is natural in chapter 3 to understand that Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he has an interest in what Jesus has to say. And as he is himself a prominent teacher in Israel, surrounded by other prominent teachers and religious leaders, it is remarkable that he would come to Jesus at all.

John says that Nicodemus comes to Jesus "at night." It is common for people to assume that he does so because he is afraid of being seen by others and being associated with Christ. Because of his teachings and his miracles, Jesus has been generating controversy and drawing much attention from the public. Religious leaders who are eager to retain their traditions and their control over the people regard him with suspicious, if not outright malice. So it is suggested that Nicodemus comes at night under the cloak of darkness. Although this is possible, it is by no means clear from the text. John does not say that this is his reason for coming at night, nor is this the necessary implication derived from anything in our passage.

There is another possible explanation. The rabbis think that the best time to study and discuss theology is at night when they could read, think, and converse for hours undisturbed. So for one rabbi to visit another at night is a common practice, and does not demand any deeper reason or motive to explain it. Yet a third possibility is that this is just one of the details that John chooses to include as he recalls this incident. At any rate, whatever the reason, we cannot insist that Nicodemus comes by night for fear of persecution or embarrassment.

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night and says to him, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." Now let us consider what Nicodemus says in this verse. First, he states, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God." A more literal translation is, "We know that you have come from God as a teacher" (NASB). The reason

Nicodemus gives for this belief is, "For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Because he uses the word "we," some suggest that Nicodemus comes to Jesus as a representative of a number of Pharisees who hold the same generally positive view toward Jesus, and who wish to inquire of him, to know more about his teaching, his mission, and what he has to say about their greatest concerns. We need not speculate about whether there are others among the Pharisees whose thinking are similar to Nicodemus, although this is probably the case, for at this moment we are interested in what we can clearly derive from what he says.

What we notice is that Nicodemus is very different from most of the other Pharisees, who would accuse Jesus of performing miracles by the power of the devil. Of course, Jesus would refute such an accusation when it is brought up (Matthew 12:24-37), but here the important thing is to note that Nicodemus does not hold the same attitude as these malicious Pharisees. He is not out to destroy Jesus, and what he says to Jesus here presents no apparent criticism.

Some commentators think that there is a note of either condescension or flattery, or condescending flattery, in how Nicodemus approaches Jesus. As Nicodemus is a rabbi himself, it seems incredible to these commentators that he would have so much respect for Jesus that he would call him one of his own. But this is what he says to him: "*Rabbi*, we know you are a teacher who has come from God." So it seems to them that he must be saying this out of a condescending attitude, or as flattery to disarm Jesus. However, this is an inference from what the commentators *assume* about Nicodemus, and not an inference from the text itself. The text offers no evidence that would support such an interpretation, and thus it is nothing more than speculation.

As for the statement, "For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him," this is not necessarily a statement of flattery, but it could be his honest opinion as to why he thinks that Jesus has come from God as a teacher. Considered in itself, there is nothing wrong with this statement. The New Testament writers readily describe the ministry of Jesus as one characterized by the miracles that he performs, as well as the abundance and magnitude of these miracles.

We read in Acts 10:37-38, "You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, *because God was with him.*" Peter uses the same language to explain why Jesus could perform all the miracles that he performed. It was because "God was with him."

Then let us also take a look at the final verse in the Gospel of John. There, John writes, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (21:25; see also 20:30). This statement refers to everything that Jesus did, and not only to



the miracles that he performed, although his miracles are certainly included, since this statement refers to *everything* that he did. Not only are his miracles included in everything that he did, but as we have just noted, they are a significant part of his ministry. And here John tells us, "If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."

Even if we regard this statement as a hyperbole – that is, as an obvious exaggeration not intended to deceive but used as a literary device, and for effect – the image that John presents to us is still significant. He does *not* say, "If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even a whole *room* would not have the space for the books that would be written." If this is what John says, we would already be impressed with the idea that Jesus accomplished a great number of things, for how many people could perform so many things that if these things were all recorded in writing, the books would fill even a whole room? Even if all our significant deeds were to be recorded on the scrolls that the New Testament writers used at the time, they might still not be enough to fill a large room. But John says that if all the things that Jesus did were recorded in writing, even the whole *world* might not have room for the books that would be written.

In other words, Jesus must have done many, many things, and he must have done many, many miracles, so that if they were all written down, even the whole world would not have the room to contain all the books that would be written. Again, even if we regard this statement as an exaggeration, and even if only a small fraction of these "many things" were miracles, it would still mean that Jesus performed an overwhelming number of miracles. It would still mean that he performed an outright ridiculous number of miracles. We must also remember that the ministry of Jesus spanned only several years, and it was during these several years that he did these "many things," including his miracles.

Putting all of this together, the implication is that these miracles were bursting forth from Jesus in such a concentrated fashion that they were constantly happening, one after another, or even many at the same time. His ministry was characterized by miracles on top of miracles. It seems legitimate to infer that he must have performed tens of thousands of miracles during his ministry. The exact number is unimportant, but what is important is to realize that there were so many miracles coming from Jesus that these miracles were happening left and right, and literally spilling forth all over the place around him. This explains why his miraculous power had become one of his distinguishing marks even at the earliest point of his ministry.

Nicodemus perceives the significance of these miracles, and says, "For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." Nevertheless, we must recall how John concludes the second chapter of his Gospel: "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man." So we cannot infer too much about the spiritual condition of Nicodemus from 3:2.

His statement implies a generally positive view about Jesus, but in itself, it falls far short of a full appreciation for who Jesus is, and it fails to reflect an understanding of the heart of his mission. At least Nicodemus could infer that the magnitude and the abundance of miracles that Jesus is performing imply that he has come from God. However, what he says does not tell us how much he understands about spiritual operations. At the most, it tells us that he is aware of the outward effects of spiritual power in the ministry of Christ, and to him this means that Jesus has come from God as a teacher.

From what John says at the end of chapter 2, we can be certain that Jesus knows exactly what is in the heart of Nicodemus, his concerns and motives, what he lacks and what he needs. So the exact condition of Nicodemus remains to be seen from how Jesus interacts with him, from what is coming up in this conversation.

## John 3:3

Keeping in mind that "he knew all men," that "he knew what was in a man," and therefore that he knows what is in Nicodemus, verse 3 says, "In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'" Jesus is not saying this to a common criminal or some drunk on the street, but to an educated, powerful, and religious rabbi. And he says, "No one" – *no one* – "can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

When I was in college, I took a course from a professor of economics who was well-known for his participation in Christian inner-city and prison ministries. One day, he referred to himself as a "born again Christian" in his lecture as he was talking about his work with prison inmates, using them as examples to illustrate a point about economics and racial issues.

When the class was over, a classmate whom I had befriended asked if I would like to have lunch with him, and mentioned a certain restaurant. I recalled the meal that I had the last time I was there and instantly agreed. As we sat down and started to peruse our menus, he suddenly looked up and said to me, "What did he mean by *born again*?" What a delicious opportunity, to be asked a question like that.

Now, I am never one to shy away from a spiritual discussion, nor do I mind initiating one with a friend or stranger. But contrary to some, I disagree that I must always tell someone that I am a Christian as soon as possible no matter what. If it is clear that I am unlikely to meet the person again, then I would have a greater sense of urgency about it, but even then I know that I am not the only one whom God can use to speak to the person. (The doctrine of divine sovereignty does *not* undermine evangelism, but if it does not mean that God is sovereign, and that he does not *need* men or a particular man, then it means nothing.) However, if it is clear that I will have the opportunity to meet the person again, or even many times afterward, then I would often wait for the right opportunity, or at least take time to set up the conversation better when introducing the topic.

Do not misunderstand – I would not hesitate to bring up the gospel even at inconvenient times, nor do I think that we must be asked before preaching to people. Once I was doing street evangelism with a church in Hong Kong, and on this particular night, we had decided to enter a fast food restaurant and speak to the customers there one-on-one. Each of us would approach a table and speak to the diners about the gospel. Each conversation involved an explanation of Christianity and would often require a defense of it as questions and objections were raised. It would conclude with an invitation to visit the church to learn more, and if the people would accept them, we would always give them several audio cassettes to bring home. Sometimes a conversation would last for thirty minutes or more, and sometimes even more than a hour. So each of us could usually talk to only several people each night.

On this night, as I was looking for the final person to talk to, I spotted a young man sitting alone at the corner of the restaurant. I said that he was a young man, but he was perhaps ten to fifteen years older than I was, as I was even younger. As I approached, I noticed that there was a rose on the table, and he was writing slowly on a notepad. I went up to him and started to tell him about God, Jesus, and the gospel. Without looking up, he cried, "My girlfriend just broke up with me. Please leave me alone!" I looked over his shoulder – he was writing a letter to her girlfriend, or ex-girlfriend, to convince her to take him back. I could not make out what he wrote, but I noticed that there were tear stains on the paper.

I was not deterred, but went right on preaching to him. I was too young at the time to have any regard for the type of problem he was experiencing anyway. I continued, and at times he would respond to my probing questions through his tears, so that we actually had a conversation despite his reluctance. Finally, as he was not in the mood for a thorough spiritual discussion about his soul, I asked if I could give him a sermon tape, and he cried, "Leave it! Leave it!" I placed a tape on the table, patted him on the back, and left. As I thought about that incident, I realized that I could have done better, but I never regretted approaching him and talking to him despite his pain and reluctance.

So it is not that I always choose to wait for a "perfect" opportunity, which might never come, but I am against setting down very rigid rules as to how long you are permitted to wait before you *must* mention the gospel. I have heard a number of preachers say that if someone has known you for more than a week and still have no idea that you are a Christian, then there must be something wrong with you. Perhaps your faith is defective, or perhaps you are not a Christian at all. Not only is this rule unbiblical, but because it is unbiblical, it injects unnecessary fear and guilt into God's people, and into believers who could become effective witnesses for Christ given the proper instructions and exhortations.

Of course, these preachers intend to encourage zeal in evangelism, but what they say is too simplistic, and betrays ignorance of anything beyond the most plain and superficial spiritual operations. I am certainly not encouraging timidity, but rather a boldness that can work together with a mature sense of spiritual timing, as well as confidence in God's providence to prepare people's hearts and direct our conversations.

I had known this student for several months, and we were in another class together previous to this, although we never spoke then. This was the first natural opportunity to speak to him about religion, and it came as a direct invitation to talk about the heart of the matter. Starting a discussion about religion in such a manner has a number of advantages, one of which is that the person will more likely follow through with it to the end, instead of turning away to escape when the conversation becomes uncomfortable for him, perhaps when the believer begins to expound on sin, its consequences, and the only solution in Jesus Christ.

There is something else remarkable about this, and that is that he asked the question at all. The term "born again" has become so familiar in some cultures that many people assume that they understand what it means, or what it refers to, when in fact they have far less understanding about spiritual things than someone like Nicodemus. But although the language might be familiar, the concept is still foreign to most people, and even to some

professing Christians. So it surprised me that my friend would ask me what the professor meant when he referred to himself as "born again." It gave me the opportunity that I had been waiting for to tell him about the Christian faith.

This student did not understand the meaning of "born again," and he was willing to admit it. The professor, on the other hand, used the term as if he knew its meaning. Although I could not be sure, from the way that he used the term, my impression was that by it he was referring to a drastic moral reformation determined and executed by himself at a point of crisis in his life. And it seemed to me that it was this kind of "new birth" that he was trying to offer people in his inner-city and prison ministries.

For example, if he could persuade a gang member to leave the gang and start a new life, or to awaken an alcoholic to his drinking problem so that he would begin to deal with the difficulties of life by investing in work, hobbies, and relationships instead, then he would have considered such a person as "born again," especially when his outreach was done in association with the church.

If my impression was correct, then the professor did not know what the term meant when he said it. Or, more precisely, he was using it in a very different way than the way it is used in the Bible. What, then, does it mean to be born again? Does Nicodemus know? Do *you* know? Will you understand it if I were to tell you?

Let us read what Jesus says again: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." The word translated "again" can convey three meanings. Commentators usually say that there can be two meanings because it is commonly agreed that one of these three does not apply in our context.

One of the meanings is "from the first." For example, the word appears in Luke 1:3, and there it is translated as "from the beginning" (NIV) or "from the very first" (KJV). In Acts 26:5, where the KJV gives the literal translation, "Which knew me *from the beginning*," the NIV translates according to the meaning demanded by the context, and reads, "They have known me *for a long time*." It is this meaning that appears to commentators as inapplicable in our context, although William Barclay suggests that it can refer to the *radical* nature of the new birth.<sup>1</sup>

The second meaning is "again," and this is the translation usually selected. For example, Paul writes in Galatians 4:9, "Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over *again*?" Then, the third meaning is "from above." Considering the context of this passage and other portions of the New Testament, it seems that both of these meanings are intended.

The response from Nicodemus in verse 4 indicates that he took the word as meaning only "again," although he fails to understand the term even from this perspective. Since, as we will see, there is a deficiency in his understanding about spiritual things and in what Jesus

---

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Vol. 1*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), p. 125.

says in this verse, we cannot depend on his interpretation alone as an indication of what Jesus intended to convey by the word.

But we may know that "again" is at least part of his meaning here, since this would be consistent with his own teaching elsewhere, as well as the teaching of the New Testament writers. For example, he says on another occasion, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Peter writes that "he has caused us to be *born again*" (1 Peter 1:3, ESV), and here he definitely refers to being born *anew*.

Then, there is perhaps even stronger evidence that Jesus includes "from above" as part of his meaning. First, we must note that just as the kingdom of *heaven* is the same as the kingdom of *God*, and just as to say that something has come from *heaven* is the same as to say that something has come from *God*, to be born "from above" is just another way of saying to be born "of God." Once we are reminded of this, we realize that what Jesus teaches here has already been mentioned in the introduction of this Gospel, where John refers to those who are "born of God" (John 1:13).

Second, the word translated "again" here in verse 3 clearly means "from above" everywhere else in John's Gospel. In the same chapter of this Gospel that we are studying, verse 31 says, "The one who comes *from above* is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all." The other instances are John 19:11 and 23. The word is translated "from above" in the former, whereas the latter verse has no direct relevance to our text, but the translation there is "in one piece *from top* to bottom."

We will say more about this when we come to verses 5-8, but right now it is clear that both "again" and "from above" are intended. This should not surprise or puzzle us, for as Leon Morris observes, John is fond of using words that can mean several different things when he intends to convey all those meanings at the same time.<sup>2</sup> The difficulty for us, then, is that in the context of our passage the word cannot be translated with a single English word. Thus some translations employ marginal notes, and others like William Barclay and Leon Morris choose to translate "born again" into something like "reborn from above," so as to pack both meanings into one expression.

If my impression of the professor was correct, then although we will say more about what it means to be "born again" and "born from above," right away we can say that his use of the term differed from the way Jesus uses it. This is disastrous because Jesus insists that a man *must* be born again. And if the professor was "born again" in a different sense, then it means that he never had what Jesus insists to be necessary for everyone.

To be "born again," to be "born from above," is much more than to have a moral crisis and to reform one's habit and lifestyle. Above all – and this is the point that even many professing Christians fail to grasp – it is not initiated or performed by the person's own decision. The very idea of being "born" precludes this. Even with natural birth, one cannot

---

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 88-89.

give birth to himself, but someone else gives birth to him completely apart from his decision. In fact, that this person has any opportunity to decide anything at all is because someone has previously given birth to him.

That a person needs to be born "again" means that the first birth by which a person enters the world is insufficient for the purpose that Jesus has in mind. And that a person needs to be born "from above" further clarifies this in that now we see he is referring to a different *kind* of birth altogether. Also, that the person is to be born "from above" again emphasizes the fact that this birth cannot be performed by another human person, and still less by the person himself. It is neither initiated nor accomplished by human relation or human volition. A person reborn from above is "born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13, NASB).

Jesus says that unless a person is born again or born from above, he cannot "see the kingdom of God." An equivalent expression appears in verse 5, and says that without being born thus, a person cannot "*enter* the kingdom of God." To someone with a background like Nicodemus, this means that no one can participate in the messianic kingdom that every Jew expects to come, and that unless otherwise enlightened by Scripture, every Jew expects to enter just by virtue of his natural descent. In conjunction with this kingdom, they expect to inherit eternal, resurrected, glorified life from God. John also addresses this in our passage.

The pivotal question here is how one may inherit life and escape death and condemnation, how one may receive life and not perish (v. 16-18). The message of Jesus comes as a shock and an offense, saying to them, "God can raise for himself children of Abraham even from a pile of rocks, and you are deceived if you think you can rely solely on your natural heritage. I tell you the truth, and that is you *must* be born again, and unless you are born again, you will not see or enter the kingdom of God, but you will perish like the rest."

Of course, John is not addressing only Jews here, nor does he use language that only Jews could understand. Rather, he says that whoever believes in Jesus Christ will be saved and receive eternal life, but whoever rejects him is condemned already. To enter the kingdom is to find life, and to be shut out is to perish. But you will never see or enter into this glorious kingdom unless you are born again – that is, born from above – not by human decision, but by God's decree and power.

## John 3:4

Jesus has just said to Nicodemus that "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." We have spent a little time explaining what the term "born again" means, and we will discuss it still more later. Right now we must turn to examine the response from Nicodemus. Does he know what it means? He says in verse 4, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

As mentioned, the word usually translated "again" in verse 3 can mean either "again" or "from above," and in our context, both. Nicodemus, it seems, takes what Jesus says only in a physical sense, and formulates his response as a rhetorical question that assumes a negative answer (NASB, ESV). As many commentators point out, he speaks with a "crass literalism" that, at least on the surface, betrays an extreme spiritual dullness, and this dullness is such that it has become an issue in interpretation.

That is, because Nicodemus understands the term "born *again*" as referring to a *second* birth, and because it appears he takes this in a purely physical sense, his response is to wonder incredulously as to whether a person can enter into his mother's womb, and then be physically born for a second time. The issue for interpretation is whether Nicodemus could really be so spiritually dull, and if not, then a superficial reading of his response would tend to produce a misrepresentation of his perspective.

It remains to be seen as to whether Nicodemus could really be so dull, but before we discuss that, I must point out an error that is common to both Nicodemus and the commentators, although they commit this error from different angles. His rhetorical question assumes that an old man cannot enter into his mother's womb and be born a second time, and many commentators also assume that Nicodemus could not be so dull as to understand what Jesus has said in this way because such a physical rebirth is obviously impossible.

However, when the subject is religion, then the special providence of God could always be a factor unless it is precluded by principles and assumptions that are previously stated. But once God's power is involved, not only is it possible for an old man to enter his mother's womb and be born for a second time, it is even easy for this to happen. God could make the same person be reborn this way several thousand times a day if he so wishes.

So in a religious discussion, nothing should hinge on whether something like this is possible or impossible. Why should anyone find it strange that God the Son would enter the world through a virgin? Why should anyone find it incredible that God would raise the dead (Acts 26:8)? Why? There is no rational justification for the doubt. What is strange, what is incredible, is that anyone would find miracles strange and incredible. But sin is what explains this irrationality of unbelief.

Since all things are possible with God, what is possible or impossible should have nothing to do with what it means to be born again. However, if all through the discussion the person



is thinking of only what he can do to make himself more religious, then for someone to tell him that he must be born again would naturally appear impossible, because it is indeed impossible for him.

But what is impossible with man is possible with God. This is Christianity! God performs that which is impossible for man to do. Thus as long as a person is fixated on finding out what is in his own power to do to save himself, or to make himself acceptable to God, he will never enter the kingdom of heaven. This is certainly a stumbling block for the Jews, and especially for the Pharisees. It is reasonable to think that this is at least part of the difficulty that Nicodemus has with what Jesus says in verse 3, that "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Now, some commentators say that the Jews are already familiar with the idea of rebirth. When Gentiles are converted to the Jewish faith, it entails such a reorientation of their entire lifestyle that they are said to be reborn. Therefore, Nicodemus must have some idea of what Jesus is talking about. According to these commentators, the issue here is that the Jews would never apply the idea of rebirth to themselves, since in their minds this is something that only the Gentiles need. And this is supposed to explain this reaction from Nicodemus.

However, this explanation makes no sense. The response shows that Nicodemus is shocked at the thought that something seemingly impossible is required for anyone to even see the kingdom of God. But if these commentators are correct, Nicodemus should express surprise at *his need* for a new birth, and not the very idea of a new birth.

In fact, elsewhere in the Gospel of John when Jesus says to the Jews, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free," they reply, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" To this, Jesus declares, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (see John 8:31-59).

When these Jews deny that they are under bondage, when they deny that they need to be "set free," they do not question the very idea of being "set free" as if they do not understand, but they appeal to their lineage to deny that they are under bondage. So if something similar is happening in John 3, and if Nicodemus is merely denying that he needs to be reborn like the Gentiles, then it makes no sense for him to speak as if he questions the very idea or the very possibility of being reborn.

Although the commentators who take the above position do not point out this problem in their interpretation, they do realize that to say "Surely this cannot happen, can it?" is very different than to say "I do not need this to happen to me." So they suggest that the rhetorical question from Nicodemus is intended to be a sarcastic response. But this is beginning to seem like that the commentators are making things up as they go along. If their interpretation is inconsistent with the speaker's statement, then the speaker is just being

sarcastic. It is sufficient to say that this interpretation lacks justification, and has not been established.

One variation of the above interpretation suggests that Nicodemus is indeed familiar with the idea of rebirth, but having witnessed many such rebirths in the Gentiles who have converted to the Jewish faith, he cannot fail to notice that there has been no genuine transformation in these people. So, his rhetorical question to Jesus in fact expresses his frustration at a proposal that appears impossible. Can a person's inner self, his true character, really be changed? Well, surely a person cannot enter into his mother's womb again and start over, can he?

If this is what Nicodemus has in mind, it would imply that he has a little more understanding than it first appears; however, even so the fact would remain that he fails to grasp what Jesus is saying. If this is the true interpretation, then it would seem that Nicodemus possesses some natural insight into the failure of human effort and human tradition. But there is still no spiritual insight, no understanding of what Jesus has just said to him. Nevertheless, even this interpretation is based on speculation about what Nicodemus must have experienced and what he must be thinking in this passage. As with the previous one, it lacks justification and has not been established.

Another interpretation also insists that Nicodemus cannot be as dull as he seems. But according to this interpretation, he is so insulted by what Jesus says in verse 3 that he offers this rhetorical question as a mocking and scornful response.

In reply, we should first admit that the gospel indeed comes as an insult to someone who has yet to perceive his need for salvation. Our preaching applies the same language and the same labels to every person, whether he is a professional or a criminal. In terms of wisdom and intelligence, there is no essential difference between the philosophy professor or physics researcher and the simpleton, the elementary school dropout, the illiterate who cannot read his mail, or the mentally disabled person who needs help to button his shirt. In terms of morals and virtues, there is no essential difference between the humanitarian or the monk and the prostitute down the street, the serial rapist, or the mass murderer. So the professor and the philanthropist are incensed when they are told that they are no better than the dunce and the whore before God.

I remember speaking to one lady who denied that she had *ever* sinned in her life. She thought that "sin" applied only to outwardly violent and lewd acts. But upon speaking to her further, I soon discovered that she was filled with hatred, resentment, and bitterness toward people. The Bible says that a person who hates someone in his heart has committed murder and is in danger of hellfire. It also says that a person who denies that he has ever sinned is a liar, and the truth is not in him. So he is either a sinner, or he is a liar, and if he is a liar, then he is still a sinner. The woman was speechless after I showed this to her. The biblical message came as an insult to her. She wanted to call herself a Christian but she did not want to admit her need to be a Christian. Thus of course, she was not a Christian.

So we admit that the gospel comes as an insult to all unsaved people, and especially those who are filled with pride and self-righteousness. That said, the interpretation in question is nevertheless based on speculation about the private thoughts and motives of Nicodemus, and not on something that is explicit or implicit in the passage, or for that matter, any other biblical passage. Therefore, like the others, it lacks justification and has not been established.

One commentator is especially charitable toward Nicodemus, but so charitable that he seems to ignore what is actually in the text. Among other things, he says we cannot believe that Nicodemus, a prominent teacher in Israel, would be so deficient in understanding that not only does he fail to grasp what Jesus is saying, but that he would misunderstand it in the way that his response in verse 4 appears to indicate. But the commentator gives no good reason for this assertion. Moreover, he then tries to force the subsequent verses into conformity with this view, that Nicodemus is not really so void of spiritual understanding.

Before you throw up your hands and say, "Maybe we cannot know what Nicodemus means at all!" let me remind you that all these interpretations come from commentators who refuse to believe that Nicodemus could be really as dull as he appears. What we notice is that not only do they fail to establish that Nicodemus is not as dull as he appears, but that they also fail to provide their own reasonable and coherent interpretation.

Underlying their refusal to believe that Nicodemus could be as dull as he appears is the *assumption*, sometimes explicitly stated, that it is impossible for a biblical scholar such as he to be so void of spiritual understanding, such that he fails to grasp even a fundamental truth upon which a proper relationship with God must be constructed. But this is what it is – an assumption, and one that has yet to be justified. In fact, from this and other passages found in this Gospel, it is more than likely that one of John's intentions for this text is precisely to challenge this assumption.

Moreover, I will not hesitate to suggest the possibility that these commentators make such an assumption about Nicodemus because they make the same assumption about themselves. Is it possible for biblical scholars like themselves to be so spiritually dull that they would fail to grasp even the most basic and necessary truth? Nevertheless, in the spirit of asserting only that which we may legitimately infer from a text, we will not speculate further about the reasons and motives of these commentators, except to say that it is unbiblical and dangerous to assume that a biblical scholar would automatically understand spiritual truths.

The assumption is sometimes even stronger, so it seems that some commentators would refuse to believe that *anyone* would be dull enough as to misunderstand what Jesus means. Anyone should have a superior comprehension than what Nicodemus appears to demonstrate in verse 4. But again, this is merely an assumption. Rather than interpreting Scripture based on what we think we know about human nature, we must interpret Scripture based on what Scripture itself teaches about human nature. What is possible or impossible for a man to understand must be defined by the Bible, and not from what we think we know about man apart from the Bible.

It does not surprise me at all that Nicodemus sounds as spiritually dull as he does. In fact, given all the biblical passages on spiritual dullness, it would have puzzled me that so many commentators outright reject the possibility, if I had not noticed that these same passages explain why the commentators fail to understand spiritual dullness! The effects of sin on the mind cannot be overcome by education, even by seminary education, but they can be overcome only when God's Spirit enlightens the mind through Scripture.

In any case, some commentators are more honest with the text. D. A. Carson writes, "A more realistic view is that Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus was talking about at all."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, A. T. Robertson observes, "The learned Pharisee is as jejune in spiritual insight as the veriest tyro," and adds, "This is not an unheard of phenomenon."<sup>4</sup>

I can cite many examples of extreme spiritual dullness from what I have encountered in ministry. I would explain certain spiritual concepts to people plainly, directly, and repeatedly, but they could not understand them. But then, for some of them, one day the Spirit illuminated their minds, and they understood. We are commanded to proclaim and to expound, but we have no direct access to the human heart, no direct control over the mind. It is up to the Sovereign Spirit to grant understanding to our hearers.

Nevertheless, examples from personal experience cannot prove anything – at best they can only illustrate what the Bible already teaches. Thus for us to arrive at a proper understanding about spiritual dullness, we should look at some of the biblical passages on the subject. One can consider this an excursus, but it is far from a waste of time, nor is it irrelevant, since what we establish here will help us better understand the upcoming verses in John 3.

Now, Jesus says in Matthew 11:25-27, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

We must realize the force of these words. Jesus is saying that true knowledge and perception about the Father and the Son are jealously guarded by them, and even deliberately *hidden* by them, except to those whom they choose to reveal themselves. So it does not matter how much natural intelligence a person seems to possess – to know God without divine revelation, one must first overcome God's omnipotence to hide himself, but if one could accomplish this, then it would not be omnipotence that we are talking about.

This passage alone should eliminate all questions as to whether someone with the learning of Nicodemus could be as spiritually dull as he appears. His ability to understand *anything* about the spiritual operations of God depends on whether God has chosen to reveal himself

---

<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. 5 (Broadman Press, 1960), p. 45.

to him, and whether he has chosen to reveal himself at that particular time. In fact, Jesus says in our passage, "You have hidden these things from *the wise and the learned*," so that human wisdom and learning cannot penetrate the barrier between natural and spiritual wisdom.

Then, we turn to Matthew 16, and we will first read from verses 5-12:

When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread."

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

When Jesus mentions the "yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees," he is not referring to food but to their doctrine. If his own disciples could misunderstand something like this, why are we surprised that Nicodemus would fail to understand what Jesus means by "born again"? Certainly, here the disciples are not being sarcastic or clever – they really think that Jesus is talking about food. And what Jesus says in his rebuke confirms that the disciples are genuinely deficient in understanding.

Now comes the crucial point. Jesus does not attribute the misunderstanding to mere miscommunication. He does not say that his statement is too vague, and neither does he say that the disciples have a general deficiency in reasoning skills or in understanding language. Instead, he blames the misunderstanding on their lack of *faith* – he says that this is a *spiritual* problem. If they would have the faith to recall and realize that Jesus could multiply food, then they would not be saying among themselves that Jesus is concerned about food.

Pay attention to what I am saying here. I am not saying what many professing Christians teach, and what many non-Christians allege that Biblical Christianity teaches. That is, I am not saying that the natural man is rational and that biblical revelation is irrational, so that to "understand" revelation, one must exercise "faith" to accept something that is irrational.

This is a misrepresentation of Biblical Christianity, although it is also one that has been taught by many professing Christians.

So take care to understand what happens in our passage, and notice what Jesus says. He does not say that the disciples fail to understand because they are too rational, so that they must become irrational by faith. No! He says that if their faith were stronger, they would take into account the earlier miracles and realize that food has never been a problem with Jesus, so that when he talks about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees, he could not be referring to physical food.

In other words, it is precisely a lack of faith and not an abundance of faith that makes them irrational, that prevents them from reasoning from true premises to their necessary conclusion, that hinders them from perceiving and understanding the truth. This is one of the reasons why a person who lacks faith cannot reason correctly about spiritual things. He cannot employ the needed premises in his deductions as long as these premises are spiritual propositions. His mind cannot process them. It is not that spiritual things are irrational, but the problem is that his mind is defective.

Of course, the problem is not limited to reasoning about spiritual things, for sin has dealt a crippling blow to the unbeliever's ability to reason about natural things as well. But even if we ignore this for the moment, and even if we assume that the unbeliever can reason about natural things perfectly, we must still point out that, in reality, it is impossible to correctly reason about anything at all without taking into account spiritual realities and spiritual premises.

Whether we are talking about physics, politics, literature, or even sports, God's works pervade everything, and therefore when a person who has no spiritual understanding tries to reason about anything – anything at all – he is doomed to failure from the start. This explains why a Christian may find even the most educated non-Christian extremely deficient in intellect. A non-Christian is wrong about *everything*, even the littlest thing, and thus a spiritual man will tend to find him irritatingly stupid. And the more perceptive the spiritual man, the more he must endure. He says with Christ, "Are you still so dull?" (Matthew 15:16), and exclaims in frustration, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Matthew 17:17).

Matthew 16:13-17 is also relevant to our purpose, but as there are several more passages that we must examine, we will have to skip this one.

Moving on to Luke 18:31-34, we read as follows:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again."

The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.

Is this not remarkable? And does this not prove our point, that a person can be as dull about spiritual things as Nicodemus appears in John 3? He could even be a biblical scholar, but without the Spirit's illumination, there can be no understanding. Here Jesus tells his disciples plainly and directly, without using figures of speech, about what would happen to him. But "the disciples did not understand any of this."

This is why I wonder about those commentators whose interpretation of John 3:4 hinges on their own refusal to believe that Nicodemus could be as spiritually dull as he appears. These people have no insight into man's spiritual condition. The truth is that, depending on what kind of audience one is addressing, sometimes a minister would find that most of his hearers are as spiritually dull as Nicodemus and the disciples. They would not understand regardless of how plainly you tell them what you mean. It is as if I were to say to someone ten times, and in different ways, "My name is Vincent," and then the next thing that comes out of his mouth is, "But what is your name?"

If you have been a Christian for very long, you should know what I am talking about, and surely most ministers have encountered such cases. Sometimes the people appear so dull that, if you do not know better, you would think that they are pretending not to understand, and pretending to be stupid, perhaps to aggravate you or play a trick on you. But the truth is that they really do not understand what you are telling them. Nevertheless, experience proves nothing, but the commentators should accept this and the many other biblical passages that illustrate the point.

There are many other passages that I can cite, and you can probably think of several yourself. But let us end this section with 1 Corinthians 2:14, since it aptly summarizes the explanation concerning the unbeliever's intellectual deficiency: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

The verse says that the natural man, the man without the Spirit, "cannot understand." The natural man rejects spiritual truths not because he is intellectually superior, but because he is intellectually inferior, and this intellectual inferiority has a spiritual cause as its root. As Paul says, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:25). This is why even the greatest natural intellect is still far too feeble to grasp the lowest spiritual truths. He is only wise according to human standards (v. 26) – that is, when compared to other unbelievers, to other fools. But the Christian has received wisdom from God.

If a person is surprised by the lack of understanding in Nicodemus, if he thinks that Nicodemus should surely be further down the road than he appears, then he is utterly out of touch with what Scripture teaches about man's condition. But those who acknowledge what Scripture teaches realize that Nicodemus already represents the best of unregenerate humanity. In both learning and religion, he represents the best that man can attain apart

from regeneration, from the new birth, and yet he is exactly as shallow and dull as he appears. At this point, Nicodemus is still a natural man, a man without the Spirit. This is why he fails to understand, and this is why he needs to be born again.



## John 3:5

Verses 5-8 consist of Jesus' answer to the rhetorical question in verse 4, where Nicodemus says, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" (NASB). As we have noted, Nicodemus exhibits a spiritual dullness that causes some commentators to stumble. But rather than trying to explain it away, we should realize that his response is not surprising in light of verse 3, where Jesus tells him that he needs to be born again. Despite being a religious leader, Nicodemus is spiritually dull because he is still a natural man, an unregenerate man, and this is precisely why Jesus tells him about this new birth from above.

In response to what Nicodemus says in verse 4, Jesus now elaborates on what he means by born again. He says, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Jesus has not changed the subject, but he is expanding on verse 3 in light of verse 4. That is, he is elaborating on what it means to be born again, and why one needs to be born again, in light of the response in verse 4 from Nicodemus, who does not seem to understand what Jesus says in verse 3. This point is important because it tells us that although Jesus uses several different terms here, especially in verses 5 and 6, he is still talking about the same thing. The changes in terms are intended to clarify the statement in verse 3.

With this in mind, we see that he says in verse 5, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Where he says "no one can *see* the kingdom" in verse 3, here he says "no one can *enter* the kingdom." But these two expressions refer to the same thing. The meaning is that no one can be saved, no one can become acceptable to God and enter heaven, unless he is born again.

Then, where he says "unless he is *born again*" in verse 3, here he says "unless he is *born of water and the Spirit*." There are several opinions as to what Jesus means by the expression, "born of water and the Spirit." In particular, the problem is what he means by "water."

It will require more than several pages to provide a full account of the various arguments, but this will become too much of a burden to our present discussion. Let us see if we can quickly think through the major options and come to a reliable conclusion without getting too involved in the details. Some of the arguments offered for the various positions appeal to extra-biblical sources, but since we cannot consider them authoritative, and since we must keep our discussion brief, I will not deal with them here. Instead, I will focus on what we can derive from our passage, as well as from other parts of the Bible. Not only will this

approach generate a more reliable conclusion, but it will also limit the length of the discussion.

One interpretation is that by "water," Jesus refers to physical birth. Accordingly, the meaning of the expression is that, to enter God's kingdom, one must undergo both a physical birth and a spiritual birth. In other words, physical birth is not enough, but one must add to physical birth a spiritual birth in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The theology in this interpretation is correct, but the question is whether it is what our passage teaches. In verse 4, Nicodemus misunderstands that by "born again," Jesus is referring to a repetition of physical birth. Or again, it might be that he assumes Jesus is not asserting this, but given his lack of spiritual understanding, this is the only way he can interpret the statement, that is, as referring to a repetition of physical birth.

This first interpretation of verse 5 would have Jesus acknowledge a person's physical birth, but then proceed to explain that he is referring to something other than and in addition to physical birth, that is, a spiritual birth. Verse 6 does not seem to contradict this understanding: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

There are reasons to reject this view. As we have noted, verse 5 corresponds to and elaborates on verse 3, but this interpretation of "born of water and the Spirit," does not parallel "born again." If "born of...the Spirit" in verse 5 corresponds to "born again" in verse 3, then for verse 5 to truly parallel verse 3, verse 3 should say, "born and born again," instead of just "born again."

Also, there is only one "of" for both "water" and "the Spirit," suggesting that Jesus is referring to only one birth in verse 5, and not two births. This is recognized by many modern translations but is obscured by the KJV, which reads, "born *of* water and *of* the Spirit." In fact, there should be no article before "spirit," so a more literal translation is, "born of water and spirit." Lattimore's translation reads, "born from water and spirit." One commentator who perceives the unity between "water" and "spirit" in this expression suggests, "born of water-spirit."

As for verse 6, there Jesus does not say, "You must be born of the flesh, and you must be born of the Spirit," as if he is positively encouraging both. Rather, throughout the entire passage he is only encouraging a spiritual birth – of course, the physical birth has already happened. Verse 6 merely contrasts the two to emphasize what Jesus is really talking about. He is saying that flesh is flesh, spirit is spirit, so that we need the latter to produce spiritual life. It is a case of flesh versus spirit, or the inferiority of the flesh and superiority of the spirit, and not a case of flesh *and* spirit working together to bring a man to God's kingdom.

This brings us back to verse 5. Like verse 3, here Jesus refers to a person who is already born in the physical, fleshly sense. If this person were not already born in the flesh, then

he would not even need to enter God's kingdom, because he would not exist at all!<sup>5</sup> But he is telling Nicodemus what must happen to a person (already born in the physical sense) in order for him to enter the kingdom of God. It is necessary for a person to undergo spiritual birth in order to see or enter the kingdom, but spiritual birth would not even apply to a person who has not been born in the flesh, since such a person would not exist to need such a spiritual birth in the first place.

Then, another argument against this view is that John does not use the term "water" in John 1:13 when he refers to physical birth.

A second interpretation is that by "water," Jesus is talking about water baptism. Those who hold this view are split on whether Jesus is referring to John's baptism or Christian baptism. For our purpose, we do not need to make this distinction, but we will deal with the view that "water" here refers to baptism in general.

Our previous arguments apply also to this interpretation. Since verse 5 corresponds to verse 3, making water and spirit into two distinct elements in verse 5 would break the parallel between these two verses. Also, whereas it is possible to infer from verse 3 that Jesus is talking about a spiritual birth (born "again" means born "from above"), there is no way to infer baptism from the verse, or just from the term "born again." In the several other places where Jesus refers to this spiritual birth in our passage, there is nothing that can be construed as a reference to water baptism, but he uses expressions such as, "born again," "the Spirit gives birth to spirit," and "born of the Spirit."

As far as I am aware, the Bible nowhere refers to baptism as a birth (or as producing a birth). For the sake of clarity, and to avoid begging the question, I will admit that if this verse is indeed talking about water baptism, then this would be one instance in which the Bible refers to baptism as a birth. So to be precise, I am saying that, ignoring our verse for the moment, it seems that there is no *other* place in the Bible that refers to baptism as a birth. But even if the Bible speaks of baptism as a birth elsewhere, our other arguments show that baptism does not fit into this verse.

This interpretation, the one that says "water" refers to baptism here, goes against the entire thrust of the passage, which stresses God's action in giving spiritual birth to the one who would see and enter his kingdom. In verses 3, 6, 7, and 8, there are expressions like "born again (from above)," "the Spirit gives birth," "You must be born again (from above)," and "born of the Spirit." Thus it would be inconsistent to find Jesus here declaring water baptism – something performed by a man – as a crucial condition in one's entrance into the kingdom. It would appear to subvert what he emphasizes in the other verses, and oppose the direction that his statements are driving toward. On the other hand, if verse 5 also stresses God's action alone, then there is perfect coherence. But if verse 5 indeed stresses God's actions alone, then the "water" in the verse cannot refer to baptism.

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the fetus already exists and is fully human before it exits the womb. The point is that spiritual birth applies to a person (in the womb or not) only after he is "in the flesh"; otherwise, there would be no person to which we apply the spiritual birth.

The correct interpretation is that Jesus is talking about a single birth. Physical birth is assumed, and this is why spiritual birth applies in the first place. The theological, grammatical, and contextual reasons already discussed above all apply here as support for this view, but we need not repeat them. Instead, we will make only one more point to make sense of the "water" in verse 5.

In verse 10, Jesus refers to Nicodemus as "Israel's teacher," and because of this he is supposed to "understand these things." We infer from this that the Old Testament already contains what Jesus is teaching here. With this in mind, we find the following in Ezekiel 36:25-27, where God declares through the prophet:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

What is described in this promise is consistent with what Jesus teaches in John 3, and here the application of water and spirit is considered as one act, and this one act is to be performed by God and not man. It is likely that Jesus expects Nicodemus to recall this passage and come to understand what he means by "born again," or what is the equivalent, "born of water and spirit."

With all this talk about what it means to be born of water and spirit, I do not want anyone to lose sight of what our passage is really about, what Jesus is really telling us, and that is, "You must be born again." Unless a person is born again, or born from above, and unless God sprinkles this person with water and puts a new spirit into him, he will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, when you assess the condition of your soul, the first question to ask yourself is not whether you have made a decision to reform your life, or whether you have repeated a prayer of salvation, but the question is whether God has performed this cleansing action in you, whether he has given birth to you in the spirit, and whether he has thus adopted you through Jesus Christ.

## John 3:6-7

We have devoted a short chapter to verse 5 to clarify the expression "born of water and the Spirit." But verses 5-8 constitute a unit. It is Jesus' answer to what Nicodemus says in verse 4, and comes before Nicodemus speaks again in verse 9. So let us read these verses again: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Since we have dealt with verse 5, now we will turn to verse 6, which is the portion that says, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Keep in mind that this continues Jesus' answer to what Nicodemus says in verse 4: "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" The relevance of what Jesus says here is indeed obvious, as he is explaining what he says in verse 3 in light of the disappointing response by Nicodemus.

Paul regularly uses the word "flesh" in a sense that keeps man's depravity at the forefront, so that the NIV even translates it as "sinful nature." But John often uses it with a different emphasis. Namely, it is not the sinfulness of it that John stresses, but the feebleness of it, especially when it comes to spiritual things.

For example, Jesus says in John 6:63, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." The verse speaks of what the Spirit can do that the flesh cannot do, but the emphasis is not on the sinfulness of the flesh. John 1:13 mentions "the will of the flesh" (KJV, NASB). Again, "flesh" here refers to that which is natural or physical, and not necessarily that which is sinful. Of course man is sinful, and of course John acknowledges this, but we are noting the precise meaning that John has in mind when he uses the word "flesh."

Jesus reminds Nicodemus that there are two basic categories of reality, or two realms of existence. They are the flesh and the spirit, and each gives birth to its own kind, so that the flesh produces flesh and the spirit produces spirit. This being the case, a person who is born by flesh has the life of flesh, but he has no spiritual life. He can improve the flesh, educate the flesh, and dress it up, but it is still flesh, and it remains spiritually lifeless and impotent.

No matter what you do to the flesh, you cannot make it into spirit. In other words, the difference between flesh and spirit is not one of degree, but one of kind or category. Therefore, it will not do, as the rhetorical question in verse 3 suggests, for a man to undergo a second birth of the flesh. He can do that for a thousand times and he will still be flesh. He will still have no spiritual life. For there to be spiritual life, he must be born by the Spirit.

A central concern in the Gospels, including this one, is to show that the Jewish people must not trust in their natural lineage as their guarantee to salvation. They tend to think that they have special favor with God just because they are the natural descendents of Abraham. But John corrects this by stating that God has chosen people from all over the world (v. 16), and not just the people of Israel.

In addition, elsewhere he shows that the Jews have misunderstood what it means to be the children of Abraham in the first place. We will illustrate from an episode in John 8, although we can take time to quote only a part of it:

"Abraham is our father," they answered.

"If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does."

"We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself."

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." (v. 39-47).

No doubt we can produce an exposition on these verses almost as long as the one that we are undertaking. But to the one who is given to see and to hear the things of the spirit, what Jesus says here is very plain and obvious. Do you see it? Can you hear it?

They say, "Abraham is our father," and Jesus does not deny this (8:37), but as he says elsewhere, "the flesh counts for nothing" (6:63). Of course they are Abraham's natural descendents, but are they like Abraham? Do they believe the same things, exhibit the same characteristics, and perform the same works? Do they welcome the Son of God with gladness and reverence, as Abraham would? No, they are ready to murder the Son of God. They are nothing like Abraham.

So then they assert, "The only Father we have is God himself." But Jesus brings them back to the same point: Are they anything like God? Do they believe what he tells them? Do they exhibit his characteristics? Do they perform his works?

Now here comes something very interesting, something very straightforward, and ties back to our exposition on John 3:4 about spiritual dullness. Jesus says in verse 43, "Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say." Why are they unable to hear? He says, "You belong to your father, the devil." Then, he continues, "If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."

Can anything be plainer? Jesus tells them the truth, the truth about spiritual things, using simple and direct language. Why do they not understand? Why do they not believe? "The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." Here is the answer. The devil is their father, but the devil is a liar, and this is why they cannot understand or believe the truth. They cannot process something that is not in their spiritual nature to grasp.

For a person to understand and believe the truth, he must *first* "belong to God," that is, to be the child of God rather than the child of the devil. Just because they are the natural descendents of Abraham does not make them the spiritual descendents of Abraham, nor does it make them the spiritual children of God. So to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, God must give birth to them – they must be "born again."

One must first "belong to God" in order to believe the truth, so that regeneration, the new birth, must come before faith. This demolishes the teaching, so common nowadays, that we are born again by faith, that we are born again *because* we believe. If the condition of your soul is such that you can have faith, why would you need to be born again? Jesus says that these people have the devil as their father, and they do not "belong" to God, so that they cannot have faith. We are born again by a sovereign act of God, completely apart from human decision or human effort, and it is after we are born again that we are able to believe the gospel. This means that we are entirely at God's mercy when it comes to salvation.

Paul teaches the same thing in his letters. He writes, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:28-29).

Again, it means nothing for a person to be a Jew in a merely outward and physical sense. In fact, when it comes to spiritual things, Paul bluntly states that such a person "is not a Jew" at all. What matters, he says, "is circumcision of the heart." This is not something initiated by human decision or performed by human effort, but it is done "by the Spirit." So, Paul is just saying in a different way the same thing that is taught in John's Gospel. Flesh is flesh, spirit is spirit. A man can enter the kingdom of heaven, a man can believe the gospel, only when he is "born again" by the Spirit, and only when the Spirit directly acts within him to perform what Paul calls the "circumcision of the heart."

This should not be new information to Nicodemus, for the teaching is already present in the Old Testament. Thus Jesus says in verse 7, "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" Here he does not limit the necessity of regeneration to

Nicodemus. The first "you" is in the singular, but the second instance is plural. The NIV indicates this in the marginal notes (also NLT, HCSB, NRSV), while this information is missing from others (KJV, ESV, NASB). Some translations choose to include this in the main text. These include the GNT ("You must *all* be born again"), NCV, and REB. The significance is that regeneration, to be born again, is a universal necessity. The teaching is already expressed in another way in verse 3, where Jesus says, "*No one* can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

To paraphrase, Jesus answers what Nicodemus says in verse 4 by saying, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, and spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying that *all of you* must be born again, born from above, or born by the Spirit. This is because, unless any of you has been born again already, all of you are still just flesh, and possess only the life of flesh. You need to be born by the Spirit to have the life of the spirit."

Flesh is flesh, and spirit is spirit. The natural man cannot cross over from flesh to spirit, as these are different categories or dimensions of reality. He must be *born* of the Spirit to have spiritual life. And this is why Jesus tells Nicodemus, "You, all of you, must be born again."



## John 3:8

Jesus finishes his explanation of the new birth in verse 8. We should remind ourselves of its connection with the previous verses. In verse 3, Jesus states that one must be "born again." When Nicodemus wonders about this in verse 4 as if he takes what Jesus says as a repetition of physical birth, Jesus proceeds to explain that flesh and spirit are different categories of reality, and that when he talks about being "born again," he is referring to spiritual birth.

Verse 8 proceeds to reveal even more about the nature of this spiritual birth. It says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

The word translated "wind" is also the word for "spirit," and previous to this verse, the word has been rightly translated as the latter. If we were to translate the word as "Spirit" here, the verse would be telling us that although one can notice the effect of the Spirit's activity, he cannot directly detect this activity. The Spirit's work is not subject to natural explanation, manipulation, or prediction.

This coheres with the teaching of the passage, and it is indeed what the verse itself intends to teach. But the difficulty with translating the word as "spirit" is that it implies that a person can "hear its sound," or the "voice" of the Spirit. Since it seems clear that Jesus intends to say that a man can detect the effect but not the cause of spiritual birth, it would appear inconsistent to say that the person can nevertheless directly detect the very voice of the Spirit. Such a translation would also make it harder to make sense of the conclusion of this verse, "so it is with everyone born of the Spirit," and how the two expressions relate to each other. Also, it would imply that even an unregenerate man is able to hear the Spirit's voice, but this appears inconsistent with the passage and the rest of Scripture.

Therefore, it is usually agreed that "wind" is the correct translation, and that Jesus is making an analogy between the wind and the Spirit's work in spiritual birth. Moreover, it would not be surprising if this double meaning of wind and spirit is intentional, as we have already mentioned that the Gospel of John uses words that carry multiple meanings to convey theological ideas. The verse makes good sense when we retain "wind" as the translation.

Then comes the statement, "So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." There seems to be two possible ways of understanding this.

First, it can refer to the manner in which spiritual birth occurs. To paraphrase, Jesus would be saying, "Just like you can detect the effect of the wind but not where it comes from and where it is going, *in this manner* a man is born by the Spirit." Or we can say, "This is how it is with the spiritual birth." In other words, one can detect the effect of the Spirit's work in a person, but not the work of spiritual birth itself. The spiritual *birth* is like the wind. This interpretation is consistent with the passage and the rest of the Bible.

Second, the statement can refer to the born again person himself. In this case, Jesus would be saying, "Just like you can detect the effect of the wind but not where it comes from and where it is going, a man born by the Spirit *is also like this*." Or we can say, "This is how it is with the spiritual man." In other words, just as one can detect the effect of the wind but cannot fathom the activity of the wind itself, a natural man cannot comprehend the person who has been born again, or born by the Spirit. The spiritual *man* is like the wind. As we will show, this interpretation is also consistent with the passage and the rest of the Bible.

We find something strange when we turn to the commentaries on this verse. Although both interpretations are represented in the thirty or so commentaries I consulted, none of them mention both. Each writer would favor either one interpretation or the other, but without offering reasons for favoring one and not the other. The translations are also divided.

My aim is not to fill this void or compensate for this deficiency, but while acknowledging that the first interpretation fits naturally with the rest of the verse and the previous verses, I would like to discuss the second interpretation for the rest of this chapter. Its relevance and significance will soon become obvious, if it is not already. Even if one considers it a less appropriate interpretation for this verse, it is nevertheless a biblical teaching in the rest of the Bible. Moreover, since it is related to something that we have already mentioned, this is a good place to discuss it.

First, even if the first interpretation follows more naturally from the previous verses, the second interpretation foreshadows an idea expressed in the next several verses. To illustrate, verse 11 says, "I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony." The spiritual man perceives a realm of reality that the natural man knows nothing about. This is consistent with the idea that the born again person is as the "wind" to the natural man.

Second, this second interpretation complements what we discussed earlier about spiritual dullness in connection with verse 4. Because the natural man cannot understand spiritual things, neither can he understand the spiritual person, the one who is born by the Spirit and walks in the Spirit.

Now, just as we turned to 1 Corinthians 2 to inform our understanding of verse 4, when we were considering the spiritual dullness of Nicodemus, we will turn back there to see what else we can gain from it. On the previous occasion, we read from verse 14, which says, "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (NASB). The NIV exercises more liberty and translates, "The man without the Spirit." The translation is not literal, but it offers the correct meaning, since it observes the context given in verse 12: "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God." In any case, the natural man is also one who is without the Spirit of God.

We stopped at verse 14 the last time we referred to 1 Corinthians 2, but Paul is not finished. Verse 15 continues, "But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised

by no one" (NASB). There is a context to this statement, and Paul is dealing with some specific issues here. The verse might be mainly referring to Paul as the spiritual man, so that he is not subject to the judgment of his critics. And just as no one can take upon himself to instruct the Lord, neither can anyone contradict those who have the mind of Christ, that is, the inspired apostles (v. 16).

However, the fact remains that verse 15 states a general principle that can be applied to all who are "spiritual," or all who have received the Spirit of God. And just as no one can judge the apostle who receives infallible revelation from the Spirit, and who possesses the very mind of Christ, no unbeliever can judge the Christian who has been born by the Spirit and who now walks in the Spirit. Just as the apostle is not subject to the judgment of his critics, those who believe and preach the apostle's message are not subject to the judgment of those who do not.

Jesus says that flesh is flesh and spirit is spirit, and one who has been born in the flesh must also be born in the spirit to enter the kingdom of heaven. We inherit flesh-life by being born in the flesh, and spirit-life by being born by the Spirit. The difference is not one of degree, but one of category. This means that, whereas the Christian lives in the realm of the spirit, the unbeliever is ignorant of this entire dimension of reality. How then can the unbeliever make an evaluation of the Christian?

On the other hand, the Christian is in contact with both flesh and spirit.<sup>6</sup> He is aware of both dimensions of reality – he has been born into both, and he lives in both. Therefore, the Christian, the spiritual man, can judge or appraise "all things." The *Christian* can understand and evaluate both the Christian and the non-Christian, but the *non-Christian* cannot understand and evaluate the Christian.

As a Christian, I am able to understand both the Christian and the non-Christian persons and perspectives, and I can address and evaluate both with authority. But the non-Christian must remain silent, especially when it comes to matters of faith and of spirit. Moreover, as we have already mentioned, since the spiritual pervades all things and rules over the realm of the flesh, the unbeliever cannot even talk about the things of the flesh with authority, but only the Christian can do this.

So when I reject unbelief in favor of faith in Christ, it is not because I do not understand unbelief or the reasons and excuses the non-Christian gives for it. I am a Christian not because my judgment has been clouded, but because I have been enlightened by God's sovereign grace. And when I reject wickedness in favor of righteousness, it is not because I do not understand wickedness, but I do understand wickedness and why the unbeliever transgresses. I can criticize and refute unbelief, and I can condemn wickedness, but the unbeliever cannot say anything about faith and righteousness. I know him better than he knows himself, but he does not know me and has no right to evaluate me.

---

<sup>6</sup> Remember, in the writings of John, "flesh" does not necessarily denote something sinful, but only what is natural and physical.

This is not at all a matter of experience, but of birth. To use an analogy, although it is limited and can be misleading if taken out of this immediate context, I am not saying that I am an American who has *visited* Great Britain, but that I have been *born* into one country, and then *born* "again" into the other. Thus I am native to both countries. I understand the things of the flesh because I have been born in the flesh, and I understand the things of the spirit because I have been born in the spirit.

So it is not that a Christian can understand and evaluate the non-Christian because he has been a non-Christian. No, this is not a matter of experience but a matter of faculty. In fact, the reason why a person can understand experience in any realm is because he has the faculty to process it in the first place. You can put a rock through high school and it will still not be able to tell you what it is like to write a term paper or sit through a lecture.

A natural man is spiritually dead so that he can exercise only natural faculties. When he encounters the spiritual man, he uses natural categories to describe him, and so he is always wrong. And even the natural man requires spiritual categories to describe – including, for example, the biblical concept of sin – so that the natural man, the non-Christian, cannot even know himself. But the spiritual man can evaluate the natural man with knowledge and authority.

This is not just mystical nonsense, but it affects all aspects of human interaction and scholarship. For example, once in a while someone will publish a psychological perspective on faith and religion. Our discussion above implies that if the writer is a non-Christian, he will always be wrong. A non-Christian cannot even write an accurate historical account of Christianity. It is impossible, since there are necessary categories of thought that are foreign to him and rejected by him.

The unbeliever cannot even understand and evaluate adherents of non-Christian religions. This is because although all non-Christian religions are false and are therefore natural rather than spiritual, they still require spiritual categories to explain their true nature, such as idolatry, rebellion, unbelief, and deception.

A chicken can try to analyze another chicken who is pretending to be an eagle, but since neither chicken knows anything about eagles, the project is futile. On the other hand, someone who knows about both eagles and chickens can, with knowledge and authority, speak about the eagle, the first chicken, and the other chicken who is pretending to be an eagle. So a non-Christian's opinion about *anything* is wrong and useless, but this is true especially when it comes to spiritual things and persons.

Although the first interpretation also seems to fit well with the passage, it is more than possible that the above is what Jesus intends to convey at the end of John 3:8. Carson writes, "The person who is 'born of the Spirit' can be neither controlled nor understood by persons of but one birth."<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Morris says, "As is the wind, so is anyone who has been born of the Spirit. The person who lacks spiritual life may have contact with such

---

<sup>7</sup> Carson, p. 197.

people, but knows neither the origin of their life nor their final destiny."<sup>8</sup> In any case, both interpretations represent scriptural teachings that must be affirmed.

---

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 195.

## John 3:9-13

We have seen that unless God sovereignly gives spiritual life to a person, he cannot see or enter the kingdom of heaven. Spiritual things and spiritual persons will remain incomprehensible to him, not because these things are irrational, but because the natural man lacks the faculty to process and understand spiritual propositions. Spiritual things seem foolish to the natural man, because the natural man is foolish when it comes to spiritual things.

As noted, verses 5-8 represent Jesus' answer to the rhetorical question from Nicodemus in verse 4, which in turn indicates the Pharisee's failure to understand what Jesus says about being "born again" in verse 3. In verses 5-8, Jesus corrects the misunderstanding by first making a distinction between flesh and spirit, and then by explaining that he is referring to a spiritual birth when he talks about a person's need to be "born again" or "born from above."

Verse 9 captures the Pharisee's reaction. At this point, he still has not received the Spirit's illumination, so that after hearing the explanation in verses 5-8, he remains perplexed and asks, "How can this be?" One may marvel at his spiritual dullness, but in light of our earlier discussion on verse 4, there is no longer any excuse to find it hard to believe. Nicodemus is indeed as dull as he seems. Hendriksen observes, "It becomes very clear that this religious leader lacked the most elementary knowledge of the way of salvation. At the outset his Pharisaic training seems to have made him immune to spiritual apprehension."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus replies, "You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things?" (v. 10). He literally calls Nicodemus, "*the* teacher of Israel" (NASB, NKJ, ESV). This does not mean that Nicodemus is the only teacher of the law in Israel, but he is a teacher of high standing, perhaps one of the several most prominent ones. Thus he is to be blamed for being one of the best trained and most prominent scholars in the land, but at the same time failing to understand the most basic spiritual truths. We can hardly expect him to teach his people the biblical gospel of salvation.

We do not hear from Nicodemus anymore. But Jesus continues, "I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man" (v. 11-13).

After highlighting what he is about to say with "I tell you the truth," Jesus transitions into the plural and refers to what *we* speak, what *we* know, what *we* testify to, and what *we* have seen. The "we" poses a problem of interpretation for some, but the difficulty has been exaggerated.

---

<sup>9</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to John, Vol. 1* (Baker Book House, 1953), p. 135.

First, we must reject the suggestion that John here introduces anachronism into the words of Jesus. Besides implying a denial of the inspiration of Scripture, this is inconsistent with the way that the apostle writes in the rest of the Gospel. As Carson observes, "John is persistently careful to distinguish between what the disciples understood during Jesus' ministry and what they understood only later."<sup>10</sup>

Another interpretation is that Jesus is referring to himself and his disciples as a group. Thus the meaning would be that the community of Jesus speaks from knowledge and authority about spiritual matters, while the community of Nicodemus rejects this testimony.

Carson thinks that this is unlikely, because "at this point in their pilgrimage the disciples could not be described as speaking of what they know and testifying to what they have seen."<sup>11</sup> This is true enough, but it cannot rule out this second interpretation, because as long as the disciples are close followers of the one who truly knows and who truly speaks with authority, then there is indeed a sense in which it is appropriate for Jesus to refer to the entire group as a unit, especially in contrast with the community of Nicodemus.

Then, Carson suggests that "The simplest explanation for the plurals in this verse is that Jesus is sardonically aping the plural that Nicodemus affected when he first approached Jesus."<sup>12</sup> The plurals here indeed make the verse correspond to the plurals in the previous verses (v. 2, 7), but it is unnecessary to suggest that Jesus uses them "sardonically," especially if there is any truth to the second interpretation mentioned above. Where plurals are concerned, we should also note that Jesus is not speaking only to "you" in verse 11, but to "you people." That is, his comments are meant for the people identified by the "we" in verse 2 and the plural "you" in verse 7.

In any case, if we become engrossed with the plurals, we will fail to understand the rest of the unit, since Jesus switches back from the plural in verse 12. He says, "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" This implies that what Jesus has been saying thus far belongs to the category of "earthly things." Of course the new birth, being a birth "from above," is heavenly in its nature and its source, but it is "earthly" in the sense that it is something that happens to people on the earth. Now if Nicodemus and his company cannot believe Jesus when he tells them about what God does on the earth, they would find it still harder to believe what he says about what happens in heaven.

Verse 13 is what makes sense of both verses 11 and 12. It says, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man." We cannot take time to unravel the technical issues involved, and so I will just offer you a paraphrase of the verse: "No one has ever ascended to heaven (and come back) to tell you about heavenly matters, except for the Son of Man, who has come from heaven to speak to you about these things."

---

<sup>10</sup> Carson, p. 198.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 198-199.

The "Son of Man" is a term taken from Daniel 7:13-14, and refers to the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Verse 13 makes sense of verses 11 and 12 because it explains who it is that knows, why he knows, and why people should believe him. Nicodemus and his company (v. 2, 7) ought to believe what Jesus says about heavenly matters because Jesus came from heaven! The phrase "what we have seen" in verse 11 thus cannot refer to empirical observation – Nicodemus and his friends have also been observing Jesus (v. 2), and yet they neither understand spiritual things nor believe the testimony of truth.<sup>13</sup> No, "what we have seen" mainly refers to the direct knowledge of Jesus about heavenly matters, and it is this that he testifies about in his ministry.

This also explains why Jesus can use "we" in verse 11. Although the disciples might not yet have a direct knowledge about spiritual things, they have identified themselves with Christ by following him. It is not as if they each have a similar testimony about heavenly matters based on an immediate knowledge of heaven, but that they – as we do now – testify about the revelation of Jesus Christ.

If the second interpretation of verse 11 is unlikely *because* "at this point in their pilgrimage the disciples could not be described as speaking of what they know and testifying to what they have seen," then they never were able to testify in the sense that Jesus is speaking of here. This is because verse 13 tells us what Jesus means in verse 11, and he means a direct knowledge of heaven. By the time the disciples gained such knowledge, and by the time they attained it in the same sense as what is referred to in verse 13, they were already in heaven, and we never heard from them again! The exception is 2 Corinthians 12, but what was revealed in that experience, "man is not permitted to tell" (v. 4). And if there are other exceptions, certainly they are exceptions. My point is that Carson's reason for rejecting the second interpretation of verse 11 is perhaps too restrictive.

Again, we do not want to get one or two details right but miss the whole point of the passage, so let us review verses 9-13 as a whole. By now Nicodemus has twice wondered at what Jesus tells him about regeneration, the heavenly birth that everyone needs in order to enter God's kingdom. So Jesus' gives his assessment of the situation. As one who has come from heaven, he has true and direct knowledge about heavenly matters. Therefore, his testimony about the works of God is true, and he speaks with authority about spiritual things.

As trained scholars and religious leaders, Nicodemus and his colleagues appear to be in the best position to understand and believe this testimony, but instead they misunderstand and disbelieve it. This in turn underscores the necessity of regeneration, for unless a person is born again, or born from above, he can neither see nor enter the kingdom of God.

---

<sup>13</sup> Jesus uses similar language in John 8:38: "I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father." The teaching of Jesus comes from what he has "seen" *in the Father's presence*, and not from what he has "seen" in a physical, empirical sense. Likewise, the second part of the verse refers to what the Jews have learned from the devil, but it is not as if they have been physically sitting under the devil to "hear" him lecturing to them in an empirical sense.



When it comes to spiritual things, faith and understanding are connected, but the dictum "I believe so that I may understand" is unscriptural, at least when removed from its original context and used by itself without qualification. The biblical teaching is, "You must be born again, so that you may both believe and understand." Faith and understanding promote and depend on one another, and both are impossible unless one is first born again. This in turn makes faith and understanding dependent on divine sovereignty and not human decision, as Jesus, John, and Paul repeatedly declare to us.

## John 3:14-15

Verse 13 says that the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, has come to us from heaven. Because of this, his testimony about spiritual things is authoritative and reliable, and this is true whether he is speaking about the earthly or the heavenly works of God. Then, verses 14 and 15 proceed to teach us about the heart of his mission, the central purpose for which he came to fulfill: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

The beginning of verse 14 refers to a time when "Moses lifted up the snake in the desert." This is a reference to Numbers 21:4-9. The passage reads as follows:

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

The verse says that in like manner "the Son of Man *must be lifted up*." As is typical with John, the key term "lifted up" carries a double meaning in this Gospel. To illustrate, Jesus says in John 8:28, "When you have *lifted up* the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [the one I claim to be] and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me." The NIV has added, "the one I claim to be," but he literally says, "then you will know that *I am*." This is a bold claim to deity that few Jews would miss. But he says that this would happen as he is "lifted up," that is, on the cross.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the term "lifted up" refers to both the physical lifting up of Jesus on the cross, and at the same time his exaltation on the cross.

But the point that one must not miss in John 3:14 is that Jesus must be *crucified*. He must be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. And just as those who looked

---

<sup>14</sup> Jesus says in John 12:32, "But I, when I am *lifted up* from the earth, will draw all men to myself," and John explains, "He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die" (v. 33).

upon the snake were healed, those who "look" upon the crucified Son of Man in faith will receive eternal life.

This aspect of Jesus' ministry is crucial in the preaching of the gospel. Paul writes to his converts, "Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified" (Galatians 3:1). This tells us about at least part of what this apostle aims to do as he preaches the gospel – he tries to portray the crucified Christ to his hearers. Otherwise, they would not be able to look upon the Son of Man as he was lifted up, so as to believe and have life in him.

The verse also stresses the necessity of the crucifixion, saying, "the Son of Man *must* be lifted up." The aim is to make it possible for man to have eternal life (v. 15). Apart from the crucifixion of Christ, or the atonement of Christ, eternal life would be unavailable to mankind. And apart from looking upon the crucified Son of Man – apart from faith – there would be no way for a person to have eternal life.

In other words, the only way to have eternal life is to become a Christian. We will return to this thought later, but even at this point, this "must" alone has doomed all non-Christians to an everlasting hell. The "must" might also have reference to the immutable decree of God on the matter, as foretold through the prophets, and thus "must" be fulfilled.

Verse 15 explains the significance or the purpose of Christ's crucifixion. It is so that "everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." A better translation is "everyone who believes may have eternal life *in him*." The NASB preserves the word order and translates, "that whoever believes will *in Him* have eternal life."

The words "in him" should modify "eternal life" because John uses a different expression when he wishes to say "believe *in him*." Here the verb "to believe" is used absolutely, without reference to an object. Another instance is John 6:47, which says, "I tell you the truth, he who *believes* has everlasting life."

Although the verb does not refer to an object for believing, it is not difficult to ascertain from the context what one is to believe. Jesus complains in verse 11 that the people "do not accept *our testimony*," and in verse 12, that they "do not believe" him when he speaks about "earthly things," which include what he has just explained about the nature and necessity of a spiritual birth. Still less, he surmises, would they believe him were he to speak about "heavenly things."

Verse 13 refers to the fact that the Son of Man has come from heaven, something that cannot be said about any other man. Then, verse 14 says that he must be "lifted up" as typified by Moses and the bronze snake in the desert, so that those who look to him might have life. Thus, even though the verb for believing is used absolutely, even from this passage we can derive much information about the things that we are to believe. Briefly, we must believe the whole testimony of Jesus, about where he comes from, what he teaches, and what he has come to accomplish.

As for "eternal life," this is the first time the term appears in this Gospel, although John has already referred to "life" at the very beginning, saying, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men" (1:4). It is true that *eternal* life is life that will never end, but the term does not refer to duration, or the quantity of life, but its quality. It is the life that is found in Christ, the life that is found in God. It is resurrection life, the life that is proper to the age of come, but that is possessed and experienced in the present by those who believe in the Son of God.

Flesh is flesh, spirit is spirit – this is the kind of life that comes from God, and not by natural human birth. This is a different *kind* of life than flesh-life. As Morris writes, "Eternal life is life in Christ, that life which removes a person from the merely earthly. As we see from the earlier part of this chapter, it originates in a divine action, the action wherein one is born anew. It is the gift of God, and not a human achievement."<sup>15</sup>

The Greek original does not contain devices like quotation marks to indicate when a person begins speaking and when he ceases to speak, and so they are added to the translations. In many of them, the quotation marks suggest that Jesus' speech extends all the way to verse 21, and red-letter Bibles would highlight all of verses 10-21 as the Lord's words. But it appears certain that Jesus has stopped speaking way before the end of verse 21, and that what we have instead is the commentary and reflection of the apostle John.

However, the precise point of transition is an issue of dispute. Some would suggest that Jesus finishes speaking at the end of verse 10. This would make verses 11-21 into a neat parallel to verses 31-36, as this latter passage is also considered the apostle John's words rather than that of John the Baptist. But this is unlikely because, everywhere else, "the Son of Man" seems to be an expression used exclusively by Jesus as a self-designation. Thus it seems safe to conclude that the words of Jesus extend at least to the end of verse 15.

Then, there are several indications that John's commentary begins from verse 16, and that from this point on Jesus is no longer the one speaking. First, at this point the text switches to the past tense, and this is what we would expect if we are reading John's reflection about something that had happened, rather than a quotation from Jesus. Second, verse 16 refers to Jesus as God's "one and only Son" or "only begotten Son" (also v. 18). John is accustomed to using this expression. For example, he uses it in John 1:14, 18 and 1 John 4:9, where we are certain that we are reading John's words instead of quotations of Jesus. Third, verse 19 uses similar expressions to echo something that John has already stated in 1:9-11.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus finishes speaking at the end of verse 15, and that verses 16-21 consist of the commentary and reflection of John the apostle.

That said, nothing can be more important than to remember that we are noting this merely because we would like to know as much as possible about the text, and as accurately as we can – it is not because we are trying to distinguish between words that carry divine authority and words that do not.

---

<sup>15</sup> Morris, *Gospel According to John*, p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> Robertson, p. 50.

The whole Bible is inspired and infallible, and both the words of Jesus and the words of John come from God, and are therefore equally authoritative. Of course, in themselves, Jesus (who is God) is infinitely more authoritative than John, but when we are comparing the words of Jesus and the inspired words of John, we are comparing inspiration with inspiration, or God with God, so that there is no difference.<sup>17</sup> We are not comparing the divine Jesus with the merely human John, since the entire Bible is a product of the Holy Spirit.

So, even if we cannot discover the precise point of transition with complete certainty, it makes no difference where the authority of the text is concerned. And therefore, we must approach verses 16-21 with total reverence and confidence, just as we do the rest of the Bible.

---

<sup>17</sup> Vincent Cheung, "Sufficient and Profitable."

## John 3:16

John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. It is so familiar that many people have no idea what it says, what it means, and what it implies. Thus it is also one of the most frequently distorted verses in Scripture. These interpretations are dangerous not only because they assert false ideas, but also because they obscure what the verse intends to convey, neutralizing its original force. Great crimes have been committed against John 3:16, and so it would be appropriate for us to take some time to dissect it. But first, let us read it again, even if we have read it many times before: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

The atonement is already alluded to in verse 15 when it is said that "the Son of Man must be lifted up." When verse 16 says, "For God so loved the world," it is a revelation of the very mind of God, telling us why he sends Jesus Christ to die for sinners. He sends Jesus to suffer the pain and humiliation of incarnation, persecution, and crucifixion because of *love* – because he loves those whom he wishes to save from everlasting destruction and punishment.

It is common for people to impose their own human, and even sinful, ideas about love into places where Scripture refers to the love of God. The resulting heresies and licentiousness have proved devastating to true religion. Several central biblical doctrines are subverted and a confused message about the nature of God, his requirements, and his solution has been announced to the world.

God's love is not a feeling, but it is a policy of benevolence that results in actions performed for the benefit of those who are the objects of this love. This love is not promiscuous, but specific and effective. It consciously targets chosen individuals and it successfully accomplishes the acts of benevolence that it sets out to do. As God says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Romans 9:15), and Paul affirms, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (v. 18). And it is also written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (v. 13).<sup>18</sup>

That God sends his Son out of love reminds us of the harmony within the Godhead. The Son does not come from heaven either against or apart from the Father's will, but it is the Father's love that sends him in the first place. Therefore, in the atonement, Christ does not offer himself as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of a reluctant God. Rather, the atonement is God's way to save those he loves, but at the same time to appease his own wrath and satisfy his own justice.

---

<sup>18</sup> Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

The foundation of our salvation is God's love for us. Another implication of this fact is that God is not moved by any faith or merit that he foresees in us. Neither is there anything deserving in us that makes him love us. His love is never separated from his will, so that he loves us not because he is overwhelmed by our goodness or potential, but he loves us because he chooses to love us.

The verse says that God loves "the world," and this refers to the object and the scope of his love. As it is, this expression adds to the beautiful picture that John is painting for us about God's plan of redemption. However, at this point many people begin to twist the text to serve their own theological prejudice and humanistic bias. The distortion has been so emphasized and promoted that it has become the majority view. Therefore, we will devote part of this chapter to deal with it.

There are those who insist that "the world" here must refer to every human person in the entire history of mankind, that is, every individual in all of time. Those who, like me, disagree with this interpretation, but who point out that there is a context to John's usage of the term that narrows its scope, are sometimes accused of refusing to accept the plain teaching of the verse.

Now, if "the world" indeed refers to every human person in history, then the verse would be saying that God loves everyone, and that he loves everyone with a saving love that sends Jesus Christ to die for each human person. Therefore, from God's perspective, he has done all that he could do to secure *potential* salvation for every person. Salvation now depends on the person, on his own freedom of choice, and no longer on God. If this is what the text states and implies, then we ought to submit to it. But as I will explain, this interpretation is not only false, but it is also irreverent.

When we object to the above understanding of the word "world," we are told that if the text says "world," then we must accept that it means "world." I have no problem with this, but my question is what "world" means. Our opponents make a similar point in places where the Bible uses words such as, "anyone," "everyone," "all," and so on. They ignore the fact that these words appear in specific contexts that define their meaning and restrict their scope. I will first illustrate this point from general language usage, and then from several biblical passages.

First, it is true that we must accept what is written just as it is written. But what is written is always written within a context. When we accept "what is written," we must accept all that is written, that is, along with the context of the specific words and phrases that we are focusing on.

If I were to write, "I deny that I am a woman," then for you to take only "I am a woman" and say that we must accept just "what is written" is in fact to reject what is written. In this case, your representation of "what is written" would be the exact opposite of what is actually written.

This is so simple that it appears I am insulting my readers, but it is precisely this very simple principle that our opponents refuse to implement when they read the Bible. Of course we should accept the plain statements of Scripture, but what are these plain statements? Our opponents would say that I plainly wrote, "I am a woman," and of course I did. But it is something that "I deny."

As for these seemingly universal terms like "anyone," "everyone," "all," and so on, they are indeed universal in the contexts in which they are used, but they are not always absolutely universal. If you were to tell me, apart from any stated or assumed context, that *anyone* can learn to cha-cha, I would reply, "Yes, and I would like you to teach a panda how to do it." You would come back and tell me that you mean *any human* person can do it. But then I would ask, "What about someone who is in a coma? How about a crippled person? And can a newborn baby learn to cha-cha?"

The point is that the context defines and restricts a seemingly universal term. Surely our opponents realize that the words "God so loved the world" are surrounded by other words, and that the entire passage appears in the much larger text of the Gospel of John? What then is this context? And why does this context support their interpretation? What is the theology of John? And how does it imply their understanding of the word "world" as it is used in John 3:16?

Let us take several examples from the Bible. The first one will just illustrate the need for context, and I have deliberately chosen something that has no immediate relevance to our verse. The example is Exodus 20:13, and there God declares, "You shall not kill." But *what* shall we not kill? Yes, humans. But what about vegetables? What about bacteria? These are not ridiculous questions, for once the context is ignored, these are indeed possibilities.

As with John 3:16, this verse has been subject to much abuse, and what usually happens is that a context, which defines and restricts the meaning, is imposed upon the text in the reader's mind without regard to the actual context in which the verse appears. This is why some people think that they can use this verse to oppose capital punishment, whereas other parts of the Bible explicitly command it. Others assert that this commandment would forbid us to eat meat, whereas the Bible explicitly permits it elsewhere. But if we cannot eat meat because we cannot "kill," and the killing here somehow includes animals, then how come vegetables and bacteria do not come under the same protection?

Of course, the commandment is more properly translated, "You shall not *murder*" (Exodus 20:13, NIV), but we still need the broader context of Scripture to define murder, since some advocates suggest that it is murder to execute a criminal, and it is murder to kill a chicken. But somehow it is permissible to murder vegetables and bacteria.

Now let us come to a more relevant example, at least in terms of the expression used. We read in John 12:18-19, "Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, 'See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how *the whole world* has gone after him!'"



The Pharisees lament that "the whole world" has gone after Jesus. If we were to interpret Scripture as our opponents do, we must conclude that all human beings in all of history have become Christians. The work of evangelization is finished, and hell is completely empty except for the devil and his angels. And now that we think of it, why are the devil and his angels excluded from "the whole world," unless Scripture provides a context to justify this exclusion? Moreover, if we will forget about demons for now, if "the whole world" must mean every human person, then the Pharisees who uttered this statement must themselves have "gone after" Jesus. This would make their exclamation not a complaint, but a glad observation!

If our opponents do not adopt this absurd interpretation, it is because they are assuming a context that is different from the one that they use when reading John 3:16. Just by reading the surrounding verses, it becomes clear that "the whole world" in verse 19 refers to the "many people" in verse 18, and perhaps also "the crowd" in verse 17. If "the whole world" does not automatically and necessarily mean every human person in history, then neither can we simply assume when it comes to the "world" in John 3:16.

There are many other examples in the Bible, but we will look at just one more. Just a few verses after John 3:16, we find the following, "He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but *no one* accepts his testimony" (3:32). *No one*, the verse says, accepts Christ's testimony. This time, if we were to interpret Scripture as our opponents do, then we would have to conclude that "no one" in all of human history has believed or will ever believe in Christ. There has never been and never will be a Christian in all of human history.

And if "no one" must mean every human person without restriction and without exception, then it must mean that even as he writes this verse the apostle John himself has not accepted Christ's testimony. It is indeed strange, then, how he repeatedly encourages his readers to believe a testimony that he has rejected. Moreover, the way that our opponents would interpret this verse – that is, if we imitate their treatment of John 3:16 – would make John 3:32 contradict John 12:19. The former would make world evangelization futile, but the latter would say that the mission has already been accomplished.

If I were to ignore the context of everything that you say and take every universal term that you use as if it refers to every human person in all of history, I would make nonsense of your part of the conversation, and communication would break down. In addition, you could rightly accuse me of blatant disrespect for your speech and your person. You might even think that I am doing it on purpose to mock you or to annoy you.

Likewise, our opponents assume that "world" in John 3:16 must mean all human persons in all of history, and they accuse us of refusing to accept the verse just as it is written, but they are the ones who exhibit contempt for God and Scripture. In essence, they accept only one word from the text, and then assume the meaning that they desire for it without any regard for the context. On the other hand, we urge intelligence in interpretation, respect for the text, and reverence toward God by observing the context of the verse, including how all such universal terms are used throughout the writings of John, as well as the main theological concerns of the apostle.

The controversy that we are dealing with has to do with the biblical doctrines of divine election and definite atonement. Because I have addressed these doctrines elsewhere in great detail,<sup>19</sup> I will not discuss them here. I am mentioning this just to point out that the verse neither proves nor disproves these doctrines. Even if the verse has some relevance to these doctrines, the focus is on something else.

John is counteracting the idea that salvation is exclusively or even mainly reserved for the Jews, or the natural descendents of Abraham. He has labored to build up this point from the very beginning, and throughout his Gospel there are comments, discourses, miracles, and other episodes to repeatedly reinforce the teaching. John 3:16 neither affirms nor denies that Christ has come to die for every individual.<sup>20</sup> The question is settled in many places in Scripture, but *not here*. Whatever side we are on, if this has become our focus when studying the verse, then we have missed one of its main concerns.

John is stressing the transracial, transcultural, and transnational nature of salvation in Christ (1:13, 4:4-42, 8:31-47, 10:16). Along with the other New Testament writers, John is eager to announce that those who would receive eternal life will consist of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Revelation 7:9). I am deeply indignant that anyone must be diverted from reflecting on this aspect of the good news because of the incompetent, dishonest, and irreverent abuses that our opponents constantly inflict on this and other biblical passages.

We can reinforce our point with yet another example. John 12:32 says, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* to myself." The word "draw" refers to a powerful and effective action from God by which he inwardly drives a person to come to Christ. If "all" must mean all human persons in all of history, then this must mean that all human persons in all of history will become Christians, or at least all those who live after Christ had been "lifted up." But then this promise or prediction would have failed even before the Acts of the Apostles.

And even if we weaken the verb "draw" to something like a gentle nudge, it is doubtful that all human persons after the crucifixion have been thus nudged to come to Christ, as many have died never having heard of him, and many who have heard were repulsed by the message of the cross. Add to this the fact that God deliberately withholds understanding and repentance from many, and even harden their hearts (Romans 9:18, 11:7), it is impossible to interpret "all" here as referring to all human persons in all of history, or even just in all the years after the crucifixion.

The meaning of the verse is clear if we will demonstrate even a little respect toward God and Scripture, and not abuse the text as our opponents do. Just a few verses earlier (v. 20-22), John writes that some Greeks had expressed an interest in seeing Jesus. This provides

---

<sup>19</sup> Among others, see Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology and Commentary on Ephesians*.

<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, we cannot read the verse as if it is neutral on these topics. Once we have learned the biblical meanings of God's love, Christ's atonement, and other concepts employed in the passage, it becomes obvious that the verse is inconsistent with the false doctrine of universal atonement.

the context for us to understand "all men," that Jesus is again referring to the fact that the gospel will transcend racial, cultural, and national boundaries to reach all kinds of people.

This is repeated especially to counteract the stubborn notion that the Jews are automatically entitled to salvation just because they are the natural descendents of Abraham. This is the consistent and emphatic message of John and the other New Testament writers. Matthew, for example, cites Jesus as saying, "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11).

When Jesus says that, "But I, *when I am lifted up from the earth*, will draw all men to myself," he is foreshadowing his later command to the disciples to no longer preach only to the people of Israel (Matthew 10:5-6), but to "make disciples of *all nations*" (Matthew 28:19). As he says in Luke 24:46-47, "This is what is written: The Christ *will suffer and rise* from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name *to all nations*, beginning at Jerusalem." This is just another way of saying what we find in John 12:32. First, Christ will "suffer" ("when I am lifted up"), and then the gospel will be preached "to all nations" ("will draw all men").

This commission to perform worldwide ministry is repeated in Acts 1:8, and its fulfillment began just a number of days later in Acts 2, even before the disciples scattered away from Jerusalem. "God-fearing Jews from *every nation* under heaven" (v. 5) gathered there on the day of Pentecost. Under Peter's preaching, thousands of them believed (v. 41), we assume that they brought the gospel back to where they lived.

We can make our point yet another way from Acts 2, since Peter cites Joel's prophecy, saying, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on *all people*" (v. 17). Again, this cannot refer to all human individuals without exception, but consistent with what is obviously one of the main thrusts of Acts 1 and 2, the term refers to people of "every nation" (v. 5). As Peter says in verse 39, "The promise is for you and your children and for *all who are far off* – for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Salvation is indeed for "all," but all of what? Peter says it is for all "whom the Lord our God will call." God is the one who chooses those who would be saved – indeed he will save all those whom he has chosen, and he has chosen not every individual in man's history, but people of all nations, even those who are far off, even as far as "the ends of the earth" (1:8). By extending the universal terms to include all human persons, our opponents have distorted all such verses, and obscured their important message.

Then, it is also likely that John is using the word "world" in John 3:16 to denote a humanity that is hostile to God, so that he loves even those who are now opposed to him, and he sends Christ to save them. This is consistent with what John teaches elsewhere, as when he writes in 1 John 4:10, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (also v. 19).

The same idea appears in Paul, who writes, "Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:3-5). Again, that this could be John's meaning neither proves nor disproves the doctrines of divine election and definite atonement. The verse does not directly address them.<sup>21</sup>

God's love is demonstrated in effective action. For the purpose of saving those whom he loves, God sends his Son. Verse 16 itself does not tell us the relevance of God sending his Son or what he sends the Son to accomplish. It only tells us that because he has been given, those who believe on him would not perish but have eternal life. This is because verse 15 has already informed us about his mission and how it relates to the salvation of men. It says that Christ would be lifted up so that those who believe would have eternal life. Verse 16, then, tells us what is at the back of this mission – God has sent his Son because he loves those whom he wishes to save.

We are so familiar with the verse that we might not realize it, but this verse tells us something that would be impossible for us to know other than by God's self-disclosure. As Paul writes, "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Corinthians 2:11-12). So we should regard it as a special gift to know, not only that God has sent his Son, but that he sent him because of love.

God has given something special, something unique, something precious, even his Son, in order to save those whom he loves. Not only does this tell us about the extent and intensity of God's love for those he saves, but it also teaches us that even his great love does not blind or nullify his justice. Rather, his love satisfies his justice. On the other hand, from this we also realize what it takes to satisfy this justice, and the divine wrath that our sins have incurred. And if this is what it takes to satisfy justice, we can be sure that this same justice will allow *no one* to escape everlasting hellfire who rejects the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We would prefer to revel longer in God's love and justice, and the perfect harmony between the two, but we must take time to deal with our opponents once again as they manipulate the next phrase to serve their own bias. John writes that God sent his Son out of love, so that "*whoever believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Our opponents differ in emphasis, but together, they have inferred from the text several unbiblical teachings, or rather, alleged support for unbiblical teachings that they already affirm.

First, coupled with their false interpretation of "the world," the term found earlier in the verse, they now infer from "whoever believes" that God loves every person the same way, and that Christ has died and made atonement for every person. Because I have already proved the biblical doctrine of a specific effective atonement elsewhere, I will not repeat

---

<sup>21</sup> Morris, *Gospel According to John*, p. 111-113.

the arguments here, as the topic is not the chief concern of this verse. Rather, I will just point out how the unbiblical doctrine of universal atonement cannot be inferred from it.

Second, it is suggested that to say "whoever believes in him shall not perish" implies that, since Christ has already accomplished his work of atonement, the salvation of each individual now depends on the person's free choice. A related implication is that the person is able to make such a free choice. Again, as I have also refuted human freedom elsewhere, here I will only point out how it is impossible to infer human freedom and ability from this verse.

Both items can be quickly resolved. First, the language itself does not warrant the inferences made. I can say, "Whoever becomes a fish can breath under water." The statement is true, but it does not mean that a person can become a fish anytime he wishes. In fact, any inference about one's ability is strictly invalid, since the statement contains no information about ability except for the fish's ability to breath under water. Whether or not it is possible for a person to become a fish, one can infer nothing about it from the statement itself, but it only informs us as to what would happen to a person who turns into a fish.

Moreover, even if it is possible for a person to become a fish, the statement says nothing about *how* this is possible, or whether it is within the person's *own* power to do so. God is certainly able to turn a man into a fish, but a man "cannot make even one hair white or black" (Matthew 5:36). A statement like the one that I have made tells us nothing about a person's ability, but information about ability must be obtained elsewhere.

Whenever we are talking about something that is impossible with man – such as for a man to turn himself into a fish – it means that it will either never happen, or God must make it happen by his omnipotence. One episode in Jesus' ministry makes exactly this point:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:23-26)

We only have time to note what is relevant to our discussion. Jesus says plainly that it is *impossible* for such a man to be saved, except if God makes it happen, since all things are possible with him. But what has happened to "whoever believes"? Jesus never said that everyone can believe, or that it is up to the person to believe, but only that whoever believes will not perish, but will have eternal life. Whether this person in Matthew 19 believes depends on God, not on him, since only God could make it happen.

In any case, the Gospel of John explains itself on this point, and does not leave us guessing. In John 10:26, Jesus says, "You do not believe because you are not my sheep." So a person is Jesus' sheep *before* he believes, and it is because he is his sheep that he believes. How does one become Jesus' sheep? Verse 29 says, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." Jesus' sheep are what they are because they have been given to him *by the Father*, and remember, *this* is why they believe.

However, according to our opponents' theology, we freely decide to believe, and anyone can do it. Applying it to this passage, Jesus would have to say that we are the ones who *give ourselves* to him, and that we are the ones who *make ourselves* his sheep. Needless to say, this contradicts John 10, and therefore it is false doctrine.

Then, here is a passage that we have already cited in another context, but it is very relevant for the present discussion, and so we will read it again:

"Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you *do not believe* me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, *why don't you believe* me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." (John 8:43-47)

In agreement with John 10 but without the metaphors, this passage tells us that a person cannot believe Jesus unless he already "belongs" to God.

Then, John 12:38-41 is even more explicit, or rather, it tells us something similar from another angle:

This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them." Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.

They *cannot* believe, because God actively prevents them! He imposes spiritual blindness and deadness upon them, and he withholds understanding and repentance from them.

Who, then, is the "whoever" in "whoever believes"? It is the person whom God sovereignly loves, and to whom he grants understanding and repentance. Rather than teaching man's

freedom in salvation, the "whoever believes" in John 3:16 effectively shuts out all mankind from salvation except to those whom God sovereignly grants faith in Jesus Christ.

Thus once we take into context the whole of John's Gospel, John 3:16 teaches the exact opposite of what our opponents assert. Rather than teaching man's freedom in salvation, it altogether destroys it. If our thinking is conformed to Scripture, and if we are speaking as Scripture speaks, then to encourage men to believe, to have faith, is not to acknowledge their spiritual freedom and ability, but it is an unabashed declaration that men cannot save themselves.

To tell them that they need faith is to tell them that "with man this is impossible." And although "with God all things are possible," he does not make it happen for everyone. Moreover, although it is true to say that they can believe only when God grants faith to them, what we have established is even stronger than that – God must not only cause them to believe, but he must first stop working against them.

The problem is that our opponents do not take into account the context of John's Gospel. And this is why I call them dishonest and irreverent. They have too little respect for God and Scripture to hear all of what is said. And if they infer from a small phrase what is not really in the phrase, then they are not paying attention even to those few words. They are trying to catch what they want to hear, distort it to fit their opinions, and then they run with it and never look back.

Those who "belong" to God, those whom God has already given to Christ – "whoever" they are, they will surely come to Christ and believe. And Jesus promises that they "shall not perish but have eternal life" (v. 16). Thus he implies that those who do not believe will perish. Verse 18 will confirm this inference, and so we will mention this again when we get there. As for "eternal life," we have already expounded on this, albeit briefly, and now we must move on.

## John 3:17-18

Verse 17 closely follows verse 16, and continues to describe Jesus' mission, for which God has sent him to accomplish: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

To accurately understand this verse, we must first remember that it continues from verse 16, and should not be read apart from it. Verse 16 in turn follows verse 15, and should not be read apart from it. So, going back to verse 15, there it is said that Jesus would be "lifted up," and elsewhere John explains that this refers to "the kind of death he was going to die" (12:33). That is, verse 15 refers to the crucifixion, a central event in Christ's work of atonement. Although verse 16 most likely begins John's commentary, it is nevertheless a commentary on verse 15, and it does not change the subject but rather extends it. So it says that, out of love, God sends his Son to perform the work of atonement on the cross.

Keeping this in mind as we read verse 17, it makes perfect sense to say that "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." The present focus is the atonement, and of course the atonement is not mainly to condemn the world, but to save those for whom Christ dies, for whom he makes this atonement.

Because of this context, there is a particular sense in which God did not send his Son to condemn the world. The next verse says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but *whoever does not believe stands condemned already* because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." Why, of course! Do you see it? We are able to understand all of this in precisely the sense in which it is intended as long as we keep in mind Christ's redemptive work as the background. He came to heal the sick, raise the dead, and save the sinners. He did not need to do the opposite – people were already sick, already dying, and *already condemned*.

Now consider John 9:39, where Jesus says, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Some people might find a verse like this puzzling in light of what we have just read in John 3:17, but the difficulty is easily resolved because we have taken the time to observe the precise sense in which 3:17 asserts what it does. When we then take similar care to read John 9:39, we immediately notice that the two verses are in fact talking about different things, or "judgment" in different senses.

The word "judgment" does not have to mean condemnation, but among other things, it can mean distinction or separation. This is what we find in John 9:39, as the kind of "judgment" that Jesus has in mind here is such that "the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

At the background of this verse is the moving account of how Jesus healed a man born blind. The Pharisees were jealous and hostile, but when questioned by them, the man was



grateful and loyal to the one who healed him. The Pharisees threw him out, but Jesus found him and asked, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man asked, "Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. What a beautiful picture of conversion! Can you see the Spirit of God working in him? No man, Paul writes, can say that Jesus is Lord unless by the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the Pharisees were hardened, and Jesus said to them, "Your guilt remains."

Wherever Jesus went and whatever he did, he caused a distinction to be made among men, and a separation between the believing and the unbelieving, the elect and the non-elect. Simeon had predicted, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed" (Luke 2:34-35). And Jesus himself declared, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

But this is different from the emphasis in John 3:17. There the judgment is not a distinction made between people as they exhibit sharply different reactions to the words and works of Christ – that does not come up until verse 19. Rather, "to judge" in John 3:17 is contrasted against "to save," and this is why some versions use "to condemn" to translate the verb: "For God did not send his Son into the world *to condemn* the world, but *to save* the world through him."

Many people are eager to eliminate or explain away the teachings concerning condemnation in the Bible, and some of them would quickly seize upon a statement like "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world." They might infer from this that God has no intention to condemn anyone, or they might apply this to Christian evangelism and say that sermons that refer to the wrath of God are inconsistent with God's love and Christ's mission. Others would use verses like this to resist Christians who speak out about their sins.

We can unleash an avalanche of biblical passages that unmistakably assert God's wrath, his condemnation of the wicked, and his active punishment against unbelievers. But even if we ignore all of them for now, verse 18 is sufficient to destroy the above delusions, and false inferences and applications: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

In other words, it is not that God will not condemn, but that the condemnation of sinners and unbelievers is already settled, already taken care of. The atonement does not have an opposite counterpart that Jesus must perform in order to secure the condemnation of the wicked. The verse refers to those who hold to a stubborn and persistent unbelief. They are non-Christians, and they will never become Christians. These people, the verse says, are "condemned already." There is no need for God to send his Son to do something special to make it happen. It is already a certainty.

If anything, the coming of the Son of God has made the condemnation of the wicked even more clear and certain. The verse says that the unbeliever is condemned "because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." Verse 36 says, "God's wrath remains on him." The verse speaks of God's judgment against the person as a present reality, and not something that is doubtful until the future.

Rather than dampening the Bible's message of condemnation, the verse seals the condemnation of the unbeliever. At the same time, it provides us with a strong statement regarding the exclusivity of the Christian faith. A person is condemned "because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." It tells us that if you are a non-Christian, then unless you become a Christian, you are condemned already. It does not matter what you do or what you become, as long as you remain a non-Christian, you are already under condemnation.

This teaching pervades John's writings. Here are only several examples: "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him" (John 5:23); "He who hates me hates my Father as well" (John 15:23); "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also" (1 John 2:22-23).

Notice those verses from 1 John. There John writes in the same way as he does in John 3:16-21. He states both the positive and the negative aspects of an idea, as if he wishes to eliminate all excuse and confusion. I could just say, "I am a man," but I make my emphasis and intention unmistakable when I say, "I am a man; I am not a woman." The same goes with "I am a Christian" as compared to "I am a Christian; I am not a non-Christian." In this way, John writes, "No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also."

No one who denies the Son has the Father. As Jesus says in John 14:6, "No one comes to the Father except through me." What am I getting at? There is no way that a person can be a non-Christian and approach the Father, but the only way to approach God is to become a Christian. In other words, no non-Christian religion can lead to God, but all non-Christians remain under God's condemnation – even if they are not atheists, but are Buddhists, Mormons, Muslims, Catholics, and so on.

You cannot disbelieve or reject Jesus Christ and still claim that you love God, or are accepted by God. You cannot say that you are not a Christian, but that you are finding God some other way – there is no other way. This is because to reject the Son is to reject the Father who sent him. Again, John writes, "We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son" (1 John 5:9-10). If you do not accept Jesus Christ, if you reject the Christian faith, then you have called God a liar, and God's wrath remains on you. But

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well" (1 John 5:1).

Christians often hesitate to say for sure whether a non-Christian who has died has been condemned to hell. They say that this is something that rests solely in God's hands, and it is not known to us. However, if we have any respect for God at all, then we must say that the fate of each unbeliever is in fact known to us, for God has revealed it to us. When the non-Christian dies, he is thrown into an everlasting hell. There he will suffer conscious extreme torture – pain! agony! madness! – beyond anything that we have known or imagined, for an endless duration, and where each second's suffering is just as fresh as the one before.

The only reason to withhold judgment on the issue is the possibility that someone has become a Christian in the final seconds before his death. Of course, when this happens, the person has died as a Christian and not a non-Christian. But let us never hesitate to say that someone who has died as a non-Christian is now suffering extreme torment in hell. It might not make us very popular at funerals, but if those who attend do not believe, then they will likewise perish.

In light of what God and Christ have done to secure salvation, it is blasphemous to say that the Christian faith is not the only way to salvation or to escape condemnation. Remember what had to happen: God had to send his Son to die on the cross. If there was another way to secure salvation, if God had willed another standard for satisfying his own justice, then evidently even God himself did not know about it.

For someone to say that there are other ways to salvation would be to say that God was mistaken about his own nature and his own decree. And it is as if he walks up to Christ while he was on the cross and says, "What are you doing? We don't need you. You are being crucified for no reason." And a Christian who acknowledges that there might be other ways to God is doing the same thing. It is as if he walks up to Christ on the cross and says, "What are you doing? They don't need you. Nobody does. Don't you know that you are suffering for nothing?"

This is the implication of denying the exclusivity of the Christian faith. Accordingly, a church member who denies this doctrine should be repeatedly entreated, corrected, and rebuked. But if there is no repentance, and if he refuses to affirm that only Christians will enter heaven and all non-Christians are condemned to hell, and especially if he is vocal about this horrible blasphemy, then he should be excommunicated.

The person who denies the exclusivity of the Christian faith might consider himself compassionate toward other people, and he is unwilling to think of the great number of non-Christians as condemned. But under this cloak of humanistic love is his resentment against God and an utter disdain for the cross. The person who insists that only Christians are saved has nothing to answer for, but it is the one who says that there are other ways that must defend his blasphemy.

On the other hand, the more we emphasize and glory in the exclusivity of the Christian faith, that the only way to have eternal life and to escape everlasting hell is to believe in Jesus Christ, the more we honor God's love and Christ's sacrifice. We accept what he has provided with reverence and gratitude. At the same time, we dare not and wish not tell others that all will be well even if they mock God's love and spurn Christ's suffering. Few people are more wicked than those who say that even non-Christians can be saved, who blaspheme God and deceive men in the same breath.

I realize what God has saved me from and what he did to secure this salvation. So I am not about to turn against him by saying that all that he did for me was unnecessary, for indeed he has declared that faith in Christ is the only way. And whether as a church member or as a church leader, I am not going to let anyone blaspheme like this with impunity. But for such a person, the greatest punishment is yet to come, for "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

Even if you consider yourself a Christian, if you have compromised the precious and crucial doctrine that Jesus is the only way to salvation, then you have committed a terrible sin. If you have suggested or even entertained the idea that there might be another way to God, you are a great sinner. You have called God a liar, and it is as if you have spat on Christ as he hung on the cross, and joined the reprobates as they mocked his suffering.

Your contempt for God and for Christ disgusts me, and it is hard for me to think of a word insulting enough to describe someone like you. I would be ashamed to call you a brother or sister in Christ. You are unworthy to even be in the same room with those of us who affirm that "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

And in fact, someone who blasphemes God and mocks the work of Christ like you might not be a Christian at all, but you might still be under condemnation, being prepared for everlasting hellfire. If you think that there is another way to salvation, then you should try it and see what happens when you die. But if you are unwilling to entrust your soul to a non-Christian way, then why do you suggest that other people can do it and be saved? You hypocrite!

Nevertheless, God is merciful, and even someone despicable like you can be forgiven, that is, if you will now repent and affirm the truth, that Jesus Christ is the only way to God, to salvation, to escape everlasting condemnation, and that all non-Christians will suffer in hell forever.

## John 3:19-21

We cannot judge what we cannot know, and so we admit that we cannot judge someone's thoughts and motives when we cannot know a person's heart. Further, we would be unjust to speculate about a person's thoughts and motives, and then make a judgment about him on such a basis. When we do this, not only do we sin against the man, but we sin against God, for we pretend that we can do that which only an omniscient judge can do, and thus we usurp his role and rob his honor.

All of this is true, but problems occur when we infer from this that we cannot have any reliable knowledge about the hearts of men, so that we can never make any authoritative statements regarding their thoughts and motives, or even to denounce their unbelief and sinful behavior. The inference is invalid, because even though we have no direct knowledge about the hearts of men, God knows all things, and he has told us something about what he knows concerning the evil thoughts and motives of the non-Christian.

And on *this* basis – not speculation but revelation – we can confidently expose the sinner's thoughts and criticize his motives. Of course, we do not know the sinner's heart in the fullness and with the precision that God knows it, but we can know as much as God has revealed to us. We must not speculate beyond what God has revealed, but at the same time, we must boldly apply what the Spirit has shown us about the sinner in the Bible.

In verses 19-21, the inspired apostle expounds to us not only the reactions of men toward Christ, but also their motives and reasons for these differing reactions:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

Morris thinks "verdict" is a misleading translation: "The word denotes the *process* of judging, not the *sentence* of condemnation."<sup>22</sup> If we will read the passage carefully, we should notice that it is describing how the judgment is worked out rather than a pronouncement of judgment.

Of course, there is a judgment, and there is a pronouncement, but this passage has a different emphasis. It would be awkward to translate the word as "judging," but some versions make attempts to convey the meaning. For example, the NLT says, "Their judgment is based on this fact," and the GNT says, "This is how the judgment works."

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

First, John says, "Light has come into the world." This establishes the reference point by which people are judged. Their nature and their motives are uncovered by how they react and relate to the light. This light is Jesus Christ, who says elsewhere in this Gospel, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8:12). Therefore, he is the reference point by which people are judged.

John continues, "...but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." He tells us men's reaction and the reason for this reaction. Jesus Christ, the light, has come into the world. But men love darkness instead. This is not because it is irrational to come to the light, and it is not because these men already have the light, or that they have something better. But they love darkness because their deeds are evil, because they are evildoers.

Now, it is not as if these evildoers merely prefer evil, that while they commend the light and those who come to the light, they just feel that they must head toward another way. No, John says, "Everyone who does evil *hates* the light." They resent and detest the light. Some run away from it, and some actively oppose it. Paul lashed out at the light until the light struck back and made a believer out of him (Acts 9).

The evildoer "will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." You see, there is something wrong with him. There is something wrong with the non-Christian. There is something wrong with the person who hears the gospel but does not believe. There is something wrong with the person who argues against Christianity. And there is something wrong with the person who affirms a religion other than the Christian faith. There is nothing wrong with Christ or Christianity, but what is wrong is that the evildoer fears that his deeds will be exposed. The word rendered "exposed" can also mean to convict or to reprove.

This is the reason why people do not come to Christ and believe in him. It is not because there is something wrong on the side of Christianity, but it is because the unbeliever is evil, and he does not want to be exposed, convicted, and reprovved. He resents and fears the light, and so he runs away from it and hides from it. Those who wish to retain their pride sometimes ridicule it, argue against it, and slander it by making up stories about it.

They would give themselves all sorts of reasons for not coming to the light, fearing that they would be exposed for the depraved individuals that they are. For example, some people might base their unbelief on a work of fiction, a novel based on old and refuted theories about the Christian faith. And often their arguments and theories even contradict one another. But they are desperate, and so they will hang on to anything to give them an excuse.

In contrast, "whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." The verse literally says, "whoever *does* the truth," or as in the NASB, "he who *practices* the truth." So in these three verses (v. 19-21), John gives us a picture of one who does evil and one who does the truth.

Although John is fond of contrasts and parallels, his description of these two persons do not exactly correspond at every point. The former does evil, but rather than saying that the latter does good, he says that this person does "the truth." In both his Gospel and his Epistles, "truth" is inseparably tied to the person and doctrine of Jesus Christ. Thus the person who welcomes the light is not just one who does good in general, but he is one who follows or practices the teachings of Christ.

He comes to the light "so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." Here is another point where the contrast is not an exact parallel. The evildoer does not come to the light because his deeds are evil, and he does not want to be exposed, convicted, and reprov'd. On the other hand, John does not say that the one who comes to the light wishes all to see that his deeds are good, but he wishes to make it known that his deeds have been "done through God," or literally, "wrought in God" (NASB). The one who comes to the light does so because God has been working in and through him. The verse thus teaches "a strong doctrine of divine election."<sup>23</sup>

Some commentators suggest that there is a sense in which the person who hides from the light is self-condemned. The illustration is used that the way a person reacts to an established work of art tells us something about the person rather than the work of art. The masterpiece serves as a standard and a reference point by which the person is judged, and rather than damaging its worth, the person who belittles the masterpiece is "self-condemned," at least when it comes to art appreciation. In a similar fashion, the person who does not come to the light betrays his true nature and motives, and according to the beginning of verse 19, this is how the process of judging occurs.

There is no problem with this – and indeed, if this is what the passage teaches there *cannot* be any problem with this – as long as we remember that the description is relative, so that we do not abuse the text by deriving from it some idea of human freedom, as if man is self-condemned apart from God. No, this would contradict the consistent teaching of Scripture, that God exercises complete control over all men, whether for good or for evil.

The text is relative because, although it indeed tells us how humanity is split by Christ as the standard and the reference point, it does not tell us why some are evildoers and why they remain such. Nothing in the text says that evil is self-caused or that men make themselves evil. In addition, in a context when Paul is talking about the elect and the non-elect, those whom God loves and those whom God hates (Romans 9:13), he mentions that it is up to God to make "some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use" (v. 21).

The Gospel of John itself refers to those who "belong" to God and those who "belong" to the devil, and nothing indicates that the people themselves are the ones who decide to whom they will belong. And we must not forget the passage, also in the Gospel of John, which says that some people cannot believe because God actively blinds their minds and deadens their hearts. So both the elect and the non-elect are *made* that way by God, and

---

<sup>23</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, New International Biblical Commentary (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1989), p. 60.

actively kept that way by God, and it is *this* that explains why they behave differently in John 3:19-21.

Moreover, although the idea of self-condemnation has some meaning in a very narrow context – it tells us how some people behave relative to a reference point – it cannot be pressed very far. It is not as if a person can create a hell and then send himself there. No, God decided to create it and send people there. A man would not even know how to go to hell after he dies unless God takes him there. Why, do you think that God would just hand him a map and expects him to find his way to hell by himself? No, John writes that the unbeliever is *thrown* into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

When we fail to keep it within context, the idea of self-condemnation can produce various unbiblical implications.<sup>24</sup> If we must retain this term, at least we must say that God is the one who *makes* people think and behave in a way that condemn themselves. But it is often easier just to say that God makes them that way, keeps them that way, then condemns them for being that way, and that in all of this, he remains righteous and blameless. Just as a potter has the right to do whatever he wishes with a lump of clay, God has the right to make any kind of creatures he wishes and to do whatever he wants to them.

Unbelievers tell us not to judge them. "You narrow-minded bigots!" they would say to us, "You don't even know us!" We do not claim to know more than what God has revealed to us through Scripture, but Scripture gives us so much information about their thoughts and motives that it has rendered speculation unnecessary. From these three verses alone, we already know about their dispositions, the nature of their deeds, and why they do not come to Christ. God has given us a description of their very thoughts and motives, so we know what happens in their hearts, even at a deep spiritual level.

We do not play God or usurp his authority, but we merely repeat and expound on what he has already declared: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." And at the same time, precisely because we do not play God or usurp his authority, we dare not keep silent about his revelation to us or compromise its message before the world, when he has commanded us to preach to all nations.

Non-Christians want us to stop seeing things in black and white, in absolutes, and start seeing in shades of gray instead. But John gives us no such option. With him it is either belief or unbelief, life or death, love or hate, light or darkness, good or evil, true or false, and salvation or condemnation. He packs all of these ideas in verses 16-21, and he would repeat them and add several others in the rest of his writings. You are either a Christian or

---

<sup>24</sup> To illustrate, Romans 2:1-2 says, "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, *you are condemning yourself*, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth." Paul writes, "You are condemning yourself," but he is describing their behavior relative to the standard that is the law of God (v. 12-15). The expression does not tell us what causes them to disobey the law, or why they judge others for doing the same things. Paul is not talking about metaphysics, or divine sovereignty and human freedom. When it comes to these latter issues, he is emphatic that God is the one who controls both the elect and the non-elect, both the righteous and the wicked.



a non-Christian. You either believe in Christ, or you disbelieve in Christ. If you believe, you have eternal life, but if you disbelieve, you are condemned to hell forever. It is as simple as that.

Man is a sinner. He needs a savior. Jesus is the answer. Just reading John 3:1-21 is enough to make a Christian weep and tremble. His spirit responds to God's words (John 6:63), and his heart burns within him as he reads (Luke 24:32). But all of this feels dead to the damned. No, it is not that the words are dead – they are "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12) – but the hearts of the damned are dead.

What about you? Does all of this mean anything to you? Does all this talk about spirit, faith, life, and light sound meaningless and foolish to you? There is nothing wrong with the message, but there is something wrong with you. You are still dead in your sins, and you must be born again. Seek him today. Entreat him today. And it might be that he has chosen you even before the foundation of the world, so that he will now open your understanding, revive your spirit, and grant you new life in Christ.