

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

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

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



Buy me a coffee

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



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

any especially intellectual countenance? Are there any evidences of refinement or spirituality? Are any of the men strong-willed? Are any physical weaklings? Pick out specimens that are fit to be world conquerors. Any that would make religious fanatics. Imagine these men living in America to-day: what kinds of citizens would they become, and what would be their probable occupations?' Perhaps Director Bailey and Professor Foster will publish the answers of the smart American boy.

On the 24th day of June 1908, at one of the sittings of the Pan-Anglican Congress, a special offering was made for Foreign Missions. The sum contributed was £352,000. How was that sum spent? The whole story is told in *The Spending of a Thank-Offering*, a handsome illustrated volume, edited by Aubrey Baskerville Mynors, M.A., and published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (4s. cloth, 2s. 6d. paper, net).

Mr. Arthur Herald's *Essays in Moderation* (Swarthmore Press; 5s. net) are chiefly essays in Utopianism. The last half of the book is deliberately given to the description of a perfect State. Only the first essay deals directly with Moderation. It is a sermon on the text, 'Let your moderation be known unto all men' (Ph 4⁵). Mr. Herald takes

the word to mean 'a proper sense of proportion' or the putting of first things first.

'One great weakness of the churches at the present time is that we are still groping after a theology which is at once simple and profound, loyal to the historic revelation and loyal to the manifestations of truth in modern science—a theology which would interpret life's meaning and purpose as clearly as Calvinism used to do or as Marxism does—a theology which will satisfy the mind and stir the heart—a theology that can be preached.'

The Rev. Herbert G. Wood, M.A., does not profess to supply this theology or to be able to supply it. But in the Swarthmore Lecture for 1920 on *Quakerism and the Future of the Church* (Swarthmore Press; 1s. 6d. net) he does very clearly open the way for it. He shows that 'all the leading ideas of the older theology have broken down in the form in which they used to be presented. The idea of the sovereignty of God and of predestination and election have to be reshaped. The doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin, of a substitutionary Atonement and of Eternal Punishment are no longer believed and can no longer be preached. The popular conception of the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures can no longer be maintained.' But he shows just as clearly that the theologian who tosses all these doctrines aside and offers no substitute for them is not the theologian that we are in search of.

Nicodemus.

BY THE REVEREND GEORGE STEVEN, D.D., EDINBURGH.

It is of importance for the understanding of this story that we keep in mind throughout the position of Nicodemus and the high esteem in which he must have been held by his fellow-countrymen. He was not only a man of education and blameless character, but of such marked ability that he had been chosen a member of the Sanhedrim, the highest civil and ecclesiastical court of the land. This position of honour and influence it was his duty to maintain. It has been customary to despise him for visiting Jesus under cover of the darkness, yet there are not many men among us of

high place and repute who would not shrink from what they might think was compromising themselves by showing openly an interest in a movement which was limited to the lower classes, and was said by the more influential people of the time to be subversive of the national faith.

It is of importance also that we have a clear conception of the motive which led Nicodemus to visit Jesus at all. As is manifest from the Gospels, our Lord's work and teaching were causing great discussions everywhere, and Nicodemus may have taken part in them. At any rate he confessed he

knew what they were, and had formed his own conclusions about them. Many motives have been ascribed to him of one kind or another, but I am inclined to believe from the turn of the conversation that he was moved by a purely intellectual curiosity, which Jesus with His unerring intuition into human character perceived at once. Nicodemus wished to understand what this new movement meant, wished to get to the heart of it, to study it and to study it at the source. Moreover, he knew that a private conversation was the best method of attaining his object. Yet his high position and his sense that he was stooping from it were against his getting at any real comprehension of Jesus. Very few men of education and refinement can lightly put aside what it has cost them a whole lifetime to build up, so as to listen with an open mind to what a young working-man from a country village has got to say about the very subject which they have studied most deeply. In addition to that, the very religion of the Pharisee would make it difficult for him to listen with appreciation to the new teaching. He had been trained from his earliest days in the law, to believe that men were saved by strict obedience to commandments, to reverence the traditions of the elders, to shape his whole conduct by a complicated system of rules. He therefore had an idea of God which closed his mind against the free spirit of Jesus. And a false idea is as blinding as sin. Now an intellectual interest in religious movements is attractive, even fascinating, and wholly legitimate, but to come with a prejudiced mind to the study of anything, not to speak of religion, prevents any intimate knowledge of it. I suspect that Nicodemus, while he was interested, was, like other Pharisees, wholly satisfied that the law was the only divine means of saving a man's soul. And to be satisfied with our religious attainments is fatal.

Through the dark streets of Jerusalem Nicodemus stole along until he reached the house where Jesus lodged. He entered, and was in the presence of the Son of God. Sitting in the dimly lit room, they talked together, while the wind blew where it listed, and they heard the sound of it beating on the casement. Nicodemus opened the conversation, and, we may frankly admit, opened it diplomatically by a kindly reference to Jesus' teaching and work, 'We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these signs thou doest except God be with him.' It would have been easy for

Jesus, if He had been so minded, to lead on from the vantage ground thus given Him to deeper matters. He had done so with Simon the son of Jonas, when, taking him at his best, He called the impulsive man of action a 'rock'—no longer impulsive but immovable. He had done so also with Nathanael the mystic, and had promised him still richer visions than those he had had under the fig-tree, yet steadied them by resting them all on the fact of the Son of man. Why then did He pull Nicodemus up sharp, preventing him from even so much as putting the question he had come to ask? Was there something in his manner or in his tone that revealed him? Or was the man sincere who said that Jesus was a teacher come from God, and yet could not talk with Him in broad daylight? Whatever it was that moved him, our Lord at once checked the speech by what seems an irrelevant reply: 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' This would seem to mean: 'There is no use of our discussing the matter, for we have no common ground to go upon; no one can discuss it until he has had experience of it: it is a matter not for discussing, but for inward seeing.' As we are all aware there are certain facts in life which cannot be explained, because they are ultimate facts and must simply be accepted—such as life, love, fear, hope; we cannot analyse them. An illustration or two will bring the truth of this home to our minds. Take a landscape. Have you ever been in the presence of a fine sunset, and at the same time in the company of one who had no sense of beauty? You speak to him of what you see and feel, of what moves you deeply, and he answers you that he does not understand your emotion. You do not argue the matter with him, you only regret that your friend is beauty-blind. A company were once sailing up one of the famous rivers of America, and some of them were breaking out from time to time in admiration of the splendour of the scene that was passing before them. A wealthy American was of the number, who after listening for a time cried out: 'What are you all raving about?' Then sweeping his arm across the scene, added: 'I would not give fifty dollars for five miles of it.' The others were silent, and one of them who told the story was sorry for the poor creature. The man did not *see* it—that was all, but how much it was! Turner, the famous painter was busy painting a picture in the presence of a lady friend, who kept watching

and comparing the landscape and the picture as it took shape under Turner's creative hand. At last she exclaimed, 'Mr. Turner, I don't see that!' He stopped, looked at her for a moment, and answered, 'But, madam, don't you wish you could?' His question rendered debate needless. It is the same with music and with poetry. What thrills one soul leaves another cold. 'Daffodils, That come before the swallow dares and take The winds of March with beauty,'—these words of Shakespeare will be nothing particular to one man, and will haunt the mind of another for ever. There is something even more marvellous than these. There are men and women among us to-night who love most of all the friendless, the degraded, and the lost souls of your city, who are restless in their own comforts, who have felt the fascination of Home Mission work, and give their time, their strength, their all to save them. As men of the world observe them, they are amazed or amused, counting it hopeless work. The reason is they have not been quickened by the divine power of Christ's compassion for men, and have not had their eyes anointed with salve so as to see the loveliness of a life redeemed. It seems to me that it was for some such reason as this that our Lord declined to enter on any discussion with Nicodemus concerning this new religious movement, in which he showed a keen intellectual interest, saying in as many words: 'You do not see or feel or grasp the meaning and power and beauty of My message.' If Christ were here among us to-night, as in very truth He is, what would He ask? Do *we* feel the charm of a holy life, or see the loveliness of a meek and chastened spirit, or desire the humility that is pleased enough to be overlooked in a congregation which we have served for years? Are we pained by a story of sin, wounded by the sight of pride or greed in a good man, shocked by a cry for retaliation or by a sneer at a pure life? If these things are true of us, would He not say: 'Then verily, you are born again'?

Nicodemus was puzzled by this new view of his relation to God, and asked: 'How can a man be born when he is old? How can these things be?' That question does not seem to me a silly one. It would appear rather that the whole Christian world has, in one form or another, been trying to answer it ever since the night Christ spoke. And never have men highly skilled in mental science been so busy with the problem as they are to-day. It is

quite true we cannot solve it, but we can at least try to understand it, if it be only a little. To be born again, as our Lord said that night, is to be born of the Spirit, and the Spirit of the living God is God dealing with us, thinking of us, seeking us, persuading us, working in us. On the other hand, our spirit is *our* power of thinking, of desiring and seeking, of being interested, of purposing and doing. When the Spirit of God speaks to us, He speaks in our spirits, that is to say, in our thoughts, in our affections, in our wills. When we make God's thoughts our thoughts, love Him as He loves us, surrender our wills to accomplish His will, then we have the new heart, we are born again. This new birth, this begetting us anew, is not something God does *to* us, but something He does *through* us—something He does by means of our own thinking and desiring and purposing and striving. He appeals to us in our human nature, He persuades us by revealing Himself, He wins us by His love for us—and all through Jesus Christ. It is Christ who saves us, not we who save ourselves. The preacher's duty and the teacher's is first and foremost to bring men into the presence of Christ, and to let Christ do His own special and gracious work of saving. It is not any word of ours that delivers men, but Christ; it is not any argument of ours that persuades men, but the Spirit of Christ, breathing like the wind upon the spirit of man. It is a mystery. Yet there is no mystery in this plain fact, that we can leave off our own petty efforts at salvation and our own narrow thoughts of God's mercy, and get out into the light of Christ, and breathe the fresh air of His redeeming love.

A friend of mine was called out one morning to visit a dying child. He had a mile or two to walk in the sunshine and the bracing air of a fine summer day. When he entered the ploughman's cottage, he found the tiny closet crowded with sympathetic neighbours, and the sobbing mother bending low over the dying infant. He felt stifled with the close air, and in his usual rapid manner, took in the situation and acted at once. Asking the women to withdraw and leave the kitchen door open, he lifted the mother from her child, saying: 'Stand back, you are choking your child.' He tried to open the little window, but finding it fixed, broke the glass with his stick. 'Stand back,' he quietly repeated to the mother, 'and let your child breathe the fresh air.' It very quickly revived. The child was actually choking for want of air, and

there were cubic miles of life-giving air on every side around it. This is a figure of what is happening in the spiritual world every day and in every Christian land. The great tide of the Father's universal, unwearying, inexhaustible love is beating upon us and surging around us every moment of our lives, and we shut our children up in the close stifling air of our own petty thoughts of Him, debate over little details of doctrine and church order, unchurch one another for not holding views which our Lord never mentioned. Thus our children have their spiritual instincts and aspirations checked and perverted within them. Stand back and let the love of their Heavenly Father flow freely into their hearts. Let them look into the face of Jesus Christ, and it will transform them into His image. Let them feel something of His compassion, and see what agonies He bore for their sakes. It is the presence of Christ, and the contemplation of His words and His sufferings, that create the new heart, and bring a man, even when he is old, to birth again.

There is another thought, one which may have been in your minds while I have been speaking. If it is in any sense a birth, you may say, how is it possible, now that our habits of thought and feeling have been formed? Let me conclude with a few words on this mysterious problem. There is,

I believe, in every man a germ of the divine, which, if it is cared for, fed and nourished, will change him into a son of God. This germ of spiritual life is often buried deep under habits of sin, or under the cares and worries of business, or the inordinate love of knowledge, or the calls of social life, or the satisfactions of a happy home. Into such entanglements, the whole life may get so absorbed that there is no time left for God. Nevertheless the seed remains, and cannot entirely be destroyed so long as man is man, for it is a part of his rational nature. The grace of the Almighty has not been sleeping, for appeals have been made to this germ from day to day in books, and speech, in the lives of men and women, in the events that have been a man's lot, in sorrow or defeat or failure, in the coming of his children, or the approach of death. These have kept the life from perishing. Then at last on God's own day, Christ comes athwart the soul; He speaks, and the soul listens; He pleads, and the soul feels the power of the pleading; He persuades, and the soul yields itself; He reveals the love of the Father in the Cross, and the soul embraces Him. Then is seen what is surely the most marvellous of all miracles, the bands of sin and self are broken, and the man rises clean away from the thralldom of his old life, and becomes the bondslave of Christ for ever.

In the Study.

Virginitus Puerisque.

Birthdays of Good Men and Women.

'Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord.'—Ro 12¹¹.

A LIFE spent on a farm that is not too big can be very happy indeed, especially to boys and girls. I am thinking of a boy called George Williams who had his home at a delightful English farmstead. Such a jolly place it was. You would have loved the great open fireplace in the kitchen; both a pot and a kettle could hang over the fire at the same time, and there was room for a person to sit on a stool inside the fireplace. Then there was an old oak settle standing against the wall. If you sat on it and looked up you could see that the rafters were almost quite black, and you would feel that you did not wish them to be any other colour. The smoke from the fire painted them.

George was quite young—just fifteen—when he left that dear home to go to a town called Bridgewater to learn the drapery business. That was in the year 1836, so he must have been born in 1821.

It was a misty summer morning when he and his father set out for Bridgewater. Even although it was very early you may be sure his mother came down to the gate at the end of the garden which opened on to the public road and bade her boy an affectionate good-bye, and then stood watching the two figures in the dogcart until they were quite out of sight.

George was a ruddy-faced, active boy. Standing behind the shop counter he seemed born to the business. He loved it. He did more than merely sell things; he kept writing down, or committing to memory, particulars of prices and names of