

The New Birth

By

Herman A. Hoyt, Th.M., Th. D.,
Dean, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ROMANCE CREATED BY THE NEW BIRTH

"After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Aenon, near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came and were baptized. For John was not yet cast into prison. Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him. John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voices: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:22-30).

It is one thing to understand the importance, mystery, and method of the New Birth, and even to experience this supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit. But it is quite another thing to realize and fully appreciate the new relationship into which this operation brings one. Very few believers, if any, from the moment they enter the new life, fully comprehend it. This is to be expected because they are babes in CHRIST. It is not unusual to find them spiritually low, emotionally joyless, and morally defiled with the things of this world. For this reason the apostle John, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, introduces an incident from the life of John the Baptist in order to bring into clear relief the new relationship with CHRIST.

The key to this passage of Scripture is the first clause of verse 29. **"He that hath the bride is the bridegroom."** This is a statement of fact viewed as an ideal state. The ideal provides the framework for the unfolding of a relationship which CHRIST will sustain to the Church and will later be elaborated in the New Testament. To the average believer this is an enigma because he knows so little about the Word of GOD. Nevertheless, this is the key to this passage of Scripture, and it speaks of romance, romance with CHRIST, the most perfect romance of time and eternity. Here is a perfect lover, the Lord JESUS CHRIST. He has a perfect friend in John the Baptist. And He is perfecting a bride whose loveliness will surpass that of any bride in history.

This is the mystical bride of CHRIST. All the saints from Pentecost to the Rapture will comprise

the bride. Each one experiences New Birth, and then by the artistry of the Holy Spirit is given his place in this spiritual organism. Every spiritual component of this one living entity, the bride, joins in directing loving devotion to the Bridegroom who purchased her with His own Blood (Acts 20:28), and sought her out by His Spirit (Acts 15:14), and now delights to bestow upon her such attention as to fashion her into a Bride whose loveliness will be without spot or blemish, or any such thing (Ephesians 5:25-27).

So naturally does this teaching intrude itself upon the mind of the reader that he is scarcely aware of the movement of thought. The friend of the Bridegroom must relinquish his place of prominence to the Bridegroom who now moves into the forefront. As the friend recedes from view, it is the Bridegroom who occupies the central place in the affections of the bride.

I. THE CONTEMPORANEOUS MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS

"After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Aenon, near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized. For John was not yet cast into prison" (John 3:22-24).

After His ministry in the central city of Jewry, JESUS moves to the countryside where for a time the ministries of John and JESUS parallel each other. Shortly John the Baptist will have finished his course. But during this period an occasion arises to exhibit the relation of these two leaders.

1. For a period of six to nine months the ministries of John and JESUS are contemporaneous.

Side by side they pursue their separate paths, each preaching a message of repentance, saying, "**Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). John is working in the wilderness of Judaea (Matthew 3:1), while JESUS is in the city. He begins in the temple (2:14), but finding no response He moves into the city (2:23), and from there to Judaea (3:22), and finally removes to Galilee (4:3).

2. The ministries of these two leaders are in every sense cooperative, though some were bound to interpret them as competitive.

While JESUS was ministering in Judaea preaching and by His authority having the disciples baptize the converts (3:22; 4:1-2), "**John also**" was not far away in Aenon performing the same ministry. The baptism they authorized was not Christian baptism, but it was a sign to everyone that those who submitted to it had been persuaded by the preaching of these leaders, and now they were joining them as followers.

3. It will not be long until John the Baptist has completed his ministry.

As the apostle John looks back, the time element is so clear to him, so he adds the note, "**For John was not yet cast into prison**" (24). This is a significant statement. It means that John the Baptist was faithful to his call to the very end of his ministry. Perhaps he was aware of the forces that were already gathering against him. He had been investigated by a committee from the Sanhedrim (John 1:19). But from a totally different source his ministry was to be cut off. It was

Herod who ordered his imprisonment (Matthew 14:3).

4. The divine record is perfectly clear in setting forth the complimentary aspects of John's ministry.

Some of his disciples did not understand it, so it is not surprising that readers of the Gospel miss it. In the opening chapter of this Gospel, the apostle makes this clear. Probably the reason John the Apostle records this incident is because he was one of those disciples. John the Baptist pointed the two to CHRIST, and he not only did so with approval, but there was also in it the urgency to follow JESUS (John 1:35-37). From the very first this was John the Baptist's relation to CHRIST. He went before to prepare the way and a following for CHRIST.

As far as we are able to see from the record, CHRIST's appearance upon the scene was never marked by an effort to take over the reins from John the Baptist and dismiss him from service. He allowed him to continue until in the providential course of events John was withdrawn from service by imprisonment. But the movement of disciples from John the Baptist to JESUS disturbed some among the followers of John. It is this movement that provides the occasion for the next incident.

II. THE CONTROVERSY ARISING OVER THE QUESTION OF PURIFICATION

"Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him" (John 3:25-26).

1. That the movement of disciples from John to JESUS provided an occasion for distress to the disciples of John is made evident by the opening word of verse 25.

"Then" in English may be logical as well as chronological in meaning. And here it is. This points the reader back to the parallel ministries of John and JESUS. Though many were joining themselves to John the Baptist as his disciples, it was not long until they were leaving him and joining themselves to JESUS. It was inevitable that some would observe this movement and place upon it a false interpretation. In this case it became the occasion to provoke a controversy over purification.

2. The factions in this controversy consisted of Jews on the one side and John's disciples on the other.

This may indicate how unhappy officialdom was over the ministry of John. His appearance in Israel had created a furor and a following that was amazing (Matthew 3:5). Until John the Baptist, the heavens had been silent for 400 years. GOD had sent a famine of the hearing of the words of the Lord. He had not spoken to his people by any prophet. And then came John the Baptist, the last of the line of Old Testament prophets, and the greatest. He spoke with such authority that all Israel went out to him.

This made it necessary for the Sanhedrim to investigate. The investigation proved entirely

unsatisfactory (John 1:19-28), and they were unwilling to approve his ministry. But they did not dare to legislate against him for fear of the people (Matthew 21:24-27). Now that another prophet has appeared in their midst by the name of JESUS, whose force and following is even greater than John the Baptist, they see an opportunity to pit the two against one another and perhaps break the back of both movements.

3. The nature of this controversy concerns a question "about purifying."

Someone has said that this may be the first baptismal controversy. And this may well be true. When John the Baptist was being interviewed by the investigating committee from the Sanhedrim, he had been questioned about his baptism (John 1:25). Later in his public preaching he drew a sharp contrast between his ministry and that of CHRIST. He declared that he came "**baptizing with water**" (1:31), but there was One coming who stood above him in rank (1:30), who was anointed of the Holy Spirit (1:33), who would baptize "**with the Holy Ghost**" (1:33). When CHRIST came authorizing a baptism in water, this was undoubtedly interpreted to mean that the Holy Spirit was ministered to men in this way. Such a baptism would far outrank that of John the Baptist. And this the Jew threw into the face of John's disciples.

4. The result of the controversy was the conclusion to which John's disciples reluctantly came.

They, could not gainsay the fact that the meteoric fame of their leader was diminishing in the face of the rising fame and favor of CHRIST. Their deep devotion to John made them feel this personally. So they rushed to John with the problem. "**Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold the same baptizeth, and all men come to him**" (26). This was undoubtedly intended to mean that this situation was not right, and they didn't like it, and something must be done to correct it. This is implicit in the statement, and John the Baptist understood it that way. This expression of loyalty on the part of his disciples undoubtedly warmed his own heart. But it also provided him with an opportunity to explain more fully the purpose of his ministry to these men. At least he uses it to make some remarkable confessions.

III. THE CONFESSIONS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST IN ANSWERING HIS DISCIPLES

"John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him" (John 3:27-28).

Great men, it has always been discovered, have risen to prominence and performed amazing feats because of what they believed. These systems of faith or philosophies of life have provided them with the dynamic that has driven them on to realize all their potentialities, and in many cases go far beyond ordinary endurance. This was true of John the Baptist.

In this fleeting instance, there is a glimpse into the heart of this man as revealed by his own lips.

1. He first confesses that he believes in the supremacy of the government of Heaven.

"A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven" (27). This is his way of

stating that he believes in an infinite and sovereign GOD. His GOD is not struggling uncertainly with a stubborn and insurgent creation, the final outcome of which may result in defeat. At no point in the outworking of His plan is there any uncertainty or defeat. John the Baptist serves a GOD who is working "**all things after the counsel of his own will**" (Ephesians 1:11), "**and his kingdom ruleth over all**" (Psalm 103:19).

2. This means to John the Baptist that there is a subserviency of all human government to the government of Heaven.

"A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven." "For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south: But God is the judge; he putteth down one, and setteth up another" (Psalm 75:6-7).

Kings must be submitted to His will. "**The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water; he turneth it whithersoever he will**" (Proverbs 21:1).

"Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain" (Psalm 76:10).

In this persuasion John bore testimony to his disciples concerning the prominence that had come to JESUS.

3. The sincerity of John the Baptist was displayed when he called his own disciples to witness the statement he had made to the investigating committee from the Sanhedrim.

"Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ" (28). If ever one had an opportunity to cash in on a large following and rise to even greater heights, that man was John the Baptist. No one up to his time, over the past 400 years, had stirred Israel as he did. The movement had grown to such proportions that it had excited the concern of the ruling body in Israel. When asked whether he were the CHRIST, he could easily have usurped that place and gained a following that might have brought on a revolution.

But with a frankness and candor that was transparent he disclaimed any right to be called the CHRIST, or Elijah, or that prophet (John 1:19-25). His own disciples were witnesses to this. Even in the face of the high hopes of His own disciples for him, he did not encourage them to believe anything other than the truth.

4. His service stood in contrast to that of the CHRIST.

His own disciples had heard him say, "**that I am sent before him**" (28). He had gone before Him "**that he should be made manifest to Israel**" (1:31). When the committee had insisted on clear identification (1:22), "**he said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias**"(1:23). In this he reduced himself to a nonentity. His only ministry was that of a messenger, and the messenger only a mouthpiece, and the mouthpiece only to convey a message, and the message to make straight the way of the Lord. His disciples knew this, but they had never divined its meaning. Now the months have passed and they are witnessing a strange turn in the fortunes of the Baptist that require the

refreshing of their memories. Unless they see the present situation in the light of his own testimony at the beginning, they will not be able to understand the turning of the tide. But if they can see this, their own hearts will be put to rest. This is not defeat. This is the fulfillment of purpose.

IV. THE COMMISSION GIVEN TO JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE BEGINNING

"He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth great because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled" (John 3:29).

1. As other prophets of GOD, John the Baptist had been called and commissioned for his work.

He was the last in that illustrious line of prophets stretching across the Old Testament economy, for **"the law and the prophets were until John"** (Luke 16:16). And among those mighty men of old, Adam, Abel, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Daniel, and the rest, the Lord JESUS singled him out as the greatest. There was a moment when he seemed to waver, when he was thrown into prison (Luke 7:19). But JESUS used this as an opportunity to eulogize him to the people. No higher tribute could ever have been paid to anyone than the tribute JESUS paid to John. **"For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women, there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist"** (Luke 7:28; cf. 20-27).

His commission was announced by an angel to his father, while performing the order of his service in the temple, even before John was conceived in the womb.

"For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink: and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:15-17).

From the moment he emerged from the wilderness to engage in his public ministry he attracted a following. So powerful was his preaching that many repented and joined themselves to him. But there was that authority in his ministry, that the moment CHRIST was identified and inducted into public service, the disciples of John felt compelled to leave him and follow JESUS. For **"he that hath the bride is the bridegroom."**

2. In this capacity John was exercising the functions of "the friend of the bridegroom."

This office is far more familiar to those of Oriental culture than to those who live in the Occident. It was the custom for a man desiring marriage to commit the whole matter into the hands of a friend. It was the business of the friend to search out a bride, make all the arrangements with the woman, and then bring the bride and introduce her to the bridegroom. Until that moment the voice of the bridegroom was never heard. In the ceremony of acceptance the voice of the bridegroom was heard for the first time. John knew all of this, and that in a very real way he stood in relation to the CHRIST and His people as the friend. He knew therefore that

his ministry was preparatory and passing. He knew that all those who responded to his stern message of repentance would eventually turn to the Messiah. When he accepted his office it was with this in mind, and this he wanted these dear followers who were jealous for his success to know.

3. This was no occasion for sorrow, but for consummate joy.

"This my joy therefore is fulfilled" (29). There is no greater joy than a task accomplished, especially when that task and its fulfillment is in the very center of GOD's perfect will. It was so with John the Baptist. These people whom he had won to himself for a time, at last recognized that they were meant for the heavenly Bridegroom. When at last they heard his voice and yielded themselves into his embrace, **"the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice."** That voice meant even more to John. It meant that the Bridegroom recognized that these whom John has sought out were His own. To the bridegroom who had commissioned him for his task, he had been faithful, discerning, and sincere. The message he had borne had not been distorted or misleading. It had attracted only those who had hearts that were fashioned for the Lord and would gently yield to His tender embrace. Now he hears the voice. It is its own reward. **"This my joy therefore is fulfilled."**

V. THE CONSUMMATION OF THE NEW RELATIONSHIP OF BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM

"He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

1. The majesty of these words have fascinated believers down across the years.

Only a great soul could have uttered them. It is the greatness exhibited by these words that has encouraged the saints to resolve greater things. In these words there is nothing of depreciation of self on the part of John the Baptist. This is the expression of perfect contentment that a task has been completed, a mission has been fulfilled, a goal has been reached. In the order of accomplishment it means that the bride is now occupied with the Bridegroom and the friend recedes into the background. The friend has finished his work for the Bridegroom, and is no longer needed in this circle of society. It is not easy for one to step back into the shadows when he has been in the center of floodlight. His disciples felt this more keenly than he. But John the Baptist showed the dignity and worth of his great soul in this determination.

2. The meaning of this statement must be sought in the customs of the East.

Once the friend had acquired the bride for the groom, and had heard the word of acceptance from the voice of the bridegroom, he regarded this as permission for withdrawal. From this point on the bride centered her attention upon the groom. She was to have no eyes, but eyes for him; no ears, but ears for him; no heart, but a heart for him; no thoughts, but thoughts for him. With propriety, the friend gently withdrew from the marriage scene and left the bridegroom in full possession. What tragedy there would have been if the friend had become enamored with the bride, and the bride had turned her affections to the friend. This would have caused his mission to end in failure. This John knew, and with the magnanimity of a man who was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, he announced his purpose to his disciples. **"He must**

increase, but I must decrease."

3. The message of the bridegroom and the bride is not a mere adaptation to the subject of New Birth.

In this age of grace it has been the plan of GOD that from among .Jews, but in large part from among Gentiles, "**to take out of them a people for his name**" (Acts 15:14). This people joined to the eternal Son of GOD receive His name. The Holy Spirit has been commissioned with the message, and with the call of the Gospel of grace. Across these centuries millions have responded. They have experienced the New Birth, by which they have been brought into that society of believers known as the bride of CHRIST, the Church.

Today, the bride is "**beholding as in a glass darkly the glory of the Lord**" (II Corinthians 3:18), but one day she shall see the great bridegroom "**face to face**" (I Corinthians 13:12). Presently He will come for His bride (John 14:1-3), and the wedding will occur (Revelation 19:7), and in the Holy City they shall reside forever (Revelation 21:3), where she shall behold the glory of His blessed face (John 17:24).

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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