

LETTER 55

WATER AND SPIRIT IN JOHN 3:5

In exegesis of passages of Scripture I always endeavor first to study the grammar thoroughly, and then to examine the historical background, before undertaking to explain the meaning of a passage in connection with other passages of the Scripture.

From the grammatical viewpoint, I find here something that impresses me as probably of considerable importance. That is the fact that in John 3:5 the word for "water" and also the word for "spirit" are without articles in the Greek. The correct translation is the literal one, "water and spirit". It seems to me unfortunate that our English versions insert the article with "spirit", while, of course, not doing so with "water".

Now from the historical point of view it is important to note when this message was given. It was evidently near the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He was speaking to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, who would be familiar with the Old Testament and with Jewish beliefs, and would doubtless have heard of John's baptism, but would certainly have no familiarity with Christian baptism, or with the fully developed doctrine of the Trinity. Under these circumstances, if specific reference to baptism were intended as most of the commentators seem to think, it would impress me that it would have been necessary to explain it a little more fully, or else no such idea could possibly have come to the mind of Nicodemus.

In the light of these factors to which I have called attention, it impresses me that the correct meaning of the passage is that Jesus answered Nicodemus' question as to the mode of the "new birth" or "birth from above" by saying that it must involve two features, one of which can be represented by water, and the other of which involves spirit. Nicodemus would, of course, be thoroughly familiar with the use of water, both in Jewish ritual and in daily life, as an agent of cleansing. I do not see how he could help deriving from this statement the idea that the "new birth" involves a complete cleansing of the "old man". He is not speaking