

HARD SAYINGS OF CHRIST.

II.

"Verily, verily I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." John III, 5.

One can hardly hope to offer anything very new or striking on a saying of Christ so familiar as this, nor do I propose to suggest any new interpretation of the great truth which the earnest theology of all ages has discovered here as to the radical nature of the change that must be undergone by everyone who enters the kingdom of God and as to the divine agency by which it is wrought. But I suspect everyone who has thought of the matter at all has felt a little inclined to sympathize with the perplexity of Nicodemus regarding the form under which that is represented. So soon as we try to put upon all fours the analogy between that change and a birth we are puzzled and a little provoked to find that it carries us so short a way in the explanation of the essential condition of salvation. Beyond the greatness of the change it suggests almost nothing as to its nature. It was hardly to be wondered at that it should be widely hailed as a great enlargement of our ideas on the subject, when Professor Drummond in his "Natural Law in the Spiritual World," as the spiritual example of the law of biogenesis in accordance with which life can come only from life previously existing, adduced the fact that man must be born again through the living spirit of God if he is to be regenerated at all. But in truth that analogy is of the most superficial kind, and might be made altogether misleading. To be perfectly parallel according to the law of biogenesis, the spiritual new birth would have to be dependent upon the intervention of a

human agency that is, spiritually alive as well as upon divine power, which, as we all know, is by no means a necessity, or the church never could have been started in the world at all.

The true and really helpful explanation of the figure lies in an altogether different direction—one in which Nicodemus, as a master in Israel, should have had no difficulty in finding it. It was in fact a figure of speech which he and his fellow-rabbis were in the habit of using in a sense closely resembling that of Christ when they spoke of any Gentile being admitted to the membership of the synagogue. In theory, the privileges of the old covenant were strictly confined to the seed of Abraham. But in that age far more than now, Judaism was an aggressive religion and proselytes from heathenism were by no means uncommon, as is plain from the frequency with which they are referred to in the Acts of the Apostles. Some of these were only what the Talmud calls "proselytes of the Gate," devout listeners who were in sympathy with the teaching of the synagogue, but assumed no obligations. Others were "proselytes of righteousness," who went the whole way, and made a formal profession of the Jewish faith. On being received, these became technically children of Abraham, as if by a kind of new birth, or as we would say, by adoption. In the eye of the Jewish law they were henceforth recognized Jews, as much as if they had been born so. The process corresponded very closely to our method of naturalization by which an alien born in a foreign country, is enabled, on certain conditions, to acquire all the rights of native-born citizens. The fiction saved the