

PFRS Commentary

John 1:12-13

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John 1:12-13 (NKJV)

12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:

13 who **were** born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

John 1:12-13 (Our literal translation following the earliest known reading)

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Introduction

This passage is frequently used to support Calvinism. Verse 13 is said to indicate that man's free will is not a factor in his becoming a child of God. In reality it refutes Calvinism because it establishes that the ones who became "*children of God*" are those who "*received Him*." Receiving someone demands an act of the will. An act of man (received him & believed on His name) RESULTS in God's giving him the right to become a son of God.

The sentence, "*born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man*," does not refer to salvation but to physical birth. "*Born of blood*" refers to the ordinary means through which humans are brought into the world — physical birth. The "*will of the flesh*" refers to sexual desire. The "*the will of man*" refers to physical sexual intercourse that produces procreation. That is, two people decide to get married, and have children.

It was not God's sovereignty in unconditional election that John was addressing in this passage at all, nor the lack of man's free choice. It was purely a contrast between the "natural" ("*born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man*") and the "supernatural" ("*but of God*").

The Context

John 1:6-13

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

7 *This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, **that all through him might believe.***

8 *He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.*

The above underlined statement flatly contradicts the Calvinist idea that God's purpose is only to save a select few. John says exactly the opposite. John the Baptist came to bear witness to the Logos SO THAT "all men through Him might believe." Not some men, not only the elect, but "all men." There is absolutely no warrant for suggesting that "all men" refers to the elect in this context. That this refers to everyone is proven by the following verse:

9 *That was the true Light, which gives light to every man coming into the world.*

Had John said merely "every man" (cf. Heb. 2:9) that would be weighty enough. But, by adding "coming into the world," John has included every single human being that comes into the world by human procreation. The phrase, "coming into the world" can refer only to physical birth, since that is the only way humans come into the world. Every person that is born naturally (of blood, by the will of man, etc.) is "lightened" by the Logos so that "all men through Him might [not shall] believe." The verb "πιστευσωσιν" (might believe) is in the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood indicates probability or objective possibility, pointing to the intended purpose or desire of God, not to the final result. If Calvinism were true, then John should have used the indicative mood, and should have referred only to the elect, not "all men." By using the subjunctive mood, John indicates God intended that all men believe, but that NOT all will believe.

10 *He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.*

11 *He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.*

In verse 11, the words, "He came to His own," refer to His coming unto His own CREATION (the world - as in the previous verse) not to the Jews. The words "His own" in the first part of verse 11 are in the neuter gender, and refer back to the "world" that was "made through Him." But the words "His own" in the last phrase are in the masculine gender. The proper interpretation is that Jesus came to His own creation (the world made by Him), and His own (people - Jews) received Him not.

That the Jews did not receive Him indicates an act of their WILL, that is they REJECTED the "light" given to them, **and RESISTED God's grace** to them. As Stephen accused the Sanhedrin, "ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." And as

Paul said of the Jew in Rom. 2, "*But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.*" Yet, these are the same persons whom Paul rhetorically asked, "*despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?*" The point is that those whom Paul said would end up in the wrath of God are the same people God was leading to repentance through His goodness and forbearance! So much for the idea that God calls only the elect!

12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:

Those who "*received Him*," refers to those who did not resist Him, but submitted to Him. To these people who received Him, through an act of their will, He gave the right to become sons of God. The last phrase proves that salvation comes AFTER believing, and as a RESULT of believing. Even to THEM who believe in His name. We could also say, God gave BELIEVERS the right to become sons of God.

13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

You may have noticed that our translation of this verse at the top of the page differs from the NKJV by one crucial word. Whereas, most Bibles use the plural, "*who **were** born...*", we have the singular, "*who **was** born.*" The reason for this difference is a variant reading in some of the early manuscripts of John's Gospel. The singular reading appears in very old Latin and Syriac copies. Before examining this variant reading, and its implications, let me first offer our interpretation assuming that the NKJV (plural) reading is what John wrote.

Verse 9 states clearly that everyone born into the world through human procreation is given the "light" that Christ brings. But, in verse 13, only SOME of those born of the flesh become "sons of God" (those in the previous verse who "received Him" and "believed on His name"). Therefore, when John described this kind of "birth," he indicated that it is "*not of blood* [through the birth canal], *nor the will of the flesh* [sexual desire], or *of the will of man* [the act of intercourse], *but of God.*" That it is according to the "*will of God*" in no way implies selective election of individuals, but refers to the whole plan of God to redeem mankind through supernatural means. That is, the whole plan of the salvation of mankind is according to the will of God. Even if the plural reading is adopted, this passage does not support Calvinism.

The Textual Variant

In addition to very early Latin and Syriac copies that have the singular reading, the earliest citations of this verse in the Ante Nicene period confirm the singular

reading. The earliest evidence is found in three citations by Irenaeus and two by Tertullian. They understood the verse to refer to the birth of Christ, not to believers' "new birth." Some have claimed that Irenaeus may have been mistranslated. However, in all three of Irenaeus' citations of John 1:13 he applied this verse to the incarnation of Christ in human flesh. All three times his point in the context depends on this reading. A simple mistranslation cannot account for Irenaeus' usage. His copies of John's Gospel definitely had the singular reading. Remember also that Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was himself a disciple of John, the author of the verse in question. He likely had at his disposal a very early Greek copy of John's Gospel.

*"... that he is Emmanuel, lest perchance we might consider him as a mere man, '**for not by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man, but by the will of God,**' was the Word made flesh; and that we should not imagine that Jesus was one, and Christ another, but should know them to be one and the same."*¹

*"For this reason [it is said], 'Who shall declare His generation?' since 'He is a man, and who shall recognize Him?' But he to whom the Father which is in heaven has revealed Him, knows Him, so that he understands that **He who 'was not born either by the will of the flesh, or by the will of man,' is the Son of man,** this is Christ, the Son of the living God."*²

*"as in the natural [Adam] we all were dead, so in the spiritual we may all be made alive. For never at any time did Adam escape the harms of God, to whom the Father speaking, said, "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness. "And for this reason in the last times, **not by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man,** but by the good pleasure of the Father, His hands formed a living man, in order that Adam might be created [again] after the image and likeness of God."*³

At the very least, we must conclude that the singular reading is the oldest extant reading, older than any Greek manuscript we have that contains the plural reading, being extant in Greek copies known to Irenaeus and his readers in the mid second century.

Tertullian (last half of 2nd century) wrote in Latin, but was familiar with both Latin and Greek manuscripts. Yet, he insisted on the singular reading, although he knew of the plural reading in his time (late second century).

"For, as I have read in some writer of Valentinus' wretched faction, they refuse at the outset to believe that a human and earthly substance was created for Christ, lest the Lord should be regarded as inferior to the angels, who are not formed of earthly flesh; whence, too, it would be

necessary that, if His flesh were like ours, it should be similarly born, 'not of the Spirit, nor of God, but of the will of man'." 4

Tertullian went on to charge Valentinian Gnostics with altering this verse in some copies to read plural, "who WERE ... born." Tertullian had a lot to say in several passages about Gnostic tampering with the text, naming names and giving examples of corruptions. He also agreed with our interpretation of the words, "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man," being references to physical sexual activity and human procreation. In the following quote from Tertullian, notice the reason he ascribed to the Valentinians' alleged corruption. He indicated that *elite elect* thinking (predestination advocated today by Calvinists) was not only part of Valentinian Gnosticism, but was the reason they altered the text in their Greek Alexandrian copies.

"What, then, is the meaning of this passage, "Born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God?" I shall make more use of this passage after I have confuted those who have tampered with it. They maintain that it was written thus (in the plural) "Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God," as if designating those who were before mentioned as "believing in His name," in order to point out the existence of that mysterious seed of the elect and spiritual which they appropriate to themselves. But how can this be, when all who believe in the name of the Lord are, by reason of the common principle of the human race, born of blood, and of the will of the flesh, and of man, as indeed is Valentinus himself? The expression is in the singular number, as referring to the Lord, "He was born of God." And very properly, because Christ is the Word of God, and with the Word the Spirit of God, and by the Spirit the Power of God, and whatsoever else appertains to God. As flesh, however, He is not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of man, because it was by the will of God that the Word was made flesh. To the flesh, indeed, and not to the Word, accrues the denial of the nativity which is natural to us all as men, because it was as flesh that He had thus to be born, and not as the Word. Now, whilst the passage actually denies that He was born of the will of the flesh, how is it that it did not also deny (that He was born) of the substance of the flesh? For it did not disavow the substance of the flesh when it denied His being "born of blood" but only the matter of the seed,' which, as all know, is the warm blood as converted by ebullition into the coagulum of the woman's blood. In the cheese, it is from the coagulation that the milky substance acquires that consistency, which is condensed by infusing the rennet. We thus understand that what is denied is the Lord's birth after sexual intercourse (as is suggested by the phrase, "the will of man and of the flesh"), not His nativity from a woman's womb. Why, too, is it insisted on with such an accumulation of emphasis that He was not born of blood, nor of the will of

*the flesh, nor (of the will) of man, if it were not that His flesh was such that no man could have any doubt on the point of its being born from sexual intercourse? Again, although denying His birth from such cohabitation, the passage did not deny that He was born of real flesh; it rather affirmed this, by the very fact that it did not deny His birth in the flesh in the same way that it denied His birth from sexual intercourse. Pray, tell me, why the Spirit of Gods descended into a woman's womb at all, if He did not do so for the purpose of partaking of flesh from the womb. For He could have become spiritual flesh without such a process, — much more simply, indeed, without the womb than in it. He had no reason for enclosing Himself within one, if He was to bear forth nothing from it. Not without reason, however, did He descend into a womb. Therefore He received (flesh) therefrom; else, if He received nothing therefrom, His descent into it would have been without a reason, especially if He meant to become flesh of that sort which was not derived from a womb, that is to say, a spiritual one."*⁵

The above ancient evidence for the singular reading, referring to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, is the oldest evidence. That in itself does not prove it correct. But it should not be easily dismissed.

The earliest evidence we have for the *plural* reading comes from Clement of Alexandria (albeit not a direct quote), a contemporary of Tertullian. Interestingly, Alexandria was the center for Valentian Gnostics whom Tertullian credited with what he considered the plural corruption. If Tertullian was correct about the source of the plural reading, it would be no surprise that Clement of Alexandria was familiar with the plural reading.

*"For not only must the idols which he formerly held as gods, but the works also of his former life, be abandoned by him who has been "born again, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh," but in the Spirit; which consists in repenting by not giving way to the same fault."*⁶

Here, Clement applies the passage to repentant believers, consistent with the modern understanding. The final reference to the plural reading in the Ante Nicene period comes from a highly corrupt harmony of the Gospels known as Tatian's Diatessaron. His work was deplored by other more orthodox fathers.

*"And those who received him, to them gave he the power that they might be sons of God, — those which believe in his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God. And the Word became flesh, and took up his abode among us; and we saw his glory as the glory."*⁷

It is also weighty evidence that the singular reading (referring to Christ) is found

in both Greek (Irenaeus) and Latin (Tertullian) writers from the second century. Both Greek and Latin copies of John's Gospel were extant by this time. This indicates an extremely early common source, long before the earliest surviving copy of John's Gospel was made. That the singular reading is the oldest known, comes from a wide geographical area (Europe and Africa), is found in both languages in which John's Gospel had been copied, and that the plural reading was traced to Gnostics by a second century writer, are reasons enough for giving considerable weight to this reading. This despite the fact that it does not appear in any of the earliest Greek copies (which are themselves Alexandrian).

But, there is more! The internal evidence also weighs in favor of the singular reading. The statements immediately before and after verse 13 refer to Christ. The singular reading is by far the smoothest, eliminating the awkward switching of subjects (or parenthetical statement) found in the plural reading. Literally, the singular reading is translated as follows: "*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become sons of God, to those who **believe in the name of Him who was born**, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And **the Word became flesh** and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of **the only begotten of the Father**, full of grace and truth*" (vss. 12-14).

Conclusion:

Whether we adopt the singular or plural reading of verse 13, there is no support for Calvinism here. Even if the plural is what John wrote, his point was to contrast physical procreation, involving the "will" of one's parents with regard to intercourse, with spiritual birth which is of the "will of God." John certainly did not indicate that the individual's own will is not involved in his own spiritual birth. D. A. Carson indicates that a significant number of scholars, mostly Catholic, accept the singular reading as a reference to the virgin birth.⁸ We should not be surprised that the majority of Reformed Scholars reject it, since they like to use this as a proof text for their Calvinism.

Notes

1. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book III, ch. Xvi
2. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book III, ch. Xix
3. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book V, ch. ii
4. Tertullian, On the Flesh of Christ, XV
5. Tertullian, On the Flesh of Christ, XIX
6. Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, Bk. II, ch. Xiii
7. Tatian, Diatessaron, section IV, 51-53
8. Kutilek, Doug, As I See It, Vol. 7:9, Sept. 2004 http://www.kjvonly.org/aisi/2004/aisi_7_9_04.htm