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Criticism of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration

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CRITICISM OF THE DOCTRINE OF BAPTISMAL REGENERATION.

Were the great age of any item of doctrine to decide for its trustworthiness, the belief in the regenerating power of Baptism could claim the undivided support of Christendom. It is hoary with the weight of years and made venerable by the sanction of the Fathers. As early as the opening years of the second century it found a place in the church. By 150 A.D. it was "commonly believed that baptism procured a full remission of sins". Such names as Justin Martyr, Clement, Tertullian, Irenæus, Origen and Cyprian are found associated with this belief, with the limitation, on the part of some at least, of a "right inner disposition" and a denial of the absolute necessity of the sacrament. Augustine (6th Cent.) says that Baptism wholly removed original sin as a matter of guilt, others in authority at this time declaring that no one can be released from sin except by baptism. Bellarmin (1542-1621) even says "Whosoever is not baptized is not saved though it be from ignorance or impotence". This statement with a possible modification of the last clause is the present attitude of the Roman Church which is approximated by the Anglican Church. Thus it is seen that no small weight of authority is set aside by a denial of the regenerating power of baptism. Nevertheless it

seems guilty of grave exaggeration from the standpoint of fair scriptural interpretation, of fact, and of reason: From these standpoints it shall be examined:

Since the Nicodemus discourse is the principal pillar in the structure of the doctrine it will deserve special notice. Its literal interpretation seems conclusive and being the utterance of Christ is accorded great significance. The truth is that the meaning attached to it is pure assumption. Granting that Christ may have had the idea of baptism in mind when speaking of water, ~~the~~ absolute necessity of baptism is read into this passage. A sixpence may be held so close to the eye as to shut out the sun, ~~these~~ these words may be held so exclusively in the attention that the perspective of New Testament teaching in regard to salvation may be lost sight of. Zwingli and Calvin were the first to maintain that "born of water" had no allusion to Christian~~s~~ baptism. (Calvin's statement is "Spiritum et aquam pro eodem pasuit. Aqua nihil aliud est quam interior spiritus sancti purgation et vegetatia"). There are good grounds for the support of this assertion but as stated above they may be waived with the understanding that that for which "of water" stands is necessary, i.e. a spiritual washing or purification.. Christ does not speak of the partaking of the bread and the wine as a

necessity but that for which they stand, viz: partaking of and union with him is emphasized repeatedly as a necessity.

Regeneration presents throughout the New Testament a negative and a positive aspect (1) a dying to the past and (2) a new life for the future. (Titus 3:3, 5f; (Ezek. 36:25, 27). The former as well as the latter phase must be made clear to this Pharisee who naturally would be too proud to go down into the water in the presence of the Gentiles and acknowledge his sin and need of salvation, by baptism. (Luke 7:30 expressly states that the Pharisees were not baptized of John since this placed a discount on the imagined efficacy of Jewish birth). Christ must needs emphasize this particular condition of salvation to this particular inquirer. The "water" stands for the washing away of past sins as effected by the Spirit and the "Spirit" stands for the principle of the new life. Neander says "The mention of water is only of secondary importance in order by reference to a familiar symbol to render palpable to the mind of Nicodemus that all purifying power of the divine Spirit which was needful for every man". It frequently occurs that in connection with the mysterious power of the Spirit some familiar term is used for explanatory purposes. Thus Christ baptizes with the "Holy Ghost and with fire" referring to the purifying and refining effect. Also John 7:38 "He that believeth on me, out of his belly shall flow

rivers of living water" to which is added, "this spake He of the Spirit".--It is noticeable that Christ's first statement does not mention "water" at all. It is only when Nicodemus has shown dulness of insight that Christ uses this term to convey to his mind the essential idea. It is also noticed that the remainder of the discourse, lays the whole emphasis upon the Spirit and spiritual activities, externalities not being once mentioned. Indeed of so slight significance is the phrase "of water" that were it stricken out entirely the effect would be unnoticed except it be to leave the discourse more nearly a unit. Unless the above explanation of its meaning be accepted the phrase seems an incongruous and obtrusive element in the discourse suggesting the possible meddling of some later hand.

Again if we are to accept the rigid literalism of "born of water" as referring to baptism, as necessary, we are equally ~~is~~ bound to extend that literalism to the order of words and hold that the birth "of water" precedes or is at least contemporaneous with the birth "of the Spirit", whereas by examination of those references to actual baptisms, and where baptism is unmistakably referred to it is seen that in every case the fruits of the Spirit, particularly repentance and faith and frequently also the actual receiving of the Spirit, precede baptism. In some, baptism seems but a secondary consideration and in a few cases nothing is plainer than that regeneration actually occurred

independently of baptism, which is sufficient evidence to any candid mind that it has at best only a relative importance. This is further strengthened by the fact that baptism in the case of Simon Magus was a failure so far as any visible fruits of the ~~S~~ Spirit are concerned. Again the literalist who insists upon John 3:5 must also insist upon John 1:13 "born of blood" which is plainly but a figure of natural birth.

Other passages used to support the theory are Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:26,27; Eph. 5:26,27; I Peter 3:20,21; Titus 3:5. It is unnecessary to make special examination of each of these. They can all be made to teach the necessity of baptism by that type of literalism which if logically carried out would make Christ not the bringer of "peace on earth" but the stern-faced warrior revelling in blood and the sword. Matt. 10:38. The rite went hand in hand ~~in hand~~ with a profession of faith, the reception of the Holy Spirit etc. It was deemed the initiating rite into the visible church, but by long and intimate association of the rite with the beginning of the new life it naturally came to have, in the mind of the church, some real relation to the entrance into the invisible church or the kingdom of God. In accordance with this view, such passages as "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" instead of

showing the necessity of being baptized are much more rationally interpreted thus: "He that believeth (means of regeneration) and is baptized (i.e. enters into the proper relations and duties which regeneration demands, baptism being the recognized initiatory rite to such a relation) shall be saved",

We may now consider some of the rational objections to Baptismal Regeneration, all of which are strengthened by the conviction that the Scriptures have furnished for it no sufficient grounds. The difficulty which at once presents itself is the utter impossibility of construing the connection between the application of a material to the body and the change or renewing of a spiritual entity. How does one effect or affect the other? What the process by virtue of which a soul is cleansed of its sin and united with Christ by the application of water to something which is not the soul? The firmest believer in the power of baptism must recognize the fact that in the last analysis the effect of baptism must reach the soul by virtue of spiritual operations and contact, alone. No conceivable manipulation of material or solemn performance of ceremony can be judged efficacious in changing a spiritual state without the action of that spirit or of another Spirit upon it. This being true the application of water is at once made a type or symbol of that action if

it is anything. It may of course be held that not the water effects the change, but that God chooses to convey his regenerating power in conjunction with the rite of Baptism, but this is promptly set aside by the wellnigh universal admission (at present time) that in the case of positive inability to procure baptism the "disposition" or will to be baptized is sufficient. If it is possible to be regenerated in the middle of Sahara without baptism it is possible in the middle of the Atlantic. The admission of one possible exception to this necessity is the sure destruction of the consistency of the doctrine, and at once relegates water baptism to a relative rather than an absolute place in the economy of regeneration. Moreover, to hold that God chooses to limit the action of his regenerating grace in any sense to the caprice of man's will in choosing or refusing to baptise a candidate is contrary to all that Revelation and Reason have to say of the nature of God; it renders remission and regeneration independent of the Divine will in that the Divine will must wait upon the will of A, before it can regenerate the soul of B. It puts into human hands to an unwarranted extent the advance of the Kingdom of God on earth since the connivance or negligence of a body of priests could imperil the spiritual welfare of all depending upon them for this sacrament. The belief that the regenerating power of baptism is independent of the moral state, or acquiescent will of

the candidate is scarcely worthy of notice so far is it from the spirit and indeed the plain literal teaching of the Scripture. To say that one becomes a real part of Christ by the application of water to the body and the performance of a ceremony, while the man himself is violating all the spiritual conditions of regeneration enjoined in the New Testament, is a total abrogation of Christ's own teaching, and so far from the dictates of fair reason that it defies appropriate characterization. Likewise the belief that infants are subjects of damnation if denied baptism is a gross libel upon the tender words "Of such is the kingdom of heaven"--"God is a spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit", are words which infinitely transcend the ideas upon which these materialistic doctrines rest. It is wholly inconceivable that if baptism were to play so important a part in the regeneration of the world God should have suffered Revelation to have remained so indefinite on this point as it undoubtedly is, for despite the strong claims of its advocates that it is in the foreground of New Testament teaching, a bird's-eye view of the whole will show that it is always a secondary consideration deeply overshadowed by the strongly prominent requirements of "Faith", "Belief", "Repentance" and the grace of God as the efficient power. These requirements are reiterated and enjoined again and again in the plainest possible terms and if they were dependent upon the sacrament of baptism surely this vital fact

would be as plainly stated and as often repeated.

Again the speculative question may arise (which though of slight importance may at least serve to show the artificial nature of this supposed necessity): How much water is necessary? If the water plays a real part other than a symbol, there must be a certain quantity ~~kmx~~ which is more efficacious than another quantity. If the bowl be as efficient as the stream and the moistened hand as efficient as the bowl it (quantity) is easily and logically reduced to the vanishing point, serving to show that the real power effecting the change is deeper than the accidents of the rite. If it be claimed that the virtue is in the sacrament itself rather than the water, exactly the same line of argument will serve to show the extreme mechanical and wooden nature of the doctrine. Finally, the one who would convince us of the truth of this theory must answer the following questions in a satisfactory way, before we can subscribe with him: (1) The Judaizers plainly said "without circumcision there is no salvation". Why did not Paul answer, "without baptism there is no remission" since baptism corresponded to circumcision, being an initiatory rite. Whereas at these times he only emphasized faith in Christ.

(2) If baptism is necessary for regeneration why is it never held that rebaptism is necessary for re-regeneration after one has fallen away from grace into sin ten-fold greater than preceded the first baptism?

(3) In the mind of one who holds this doctrine in connection with the belief in election what place can baptism hold? Since some who are baptized are not elected. (4) What weight has the testimony of the conscience and the witness of the Holy Spirit when found in conflict with this doctrine? It is unquestioned that thousands unbaptized are subject to powerful impressions concerning a regenerate state, while on the other hand even a greater number might witness that they were conscious at and after baptism of no change. It is much more difficult to answer this question than to explain the fact that multitudes have felt the new birth at the moment of baptism. Regeneration being the result of subjective conditions, it occurs when these conditions are appropriate, and to one having faith in baptism as the saving power. ~~The most~~ ^{the most} ~~propitious~~ ^{propitious} time for the attainment of these conditions would be at the moment of baptism. The real change being entirely independent of any virtue in either water or sacrament and would have occurred even though the senses of the candidate were deceived as to the actual performances of the rite. (5) During that period of history when it was customary to postpone baptism until the hour of death can it be held in the face of all evidence and testimony that the whole life was unregenerate? Akin to this, in that sect which was constrained to reject baptism ^{in part} (for which this extreme doctrine of the necessity of baptism is

responsible) can it be claimed in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary that there never was a regenerate Quaker? Such a claim sets at naught the fruits of regeneration as they appear in human conduct. (6) What are the rational grounds for this belief? Diligent examination of many works written in the interest of Baptismal Regeneration has been made. But not a single attempt could be discovered to place this doctrine upon a rational basis: all rest their claims upon the Scripture. A true Scriptural ground for any doctrine is certainly the best ground: but we must allow the Scriptures to be reasonable, and a doctrine purporting to be Scriptural which has not the slightest foundation in reason is at once suspicious, and when its hold upon Scripture is found to depend upon strained interpretations and far-fetched meanings surely we are at liberty to doubt its place in revelation to say the least.

These are not all the sins of which this doctrine are guilty, but are sufficient to show the infirmities of a theory which so boldly discounts the efficacy of divine grace in the interest of human ministrations.

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