

ART. VIII.—THE PRESBYTERIAN THEORY OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM.

In the October number of the *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review*, there is an article on Infant Baptism which professes to set forth the Presbyterian theory on this subject, and it is endorsed as such by the editors of the *Review* in the following words: "We are quite clear that the main positions taken by Mr. White" (the author of the article), "are in accord with our standards, when their meaning is fairly elicited by a comparison of their various parts, and that these in turn are in accord with the Scriptures."

We will first give the theory and then make some criticisms upon it.

1. Baptism is the *official initiatory rite* of the visible Church. This is the first point. The writer distinguishes this character of the sacrament from (a) that public confession of Christ before men that our Lord so pointedly commands, and (b) from the "door," which he erroneously makes synonymous with *entering* the Church.

2. Baptism symbolizes, and thus has implied reference to, that radical change in the soul that we commonly call "regeneration." This proposition the writer fortifies by a number of Scripture passages. John iii. 5; Acts ii. 38; Rom. vi. 3, 4; Gal. iii. 27; Col. ii. 12; Col. iii. 1; Tit. iii. 5.

3. Baptism, as a sacrament, is an instrument and medium, through which the Holy Ghost conveys to those by whom it is worthily received, spiritual grace.

That Baptism is such an instrument and medium of the Holy Ghost, the writer says, is to be inferred from the frequent connection in the Scriptures of the ideas of baptism with water and with the Spirit. The references are Matt. iii. 11; Acts ii. 38; Acts xix. 5, 6; 1 Cor. xii. 13. He adds: That grace of some sort is conveyed to those who worthily receive baptism is denied only by those, who hold the very lowest view of the sacraments.

Then follows a quotation from Hodge's *Theology*, Vol. III. p. 589 to the following effect: "Baptism is not only a sign and seal, it is also a means of grace, because in it the blessings which it signifies are conveyed, and the promises of which it is the seal are assured or fulfilled to those who are baptized, provided they believe. Unless the recipient of this sacrament be insincere, baptism is an act of faith, it is an act in which and by which he receives and appropriates the offered benefits of the redemption of Christ."

In the next place, the writer gives us the "conditions in the recipient prerequisite to the administration of baptism, which are the following:

1. Membership in the visible Church.
2. Presumptive Regeneration.
3. Capability of receiving spiritual grace.

The first condition as applicable to infants is established by numerous references to the Old Testament and the New.

In regard to the second, he says: "Baptism, as we have seen, symbolizes regeneration, but *presumptive* regeneration is all that we can predicate of any candidate, whether old or young," and then goes on to show, that "the regeneration of infants is *possible*," that "this moral change wrought by the Holy Ghost is *possible* in the case of children of believers, and that Scripture expressions encourage us to *expect* it." "Facts in the Church favor the belief, that the children of believers are to be presumed to be regenerate till the contrary appears." "All churches that baptize infants do so upon the ground that they may be regenerated in infancy."

The third condition follows from admitting the second; for if infants are capable of being regenerated, as implying a moral change, then they must be capable of receiving spiritual grace. We quote here as highly significant the further comments of the editor of the *Presbyterian Review* on this article.

"We deem the doctrinal aspect of the subject important, because of its practical bearings upon Christian nurture and training. In our view God's covenant TO BE A GOD to our children, and the consequent annexation of the sacramental

seal of His covenanted grace, puts them within the pale of the visible, or presumptive people of God—to whose very position, therefore, it belongs to think and feel, and live and act as the children of God, in all the ways appropriate to their years. They are to be dealt with as those who are not outsiders to the Church, who may not consistently cast their lot with and live like heathens and publicans, until they undergo a conscious, inward transformation, of which they can give a clear account. 'They are to be taught to pray, to abhor sin, to please God, and to obey the Lord Jesus Christ' (*Directory for Worship*, Chap. IX), and that any other course is just as recreant to their covenanted privileges and obligations, and place in the Church, as in older persons who have come to the Lord's Table making a formal profession of religion. Further, agreeably to our Directory just quoted, they are to be taught and trained to have in view the coming to their first communion in the due exercise of faith and repentance, as soon as they reach the period of knowledge and discretion, when they can properly understand the meaning of the act, and take upon themselves its obligations.

It is our full belief, that Christian nurture and training conducted on these principles, would result in saving very many children of the covenant who are now, under a different theory, made to feel that their place and their sympathies are rather 'in the seat of scorners,' than in 'the congregation of the righteous,' and that a correspondent manner of living befits this position till at some future time they suffer some shock and commotion of soul consciously *ab extra* issuing in conversion. We fear that the effect of placing them virtually in such a conscious attitude is to make multitudes of them more and more aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants, of promise, without hope and without God in the world; and that great numbers thus cast upon the dark mountains of sin, are left to wander and stumble to perdition.

On the other hand, we believe, that bringing them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, in accordance with the doctrine and method of our standards, would be so attended

with the presence and inworking of the Holy Spirit, that the manifestations of His sanctifying influence would grow with their growth, and strengthen with their strength; that we should witness multiplying and delightful instances of those sanctified from infancy, yea, even from the womb; that Christian piety would be more ripe, mellow, and symmetrical; that, inwrought into all the springs and habitudes of action through the formative period of life, it would develop into a robust and beautiful prime, making the hoary head a crown of glory; that thus the Church, by a normal development, would prolong and enlarge itself more by internal evolution than external aggregation. It is not indeed to be expected, that children will cease to be children, or that 'young Christians' will be wholly free from the follies of youth, any more than older Christians will be without spot or wrinkle, this side heaven. Nay, many children of the covenant, like many older professors, may prove Christians only in name. 'All are not Israel that are of Israel.' It may, like any other system, be perverted to formalism. With all due allowance for this, we believe that the true conception of infant baptism and church-membership, duly carried out in Christian nurture, would prove an inestimable gain to the cause of religion in the family, the Church and society. It is more nearly realized in the Presbyterianism of Scotland than in this country. In our opinion, it has much to do with the hold which this glorious type of Christianity obtains and retains on all classes of the Scotch people, high and low, rich and poor, from generation to generation. Many of their Churches, under zealous, evangelical pastors, have an almost constant revival, in the continual accession, with devout preparation and intelligent faith, of their baptized children to the Lord's Table.

The ground of infant baptism assigned by Mr. White is largely given in the Reformed theology and symbols, from which our own are largely derived. Thus the first Helvetic Confession gives as a reason for the baptism of infants, that *de eorum electione pie est præsumentum.*

Vitringa says: 'When God hath begun to manifest His grace to the parents, or either of them, we may not presume other-

wise than that He will confer the like grace upon their infants, so long as the contrary does not appear: *Non licet aliter præsumere quam illam leandem gratiam præstiturum infantibus, quamdiu nobis non liquat contrarium.*' For more passages to the same effect from DE MOOR, MARKIUS, WITSIUS, etc., see the little volume issued by our Board, entitled *Children of the Church and Sealing Ordinances*, pp. 101 *et seq.* Dr. Watts says: 'In my opinion, so far as they (infants) are in any way members of the *visible* Church, it is upon *supposition* of their being (with their parents) members of the *invisible* Church of God.' 'Supposition' here is equivalent to 'presumption,' in the sense above."

Criticism.

It will be seen, that this theory goes on the presumption that the children of believers are regenerated in their infancy. The main question in the case for the writer in the *Presbyterian Review* evidently is, whether that great and radical change referred to by our Lord in His discourse with Nicodemus is possible in the case of infants. He presses this point: "There have been many discussions concerning the nature of original sin and the possibility of innate guilt, but the generally received Catholic view always has been, that every soul possesses a *moral character of some kind*, antecedent to its actual conscious choices. Thus by changes wrought in that moral character every soul, even before self-consciousness, is capable of receiving spiritual grace; and infants, when brought by believing parents to the sacrament of baptism, may receive, or may have already received, that promised grace which, in the words of the Westminster Confession, is "not only offered but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto according to the counsel of God's own will in His appointed time."

Just at this point, we take it, is to be found the chief objection to infant baptism. Can infants be regenerated? If they can, then it is easy to see how a rite can be appointed as its sign and seal, a rite which will not be an empty ceremony but a grace-bearing sacrament.

We question whether the idea of regeneration in the Ancient Church, went quite so far as the idea of this writer in the *Presbyterian Review*. He seems to have in his mind something of the modern conception of the moral change wrought in conversion, although he does very properly, in one place, distinguish between the two, when he says: "Regeneration is the work of the Holy Ghost, transforming the soul. It is the divine side of that great change, of which the human side is 'repentance' (*μετνοια*) or conversion." He does not hesitate to speak of it as a *moral change*, whereas the convention of Bishops assembled in Baltimore several years ago declared, that baptism must not be thought to effect any *moral change*, in which declaration they evidently referred to regeneration in the old Church sense as connected with baptism.

But be this as it may, this Presbyterian theory does not hesitate to say that infants may be regenerated, in the sense of the new birth, or the birth from above, as spoken of by our Lord in His discourse to Nicodemus. It goes further, and says they are to be baptized on the *presumption that they are regenerated*. Some may not be regenerate, but all are presumed to be.

Now the point to be particularly noticed here is, what determines certainly which infants of believing parents are regenerated and which not. This clearly (although now-a-days Presbyterians keep it in the back-ground) is the secret election of God. This comes out in the Westminster Confession, where it says, that in baptism grace is not only offered, but *really exhibited and conferred* by the Holy Ghost to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto ACCORDING TO THE COUNSEL OF GOD'S OWN WILL.

The Presbyterian can go quite as far as the most ultra-Romanist in asserting a regeneration *ex opere operato*, only he asserts it in connection with the abstract will or counsel of God, whereas the Romanist asserts it in connection with a sacrament. We cannot see how the Presbyterian can consistently refute the Roman theory; for if God can regenerate infants by an act of His will, why can He not do it in connection with the

administration of a sacrament? The objection cannot be made against the *ex opere operato* method, but only in applying the grace to *all* infants that are baptized, the Presbyterian allowing it only in the case of elect infants. That is all the difference. And the Romanist has the best of the argument on his side; for according to the Presbyterian theory no man can know certainly that he received any grace in his baptism, because he cannot know whether he is one of the elect.

This is a weak point in Presbyterian theology; for it militates against their assertion also, that all infants dying in infancy are saved. The writer of this article asserts this as his belief. He says, "We believe that *all* children dying in unconscious infancy are saved. They enter heaven only as redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, and as with a moral nature transformed by the power of the Holy Ghost. Their first conscious thought must be in harmony with the will of God, but the great moral change—their regeneration—preceded it while they were still unconscious." Dr. Hodge asserts that this is Presbyterian doctrine. But it is a palpable misrepresentation of Calvinism as bearing on this point, as Dr. Krauth has pointed out by quotations from standard Calvinistic authors.

If the grace of baptism is given only to those "to whom it belongeth according to the counsel of God's own will," and if only "*elect* infants dying in infancy are saved," how can these latter exponents of Calvinism assert, that, according to the teaching of Calvinism all infants dying in infancy are saved? Why then put in the word "*elect*" at all?

But leaving out of the case now this peculiar element in the Presbyterian doctrine of baptism (which lurks under that word "*presumed to be regenerated*"), we hold it to be the main fact, that the children of believing parents are presumed to be regenerated in infancy, and that they are to be baptized on this presumption.

This is a great concession for Presbyterians to make. It requires them, as confessed in the quotation from the Editors given above, to fall back upon the old system of educational religion, which belongs to original Presbyterianism, and was

practiced on when that Church used to keep up catechetical instruction. In later times they have fallen, practically, at least, into the Puritan and Methodist theory of regeneration, which identifies it with conversion.

Do Presbyterians preach this doctrine? Do they say to their baptized members, "You are to presume that you are a regenerate person, and on the basis of this you are to receive the instructions of the Church and become prepared to assume your baptismal vows?" Has it not rather been the effort to bring them to repentance and faith, and on the basis of this to predicate their regeneration as a fact in their lives, which dates from such conscious experience? We are not saying here what should be the character of the address to the baptized, but what it should be on the basis of this Presbyterian theory. It is easy to see, that it is embarrassed by the doctrine of election; for the child must presume, that it is regenerated, provided it has been elected. But inasmuch as the decree of election is secret and unknown, they are to take for granted that they are also of the elect, and to be certain of it when they see the fruits of it in their experience and life. But even with this embarrassment it would be a great matter, if all Presbyterian Churches would make account, even as they used to do, of educational religion and catechetical instruction.

We take issue with this theory when it asserts, that men are to be baptized on the presumption that they *have previously been* regenerated. And we think the article we are criticizing furnishes sufficient evidence to overthrow this assertion. It is the most natural interpretation of the passages of Scripture quoted in the article to understand that the grace signified is actually conferred in baptism, as indeed the Westminster Confession asserts, "Except a man be born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." This passage the writer quotes among those referring to baptism. "Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost." "Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins." "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." These and other passages

seem to connect the reception of the grace with the administration of the sacrament. *There is but one case in the baptisms recorded in the New Testament, in which the communication of the Spirit preceded baptism.* "The communication of the Spirit, and consequently regeneration, in this case (of Cornelius), before baptism, is striking, and without parallel in the New Testament. In all other cases, as with the Samaritans, the gift of the Spirit accompanied or followed baptism and the laying on of hands." (Dr. Schaff's Hist. Apos. Church, p. 222.)

Why then should this writer reverse this order, and say that the grace which baptism symbolizes is universally conferred before baptism? There is no reason for this. It is unnatural. As well might you say, that it is to be presumed that every one who comes to the Lord's Supper has previously received the specific grace connected with the observance of this holy sacrament, and the eating of the bread and drinking of the wine is only a symbol of a transaction already taken place. But we do not do this. Presbyterians do not speak thus of this sacrament. *Whatever grace is bestowed is received in connection with the eating and drinking.*

This view, that baptism symbolizes a fact or event already consummated is the Baptist theory, which the writer opposes. It comes from an interpretation given to the words, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." But if we are to frame a theory from the mere order of the words here, then we should do the same in the words, "Except a man be born of the water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven." We would suppose that the order of the words is as important in the one case as in the other.

Now when we consider, that the writer asserts that the baptism of infants has precisely the same significance as the baptism of adults (on the third page of his article), we ought to conclude that we should follow the order exhibited in the New Testament, and not *vice versa*, as the Baptist theory does. Moreover it is reasonable. If God can regenerate a child before it is baptized, some time between its birth and its baptism, why may He not regenerate it when it is baptized? This would

agree with the use of human *initiatory* rites. An organization that has such a rite makes the administration of the rite and entrance into the organization synchronous. The person may be elected before, and have all the necessary qualifications, but he is not a member until he is initiated.

Then we have the unanimous view of the early Church on this subject, and the idea of a sacrament as held in all ages to support our position. It is not necessary to enlarge on this point. The whole conception of the mysteries of Christianity requires us to hold, that its sacraments are not merely external rites, but signs and seals of grace. And the writer of this article comes to this also in a singular way. His third point in defining the sacrament is, "*Baptism, as a sacrament, is an instrument and medium, through which the Holy Ghost conveys to those by whom it is worthily received spiritual grace.*"

This is a strong statement. It allows all that is claimed by the advocates of baptismal regeneration, so far as the question as to the relation of the outward sign to the inward grace is concerned. The old objection, that the Holy Ghost does not join His activities with the administration of an outward rite, is set aside. A certain kind of grace is conferred in the administration of the sacrament. And the sacrament is "the instrument and medium through which" it is conveyed. We need not question how this can be any more than we need question how God could join the healing of Naaman with his washing seven times in the river Jordan.

But the article leaves us in the dark as to what the specific grace is which is conferred in baptism. According to the writer the grace of regeneration is conferred previous to baptism. Some other grace then is conferred in baptism. What is its character? Is it a confirming and strengthening grace? How then is it distinguished from the grace conferred in partaking of the Lord's Supper? The writer is evidently involved in confusion here. Baptism in the New Testament is spoken of as the sacrament of regeneration. It is called the laver of regeneration. The article says that it symbolizes, and thus has implied reference to, that radical change in the soul that

we commonly call "regeneration." If this be so, why then does the writer make it an immediate and direct sign of some other grace, and refer it only remotely to the grace of regeneration? We can explain this only on the supposition, that he wishes to avoid a certain conclusion. He dreads the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, and still more the *ex opere operato* theory. This it is that leads him to avoid the very conclusions to which his premises point.

Our limits do not allow us to extend this criticism. We close with the following remarks.

1. We think the writer aims at the accomplishment of an important purpose, in seeking to point the Presbyterian Church to a better view of baptism, than that it is a mere empty sign. That is what is practically held by a great portion of his Church. The consequence is, that the administration of baptism to infants has come to be sadly neglected in that Church. The General Assembly has repeatedly noticed and lamented the fact. Years ago Dr. Nevin called attention to the fact, that the Presbyterian Church and Puritanism generally, had fallen away from the old Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper, and he maintained it in a masterly work on "The Mystical Presence," and in a subsequent discussion with Dr. Hodge, who was brought to review his book only by the pressure of a special necessity. Here is a confession that that Church has fallen away also from the old Reformed doctrine of baptism. We hope the article we have criticised, and the words of the Editors of the *Review* in which it appeared, may serve to call attention to the fact.

2. The Reformed doctrine of baptism which joins the grace of regeneration (in the old Church sense of regeneration,—not the modern which confounds it with conversion) with the application of water in the administration of the sacrament of baptism, is not, by any means, the Roman doctrine. The Roman doctrine of natural depravity, or the state of the child by birth, is very different from the Protestant doctrine. And the Roman theory, that baptism places the subject in a state of innocency, completes the work, so that he need only to watch and guard against a fall from that state of innocency, and if he fall to seek restoration again in the sacrament of Penance, is widely different from the Protestant conception, that baptism is only the foundation and beginning of a growth in which sanctification is realized. But we cannot dwell further upon this point now.

RECENT PUBLICATION.

LIBRARY OF CHOICE FICTION. "May," by Mrs. Oliphant, Author of "At His Gates," "Chronicles of Carlingford," "Miss Majoribanks," &c., &c. Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 654 Broadway, New York.

PATER MUNDI; OR, DOCTRINE OF EVOLUTION. Being in substance Lectures delivered in various Colleges and Theological Seminaries. By Rev. E. F. Burr, D. D., author of "Ecce Cœlum" and "Ad Fidem," and lecturer on the scientific evidences of religion, in Amherst College. Boston: Noyes, Holmes and Company, No. 117 Washington Street. 1873.

THE HOLY BIBLE, ACCORDING TO THE AUTHORIZED VERSION (A. D. 1611,) WITH AN EXPLANATORY AND CRITICAL COMMENTARY AND A REVISION OF THE TRANSLATION. By Bishops and other Clergy of the Anglican Church. Edited by F. C. Cook, M. A., Canon of Exeter. Vol. II. Joshua.—1 Kings. New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 654 Broadway. 1873.

This is what has been known as The Speaker's Commentary, because it was entered upon, if we mistake not, at the suggestion of the Speaker of the House of Commons. The volume before us is admirably brought out by Scribner, Armstrong & Co. The binding is rich, plain, and substantial. The paper and type are of a quality in keeping with the character of the work. Altogether it is a volume pleasant to the eye, and an ornament as well as an addition to the library.

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