

REGENERATION AND BAPTISM

Church Association Tract 193

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1. *What is Baptism?*

It is a holy ordinance or sacrament appointed by Christ, for the continual admission of new members into His Church. Every Christian begins his Church membership by being solemnly baptized with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Baptism, also, is a sign of regeneration or new birth, and has a most wholesome effect, as the Twenty-fifth Article says, in those who receive it worthily. Moreover, St. Paul says, "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal. iii. 27.)

2. *Do all baptized persons receive inward spiritual benefit from the outward ordinance of baptism with water?*

Most certainly not, to all appearance. Myriads are outwardly baptized every year, who, from the font to the coffin, and from their births to their deaths, never give the slightest evidence that they have grace in their hearts, or have received any inward spiritual benefit at their baptism. They live and die apparently without knowledge, faith, repentance, obedience to God, or meetness for heaven. In fact, notwithstanding their baptism, they exhibit no more Christianity in their lives and characters than many heathens.

Judas Iscariot, Simon Magus, Ananias and Sapphira, and others mentioned in Scripture, were baptized but certainly not regenerate.

3. *What is regeneration?*

It is that complete change of heart and character which the Holy Spirit works in a person when he becomes a real Christian. The Church Catechism calls it "a death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness." It is the same thing as being "born again," or "born of God," or "born of the Spirit." "Except a man be born again" means "except a man be regenerate." "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature;" that is, he is "born again, or regenerate." (John iii. 3; 2 Cor. v. 17.)

4. *What are the marks and evidences of regeneration?*

They are laid down for us so clearly and plainly in the First Epistle of St. John, that he who runs may read them. It is written there, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin," "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God,"—"Every one that doeth righteousness is born of Him,"—"Every one that loveth is born of God,"—"Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world,"—"He that is begotten of God keepeth himself." (1 John iii. 9; 1 John v. 1; 1 John ii. 29; 1 John iv. 7; 1 John v. 4; 1 John v. 18.) If plain English words have any meaning, these texts mean that he who has these marks is "born again" or "regenerate," and he who has them not is not regenerate.

5. Have all regenerate persons these marks of regeneration in the same degree of depth, strength, clearness, and distinctness?

Most certainly not. There is a wide difference between the highest and lowest measure of grace possessed by those who are “born again.” There are real and true Christians who are only “babes” in spiritual attainments, and there are others who are “strong,” and vigorous, and able to do great things for Christ. (1 John ii. 12-14.) The Scripture speaks of little faith and great faith, of little strength and great strength. One thing only is certain,—every regenerate person has more or less the marks of regeneration, and he who has none of them is not born again. (Matt. xiv. 31, xv. 28; Rev. iii. 8; Rom. xv. 1.)

6. But are not all baptized persons regenerate, and does not regeneration always accompany baptism?

Certainly not. Myriads of baptized persons have not a single scriptural mark of regeneration about them, and never had in their lives. They know nothing whatever of “a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness.” On the contrary, they too often live in sin, and are enemies of all righteousness. To say that such persons are “regenerate” on account of their baptism, is to say that which seems flatly contrary to the First Epistle of St. John. The Church Catechism says that baptism contains two parts,—the outward and visible sign, and the inward and spiritual grace. But the Catechism nowhere says that the sign and the grace always go together.

7. But does not the Baptismal Service of the Church Prayer Book say of every baptized child, “this child is regenerate,” and does it not tell us to thank God that it hath “pleased Him to regenerate the infant?” What can this mean? How can it be explained?

The Baptismal Service uses these expressions in the charitable supposition that those who use the service, and bring their children to be baptized, are really what they profess to be. As Bishop Carleton says, “All this is the charity of the Church; and what more can you make of it?”—As Bishop Downname says, “We are to distinguish between the judgment of charity and the judgment of certainty.”

8. But is this explanation of the language of the Baptismal Service honest, natural, and just? Is it the real meaning which ought to be put on the words?

It is the only meaning which is consistent with the whole spirit of the Prayer Book. From first to last the Prayer Book charitably assumes that all who use it are real, thorough Christians. This is the only sense in which the Burial Service can be interpreted, or the Service for Adult Baptism, or for the Churching of Women. This is the only sense in which we can teach children the Church Catechism. We bid them say, “The Holy Ghost sanctifieth me and all the elect people of God.” Yet no man in his senses would say that all children who say the Catechism are really “sanctified” or really “elect,” because they use these words. On the contrary, large numbers of children never show the slightest evidence of sanctification or election.

9. But ought we not to believe that all who use Christ's ordinances receive a blessing as a matter of course?

Certainly not. The benefit of Christ's ordinances depends entirely on the spirit and manner in which they are used. The Scripture expressly says that a man may receive the Lord's Supper, “unworthily,” and eat and drink “to his own condemnation.” The Articles of the Church of England

declare that in such only as receive sacraments “rightly, worthily, and with faith,” they have a wholesome effect and operation. The famous Hooker teaches that “all receive not the grace of God which receive the sacraments of His grace.” To maintain that every child who is baptized with water is at once regenerated and born again, appears to turn the sacrament of baptism into a mere form, and to contradict both Scripture and Articles.

10. *But do not all infants receive baptism worthily, since they offer no obstacle to the grace of baptism? and are they not consequently all regenerated, as a matter of course, the moment they are baptized?*

Certainly not. No infant is of itself worthy to receive grace, because, as the Catechism says, it is “born in sin and a child of wrath.” It can only be received into the Church and baptized on the faith and profession of its parents or sponsors. No true missionary thinks of baptizing heathen children without friends or sponsors. The Church Catechism asks the question, “Why are Infants baptized?” But it does not give as an answer, “Because they offer no obstacle to grace,”—but “because they promise repentance and faith by their sureties.” Let us always remember that an infant has no title to baptism but the profession of its sureties. Surely when these sureties know nothing of repentance or faith, or of what they are promising, common sense points out that the infant is not likely to get much inward benefit from the sacrament. In plain words, if parents or sponsors bring an infant to baptism in utter ignorance, without faith or prayer or knowledge, it is monstrous to suppose that this infant must, nevertheless, receive regeneration. At this rate it would matter nothing in what way sacraments are used, whether with ignorance or with knowledge, and it would signify nothing whether those who use them were godly or ungodly. The children of believing and of unbelieving parents would receive precisely the same benefit from baptism. Such a conclusion seems unreasonable and absurd.

11. *But does not St. Paul say in his Epistles that Christians are “buried with Christ in baptism;” and that baptized persons have “put on Christ?” (Gal. iii. 27; Col. ii. 12.)*

No doubt St. Paul says so. But the persons of whom he said this, in all human probability, were not baptized in infancy, but when they were grown up, and in days too when faith and baptism were so closely connected that the moment a man believed he confessed his faith publicly by baptism. But there is not a single passage in the New Testament which describes at length the effect of baptism on an infant, nor a single text which says that all *infants* are born again, or regenerated, or buried with Christ in baptism. As Canon Mozley says, “Scripture nowhere asserts, either explicitly or implicitly, the regeneration of infants in baptism.” (Mozley’s *Baptismal Controversy*, p. 34.) Beside this, we are expressly told that Simon the sorcerer, after his baptism, had “no part” in Christ, and his “heart was not right in the sight of God.” Simon, therefore, could not have been regenerated, or born again in baptism. (Acts viii. 21.)

12. *But does not St. Peter say, “Baptism doth also save us?” and if it saves us, must it not also regenerate us? (1 Pet. iii. 21.)*

No doubt St. Peter says so. But those who quote this text should not stop at the words “save us,” but read carefully on to the end of the sentence. They will then see that St. Peter distinctly fences and guards his statement by saying that the baptism which “saves” is *not* the mere outward application of water to the body, but the baptism which is accompanied by the “answer of a good conscience toward God.” Moreover, it is a curious fact that St. Peter, who uses the expression “baptism saves,” is the very same apostle who told Simon *after baptism* that he was “in the bond of iniquity,” and his “heart was not right in the sight of God.” (Acts viii. 21.)

13. *But does not our Lord Jesus say to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"? (John iii. 5.) Does not that prove that all who are baptized with water are regenerate?*

Certainly not. It proves nothing of the kind. The utmost that can be made of this famous and often quoted text is, that it shows the necessity of being "born of water and the Spirit" if we would be saved. But it does not say that all who are baptized, or "born of water," are at the same time "born of the Spirit." It may prove that there is a connection sometimes between baptism and regeneration, but it does not supply the slightest proof that an invariable connection always exists.

14. *But may it not be true that all baptized persons receive the grace of regeneration in baptism, and that it remains within them like a dormant seed, alive, though at present bearing no fruit?*

Certainly not. The Apostle St. John expressly forbids us to suppose that there can be such a thing as dormant, or sleeping grace. He says, "Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin, for His seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God." (1 John iii. 9.) This witness is true. When there can be light which cannot be seen, and fire without heat, then, and not till then, there may be grace that is dormant and inactive. The well-known words, "Stir up the gift of God that is in thee" (2 Tim. i. 6), are far too often addressed to the baptized, as if they referred to some gift received in baptism.

Yet common sense will tell any one who refers to his Bible that these words were not used at all about baptism, but about ordination. (1 Tim. iv. 14.)

15. *But does not this view of regeneration, according to which many baptized persons are not regenerate at all, and receive no benefit whatever from their baptism, do great dishonour to one of Christ's sacraments, and tend to bring it into contempt?*

Not at all. The truth is exactly the other way. To say that infant baptism confers grace mechanically, as a chemical solution produces an effect on a photographic plate, and that if water and certain words are used by a thoughtless, careless clergyman over the child of thoughtless, ignorant parents, the child is at once born again,—to say, furthermore, that an immense spiritual effect is produced by baptism when no effect whatever can be seen, all *this*, to many thinking persons, seems calculated to degrade baptism. It tends to make observers suppose that baptism is useless, or that regeneration means nothing at all.

He that would do honour to baptism should maintain that it is a high and holy ordinance, which, like every ordinance appointed by Christ, ought not to be used without solemn reverence; and that no blessing can be expected unless it is used with heart, and knowledge, and faith, and prayer, and followed by godly training of the child baptized. Above all, he should maintain that when baptism does good, the good will be seen in the life and ways of the baptized. Those who do not feel satisfied about this matter will do well to study attentively the strong language which God uses about His own ordinances, when used formally and carelessly, in the prophet Isaiah. (Isa. i. 11, 12.) What did the prophet mean when he wrote these words: "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord. I delight not in the blood of bullocks or of lambs." He evidently meant that God's own ordinances may be made *perfectly useless* by man's misuse of them.

16. *But may we not believe that regeneration means nothing more than a change of state, and does not mean a moral and spiritual change at all? May we not believe that it is a mere*

ecclesiastical word, signifying nothing more than admission to a state of Church privilege? And may we not then say that every person baptized is regenerated in baptism.

Of course we may say and believe anything we please in a free country like England, and this idea of an *ecclesiastical* regeneration cuts the knot of some difficulties, and has always satisfied some minds. But it is an insuperable difficulty that the word “regeneration” is never once used in this sense in the New Testament. Moreover, the parallel expression “born of God,” in St. John’s First Epistle, most certainly means a great deal more than being admitted into a state of ecclesiastical privilege! To say, for instance, “Whosoever is baptized doth not commit sin,—and overcometh the world,” would be ridiculous, because untrue. Moreover, the Church Catechism distinctly teaches that the inward and spiritual grace in baptism is not a mere ecclesiastical change, but “*a, death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness.*” Moreover, the Homily for Whitsunday expressly describes regeneration as an inward and spiritual change. One thing is very certain, no plain reader of the Bible ever seems to understand how a person can be “regenerate” and yet not saved. The poor and simple-minded cannot take in the idea of ecclesiastical regeneration.