

THE SYMBOLISM OF BAPTISM (Part Three)
"Baptism Viewed as a Reality"

Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:5)

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:16)

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (I Peter 3:21)

INTRODUCTION:

As stated in the first message in this series, our aim is to show whether baptism is a symbol of a deeper reality, namely regeneration, or whether it is the reality itself. We defined a symbol as "something that points to and represents something beyond the symbol itself." It is a visible manifestation of an invisible reality. In so doing, it establishes a relationship between itself and the thing which it is representing. A picture represents an image of the person, but it is not the person itself, nevertheless the picture bears a representation of the person's reality. We then gave a detailed survey of the use of symbolism as a means in which the invisible Creator has used to communicate with His visible creature man. This encompassed four realms:

First, in nature itself or what we call natural revelation. Second, in special revelation as found in the Old Testament scriptures. Third, in special revelation as found in the New Testament scriptures. Fourth, in Jesus Christ Himself, as the God-man in *"the image of the invisible God."* (Colossians 2:15).

In the second message, I presented the position (which I believe is the Biblical position) that water baptism is a symbol of a deeper reality, namely, the regenerating or renewing of a sinful person into Christ and His righteousness. In so doing, we took the position that this can only be reenacted by the immersing of a believer in a watery grave whereupon they are raised into newness of life.

In today's message I wish to present the view which maintains that baptism is the reality of regeneration, namely that grace is infused in the act of baptism itself. This is known as "sacramental grace."

I. REGENERATION DEFINED

In order to understand the teaching of baptismal regeneration, it is important that we understand what we mean by regeneration. If this is not done, it will lead to various views of the meaning, thereby causing the various advocates to believe they are in agreement on the usage of the word, when in reality that may not be the case.

Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary defined the word "generate" as "to bring into existence, cause to be; produce; to reproduce; procreate." The prefix "re" is used to mean "again" indicating a "repetition of the action."

When we read in Genesis 2:7 that God "formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being," it conveys the meaning of God generating or producing life in man.

When we now speak of re-generation, we imply something has happened to cause the life of God in man to cease, so as to bring about the need of a renewed life to be given him if he is to know God in a saving way. That which brought about this spiritual death is known as the Fall of Man. This occurred when Adam sinned in the garden.

What was Adam's state of being prior to the fall? The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 4, section 2 states,

God . . . created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image, having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it; and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change. Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures.

Man's unfallen state was one of mutable perfection. He was created in the image of God, a rational and moral free agent, in righteousness and true holiness, placing him in dominion over

the other creatures of earth. By "righteousness" is meant that man was created sinless; by "holiness" is meant that God created the dispositions or tendencies of his will in a state of conformity and inclination toward God's law. Thus man was not created in a state of mere equilibrium, finely balanced between good and evil. Instead he was created positively holy and righteous. In Ecclesiastes 7:29 we read, "That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes (intentions)." NKJV.

This biblical view of man's unfallen state enables us to understand the gravity of the fall. It was no mere upset of the balance in man. It was much more radical than that. It was the destruction of man's dispositions of holiness and righteousness and the replacement with a sinful and godless disposition. It depraved and corrupted his entire nature. This nature was passed on to all mankind which have descended from him by ordinary generation.

The fall has brought mankind into a condition of sinfulness and misery consisting of the guilt of Adam's first sin, the loss of original righteousness and holiness, along with the corruption of his whole nature, which is called "Original Sin," together with all the actual sins which proceed from his corrupted nature. He is now exposed to the following miseries:

- (1) The loss of communion with God;
- (2) Exposure to God's wrath and curse;
- (3) Exposure to the pain and sufferings in this present life, including death itself;
- (4) Exposure to eternal sufferings in the world to come.

After seeing the effects of the Fall upon human nature, we are now ready to see the necessity and meaning of regeneration. Without an act of God, man will never seek after God to love, worship, and obey God. "Except (unless) a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Regeneration is an act of God by which the principle of a new life is implanted in man, and the governing disposition of man's soul is moved toward holiness and righteousness. It is the inner renewal by the Spirit of God which marks out the beginning of the Christian life. The terms "birth, born, begotten," signify this beginning of the new life (cf. John 1:13; 3:3-8; I Peter 1:23; I John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,4, 18; James 1:18). Ephesians 2:5 uses the verb, "quicken" (or make alive) to describe the same thing. II Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 5:15 speak of a "new creature" while Ephesians 4:24 describes a "new man". These terms set forth the leading characteristics of regeneration.

II. REGENERATION CHARACTERIZED

After defining regeneration, let us now examine several of its characteristics before we see how it relates to the ordinance or sacrament of baptism.

1. It is the work or act of God (Ephesians 2:1-10).

The creature has no power (ability) in originating this new life. The creation of new life is called a "new birth" or a "birth from above."

2. Man is passive in regeneration.

He is made a partaker of this gracious act of God, but being naturally "dead" (Ephesians 2:1), he cannot contribute to it. In contrast, the Pelagian's view sees regeneration as the free will of man choosing a new way. This view denies that Adam's sin is imparted to his offspring so as to corrupt his will. The Arminian view adopts the theory of synergism which involves a "working together" in which the human and divine wills actively cooperate in regeneration. This view holds to a semi-pelagian view of man whereby a universal sufficiency of grace is imparted to all men which offsets the corruption of the will restoring its ability to choose as Adam did before the Fall. The Biblical position is that regeneration is monergistic; that is, it is the work of God alone. A dead man can do nothing to contribute to his own resurrection, just as Lazarus in his grave could do nothing to cooperate with the Lord in his resurrection.

3. The result of regeneration is a "new man," or a "new creature."

This renewing of spiritual life, which was lost in the Fall, affects man throughout his nature, freeing him from his bondage to sin and self. It affects his understanding, his affections, and his will.

a. The understanding is "enlightened."

(cf. II Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 1:18; Colossians 3:10; etc.) The state of the natural man's mind is said to be one of "ignorance" (John 8:19; Hebrews 5:2; Romans 10:3; II Peter 3:5). It is also said to be in "darkness." In Ephesians 4:17,18, Paul describes the unbelieving Gentiles who are said to "walk in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them." In contrast, the quickened or regenerated soul is said to be brought into "God's marvelous light." In I Peter 2:9 Peter describes the regenerated person as one whom God has "called out of darkness into His marvelous light."

b. The emotions of the heart are energized.

Man's nature consists of affections and emotions as well as intellectual thinking.

Man is attracted to that which he loves. God does not bypass the emotions in the conversion of a sinner. The repentance of the Prodigal Son is a good illustration of this. He left the sins of the far country, returned to his father's house, and cast himself upon his father's mercy. This, along with his father's response, was filled with emotion. Even our emotions are moved as we read the account. In Ephesians 4:18, 19, Paul goes further in describing the unregenerate as being governed by the "blindness of their heart; who being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness." The response of the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son reveals the cold heart of the unregenerate.

c. The obedience of the will is renewed.

Question 67 in the "Larger Catechism" defines regeneration under the term of effectual calling when it states of God, "He doth, in His accepted time, invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by His Word and Spirit; savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer His call." (Romans 9:16; Philippians 2:13; Psalm 110:3).

4. Regeneration proceeds and is the immediate cause of conversion.

The Holy Spirit acts in regeneration, and as a result the human spirit acts in conversion. Conversion is a spiritual activity consisting of repentance, faith and godly obedience. There is no time delay between regeneration and spiritual activities. As soon as regeneration occurs, faith occurs. This is rejected by Socinians, Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians and Arminians who all ascribe man's spiritual acts as preceding God's act of regeneration.

5. The effects of regeneration.

Jesus informed Nicodemus there could be no spiritual activities, such as seeing and entering the kingdom without regeneration (John 3:3). John declares that only the regenerate receive Christ and enter into the privilege of being God's children. In John's Epistle of I John, he insists there is no regeneration that does not issue in spiritual activities. He lists several things about the regenerate:

a. They live righteously - I John 2:29

b. They do not live a life of sin - I John 3:9; 5:18

c. They love other Christians - I John 4:7

d. They trust Christ and have victory over the world - I John 5:4

e. NOTE: If these things are lacking in a person, they are still in an unregenerate state and a child of the devil - I John 3:6-10.

III. BAPTISMAL REGENERATION

We are now ready to explain the theory of baptismal regeneration, which is also known as "sacramental grace." God generated life into Adam. Adam sinned and lost this life and incurred both the condemnation of God as well as acquiring a sinful nature. This sinful nature is passed on to all of Adam's descendants who are born guilty before God and corrupted in their natures. How is this to be corrected? The Biblical answer is that it is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit alone, without the assistance of human agents. This is denied by those who hold to baptismal regeneration which holds that regeneration is effected by the means of baptism, or that it cannot be effected without baptism. Every church which holds to original sin must of necessity set forth a doctrine of regeneration to remove the effects of the Fall.

The church of Rome was the first church to introduce the teaching of baptismal regeneration or sacramental grace. Dr. R.A. Webb, past professor of systematic theology at Southwestern Presbyterian University in Clarksville, Tennessee, describes the leading features of Sacramentalism as held by the Roman Catholic Church. They are:

That God has deposited all saving grace in the sacraments of the church, so that, as we can say of the Son of God, that He was incarnated in Jesus Christ, we can say, in a parallel way, of the grace of the Spirit, that, it is "ensacramented" in these ecclesiastical ordinances; through the sacraments of the church all true righteousness begins, and is by them alone it is increased, and in case of fall, repaired; these sacramental ordinances are thus indispensable to the salvation of any human being, and do actually confer saving grace, *ex opere operato*, unless some effective obstacle is interposed by the recipient or the administrator; and the church is the legal, official, and divinely appointed custodian of these sacraments, and they can lawfully and effectively be made, and administered, only by the ecclesiastical priesthood, or by such other persons as may be authorized by the hierarchy. These ordinances, when properly administered and properly received, are held to communicate grace *ex opere operato*, that is, by virtue of their being administered. Fire burns wood, heat smelts the ore *ex opere operato*. With respect to the forgiveness of sins, and the initiation of a Christian state, the church of Rome teaches that baptism is the sacrament of regeneration - that all sins preceding its application, are washed away by the grace which is subjective to this baptismal ordinance - - that no infant, or adult, is savable without baptism. (The Theology of Infant Salvation, R.H. Webb, Sprinkle Pub., Harrisonburg, VA. 1981, pp. 236, 237).

Once it came to be viewed that baptism contains the grace necessary to cleanse and remove original sin, the baptism of infants was then the next logical step. It is a basic belief in

the sacramental system that all men fell in Adam, and have inherited from him a sinful nature, which exposes them to both physical death in the body and eternal death and torment in the life hereafter. Since infants die, they stand in need of regeneration in order to be admitted into heaven. In short, original sin is not denied, but affirmed by the sacramental system. What is the clear inference drawn from this doctrine? It is that any infant who dies unbaptized cannot be admitted into heaven because of its corrupted nature! Also, if baptism is the instrument of administering grace, then any person, be they infant or adult, who dies unbaptized, is lost and will be refused to enter a state of heavenly blessedness in the life hereafter.

There are varying forms of baptismal regeneration found in the teachings of very diverse churches. I list several beginning with the Roman Catholic. Others include the Greek Orthodox, the Lutheran, the Anglican (Church of England), the Episcopal, the Methodist, some branches of the Presbyterians, the Church of Christ, and its counterpart, the Disciples of Christ, some branches of the Congregational, and even some branches of the Reformed and Calvinistic churches. These all hold to some form of sacramental grace or baptismal regeneration. It should be noted that the Churches of Christ both known as "Campbellites (followers of Alexander Campbell) do not view that baptism infuses grace. This is due to their Pelagian view of man which denies Original Sin. Instead, baptism is viewed as an act of obedience to the command of Christ. Campbell held that the words, regeneration, conversion, and immersion, were synonymous, and meant the same thing. One receives the benefits of Christ's death when they come into contact with the baptismal waters, resulting in sins forgiven.

The differences between viewing baptism as a symbol and a reality are immense and cannot be harmonized. We are saved by grace through faith in the Gospel - which is the message of Christ's redemptive work. This message is set forth both in word and symbol - the word in the verbal form and the symbols as set forth in baptism and the Lord's table or communion. Baptismal regeneration is a departure from the Gospel and leads to much confusion and trusts in a physical ordinance rather than in Christ who saves sinners. Is your hope of righteousness in a Person or in a sacrament? It is a heaven or hell question.

In the next message we will examine the scriptural texts which are used to teach baptismal regeneration. May God grant us clarity of thought and stir up our minds as we consider this most important subject of baptism, be it a symbol or a reality.