

BAPTISM AND THE NEW BIRTH

(Author's note: The reason for the article under the above title needs some explanation. In the S.S. of June this year a contribution appeared under the title "The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard." At the end of that article I said that, with the Editor's agreement, I would follow with a further exposition to try to show from Scripture how we became labourers in the Lord's vineyard.

That article has never been published and not even written! The reasons why are (1) I was waiting to read the original in print. (2) It has been published in the S.S. and (3) I was on holiday at the time and did not read it because I did not see that issue of the paper until only a few days ago. By the kindness of Bro. Leonard Morgan I have now been provided with a copy. My gratitude and apologies offered to Leonard, to the editor for his patience and to readers of the S.S. for inconvenience borne: the blame I alone am responsible for. Now I submit the article.)

The scripture that obviously comes to mind is in the gospel of John, chapter 3. There are numerous passages in the New Testament on our subject, but we shall concentrate for this article on that chapter. Will you read and read again verses 1-11 so that you will be acquainted with what both Nicodemus and Jesus Christ say in their conversation? We cannot know too well what was said, for every word is vital.

In the first place we note that Nicodemus had never asked any question which required an answer. He had uttered words which recognised the authority and power of Jesus: he had praised and acknowledged Jesus. But Jesus went right to the heart of this Pharisee and ruler. Jesus was dealing with one who, like other men, needed the blessings of the New Life Jesus came to give. Like all others, Nicodemus was a sinner who needed to be forgiven cleansed and renewed. Jesus said "Unless you are born anew (born from above, born again) you cannot see the Kingdom of God." Notice the word 'see,' in this case Jesus means 'perceive,' 'understand,' 'know.' The coming of Jesus into the world was a revelation of the glory, the love of God. The heavenly Father was giving His only son for love of those who put Him to death in order that we, with them, might enjoy the new life, the salvation which Jesus brought from His death, His sacrifice.

He was speaking to one man. The salvation and new life which Jesus gives is through his own death and resurrection from the grave. The crucifixion, burial and rising again of Jesus Christ are the most tremendous events in all history. As mighty as the Creation by God "in the beginning." What Jesus accomplished in giving Himself to men and for men is the New Creation. To be part of that New Creation can be likened to:

A New Birth

Jesus tells Nicodemus that this is exactly what it is. Nicodemus is astonished. He asks Jesus "How?" Can he go again through the process of birth from his mother? He can think only of natural physical birth. It needs to be made clearer to the teacher in Israel. Jesus does so in the exact words Nicodemus needs: "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot *enter into* the Kingdom of God." It was pointed out above that Jesus at first told Nicodemus that he could not *see* the Kingdom unless he was born again. Now Jesus goes further in teaching him. He must not only *see* but must *enter into* the Kingdom, and this entering in is by "water and the Spirit" (capital 'S' for Holy Spirit, Spirit of God).

"Water and the Spirit"

It is a tragedy to witness the divisions, wranglings, debates, even to the tearing into pieces of the Body of Christ, His Church, over that word 'water.' We need not instance them: they are growing worse week by week. What a strange paradox we have in these times! National and worldwide activities are taking place, enormous sums of money being poured out to bring about union in "the divided Body of Christ." It is realised as "a scandal" and is a disgrace to present to a mocking and indifferent world such a spectacle as is apparent in the state of the many religious bodies and denominations claiming to be "all one in Christ Jesus" yet any observant or interested person can discern that underneath this facade of union there is not unity, which is a very different matter.

In Eph. 4 Paul sets out the "seven ones" which display the "unity of the Spirit." He exhorts us to "*maintain* the unity of the Spirit." We hear a great deal about promoting or bringing about unity among Christians but not a word is said about such aims in this great passage. Instead, we are to *maintain* the unity. To maintain is to continue, carry on, what already exists. That is God's doing: it is already accomplished and nothing can break it. It is ours to keep the unity which Christ achieved on the cross. We can maintain it only by understanding and setting forth what our Saviour taught by word and example as we read in the scriptures, in both writings and epistles, and we must start right. Among these seven "ones" is "one baptism."

One Baptism

What is the "one baptism?" How can it be any other than that depicted and practised by the church of the N.T. in apostolic days? Instead of all christians being now made one in Christ through baptism, we bring about more divisions by insisting upon our various 'modes of baptism.' If we left such theorisings and were content with the obvious meaning of the relevant scriptures, we should know that scripture baptism, that which Jesus Christ taught and carried out, and which His apostles faithfully followed is *immersion* — going down *into* and coming up *out of* water. Only in such baptism is it possible to practice and show forth the act and the meanings of baptism.

In "baptism" of infants many readings are given from the Bible and from "Articles of Religion," Prayer Books, Service Books, Confessions of Faith, etc., which, of course, cannot be understood, or even heard by the one they concern — the babe. The same applies to the action performed. Both reading and actions are, to that extent, meaningless. The clergyman or whoever else is officiating takes the child in his arms, dips his finger in specially prepared water ("holy water") and in these actions and what he recites makes the babe "a child of God." What was the child before? Do those participating ever question the application to the babe? Surely the incongruity of it all must strike those who can see or hear. Yet it is all accepted and perpetuated.

Original Sin

This tenet is based upon the words of King David in Psalm 5 verse 5: "I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me." It was without question accepted as true of all mankind by most who are "Christians." We venture to suggest that David never for a moment imagined that his words would be used to build a worldwide doctrine upon. We know of the circumstances under which the king uttered the words we can perhaps better understand them. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, a soldier in the king's army. Even the great king was prepared to stoop to murder by ordering his general to place Uriah in such a dangerous position in the battle line that he would be killed. This was accordingly carried out and David took Uriah's widow as his own wife, in order that it might appear that the resulting child might be regarded as legitimate. But God instructed His prophet Nathan to condemn David for the horror of his crime. Only then does David see what a foul guilt lay upon him in God's sight. In his distress and shame and misery he gives vent to the cry of anguish in his 51st Psalm. Cannot we see that what he cried was true of himself under such circumstances and tension?

Man is Under Sin

There is not any doubt that every human being has the power of sin in his very being, constantly at work within him and hindering and preventing him from doing right and good, and urging him to do that which his whole being revolts against "*I know the best and yet the worst I do.*" This unassailable reality is examined and set before us in its nakedness by Paul in his epistle to the Romans, especially in chapters 5 to 7. In chapter 7 verse 24 Paul sums up the terrible struggle in the agonised cry "wretched man that I am! who will deliver me from this body of death?" The next verse gives the answer. "I thank God, through Jesus Christ my Lord."

But that is not the doctrine of "original sin." The principle of sin marring and defacing everything which is true and honourable and lovely" is too apparent in everything in man's world today to be contradicted. Such inborn tendency is not to be eradicated by what takes place in the meaning (the christening) of a child, or the use of scriptures out of all relationship to their setting. The terrible power of sin over us is to be far more feared that what is presented in infant "baptism." This latter is treated often by its defenders with levity and frivolity. But to deal with man's sinfulness is another matter altogether. "Original sin" and its treatment is a man-made doctrine. What Paul deals with in his Epistle to the Romans is true to the word of God and in our own daily experiences.

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