

A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE ON THE DOCTRINE OF BAPTISMAL REGENERATION

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Introduction

The symbolic documents of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Lutheran churches affirm the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. They affirm, that is to say, that God withholds the grace of regeneration from no infant who receives baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In defense of the churches that adhere to those documents, one can truthfully say that, unlike Quakers and members of the Salvation Army, they insist that every Christian must undergo baptism. Unlike Baptists, Mennonites, and Restorationists, moreover, these churches insist that every Christian parent must present his children for baptism. Unlike nominally paedobaptist groups that allow parents to choose between baptism and dedication for their infants, finally, these churches do not treat infant baptism as a matter of indifference.

The baptismal practice of those paedobaptist churches that sincerely teach baptismal regeneration thus deserves praise and emulation in certain respects. Their advocacy of baptismal regeneration, however, more than cancels any benefits that might accrue from their conscientious regard for the sacrament of baptism. The primary consequence of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in the life of the church is obvious and devastating: no one worries about being born again. Rather, in the sacerdotalist churches, anxiety about one's own salvation expresses itself in efforts to avoid mortal sins and to confess such sins to a priest. Naturally, the Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith alone mitigates significantly the spiritual damage wrought by the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in orthodox Lutheran churches. Nevertheless, even Lutherans retain a distinction between mortal and venial sins and deny the necessity of a distinct experience of conversion.

In the following, we hope, first, to examine three arguments for the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, with a view to showing that its proponents offer no compelling reason to believe it; and, second, to present a single argument, which, in our view at least, suffices to demonstrate that the doctrine conflicts with the manifest teaching of Scripture.

Three Arguments for Baptismal Regeneration

1. Prerequisite of salvation? Proponents of the doctrine of baptismal generation, first, usually claim that Scripture identifies baptism, in such texts as John 3:5, Acts 2:38, and Acts 22:16, as a prerequisite, at least in ordinary cases, of salvation. In Acts 2:38 and 22:16 the Apostles Peter and Paul, admittedly, do characterize baptism as one of the initial steps of the Christian life. This characterization need only imply, however, that one who is authentically regenerate in normal

circumstances will, if he has not already been baptized, seek through baptism to unite himself to the visible church. As to John 3:5: the most robust interpretation one could reasonably assign this passage is that, except in extraordinary circumstances, those who enjoy everlasting life also submit to baptism on this earth. Any interpretation that attaches regeneration uniformly and necessarily to infant baptism would seem inconsistent with Jesus' words in John 3:8: "The wind blows where it desires, and you hear the sound of it, but can tell neither from whence it comes, nor whither it goes; such is everyone who is born of the Spirit." These words at least seem to imply that one cannot simply summon the Spirit by uttering the baptismal formula—that one cannot direct him, as it were, to regenerate the person one is currently sprinkling.

2. *For the remission of sins?* Nevertheless, proponents of baptismal regeneration argue, Peter instructs his hearers in Acts 2:38 to "repent and be baptized...for the remission of sins": i.e., presumably for the sake of obtaining the remission of sins. Again, however, Peter instructs his hearers to begin the Christian life and does not pause to make precise distinctions. Even if one grants, for the sake of argument, that Peter sets forth baptism with water as a condition of salvation in this verse, he does not specify whether it is an antecedent or a consequent condition. Peter does not indicate, that is to say, whether one must be baptized because baptism constitutes an instrumental cause *sine qua non* of regeneration; or whether one must be baptized after regeneration because the Spirit, except in extraordinary cases, leads those whom he regenerates and who have not yet undergone baptism to unite themselves to the visible church through baptism. If Peter identifies baptism as a condition of salvation in the latter sense, i.e., as a consequent condition, he in no way endorses the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. He endorses, rather, a commonplace of Reformed theology: that baptism, like good works, is, in ordinary circumstances, a consequent condition of salvation.

3. *Explicit testimony?* Nevertheless, argue proponents of baptismal regeneration, Scripture explicitly states on a number of occasions (Rom 6:4; 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12; Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 3:21) that baptism regenerates. In 1 Pet 3:21, however, Peter seems explicitly to deny that physical washing with water procures regeneration: "Corresponding to that," he writes, "baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." In Tit 3:5 and 1 Cor 12:13, moreover, Paul certainly employs baptismal imagery for regeneration, but does not unambiguously refer to the sacrament itself.

While Paul seems to describe regeneration as concurrent with baptism in Col 2:12, he identifies faith in the same verse as the instrument through which believers are raised from spiritual death in Christ. In Gal 3:27, likewise, Paul states not that baptism brought about the Galatians' new birth, but that all of the Galatians who had been baptized had "put on Christ." Paul describes the same persons in the previous verse as "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."

The strongest verses in the arsenal of those who defend baptismal regeneration perhaps are Rom 6:3-4:

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into

death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

The key phrase in this passage is “through baptism” in v. 4. If Paul refers to baptism with water here, then he does seem to ascribe some instrumentality to baptism in the regeneration of the believer. This need not constitute, however, an endorsement of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. For, as Acts 2:38, 9:18, and 22:16 illustrate, in the earliest church baptism seems to have come immediately after one’s initial profession of faith and to have been so closely associated with it as to constitute its virtual equivalent. Rom 6:3-4, accordingly, needs supply no more evidence for baptismal regeneration than Rom 10:9: “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

An Argument Against Baptismal Regeneration

The proponents of baptismal regeneration, therefore, offer undecided persons no clear and compelling scriptural warrant for their doctrine. This is not to say, however, that Scripture speaks with an unclear voice on the subject. Rather, as we shall attempt to demonstrate in the present section, Scripture does mandate rejection of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in unmistakable, albeit implicit, terms. Scripture, it is true, offers numerous arguments of probability against the doctrine of baptismal regeneration that are worthy of attention. For example, Paul proclaims, “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor 1:17). He rejoices that he baptized none of the Corinthians save Crispus and Gaius (1 Cor 1:14), yet regards himself as the spiritual father of them all (1 Cor 4:15). Philip demands faith, a fruit of regeneration, from the Ethiopian eunuch as a condition for baptism (Acts 8:37). On numerous occasions, Scripture represents faith as the condition of salvation, without mentioning baptism. One could multiply such arguments indefinitely. It seems, however, that a deft apologist for baptismal regeneration could show arguments such as these to be, at least when considered in isolation, less than absolutely decisive. Only one argument, drawn not from scattered texts, but from a central theme of New Testament soteriology, seems adequate to the task of establishing irrefragably the falsehood of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration: viz., that this doctrine cannot be true, because it conflicts with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

If the doctrine of baptismal regeneration were correct, then countless persons who have died apostates were once authentically regenerate. This is impossible for the following reasons. First, the final apostasy of even one regenerate soul would falsify numerous promises, such as, “the one who comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37b; cf., e.g., 6:39, 40; 10:27-29) and “neither death, nor life, nor angels...nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God” (Rom 8:38-39; cf. vv. 29-39). Second, failure to preserve a saint in the state of grace would be contrary to the character of a God who keeps his promises (Num 23:19; Rom 11:29; Tit 1:2) and finishes what he begins (Phil 1:6; 1 Thess 5:24). Third, to allow the apostasy of a saint would be to cheat Christ of a soul purchased by his blood. Fourth and finally, if God allowed the regenerate to perish eternally, then the hope of salvation would not constitute “an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast” (Heb 6:19). One could not honestly confess with David, “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up” (Ps 27:10 AV).

Conclusion

By undermining the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, the doctrine of baptismal regeneration poisons the wellsprings of Christian life and doctrine. Reformed Christians of today, accordingly, would do well to take up the cudgels against this doctrine as Charles Haddon Spurgeon famously did in 1864. In particular, Reformed Christians ought to root out of their churches the so-called Auburn Avenue theology, one of whose tenets is a mitigated form of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Whether they are willing to do so is a test of whether Reformed Christians deserve the names Reformed and Christian.