

"The Doctrine of the 'New Birth' in History.

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The force and far-reaching influence of an idea are not easily described in detail, as it is an unseen power. It is a miracle worker. No improvement can be made upon the description of an idea given by the "Man of Nazareth" when he said the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Righteousness and true holiness, is as heaven, subtle, silent, omnipotent.

The historian writes blindly and to little purpose when he fails to discover and to clearly describe, in every revolution, the dynamic idea which caused it. He alone can read history intelligently who reads with an appreciation of the mental and moral forces at work. By this we see the motives which move people, how some were led to embrace error, and others to stand by the true and the good, and so to learn from history the proper lessons.

These principles should ever guide us in our studies of Religious Revivals.

In the fourth decade of the eighteenth century a revival of religion, known as "The Great Awakening" began in the New England Colonies of America, largely under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. It very rapidly assumed large proportions, and brought into active Christian work many laborers.

In all that belongs to the revival we in these provinces, and especially in this county, have a direct interest; because it was in these colonies many of our fore-fathers and mothers had their birth. Under the influence of this religious movement, and the opposition it provoked, they had their religious training. They brought their religious convictions with them, and shaped the trend of religious thought for coming generations here.

The practical idea, that was the hidden force, and which by this great reform received increased recognition in the Christian world, and which it still maintains in all orthodox churches, was the doctrine of the "New Birth."

This doctrine was held previously by the Puritans and Orthodox Congregationalists of New England and other religiousists who were in harmony with them, but it only had a nominal place in their creeds; its dictates were unheeded in the churches. It was regarded as a non-essential in church life.

About the year 1734 this doctrine seems to have arisen and asserted its scriptural authority. It emphasized the fact that a man in order to be saved must undergo a change in his principles of moral action, which will be either accompanied or succeeded by exercises of mind, of which he is conscious, and can give an intelligent account. So that those who have been thus changed may, ordinarily, be distinguished from those who have not.

From this it follows that those who exhibit no such change, ought to be considered and treated as unregenerate, on the road to perdition, and therefore not to be admitted to the membership and ordinances of the church.

This doctrine of the New Birth as an ascertainable change was not generally prevalent in any communion when the revival commenced. It was urged as of fundamental importance by the leaders of the revival; it took strong hold of the converts. It naturally led to such questions as the revival brought up for discussion. This at once stirred religious thought—it provoked much opposition, and doubtless led both its promoters and opposers to many wrong conclusions.

If any in our day are inclined to regard this doctrine, and this religious movement with disrespect, some of the cardinals of religion may be profitably studied by them. Two things are implied in being a Christian: 1st. "The reception of the Christian system of our Creed; and 2nd the conformity of our thoughts and acts to its teachings."

In Christian lands most persons grow up with little knowledge of any particular creed, or the doctrines held by the churches with which they are connected; and so they live on without seriously enquiring whether they are on the way to heaven or hell; imagining that in some way their end will be all right. Then in the course of events, some in one way and some in another, are "awakened" to an enquiry as to this all-important matter.

When awakened the very thought that they know not whether they are on the way to heaven or not, that they have lived in hourly danger of death without preparation for it, or for right living, is a most serious and alarming thought. To the most noble minds these reflections bring the keenest regrets.

This will naturally be followed by self-examination—the deliberate scanning of their relationship to God and their fellows according to Bible standards. This examination, if honest and intelligent, will most surely discover guilt, and result in the most clear conviction of sin. The discovery that we are morally worse than we ever supposed is an appalling discovery to him who makes it. Hopelessly apostate must he be if such a discovery is not the source of alarming anxiety. This will most naturally bring up the question of possible reform,

and the how of it. The punishment of sin, and the justice of it, or whether there, be any way of escape and how? will press for an answer. This must be the normal condition of a sane mind under these circumstances. All this can but produce intense emotions.

In the Scriptures, religious services and the council of religious friends a satisfactory solution of all these grave questions will most naturally be sought. The worship of such an one will be speedily and radically changed from a nominal to an intensely earnest service. Nor will he be satisfied until he understands for himself that all his desires are met in God's own remedy for sin; and of that salvation he by the grace of God has partaken to the joy of his soul. Such in substance must be the experience of every one who enters upon a new Christian life—to every convert to the doctrine of the New Birth; subject as it must be to wide variations of knowledge, tastes, habits, health, and environments. But in all cases the essential parts of the process are the same. Out of this will come a wider religious intelligence, and the reformed life all in harmony with the teachings of the Scriptures and the dictates of the Holy Spirit, finding its completion in such a life as Christ demands.

This doctrine of the New Birth can but take its place at the door of the church, and forbid the entrance of all but its own subjects. In this it was vigorously opposed, at the time of which we speak, as it put at fault the popular church standards of the 18th century.

While the "great awakening" disturbed the religious ideas of its day generally, the centre of the conflict was about the right observance of the Lord's Supper.

To rightly understand this question we must know the religious practices of New England and Europe at this date.

In the early days of New England none but church members could hold office or vote at elections. Church and State were thus united. Throughout Christian Europe, both Romanist and Reformed, the general practice was to baptize all in infancy, and to consider them as members of the church, unless excommunicated. In childhood they were to be taught certain forms of faith and worship, after which they were admitted to the Lord's Supper. Exclusion from the communion—that is excommunication—was attended with loss of certain civil rights, and in many occasions followed by the infliction of punishment by the civil authorities. A man appointed to any civil or military office must qualify by receiving the Lord's Supper in the established church. The clergyman who withheld the Lord's Supper from one requesting it, inflicted a civil injury, and was liable to prosecution. Under such laws the Lord's table must be open to all who have been baptized, who have learned the creed or catechism and have not committed any crime which a civil court would judge scandalous.

All this was in harmony with the doctrine of baptismal regeneration and the union of church and state. It carried the belief that regeneration is not apparent to men, that all who were thus qualified to partake of the Lord's Supper might reasonably hope to reach heaven. The ministry of the churches if properly educated were supplied from this class.

A peculiar view of conversion obtained in harmony with the polity and practices of the churches, all of which favored the idea that the unconverted could without supernatural aid commence to carry on a series of works preparatory to conversion, and so were in little danger. The result of this was that the concerns of the soul were neglected without barring the hope of heaven.

Such was the downward progress of religion in New England, and such will always be the result of the like doctrines. Revivals had become less frequent and less powerful. The difference between the church and the world was vanishing. Church discipline was neglected, immorality invaded the churches.

There was in those days a pious dread of Arminianism as it then—and now—stood related to Romanism, and an alarm at its increase in the land.

John Wesley, for preaching Arminianism, was even accused of being a Jesuit in disguise. The maintenance of the doctrines of the Reformation was to the most thoughtful and pious the only safe course. Many who considered themselves Christless were awakened to a sense of their danger, and a fear that God would forsake the land for its wickedness. Grave doubts as to the doctrines and practices of the churches filled many with trembling and fear. An earnest search for the way of life was begun by the unseen power of the Holy Spirit.

To meet this state of mind God had evidently prepared Jonathan Edwards. He most successfully did this by preaching fully on those points of doctrine on which the controversies of these times turned. Mr. Edwards was dissuaded by his friends, found fault with by his critics, ridiculed by the thoughtless, and persecuted by his enemies for introducing controversial subjects into the pulpit, but he understood the crisis, and the cure his people needed. He commenced with a series of sermons on "Justification by Faith alone." That article by which Luther declared a church stands or falls. A writer says: "The effects of these discourses was first to make men feel that now they understood the subject, and had hold

of the truth, and then to sweep away all hopes of heaven which they had built upon their own doings—upon their morality, their owning the Covenant, partaking of the Lord's Supper, or in using any other means of grace. The people were made to see that God had not appointed anything for them to do before coming to Christ by faith and repentance.

A historian tells us that these discourses were followed by others in which Edwards taught "God's absolute sovereignty" in regard to the salvation of sinners, and his just liberty with regard to his answering the prayers, or succeeding the pains of mere natural men, continuing such. That idea of "God's just liberty" is an idea of tremendous power. God is at liberty with respect to bestowing salvation. His liberty is just and perfect. Nothing that the "natural man" has done nor can do, while continuing such, in anyway impairs that liberty or brings God to a favorable decision. It is right that it should be so, as it is just. Sinners have merited, and now deserve instant damnation, and God's liberty to inflict it upon them now, or to defer it for the present, or to save them from it wholly, according to his own pleasure is a most "just liberty." Otherwise God's Sovereignty would be impaired, His right to govern questionable, His government impeachable.

When the sinner sees and feels this doctrine to be true, he knows that no course remains for him but to call upon God for mercy, and that he has nothing to depend upon, as a ground of hope, that he shall be saved but the mercy of God in Christ. He can make no appeal to the justice of God for that only condemns him; nor to any other attribute or relationship, but mercy, which in its very nature is free and unrestrained. And he can find satisfactory evidence that God is disposed to be merciful to sinners in the fact that he has given his Son to die for them. Here is his only ground for hope. And this is the point to which he needs to be brought. This is the dependence which the sinner needs to feel, and feeling which will drive him to prayer. But it may be asked will not the cutting off of his hope drive the sinner to despair, and make him reckless? It would, but for the doctrine of justification by faith. This encourages him who has no merits to trust in "Him who justifieth the ungodly." It teaches the sinner that in all this he is only like all others who have been saved by the grace of God through Christ. It teaches that there is in God an overflowing goodness which reaches even to the salvation of those who have no claim to be saved, and the sinner is encouraged to trust in that goodness, and to resign himself to the disposal of God. And this is faith, and faith works by love, and transforms the whole character.

Thus did Jonathan Edwards preach in New England in the eighteenth century. There was a call for this gospel then and it was the power of God to the salvation of thousands. Is there a call for such preaching now in these Provinces? Are not our churches now as then, filled with unconverted souls? With those who know nothing of these experiences of the "New Birth," of the joys of justification by faith, who never knew of the conviction of sin which calls for the wonders of God's sovereign grace? Is it possible now as then that churches are highways to hell, in which the ungodly blindly go? And if the doctrines of grace were now preached as Jonathan Edwards preached them, and the like results followed, would a stirring opposition be awakened? Is it not noticeable that by much of our modern preaching and methods of church work, but few additions to our churches come, and that these converts, as a class, come with very faint convictions of sin. And is it not also true that our present methods are not reaching the most influential and thinking men of our land? It verily looks as if in this century our church life is but repeating the history of the lapsing of piety in past times. Have we a better remedy for this than is supplied by the old doctrines of grace, that wrought so mightily in the past?

I do not by this, wish to intimate that former days in our church life were better than the present. My best judgment is that for intelligence and loyalty to truth, our churches and ministers of to-day have never been excelled. For these thirty years the swing has been towards evangelistic reaping in our church work. It may have been overlooked that the good results of these revival methods are largely due to previous seed sowing. An improvement may be now brought about by a careful reseeded with the old doctrines of grace.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE NEW BIRTH AND THE ORDINANCES.

As we have seen the doctrine and experiences of regenerate life condemned the practices of religious bodies in their administration of the Lord's Supper; and subsequently, in New England, in the practice of infant baptism.

This doctrine demands regeneration by the Spirit of God as a pre-requisite to the ordinance of baptism, and as in all time by all Christian bodies, baptism before communion. So this idea is at the bottom of all discussion at the present day on open and close communion in the churches.

As these contentions originated in the distinguishing characteristics of the "New Birth," so they can only be settled by the well known standards of Christian life, and the acceptable Christian service this doctrine dictates. That is, a real spiritual life voiced in the ordinances of baptism and communion; and hence a regenerate church membership, and a true fellowship in all church activities.

This doctrine is the germ—the seed thought of Baptist history in America and in the world.

It was far from the thought of Mr. Edwards and his fellow workers to make Baptist history—a history of surprising growth—and yet it is now seen that he did this most effectively. But of the chaos of religious thought in the "Great Awakening" of the 18th Century, the Baptist churches of to-day have been evolved.

The original leaven in this work of grace is the doctrine of the "New Birth."