

The Dearth of Conversions—The Cause and the Cure.*

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It may be well, in connection with the subject now before the Presbytery, to call attention to what seems to be a prevailing oversight of important principles, whose prominence in Scripture has always been recognized in the Presbyterian Church, and which have always, more or less, occupied a prominent place in its teaching, discipline, and practice. We refer particularly to two great Scripture principles; the first being, That the Church consists of Christian believers and their children, the sincerity of those who profess their faith in Christ being presumed, unless there is evidence to the contrary. But, notwithstanding prevailing insincerity, God, under all the dispensations, claims the children of His professing people as His children, as we read in His reproof of them in Ezek. xvi. 20-21, "Thou hast taken thy sons and thy daughters, whom thou hast born" (not borne, as in some Bibles) unto me, and these hast thou sacrificed unto them to be devoured. Is this of thy whoredoms a small matter, that thou hast slain My children, and delivered them to pass through the fire unto them?" The other is, That the salvation of the child is assured to the believing parent (father or mother, I. Cor. vii. 14) by divine promise, which "being mixed with faith," Heb. iv. 2, and pleaded in faith—the faith that, like that of Jacob and of the Tyrophenician woman, will not take denial, cannot fail of fulfilment. Assuming these principles, which pervade the Scriptures, as "the blood which is the life," prevades the body, so that one cannot open the Bible without seeing them. Even as one cannot insert the point of a pin anywhere in the body without the sight of blood; and assuming that professing Christian parents were, in faith and practice, as they profess to be, we would expect that the normal Christian experience in the Church, from generation to generation, would be that of infant regeneration.

Instead of a normal or even frequent experience of the kind referred to, the expectation of it seems to have largely disappeared. And with the disappearance of the expectation, there cannot but be the disappearance of the experience. For the experience depends on the expectation—the expectation of faith relying on the divine promise. The expectation, however, has not died out. There are still, as there have always been, those who, relying on the promise, plead it with God, travelling, as in birth, for the salvation of their children. Such believing souls are not disappointed. They may, for their own good, have to wait long. But when "patience has had its perfect work," they find that the Lord, who is full of consideration towards those whose hearts are right towards Him, has graciously over-looked humiliating shortcomings and failures in parental duty, and "is not slack concerning His promise."

But it cannot be questioned that this experience is comparatively rare—compared, that is, with what it ought to be. There are those, perhaps many, who think that regeneration is an experience

not to be expected until the child has some measure of religious knowledge. However erroneous the conception may be, there can be no doubt of its prevalence, that there is no experience of regeneration until the subject of it is more or less informed in Christian truth. Not questioning that it is so, in the case of the adult, I Peter i. 23, where the apostle speaks of our "being born again of the seed of the word," and admitting that we cannot have full evidence of regeneration except in connection with the intelligence of the subject of it, we cannot, in view of the promise of God to the Christian parent, believe that the regeneration of his child must wait upon the development of its intelligence. The simple fact that the child of the believing father or mother, dying in infancy, immediately "passes into glory, made perfect in holiness," sufficiently proves that he is one of Christ's redeemed, and a subject of the regenerating grace and power of His spirit. Indeed it cannot be that, notwithstanding the promise of God to the godly parent, the child is to be expected to continue for many years from his birth in a state of enmity to God, and that not till he has passed perhaps his first decade, may it be hoped that he may be regenerated and converted by his being, through his intelligence, awakened to a sense of sin and his danger as a sinner, and led consciously to embrace the Saviour.

It is evident that our views in relation to the subject before the Presbytery will depend very much on our acceptance of the one or of the other of the conceptions referred to—the one, the Scripture conception, according to the Presbyterian understanding of Scripture teaching and the other, a conception that is more or less prevailing. In the one case, we shall ascribe the "dearth of conversions" very largely, if not mainly, to parents—to their being, if not altogether destitute of Scripture piety, seriously wanting in concern for the spiritual interests of their children; and, if not altogether inconsistent in their walk, wanting in the faith to which "all things are possible," or that ensures the experience of all that is within the compass of divine promise. And we shall look for the cure in the spiritual quickening of parents, not only to anxiety about their children's salvation, but to believing prayer for them—the prayer of the faith that will not take denial, and which God will not deny. In the other case, though not altogether without concern and anxiety, as parents especially, yet, not expecting anything else, we shall probably not be very greatly concerned in not seeing any indication of Christian piety in our children, and may perhaps rather excuse their indifference to divine things, and even their grosser evil ways, as being natural in childhood and youth. And we shall indulge ourselves in the hope that, as they advance in Christian knowledge, the indifference or the enmity of earlier years may be dispelled by faithful preaching adapted to their intelligence, by the personal appeals to them of loving and faithful friends, by evangelistic services, by protracted revival services, and by any other means which, we may think, are fitted to constrain them to make a profession of their desire and determination, by the promised grace of God, to live a Christian life.

It will help not a little to clear our way,

in coming to right conclusions in relation to the subject before us, if we bear in mind the distinction between regeneration and conversion. Though the terms are often used as if they were synonymous, because of the essential connexion between the things signified by them, the distinction is too important to be overlooked. In the case of one who has reached the years of intelligence before undergoing a saving change, regeneration and conversion are indissolubly connected, not only as cause and necessary effect, but as being simultaneous in time, in the experience of the subject of them, even as the lighting of a lamp and its giving light are simultaneous. But, having regard to the same illustration, regeneration, in the order of nature, precedes conversion, and is the next cause of which conversion is the next effect. While in regeneration the subject of it is passive, in conversion, the sinner is also active. It is he who, as the necessary effect of regeneration, "repents and is converted" or turns from his sins to the Lord. In the order of nature, the work of the spirit must precede the fruits of the spirit. In believing and repenting, he is active, as he is called to be, as capable of understanding the terms of the gospel and of the Lord's promise of the Holy Spirit who "works in us to will and to do."

But while regeneration always necessarily precedes conversion in the order of nature, or, in other words, while faith and repentance or turning from sin unto God, are the acts of the new or regenerate nature, and not simply the rational acting of the old man in order to regeneration, as was strongly insisted by some in Scotland in my student days, it is, at least in some cases, first also in the order of time; and, as we have said, such should be the normal experience, according to our Presbyterian principles. That we believe in infant regeneration does not imply that we believe the miserable and mischievous priestly figment of baptismal regeneration, according to which every one that is baptized is thereby (ex opere operato), made "a new creature in Christ Jesus," "a member of Christ and an inheritor of the Kingdom of heaven," though he may never, to end of his life, give the least indication of his being a subject of the renewing of the Holy Ghost. But we believe in such an infant regeneration as is "signified and sealed" in baptism to the believing parent, who in the baptism of his child, receives the assurance of its salvation. Not that we believe the perdition of the child of unbelieving parents, that dies in infancy. But in such a case we rest our persuasion of the child's salvation, as we may well do, upon the great and to us unquestionable principles of the procedure of the Supreme Moral Governor. We know that the "Judge of all the earth will do right," "will not slay the righteous with the wicked," nay, will not destroy but spare the wicked community for the sake of its ten righteous men, and that "He delighteth in mercy." But God in His wisdom, does not see it good to give to the unbelieving and ungodly parent the assurance that he gives, in promise, to the believing and godly parent—promise the seeming or even real non-fulfilment of which in any case must not be ascribed to unfaithfulness on the

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