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"WISDOM IS THE PRINCIPAL THING; THEREFORE GET WISDOM."

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Theology.

INFANT BAPTISM.

"Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had being yet uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: and the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised. For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not made to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect: because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression." Rom. iv. 9-15.

The following is the paraphrase: "Doth the blessing of an imputed righteousness come then upon the circumcision only? or may it come upon those who are uncircumcised? We have said that it came upon Abraham, and that it was faith which was reckoned to him for righteousness. Now in what circumstances was he at the time when it was so reckoned? Was he in circumcision, or uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And circumcision was received merely as a token, or as a seal, of the righteousness of that faith which he had when he was uncircumcised; that he might be the great exemplar of all those who after him should believe, though they were not circumcised; that to them also, even as unto him, there might be an imputation of righteousness; and that he might furthermore be the exemplar of those who were circumcised; and were at the same time, more than this, walking in the steps of that faith which their father Abraham had while uncircumcised. For the promise that he should obtain the inheritance was not to Abraham or his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they only are to inherit who fulfil the law, then faith is rendered powerless, and the promise can have no fulfilment. Because the law worketh wrath, and not favour; and it is only when it is taken out of the way, that transgression is removed, and righteousness can be imputed."

The first lesson we shall endeavour to draw from this passage is, that it seems to contain in it the main strength of the scriptural argument for infant baptism. It looks a rational system, to make sure of the thing signified ere you impress the sign; to make sure of the belief ere you administer the baptism: if the outward ordinance signify any thing at all, to make sure that what is so signified be a reality. And all this has been applied with great appearance of force and plausibility to this question; and the principle deduced out of it, that ere this great initiatory rite of our faith be laid upon any individual, he should make a credible profession of that faith. In confirmation of this, we are often bidden to look to the order in which these two things succeeded one another in the first age of Christianity. We read of this one convert and that other having believed and been baptized; not of any having been baptized, and then believed. And so this should be the order with every grown up person who is not yet baptized. Should there be any such person who, from accidental circumstances, has not been administered to him in his own country, demand the profession of his faith, and be assured that it

is a credible profession, ere you baptize him. Let Missionaries, these modern Apostles, do the same in the pagan countries where they now labour; just as the first Apostles did before them; just as was done with Abraham of old, who, agreeably to Paul's argument, first believed, and afterwards underwent the rite of circumcision. But mark how it fared with the posterity of Abraham. He, the first Hebrew, believed and was circumcised; and it was laid down for a statute in Israel, that all his children should be circumcised in infancy. In like manner, the first Christians believed, and were baptized; and, though there be no statute laid down upon the subject, yet is there no violation of any contrary statute, when all our children are baptized in infancy. At the origin of the two institutions the order of the succession is the same with both. The thing signified took precedence of the sign. Along the stream of descent which issued from the first of them, this order was reversed, and by an express authority too, so as that the sign took precedence of the thing signified. And so has it been the very general practice with the stream of descent that issued from the second of them; and if the want of express authority be pleaded against us, we reply, that this is the very circumstance which inclines us to walk in the footsteps of the former dispensation. Express authority is needed to warrant a change; but it is not needed to warrant a continuation. It is this very want of express authority, we think, which stamps on the opposite system a character of presumptuous innovation. When once bidden to walk in a straight line, it does not require the successive impulses of new biddings to make us persevere in it. But it would require a new bidding to justify our going off from the line into a track of deviation. The first Christians believed and were baptized. Abraham believed and was circumcised. He transmitted the practice of circumcision to infants. We transmit the practice of baptism to infants. There is no satisfactory historical evidence of our practice having ever crept in—the innovation of a later period in the history of the church. Had the mode of infant baptism sprung up as a new piece of sectarianism, it would not have escaped the notice of the authorship of the times. But there is no credible written memorial of its ever having entered amongst us as a novelty; and we have, therefore, the strongest reason for believing that it came down in one uncontrolled tide of example and observation from the days of the Apostles. And if they have not, in the shape of any decree, or statutory enactment, that can be found in the New Testament, given us any authority for it, they at least, had it been wrong, and when they saw that whole families of disciples were getting into this style of observation, would have interposed and lifted up the voice of their authority against it. But we read of no such interdict in our Scriptures; and, in these circumstances, we hold the inspired Teachers of our faith to have given their testimony in favour of infant baptism, by giving us the testimony of their silence.

It is vain to allege that the Jewish was a grosser dispensation; not so impregnated with life and rationality and spiritual meaning as ours; with a ceremonial appended to it for the purpose mainly of building up a great outward distinction between the children of Israel and all the other families that were on the face of the earth; and that this was one great use of circumcision, which, whether affixed during the period of infancy or advanced life, served equally to signalize the people, and so to strengthen that wall of separation which, in the wisdom of Providence, had been raised for the sake of keeping the whole race apart from the general world till the ushering in of a more comprehensive and liberal dispensation. "The flesh profiteth nothing," says the Saviour; "the words I speak unto you,

they are spirit and they are life." But it so happens that in the ordinance of circumcision, there are the very spirit and the very life which lie in the ordinances of baptism. Viewed as a seal, it marks a preliminary obligation on the part of God, of the same privileges in both cases; and that as the righteousness of faith. Viewed as a sign, it indicates the same graces. It indicates the existence of faith, and all its accompanying influences on the character of him who has been subjected to it. "That is not circumcision which is outward in the flesh," says Paul; "but circumcision is of the heart; in the spirit, and not in the letter." That is not baptism, says Peter, which merely puts away the filth of the flesh; but baptism is the answer of a good conscience unto God. If the baptism of infants offer any violence to the vital and essential principles of that ordinance, the principles of the ordinance of circumcision are altogether the same. Circumcision is the sign of an inward grace; and upon Abraham, in the previous possession of this grace, the sign was impressed. And, in the face of what might have been alleged, that it was wrong when the sign and the thing signified did not go together, this sign of circumcision was nevertheless perpetuated in the family of Abraham, by being impressed on the infancy of all his descendants. In like manner, when an adult stands before us for baptism, should we be satisfied that he has the washing of regeneration, then we may put the question, "Can any man forbid water, that he should not be baptized who hath received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" But should any man go further, and forbid water to the infants of his present or his future family, he appears to do so on a principle which God himself did not recognise; and while he seems to exalt faith over forms, by waiting for the rise of this inward grace ere he will impose the outward ceremonial, he stamps a reflection on that very procedure that was instituted for him who is called the "father of the faithful."

But is it not wrong, when the sign and the thing signified do not go together? Yes, it is very wrong; and let us shortly consider who they generally are that are in the wrong when such a disjunction at any time occurs. In the case of an adult, the thing signified should precede the sign. When he offers himself for baptism, he asks to be invested with the sign that he is a disciple, and he makes a credible appearance and profession of his being so. Were it not a credible profession, then the administrator is in the fault for having put the outward stamp of Christianity on one whom he believed to be a counterfeiter. Were it a profession rendered credible by the arts of hypocrisy, then the minister is free; and the whole guilt that arises from an unworthy subject, standing arrayed in the insignia of our faith, lies upon him who wears them. But in the case of an infant, the sign precedes the thing signified. The former has been impressed upon him by the will of his parent; and the latter remains to be wrought in him by the care of his parent. If he do not put forth this care, he is in the fault. Better that there had been no sign, if there was to be no substance; and he by whose application it was that the sign was imparted, but by whose neglect it is that the substance is not infused, he is the author of the mockery upon ordinances. He it is who hath made the symbolical language of Christianity the vehicle of a falsehood. He is like the steward who is entrusted by his superior with the subscription of his name to a space of blank paper, on the understanding that it was to be filled up in a particular manner, agreeably to the will of his Lord; and, instead of doing so, has filled it up with matter of a different import altogether. The infant, with its mind unfilled and unfurnished, has been put by the God of providence into his hands; and after the baptism which he himself hath craved,

it has been again made over to him with the signature of Christian discipleship, and by his own consent, impressed upon it; and he, by failing to grave the characters of discipleship upon it, hath unworthily betrayed the trust that was reposed in him; and, like the treacherous agent who hath prostituted his master's name to a purpose different from his master's will, he hath so perverted the sign of Heaven's appointment, as to frustrate the end of Heaven's ordination. The worthies of the Old Testament, who, in obedience to the God whom they served, circumcised their children in infancy, never forgot that they were the children of the circumcision; and the mark of separation that had been enjoined to impose upon them reminded them of the duty under which they lay, to rear them at all the virtues of a holy and separate generation; and many a Hebrew parent was solemnized by this observance into the devotedness of Joshua, who said that whatever others should do, he with all his house should fear the Lord; and this was the testimony of the Searcher of hearts in behalf of one who had laid the great initiatory rite of Judaism upon his offspring. "That He knew him, that he would bring up his children after him in all the ways, and statutes, and ordinances that he had himself been taught;" and it was the commandment of God to his servants of old, that they should teach their children diligently, and talk to them as they rose up and sat down, and as they walked by the way-side, of the loyalty and gratitude that should be rendered to the God of Israel. Thus was the matter ordered under the old dispensation. The sign was impressed upon the infant, and it served for a signal of duty and direction to the parent. It pointed out to him the moral destination of his child, and led him to guide it onward accordingly. There ought to be a correspondence between the sign and the thing signified. At the very outset of the child's life, did the parent fix upon its person the one term of this correspondence, as a mark of his determination to fix upon its character the other term of it. It was as good as his promissory declaration to that effect; and if this be enough to rationalize the infant circumcision of the Jews, it is equally enough to rationalize the infant baptism of Christians. The parent of our day, who feels as he ought, will feel himself in conscience to be solemnly charged, that the infant whom he has held up to the baptism of Christianity, he should bring up in the belief of Christianity; and if he fail to do this, it is he who has degraded this simple and impressive ceremonial into a thing of nought; it is he who has dissolved the alliance between the sign and the thing signified; it is he who brings scandal upon ordinances, by stripping them of all their respect, and all their significance. Should the child live and die unchristian, there will be a proper and essential guilt attached to him in consequence; but it will at least not be the guilt of having broken a vow which he was incapable of making. And yet the vow was made by some one. It was made by the parent; and in as far as the ruin of the child may be resolved into the negligence of him to whom he owes his birth, it is he who moved the baptism, and it is he who hath profaned it.

This ordinance lays a responsibility on parents; the sense of which has, we doubt not, given a mighty impulse to the cause of Christian education. It is well that there should be one sacrament in behalf of the grown-up disciple, for the solemn avowal of his Christianity before men; and the very participation of which binds more closely about his conscience all the duties and all the consistencies of the Gospel. But it is also well that there should be another sacrament, the place of which in his history is, not at the period of his youth or manhood, but at the period of his infancy; and the obligation of which is felt, not by his conscience still in embryo, but by the con-