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The Dangers in Decision Day

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"Decision Day" is a new applicant for Baptist favor. A large number of such applicants have arisen in recent years. Most of them originate in Pedobaptist connections; but since we are a very accommodating sort of people, and a little thin skinned under the charge of bigotry, we are more or less inclined to fall into line with any new thing that comes along looking as if it might be useful without involving any very serious risk. The Baptists who pride themselves on being broad-minded and progressive, are ready to ask, "What harm is there in 'Decision Day' any way?" To answer that question, in part at least, is the present purpose.

The idea of the institution is this: A day once a year is set apart for a concerted and special effort in Sunday schools to induce the children to "decide for Christ." Pressure (of what quality and how urgent depending on the manipulators of the effort) is brought to bear on the children in the mass to induce them to indicate in some way, usually a very easy way, that they "decide for Christ." What harm is there in that? We answer in two ways, considering the method first individually, as standing by itself; second collectively, in its associations.

I. View it Individually, as an isolated action, in a Baptist school and atmosphere, separate from the interpretations placed on it by the use and understandings elsewhere. So viewed, it seems to me open to serious objection because of several perils involved in it.

1. The peril of the Time Limit. One day is set apart for this appeal, one day out of the whole year; if not exclusively so, then conspicuously so; and the tendency will be toward the exclusive interpretation, and the omission of such appeal at other times. This day is announced and anticipated with this special distinction. It is "Decision Day," and others therefore are not decision days in any serious sense, if at all. But there is only one legitimate time word in Christian evangelism—"Now!" One has no right to set any day anywhere in the future for any one to decide to accept or reject Christ. Whoever does that, in a Sunday school as certainly as elsewhere, insults the Lord and imperils the soul. What is needed with the young no less than the old, is to understand that it is exceedingly perilous to trifle with God, and that putting off the acceptance of His grace is trifling with Him; that God is sovereign in this whole field; that we are saved by grace, and that grace is under no obligations to us; that God has a right to reject us tomorrow if we reject Him to day; that if we put Him off till our "decision day," He may put us off forever. "Decision Day" as I understand it to be commonly conceived, is equivalent to placing God in the attitude of subordination, waiting for us to set the time at which we will "decide" what we will do with Him. But He is sovereign. To Him belongs the leadership in methods and times of human salvation. We cannot consistently adopt any method of evangelism that impairs God's insistence on immediate attention. That the "Decision Day" method is such, in its tendency and almost inevitable effect, seems to me evident.

2. The peril of Magnetic Deception. It is great even with adults; here was perhaps the greatest evil in a certain kind of old time revival that comparatively dealt with adults and did not seek children. But the peril is intensified with the young. The idea captures the imagination. Childhood is impulsive and gregarious; it is responsive to the sway of the crowd, and thinks that the way the crowd goes must be the right way. Other things equal, youth needs for this reason to be dealt with religiously in special solitude and quiet, in order to be dealt with safely. Have we not seen it? A skillful manager can induce a company of children to rise in response to almost any proposal; and the more of them he has in hand, the more easily he can manage them. That is always true? Yes, but with one day set apart for concerted movement, not only locally but universally, the danger is immensely in-

creased. Have we not had enough mischief of this kind of thing, without adopting a method that puts a premium on it?

The peril of Vital Error. This has relation to the origin and quality of the saved life. It involves error in relation to all fundamental truths, sin, repentance, faith, and their kindred in the doctrinal kingdom; but space forbids the treatment of them, and the reader can catch the bearings for himself as we unfold briefly the central doctrine in this view, that of the origin and quality of the spiritual life, on which all else depends. The point is this: A day is set apart in which children are to "decide" their relations to Christ; we are thinking of it as in the Baptist atmosphere, where there is a fair degree of correctness in the general understandings abroad; still that way of putting it will almost certainly give the impression that the making of a Christian is in the simple willing of the person himself; it is all a question of his decision; he can decide the whole issue somewhat as he can decide what kind of candy he will have; if he rises or holds up his hand, that makes him a Christian; his "decision" is all, for God as well as himself. The peril herein is peculiarly the peril of youth with its limited experience, its comparative innocence and its abounding self confidence. The scheme is constructed to ignore the Holy Spirit as the initial power and authority, and to repudiate the birth from above as the essential basis for the effectiveness of the human will.

The "Decision Day" method belongs rather with Presbyterianism. The Presbyterian (the Reformed) system is logically adapted to "Decision Day," for the "children of the church," at least. Its idea is that the child of church members is, by virtue of natural birth, in the church, and in the kingdom of Heaven, at least to the extent of giving superior standing before God, so that all he has to do, on reaching discretion, is to assume that he is right with God and go ahead on his decision to this effect, without such experiences as Baptists think essential to the beginning of the Christian life in every one. "Decision Day" is also quite well fitted to "Campbellism," according to what seems to be the prevalent belief in that body. The faith required being that of intellectual assent, and the divine favor being locked up in baptism, more or less, then the assent followed by baptism covers the whole ground. But Baptists believe that faith in Christ is not only more but different from faith in Caesar, and that baptism is a nullity unless it is preceded by this superior faith, which is so superior that it is impossible without a renewing work of the Spirit of God before it.

The radical differences between those systems and our own makes a profound peril for us precisely at the point where the adaptation to them appears in "Decision Day." So much for the individual view.

II. The Collective View. We think now of "Decision Day" as one in a collection of manifestations, all of a kind, supporting each other, and the tendency of the whole away from the Baptist position. This has been suggested in the reference to the fitness of "Decision Day" to two denominations for the very reasons making its unfitness for us; but the present view is still wider, taking in more elements. The whole reason for the existence of Baptists as a separate people is in their conceptions of the spiritual life; and the constant peril for ourselves, as well as for others in relation to us, is that we shall forget or fail to appreciate that fundamental difference. And the closer the fellowship between others and ourselves in the things nearer the surface, where we are really more alike, the greater this danger is. If the general conditions are unfavorable to that life for which we distinctly stand, our peril is so far increased, because we are thereby unfitted to guard against the subtle influence of the error offered to us, consciously or unconsciously, by our esteemed neighbors.

Now, a considerable number of forces have been working together in this country in recent years against spiritual religion. All evangelical denominations have been affected, the Baptists included. I know that some of our optimistic

brethren think this is "pessimism;" but they are respectfully notified that it is the way of error, especially in a domain of truth, to patiently percolate under the surface and suddenly burst the levee, after which the flood runs itself, needing no help, not even from the devil. That is going on now—in the Baptist denomination, and it is working South. This movement expresses itself in a certain class of symptoms, in the realm, speaking generally, of "ritualism." That Baptists have, within our memory, taken up the concert recitation of the Lord's Prayer" in the public congregation, "responsive reading" likewise, the observance of Easter, in some cases Good Friday," and even "Passion Week," and such like things—what does it mean? Is it accidental? These things all come from the same quarter, in which ritualism predominates and the spiritual life is low. There is no accident in that. There is profound meaning in that. The meaning at bottom is that Baptists are seeking substitutes for spirituality, and they are finding them just where others have found them for the same purpose. "Decision Day" comes intertwined with this whole group of the expressions of a declining spiritual life, and supported by all of them. There is the breadth of the danger of it. It is an expression of our lowering conception of sin and salvation; it stands for the displacing of regeneration by education in dealing with the young, for slack views of sin and consequent trimming down of our conviction of the change needed in human nature and the necessity of the Holy Spirit working a supernatural renewal as the basis of the Christian life. It is the loss of spiritual power and of the sense of spiritual need, answering its own unrest by putting the human decision in the place of the divine renovation. It is the thin edge of that conception in all this field that Episcopalians express in "confirmation." It is a handy contrivance for those who want the thing but not the name. Now, most Baptists don't mean it in the way I have been working it out, and many of them don't mean it at all; but that is what it means, and that is what they will get if they keep on long enough in the way that some of them have started.—*Western Recorder.*

We are very thankful to the many friends who have sent in payments for "THE HOME MISSION JOURNAL" of late. But there are some who are in arrears yet, that we would like to hear from. We are very much encouraged by the many appreciative words that accompany many of these remittances. It is our purpose and endeavor to make the little paper as useful and helpful to the families that receive it as is within our ability to do. And we would be pleased to receive original articles from any of our brethren and sisters upon religious subjects at any time, as well as items of religious news. We hope that all those whose year's subscriptions end with July will continue the paper, as many already have done. But if any wish to discontinue it they will please send in such notice with full payment, and not leave their paper in the post office *refused*, as some have, without either paying for it or notifying us that they wanted it stopped. No paper can be refused or stopped until it is paid for, and if those who move away and change their address will notify us, we will send the paper to them at their new home, and it will save themselves and us a good deal of trouble and inconvenience. Some have gone away and have not let us know of their removal, nor have settled their account for the paper, and we are at a loss to know where to send their paper, nor where to send the bill for payment. This is rather a shabby way of doing. We regard all our subscriptions as permanent until notified to stop the paper, and payment is made. Some friends have ordered a few copies of the paper to be sent to some families that are too poor to pay for it. We would be pleased to have others do the same. It would be a charitable and useful act for any one who would send a dollar, or two dollars for this purpose. We will see that any sum coming to us for this object will be faithfully applied. Such benefactors can designate their beneficiaries, or leave it to us to do it.