

**A GENERAL VIEW OF THE
DOCTRINE OF
REGENERATION IN
BAPTISM**

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A General View of the Doctrine of Regeneration in Baptism by Christopher Bethell

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CHRISTOPHER BETHELL

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W. H. L. Gibbs
1839.

GENERAL VIEW

OF THE

DOCTRINE

OF

REGENERATION IN BAPTISM.

BY THE RIGHT REV.

CHRISTOPHER BETHELL, D.D.

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P R E F A C E

to

THE SECOND EDITION.

SOME years have now passed away, since I was informed by my late respectable publisher¹, that this treatise, published in 1822, was out of print, and was recommended by him to publish a second edition. It is needless to assign the reasons which have hitherto prevented me from acceding to this suggestion. It will be sufficient to say that the delay has not been occasioned by any change of opinion, or any intention of altering or modifying the doctrinal statements which I then submitted to the public.

In some of the numerous tracts which have issued of late years from the press, suggesting alterations in the Book of Common Prayer, the revision of the Baptismal services, with a view to the exclusion of the opinions maintained in this work, has been

¹ Mr. C. Rivington.

strongly recommended. The Church of England however will not, I am persuaded, consent to erase from her formularies a doctrine which she has received as a Catholic verity, founded in God's word, held by the universal Church from the time of the Apostles till the days of Zuinglius and Calvin, and deliberately retained by the Fathers of her Reformation.

Of those who advocate the changes to which I am adverting, there are some who do not go the length of condemning this doctrine as unscriptural, or mischievous, but recommend this revision of our services on principles of conciliation and concession. Were this a question of words only, or of things indifferent and of little value, such a proposal might be a fair subject of inquiry and discussion. But if it relates to the very nature and efficacy of a Sacrament, and if the alterations suggested involve not merely the mode of stating a doctrine, but that doctrine itself, compromise and concession are inadmissible. If the doctrine of Regeneration in Baptism is unscriptural, it ought to be abandoned without hesitation. If it is, as we are persuaded, the doctrine of Scripture, explained and illustrated by the history of the Church of Christ, we dare not expunge it from our service books, or our Articles of religion, in deference to the opinion of those whom we believe to be in error.

Those objectors, who call for this revision of our

offices for the administration of Baptism, because they conceive the doctrine contained in them to be unscriptural, must be referred to the body of the following work. How justly it is liable to this objection, and with what show of reason it has been numbered among the errors and corruptions of Christianity, I must leave to my readers to determine.

I have lying before me an anonymous pamphlet¹ which presents a striking specimen of the prejudices against this doctrine into which men are often betrayed by the course of reading which they pursue, and the language which they hear from their instructors. I do not allude to this pamphlet on account of any importance which I attach to it, because the writer, though he throws out assertions with unflinching intrepidity, is evidently unacquainted both with the state of the question, and with the history of Theological opinion. I shall merely advert to a few passages of this book, as exhibiting a sample of prevailing errors, and of the manner in which gentlemen, who know nothing of the plainest facts of ecclesiastical history, think themselves qualified to censure our service book, and to reform the doctrines of our Church.

¹ Reasons for refusing to sign the Lay Address to the Archbishop of Canterbury: in a Letter to a Friend. Hatchard, 1834.

The writer, assuming the correctness of his own views of the nature of Regeneration, and of the meaning of the word in Scripture, very naturally comes to the conclusion, that the doctrine maintained by our Church is unsound and unscriptural: and proceeds to give what he imagines to be an historical account of this corruption of pure and primitive Christianity.

He attributes, for instance, the assertion of this doctrine by the Church of England to the compromising policy of Elizabeth and her counsellors¹; who, as he informs us, in order to conciliate the Papists, were anxious to retain as much of Popery as they could in the construction of our Liturgy and Articles. In matters indifferent, it was a wise and just policy to retain those ancient and decent usages, to which the people had been accustomed. But the learned and pious Divines to whom the management of our Reformation was intrusted, while they retrenched with an unsparing hand the superstitious practices and unsound doctrines of Popery, did not renounce either the tenets or the usages of the Apostolic and universal Church, merely because they had been held, and in some cases, perhaps, perverted by the Church of Rome, in the days of its ascendancy. They were content to lop off excrescences and to remove corruptions,

¹ Pp. 16—20. 27. 34, 55.

without destroying the substance of primitive and Catholic doctrine.))

Taking for granted that the doctrine of infant baptismal regeneration is a Popish tenet bequeathed to us by the policy of Elizabeth, the author brings forward, as a strong prejudice against it, and as a symptom of its papal origin, the fact that it places the spiritual condition of a human soul at the discretion of a fellow-creature¹. But he seems to forget that this is in accordance with the state and circumstances of our common nature; that the spiritual, no less than the temporal, welfare of children is deeply involved in the care and faithfulness of those to whom they are intrusted: and that whenever a duty connected with the happiness of our fellow-creatures is imposed on such frail and sinful beings as we are, it may be, and too often is neglected, at the hazard of their best interests. But the Church of England does not put any harsh construction on the case of infants dying without baptism. We hold, indeed, that children who are baptized, dying before they commit actual sin, are undoubtedly saved; but we do not hold that infants dying without baptism are undoubtedly damned: and though we do not venture to speak peremptorily of their condition, we leave them without despair or distrust in the hands of a merciful Saviour.

¹ P. 27.