**THE FUNDAMENTALS: A TESTIMONY TO THE TRUTH**

**VOLUME 3; CHAPTER 10. REGENERATION - CONVERSION - REFORMATION**

BY REV. GEORGE W. LASHER, D.D., LL. D., AUTHOR OF "THEOLOGY FOR PLAIN PEOPLE" CINCINNATI, OHIO

In his "Twice-Born Men," Mr. Harold Begbie gives us a series of instances wherein men of the lowest grade, or the most perverse nature, became suddenly changed in thought, purpose, will and life. Without intentionally ignoring the word "regeneration," or the fact of regeneration, he emphasises the act of conversion in which he includes regeneration which, in our conception, is the origin of conversion and a true reformation as a permanent fact. A weakness in much of the teaching of modern times is in that conversion and reformation are thrust to the front, while regeneration is either ignored, or minimized to nothingness.

Jesus Christ did not say much about regeneration, using the equivalent word in the Greek (paliggenesis) only once, and then (Matt. 19:28) having reference to created things, a new order in the physical universe, rather than to a new condition of the individual soul. But He taught the great truth in other words, the needful fact by which He made it evident that a regeneration is what the human soul needs and must have to fit it for the kingdom of God.

In the other Gospels, Jesus is represented as teaching things which involve a new birth, without which it is impossible to meet Divine requirements; but in John's Gospel it is distinctly set forth in the very first chapter, and the idea is carried through to the end. When (in John 1:12, 13) it is said that those who received the Word of God received also "power," or right, to become God's children, it is expressly declared that this power, or right, is not inherent in human nature, is not found in the natural birth, but involves a new birth - "who are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." It is this new or second birth which produces children of God. The declaration of John (3:3) puts to confusion the very common claim that God is the Father of universal humanity, and makes it absurd to talk of "the Fatherhood of God," "the Heavenly Father," "the Divine Fatherhood," and other such phrases with which we are surfeited in these modern days. Nothing is farther from truth, and nothing is more dangerous and seductive than the claim that the children of Adam are, by nature, God's children. It is the basis of much false reasoning with regard to the future state and the continuity of future punishment. It is said, in words, that, though a father may chastise his son, "for his profit," yet the relation of fatherhood and sonship forbids the thought that the father can thrust his son into the burning and keep him there forever. No matter what the offense, it can be expiated by suffering, the father heart will certainly relent and the prodigal will turn again and will be received with joy and gladness by the yearning father.

Of course, the fallacy of the argument is in the assumption that all men are, by nature, the children of God a thing expressly denied by the Lord Jesus (John 8:42) who declared to certain ones that they were of their father the devil. The conversation with Nicodemus gives us the condition upon which once-born men may see the kingdom of God, namely, by being twice-born, once of the flesh, and a second time of the Spirit. "Except a man be born again [anothen, from above] he cannot see the kingdom of God." There must be a birth from heaven before there can be a heavenly inheritance. Nicodemus, though a teacher of Israel, did not understand it. He had read in vain the word through Jeremiah (33:31) relative to the "new covenant" which involves a new heart. He had failed to discern between the natural man and the spiritual man. He had no conception of a changed condition as the basis of genuine reformation. But Nicodemus was not alone in his misconception. After all these centuries, many students of the New Testament, accepting the Gospel of John as canonical and genuine, stumble over the same great truth and "pervert the right ways of the Lord." Taking the fifth verse of John 3, they accept the doctrine of regeneration, but couple it with an external act without which, in their view, the regeneration is not and cannot be completed. In their rituals they distinctly declare that water baptism is essential to and is productive of the regeneration which Jesus declares must be from heaven. They stumble over, or pervert the words used, and make "born of water" to be baptism, of which nothing is said in the verse or in the chapter, and which the whole tenor of Scripture denies.

The lexicographers, the grammarians and evangelical theologians are all pronounced against the interpretation put upon the words of Jesus when He said: "Except a man [any one] be born of water kai spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." The lexicographers tell us that the conjunction kai (Greek) may have an epexegetical meaning and may be (as it frequently is) used to amplify what has gone before; that it may have the sense of "even," or "namely." And thus they justify the reading: "Except a man be born of water, even [or namely] spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." The grammarians tell us the same thing, and innumerable instances of such usage can be cited from both classic and New Testament Greek. The theologians are explicit in their denial that regeneration can be effected by baptism. They hold to a purely spiritual experience, either before baptism, or after it, and deny that the spiritual birth is effected by the water, no matter how applied. And yet some who take this position in discussions of the "new birth" fall away to the ritualistic idea when they come to treat of baptism, its significance and place in the Christian system. (It would be easy to justify all these statements by reference to authors and books, but space forbids the quotations here. So patent are they that we can hardly doubt the acceptance of the assertion by the intelligent reader, without citations in proof.)

**PAUL AS AN INTERPRETER OF JESUS**

The best interpreter of Jesus who ever undertook to represent Him was the man who was made a "chosen vessel," to bear the Gospel of the kingdom to the pagan nations of his own time, and to transmit his interpretations to us of the twentieth century He could say: "The Gospel which was preached of me is not after man, neither was I taught it, but by revelation of Jesus Christ." And Paul speaks of this work wrought in the human soul as a "new creation" - something that was not there before. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature" (creation). "Neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (creation). Never once, in all his discussions of the way of salvation, does Paul intimate that the new creation is effected by a ritual observance. It is always and everywhere regarded and treated as a spiritual experience wrought by the Spirit of God, the subject of it knowing only, as the healed man said of himself, "Whereas I was blind now I see."

**THE TESTIMONY OF EXPERIENCE**

The prayers of the Bible, especially those of the New Testament, do not. indicate that the suppliant asks for a regeneration- a new heart. He may have been taught the need of it, and may be brought face to face with the great and decisive fact; but his thought is not so much of a new heart as it is of his sins and his condemnation. What he wants is deliverance from the fact and the consequences of sin. He finds himself a condemned sinner, under the frown of a God of justice, and he despairs. But he is told of Jesus and the forgiving grace of God, and he asks that the gracious provision be applied to his own soul. "Mercy, and not sacrifice," is the argument, the mercy secured by the work of Him whom God hath appointed to be the propitiation for our sins. But when the supplicating and believing sinner awakes to a consciousness that his prayer has been heard, he finds that he is a new creature. The work has been wrought without his consciousness of it at the moment. All he knows is that something has taken place within him - a great "change." He is a new creature. He dares to hope and to believe that he is a son of God; and he cries in the ecstacy of a new life: "Abba, Father" (Dear Father)! "The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God," and subsequently we learn that we are heirs of a rich Father - "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ," with whom we are to both suffer and reign.

CONVERSION (which really means only "change"), we have said, is included in the idea of regeneration; but the words do not mean the same thing. Regeneration implies conversion; but there may be conversion without regeneration. The danger is that the distinction may not be observed and that, because there is a visible conversion, it may be supposed that there must be a prevenient regeneration. Conversion may be a mere mental process; the understanding convinced, but the heart unchanged. It may be effected as education and refinement are effected. The schools are constantly doing it. It is what they are for. Regeneration involves a change of mind; but conversion may be effected while the moral condition remains unchanged. Regeneration can occur but once in the experience of the same soul; but conversion can occur many times. Regeneration implies a new life, eternal life, Divine life, the life of God in the soul of man, a Divine sonship, the continuous indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Conversion may be like that of King Saul, when he took a place among the prophets of Jehovah, or like that of Simon the sorcerer, who said: "Pray ye the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me."

Conversion may be the result of a conviction that, after all, a change of life may be profitable for the life that is to come, as well as for the life that now is; that in the future world a man gets what he earns in this life. It does not imply a heart in love with God and the things of God. Men of the world are converted many times. They change their minds, and often change their mode of living, for the better; not because they have been regenerated and brought into sacred relations with God in Christ, being renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

One of the most imminent dangers of the religious life of today is the putting of conversion in the place of regeneration, and counting converted men as Christian men, counting "converts" in revival meetings as regenerated and saved, because they have mentally, and, for the moment, changed. Men are converted, politically, from one party to another; from one set of principles to another. Christians, after regeneration, may change their religious views and pass from one denomination to another. Few Christians pass through many years without a need of conversion. They grow cold of heart, blind to the things of God, and wander from the straight path to which they once committed themselves; and they need conversion. Most revivals of religion begin with the conversion of saints. Rarely are souls, in considerable numbers, regenerated while regenerated men and women are unconscious of their high calling and are in need of conversion, in order to their hearty engagement in efforts for those around them. First, a converted church, then regenerated and converted souls.

REFORMATION implies conversion, but it does not imply regeneration. Regeneration insures reformation, but reformation does not imply regeneration. Reformers have been abroad in all ages, and are known to paganism as well as to Christianity. The Buddha was a reformer. Confucius was a reformer. Zoroaster was a reformer. Mahomet was a reformer. Kings and priests have been reformers, while knowing nothing of the life of God in the human soul. A Christian man is a reformed man, though his reformation may be far from complete and may need a great many reforming impulses. The most glaring and fatal mistake in the religious world today is the effort to reform men and reform society by making the reformation a substitute for regeneration.

The social life of today is full of devices and expedients for bettering the physical condition of individuals, families and communities, while yet the soul-life is untouched. Human devices are taking the place of the Divine ideal, and those who cannot reach the inner life are contenting themselves, if they can reach and better the outer life, the mere incident of being. We have civic organizations without number, each of which has for its highest object the betterment not simply of worldly conditions, but of the character of the brotherhood. An argument for the existence of many of these organizations is that they may make better men by reason of the confidence and fraternity secured by the contact effected, by the oaths and vows taken, and by the cultivation of the social life. A willingness to learn and to receive instruction is a condition of initiation into the order.

That reformatory agencies are good and accomplish good is not denied. Each has its good points and helps to elevate the tone of society in the aggregate. But a fatal mistake is in the notion that the elevation of society, the eliminating of its miseries, is conducive to a religious life and promotive of Christianity. Perhaps the greatest hindrances to the conquest sought by Christianity today, in civilized and nominally Christian countries, are the various agencies intended to reform society. They are improving the exterior, veneering and polishing the outside, while the inside is no better than before because the heart remains wicked and sinful. "Now do ye Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and the platter, but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness."

The Pharisees were the best people of their day; and yet they were the greatest failures. Against no others did Jesus hurl so fierce denunciations. Why? Because they put reformation in the place of repentance and faith; because they were employing human means for accomplishing what only the Holy Spirit could accomplish. And so, today, every device for the betterment of society which does not strike at the root of the disease and apply the remedy to the seat of life, the human soul, is Pharisaical and is doing a Pharisee's work. It is polishing the outside, while indifferent to the inside. The road to hell from a church door is as short as is that from a hangman's noose, or an electric chair. More church members than murderers have gone to the hell of the unbeliever. "The good is always the enemy of the best"; and so reformation is always an enemy of the cross of Christ.

Mr. Begbie's "twice-born men" were reformed, and they made proof of it in their subsequent lives because they were regenerated, twice born; but there were beside them, a great multitude of "reformed" men, who were no less heirs of hell than before their "reformation." He tells us of only a few of the great multitude of those reformed - a few of thousands. (By reference to Mr. Begbie's book, the writer means no criticism, for he is in full accord with the facts and purposes of the book. He uses it only as a striking illustration of the point he wishes to make.)

Fundamental to the Christian system is a conviction of sin which compels a cry for mercy, responded to by the Holy Spirit, who regenerates the soul, converts it, reforms it and fits it for the blessedness of heaven.