

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service  
by John Keble

### SERMON XXX.

August 25, 1850.

ST. JOHN xv. 3,4.

“Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in Me and I in you.”

THE infant having been solemnly admitted into the congregation, and Christ's mark put upon his forehead, the Priest restores him to his nurse's or Godmother's arms: in which action when we behold him, we may think of Jesus Christ, how He is even now committing this little lamb of His, newly sealed with His own Name, to the care of its Spiritual Mother the Holy Church, which promises and is bound to nurse and to teach him. Every woman, thus receiving a newly baptized child from the Priest, is for the time a figure and type of the Holy Church of God, receiving infants from Christ, and would do well to consider what a serious thing it is, what a great wonder and mystery, in which she is so permitted to bear a part, and so she should keep her attention from being wholly taken up with the child, and should try to think as much as she can of the great work which God has just been doing for its soul.

When the Priest has so given back the child, he proceeds to invite the congregation to join him in thanksgiving and prayer; “Seeing now, dearly beloved Brethren, that this child is regenerate and grafted into the Body of Christ's Church, let us give thanks unto God for these benefits, and with one accord make our prayers unto Him, that this child may lead the remainder of his life according to this beginning.”

Now the first thing to be observed upon this is, that the Church directs us to speak the words over every baptized infant alike. Whatever be the child's name and his parents', be they rich or poor, high or low in the world, nay whatever their character be, good or bad, religious or irreligious, to the child it is all one, so far as this: that the Church commands us to thank God for its Regeneration. We are to say distinctly, “this child is regenerate;” if there were any doubt, the Church, I suppose, would bid us say, “we hope that this child is regenerated.” There is no reason against our saying that, if it were more according to the truth, according to our Lord's sayings, and the mind of His Holy Church. We might say, we hoped this child was regenerate, just as we say in the Burial Service, “our hope is” that our Brother or Sister is now resting in Christ. The word would have been just as easily spoken. But instead of saying, “we hope,” we say, positively, “it is regenerate.” We say it concerning every child: no distinction is made between this one and that one. Why should we say it, if we are not to believe it? Surely the Church meant us all to believe it: and if we will be true Churchmen, we must believe it. I say it over and over again, and I wish you to take notice of it, and always to remember it, that over every child without exception, immediately after it has been baptized, the Priest is desired to say, “This child is regenerate:” not, “it may be,” or, “we hope it is,” but plainly and distinctly, “it is.” Supposing any person should come up at the same moment and say, “Perhaps it is not so, we cannot tell, we can only hope that it is so,” would you not say that person contradicts the Prayer-Book? Surely this matter is so

plain, that no one can help perceiving it, unless he chooses to be blind. And we ought to be very thankful that the matter is so plain. For unhappily there are too many who for various reasons wish to make it out that we need not believe all infants to be regenerate in Baptism: and they have many subtle things to say, which may perplex the hearts of the simple; and we all know too well that Satan is very busy in this matter, for it exactly serves his purpose, if he can get men to imagine that their sins are not so very bad, because perhaps they have never had grace given them; and since unhappily even well-meaning persons have somehow got to persuade themselves that the Prayer Book does not say, *all* baptized infants are regenerate, I fear, I greatly fear, that the evil one will be more than ever busy in deceiving us. Therefore I say, we ought to be very thankful that God has given us such a plain and direct answer to him. We have but to point with our finger to this one place in the Baptismal Service, “this child is regenerate;”—words to be spoken over every single infant that is christened. We have but to point to these in faith, and the adversary must go away ashamed. And this is what I should advise you generally to do, instead of entering upon long arguments. Keep close to the simple saying, this child is regenerate; let nothing drive you from it: so may the simplest who now hears, be a sound and effectual witness to God’s holy truth. O! who can thank our Merciful God enough, that His good Providence has caused our Church-Prayer-Book to be so very plain and distinct upon that one point especially, which in our age people are most apt to scorn and disbelieve.

And to make it, if possible, still more distinct, observe what we are directed to say, when a child is brought to Church that has been christened at home. The Priest takes *it* also in his arms and makes the sign of the Cross in the regular form: but when he invites the people to give thanks, instead of saying, “this child is regenerate,” he says, “this child is *by Baptism* regenerate,” not by the prayers of its friends and sponsors, nor by some unknown gift before Baptism, but by Baptism itself. What can be plainer?

And you will observe further, that this thanksgiving, to which the Priest invites us all, refers to certain prayers which had gone before. Before the child is christened, we pray that it may be regenerate: after it has been christened, almost the next moment after, we thank God that it is regenerate. How should that be, if Holy Baptism has nothing to do with regeneration? O my brethren, others must do as they please: let us for our part, you and me, keep our faithfulness to the old and good ways. We ought rather to die, than willingly to sacrifice any portion of the Church’s treasure, any one Article of the Faith?

But now observe, we have been truly regenerated in Baptism. Every one of us here present has indeed been born again: every one of us, being by nature born in sin and a child of wrath, has been truly and really grafted into Christ, truly and really made a member of Him. We are taught it in the very first answer of the Catechism. For there every one of us, one as much as another, was brought up to say, “In my Baptism I was made a member of Christ.” We do not say, “perhaps I was so, but I cannot be quite certain.” We make no doubt of the fact, no more than we do of our own birth. We have been regenerate, and we have been made members of Christ, every single one among us. In that respect there is no difference. “As in Adam we all died, even so in Christ have we all been made alive.”<sup>1</sup> What then? are we to go on at our ease, taking no care of ourselves, because He hath done so much for us? why, only just consider how it is in regard of our natural life, the life of the body, the life which we had from our parents at

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:22

our first birth. You know very well that if no care had been taken, no meat and drink, no lodging nor clothing, no help nor watching, that life would soon have passed away: and yet it was a true and real life; none of us ever doubted *that*; you would think a person out of his senses who should say, "I see that such and such a child is dead: I conclude therefore that it never was really born." And you may be quite sure, it is much the same grievous mistake, when you hear it said, as it often is said, "I see that such and such a person is dead in sin: how can I believe that he ever was born again?" As if there were no such thing as dying after birth: as if it were impossible to depart from grace given: as if we had never heard of the fallen angels nor of Judas Iscariot, nor of the Prodigal son in our Lord's parable. Never, I beseech you, listen to any one, however good and wise, and greatly to be regarded in other respects, who shall come teaching you such a doctrine. Say to them in your heart, if not with your lips, "I cannot, I must not believe you:" the Church says plainly in every case, "This child is regenerate;" the Holy Scripture says just as plainly, "as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." But when you have said something like this in your heart, as concerning those who would lead you into false doctrine, say a good word, I beseech you, to yourself also. Go on and think to yourself, "yes indeed I was regenerate and grafted into the Body of Christ: but where is my spiritual life now? am I at this moment a working limb of that Blessed Body, not dead nor palsied, not yielding to wilful sin?" O my brethren, it is a sad confession to make, but there can be no doubt at all of it: if we, who know that we were baptized and born again in Christ, had been always careful to maintain our life in Him; if we had always walked worthily of the great unspeakable gift; if we had never quenched the Spirit; no one would ever have thought of denying the great truth of baptismal grace. It is our sins, which have given occasion to the enemy so to blaspheme and to weak brethren so to stumble. O may the merciful Spirit, to Whom we have made so ill a return, humble us more and more with the most true and sorrowful conviction, that all this confusion and unbelief is in reality the doing of such as we are, who knew ourselves to be the members of Christ, but did not the works of Christ.

When we were christened. Holy Church after pronouncing us regenerate, invited all her children to give thanks to God for so great a benefit. Each one of us then in turn has had the thanks of the Church spoken over him; not only of the persons then present, but of the whole Body of Christ. For Faith perceives and owns the presence of the whole Body, wherever there are but two or three persons gathered round the Font in the Name of Christ. Reflect, my brethren, what an honour and blessing this is: that when, after the christening of a child, rich or poor, it makes no matter, the Priest invites us to return thanks, not only we who see one another, not only all our friends far and near, who may be aware of our christening-day, but the Angels also in Heaven whom none of us can see, and perhaps too the blessed Saints departed in Paradise or in Heaven unite in one and the same joy with the parents and friends of that little child. As it was at our Lord's Nativity, so it is at the Spiritual Nativity, the new birth of all who are made His members. There is a glory round each one of them, as there was round Him in the manger; and as Mary and Joseph and the Shepherds and the Angels joined in praising God for what they saw that day, so doth the glorious company of Heaven join with Christ's people on earth, and especially with the parents and sponsors of the new-baptized, in praising Him, for that He hath regenerated this infant by His Holy Spirit. Some of us may remember, what joy

there was when our Queen's eldest son was born.<sup>2</sup> But what was that, what is the inheritance of all earthly kingdoms put together, in comparison with the glorious condition of a child just made a member of Christ, and sure, if it die as it is now, of an everlasting kingdom in Heaven. Depend on it, there is joy in the other world and in this, at the Baptism of the meanest infant, far deeper, far more transporting than all that is felt here on the birth-day of an heir to the greatest and most beloved prince.

But observe this also very particularly, that along with her thanksgiving the Church then offered her prayers. "Let us give thanks," the Priest said, "unto Almighty God for these benefits; and with one accord make our prayers unto Him, that *this Child* may lead the rest of *his* life according to this beginning." For here, as all along, from beginning to end of the Baptismal office, two doctrines go together, or rather two parts of one doctrine. The one, that every baptized babe without exception is regenerate by the Holy Ghost, the other that every one who lives to the age of actual sin will stand in need of further grace,—the grace of perseverance and of improvement, most likely of conversion also, that he may not after all be a castaway. These two are necessary parts of the Church's doctrine of Baptism, and we have no right at all to leave out either of them: neither we in our teaching, nor you in your belief. And therefore it is, that both thanksgiving and prayer are necessary parts of the duty of the congregation, and are therefore both made part of the office, after the Sacrament has been administered. Because the child is regenerate, we give thanks; because it will surely fall away without further continued help, therefore we pray for more grace. We are invited to pray that the favoured and happy child, having really been made a member of Christ, may "lead the rest of his life according to that beginning." What "beginning?" Surely a reality, not a mere fancy and shadow, not a set of words without meaning. Surely what the Church means is, that we all, not doubting that the infant has received the heavenly life, should unite in praying, that it never may lose that life, but may go on from strength to strength, and finally appear before God in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is the prayer, which was made over every one of us. My brethren, let me beseech you with all earnestness, not to make that prayer void. Void indeed it cannot be, any more than the Baptism can be, on which it follows: it must be either a great blessing or a great curse. You, by His mysterious Providence, are left free to choose which it shall be. The prayer of the Angels and of the whole Church was, that you might "lead the rest of your life according to that" good "beginning." That is, that as your Baptism was the greatest of changes, so your life should be all new; quite different from what it could have been, if you had not so put on Christ. Then, that as you were washed in pure water, so your souls and bodies might continue pure from all stain of wilful, deadly sin. Then, that as your Baptism grafted you into Christ, so you might never, never be cut off from Him, according to His Own blessed Promise: "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you: abide in Me, and I in you."<sup>3</sup>

This was the prayer: and by God's great Mercy it rests with yourself, whether it shall be fulfilled or no. And it may do you good, sometimes to think thus with yourself, that the same company which then offered this prayer for us after our Baptism will be once again assembled around us: we shall meet them all face to face, both Angels and Saints, and Parents, and Sponsors, and neighbours, and friends present and absent, openly

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<sup>2</sup> Keble's reference is to Queen Victoria's son, Prince William.

<sup>3</sup> John 15:3

before the Judgement seat of Christ. Who can express the joy that it will be, if they find their good prayers fulfilled? or the misery, if our folly and wickedness force them even to bear witness against us, and consent to our condemnation, as they gave thanks at our Baptism. The Good Lord enable us to keep this thought in our hearts!