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THE WASHING OF REGENERATION

by DONALD L. NORBIE

MR. NORBIE examines the reference to "the washing of regeneration" in Titus 3: 5, and suggests an alternative interpretation to the common one which takes the phrase to mean baptism.

THIS striking phrase is found in that familiar passage, Titus 3: 5: Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.

Paul is writing of God's marvellous grace in saving sinners. This great salvation flows out freely from the fountainhead of God's kindness and love. Its source is not found in man nor in his efforts but in the very nature and attributes of God. In fact, by nature and practice man merited only the burning wrath of a God who hates sin. Thus salvation is "according to his mercy". The condemned are pardoned because God is a God of mercy.

The channel through which this grace reaches man is described as "the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost". Perhaps it would be well to notice the words closely.

The word "washing" (λουτρόν) is also found in Eph. 5: 26. It comes from the Greek verb λούω meaning "to bathe" or "to wash", which is found a number of times in the New Testament and in the Septuagint.

The word "regeneration" (παλιγγενεσίας) literally means a "birth again" or "new birth". Like the word "washing", it is found in only one other place in the New Testament. In Matt. 19: 28, when the Lord speaks of the renewed or reborn creation over which He would one day reign, He uses this same word.

"Renewing" (ἀνακαίνωσις) is also found only one other time in the Greek New Testament. Paul uses the word in his eloquent plea for Christian consecration in Rom. 12: 1 f. There he speaks of the "renewing of the mind", the mind being reformed and renewed, thus transforming the life. Here in Titus 3: 5 the Holy Spirit is revealed as the agent who effects this amazing change in a person. Apparently here the continuing process of the Spirit's work is not primarily in mind, but the instantaneous change which takes place at conversion. (Note the aorist tense: "He saved us".)

Of course this renewing ministry of the Holy Spirit does continue daily in the believer.

Many commentators assume without question that the phrase "washing of regeneration" can only refer to water baptism. They do not even consider any other possibility. Dean Alford writes concerning the passage: "The font is the laver of regeneration because it is the vessel consecrated to the use of that sacrament whereby in its *completeness* as a sacrament the new life unto God is conveyed." Walter Lock in the *International Critical Commentary* speaks of "the stress on baptism". According to Meyer's Commentary, "Paul calls baptism the bath of the new birth". R. C. H. Lenski writes: "God saves us by means of baptism. Baptism is a bath of regeneration and renewing, in both of which the Holy Spirit is the actor."

Thayer in his *Lexicon* states that this renewing is "effected in baptism". In their massive *Greek-English Lexicon* W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich write of λουτρόν: "*bath, washing* of baptism . . . the bath that brings about regeneration" (Tit. 3: 5). No alternative possibility is even considered.

All of these commentators take the genitive phrase "of the Holy Spirit" as subjective; that is, the Holy Spirit produces the action of renewing. Obviously the Spirit of God does not receive the renewing action; He is the source of this blessing.

However, when the phrase "of regeneration" is handled most treat the phrase as objective. The washing, they say, effects the regeneration and this must be baptism. They take the first phrase as an objective phrase and the second as subjective.

Is it not the more natural to take both as similar and parallel constructions? The author gives two blessings which come at conversion: a washing from the filth of this life and an inward renewing. Regeneration and the Holy Spirit accomplish these two changes. The new birth brings a cleansing from the defilement of sin. In a similar passage where the ugliness of sin has been described, Paul writes:

And such were some of you: but ye were washed, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6: 11, A.S.V.).

In Titus 3: 3 one reads:

For we also were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.

Following this Paul speaks of "the washing of regeneration". Ezekiel mingles the same thoughts of cleansing, regeneration and the work of the Holy Spirit in Ezek. 36: 25-27. To find an out-

ward ceremony in Ezekiel's passage is impossible. It is clearly an inward, spiritual work which is described.

The priest who would serve in the sanctuary must pass through the consecratory rites of the law (Ex. 29). When the solemn service was finished the priest had been washed with water and his body marked with blood and anointed with oil. Water, blood and oil—these three currents of thought are found flowing in Titus 3. "The washing of regeneration", "the renewing of the Holy Spirit" and "being justified by his grace" are vital for the priestly work of a holy people in the New Testament age.

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