

Reformation Is Not Regeneration

Joseph Charles Philpot | Added: Mar 11, 2018 | Category: Theology

Before the soul can know anything about salvation, it must learn deeply and experimentally the nature of sin, and of itself, as stained and polluted by sin. It is proud, and needs to be humbled; careless, and needs to be awakened; alive, and needs to be killed; full, and requires to be emptied; whole, and needs to be wounded; clothed, and requires to be stripped. It is, by nature, self-righteous and self-seeking; is buried deep in worldliness and carnality; is utterly blind and ignorant; is filled with presumption, arrogance, conceit and enmity, and hates all that is heavenly and spiritual.

Sin, in all its various forms, is its natural element. Covetousness, lust, worldly pleasure, desire of the praise of men, an insatiable thirst after self-advancement, a complete self-abandonment to all that can please and gratify every new desire of the heart, an utter contempt and abhorrence of everything that restrains or defeats its mad pursuit of what it loves – these are some of the features of the unregenerate nature of man.

Education, moral restraints, or the force of habit, may restrain the out-breaking of inward corruption, and dam back the mighty stream of indwelling sin, so that it shall not burst all its bounds, and desolate the land; but no moral check can alter human nature. A chained tiger is a tiger still. "The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, nor the leopard his spots". To make man the direct contrary of what he originally is; to make him love God instead of hating Him; fear, instead of mocking Him; obey, instead of rebelling against Him; and to tremble at His awesome majesty, instead of running upon the thick bosses of His shield-to do this mighty work, and to effect this wonderful change, requires the implantation of a new nature by the immediate hand of God Himself.

Natural light, natural love, natural faith, natural obedience, in a word, all natural religion, is here useless and ineffectual. To turn the stream does not alter the nature of the waters. Let the muddy brook be diverted from its southern course. and made to run north, it is a muddy brook still.

Thus the old nature may be restrained and modified, and directed into new and different channels, but it is old nature still. And this is the employment of hundreds who call themselves ministers of Christ and laborers in His vineyard, to use pick-axe and spade, and cut out various channels for the waters of old nature to run in; and when, by much toil and labour, they have drawn off a few streamlets into their narrow canals, they dignify their success with the names of "conversion", and "regeneration", and "a work of grace".

Thus one cuts out a channel in the Sunday School, another digs a broad canal for the Bible Society, a third opens a new cut for decided piety, and a fourth excavates a wide channel for self-righteousness, under the name of Christian holiness. But after all their pains, and after all their success in leading the streams of nature to flow into these new channels, it is old nature still, as fallen, as ignorant, as blind, as carnal, as dead, as full of enmity against God, and as unable as ever to enter into the kingdom of heaven. To whitewash, to paint, to gild over, to clothe, to put a gloss upon; in a word, to reform the outside of old nature, is the religion of the day.

Hundreds of churches and chapels are built, thousands of sermons are preached and millions of pounds are expended with the sole purpose of hewing out the 'rough block of nature' into the shape, limbs and features of a man; and all this labour produces nothing but a statue, a dead image, a lifeless resemblance of vital godliness, which has a mouth, but speaks not; eyes, but sees not; ears, but hears not; hands, but handles not; feet, but walks not; neither speaks through its throat. Churchman and Dissenter, Orthodox and Evangelical, Baptist, Independent and Methodist, all join hand in hand in the good work. "They encourage one another with the words, 'Be strong!' The craftsmen rush to make new idols. The carver hurries the goldsmith, and the moulder helps at the anvil. "Good," they say. 'It's coming along fine.' Carefully they join the parts together, then fasten the thing in place so it won't fall over." Isaiah 41:6-7

But reformation is not regeneration, neither is a change of life the same thing as a change of heart. There may be abundance of zeal, devotedness, consistency, studying of the Bible, private and family prayer, hearing of the gospel, religious conversation, attention to the ordinances of the New Testament, and a great show of outward piety and holiness, where there is not a spark of divine life in the soul. Man's religion is to build up the creature in good works, in piety, in hearing the word, in reading religious authors, in activity, in all the busy ferment and excitement of societies and schools. God's religion is to throw the creature down into the dust of self-abasement and self-abhorrence.

Man would teach religion as he teaches arithmetic or mathematics. This rule is to be learned, this sum is to be done, this problem is to be understood, this difficulty is to be overcome, and thus progress is to be made. The fire is to be kindled, the bellows to be blown, the steam to be gotten up, the engine to be set to work, the prescribed task to be done.

Religion, according to the received creed, is something which a man must be urged into. He must be made religious somehow or other. He must either be driven or drawn, wheedled or threatened, enticed or whipped into it, by human arguments or human persuasions.

Religion is set before him as a river between his soul and heaven. Into this river he is persuaded, invited, exhorted, entreated to jump. He must leap in, or be pushed in. His feelings are wrought upon, and he takes the prescribed spring. He becomes a professor. He hears, he reads, he prays, he supports the cause; he attends the Sunday School; he models his garb according to the regimentals of the party to which he belongs; he discards shirt collars, combs his hair smooth, and trims off his whiskers; he furnishes his mind with the creed of the sect which he has joined, talks as it talks, believes as it believes, and acts as it acts. And all this is called "conversion" and "decided piety", when all this time there is not an atom of grace, a grain of spiritual faith, or a spark of divine life in the poor wretch's soul.

Now, God's way is very different from all this miserable system, so widely prevalent. He does not build up until He has first pulled down, nor save before He has made the soul to feel itself lost. He does not take the sticks and stubble of old nature to lay a foundation with, nor does He use tar instead of mortar to build up a rotten Babel. Man's way is to put a stick here, and place a stone there; to fill up this corner with a brick and the other corner with a tile; and in this progressive way to build a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven.

God's way is to come down and confound their language, to scatter every stick and every stone to the four winds of heaven, and not to leave one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down. He is a jealous God, and will have no partner in the way of salvation. He will not put the new wine into the old bottle, nor a new patch on the threadbare garment. Joshua's filthy garments (Zechariah 3:4) must be taken away from him before he is clothed with a change of clothing. Thus killing goes before making alive—poverty before riches; beggary and the ash-heap before the inheritance of the throne of glory; the grave of buried hopes and the dust of self-abhorrence before exaltation to a seat among princes. Sowing in tears precedes reaping in joy; ashes go before beauty, mourning before the oil of joy, and the spirit of heaviness before the garment of praise.

Salvation is not an outward thing. It stands not in the letter, but in the spirit; not in a sound creed, but in the enjoyment of it as a balm to a broken heart. Thus, in answering the great question, "What is it which saves a soul?" we must first premise that the very word "save" implies a previous state, for which, and from which, it is a remedy, an escape, a deliverance. That salvation implies previous loss, ruin and misery, and that it is a deliverance from all these, everybody admits. But it is not so readily admitted, or, if

acknowledged in words, it is not put forward as a fundamental truth, that it is a felt loss, ruin and misery, from which salvation is an escape.

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