

## XVIII.

## What It Is Not.

“We are His workmanship.”

—*Ephes. ii. 10.*



In the preceding article we contended that there is preparatory grace. In opposition to the contemporary deism of the Methodists,<sup>9</sup> the Reformed churches ought to confess this excellent truth in all its length and breadth. But it should not be abused to reestablish the sinner's free will, as the Pelagians did, and the Arminians after them, and as the Ethicals do now, tho differently.

The Methodist errs in saying that God does not care for the sinner until He suddenly arrests him in his sinful way. Nor may we tolerate the opposite error, the denial of regeneration, the new starting-point in the life of the sinner, which would make the whole work of conversion but an *awakening of dormant* and suppressed energies. There is no gradual transition; conversion is not merely the healing of disease, or an uprising of what had been suppressed; least of all, the arousing of dormant energies.

As regards his first birth, the child of God was *dead*, and can be brought to life only by a second *birth* as real as the first. Generally the person so favored is not conscious of it. In the nature of the case, man is unconscious of his first birth. Consciousness comes only with the years. And the same applies to regeneration, of which he was unconscious until the time of his conversion; and that may be ten or twenty years.

The grounds upon which the Church confesses that a large majority of men are born again *before* holy Baptism are *many* indeed; wherefore, in Baptism, it addresses the infants of believers as being regenerate.

And what do the Semi-Pelagians of all times and shades, and the Ethicals of the present time, teach concerning this? They lower the first act of God in the sinners to a sort of preparatory grace, imparted not only to the elect, but to all baptized persons. They represent it as follows:

First, all men are conceived and born in sin; and if God did not take the first step, all would perish.

Second, He imparts to the children born in the Christian Church a sort of assisting grace, relieving inability.

Third, hence every baptized person has the power to choose or reject the offered grace.

Fourth, wherefore, out of the many who received preparatory grace, some choose life and others perish.



9 See section 5 in Preface.

And this is the confession not of Augustine, but of Pelagius; not of Calvin, but of Castellio; not of Gomarus, but of Arminius; not of the Reformed churches, but of the sects which they have condemned as heretical.

This impious lie, which pervades this whole representation, must be eradicated; and the Methodist brethren deserve our strongest support when with holy enthusiasm they oppose this false system. If this representation be true, then the counsel of God has lost its certainty and stedfastness; then the Mediator's redemptive work is uncertain in its application; then our passing from death unto life depends in the end upon our own will; and the child of God is robbed of all his comfort in life and death, since his new life may be lost.

It does not avail the Ethical theologians when under many beautiful forms they confess their belief in an eternal election, and that grace can not be lost, and in the perseverance of saints. As long as they do not purge themselves of their principal error—viz., that in Baptism God so relieves the inability of the sinner that he can choose life of himself—they do not stand on the basis of the Reformed churches, but are directly opposed to it. Nor will they be counted as children of the Reformed household of faith until, without any subterfuge, they confess definitely that preparatory grace does not operate at all, except upon persons who will surely come to life, and who will never be lost again. To suppose that this grace can work in a man without saving him to the *uttermost* is to break with the doctrine of Scripture and to turn the back upon a vital feature of the Reformed churches. We do not deny that many persons are lost in whom many excellent powers have wrought. The apostle teaches this very clearly in [Heb. vi.](#): “They may have tasted of the heavenly gift.” But between God's work upon *them* and that in His *elect* is a great gulf. The workings in these non-elect have *nothing* in common with saving grace; hence preparatory grace, as well as saving grace, is altogether out of the question. Surely there is preparatory grace, but only for the elect who will certainly come to life, and who being once quickened will remain so. The fatal doctrine of three conditions—viz., that (1) of the spiritually *dead*, (2) of the spiritually *living*, and (3) of men hovering *between life and death*—must be abandoned. The spread of this doctrine in our churches will surely destroy their spiritual character, as it has done in the ancient Huguenot churches of France. Life and death are absolute opposites, and a third state between them is unthinkable. He that is scarcely alive belongs to the living; and he that has just died belongs to the dead. One apparently dead is living, and he that is apparently living is dead. The boundary-line is a hair's breadth, and a state between does not exist. This applies to the spiritual condition. One *lives*, altho he has received no more than the vital germ, and still wanders unconverted in the ways of sin. And he is *dead*, tho tasting the heavenly gift, so long as life is not rekindled in his soul. Every other representation is false.

Others advance the view that preparatory grace prepares not for the reception of life, but for *conversion*. And, this is just as pernicious. For then the soul's salvation depends not

upon regeneration, but upon conversion; and this makes the salvation of our deceased infants impossible. Nay, standing by the graves of our baptized young children, confident of their salvation through the one Name given under heaven, we reject the teaching that salvation depends upon conversion; but confess that it is effected by the divine act of creating in to a new life, which sooner or later manifests itself in conversion.

Preparatory grace always precedes the new life; hence it ceases even before holy Baptism, in infants quickened before being baptized. Hence in a more limited sense, preparatory grace operates only in persons quickened later on in life, shortly before conversion. For the sinner once quickened has received grace, *i.e.*, the germ of all grace; and that which exists can not be prepared.

A third error, on this point, is the representation that certain moods and dispositions must be prepared in the sinner before God can quicken him; as tho quickening grace were conditioned upon preparatory grace. The salvation of our deceased infants opposes this also. There were no moods or dispositions in them; yet no theologian will say that they are lost, or that they are saved by another name than the One in whom adults find salvation. No; the sinner needs nothing whatever to predispose him for the implanting of the new life; and, tho he were the most hardened sinner, devoid of every predisposition, God is able at His own time to quicken him. The omnipotence of divine grace is unlimited.

The implanting of the new life is not a *moral*, but a *metaphysical* act of God—*i.e.*, He does not effect it by admonishing the sinner, but independently of his will and consciousness; yet despite his will, He plants something in him whereby his nature obtains another quality.

Even the representation, still maintained by some of our best theologians, that preparatory grace is like the drying of wet wood, so that the spark can more readily ignite it, we can not adopt. Wet wood will not take the spark. It *must* be dried before it *can* be kindled. And this does not apply to the work of grace. The disposition of our souls is immaterial. Whatever it may be, omnipotent grace can kindle it. And, tho we do not undervalue dispositions, yet we do not concede to them the potentiality of kindling.

For this reason the theologians of the flourishing period of our churches insisted that preparatory grace should not be treated loosely, but in the following order: “The grace of God first *precedes*, then *prepares*, and lastly *performs* (*præveniens, præparans, operans*)—*i.e.*, grace is always first, never waits for anything *in us*, but begins its work before there is anything *in us*. Second, the time before our quickening is not wasted, but during it grace prepares us for our lifework in the kingdom. Third, at the appointed time grace alone quickens us unaided; hence, grace is the *operans*, the real worker. Hence preparatory grace must never be understood as a means to prepare for the impartation of life. Nothing prepares for such quickening. Life is enkindled, wholly unprepared, not from anything in us, but entirely by the working of God. All that preparatory grace accomplishes is this, that God by it so disposes



our life, arranges its course, and directs our development that being quickened by His exclusive act, we shall possess the disposition required for the task assigned to us in the kingdom.

Our person is like the field wherein the sower is to scatter the seed. Suppose there are two fields in which the seed must be sown; the one has been plowed, fertilized, harrowed, and cleared of stones, while the other lies fallow, uncared for. What is the result? Does the former produce wheat of itself? By no means; the furrows were never so deep and the ground never so rich and smooth, if it receives no seed-grain it will never yield a single ear. And the other, not cultivated, will surely germinate the seed scattered therein. The *origin* of the wheat sown has no connection with the cultivation of the field, since the seed-grain is conveyed thither from *elsewhere*. But to the growth of the wheat, cultivation is of greatest importance. And so it is in the spiritual kingdom. Whether great or small, preparatory grace contributes nothing to the origin of life, which springs from the “incorruptible seed” sown in the heart. But to its *development* it is of greatest importance.

This is why the Reformed churches so strongly insist upon the careful training of our children. For, altho we confess that all our training can not create the least spark of heavenly fire; yet we know that when God puts that spark into their hearts, kindling the new fire, much will depend upon the condition in which it finds them.



**Fourth Chapter.**  
**REGENERATION.**

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