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Engrafting:

A Study in New Testament Symbolism and Baptismal Application

by Roy A. Stewart

According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's" (Answer to Question 94). Mr. Stewart, who has served as a Church of Scotland minister in places as far apart as Cairo and Glasgow, has reflected deeply on the meaning of the phrase "our ingrafting (engrafting) into Christ" and gives us the fruit of his reflection here.

THE purpose of this article is essentially practical. Over some seventeen years of ordained ministry, I had, in accordance with the rubric, pronounced many baptized babies "engrafted into Christ". Suddenly it dawned on me, with shattering reproach, that the phrase conveyed little clear impression to my mind, that something must be done about this. For one habituated to free prayer traditions, only slightly versed in liturgics, and totally ignorant of botany, it was not easy to arrive at the real meaning of a deceptively simple phrase. This led to some research, comprehensive though not exhaustive, into the liturgical background of the concept; the knowledge of grafting in classical, patristic and rabbinic literature; and more particularly the New Testament passages dealing with the same theme. Three questions were kept chiefly in mind. Is the phrase clear, meaningful and valid? Has it adequate Scriptural support? Should it be changed to a better one? The research findings are set out somewhat fully, and may interest the reader, whether he does or does not accept the particular conclusions reached.

The underlying botanical facts have been known for many centuries, and may be presented quite briefly. Engrafting means nothing more than the inserting of a young slip or scion into a stock or rooted plant, with a view to their union, fusion, composite growth and greater imparted fruitfulness. Trees and shrubs contain a xylem or woody part, phloem (bast or inner bark), and cambium, a viscid substance just under the bark, in which growth takes place. For successful grafting, there must be contact and intermingling between these three elements of stock and scion. A twig or bud, or a piece of bark containing a bud, may serve as scion, the stock may

be anything from stump to entire tree. Compatibility between the two kinds is absolutely essential—it is idle for instance to attempt to graft the apple onto the oak. Stock and scion must both produce callus or cell growth, and this finally fuses into a homogeneous mass. The engrafted branch or slip may become very fruitful indeed, but its life, botanically speaking, is entirely dependent on the root. A scion which possesses immunity to disease may impart this quality to a stock which is lacking therein, so long as it is healthy at the time of fusion. The direction of transference of this immunity is also reversible.¹ In ancient as in modern times, a wild, inferior or unfruitful tree, of olive or of another kind, was frequently improved by the engrafting into it of a branch from a better strain. To this day olive seedlings are regarded as slow to germinate or unsatisfactory in fruitage; budding and grafting are still practised; and the cultivated olive scion is still grafted onto the wild stock. Many a fair, full rose in the modern garden is a successful cultivated slip, grafted to a wild stock.

In all the sources here surveyed, pagan, Jewish and Christian, the terms for grafting are used both literally and metaphorically—obviously the baptismal usage itself is highly figurative. It will be convenient to begin with the classical writers of Greece and Rome—then to proceed through the Talmud to the New Testament—and only finally to consider the more recent history of the baptismal phrase.

I. CLASSICAL LITERATURE: GRAFTING IN FACT AND METAPHOR

The process of grafting was well known and frequently practised in the ancient world.

(a) *Greek usage* Greek uses the verbs ἐμφυλλάζω, ἐγκεντρίζω and ἐμφυτεύω, with their cognate nouns, for the technical procedure in horticulture—but the second and third terms have alternative meanings, and sometimes the usage is purely metaphorical. Plato uses the third verb to describe the implanting of lungs into human bodies by those gods supposed to fashion them,² likewise for the implanting of souls into stars.³ Aristotle however is strictly botanical when he uses in that order the nouns from the second and first verbs,⁴ to inculcate first the necessity of grafting like kinds with like; then to explain the particular case of the cultivated olive (καλλιέλαιος) scion, and the stock of the wild olive or oleaster (ἀγριέλαιος,

¹ Cf. A. J. Brook, *The Living Plant*, (E.U.P., 1964), pp. 144 f.; A. Nelsons *Principles of Agricultural Botany* (Edinburgh, 1946), pp. 100 f., 480; *Enc. Brit.* art. "Plant Propagation"; etc. etc.

² *Tim.* 70C.

³ *Tim.* 42A.

⁴ *de Plant.* 820b, lines 34 f., 40.

elsewhere frequently called κότινος). Diodorus Siculus⁵ uses the third verb for the selfsame process. Theophrastus⁶ is of the opinion that he is more likely to see a good olive tree run wild than to see the process reversed—but he admits the potential of amelioration, and may be thinking primarily of trees left to their own devices. Elsewhere⁷ he uses the second verb—which Paul also uses in Rom. 11: 17ff.—in connection with the almond tree. There is an altogether fascinating passage in Marcus Aurelius,⁸ who carefully distinguishes the native branch of the tree (ὁ κλάδος ὁ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς συμβλασθήσας) from the one engrafted (ἐγκεντρισθείς). He describes the latter, in reference to the tree, as "growing with it, but not sharing its opinion", to translate the Greek somewhat baldly (ὁμοθαμνεῖν μὲν, μὴ ὁμοδογματεῖν δέ). This is a somewhat flamboyant metaphor in a sociological discourse concerning man and community, and is perhaps not meant to be taken too seriously as a pronouncement on arboriculture, but its use of technical terms is careful and precise.

These Greek passages range in date over a period of some six hundred years.

(b) *Latin usage.* The Latin verb for engraft is *insero*, a word which eventually gained very strong theological overtones. At the moment we are concerned only with classical usages, botanical and metaphorical. One specialized theme, deliberately omitted here, will be taken up later, in connection with Rom. 11.

Virgil refers many times to the fact and method of engrafting. The evicted farmer Meliboeus remarks to his happier and fortunately re-settled friend Tityrus, in bitter and ironic self-reference: *inserere nunc, Meliboee, pirus: pone ordine vites.*⁹ A longer passage¹⁰ states as a principle that trees left to grow on their own are liable to be luxuriant in foliage, yet poor in fruitage—nevertheless grafting and transplantation are capable of working wonders. Ovid¹¹ speaks of making an incision in the bark, applying a graft, and furnishing sap to the adopted bough. Cicero deals with the same theme—Columella and Palladius will be cited in a later section.

The word *insero* also exhibits a wide range of metaphorical usage, sometimes interesting in the light of later theological adaptation. This may be illustrated selectively from the poetry of Ovid.

⁵ V, 16.

⁶ *Hist. Plant.* II, iii, 1.

⁷ *Ib.* II, ii, 5.

⁸ *Med.* XI, 8.

⁹ *Eclog.* I, 73; cf. *ib.* IX, 50; *Georgics* II, 73, 302; etc. etc.

¹⁰ *Georg.* II, 47 ff.

¹¹ *Metamorph.* XIV, 631:

fissa modo cortice virgam
inserit; et succos alieno praebet alumno.

Sometimes the meaning is simply to mingle, as an individual with a group—*insere te turbae*.¹² Akin to this is the concept of meddling, interfering—*nec te civilibus insere bellis*.¹³ Still analogous is the idea of physical insertion—*potes, si forte iuvabit/Cancellis primos inseruisse pedes*¹⁴ (you can stick your toes through the grating if you like); likewise the passing of one object through another, as the human head through an aperture—*inseruitque caput*.¹⁵ The word may be used to describe the fitting of one object into another, a man's fingers for instance into the thong of his javelin;¹⁶ or in the sense of entwining or interweaving—¹⁷likewise of inserting coarse jests into the translation of an author.¹⁸ All these usages, literal and metaphorical, exhibit a certain family likeness—and the theological concept of engrafting into Christ might conceivably be regarded as an extension of analogy within the same general pattern.

II. GRAFTING IN THE RABBINIC LITERATURE

It is difficult to find specific references to grafting in the Old Testament, though the process must have been very familiar, particularly in connection with the prolific and important olive tree, and its special arboricultural needs. In the Talmud, references are quite numerous—a casual exemplification will be sufficient for present purposes.

The Hebrew Bible and the Mishnah both clearly distinguish the *zayith* or cultivated olive, *καλλιέλαιος* in Greek, from the *'ēs šemen* or oleaster, known both as *ἀγριέλαιος* and as *κότινος* in the tongue of the Hellenes.¹⁹ The mere fact that the Old Testament mentions both types demonstrates indirectly that the process of grafting was used. The Rabbis in their day were thoroughly well informed²⁰—the verb they commonly use is the hiph'il of *rkb*, an idiom dating from Mishnaic times. *Kilaim* i, 7 carefully prohibits the grafting of a scion with a stock of diverse kind, but this may embody a motive of ritual as well as a principle of arboriculture.

There is a Gemara passage at *Yebamot* 63^a, which possesses special interest in the light of Paul's engrafting allegory in Rom. 11: 16ff. The teacher quoted, R. Eleazar, lived in the second Christian century. He represents God as uttering to Abraham a prediction concerning Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess,

¹² *A.A.* I, 605; cf. *Met.* XIII, 33, 166.

¹³ *Met.* III, 117.

¹⁴ *Amores* III, ii, 64; of erotic kissing, *ib.* III, vii, 9.

¹⁵ *Met.* XIV, 737.

¹⁶ *Met.* XII, 321.

¹⁷ *Met.* VI, 56.

¹⁸ *Tristia* II, 444.

¹⁹ Both terms used Neh. 8: 15; also Mishnah *Tamid*, ii, 3.

²⁰ Cf. Strack-Billerbeck, *Komm. zum N.T. aus Talmud u. Midrasch*, Vol. III, p. 290 ff.; Levy, *Neuhebr. u. chald. Wörterbuch*, Vol. IV, p. 450 b, with refs.

mother of Rehoboam (cf. 1 Kings 14: 31, etc). This back-dating of prophecy is not unusual. The text runs: *štē b^erākḥōth ṯōbōth yeš li l^eḥabṛīkh b^ekha*. This may be translated literally "I have two blessings wherewith to bless you". Now the verb to bless and the verb to graft contain the selfsame consonants in a different order, and anyone familiar with Rabbinic methodology and style will perceive a punning reference. What R. Eleazar is really saying is that the pagans Ruth and Naamah are to be grafted on to the stock of Israel, and that Israel will gain thereby. The Pauline parallel will become obvious in its proper place.

III. SOME POSSIBLE NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES TO GRAFTING

There are several passages in the New Testament where a reference to grafting is possible or even probable, but where, owing to that above mentioned ambiguity in certain Greek words, or to some other factor, an alternative interpretation must be recognized. It will be convenient to dispose of these briefly, before turning to the main passage.

The ἐμφυτός λόγος of Jas. 1: 21 is familiarly and pungently translated by the A.V., not without impressive precedent, as "the engrafted word". On this interpretation, the human heart is the wild tree, the superior graft or scion is the Word of God, the fruit engendered thereby is that spiritual harvest of which Paul speaks (Gal. 5: 22 f.; Eph. 5: 9). This affords unimpeachable symbolism and is very probably the correct meaning. The adjective can however be legitimately rendered in other ways. Plato uses the same word for "innate" in *Eryxias* 366C, and his verbal usages for "implant" in *Timaeus* have been already cited. "Innate" is ruled out by the context in James, but "the implanted word" is a defensible translation and is indeed advocated by certain scholars. It is possible to make a good case, though not a conclusive one, for "the engrafted word".

A similar ambiguity prevails in the translation of Paul's σῦμφυτοι in Rom. 6: 5. This word, like its cognate above, may mean "innate", as in Philo's phrase concerning the memory, *μνήμη τῆς συμφύτῳ*.²¹ Philo uses the same term in reference to the character and personality of God,²² likewise to the evils inherent by nature in the whole realm of mankind.²³ But the word can mean several other things—Pindar uses it in the sense of inherited,²⁴ Euripides in that of related by blood,²⁵ Josephus for that which is instinctive in human beings by reason of race or personality,²⁶ Aristotle for

²¹ *De Opif. Mundi* 18; cf. 3 Macc. 3: 22.

²² *Vit. Mos.* I, 198.

²³ *Quis Rerum* 272.

²⁴ *Isth.* III, 14.

²⁵ *Andr.* 954.

conjoined,²⁷ and so forth. Paul is unquestionably describing the union of believers with Christ, and the balance of interpretative opinion is in favour of the concept of conjoint growth, rather than merely of contiguous planting out, as in the case of trees or vegetables in rows.²⁸ The metaphor of engrafting would suit the context to perfection, and once again the case for this interpretation is strong but not conclusive. The Greek adjective is not used elsewhere in the New Testament—the LXX uses it in botanical reference in Esth. 7: 7 f, and Zech. 11: 2. The cognate verb appears once in the New Testament, Lk. 8: 7, in clear reference to contiguous and independent growths, those respectively of the sown seed and the thorns. This affords no decisive argument against an implication of grafting in the Pauline passage, for Greek words change their shade of meaning from context to context.

In John 15: 1-8, Christ is the vine, immediate disciples and later followers are branches—but are they *natural* or *engrafted* branches? The answer to this question has considerable bearing on the baptismal symbolism. The adhesion of the ivy to the oak involves no conjoint growth, no final organic union, merely external propinquity. But the teaching of Christ is that He and His disciples form one plant, physically united in all its parts, the dependent branches drawing their sustenance from the root, and remaining fruitful only in living connection with that root. Botanically speaking, the symbolism is true and valid, whether the branches are natural or engrafted. The word here used for branch, κλήμα, has been associated etymologically with the verb κλάω, to break—some have connected this with the fact that the slips or scions are broken from another stock.²⁹ It is possible to argue also from the radical change involved in discipleship, the utter inconceivability, humanly speaking, of the external branch ever becoming incorporated into the plant save by grafting. Yet none of these considerations is entirely convincing. The passage refers to an existing relationship, not to its aetiology—it is never strictly imperative to push the symbolism of a parable beyond its *Sitz im Leben*. There is nothing to exclude the concept that disciples are branches engrafted into the vine, but there is no specific statement to that effect, and the burden of proof rests with those who would have it that way. It is perfectly legitimate to visualize an organic plant with natural branches.

²⁶ C. Ap. I, 42.

²⁷ *Topica* VI, 6 (145 b 3).

²⁸ Cf. LSJ p. 1689; AG p. 788; TWNT Vol. VIII, p. 786; and standard commentaries.

²⁹ For fuller etymological detail, cf. A. Walde and J. Pokorny, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der indogermanischen Sprachen* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1930), Vol. I, p. 437; E. Boisacq, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Heidelberg & Paris, 1916), p. 465; TWNT Vol. III, pp. 756 f.

It might be precarious to vouch for a specific and incontrovertible reference to arboricultural engrafting, or indeed any other kind, in any of the three passages so far discussed. Valid alternative interpretations cannot in honesty be denied. A more convincing case can be made out for Jas. 1: 21 and Rom. 6: 5 than for John 15: 1-8. It may be better to leave the matter in this fluid state until the final summing up, as these verses are rather vital ones for the baptismal concept, and everything may turn on the precise way in which they are interpreted.

IV. PAUL'S ALLEGORY IN ROM. 11: 16-24

In Rom. 11: 16-24, the reference to grafting is quite certain and indisputable. Obedient Israel is the cultivated olive of God's planting, the Gentiles are the wild olive, and a double strand of symbolism runs through the verses. Certain Gentiles, despite the wild strain of their origin, may be grafted by faith into the good tree of accepted Israel—this is the main allegory. Interwoven with this is the sub-allegory. Certain Israelites are as branches judicially broken off from the parent tree through unbelief, and are now under judgement—but they may on repentance be grafted in again. This signifies the ultimate conversion to Christ, Head of the true Israel, of Judaism, or of the proximate conversion of individual Jews. There is absolute continuity between the old covenant and the new. The theology is clear, the botany puzzling at first sight.

Commentators have suggested three main lines of interpretation, which more or less exhaust the possibilities. The first is that Paul, a townsman ignorant of country ways, simply made a botanical "howler". The second is that he deliberately used the language of paradox, in order to bring out a deeper meaning. The third is that he spoke of a practicable but less usual kind of grafting, at least in his main allegory. The first theory is quite untenable—Paul himself refutes it in verse 24, where he describes the grafting of the oleaster scion onto the cultivated stock as "contrary to nature". The second postulate of deliberate paradox is more plausible. It is not the correct explanation of the main allegory, but may very well explain the sub-allegory of verse 23. The third theory, advocated by Professor Moses Stuart in 1832, in his *Commentary on Romans*, later elaborated by Sir William Ramsay,³⁰ then overlooked by many subsequent expositors, is almost certainly correct.

If a cultivated olive stock was old, or leafy but unfruitful, an oleaster scion was sometimes, in deliberate reversal of the normal process, engrafted into it, thereby imparting a "kick"—somewhat

³⁰ *Pauline and Other Studies* (London, 1906), "The Olive Tree and the Wild Olive", pp. 219-250.

like a healthy commoner marrying into a royal but seriously in-bred family, bringing improved health to the next generation. The infant church was partly of Israelite descent, yet the influx of a virile Gentile strain, though not unattended by dangers, could bring immense blessing and re-invigoration. Paul, himself of the stock, addresses those of the scion, urging gratitude and humility upon them, reminding them that the covenant privileges they have been brought in to share are not irretrievably lost to Israel. Believing Israel may have gained by their presence, but let this engender no false pride—they themselves, once aliens (cf. Eph. 2: 11-13), have gained vastly more. The engrafting of Gentile Christians into the spiritual stock of Israel must however be understood in this special and rather technical way.

We may refer back in support of this to the Talmudic passage above cited, where the Gentiles Ruth and Naamah, from a Jewish point of view, exemplify the same reversal of rôles for scion and stock. It is highly probable that Paul had these very women in mind when he wrote. There is considerable further botanical evidence from Latin literature. Nothing could be more explicit than the statement of Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella, writer on agriculture, contemporary of Paul, in his chief work *de Re Rustica* V, ix, 16:- *solent etiam quamvis laetae arbores fructum non afferre. eas terebrari gallica terebra convenit, atque ita in foramen viridem taleam oleastri arcte immitti. sic velut inita arbor secundo semine fertilior exstat.* (Some minor critical variants in the text are here ignored, as the general sense is clear enough.) In the fourth century Rutilius Taurus Aemilianus Palladius wrote a treatise similar to that of Columella—indeed the very sentiments and terminology of the passage above cited are echoed in *lib. XI, cap. viii*, the same and additional remedies prescribed in IV, viii. The fourteenth book of Palladius, written by way of variety in creditable Ovidian elegiacs, is entirely concerned with the grafting and crossing of fruit trees. Three lines are of especial interest, because they reflect the grafting of the olive *in both directions*.³¹

Nobilitat partus bacca superba feros.
Fecundat sterilis pingues oleaster olivas.
Et quae non novit munera ferre docet.

Against all who would indict Paul of ignorance concerning the ways of the olive, Columella, Palladius and the Talmud may be confidently cited as witnesses for his defence. The bearing of his main allegory moreover is now fully explained.

The broken branches of the parent olive are apostate Israelites—the symbolism of verses 17, 19-21 is perfectly clear. It is only at verse

³¹ See Cabaret-Dupaty edn. (Paris, 1843)—verse passage, p. 428. Columella is in Loeb series.

23 that the sub-allegory raises perplexity, at least to those literally minded. It is certainly difficult at first sight to envisage the re-grafting of lopped-off branches, now presumably withered, and outside the pale of normal arboricultural expectations—one scans the treatises of Columella and Palladius in vain for any help in this connection. This quite certainly belongs to the realm of paradox or miracle. Yet the very paradox affords a logical extension of the main allegory. The verb ἐγκεντρίζω normally means to engraft, but need not bear this precise significance in every context—in reference to the lopped-off branches, it might be better rendered "re-incorporate", though this does not bring the concept within the normal physical probabilities. On Paul's covenantal presuppositions, a Jew turned Christian is not a renegade, but rather a homecomer—he is incorporated branch-wise into the tree, or, in dominical language, into the true vine, by a miracle of grace as great in its own realm as that of re-incorporating the lopped-off branches into the olive again.

This important allegory engaged the attention of John Calvin, and, earlier still, of certain of the Fathers. It will therefore receive some passing further mention in the next two sections.

V. "ENGRAFTED INTO CHRIST"—SOME PROTESTANT USAGES

The phrase "engrafted into Christ" often occurs in Protestant confessional statements, and is still frequently heard in rubrics of baptism, usually, though not exclusively, when infants are the subject of the claim. The reference is certainly not to infants in the Baptist Confession of 1688.³² This section will merely glance at a few representative Protestant documents, and then consider briefly the teaching of Calvin. The Latin verb *insero*, which is generally used or translated in the contexts which follow, means to sow, implant, engraft. The first of these renderings is obviously unsuitable. The second could sometimes be argued, but the third is almost always neater and more convincing. It may indeed be taken for granted in the remarks appended.

Definitive for the orthodox Anglican position is Article XXVII of the Thirty-Nine Articles (1562), which states that baptism is a sign of regeneration, and that those baptized are engrafted into the church (*Baptismus. . . etiam est signum regenerationis, per quod tanquam per instrumentum rectè baptismum suscipientes, ecclesiae inseruntur. . .*³³). The phraseology of the baptismal service is to the same effect. The child here is engrafted into the church, not into Christ, and the sacrament so far is merely a *sign* of regeneration,

³² See P. Schaff, *Creeds of Evangelical Protestant Churches* (London, 1877), p. 741.

³³ Latin in Schaff, p. 504; English in any Prayer Book.

not its actualized reality. A long further step towards the doctrine of baptismal regeneration is taken when the officiating clergyman is required by the Prayer Book to say after the sacrament—"This child is regenerate". Many who might accept Article XXVII would hotly deny the implications of the latter phrase.

Presbyterian teaching is officially stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), Chapter XXVII, Section 1. This endorses the main heads of Article XXVII, but makes the significant addition of the Covenant of Grace. The key phrases referring to the sacrament are: *signum. . . et sigillum cum foederis gratiae, tum suae in Christum insitionis, regenerationis. . .*³⁴ The proof texts adduced for the engrafting into Christ are Gal. 3: 27 and Rom. 6: 5. The first of these seems a rather weak choice, and the second, though relevant, is scarcely definite enough to bear the unaided weight of Scriptural demonstration. The rubric for the Sacrament of Baptism to Infants in the 1940 Book of Common Order states: "The Sacrament thus instituted is a sign and seal of our ingrafting into Christ; of forgiveness of sins by His blood, and regeneration by His Spirit". These phrases are regularly used in the Church of Scotland, and in certain sister Churches of Presbyterianism. The earlier Scots Confession of 1560 declares: "No, wee assuredlie beleeve that be Baptisme we ar ingrafted in Christ Jesus [*nos in Christum inseri*]." ³⁵

The Continental usage of the phrase is confirmed by the Gallican Confession of 1559, Article XXXV, which, speaking of baptism as a pledge of adoption, adds: "*parce que là nous sommes entés au corps de Christ*".³⁶ On the other hand, the conception of engrafting is absent from the First and Second Helvetic Confessions, the Waldensian Confession, and sundry comparable documents, most of which can be consulted at first hand in Schaff or Kidd. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Q.74, says in the parallel context that baptized persons are to be "incorporated" (*eingeleibt*) into the Christian church. Schaff mistranslates the participle as "ingrafted", but the German verb, more commonly *einverleiben*, does not bear this meaning—the French version correctly renders *incorporés*. Clearly the Continental Protestant formularies may speak of engrafting into Christ; or of incorporation; or may use neither term.

Calvin's classic exposition of baptism and paedobaptism, *Institutes* Book IV, chs.xv-xvi, published in 1536 and therefore slightly pre-dating any of the above rubrics, uses at least a dozen times the phrase "engrafted into Christ", or "engrafted into the church",

³⁴ Latin in Schaff, p. 662, several English edns. available.

³⁵ Art. XXI, Schaff, p. 468; G. D. Henderson (ed.), *Scots Confession* (Edinburgh, 1937), p. 84.

³⁶ Schaff, p. 379; B. J. Kidd, *Documents of Continental Reformation* (Oxford, 1911), p. 671.

generally employing some part of the familiar participle *insitus*. Not one of these passages is furnished with a direct Scriptural proof text for the apposition of baptism and engrafting—in view of Calvin's customary methodology, the omission is rather significant. In that particular connection, the Westminster Confession did not succeed much better.

The essential meaning of baptismal engrafting into Christ as Calvin envisages it comes out clearly in *Institutes* IV, xv, 5: *Et quemadmodum surculus substantiam alimentumque ducit a radice, cui insitus est: ita qui Baptismum ea qua debent fide accipiunt, vere efficaciam mortis Christi sentiunt, in mortificatione carnis suae: simul etiam resurrectionis, in vivificatione Spiritus*. There is here an unmistakable echo of the allegory of the vine and the branches in John 15. In IV, xv, Calvin speaks of baptism, in IV, xvi, specifically of paedobaptism. As most of his readers were in any case baptized in infancy, this may seem something of a distinction without a difference. It would not seriously misrepresent his meaning to substitute some such phrase as "the remembrance of the baptism received"—for the passage obviously presupposes some intelligent response. In his 23rd Sermon on Galatians, in particular reference to Gal. 3: 27 and Rom. 6: 5, Calvin says:³⁷ *Ceste similitude d'ente est aussi propre que celle du vestement. Car on prendra un surgeon d'un arbre: on coupe une branche en l'autre, ou le tronc, on met ceste petite verge qui estoit tirée d'ailleurs, on voit que cela s'unist et qu'il y a une substance commune, et que la racine iette sa vigueur à ce petit surgeon qui est prins d'un autre arbre*. Here one catches the overtones of the careful expository preacher, bringing exact botany to the service of exact theology. It would seem that Calvin read the imagery of engrafting into Rom. 6: 5, but not into Gal. 3: 27, which uses the entirely different figure of clothing. A misunderstanding of the Sermon just quoted may have led to the irrelevant inclusion of Gal. 3: 27 as a proof text for engrafting in the Westminster Confession. Another interesting passage, *Institutes* IV, xvi, 14, may be taken as a further comment on Rom. 11: 16-24. Calvin has just admitted the prior covenant claims of the Jews, and their prior status of holiness. But God is not tied to physical descent—through sin, Ishmael, Esau and others have lost the blessing. Nevertheless we are in fact the wild scion, Israel the original though now degenerate stock. The most interesting part of the comment follows: *nos vero, si cum illis componamur, velut postumos, aut etiam abortivos Abrahae filios: idque adoptione, non natura: quemadmodum si defractus a sua arbore surculus in alienum stipitem inseratur*. The two covenants form indeed one tree—Israel persists in root and

³⁷ *Corpus Reformatorum* Vol. LXXVIII, col. 563, near top.

stump, though many worthless branches have been lopped off, and many new ones engrafted onto the original stock as Gentile scions.

This section may be augmented by further material in H. Heppé, *Reformed Dogmatics*, E. T., pp. 611-626. Shortly after Calvin wrote his *Institutes*, the Roman Church, convened for the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent, on 13th January 1547, used the phrase *per Jesum Christum, cui inseritur*. In Reformed and Roman circles, the concept was clearly a commonplace.

VI. BEFORE CALVIN

In the theological literature between the close of the New Testament canon and Calvin's *Institutes*, there is voluminous symbolic reference to engrafting, the great bulk of it springing from direct exegesis of Rom. 11: 16-24. A few representative passages must suffice here. These are deliberately chosen from the period closest to the apostles—the earliest of them precedes Calvin by more than a millennium.

St. Augustine (354-430) has a lengthy passage in *de Correctione Donatistarum* 44, where the tree represents the church, the engrafted branches the clergy restored after fault, the incision the wounds suffered by the church. This is of course a specialized application, but the symbolism is instructive. Rom. 11 is directly expounded in the *Enarratio in Psalmum CXXXIV*, par. 7, where Augustine speaks of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, *unde effloruit populus Dei*. He then goes on to speak of Israel as the olive stock, with a clear side reference to John 15: 2, 6: *sed haec arbor olivae putata est, non amputata, et inde superbi rami fracti sunt: ipse est blasphemus et impius populus Judaeorum*. Although most of the Jews, from a new covenant viewpoint, apostatized, the apostles and others remained faithful—then the wild olive scion of Gentile Christendom became engrafted: *Manserunt tamen rami boni et utiles; nam inde Apostoli. Et cum ibi rami utiles relictis essent, per Dei misericordiam insertus est oleaster Gentium* (Rom. 11: 17-18). There is a good deal more in the same strain, and some further references to the *oleaster insertus*. In *de Natura et Gratia* LIII (61), Augustine uses the participle *insitus* in the sense of inherent or innate, a meaning which is found in other writers.³⁸

The general usage of Calvin is very closely paralleled in *de Peccatorum Meritis*. . . I, x, a treatise published in 412. There Augustine speaks of baptized infants as engrafted into the body of Christ. This seems however to be an isolated passage, and it reads like a spontaneous metaphor, rather than a doctrinal pronouncement.

³⁸ E.g. John Cassianus, *de Inst. Coenobiorum*, V, xi, 2.

It is however the most important bit of evidence gathered from the early period.

An older contemporary of St. Augustine, John Chrysostom (347-407), refers to Christians in relationship to their Leader as πεφυκότες μᾶλλον δὲ συμπεφυκότες—a phrase interesting chiefly for its verbal echo of Rom. 6:5.

Tertullian (c. 160-240), writing against the heretical Valentinians, Chap. XXVII, init., speaks of engrafting the (human) Jesus onto the (divine) Christ. This is a somewhat different matter, but it possesses interest as an early parallel usage of the verb *insero*. The passage runs: *Nunc reddo de Christo: in quem tanta licentia Jesum inserunt quidam, quanta spiritale semen animali cum inflatu infulciunt, fartilia nescio quae commenti, et hominum et deorum suorum.*

Irenaeus (c. 130-190), earlier than any of the writers so far mentioned, expounded Rom. 11: 17,³⁹ on lines of horticultural methodology and resultant fruitfulness, spiritually applied. Noteworthy are his repeated references to the engrafting of the Spirit; also to the engrafting of the Word.

There is no baptismal engrafting into Christ discernible in any of these passages, save only the brief allusion in *de Pecc. Mer.* I, x.

VII. CONCLUSION

According to the official documents of the Church of Scotland, in which the writer happens to serve, baptism, normally administered to infants, is a "sign and seal of ingrafting into Christ".⁴⁰ The careful differentiation of sign and thing signified may dissipate much acrimonious heat in sacramental controversy—in this respect, the wording is admirable. In the light, however, of the evidence hitherto vouchsafed, exception may be taken to the words "ingrafted into Christ", whether they be applied to infants or to adults, and that on two main grounds.

(a) *The phrase is without adequate Scriptural authority, or even early attestation.* Of the two proof texts adduced by the Westminster Confession, the first, Gal. 3: 27, is, as we have already stated, irrelevant. In the second, Rom. 6: 5, the reference to grafting as such cannot be called more than probable—the word could also imply conjoint or contiguous growth. Undoubtedly baptism (probably in the context that of adults, and by immersion) has just been mentioned in verse 4—but the conclusion that Paul means in verse 5 that persons are engrafted into Christ by baptism, or engrafted at all in any

³⁹ *Against Heresies*, V, x, 1-2; xi, 1.

⁴⁰ Westmr. Conf. XXVII, i; Larger Catechism, Q. 165; Shorter Catechism Q. 94; *Book of Common Order* (1940 edn.), Orders for Infant and Adult Baptism.

sense, involves several unproved assumptions. The reference to grafting in John 15: 1-8 is equally unproved—the immediate symbolism seems to be that of plant and branches, irrespective of the type of the latter. In James 1: 21, a use of the imagery of the graft is much more probable, but this deals with the Word and the believer, not with baptism. The one absolutely certain New Testament reference to the horticultural process is Rom. 11: 16-24, but here again the passage has nothing to do with baptism. The Westminster Confession, normally so profoundly biblical, did not in this instance offer a single proof text worthy of the name, for the simple reason that there is none to offer.

The evidence for the baptismal use of the phrase “engrafted into Christ” before Calvin so far discovered by the writer amounts to one brief reference in St. Augustine, probably intended in a pictorial rather than a doctrinal sense. It is obviously impossible to make any dogmatic statement here on anything short of a complete survey of the patristic field. The writer has however read enough to feel a reasonable assurance that if the idea had been widespread, or in any sense standard doctrine, he would have encountered further examples. Calvin cannot be credited or discredited with its invention. The occurrence of the phrase in *Inst.* IV, xv-xvi no doubt accounts for its popularity in Protestant circles. His total lack of proof texts, added to the weak attestation of the Westminster Confession, suggests strongly that the phrase is of man’s devising, and entirely lacking in Scriptural authority.

(b) *The symbolism of the phrase is all wrong.* Metaphors may possess a greater or a lesser appropriateness—this is a poor example. The scion is intended to be superior to, more fruitful than, the stock, otherwise there would be no point in engrafting it thereto. This is true in its own realm of the strong but wild oleaster strain inserted into the cultivated but decadent olive tree—this is to re-invigorate it in its leafy unfruitfulness. The idea of any (figurative) human scion “improving” the (figurative) stock which is Christ is simply ridiculous, if not bordering on the blasphemous. Calvin gave enlarged currency to a singularly unfortunate piece of symbolism. Moreover even if the phrase were more appropriate, it is too technical and recondite for the baptismal service, where the persons chiefly involved, including the officiating minister, may be innocent of the necessary horticultural erudition.

There are several acceptable alternative phrases of a parallel nature. The abovementioned variant of the Heidelberg Catechism, “incorporated into Christ”, is meaningful and appropriate, also free from any mixing or distorting of metaphors. It need not be taken to imply baptismal regeneration at all—the child is merely incorporated into the outward company of professing covenant

people, who differ enormously in their degree of piety and commitment. The child may apostatize later—nothing is predicted concerning his or her ultimate spiritual destiny. The phrase happily avoids difficulty and incongruity, and harmonizes beautifully with the plain meaning of John 15: 1-8.

It would be legitimate enough also, on the analogy of James 1: 21, to pray that the word might be engrafted into the child—not as an immediate result of the baptism, but as a future potential. Even the petition that Christ might be engrafted into the child is less objectionable than its converse. It is however a little *recherché*, and might convey little to many hearers.

The first suggested alternative, “incorporated into Christ”, is probably the simplest and best. Moreover it alters only one word of the liturgy. The present phrase, one feels, ought to disappear.

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