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The Evangelical Doctrine of Baptism

John Stott

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Let me introduce this subject with two preliminary statements:

(i) *Evangelical churchmen do not treat the sacrament of baptism lightly.* We do not forget that it was instituted by the risen Lord, nor that it was administered by the infant Church from the Day of Pentecost onwards (Acts 2:38, 41). Because of the precept of Christ and the practice of the apostles, it is the plain duty of every professing Christian to ask for baptism for himself and his children; and of the ordained minister to press upon his congregation this obligation and privilege.

(ii) It is the claim of the evangelical churchman that his doctrine of baptism is *the biblical doctrine*. At all events, he could not contemplate the existence of an *evangelical* doctrine of baptism as distinct from a *biblical* doctrine; since his primary concern is to understand the biblical doctrine and to conform his thinking and practice to it. If the so-called 'evangelical' doctrine of baptism can be shown to be unbiblical, the evangelical churchman is ready to abandon it in favour of any doctrine which can be shown to be more biblical.

My task then is first to seek to establish the biblical doctrine of baptism, and secondly, to show that the teaching of *The Book of Common Prayer* and the Articles can and should be interpreted in a way that is fully consistent with the biblical doctrine.

In this study I am *not* concerned with the proper *mode* of baptism (whether by affusion or immersion), nor with the proper *subjects* for baptism (whether adults and infants, or adults only); but rather with the meaning and the effect of the sacrament, that is, what it signifies and how it operates.

1 The Meaning of Baptism

The best way to introduce the meaning of baptism is to assert that both the sacraments of the gospel are essentially sacraments of *grace*, that is, sacraments of divine initiative, not of human activity. The clearest evidence of this in the case of baptism is that, in the New Testament, the candidate never baptizes himself, but always submits to being baptized by another. In his baptism, he is a passive recipient of something that is done to him. The Articles are quite clear about this. For instance, Articles twenty-five, twenty-seven and twenty-eight all begin with the statement that a sacrament is a sign not of what we do or are, but of what God has done, or does.

Now, granted that baptism is a sacrament of grace, what grace of God does it signify? The answer to this question is threefold.

a Baptism signifies union with Christ

God's chief grace to undeserving sinners is his plan to unite them to his Son. That this is the primary meaning of baptism is clear from the use of the preposition *eis* with the verb 'to baptize'. Just as the passage of the Red Sea was a baptism *eis* (into) Moses (1 Cor 10:2), so Christian baptism is baptism not into any man (1 Cor 1:13) but into Christ (Rom 6:3). It is true that sometimes baptism is said to be *en* or *e π i* the name of Christ (Acts 10:48; 2:38), but the commonest preposition is *eis*, 'into the Name of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 8:16; 19:5).

It is true again that, according to the Matthaean record of the institution of baptism, baptism was to be into the one Name of the three Persons of the Trinity (Matt 28:19), but this gives place in Acts and the Epistles to baptism into the Name of Jesus – probably because it is he who revealed the Father and sent the Holy Spirit, so that we cannot be related to him without being related to them also.

Further, baptism into the Name of Christ is baptism into Christ crucified and risen (Rom 6:3, 4). This union with Christ crucified and risen signifies participation in the virtue of his death and the power of his resurrection, the end (by death or burial) of the old life of sin, and the beginning (by resurrection or rebirth) of the new life of righteousness. This union with Christ in his death and resurrection, and the beginning of a new life, is the controlling idea in baptism, and the next two meanings simply amplify the benefit of sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ.

b Baptism signifies the forgiveness of sins

It is safe to say that all religious water rituals are purification ceremonies,

and Christian baptism is no exception. 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins', said Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). 'Rise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his Name', said Ananias to Paul (Acts 22:16). Similarly, it is almost certain that the phrases 'but you were washed' (1 Cor 6:11), and 'the washing of regeneration' (Titus 3:5) are references to baptism. The washing of our bodies with pure water (Heb 10:22) signifies the washing of the soul from the defilement of sin.

c Baptism signifies the gift of the Spirit

It is well known that John the Baptist (according to the four evangelists) contrasted his own water-baptism with the Spirit-baptism which the Messiah would administer: 'I baptize you with water... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (Matt 3:11). In view of this contrast, we would expect that when Jesus Christ began to baptize with the Spirit, all baptism with water would cease. The fact that water-baptism continued, by special command of the risen Christ, suggests that it now intended to signify the very Spirit-baptism with which it had previously been contrasted. The pouring of water by which we receive the baptism of water, dramatizes the outpouring of the Spirit by which we receive the baptism of the Spirit. Peter seems to have understood this on the Day of Pentecost, for, having interpreted the coming of the Spirit as the fulfilment of God's promise to pour out his Spirit on all flesh, he said: 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him' (Acts 2:38, 39). Here baptism is associated with both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit.

These two blessings were distinctive blessings of the New Covenant promised by God through the prophets. Baptism is therefore to be understood as an eschatological sacrament, inasmuch as it initiates into the New Covenant which belongs to the New Age. It does this by incorporating us *into Christ*, for Jesus Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant, and the bestower of its blessings.

To sum up, baptism signifies union with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, involving the end of the old life (through the forgiveness of sins) and the beginning of a new life (through the gift of the Spirit). Alternatively, baptism signifies union with Christ bringing both justification (a once for all cleansing and acceptance) and regeneration (a new birth by the Spirit unto a life of righteousness). To these three meanings of baptism we must add that incorporation into Christ includes incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.

With all this *The Book of Common Prayer* is fully consistent.

(i) *Union with Christ.* In the Catechism, the second answer declares that in baptism ‘I was made a member of Christ’. This is the controlling idea – incorporation into Christ. Such a union with Christ involves ‘a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness’ through becoming partakers of Christ’s death and resurrection.

(ii) *Forgiveness.* Familiar expressions in the Baptism Service are ‘the everlasting benediction of thy heavenly washing’, and ‘the mystical washing away of sin’.

(iii) *The Gift of the Spirit.* ‘Regeneration by thy Holy Spirit’ is the gift signified in baptism for which we give thanks.

These two blessings are brought together in Article twenty-seven: ‘the promises of the forgiveness of sins and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost are visibly signed and sealed’.

(iv) *Church membership.* The service speaks of a reception, grafting, or incorporation into Christ’s holy Church, or the congregation of Christ’s flock.

We turn now from the meaning of baptism to its effect; from what it signifies to how it operates.

2 The Effect of Baptism

We would all (I imagine) agree with the definition of a Sacrament given in the Catechism: ‘an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof’.

So far we have been seeking to define the inward and spiritual grace of which baptism is the outward and visible sign. We now go on to define the relation between the visible sacrament and the invisible grace, between the sign and the thing signified, and thus to define the effect or operation of the sacrament.

Three main views have been held. The first is the view that the sign always conveys the gift, automatically, by itself, *ex opere operato*, so that all those who receive the sign willy-nilly also receive the thing signified.

The second is the view (at the opposite extreme) that the sign effects

precisely nothing. It *signifies* the gift visibly, but in no sense or circumstance *conveys* it. It is a bare token or symbol, and that is all. Neither of these is the evangelical doctrine of baptism.

The third and evangelical view is that the sign not only signifies the gift, but seals or pledges it, and pledges it in such a way as to convey not indeed the gift itself, but a title to the gift – the baptized person receiving the gift (thus pledged to him) *by faith*, which may be before, during or after the administration of the sacrament.

The best way to proceed will be to examine these three views consecutively – the *ex opere operato* view, the bare token view, and the covenant sign view.

(i) *The ex opere operato view.* This is the view that the sign always, inevitably and unconditionally conveys the thing signified, through the power of the sacrament itself, or of God's promise attached to the sacrament. The consequence of this view is to suppose that all baptized persons (especially infants) are regenerate.

Apart from the *pragmatic* argument that all baptized persons do not *seem* to be regenerate, for they do not supply evidence of their regeneration in a life of godliness and holiness, there are two strong *biblical arguments* against this view. They concern the nature of the Church, and the way of salvation.

a) *The nature of the Church.* However unfashionable it may be today, the Bible does envisage a difference between the visible and the invisible Church. We do not mean by this that a person can belong to the invisible Church without responsible membership of a local, visible manifestation of it, but rather that it is possible to belong to a visible church without belonging to the true Church, the Body of Christ, which is invisible in the sense that its members are known to God alone (2 Tim 2:19).

As St Augustine wrote: 'Many of those within are without; and some of those without are within'. Again, Bishop John Pearson, in his famous *An Exposition of the Creed* wrote: 'I conclude therefore, as the ancient Catholicks did against the Donatists, that within the Church, in the public profession and external communion thereof, are contained persons truly good and sanctified, and hereafter saved, and together with them other persons void of all saving grace, and hereafter to be damned.'

Thus, St John writes of certain heretics that 'they went out from us, but they were not of us...' (1 John 2:19). They were members (doubtless

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baptized members), but though 'with us' outwardly and visibly, they were not 'of us', not genuine, but spurious.

Similarly, Paul writes at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 10 of the Old Testament Church in the wilderness 'that our fathers were all... baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. ...Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness.' The apostle deliberately describes them as baptized communicants, who nevertheless were overthrown in the wilderness; which shows that baptized communicant membership of the church is no guarantee of salvation.

The significance of this distinction between the visible and the invisible Church is that the visible Church consists of the baptized, while the invisible Church consists of the regenerate. Since the two companies are not identical, not all the baptized are regenerate.

Simon Magus is an example. He professed faith, was baptized, and no doubt passed as a church member, but Peter described him as being yet 'in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity', with his 'heart not right in the sight of God' (Acts 8:13-24).

If Paul could write 'he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal', we could say the same of the Christian and baptism (Rom 2:28, 29).

b) *The way of salvation.* Salvation is variously described in the New Testament, but we have already seen that two of its constituent parts are Justification and Regeneration. One is a legal, the other a biological metaphor, but they are two sides of the same coin. It is impossible to be regenerate without being justified.

Over and over again the New Testament writers declare that we are justified by faith, or (more accurately) by grace through faith. It is impossible to reconcile this doctrine with the view that justification is by grace through baptism, with or without faith. If faith is necessary for salvation, then the unbelieving candidate is not saved through baptism. What Paul writes in Romans 6 about being baptized into Christ must not be interpreted in such a way that it contradicts his teaching in chapters three to five of the same epistle, that we are justified by faith.

Various attempts have been made to reconcile the doctrines of baptismal regeneration and justification by faith – mainly by diluting the meaning either of the regeneration of which baptism is the sacrament, or of the faith

through which sinners are justified.

Thus, some of the schoolmen taught that if the necessary qualification for baptism in adults was repentance and faith, its equivalent in infants was simply their infantine condition; that is, the full-orbed saving faith of the New Testament was not necessary in their case.

Luther (followed by other Reformers) attempted a reconciliation by asserting that God by his Word actually implants faith in infants to qualify them for baptism.

Others have tried to retain both baptismal regeneration and justification by faith by diluting the content not of faith but of regeneration. They debase it from the inward new birth unto righteousness (which it always means in the New Testament) into an admission to the external privileges of the Covenant; or into an implanted capacity or faculty which does not necessarily issue in good works, ie a goodness which is potential rather than actual; or into merely the negative remission of original sin (as Augustine, and some Calvinists). But there is no biblical warrant for this eviscerated idea of regeneration, which in Scripture always means a supernatural birth effected by the Holy Spirit and manifest in holy living.

These attempts to reconcile baptismal regeneration and justification by faith are unsuccessful because we have no right to give to either regeneration or faith any meaning less than their full biblical meaning. Therefore if a sinner is justified by God through faith alone, he is not regenerate through baptism without faith.

Turning to the Articles, we find their teaching consistent with the rejection of the *ex opere operato* view of baptism, namely their insistence that the efficacy of the sacraments is dependent on worthy reception. At the end of Article twenty-five there is the general statement that 'in such only as worthily receive the same they have a wholesome effect or operation...' Similarly, in Article twenty-seven, it is 'they that receive baptism *rightly*' who are grafted into the Church, and to whom God's promises are visibly signed and sealed.

If we ask what is meant by a 'right' or 'worthy' reception, Article twenty-eight explains 'insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily *and with faith* receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ...' A right and worthy reception of the sacraments is a *believing* reception; without faith the sacraments have no wholesome operation or effect; rather the reverse.

The Catechism similarly lays emphasis on the necessary conditions

required of candidates for baptism, and other statements in the Catechism which may be thought to support the *ex opere operato* view must be understood in the light of these conditions.

The benefits of baptism are not bestowed unconditionally, they are appropriated by faith. Unworthy reception brings not blessing but judgment.

To quote the Gorham Judgment: 'That baptism is a sacrament generally necessary to salvation, but that the grace of regeneration does not so necessarily accompany the act of baptism that regeneration invariably takes place in baptism; that the grace may be granted before, in, or after baptism; that baptism is an effectual sign of grace by which God works invisibly in us, but only in such as worthily receive it – in them alone it has a wholesome effect; and that without reference to the qualification of the recipient it is not in itself an effectual sign of grace; that infants baptized and dying before actual sin are undoubtedly saved, but that in no case is baptism unconditional.'

(ii) *The Bare Token view.* I think I can dismiss this view in a sentence or two. If baptism were a mere sign, which in no sense or circumstance whatever conveyed anything to its recipients, the apostles could never have used expressions which ascribe some effect to baptism like 'repent and be baptized for the remission of sins' (Acts 2:38), or 'as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ' (Gal 3:27), or 'baptism now saves you' (1 Peter 3:21). In what sense these expressions should be interpreted we will discuss later; for the moment it is enough that they demolish the notion that baptism's function is merely to *signify* grace and not in any sense to *convey* it.

(iii) *The Covenant Sign view.* The evangelical (or 'reformed') view of baptism is founded upon God's covenant of grace, and regards baptism as essentially the God-appointed sign which *seals* the blessings of the covenant to the individual Christian believer.

Pierre Marcel writes that 'the doctrine of the Covenant is the germ, the root, the pith of all revelation, and consequently of all theology; it is the clue to the whole history of redemption' (*The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, p 72).

Hooker wrote that 'baptism implieth a covenant or league between God and man' (*Ecclesiastical Polity*, V, lxiv, 4).

I cannot stop to argue that the so-called New Covenant (mediated by Jesus and ratified by his blood) was *new* only in relation to the Covenant of Sinai. In itself it was not New (as Paul argues in Galatians), but the

fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham, so that those who are Christ's are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise (Gal 3:29).

To quote Calvin, 'the covenant is the same, the reason for confirming it is the same. Only the mode of confirming is different; for to them it was confirmed by circumcision, which among us is succeeded by baptism.'¹ That is, baptism has replaced circumcision as the Covenant sign.

If this is so, and the place held by circumcision in the covenant in Abraham's day is occupied by baptism in the covenant in our day, what is this? The place and function of circumcision is defined in Romans 4:11, where Abraham is said to have 'received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised'. Here it is said that Abraham received two gifts. First, he received justification, acceptance, by faith, while still uncircumcised. Secondly, he received circumcision as a sign and seal of this righteousness. The righteousness was given him in Genesis 15; its seal in Genesis 17. Now, what circumcision was to Abraham, Isaac and his descendants, baptism is to us. It is not only the sign of covenant membership, but a seal or pledge of covenant blessings. Baptism does not convey these blessings to us, but conveys to us a right or title to them, so that if and when we truly believe, we inherit the blessings to which baptism has entitled us.

But the receiving of the sign and seal, and the receiving of the blessings signified, are not necessarily (or even normally) simultaneous. To *truly believing adults* the covenant sign of baptism (like circumcision to Abraham when he was ninety-nine years old) signifies and seals a grace which has already been received by faith. To *the infant seed* of believing parents, the covenant sign of baptism (like circumcision to Isaac at the age of eight days) is administered because they are born into the covenant and are thereby 'holy' in status (1 Cor 7:14), but it signifies and seals to them graces which they still need to receive later by faith.

This is the case also with *adults* who are baptized *in unbelief* and later believe. We do not rebaptize them. Their baptism conveyed to them a title to the blessings of the New Covenant; they have now claimed their inheritance by faith. This point was established in the early centuries of the Church in the case of the *fictus*, the person baptized in a state of unworthiness. He was not rebaptized, because a distinction was drawn between the title or *character* of baptism, which was always conferred on the recipient, and the *grace* of baptism which depended on 'worthiness', ie repentance and faith.

¹ Calvin *Institutes* IV xvi 6

This accepted view regarding unqualified adults the Reformers applied from adults to infants. Again, the baptism of infants 'has a suspended grace accompanying it, which comes into operation upon their growing up and becoming qualified for it'.²

'Baptism, correctly administered, has thus one effect which is universal and invariable, whatever be the state or condition of the baptized person at the time, viz a title or pledge for the grace of the sacrament upon worthiness.'³

'The grace of the sacrament is not tied to the time of its administration.'⁴

It is in this sense that the Articles refer to baptism as not only a sign of grace but a means of grace; and not only a sign, but an effectual sign of grace (Article 25), 'by the which God doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our faith in him'. Since a sacrament is a visible word, and it is the function of God's word to arouse faith (Rom 10:17), the sacraments stimulate our faith to lay hold of the blessings which they signify and to which they entitle us.

So the sacrament conveys the grace it signifies, not by a mechanical process but by conferring on us a title to it and by arousing within us the faith to embrace it.

'As baptism administered to those of years is not effectual unless they believe, so we can make no comfortable use of our baptism administered in our infancy until we believe... All the promises of grace were in my baptism estated upon me, and sealed up unto me, on God's part; but then I come to have the profit and benefit of them when I come to understand what grant God, in baptism, hath sealed unto me, and actually to lay hold on it by faith.' So wrote Archbishop Ussher in his book *Body of Divinity*.

Similarly Jerome: 'They that receive not baptism with perfect faith, receive the water, but the Holy Ghost they receive not'.

But in neither sacrament is the gift tied to the time of the sacrament's administration. It is possible to receive the sign before the gift, as is usual in the case of infants, or to receive the sign after the gift, as is usual in the case of adults.

The question may be asked why, if baptism does not by itself confer the

2 J B Mozley *A Review of the Baptismal Controversy* (1862) pp 48-9

3 Mozley pp 40-1

4 Mozley p 49

graces it signifies (but rather a title to them), the Bible and Prayer Book sometimes speak as if they did. I have already mentioned such phrases as 'baptized into Christ' (Rom 6:3), 'as many as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ' (Gal 3:27), 'baptism saves us' (1 Peter 3:21), and 'this child is regenerate' (*Book of Common Prayer*).

The answer is really quite simple. It is that neither the Bible nor the Prayer Book envisages the baptism of an unbeliever; they assume that the recipient is a true believer. And since 'baptism and faith are but the outside and the inside of the same thing' (James Denney), the blessings of the New Covenant are ascribed to baptism which really belong to faith (Gal 3:26, 28). Jesus had said 'he that believes and is baptized shall be saved', implying that faith would precede baptism. So a profession of faith after hearing the gospel always preceded baptism in Acts. For instance, 'they that received the word were baptized' (2:41), 'they believed Philip preaching... and were baptized' (8:12), 'Lydia gave heed to what was said by Paul. And when she was baptized...' (16:14, 15), 'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved...' (16:31-3).

It is the same in the Prayer Book service. There is no baptism in the Church of England except the baptism of a professing believer, adult or infant. The *adult* candidate's declaration of repentance, faith and surrender is followed by baptism and the declaration of regeneration. The same is true of an *infant* in the 1662 service, where it is not the godparents who speak for the child so much as the child who is represented as speaking through his sponsors. The child declares his or her repentance, faith and surrender, and desire for baptism. The child is then baptized and declared regenerate. So he is regenerate, in the same sense as he is a repentant believer in Jesus Christ, namely in the language of anticipatory faith or of sacraments.

It is in this sense too that we must understand the Catechism statement 'I was made a child of God'. It is sacramental language. I was 'made' a child of God in baptism, because baptism gave me a title to this privilege, not because baptism conferred this status on me irrespective of whether I believed or not.

J B Mozley writes of 'a class of statements which are literal in form, but hypothetical in meaning'. Again, he says it is 'a literal statement intended to be understood hypothetically' (p 241).

Conclusion

Does it matter whether we teach that the sign and the gift, the sacrament and the grace, are always received simultaneously, or generally separately?

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Yes, it does matter. People need to be warned, for the good of their soul, that the reception of the sign, although it entitles them to the gift, does not confer the gift on them. They need to be taught the indispensable necessity of personal repentance and faith if they are to receive the thing signified. The importance of this may be seen in three spheres.

a The doctrine of assurance. There is a great danger in post-Christian society of people trusting in baptism itself for salvation, and thus having a false sense of security. It is true that baptism is intended to bring us assurance, but how? Not by the mere fact of its administration, but because as a visible word of God it signifies his promises and evokes our faith in them. True assurance depends on a worthy reception of baptism.

b The discipline of baptism. We are familiar with Bonhoeffer's castigation of the modern tendency to cheapen grace.

The price we are having to pay today in the shape of the collapse of organized religion is only the inevitable consequence of our policy of making grace available at all too low a cost. We gave away the word and sacraments wholesale; we baptized, confirmed and absolved a whole nation without asking awkward questions, or insisting on strict conditions. Our humanitarian sentiment made us give that which was holy to the scornful and unbelieving. We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus was hardly ever heard. Where were those truths which impelled the early Church to institute the catechumenate, which enabled a strict watch to be kept over the frontier between the Church and the world, and afforded adequate protection for costly grace?... To baptize infants without bringing them up in the life of the Church is not only an abuse of the sacrament, it betokens a disgusting frivolity in dealing with the souls of the children themselves. For baptism can never be repeated.⁵

And to quote from a sermon preached by the Rev H Hensley Henson⁶ before the University of Oxford in 1896: 'The modern practice of unconditioned, indiscriminate baptizing is indecent in itself, discreditable to the Church and highly injurious to religion.'

Not that Scripture authorizes us to stand in judgment on the reality of people's profession. Professor John Murray's distinction is that God reserves the right to admit people to the *invisible* Church, on their *exercise* of faith. He delegates to ministers the responsibility to admit to the *visible* church, on their *profession* of faith.

5 D Bonhoeffer *The Cost of Discipleship* (1957) pp 47, 179

6 Bishop of Durham 1920-39.

Some would say that it must be a *credible* profession, but then we begin to make arbitrary rules by which to assess credibility. Our task is to be faithful in teaching the *significance* of baptism and the *conditions* of its efficacy; and then not to baptize any but those who profess to be penitent believers, and their children.

c The practice of evangelism. The baptized may still need to be evangelized, that is, exhorted to repentance, faith and surrender, so as to enter into the blessings pledged to them in baptism. But if all the baptized are regenerate, we cannot evangelize them. We can treat them as backsliders and urge them to return, but we cannot summon them to come to Christ if they are already in Christ by baptism. Thus the *ex opere operato* view cuts the nerve of evangelism, and we are back where Whitefield found himself on his return from Georgia in 1738. He was eyed with suspicion by the bulk of the clergy as a fanatic. According to Bishop Ryle, 'They were especially scandalized by his preaching the doctrine of regeneration or the new birth, as a thing which many baptized persons greatly needed'!

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