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ESSAY XII.

On Regeneration.

WHEN the apostle had reminded the Ephesians, that “they were saved *by grace, through faith;*” he added, “and that not of yourselves; *it is the gift of God.* Not of Works, lest any man should boast.”* Hence we learn, that *faith* itself, the sole recipient of all the blessings of salvation, is the effect of a divine influence upon the soul; that all real good works are the effect of a new creation; and that it is the Lord’s express design, by these means effectually to exclude *boasting*, “that no flesh should glory in his presence.” This gracious operation of a divine power in changing the heart is represented in Scripture under several metaphors, of which *Regeneration*, (or being “born again,” “born of God,” and “born of the Spirit,”) is the most frequent and remarkable; and the present Essay will be appropriated to the discussion of this interesting subject.

* Eph. ii. 8—10.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a Scribe, and a member of the Jewish sanhedrim, came to our Lord by night: for, notwithstanding his conviction that Jesus was a Teacher sent from God, he was probably afraid or ashamed of being known to consult him, concerning the doctrine that he came to inculcate. The state of his mind accorded to the darkness which prevailed at the season of this interview; and he seems to have expected some instructions coincident with the traditions of the Pharisees, and their ideas of religion and of the Messiah's kingdom, which they supposed to consist in external forms and advantages. But our Lord, with a two-fold most solemn asseveration, used by none besides himself, and by him only on the most important occasions, abruptly assured him, that "Except a man were born again, he could not *see* the kingdom of God;" or *discern* its real nature and excellency. And, when Nicodemus expressed his astonishment at this assertion, in language aptly illustrating the apostle's meaning, where he says "The things of the spirit of God are foolishness to the natural man;"* our Lord answered with the same solemnity, that "Except a man were born of water and of the Spirit, he could not *enter into* the kingdom of God." Water had been used in divers ways, as an external emblem of internal purification; and the use of it was to be continued, in the ordinance of baptism, under the new dispensation: it was therefore proper to mention it as the outward sign of that change, which could only be effected by the power

* 1 Cor. ii. 14.

of the Holy Spirit.—Our Lord next showed the indispensable necessity of this new birth. “That which “is born of the flesh,” or derived by natural generation from fallen Adam, “is flesh,” or carnal in its propensities and inclinations: “and that which is born “of the Spirit is spirit,” or spiritual, holy, and heavenly, like its divine author.* He then told Nicodemus not to wonder at his declaration, that even Jews, Pharisees, and Scribes, “must be born again;” and he illustrated the subject by the wind, the precise *cause* of which, in all its variations, cannot easily be ascertained, nor its emotions and energy altered or abated; but which is very manifest in its powerful *effects*. And when Nicodemus still enquired “how “these things could be?” he in return expressed his surprise, that a teacher of Israel should be at a loss upon such a subject, and concluded by representing this part of his instructions as “earthly things,” when compared with the deep mysteries of his Person and Redemption, which he afterwards declared to him as “heavenly things.” For this change takes place on earth continually, even as often as sinners are turned from their evil ways, and become truly pious and holy persons: it may very aptly be illustrated by the most common concerns of life: it lies as level to our capacities, (if our minds were unprejudiced,) as almost any of the works of God with which we are surrounded: and the necessity of it may be proved by as cogent and conclusive arguments, as any thing of a worldly nature can be.—The question then is ‘What

* Rom. viii. 1—16.

‘ did our Lord mean by being *born again*, or *born of the Spirit?*’ To this I shall endeavour to give a plain and particular answer; subjoining a compendious review of the arguments, by which the necessity of regeneration hath been often proved; and concluding with some observations and inferences of a practical nature and tendency.

It hardly need be said, that the ordinance of baptism, however administered, is not “ regeneration by the Spirit.” They who resolve all that is said in Scripture on this head, into the observance of an external rite, must suppose, that none can enter Christ’s church on earth, or his kingdom in heaven, or even understand the real nature of them, unless they have been baptized with water, whatever be their character or the cause of the omission: nay they must likewise consider all baptized persons as truly illuminated, real christians, and heirs of heaven; for all who are born of God are his children and heirs. No doubt, baptism is (as circumcision was,) the *outward sign* of regeneration: but they, who are satisfied with the outward sign without the inward and spiritual grace, should return to school or to the nursery, and learn over again a part of their catechism, which they have no doubt forgotten; for it expressly states the inward and spiritual grace of baptism to be ‘ a death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness.’ Indeed the *fathers*, as they are called, (that is, the teachers of the Christian church, during some ages after the death of the apostles,) soon began to speak on this subject in unscriptural language: and our pious reformers, from an undue regard to them and to the circumstances of the

times, have retained a few expressions in the liturgy, which not only are inconsistent with their other doctrine; but also tend to perplex men's minds, and mislead their judgment on this important subject. It is obvious, however, from the words above cited and many other passages, that they never supposed the mere outward administration of baptism to be *regeneration*, in the strict sense of the word: nor can any man, without the most palpable absurdity, overlook the difference between the baptism that is "outward in the flesh," and "that of the heart, by the Spirit, whose praise is not of men but of God."*

Nor does regeneration merely signify a *reformation* of the outward conduct, or a ceasing from vice to practice virtue. Some persons have been so preserved from immoralities, that they do not want such an outward reformation, as is meant by those who favour this interpretation: yet they as well as others must be *born again*, or they can neither *see*, nor "enter into, the kingdom of God." Indeed, if the strong language and multiplied figures of the Scripture on the subject, mean nothing more than this; we must be constrained to allow, that the plainest matter in the world is so covered and obscured by mysterious language, as to render it extremely perplexing, and even unintelligible, to ordinary readers. How should they suppose according to the dictates of unlettered common sense, that such solemnity of introduction, emphasis of expression, and accumulation of metaphor, only mean, that a wicked man cannot be an heir of

* Rom. ii. 29. 1 Pet. iii. 21.

heaven, unless he amend his life? for who except avowed infidels or profligates, ever supposed that he could?

Neither is regeneration merely a *conversion* from one *creed* or *sect* to another: or even from atheism, Judaism, infidelity, or idolatry, to christianity. If “without *holiness* no man shall see the Lord,” then might we pass through changes of this kind, till we had tried all the modes of religion that have been known on earth; and yet at last be excluded as unregenerate and unclean from the kingdom of heaven.— On the other hand it does not consist in any kind of *impressions*, or *new revelations*; any succession of terrors or consolations; or any whisper, as it were, from God to the heart concerning his secret love, choice, or purpose to save us. Many such experiences have been related by those, who still evidently continued the slaves of sin; and “Satan transformed into an “angel of light,” has done immense mischief in this way: for, the confidence of these persons seems in general to be rather the effect of delusion and self-flattery, than an express design of imposing on other men. Some of these things indeed, (as terror, and consolation succeeding it,) commonly accompany a saving change; others, which are evidently enthusiastic, *may* nevertheless be found in the case of some who are really born of God: yet they are neither regeneration itself, nor any effect or evidence of it; but rather a disgraceful and injurious appendage to it, arising from human infirmity and the devices of Satan.

Allowing that the expressions, *born of God*, or *born*

again, are figurative; we must yet contend, that the metaphor is significant and proper.—A new born infant is a *new creature*, brought into the world by almighty power, endued with life, and with certain propensities and capacities. It is a human being, and has all things pertaining to human nature in a weak and incipient state: but by proper care and sustenance, it may grow up to maturity, and the perfection of manhood. In like manner the divine power produces in the mind of a sinner such a change as renders him a *new creature*, with new propensities and capacities: but these are only in a feeble and incipient state, and exposed to much opposition and danger on every side. Provision is made for this “new born babe,” in “the sincere milk of the word,” and in the salvation of Christ; by means of which, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, he grows up gradually to maturity.—No new *faculties* are communicated in this change, (as some pious persons have inaccurately stated, by which the subject has been rendered less intelligible and an opening given to many plausible objections:) but a new and heavenly *direction* is given to all those faculties which the Creator had bestowed, but which sin had perverted. The capacity of understanding, believing, loving, and rejoicing, previously belonged to the man’s nature: but the capacity of understanding the real glory and excellency of heavenly things, of believing the humbling truths of revelation in an efficacious manner, of loving the holy beauty of the divine character and image, and of rejoicing in God’s favour and service, belong to him as “born of the Spirit.”

Regeneration may then be defined—‘ A change wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the understanding, will, and affections of a sinner, which is the commencement of a *new kind of life*, and which gives another direction to his judgment, desires, pursuits, and conduct.’—The mind seems to be first, by a divine energy, prepared, (as the eyes of a blind man, which have the film or obstruction removed from them,) to perceive the *real nature* and *comparative value* of objects around it, and of those proposed by the gospel; concerning which, through the ignorance and depravity of fallen nature, the corrupt maxims of the world, and the artifices of Satan, it had formed a very erroneous judgment. Thus the eyes of the understanding are opened; and the light of divine truth shines into the heart, and gradually rectifies its errors and misapprehensions.* The will and affections also are influenced in the same manner: and the man feels a disposition to fear, hate, and shun what he before delighted in, or regarded as harmless; and to love, choose, desire, and rejoice in, those things that he before despised or hated. He seems to be introduced, as it were, into a new world, in which he views himself and all things around him, through a *new medium*. He wonders, that he had not before seen them in the same light: and frequently he is so amazed at the insensibility or delusions of mankind, that he imputes them to mere ignorance, and imagines that proper instructions would bring them all over to his sentiments; nor is he easily convinced of his mistake.

* Acts xvi. 14. xxvi. 18. Eph. i. 18.

His affections now receive in all respects a new direction; so that he possesses, as it were, a *whole system* of sensations, of which he formerly had no conception: his fears and hopes, attachments and aversions, joys and sorrows, successes and disappointments principally relate to those things which before gave him scarcely any concern; but which now appear to him of such vast importance, that the objects which once engrossed his mind comparatively dwindle into insignificancy, even where he does not see them to be criminal, polluting, or ensnaring. Hence it often happens that the new convert becomes neglectful of such matters, considering them as too trifling to deserve his attention; and can only be retained in his station, or engaged to be diligent in worldly business, by a sense of duty, and a regard to the honour of the gospel.

It is not to be expected, that we should be capable of explaining the *manner* in which the Holy Spirit effects this internal change: as we cannot understand how God creates and forms the body in the womb, or how he breathes into it the breath of life. It is of more importance for us to point out with precision those *peculiar effects*, by which regeneration is distinguished from all the counterfeits of it. Among these *peculiar effects* we may first mention, an habitual and prevailing regard to the authority, displeasure, favour, and glory of God, in the general tenour of our conduct, even when most remote from human observation; an abiding sense of his all-seeing eye, his constant presence, and his all-directing and sustaining providence; and an unwavering persuasion, of his

right to our worship, love, and service, and of our obligations and accountableness to him. Connected with this, regeneration always produces a deep and efficacious apprehension of the reality, nearness, and importance of eternal things, and our infinite concern in them; so that compared with them, all temporal things appear as nothing. This is accompanied with a new disposition to revere, examine, believe, and submit to the decisions of, the holy Scriptures; yea, a desire after them, and delight in them, as the proper nourishment of the soul.*

If the person, who has recently experienced this saving change, was previously destitute of religious knowledge, he will find, that an increasing acquaintance with the holiness of God and his obligations to him; with the reasonableness, spirituality, and sanction of the divine law; and with his own past and present conduct, dispositions, motives, and affections, as compared with this perfect standard, lead him to a deeper conviction of his sinfulness, exposure to deserved wrath, inability to justify or save himself, and his need of repentance, forgiveness, and the influences of divine grace: and if he before had some measure of doctrinal knowledge, the truth, that had lain dormant, will now become a living principle of activity. Thus self-confidence and every towering imagination will be cast down; all his supposed righteousness will be found to have sprung from corrupt motives, and to have been both defective and defiled; and, whatever his previous character may have been, "God be

* 1 Pet. ii. 2.

“merciful to me a sinner!” will be the genuine language of his heart. So that, deep humiliation and self-abasement, a broken and contrite spirit, godly sorrow, repentance, and conversion to God, are the never failing effects of regeneration.

Thus the divine Saviour, and his merits, atonement, and mediation, become glorious in the eyes, and precious to the heart, of the regenerated sinner: he now perceives in some degree the wisdom, and feels the power, of the doctrine of the cross, which before he deemed “foolishness:” he “counts all but “loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ,” and gladly receives him, as his Prophet, Priest, and King.* He learns to love him whom he once slighted and despised: he begins to admire the excellency of his character, to value his favour, and to desire communion with him above all things; to be thankful for his unspeakable love and inestimable benefits; to be zealous for his honour, and devoted to his cause; to “love the brethren” for his sake, and his neighbours and enemies after his example;† and to exercise self-denial, and to endure loss, hardship, or suffering in his service. By degrees he is even enabled to say with the apostle, “God forbid that I should glory save in “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the “world is crucified to me, and I unto the world!”‡ “For whatsoever is born of God, overcometh the “world; and this is the victory that overcometh the “world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh

* John i. 12, 13. 1 John v. 1.

† 1 John iii. 14. iv. 21.

‡ Gal. vi. 14.

“ the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the
“ Son of God?”*

The apostle John mentions in a detached manner several other peculiar effects of regeneration.—“ Who-
“ soever is born of God doth not commit sin: for his
“ seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because
“ he is born of God.—In this the children of God
“ are manifest and the children of the devil: whoso-
“ ever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither
“ he that loveth not his brother.”† “ Ye know that
“ every one that doeth righteousness is born of him.”
“ We know that we have passed from death unto life,
“ because we love the brethren;” “ for love is of God,
“ and every one that loveth is born of God, and
“ knoweth God.” “ We know that whosoever is
“ born of God sinneth not.”‡ Thus all the regenerate
may adopt the apostle’s words, “ With open face, be-
“ holding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we are
“ changed into the same image, from glory to glory,
“ even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”§ So that, re-
pentance, faith in Christ, love of God and man, love
of the brethren in an especial manner, deliverance from
the dominion of sin and Satan, victory over the world,
abhorrence of evil, patience, meekness, spirituality,
temperance, justice, truth, purity, and all the fruits of
the Spirit, are the genuine effects of that change,
without which “ no man can see,” or “ enter into the
“ kingdom of God;” though the whole is imperfect

* 1 John v. 4, 5.

† 1 John iii. 9, 10.

‡ 1 John. ii. 29, iii. 14. iv. 7. v. 18. § 2 Cor. iii. 17, 18.

in degree, and, counteracted by the remaining power of in-dwelling sin and manifold temptations.

That this is the real meaning of this scriptural expression, may be further evinced, by briefly considering several other metaphors which express the same change. It is called a *new creation*.—"If any man be in Christ, he is a *new creature*; old things are passed away; behold all things are become new."* The apostle speaks of it with allusion to the creation of the world. "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Thus educing likewise order out of confusion, and beauty out of deformity.† —"In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a *new creature*," or a *new creation*; "for we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works."‡

It is also a *resurrection*.—There are, so to speak, three kinds of life,—*animal*, *rational*, and *spiritual*. *Animal life* implies the capacity of performing animal functions and relishing animal pleasures, which man possesses in common with the brutes: *rational life* rises a degree above this, and includes the capacity of rational investigation, and of relishing intellectual pleasure, of which mere animals have no conception; this, man possesses in common with unembodied spirits: but *spiritual life* is a still nobler distinction, and the perfection of created being; as it consists in the capa-

* 2 Cor. v. 17.

† 2 Cor. iv. 6.

‡ Gal. vi. 15. Eph. ii. 10. iv. 24.

city of performing and delighting in spiritual actions, in which angels find their chief felicity, but of which the most rational man in the world, who is not *born again*, is as entirely incapable as the brutes are of philosophy. *Animal life* may subsist without either intellectual or spiritual capacities; *these* may subsist apart from animal propensities; and an *intelligent* agent may be destitute of *spiritual* capacity, as fallen angels are; but *spiritual* life pre-supposes *rational* powers. Adam, created in the image of God, possessed them all: but when he sinned he lost his *spiritual* life; for the Spirit of life departed, and he became *dead in sin*. From that time he possessed the propensities of *animal nature*, and the capacities of an *intelligent agent*: but he became incapable of delighting in the *spiritual* excellency of divine things; and this is the condition of every man until “the spirit of life in Christ Jesus, makes him free from the law of sin and death,”* by that spiritual resurrection of which we speak.†

The Lord also repeatedly promises “to give his people a new heart and a new spirit;” “a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone;” and “to write his law in the heart:”‡ and this must certainly imply such an entire change wrought in the *judgment, dispositions, and affections*, as constitutes a preparation for obeying “not by constraint, but willingly.” This is also described as “putting off,” or “crucifying, the old man;” “crucifying the flesh with its affections and lusts,” “putting on the new man;” being “transformed by

* Rom. viii. 2. † Rom. vi. 4. Eph. ii. 1, 5, 6. Col. iii. 1.

‡ Jer. xxxi. 31—33. Ezek. xi. 19, 20. xxxvi. 25—27.

“the *renewing* of our mind;” or “*renewed* in the spirit of our mind, and putting on the *new man*, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.”* These expressions especially teach us, that regeneration is the beginning of a fallen creature’s *recovery* to that rectitude of soul, and conformity to the holy image of God, in which he had at first been created, but which had been lost by sin. In this view David prayed, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”† This same renovation is likewise spoken of by Moses when he says, “The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live:” and in many other places it is mentioned under the same image.‡ It is also represented by the grafting of a tree, through which the nature of it is changed and meliorated, and it is made to bear good fruit.—These and such like metaphors and similitudes abundantly illustrate and confirm the explanation that has been given of regeneration; but can never be made to coincide with the sentiments of those, who explain it of only an outward form or amendment; or of such as mistake some transient impressions or emotions for this abiding renovation of heart.

The *necessity* of regeneration might indeed be entirely rested on the solemn and repeated declarations

* Rom. xii. 2. Gal. v. 24. Eph. iv. 22—24. Col. iii. 9, 10.

† Ps. li. 10.

‡ Deut. xxx. 6. Acts vii. 51. Rom. ii. 28, 29. Col. ii. 11.

of the Saviour and Judge of men: for those multitudes, who hope for heaven while they pay no regard to this part of Scripture, strangely presume, either that Christ was mistaken, or that he will depart from his word in their favour! But other conclusive proofs may be adduced, that “except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God,” resulting from the nature of God and of man, of true religion and happiness.

No creature can be satisfied, unless its capacities of enjoyment coincide with its sources of pleasure, or unless it subsists in its proper element. The various kinds of animals are perfectly satisfied with their several modes of living, while unmolested and sufficiently provided for: but they are uneasy when out of their place, though in a situation which pleases other creatures. Different men also have different tastes: no one is comfortable, unless his inclination is gratified; and every one is apt to wonder, what pleasure others can take in that which is irksome to him. But who is there, that *naturally* takes delight in the spiritual worship and service of God? Are not these things the weariness and aversion of men? And are not those persons generally deemed melancholy, who renounce other pleasures for the sake of them? That “which is born of the flesh, is flesh,” or carnal; and “the carnal mind is enmity against God;” whose holy perfections, spiritual law and worship, sovereign authority, and humbling truth, are disliked by all unregenerate men, in proportion as they become acquainted with them. This is manifest, not only from the other vices of mankind, but especially from the prevalence of ido-

latry, infidelity, superstition, and impiety: for men have, in every age, almost with one consent, preferred any absurdity to the truths, precepts, and ordinances of revelation, and every base idol to the One living and true God!

Indeed, they who carefully watch their own hearts, while they think seriously of the omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, justice, holiness, truth, and sovereignty of God; of his laws, threatenings, and judgments; and of their own past and present sins; will find “a witness in themselves” to the enmity of the carnal mind against God. So that except a man be born again, he cannot take any pleasure in God, nor can God take any pleasure in him: he cannot be subject to the law of God: he cannot come to him or walk with him:* he cannot render him unfeigned praises and thanksgivings; but must either neglect religion, or rest in mere external observances. He can neither deem the service of God perfect freedom, and regard it as his privilege, honour, and happiness; nor exercise unfeigned repentance for all his sins: but in part at least, he will exalt himself, palliate his crimes, object to the severity of God, and murmur at his appointments. He cannot cordially receive the gospel, or live by faith in Christ for “wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption;” nor perceive the preciousness of his Person, mediation, and kingdom; the glory of his cross, his unsearchable riches, and incomprehensible love. It is impossible that he should unfeignedly give to the Lord the whole glory of his

* Amos iii. 3.

salvation; or practise from proper motives, meekness, patience, gratitude, forgiveness of injuries, and love of enemies; or count "all but loss for Christ," renounce all for him, bear reproach and persecution for his sake, devote himself to his service, even unto death; and then at last receive eternal life as the free "gift of God" in him. Nor can he enter into the spiritual meaning of divine ordinances, (especially of baptism and the Lord's supper,) or seek the spiritual blessings of the new covenant with decided preference; or love the true worshippers of God as the excellent and honourable of the earth. Nay, an unregenerate man could not relish the company, the work, the worship, or the joy of heaven; but would be disgusted even with the songs and employments of angels and "the spirits of just men made perfect;" as persons, who are in various respects widely different from each other, must know, if they would but carefully consider the subject, and reflect on the state and thoughts of their own hearts. But the nature of God, of holiness, of happiness, and of heaven, is unchangeable: and therefore, either *we must be changed*, or we cannot be either holy or happy.

All the Scriptures above referred to imply, that regeneration is wrought by "the exceeding greatness" of the mighty power of God:" but, it should be observed, that he operates on the minds of rational creatures according to their nature. The *instantaneous* renewal of a fallen angel to the divine image, would be as real a display of omnipotence as his first creation, and in some respects a greater: but the Lord might effect this renovation in a different manner.

Having made use of *truth*; as the medium of his almighty energy, in overcoming the dark and obstinate enmity of his fallen nature, and in producing a willingness to be restored; he might afterwards require his concurrence in the use of means, through which that recovery should be effected. Now, we are informed, that the Lord regenerates sinners by his holy word: ministers, therefore, and parents, and many others in different ways, are bound to set before those committed to their care, the doctrines and instructions of the Sacred Scriptures; and to treat them as reasonable creatures, addressing their understandings and consciences, their hopes and fears, and all the passions and powers of their souls; beseeching God “to give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.” And all they, who are convinced that such a renewal must take place in them, or else that they must be miserable, should be induced, by the consideration that they cannot change their own hearts, (that being the work of the Holy Spirit,) to seek this inestimable blessing, by reading the Scriptures, retirement, meditation, self-examination, hallowing the Lord’s day, hearing faithful preaching and other instruction, breaking off known sin, practising known duties, avoiding vain company and dissipation, and earnestly praying to God, to “create in them a clean heart, and to renew a right spirit within them.” Convictions of our inability have a similar effect upon us in all other cases; and uniformly induce us to seek help from those who are able to help us, with an earnestness proportioned to the supposed importance of the interest that is at stake.

As for those who continue to treat this subject with contempt and derision: it is sufficient to observe, that, seeing they will neither believe our testimony, nor that of Christ; they will at last have no cause to complain, if left destitute of that gracious influence which they have so despised.—Some may, however, believe that *such things are*, who are yet at a loss to know *what they are*; and them I would press in the most urgent manner, to beg of God daily and earnestly, to teach them what it is to be born again; and then in due time their own experience will terminate their perplexity.—But let those who *admit* the doctrine, beware lest they rest in the *notion*, without the experience and effects of it. And finally, let all who have known the happy change, recollect continually, that they need to be renewed more and more;* and should therefore unite with gratitude for what the Lord hath wrought, persevering prayer for a more complete recovery unto the divine image, in all the powers, dispositions, and affections of their souls.

* Tit. iii. 5.