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Origen's Comments on Baptismal Regeneration

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In Origen's Commentary on Romans, which was translated from Greek into Latin by Ruffinus, Origen made a comment that I believe mitigates the idea that baptism "justifies" Christians before God. It is common knowledge that Catholics, among others that teach the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, believe that baptism literally has the power to save people. This includes unbelieving infants that are subjected to the sacrament.

When commenting on Romans 2:25 Origen wrote:

For if the containment of evil which circumcision signifies is not matched by the works of faith, it is regarded as a form of wickedness. Even in the church, if someone is "circumcised" by the grace of baptism and he becomes a transgressor of the law of Christ, the circumcision of baptism is reckoned to him as uncircumcision, because faith without works is dead...Circumcision was of no value to those who thought they could be justified by it (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI, Romans, p. 76).

This obviously contradicts what Roman Catholics teach, being that the Catechism states, "Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith" (1992). Origen writes in no unclear terms that circumcision (i.e. baptism) is made void if someone thinks that it justifies them.

Many will claim that Origen is alone in this opinion in the early church. The problem is, this is wrong. Cyril of Jerusalem warned in his instructions to new believers, "He casts not His pearls before swine; if you play the hypocrite, though men baptize you now, the Holy Spirit will not baptize you. But if you approach with faith, though men minister in what is seen, the Holy Ghost bestows that which is unseen (Catechetical Lecture 17, Chapters 35 and 36).

The idea that baptism, in of itself, justifies people apart from their own faith appears to me to be an idea drastically out of step with the original teachers of baptismal regeneration. Until the time of Augustine, the common practice of the Church was not baptizing infants, but rather baptizing adults.

Why? First, the idea of being in a state of grace which is lost by sin, but restored through sacraments was not an apostolic system of penance. Rather, it evolved in time.

Evidence of this can be seen in Cyprian's *On the Lapsed*, where he speculated that the lapsed that did not forsake Christ under the pain of torture should mimic Biblical examples of penance. He suggests weeping, fasting, and wearing the equivalent of sackcloth as means to make sure the lapsed were right with God before giving them the elements. He viewed the elements as dangerous for those who were still in their sin.

Where did he get his ideas for penance? He happily and publicly stole them from Daniel 9. The fact he had to speculate as to how penance could even be done shows that it was not a historic practice.

Second, it was taken for granted until Augustine that baptism only "regenerates" if one has faith. Why? For the reasons Origen and Cyril of Jerusalem speculated. The baptism itself, apart from faith, was void. Hence, faith was the actual means of justification and baptism was the physical sign (Latin: sacrament) that the faith was there. This is why martyrs and others who died before being physically baptized were thought to be "baptized by desire."

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