

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Number 260      Copyright 2006 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692      October 2006  
Email: Jrob1517@aol.com      Website: www.trinityfoundation.org      Telephone: 423.743.0199      Fax: 423.743.2005

## Sacramental Sorcery

John W. Robbins

**Editor's note:** This month The Trinity Foundation is scheduled to release a new book, *Sacramental Sorcery: The Invalidity of Roman Catholic Baptism*, by James Henley Thornwell, a Southern Presbyterian theologian of the mid-nineteenth century. Thornwell wrote the book in response to Charles Hodge's attack on the decision of the 1845 Presbyterian General Assembly (Old School) declaring that Romanist baptism is not Christian baptism. Despite the General Assembly's Biblical declaration, Hodge, who was very sound on other doctrines, continued to teach his erroneous views on Romanist baptism in his classes at Princeton Seminary, and his soft-on-Romanism approach shaped the minds of the Princeton students who occupied Presbyterian pulpits in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was Hodge's error that became the majority view in Presbyterian churches in the twentieth century, and contributed to the ecumenism and apostasy of that century. This single example illustrates how seminaries can corrupt churches and entire denominations by their errant teaching.

The following essay is the Foreword to Thornwell's book. The 200-page book is available from The Trinity Foundation for \$12.95, plus \$5 shipping.

The twentieth century was a century of unprecedented ecumenical acceleration, characterized by religious congresses, theological seminars, joint manifestos, and combined worship services between Roman Catholic laymen and officials and Protestant laymen and officials. From the Roman side, the theological and organizational ecumenism started in the late nineteenth century when the Roman Church-State officially adopted the philosophy of the thirteenth-century thinker Thomas Aquinas as its doctrine, and Pope Leo XIII commanded all the loyal subjects of the Church-State to advance that philosophy on all fronts. The result was not only the appearance of an aggressive Neo-Thomism in the twentieth century, but a

rapprochement between the more ritualistic and liturgical denominations, which then spread to conversations and meetings with liberals and modernists in the mainline denominations. The Charismatic movement, beginning in the 1960s, cemented at the popular level the fundamental theological unity between Romanism and Pentecostalism, and members of the more conservative and even nominally Reformed denominations got on board the ecumenical train engineered by Cardinals Cassidy and Dulles and conducted by Southern Baptist Charles Colson and Anglican J. I. Packer.

---

**The Charismatic movement, beginning in the 1960s, cemented at the popular level the fundamental theological unity between Romanism and Pentecostalism.**

---

Part of the reason for the dramatic development of favorable opinion toward Romanism in the twentieth century is the opinion, long held by many Protestants, that both Romanism and Protestantism hold many things in common – the first three, four, five, or seven “ecumenical councils,” the “fundamental doctrines” of the faith, the so-called Apostles' Creed (which the apostles neither wrote, approved, nor even read), the Nicene Creed, and even Christian baptism. To this way of thinking, there are so many things that Romanists and Protestants share that it is a tragedy the Reformation happened, and perhaps, even now, at this late date, it can be reversed. (Charles Colson has boasted that had he been around in the sixteenth century, he might have been able to prevent the “split.”) By adopting Thomism as its official philosophy in 1879, the Roman Church-State achieved at the level of philosophy the intellectual convergence that the twentieth-century ecumenical movement reflected in theological terms.

The diabolical brilliance of this philosophical thrust may be seen in the fact that many, if not most, of the prominent Protestant theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had themselves adopted some variant of Thomism as their own, accepting Thomas' arguments, or at least some of them, for the existence of God; and, more importantly, accepting Thomas' basic empiricism, in which Christian theology is made to rest on the greater and prior certainty of sense experience. By thus making a sensate philosophy that many Protestant theologians already accepted its official doctrine (it had long been its unofficial doctrine), the Roman Church-State effectively disarmed them, removing the possibility of any effective philosophical criticism of Rome.

In twentieth-century America, the Lutheran John Warwick Montgomery, the Presbyterian R. C. Sproul, and the Baptist Norman Geisler were all self-confessed followers of the official philosopher and "Angelic Doctor" of the Roman Church-State. Though they have remained in their own communions, their philosophical compromise with Rome rendered them ineffective as critics of Rome, for they cannot criticize Rome at the root, where it is most important, for they would then be criticizing themselves. Worse, their philosophical compromise renders Rome's theological arguments very persuasive to many Protestants they have influenced.

---

**In twentieth-century America, the Lutheran John Warwick Montgomery, the Presbyterian R. C. Sproul, and the Baptist Norman Geisler were all self-confessed followers of the official philosopher and "Angelic Doctor" of the Roman Church-State.**

---

But the compromise with Rome neither began nor ended with Montgomery, Sproul, and Geisler. One prominent American theologian of the nineteenth century, Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary, otherwise noted for his fidelity to Scripture and the theology of the Reformation, was also an empiricist of the Scottish Common Sense variety, and accepted some of Thomas' arguments for the existence of God, and all that that implies. In theology, Hodge held not only that Romanist baptism is Christian baptism, but also that the Roman Church-State had preserved and taught the great truths of the Christian faith. Among other things Hodge wrote:

Indeed it is a matter of devout thankfulness to God that underneath the numerous grievous and destructive errors of the Romish Church, the great truths of the Gospel are preserved. The Trinity, the true divinity of Christ, the true doctrine concerning his person as God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever, salvation through his blood, regeneration and

sanctification through the almighty power of the Spirit, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life, are doctrines on which the people of God in that communion live, and have produced such saintly men as St. Bernard, Fenelon, and doubtless thousands of others who are of the number of God's elect.

In his reply to Hodge, Thornwell pointed out that these doctrines *per se* are not Romish, for Rome's doctrine is the combination of these and the "destructive errors" that even Hodge admitted. That combination is lethal, just as orange juice laced with strychnine is lethal. To argue that the orange juice, considered by itself, is nutritious is to miss the point, for Rome does not offer orange juice alone. It presents only the mixture, and the mixture is not the Gospel. It is a lethal lie.

But there is a further point: Hodge made this remark in the context of his discussion of justification in his *Systematic Theology*. He admitted that Rome's doctrine of justification is not the Bible's, yet he asserted that Rome had preserved "the great truths of the Gospel." It follows that either justification is not one of the great truths of the Gospel, or Rome has not preserved all the great truths. But so great was Hodge's ecumenical spirit that he was led to make such foolish statements. Even though he recognized the major contribution the American Presbyterian Church had made by separating state, that is, the use of force, from church, Hodge failed to recognize the American Church's correction of the errors of the Reformation on Romanist baptism. Such confusion may have been due to his acceptance of common ground with Rome in philosophy: empiricism. It was not until the twentieth century, in the work of Dr. Gordon H. Clark, that the consistent philosophical system required to oppose both Rome's philosophy and its theology appeared. Unfortunately, in their empirical blindness, twentieth-century American churches ignored or condemned Dr. Clark's Christian philosophy.

While it would be a mistake to blame the ecumenism of twentieth-century American Presbyterian churches on Hodge exclusively, he did play a significant role. Fortunately, on the questions of whether the Roman Church-State is a Christian church, and whether Roman baptism is Christian baptism, he was ably opposed by the Southern Presbyterian theologian, James Henley Thornwell, who wrote the present essay on "The Validity of the Baptism of the Church of Rome." (Unfortunately, Thornwell, like Hodge, did not challenge Romanist philosophy, but accepted its basic principle of empiricism.)

In 1845 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (Old School) declared, almost unanimously (169-8, with six abstentions), that Roman Catholic baptism is not Christian baptism. Hodge, who apparently was not present at the Assembly, immediately took exception to the clear and Biblical statement of the Assembly and quickly published a long essay in the July 1845 issue of the *Princeton Review*, a theological journal that he edited.

Thornwell, in turn, replied to Hodge's arguments in the *Watchman and Observer* (published in Richmond) in 1846.

By replying to Hodge and defending the decision of the 1845 Assembly, Thornwell tried to lay to rest the un-Biblical and fallacious reasoning of those Protestants who defend Roman Catholic baptism as Christian baptism. But Presbyterian churches in the twentieth century forgot about the declaration of the 1845 General Assembly (and subsequent declarations supporting it) and adopted Hodge's view, which he taught to generations of ministers graduating from Princeton Seminary. In the present and growing apostasy in Presbyterian churches, not only is Romanist baptism being defended as Christian baptism, but Presbyterian ministers are also asserting a doctrine of baptism similar to Rome's. This sacramental convergence is defended by those who favor cooperation with Rome at some level – in missions, politics, evangelism, worship, or education – and it is time once again to present Thornwell's devastating reply to Hodge.

Contemporary Presbyterians who defend Hodge's view on Roman Catholic baptism generally do not share his otherwise strict Calvinism. They have ignored or rejected the truth in Hodge and eagerly embraced his errors. (The current apostasy in American Presbyterian churches on the doctrine of justification is led by men whose notion of scholarship is, first, mining the writings of the Reformers, finding their errors, and then asserting those errors to be their major doctrines and "real" teaching; and second, historical revisionism in which heterodox and heretical theologians of the past are portrayed as defenders of the faith. Peter Lillback, President of Westminster Seminary [Pennsylvania] and D. G. Hart, formerly of Westminster Seminary [California], are two practitioners of this form of "scholarship.")

If one reads the arguments offered by Protestants in defense of Romanist baptism, one will be struck by the complex tissue of fallacies deployed to buttress an indefensible conclusion. Unlike the sound and simple arguments offered by the Reformers and their children on other doctrinal matters, this practical question of Romanist baptism, which had enormous political implications at the time of the Reformation, is replete with legerdemain. One cannot help thinking that politics, not theology, was the driving force requiring a certain conclusion, and that any argument whatever had to be marshalled in order to avoid admitting that the so-called Anabaptists (Calvin contemptuously called them Catabaptists) might have been right about anything, especially about Romanist baptism.

As a Presbyterian and a Calvinist I admit that Calvin's Catabaptists were right about Romanist baptism, and Calvin was wrong – Romanist baptism is in fact not Christian baptism – just as they were right about the separation of church and state. (The early Luther and the American Presbyterians were right on that point as well, and those who favor an established church have adopted

a thoroughly un-Biblical and Antichristian position.) Thornwell destroys the arguments of those Protestants who defend Romanist baptism; there is nothing left of them; and Hodge never published a reply to Thornwell. To stubbornly maintain, after Thornwell, that Romanist baptism is Christian baptism reveals anti-Baptist, pro-Romanist bigotry, not sound theology.

The arguments marshalled in defense of Romanist baptism range from the patently absurd to the superficially plausible. An example of the absurd is the argument that even though some of the priests of ancient Israel were apostate, the circumcisions they performed were never repeated; therefore, Romanist baptism is valid Christian baptism. An example of the superficially plausible is that since Romanist baptism is done in the name of the Trinity, it is valid Christian baptism. Thornwell disposed of the plausible; the patently absurd needs no refutation.

Thornwell began his refutation of Hodge by reviewing (since Hodge did not seem to know) exactly what Romanist baptism is. One gets the impression that those contemporary Protestants who defend Romanist baptism also do not understand what Romanist baptism is. Thornwell's detailed description of Romanist baptism should, therefore, be an education for them. Among many other things, Thornwell showed that Romanist baptism does not involve the use of mere water, as Christian baptism does, but requires the use of adulterated water, the efficacy of which depends upon the deliberate and ritual corruption of mere water.

---

**To argue, as Protestant sympathizers with Rome do, that baptism is valid if it is performed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is, ironically, to argue that pronouncing that name works *magically* – *ex opere operato*.**

---

Thornwell showed that the ritual use of the name of the Trinity in baptism is not a magic incantation, as the Protestant sympathizers with Rome seem to believe, but must involve the faith of the Trinity, which the Roman Church-State does not have. To argue, as Protestant sympathizers with Rome do, that baptism is valid if it is performed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is, ironically, to argue that pronouncing that name works *magically* – *ex opere operato*, even if the church, the priest, the parents, and the child lack the faith of the Trinity. Thornwell wrote:

To baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit is not to pronounce these words as an idle form or a mystical charm, but to acknowledge that solemn compact [the covenant of redemption] which these glorious agents entered, for eternity, for the redemption

of the church. It is the *faith* of the Trinity, much more than the *names* of its separate Persons, that belongs to the essence of baptism....

A standard argument used by Protestant sympathizers with Rome is that if it is true that Romanist baptism is not Christian baptism, then the church was without Christian baptism for centuries. This historical argument is of particular importance to those who favor Tradition and exalt the Church. Here is Thornwell's devastating reply to opponents who ask:

Did baptism become extinct when this innovation [adulteration of the water] was first introduced among the churches that adopted it? My reply is that I know of no sacredness in baptism which should entitle it to be preserved in its integrity when the ordinance of the Lord's Supper has been confessedly abolished in the Latin Church. Why should baptism be perpetuated entire, and the Supper transmitted with grievous mutilations? Or will it be maintained that the essence of the Supper was still retained when the cup was denied to the laity? Is it more incredible that an outward ordinance should be invalidated than that the precious truths which it was designed to represent should be lost? Is the shell more important the substance? And shall we admit that the cardinal doctrines of the Gospel have been damnably corrupted in the Church of Rome, and yet be afraid to declare that the signs and seals of the covenant have shared the same fate? If Rome is corrupt in doctrine, I see not why she may not be equally corrupt in ordinances, and if she has lost one sacrament, I see not why she may not have lost the other; and as the foundations of her apostasy were laid in the ages immediately succeeding the time of the Apostles, I cannot understand why the loss of the real sacrament of baptism may not have been an early symptom of degeneracy and decay.

Then Thornwell drove his unanswerable argument home:

But our business is with truth and not with consequences. We should not be deterred from admitting a Scriptural conclusion because it removes, with a desolating besom [broom], the structures of antiquity. We are not to say, *a priori*, that the Church in the fifth or sixth centuries *must* have had the true sacrament of baptism, and then infer that such and such corruptions do not invalidate the ordinance. But we are first to ascertain from Scriptures what the true sacrament of baptism is, and then judge the practice of the church in every age by this standard. If its customs have at any time departed from the law and the testimony, let them be condemned; if they have been something essentially different from what God has enjoined, let them be denounced as spurious. The unbroken transmission of a visible Church in any line of succession is a figment of papists and prelatists. Conformity with the Scriptures, not ecclesiastical genealogy, is the true touchstone of a sound church;

and if our fathers were without the ordinances, and fed upon ashes for bread, let us only be the more thankful for the greater privileges vouchsafed [given] to ourselves.

---

**We are first to ascertain from Scripture what the true sacrament of baptism is, and then judge the practice of the church in every age by this standard. If its customs have at any time departed from the law and the testimony, let them be condemned.**

---

Thornwell realized that it is not enough to discuss baptism in isolation, since Christianity is a system of thought, and so he discussed many doctrines. One of them was worship. He accurately described Romanist worship as sensate, and pointed out that

the miserable votaries of Rome confound the emotions of mysterious awe produced by the solemnities of sensual worship with reverence for God and the impressions of grace. Doomed to grope among the beggarly elements of Earth, they regale the eye, the fancy, and the ear, but the heart withers. Imagination riots on imposing festivals and magnificent processions, symbols, and ceremonies, libations and sacrifices; the successive stages of worship are like scenes of enchantment, but the gorgeous splendors of the liturgy, which famish the soul while they delight the sense, are sad memorials of religion "lying in state surrounded with the silent pomp of death." The Holy Ghost has been supplanted by charms, and physical causes have usurped the province of supernatural grace.

The swift currents of apostasy now racing through the American Presbyterian churches (in fact all American Protestant churches) include the sensate worship that Thornwell condemned. This sensate worship flows directly and inexorably from the philosophy of empiricism that virtually all churchmen accept and teach. This sensate, idolatrous worship is sanctimoniously defended as "full-orbed," "incarnational," "creational," "wholistic," and the devotion of the "complete man." These same churchmen condemn the intelligent, spiritual worship that God requires as "gnostic," "rationalist," and "reductionist." The false teachers who exalt the imagination and malign the intellect, the false prophets who exalt experience and malign the Word, the false shepherds who starve the sheep and feed the goats run riot in the churches, and no one dares to identify them for what they are, let alone stop them.

May God use this book to defend his truth and his people.

