Asimov's Mule and Augustine's God
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I reflect on conversion, and how patient we have become with the Protestant theory of conversion. Most of us I suppose, on being asked, will say there is only one plan of salvation. Then what about believers who come with their belief-only conversion? They love God but were converted by those who prefer the Ask-Jesus-Into-Your-Heart recipe over Acts 2:38. Whose conversion do we trust? Who gets transferred in as is? And what about denominations? Are they - corporately - blood brothers? Step-brothers? Unborn brothers? Brothers-in-spirit (vs. brothers-in-law)? The questions are old, troublesome, battered, and important.

Conventional wisdom in many places has it that belief-only immersionists (Baptists et al.) use a formula of conversion that's so close to the New Testament plan that none but insecure gnat-strainers choke on the difference. These brothers, it seems, are guilty of nothing worse than tinkering with the *purpose* of baptism. Well-mannered Christians wink at the trifling deviation and go on to important things. We are assured that faith in Jesus is the all-sufficient test; God takes up the slack by judicial decree (a courtesy we don't see Him extending to those who tamper with the *mode* of baptism).

We want to be Biblically consistent when believers come our way from Calvin's camp. It's tough. Some have been blinded to the theology of their teachers by the phosphoric clarity of Scripture on the subject of conversion; others have absorbed a deep prejudice against baptism. We try to come down somewhere between the surgical orthodoxy of the Pharisees and the easy oblivion of the three little monkeys. Sympathy for the victim of Calvinism, however, does not translate into a fraternal spirit toward the theology itself - or for the sects that hold it.

The restoration has stalled; at least our outfit has, and it might help if we could unload the deadly illusion that the distance between Bible conversion and Calvinistic conversion equals the distance between baptism *unto* and baptism *because of*. Baptism is not the watershed issue in the debate with Protestantism - never was. Calvinism is not intolerable because it pushes baptism around; it is so because it destroys the doctrine of conversion and slanders God in the process. Which brings us to Asimov's Mule.

Asimov's Mule - In *Second Foundation*, scientist-novelist Isaac Asimov invents a future space-czar, a supranatural monarch intent on sovereignty over "every star he could see - and every star he couldn't see." The fellow is a mutant. His erratic genes have given him a fabulous mental ability and he uses it to win the worlds: He performs telepathic surgery. Asimov's tyrant creates disciples by directly inverting the will of any who resist and all he finds useful - not their general will, only their disposition toward him. His victims are not automatons when the Mule is finished, and they don't mind being told about the transformation and how it came. Why should they? The otherwise-unaltered enemies of the Mule, you see, have become loyal servants; they love him. Asimov calls the change Conversion.

The Mule's disciples must be volitionally upended before they will follow him because their natural emotion is to despise the self-anointed king of the stars; in fact, the Mule has been a social outcast since birth. No wonder. The poor mutant is a physical disgrace. His limbs are bony stalks and the emaciated face consists primarily of the fleshy monstrosity of a nose. He cynically retains for his name the epithet Mule, a long-nosed mutant, and now he will take over the universe as punishment for its cruelty to him.

Through the transparent wall of his palace the Mule surveys the planets, not one of which has been denied him. But that's not victory we see in his eyes; rather an eternal self-loathing. Why? Isn't the galaxy his? Do not his interstellar bureaucrats love him? Not really; And that's the ugly joke the Mule has played on himself. His sovereignty is as sterile as his namesake and he knows it. The devotion of his minions is artificial. It lacks flavor. His disciples did not choose to love him; he chose to handle them. It's no good having friends who would be something else if left to decide for themselves. *They* cannot but feel that their love for the Mule begins in their hearts; *he* knows better.

I hate Asimov's Mule more than he hates himself. Hideous fool with his synthetic sovereignty - his ersatz conversion. But what has all this to do with Augustine's God and Protestant conversion?

Augustine's God - Protestantism is Augustinianism. According to Augustine *man* is the mutant. Sin left us with an absolutely disabled moral will toward God; we cannot choose to love God. Conversion means, therefore, that God chooses certain of us and miraculously regenerates the will, making us "free" to love Him. Augustine's God is not the paranoiac of Asimov's tale. He's good and beautiful; so how do we explain that He converts as Asimov's Mule converts? How can we stand to believe that He is content with an empty sovereignty - with a family of counterfeit children?

Luther used Augustine's metaphor of man as a mule ridden either by God or by Satan.[1] Erasmus said the doctrine is monstrous, an unforgivable insult to God.[2] Luther admitted that, logically, his theology made God wicked, cruel, intolerable; but he warned Erasmus that if God wants to choose a mule and ride it, or put the devil's saddle on another, it's none of either mule's business. Besides, the mule can't know the difference.

In the nineteenth-century battle for restoration, baptism was an important skirmish in the war of competing theories of conversion. The supreme encounter, however, was between moral conversion and miraculous regeneration. The restoration fathers lit the fire when they pointed out that, not only is Calvinistic conversion not in the Bible, it's not conversion at all. According to frontier Calvinism, God did not freely persuade the lost to become the saved; He operated on the unwilling to make them willing.

In the first year of the *Millennial Harbinger*, Campbell wrote:

All who resolve individual salvation into a mere act of sovereignty, disarm the gospel of all its power, makes its Author insincere, its promises and its arguments deceitful, an instrument of guile and double meanings.[3]

In 1837 he wrote:

Can any one suppose that people can be *made willing* by power, other than the power of motive . . .! To suppose persons to be forced into willingness, is a contradiction in terms. They are unwilling willing people without free agency, and consequently without virtue, and therefore cannot be Christ's people.[4]

In the last year of the *Harbinger* Campbell was still writing:

The doctrine of regeneration *before* faith is paralyzing heresy, dishonoring to God and ruinous to man.[5]

It's not surprising that the Calvinists are fighting one another over whether we have the right to invite people to salvation. Most Protestant leaders who choose to be soul-winners follow the evangelistic ethic of British theologian J. I. Packer, who says that the Bible genuinely contradicts itself on conversion:

Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is *also* divinely controlled; man is divinely controlled, though he is *also* a responsible moral agent. God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too. This is the revealed antimony [contradiction] in terms of which we have to do our thinking about evangelism.[6]

This means Packer calls us to believe in miraculous regeneration - infused faith, but to preach as if it were the world's biggest false doctrine. It also means that the soul-winning Protestant has a God who mystifies the converter as He manipulates the converted.

Campbell's 1843 debate with Presbyterian N. L. Rice was on baptism, but neither could avoid the broader issue of conversion. Hear the sage of Bethany on the "figment of St. Augustine, adopted by Calvin, propagated in his *Institutes*, and adopted by his children":[7]

The whole system of Calvinism, of Arminianism, is crazy just at this point. They build a world upon the back of a tortoise. they pile mountains upon an egg. They build palaces upon ice, and repose on couches of ether. They have not one clear idea on the subject of conversion. It is to them a mystic mystery - a cabalistic word - a mere shibboleth. The philosophy of mind is converted into a heap of ruins. They have the Spirit of God operating without testimony - without apprehension or comprehension - without sense susceptibility, or feelings: and all this for the sake of an incomprehensible, unintelligible, and worse than useless theory. I, therefore, *ex animo*, repudiate their whole theory of mystic influence, and metaphysical regeneration, as a vision of visions, a dream of dreams, at war with philosophy, with the philosophy of mind, with the Bible, with reason, with common sense, and with all Christian experience.[8]

Strange that so many of us want to repent and be Baptist. Traditionally, Calvinists consider us a cult because we don't believe in regeneration. Well, *I don't* believe in regeneration - not if you mean by it what Calvin and Packer and Asimov's Mule mean. And I don't believe the Bible contradicts itself.

Campbell was right and nothing has changed - Protestant conversion is still a pagan insult to God and the Bible. To say again: Our choice is not between baptismal liturgies. It's either the Bible and real conversion or Protestantism and science-fiction regeneration and all that goes with it. Choose one or the other - or the fence. (The fence doesn't count.)

1. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston tr., *Martin Luther on Bondage of the Will* (Westwood: Fleming H Revell, 1957), pp. 103, 104.
2. R. S. Bainton, *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 189.
3. MH, 1830, p. 237.
4. MH, 1837, p. 342.
5. MH, 1870, p. 481.
6. J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (London: Intervarsity Fellowship, 1961), p. 23.
7. *Campbell-Rice Debate* (Rosemead: Old Paths, n.d.), p. 619.
8. ibid.