Exegetical Study on I Corinthians 7:14

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The setting of our passage has a discussion on mixed marriages. It would be rather common for one member of a married couple to become a convert to the Christian faith while the other would remain in unbelief. The question then would become a matter of procedure on what should be done with the unbelieving spouse. Should there be divorce as in the time of Ezra when the Jews were required to divorce their Samaritan wives. To this situation Paul declares that there should be no divorce if the unbelieving partner was content to live with the Christian wife or husband. “For,” says Paul, “the unbelieving husband is consecrated [i.e., made holy] through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated [i.e., made holy] through her husband.” This is the reverse of the law of Levitical purity, for the unclean Gentile made the Jew unclean, while here the holiness of the believer transmits that holiness to the unbelieving spouse.

The argument here deals especially with children born out of this mixed marriage. These children are considered holy and clean. They are holy and clean even as their parents are holy and clean. As I see the course of the argument as given by Paul, it begins with the accepted assumption that children of the church are “holy and clean,” and then he argues back to the parents, especially to the one unbelieving parent, to make clear that they must be holy and clean. But since the assumption is that children of the church are holy and clean, it follows that the parents too are holy and clean.

This understanding of holy and clean children derives from the practice of Gentiles being converted to the Jewish faith known as proselytism. On the basis of Levitical law Gentiles are unholy and unclean. If, however, a Gentile was a convert to Judaism he became holy and clean as he submitted to the rites of circumcision and baptism. If he and his family came into the Jewish faith the males were circumcised and all were baptized.

One wonders how it was that the Jews would allow baptism since it was not mentioned in the Old Testament. There was indeed some difficulty to establish Old Testament authority for baptism. However, the great rabbi Hillel, grandfather of Gamaliel, teacher of Paul, was the head of the school that started with Numbers 15:14. “He [i.e., the stranger] shall do as you do” to establish authority for Gentile baptism. This passage the Hillelites interpreted to mean that the proselyte should be received into the Covenant even as the people of Israel once were at Sinai. They made the assumption that Israel at Sinai had been baptized in the wilderness before they were received into the covenant. The act of baptism is inferred from Exodus 24:8 where Moses took blood and sprinkled the people therewith, and it was a valid traditional teaching that there is no sprinkling without previous baptism. In this way the doctrine of the baptism of the generation in the desert became the background for
proselyte baptism. Paul no doubt was taught this doctrine by Gamaliel and Paul applies it to Christian baptism in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2: "I want you to know brethren that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."

From the above it seems clear that Jews, in receiving proselytes, practiced the ritual both of circumcision and of baptism. During recent times some questions were raised about the antiquity of proselyte baptism, whether indeed it was in vogue during the first century A.D. In the Mishnah we read of a discussion between a Shammaite scholar and a Hillelite scholar on the relative importance of circumcision and baptism. This kind of discussion would not take place unless baptism was an established procedure. So at the time of these scholars baptism seems to have been a common practice. The time of that discussion was 67 A.D.

With the reception of the proselyte and his family into the Jewish fellowship, the proselyte and his family were declared to be "clean" and "holy." Since Paul says this of children born in the church, that they indeed are not unclean but are holy, we ought to have these terms clarified. Jews were considered clean or unclean in the degree they observed cultic laws and requirements. To have fellowship with a Gentile produced uncleanness, but when the Gentile was converted to the Jewish faith and had been circumcised and baptized, he then was clean and could not defile a member of the congregation. Thus "clean" children in the church would be regarded as proper members of the congregation and not the cause of any defilement for the church.

The term "holy" coming out of the Old Testament usage denotes being set apart for God's service. Objects such as the clothes of the priests, or parts of the temple like the altar were called holy in that they were dedicated for use in the worship of Jahweh, the God of Israel. So Israel was considered a "holy nation" set apart for God's service in the world. It is God who primarily made Israel holy when God delivered his people out of Egypt and placed them in covenant relationship with himself. However, the Old Testament also states that Israel was to make herself holy in observing the law and the commands which Israel took to herself as she entered the covenant.

In our passage here, we observe that Paul declared that the believing wife makes the unbelieving husband holy and that the believing husband makes the unbelieving wife holy. This is to say that there is a contagion in holiness that is as real as the defilement of immorality about which Paul speaks in chapter five, where the little leaven of immorality defiles the whole lump. Here the leaven of the holy wife or husband makes the unbelieving wife or husband holy.

So one may observe that we have here two types of holiness: the one of the unbelieving spouse as the holiness of association and the one of the children as the holiness by birth.

The condition or state of holiness here described is not a static condition, but rather it embraces dynamic possibilities in that the believing wife may indeed save the husband. So that as I see it, holiness places one in position for future growth and development. Surely this is very relevant for our children who are also holy.
Since I was assigned this passage for the conference on baptism, I should relate this discussion on holiness to baptism. Strictly speaking this passage (I Corinthians 7:14) does not take up the practice of baptism, either adult or children. If we are seeking some direction in the teaching and practice of baptism the most we can learn here is to be derived from proselyte baptism, which appears here and elsewhere as the background. Since proselytes, both adults and children, were circumcised and baptized at their being received into the Jewish community of faith, and were thereby declared "holy" and "clean," so it appears likely that Jews and Greeks would be baptized at their being received into the Christian community of faith, and also be declared "holy" and "clean."

FOOTNOTES
2 Jeremias, J., *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (1960)