

REGENERATION

THE CHRISTIAN IS BORN AGAIN

“In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’” John 3:3

Regeneration is a New Testament concept that grew, it seems, out of a parabolic picture-phrase that Jesus used to show Nicodemus the inwardness and depth of the change that even religious Jews must undergo if they were ever to see and enter the kingdom of God, and so have eternal life (John 3:3-15). Jesus pictured the change as being “born again.”

The concept is of God renovating the heart, the core of a person’s being, by implanting a new principle of desire, purpose, and action, a dispositional dynamic that finds expression in positive response to the gospel and its Christ. Jesus’ phrase “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) harks back to Ezekiel 36:25-27, where God is pictured as symbolically cleansing persons from sin’s pollution (by water) and bestowing a “new heart” by putting his Spirit within them. Because this is so explicit, Jesus chides Nicodemus, “Israel’s teacher,” for not understanding how new birth happens (John 3:9-10). Jesus’ point throughout is that there is no exercise of faith in himself as the supernatural Savior, no repentance, and no true discipleship apart from this new birth.

Elsewhere John teaches that belief in the Incarnation and Atonement, with faith and love, holiness and righteousness, is the fruit and proof that one is born of God (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4). It thus appears that as there is no conversion without new birth, so there is no new birth without conversion.

Though infant regeneration can be a reality when God so purposes (Luke 1:15, 41-44), the ordinary context of new birth is one of effectual calling—that is, confrontation with the gospel and illumination as to its truth and significance as a message from God to oneself. Regeneration is always the decisive element in effectual calling.

Regeneration is monergistic: that is, entirely the work of God the Holy Spirit. It raises the elect among the spiritually dead to new life in Christ (Eph. 2:1-10). Regeneration is a transition from spiritual death to spiritual life, and conscious, intentional, active faith in Christ is its immediate fruit, not its immediate cause. Regeneration is the work of what Augustine called “prevenient” grace, the grace that precedes our outgoings of heart toward God.

Title: Concise Theology: A Guide To Historic Christian Beliefs

Section: God Revealed as Lord of Grace

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