

# REGENERATION

## THE CHRISTIAN IS BORN AGAIN

Regeneration: a secret act of God in which He imparts new spiritual life to us. This is sometimes called “being born again.”

### John 3:3-15

<sup>3</sup> In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” <sup>4</sup> “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup> You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup> The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” <sup>9</sup> “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. <sup>10</sup> “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

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.”

Regeneration involves something new, a whole reversal of the person’s natural tendencies. 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. This change in a person’s disposition shows itself in that they have a 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.

### **Ezekiel 36:25-27**

*<sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*

Because this text from Ezekiel is so plain, Jesus fusses at Nicodemus a bit for being "Israel's teacher" yet 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. This is the way Titus put it:

### **Titus 3:4-5**

*<sup>4</sup> But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup> he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,*

This new birth involves a putting to death of the flesh (the old self) and a counteracting of the effects of sin. A reversal begins to take place! As a change of spiritual impulses, regeneration is the beginning of a process of growth that continues throughout one's lifetime. This process of spiritual maturation is sanctification.

### **Galatians 2:20**

*<sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

### **John 4:14**

*<sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

### **1 John 2:8**

*<sup>8</sup> Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.*

## Philippians 1:6

<sup>6</sup> being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

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).

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. In fact, the calling is effectual because regeneration has occurred.

Regeneration is monergistic: that is, entirely the work of God. It raises the elect among the spiritually dead to new life in Christ.

## Ephesians 2:1-10

### *Made Alive in Christ*

<sup>1</sup> As for you, **you were dead** in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. <sup>4</sup> **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,** <sup>5</sup> **made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions**—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

**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.

Children of God are those who are "born of God" and our human will ("the will of man") does not bring about this kind of birth.

## John 1:12-13

<sup>12</sup> Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

While we play an active part in conversion, sanctification and perseverance, we are passive and play no active role in regeneration. We did not choose to be made physically alive. We did not choose to be born—it is something that happened to us; similarly, these analogies in Scripture suggest that we are entirely passive in regeneration.

Sometimes the term *irresistible grace* is used to refer to the fact that God regenerates and also effectively calls people, and both actions guarantee that we will respond in saving faith. God's work reaches into our hearts to bring about a response that is absolutely certain—even though we respond voluntarily.

### Nature of Regeneration:

It is not correct to say that the only thing that happens in regeneration is that our spirits are made alive, for just as every part of us was affected by the fall, every part of us is affected by regeneration.

## 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Because regeneration is a work of God within us in which he gives us new life it is right to conclude that it is an *instantaneous* event. It happens only once. At one moment we are spiritually dead, and then at the next moment we have new spiritual life from God. For some, this instantaneous event could go unnoticed at first but later become evident as the fruit of belief, faith, love, holiness and righteousness blossom. With others, regeneration might be clearly recognizable as a person experiences immediate change.

Scripture indicates that regeneration must come before we can **respond** to effective calling with saving faith. Therefore we can say that regeneration comes before the **result** of effective calling (our faith). But it is more difficult to specify the exact relationship in time between regeneration and the human proclamation of the gospel through which God works in effective calling.

In our lesson on "effectual calling" two weeks ago, we considered Paul's interaction with Lydia in Philippi in which we saw the general gospel call working effectively:

## **Acts 16:14**

<sup>14</sup> *One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.*

Lydia was enabled to respond with saving faith because having been regenerated (given new life) she was able to receive illumination from the Holy Spirit. She was enabled to say "yes" to the things of God. She had received new life. She had been born again. She had received effective calling. Her response of saving faith along with the fruit that followed served as evidence of the same.

## **Colossians 2:13**

<sup>13</sup> *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,*

Regeneration is not something we see or know about directly: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

## **Results of regeneration:**

As we saw above with Lydia, the first result of regeneration is that one believes.

### **1 John 5:1**

<sup>1</sup> *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God,*

In regards to sin:

### **1 John 3:9**

<sup>9</sup> *No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.*

A genuine, Christlike love:

### **1 John 4:7**

<sup>7</sup> *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.*

An overcoming of the world:

### **1 John 5:3-4**

<sup>3</sup> This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, <sup>4</sup> for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.

Protection from Satan:

### **1 John 5:18**

<sup>18</sup> We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.

### **Implications of Regeneration, Effectual Calling and Illumination**

1. Human nature cannot be altered by social reforms or education. It must be transformed by a supernatural work of the Triune God.
2. No one can predict or control who will experience new birth. It is ultimately God's doing; even conversion depends on his effective calling.
3. The beginning of the Christian life requires a recognition of one's own sinfulness and a determination to abandon the self-centered way of life.
4. Saving faith requires correct belief regarding the nature of God and what he has done. Correct belief is insufficient, however. There must also be active commitment of oneself to God.
5. One person's conversion may be radically different from another's. What is important is that there be genuine repentance and faith.
6. The new birth is not felt when it occurs. It will, rather, establish its presence by producing a new sensitivity to spiritual things, a new direction of life, and an increasing ability to obey God.

\*Most of the foregoing material was taken from "Concise Theology" by J.I. Packer, "Christian Theology" second edition by Millard J. Erickson, and "Systematic Theology" by Wayne Grudem.