

MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

Part 25: The Holy Spirit: regeneration

Regeneration and effectual calling are closely related. Through the inward call new life is imparted, enabling the soul to respond to the summons. This impartation of life is regeneration which results in conversion (repentance and faith). "Regeneration is a change wrought by the Spirit in order that the person may savingly respond to the summons, or demand of the call, embodied in the gospel call" (Murray).

Regeneration is a work of God's Spirit, whereby he doth, out of his mere good pleasure, for his own glory and the salvation of his elect, at first renew the whole man after his own image by the ministry of the word—George Swinnock [*Works*, vol.5, 20]

Regeneration is that act of God by which the principle of the new life is implanted in man, and the governing disposition of the soul is made holy, and the first holy exercise of this new disposition is secured—Louis Berkhof [*Systematic Theology*, 469]

Regeneration is a change of the whole man, in every part and faculty thereof, from a state of sinful nature, to a state of supernatural grace; whereby the image of God, that we defaced and lost by our first transgression, is again, in some good measure, restored—Ezekiel Hopkins [*Works*, vol.2, 228]

Regeneration is that supernatural act of God, whereby a new and divine life is infused into the elect person spiritually dead, and that from the incorruptible seed of the word of God, made fruitful by the infinite power of the Spirit—Herman Witsius [*The Economy of Covenants*, vol.1, 357]

I. Regeneration

A. Five aspects of regeneration

1. *Its necessity.* "Except a man be born again, he can have no right to the privileges of the kingdom of grace, nor to the possession of the kingdom of glory" (Swinnock). This necessity stems from two facts: [1] Man's spiritual inability. Because man is spiritually blind, def and dead, he is unable and unwilling to return to God. "Man is a fallen creature. It is not that a few leaves have faded, but that the entire tree has become rotten, root and branch" (Pink). "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn.3:3). "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Rom.8:7). "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1Cor.2:14). [2] Man's moral deformity. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh (fleshly or sinful), and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (or spiritual)" (Jn.3:6). "There can be no point of contact between God with a sinful man until he is regenerated. There can be no lawful union between two parties who have nothing vital in common. A superior and an inferior nature may be untied together, but never contrary natures. Can fire and water be united, a beast and a man, a good angel and vile devil? Can heaven and hell ever meet on friendly terms? In all friendship there must be a similarity of disposition; before there can be communion there must be some agreement or oneness. Beasts and men agree not in a life of reason, and therefore cannot converse together. God and men agree not in a life of holiness, and therefore can have no communion together" (Charnock).

The absolute necessity for the regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit in order for a sinner's being converted to God, lies in his being totally depraved. Fallen man is without the least degree of right disposition or principles from which holy exercises

may proceed; yea, he is completely under a contrary disposition: there is no right exercise of heart in him, but every motion of his will is corrupt and sinful. If this were not the case, there would be no need for him to be born again and made '*a new creature*.' If the sinner were not wholly corrupt he would submit to Christ without any supernatural operation of the Spirit; but fallen man is so completely sunk in corruption that he has not the faintest real desire for God, but is filled with enmity against Him (Rom.8:7). Therefore does Scripture affirm him to be '*dead in trespasses and sins*' (Eph.2:1)—A.W. Pink [*The Holy Spirit*, 48]

2. *Its imagery.* The Scripture uses three imageries to describe regeneration. These imageries underscore man's passivity and God's sovereignty in regeneration. "It is God who regenerates. The soul is regenerated. In this sense the soul is passive in regeneration, which is a change wrought in us, and not an act performed by us" (Hodge). [1] New birth. Regeneration is the restoration of God's image in man. "Regeneration is a Divine '*begetting*' (1Pet.1:3), because the image or likeness of the Begetter is conveyed and stamped upon the soul" (Pink). "The first Adam had an image to convey to his seed: therefore, it is said Adam begat Seth after his own image and likeness (Gen.5:3). So Christ, the second Adam, hath also an image to convey unto them that are his (1Cor.15:49); therefore the way of conveying it is called a birth, and he a Father: Col.3:10, '*The new man is renewed after the image of him that created him*'" (Goodwin). [2] New creation. Regeneration is the reversal of man's fall. Man becomes a partaker of God's second (new) creation, has union with the Last Adam, and is given an inheritance of the new heavens and earth. The second (new) creation, which has a beginning in man through regeneration, finds final expression in heaven. [3] Resurrection. Regeneration is the foretaste of a future bodily resurrection. "Paul argues in Romans 6:13 that, since we are united to a risen Christ and therefore share in his risen power, we should live as '*dead men brought to life*.' When we were dead through sin, God reached down *in* Christ to resurrect us *with* Christ by his grace (Eph.2:5). The Christian has '*passed from death to life*' (1Jn.3:14)" (Ferguson).

(1) Jn.1:11-13; Jn.3:1-8; Jn.5:24-27; Gal.6:15; Eph.2:1-10

3. *Its cause.* [1] Efficacious cause. The Spirit is the effectual cause of regeneration.¹ That is, He effects or causes the new birth by His power. "He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Tit.3:5). "It is the Spirit who gives life" (Jn.6:63). "The Holy Spirit is the efficient cause of regeneration. This means that the Holy Spirit works directly on the heart of man and changes its spiritual condition. There is no co-operation of the sinner in this work whatsoever. It is the work of the Holy Spirit directly and exclusively" (Berkhof). [2] Instrumental cause. The word of God, and especially the gospel, is the instrumental cause of regeneration. The Spirit regenerates through or by the word. "Of his own will be brought us forth by the word of truth" (Jas.1:18), "having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" (1Pet.1:23). "Unless you are born of water and the Spirit" (Jn.3:5), that is, the word and the Spirit, or the Spirit by and through the word. "The supernatural nature of God, by which we are regenerated, in no wise excludes, or subverts the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration, and food of the soul" (Canons

¹ The Holy Ghost is the immediate author and cause of this work of regeneration. And herein again, as I suppose, we have in general the consent of all. Nothing is more in words acknowledged than that all the elect of God are sanctified by the Holy Ghost. And this regeneration is the head, fountain, or beginning of our sanctification, virtually comprising the whole in itself, as will afterward appear. However, that it is a part thereof is not to be denied. Besides, as I suppose, it is equally confessed to be an effect or work of grace, the actual dispensation whereof is solely in the hand of the Holy Spirit...the Scripture is express in testimonies to our purpose. What our Savior calls being '*born again*' (Jn.3:3), he calls being '*born of the Spirit*' (Jn.3:5-6), because he is the sole, principal, efficient cause of this new birth; for '*it is the Spirit that quickens*' (Jn.6:63; Rom.8:11). And God saves us '*according to his mercy, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost*' (Tit.3:5)—John Owen [*Works*, vol.3, 299-300]

of Dort). [3] Meritorious cause. Christ and His work, and especially His resurrection, is the meritorious cause of regeneration. The Spirit, through and with the word, unites the sinner to Christ, in His death and resurrection. "Regeneration is causally rooted in the resurrection of Christ (1Pet.1:3). Like produces like; our regeneration is the fruit of Christ's resurrection. In union with him it is effected here and now, and will be consummated at his return. He is the firstfruits of the resurrection-regeneration of the end time; we will participate in the final harvest, but already, through the bond of union in the Holy Spirit, we share in the firstfruits (Rom.8:23)" (Ferguson).

(1) 1Pet.1:3-5; 1Pet.1:22-25

4. *Its nature.* To generate means *to become*, thus to regenerate is *to re-become*. It entails a radical change of a fleshly man into a spiritual man. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (Jn.3:6). [1] It's a moral change.² Regeneration brings no change in the substance of the soul, but a moral renewal of every faculty. "Regeneration does not consist in any change in the substance of the soul" (Hodge). "The essential parts of human nature I call the soul and body, remain the same, for substance, after Regeneration, as they were before" (Hopkins). "Regeneration is a change of the moral state of the soul, a renovation of all its faculties. It constitutes the sinner a new creature, not in respect of his essence, but of his views, and habits, and inclinations. It is the introduction of a new and powerful principle into the soul, under the influence of which its natural faculties are exerted in a different manner from that in which they were formerly employed; and in this sense, '*old things pass away, and all things become new*'" (Dick). "No new faculties are created within him, rather are his original faculties enriched, ennobled, and empowered" (Pink). [2] It's a total change. Just as total is man's native depravity, so is his renewal in regeneration. Every faculty (intellect/affections/will) is renewed in part. "Regeneration is as all-pervasive as depravity. Theologians have spoken of total depravity, meaning not that man is as bad as he could be, but that no part of his being remains untainted by the influence of sin. Regeneration reverses that depravity, and is universal in the sense that, while the regenerate individual is not yet as holy as he or she might be, there is no part of life which remains uninfluenced by this renewing and cleansing work" (Ferguson). "According to the evangelical doctrine the whole soul is the subject of regeneration. It is neither the intellect to the exclusion of the feelings, nor the feelings to the exclusion of the intellect; nor is it the will alone, either in its wider or in its more limited sense, that is the subject of the change in question" (Hodge). "Regeneration consists in a new, spiritual, supernatural, vital principle, or habit of grace infused into the soul, the mind, the will, and affections, by the power of the Holy Spirit, disposing and enabling them in whom it is, unto spiritual, supernatural, vital actions and spiritual obedience" (Owen). [3] It's an instant change.³ Regeneration is an act not a process. "This great change is not a gradual and protracted process, but is instantaneous: in an instant of time the favored subject of it passes from death unto life" (Pink). [4] It's a powerful change. "The new creation is a far greater wonder than is the old: in the first creation there was nothing to oppose, but in the new all the powers of sin and Satan are set against it. Regeneration is not like the changing of water into wine,

² If regeneration wrought any such change upon man, as that he is not now the same person regenerated, as he was unregenerated; how does the Apostle say, 1Tim.1:13, *I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious?* then also grace, instead of converting, destroyed the sinner; and, consequently, no sinner yet was or shall be saved. Grace, therefore, makes no such physical change upon the natural being or essence of man: but the understanding, will, and affections are the same for nature and essence, in the regenerate as in the unregenerate; but only they are rectified and endowed with infused habits—Ezekiel Hopkins, [*Works*, vol.2, 224]

³ Some are converted in a very gradual fashion, with much vacillation between sorrow and joy, faith and unbelief, strife and victory, and falling and rising again. This is the common method which the Lord generally pursues in the conversion of most people. When I use the word '*gradually*,' I am referring to conversion in a comprehensive and broad sense; that is, from the first conviction until one consciously receives Christ. For it is otherwise a certainty that regeneration transpires in one moment, for the soul in one moment passes from death unto life. There is no intermediate state between being dead and alive—Wilhelmus a Brakel [*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vok.2, 238]

but of contrary into contrary – of hearts of stone into flesh, of wolves into lambs. This is greater than any miracle Christ showed, and therefore did He tell His apostles that, under the mighty enduement of the Holy Spirit, they should work '*greater works*' than He did (Jn.14:12)" (Pink). [5] It's a mysterious change. "All God's works are shrouded in impenetrable mystery. Life, natural life, in its origin, in its nature, its processes, baffles the most careful investigator. Much more is this the case with spiritual life. The Existence and Being of God transcends the finite grasp; how then can we expect to understand the process by which we became His children? Our Lord Himself declared that the new birth is a thing of mystery: '*The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence it comes, and where it goes, so is every one that is born of the Spirit*' (Jn.3:8)" (Pink).

(1) Ezek.11:19-20; Ezek.36:26-27; 2Cor.5:17; Eph.4:17-24

5. *Its result.* Regeneration is the imparting of new life to the soul, which results in the exercising of spiritual life. "There is a new foundation laid in the nature of the soul for a new kind of exercise" (Edwards). [1] Immediate result. The immediate result of regeneration is conversion, which includes repentance and faith. Regeneration ensures a favorable response to the gospel call. "The regenerate person is the person called into the fellowship of God's kingdom of glory and virtue, and regeneration pushes itself into consciousness and expresses itself in the exercises of faith and repentance" (Murray). [2] Habitual result. The habitual or consistent result of regeneration is a new and holy life. "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good" (Matt.12:33). "The infusion of divine grace, like the engrafting of a tree, alters, if I may speak so, the quality of the soul, so that, instead of the sour and crabbed fruits which it formerly produced, it now yields fruit of the most excellent kind, acceptable to God and to men" (Dick).⁴ This is especially clear in John's repeated use of the present tense verb (ongoing action) and perfect tense verb (completed action with abiding results), "you know that everyone who is practicing righteousness (present) is born of Him (perfect)" (1Jn.2:29; 4:7; 4:18; 5:1).⁵

Regeneration affects all the faculties of the soul; that is, intellect, will, and affections, as well as all the members of the body which are appointed to be instruments of righteousness. '*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new*' (2Cor.5:17). Everything is changed. The change is such that it is as if a dead person became alive and arose from the dead, as if a blind person received vision, as if a deaf person received hearing, and as if a crippled person walked. Nothing is changed perfectly, however, for the flesh remains, together with its motions and operations. This results in a battle between the flesh and the Spirit (Gal.5:17; Rom.7:23)—Wilhelmus a Brakel [*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol.2, 251]

(1) 1Jn.3:7-9; 1Jn.5:1-5

⁴ This deep-seated transformation must express itself in all the relations of life. The governing disposition, the character, the mind and will are renewed and so the person is now able to respond to the call of the gospel and enter into the privileges and blessings of the divine vocation. He is enabled to embrace Jesus Christ as freely offered in the gospel and to enter into this kingdom and fellowship. Formerly he was at enmity with God but now he comes to find in him his supreme delight. Formerly dead in sins, he is now alive to righteousness. Formerly sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, now he comes to walk in the light as God is in the light—John Murray [*Collected Writings*, vol.2, 171-172]

⁵ The heart in Scripture is that which thinks, feels, wills, and acts. It is the soul; the self. A new heart is, therefore, a new self, a new man. It implies a change of the whole character. It is a new nature. It implies a change of the whole character. It is a new nature. Out of the heart proceed all conscious, voluntary, moral exercises. A change of heart, therefore, is a change which precedes these exercises and determines their character—Charles Hodge [*Systematic Theology*, vol.3, 35]