

Regeneration

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

Regeneration is the sovereign work God the Holy Spirit of granting spiritual life to each Christian, raising them from the dead so that they are now able to repent and trust in Christ as a new creation.

SUMMARY

Regeneration is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit of granting spiritual life to dead sinners. This is not a work in which man contributes but is a work of God alone. Much as an infant receives no credit for being born, man receives no glory from being regenerated by God. Because man needs a grace with resurrection power, then any willful activity on his own part, including faith itself, cannot be the cause but the effect of the new birth. The grace of regeneration is the power of God that grants humans the ability to exercise faith and new inclinations towards God.

“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” ([John 3:2](#)). So said Jesus to Nicodemus. Nicodemus struggled to understand what Jesus meant. “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ([John 3:4](#)). Nicodemus failed to see that Jesus was using a human metaphor (birth) to describe a spiritual reality.

What is Regeneration?

As I explain in *Salvation by Grace*, regeneration refers to that “work of the Holy Spirit to unite the elect sinner to Christ by breathing new life into that dead and depraved sinner so as to raise him from spiritual death to spiritual life, removing his heart of stone and giving him a heart of flesh, so that he is washed, born from above and now able to repent and trust in Christ as a new creation.” It should also be added that “regeneration is the act of God alone and therefore it is monergistic in nature, accomplished by the sovereign act of the Spirit apart from and unconditioned upon man’s will to believe. In short, man’s faith does not cause regeneration but regeneration causes man’s faith” (127).

Notice several components of this definition.

1. Regeneration is the supernatural work of the Spirit.

Jesus attributes regeneration to the Spirit when he says to Nicodemus, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” ([John 3:5](#)). Jesus is echoing imagery from the prophet Ezekiel who said the Lord would “sprinkle clean water” on his people to make them clean (36:25) and put “my Spirit within you” (36:27).

2. Regeneration is not the work of man but of God alone.

The imagery of birth conveys this point. In birth a new life comes into this world. But it is silly to think that the infant deserves the credit. No, the infant is passive. Much more so in spiritual birth. The new birth is the work of God and God alone; the sinner is passive, being spiritually lifeless. If we return to [Ezekiel 36](#), and slightly change metaphors, one will notice that when Ezekiel describes the Spirit’s regenerating work, he says the sinner’s “heart of stone” must be removed and replaced with a “heart of flesh,” one that is not dead but alive (36:26). Only the Spirit can perform such a surgery on the unregenerate.

To say, then, that regeneration is a synergistic act, one in which God and the sinner must cooperate with one another, one in which the sinner can ultimately conquer God’s grace, is to give far too much credibility to the sinner’s ability. Synergism not only conditions God’s grace on the sinner’s will but fails to remember that the sinner is incapable of cooperating in the first place. The unregenerate sinner is not merely injured and in need of assisting grace; no, he is spiritually lifeless. He is not a man on the verge of drowning in the ocean merely in need of Jesus to throw him a life preserver. Rather, he has drowned and lay dead at the bottom of the ocean. Needed, then, is a resurrection. This is the way Paul speaks to the Ephesians: “you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked ... But God ... made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” ([Eph. 2:1, 4–5](#)).

3. Regeneration precedes faith.

It must. If man, prior to the regenerating work of the Spirit, is not merely maimed or injured but dead, and if what he needs is no mere assisting or cooperating grace but grace with resurrection power, then any willful activity on his own part, including faith itself, must not be the cause but the effect of the new birth. This makes more sense if we think about what the Spirit does in regeneration.

The word itself conveys that an awakening has taken place. The sinner was blind to Christ but now he can see. Previously his will only desired sin but now it has been given new inclinations to desire Christ. Man’s willful choice to trust in Christ is impossible unless the Spirit has liberated the will from its spiritual bondage in the first place.

In our experience, everything seems to happen all at once when we first believe in Jesus. But when we dissect God’s work, we can speak logically, recognizing that regeneration is not caused by faith, but faith is caused by regeneration. If we reverse that logical order in salvation, we condition the Spirit’s supernatural work on man’s will, which scripture never does. The focus is on God’s will instead: “Of his own will [God] brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” ([James 1:18](#)) and according “to his great mercy, [God] has caused us to be born again” ([1 Pet. 1:3](#)).

Hence, John does not say that everyone who believes will then be born of God but that everyone who believes “has been born of God” ([1 John 5:1](#)). Previously we were blind to the “light of the gospel” but when God said, “Let light shine out of darkness”, suddenly and instantaneously he “shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ ([2 Cor. 4:3–6](#)). Yes, the believer does choose Christ but that is only because the Spirit has breathed new life into his dead lungs and shined new light to open his blind eyes. We are like Lydia in the book of Acts; until the “Lord opened her heart” she did not believe in the Lord Jesus ([Acts 16:14](#)).

Furthermore, even when we speak of faith, we cannot forget that it is a gift of God (see [Acts 13:48–50](#); [Eph. 2:8–10](#); [Phil. 1:29–30](#); [2 Pet. 1:1](#)). It is not a gift God merely extends to the unregenerate; again, that would assume synergism and a will that is not in full bondage to sin. Rather, faith is an effectual gift, one that the Spirit must implant within so that the sinner trusts in Jesus. That means we cannot think of faith as “my doing.” Certainly, we do believe; God doesn’t believe for us. Nevertheless, we only believe *because* God has given us faith and effectually worked such faith within us in the first place. To say otherwise is to turn faith itself into a kind of work, divesting it of its divine origin.

FURTHER READING

- Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*
- Bruce Ware, Jerry Walls, Joseph Dongell, and Thomas Schreiner, [The Great Debate: Predestination and Free Will](#)
- John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*
- Matthew Barrett, *40 Questions About Salvation*. See an author interview [here](#).
- Matthew Barrett, *Salvation by Grace: The Case for Effectual Calling and Regeneration*. See an author interview [here](#) and [here](#).
- Matthew Barrett, Video interview: [What is the order of salvation?](#)
- Matthew Barrett and Kevin DeYoung, Video interview: [How Sovereign in God’s Grace?](#)
- Michael Horton and Roger Olson, Video interview: [For/Against Calvinism](#)

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