

Regeneration

by Robert Reymond from *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* 2nd Edition

Why do some people repent and respond by faith in Christ to the divine summons to faith while others do not? Concerning those who believe in Christ's name John immediately says in John 1:13: "[These are they] who have been begotten [egennēthēsan], not by blood, nor by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of a husband, but by God." By this particular reference to God's "begetting" activity John refers to regeneration, and clearly suggests by his statement that, while faith is the instrumental precondition to justification and adoption, regeneration is the necessary precondition and efficient cause of faith in Jesus Christ. In short, regeneration causally precedes faith.

This sequential order of "regeneration as the cause, faith in Jesus Christ as the effect" is supported by Jesus' statements in John 3:3, 5. When Jesus teaches that only those who have been "begotten from above" (anōthen) can "see" and "enter" the kingdom of God (figurative expressions for "faith activities"), he surely intends that regeneration is essential to faith as the latter's causal prius.

John's statement in 1 John 5:1, "Everyone who believes [pisteuōn] that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten [gegennētai] by God," also bears out the sequential cause and effect relationship between regeneration as cause and faith as effect. It is true, if one were to restrict his assessment of John's intended meaning to only this one verse, that one could conceivably argue that John, by his reference to regeneration, was simply saying something more, in a descriptive way, about everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ—that he "has been begotten by God," but that he need not be understood as suggesting that a cause and effect relationship exists

between God's regenerating activity and saving faith. But when one takes into account that John says in 1 John 3:9a that "everyone who has been begotten [gegennēmenos] by God does not do sin, because [hoti] his seed abides in him" and then in 1 John 3:9b that "he is not able to sin, because [hoti] he has been begotten [gegennētai—the word in 5:1] by God," we definitely find a cause and effect relationship between God's regenerating activity as the cause and the Christian's not sinning as one effect of that regenerating activity.

Then when he later makes the simple statement in 1 John 5:18 that "everyone who has⁷ In every other place where it occurs in the Gospel of John—3:31; 19:11, 23— anōthen, means "from above." been begotten [perfect tense] by God sins [present tense] not," though he does not say so in so many words, it is surely appropriate, because of his earlier pattern of speech in 1 John 3:9, to understand him to mean that the cause behind one's not sinning is God's regenerating activity. What is significant in 5:18 for 5:1 is his pattern of speech. When John declares in 5:1 that everyone who believes (pisteuōn) that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten (gegennētai) by God, it is highly unlikely that he intended simply to say about the Christian, in addition to the fact that he believes that Jesus is the Christ, that he has also been begotten of God and nothing more. His established pattern of speech would suggest that he intended to say that God's regenerating activity is the cause of one's believing that Jesus is the Christ, and conversely that such faith is the effect of that regenerating work.

When one adds to this Paul's insistence in Ephesians 2:1–4 that he and Christians generally

had been spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins until God, “who is rich in mercy, because of his great love by which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive [synezōpoiēsen—Paul’s term for regeneration] with Christ,” the conclusion cannot be avoided that God’s regenerating work must causally precede a man’s faith response to God’s summons to faith. Consequently, regeneration must be positioned before repentance unto life and faith in Jesus Christ in the *ordo salutis* as the cause of both. But since Romans 8:29–30 clearly teaches that glorification is the last act in the *ordo*, implying thereby, when Paul speaks earlier of calling, that he intended to teach that effectual calling is the first act in the “series of acts and processes” in the *ordo*, we may safely conclude that regeneration either follows upon calling or is the effecting force within calling which makes God’s summons effectual (I shall argue the case for the latter possibility later).

Accordingly, we have now established the following order of application: effectual calling, regeneration, repentance unto life and faith in Jesus Christ, justification, adoption, glorification.

REGENERATION (NEW BIRTH)

The Biblical Data

The framers of the Westminster standards offer no separate and distinct chapter or questions on regeneration, preferring to treat this doctrine, as we have already noted, within the context of effectual calling. But the Scriptures have much to say about this gracious work of the Spirit. Paul employs the word (palingenesia, “regeneration”) itself only once with reference to the spiritual renewal of an individual: “Not by works which we have done in righteousness but according to his mercy he saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). But he elaborates the doctrinal notion elsewhere under the terminology of (1) lifegiving resurrection with

Christ (Eph. 2:5—“when we were dead in trespasses, he made us alive with Christ”; Col. 2:13—“when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ”; see also Rom. 4:17) and (2) the divine work of new creation (2 Cor. 5:17—“if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation”; Gal. 6:15—“what counts is a new creation”; Eph. 2:10—“we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus”). Peter and James, as we noted in another context, speak respectively of God “begetting anew” (1 Pet. 1:23) and “bringing forth” (James 1:18).

It is particularly John, following the teaching of Jesus himself, however, who is in a unique sense the “theologian of the birth from above.” John records Jesus’ “birth from above [John 3:3, 7—, *gennēthēnai anōthen*] discourse” in John 3:1–15, and refers eleven times to God’s “begetting,” in John 1:13 (“who were begotten by God”), 1 John 2:29 (“by him he has been begotten”), 3:9 (“the one who has been begotten by God,” “by God he has been begotten”), 4:7 (“by God he has been begotten”), 5:1 (“by God he has been begotten,” “the One who begot,” “the one who has been begotten by him”), 5:4 (“whatever has been begotten by God”), and 5:18 (“the one who has been begotten by God,” “the one begotten by God”).

Its Effects

By this divine work the sinner is re-created in and to newness of life, has the defilement of his heart cleansed or “washed” away (Ezek. 36:25–26; John 3:5; Titus 3:5), and is enabled to “see” and to “enter” the kingdom of God by faith (John 3:3, 5). He is also enabled to believe in Jesus (John 1:12–13), to believe that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 5:1), to love others, particularly other Christians (1 John 4:7; 5:1); and to do righteousness and to shun the life of sin (1 John 3:9; 5:18).

Its Divine Monergism

Jesus expressly taught the divine monergism in regeneration when he declared: “No one can

come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws [hēlkysē] him” (John 6:44), “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (John 6:45), and “No one can come to me, unless it has been granted [ē dedomenon] him from the Father” (John 6:65). From the analogy which he drew between the wind’s natural operation and the Spirit’s regenerating work (John 3:8), Jesus taught, in addition to the facticity (“The wind blows”) and the efficacy (“and you hear the sound of it”) of the latter, both the sovereignty (“The wind blows wherever it pleases”) and the inscrutable mysteriousness (“you cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes”) of the Spirit’s regenerating work. And while Jesus declares that the birth “from above” is absolutely necessary (dei) for faith (John 3:7), he never preaches the “birth from above” in the imperative mood as if his auditor could in his own power produce it. By his metaphor of a “begetting from above” to describe the Spirit’s quickening work, Jesus underscored its divine monergism. J. I. Packer observes:

Infants do not induce, or cooperate in, their own procreation and birth; no more can those who are “dead in trespasses and sins” prompt the quickening operation of God’s Spirit within them (see Eph. 2:1–10). Spiritual vivification is a free, and to man mysterious, exercise of divine power (John 3:8), not explicable in terms of the combination or cultivation of existing human resources (John 3:6), not caused or induced by any human efforts (John 1:12–13) or merits (Titus 3:3–7), and not, therefore, to be equated with, or attributed to, any of the experiences, decisions, and acts to which it gives rise and by which it may be known to have taken place.

Jesus’ metaphor points up how erroneous is Arminianism’s synergistic construction of regeneration, which makes man’s spiritual

renewal dependent on his cooperation with grace, and liberalism’s vision of redemption, which denies the need for prevenient grace altogether. Regeneration is the precondition of repentance unto life and faith in Jesus Christ; it is not dependent upon these for its appearance in the Christian life.

Summary of the Doctrine

Regeneration is not the replacing of the substance of fallen human nature with another substance, nor simply the change in one or more of the faculties of the fallen spiritual nature, nor the perfecting of the fallen spiritual nature. Rather, it is the subconscious implanting of the principle of the new spiritual life in the soul, effecting an instantaneous change in the whole man, intellectually, emotionally, and morally, and enabling the elect sinner to respond in repentance and faith to the outward or public gospel proclamation directed to his conscious understanding and will. No extra-biblical words have captured better both the divine monergism and the inevitable effects of the Spirit’s regenerating work than the following verse from Charles Wesley’s great hymn, “And can it be that I should gain”:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
 Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray,
 I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
 I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

All this is illustrated in the case of Lydia, about whom Luke writes: “Lydia was listening, whose heart the Lord opened to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14).