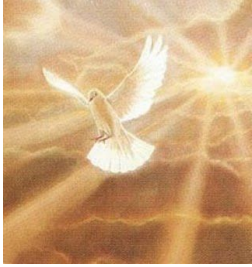


The New Man: A Study of Regeneration

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According to Scripture, fallen human beings possess two fundamental problems that present barriers to a relationship with God. The first problem is external and has to do with one's record. God provides his law as the revelation of his will for mankind. The members of the human race are each, in turn, violators of that law. Thus, the law breaker stands before the law maker, guilty as charged and without defense. The second problem is internal and has to do with one's heart. The law breaker inwardly despises the law and the law giver. In the face of these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, God provides a perfect record and a new heart.

In justification, God solves the problem of the sinner's record by declaring him righteous (Romans 4:5). God makes this declaration, not on the basis of anything that the sinner has done, but solely on the basis of the work of Christ for him (Galatians 2:16). The *broken record* of the law breaker is imputed to Christ who then bears the entire penalty of the law, fully satisfying its just requirements. Likewise, the *perfect record* of the Son is imputed to the guilty man, whereby God can truly declare him righteous in the sight of the law (2 Corinthians 5:21).

If legal innocence and imputed merit are all that is required to enter into a relationship with God, justification alone would be sufficient. The purpose of God in salvation, however, is not merely to create innocent people; nor is it to shape a people who only conform externally to God's law. As vital and necessary as these qualities are

for human beings to enter into fellowship with God, there is something deeper that salvation in Christ seeks to remedy. *God is seeking to create a people who love him.* Salvation in Christ aims to fashion a people who not only obey God's commands externally, but do so out of the overflow of their delight in God. Through the mouth of the prophet, God laments that, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13).¹ More than outward reformation is required to become the people God seeks. What is required is inward transformation. To the sinner's problem before the law, God provides atonement, forgiveness, and a righteousness not his own. But in addition to these glorious provisions, in Christ God provides the redeemed with a new heart whereby the God-hater is transformed into a God-lover. This transformation of heart is known as regeneration.

REGENERATION DEFINED

The Scripture speaks of regeneration in terms of an individual transformation (Titus 3:5) as well as the final transformation of the whole created order (Matthew 19:28). It is on the first aspect of regeneration that this paper is focused. Regeneration from this perspective is that act by which God supernaturally causes the human heart to seek out what it did not want previously. As J. I. Packer describes:

In regeneration, God implants desires that were not there before: desire for God, for holiness, and for the hallowing and glorifying of God's name in this world; desire to pray, worship, love, serve, honor, and please God; desire to show love and bring benefit to others.²

¹All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984).

²J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), p. 170.

Far from being a mere resolution to change one's external behavior, regeneration is a miraculous change of heart whereby God the Holy Spirit causes his former enemies to turn from sin, run to the Savior, and live for the praise of his glory. Several metaphors are used in Scripture to illustrate this concept. Four of the major biblical analogies for regeneration are as follows: new birth, new heart, new creation, and new life.

Perhaps the most well-known metaphor in Scripture with respect to regeneration is the concept of *new birth*. In his nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). The Apostles also make frequent use of the new-birth imagery (1 Peter 1:23 and 1 John 3:9). The Christian is described as one who has been born a second time, or "born of God" (1 John 5:18).

Another important analogy in Scripture concerning regeneration is the idea of a *new heart*. Under the mosaic covenant, God promised to bless Israel on the condition that they would be obedient to his law (Exodus 19:5). However, in that covenant agreement, no provision was given to change the people of the covenant internally. It was an external call to love and obey God without any promise or supply of inward transformation. As Charles Leiter explains, "This is always the relationship between law and the unregenerate man. Law comes to him from the outside and imposes standards on him that he hates. Law tells him what he ought to do, but gives him neither the desire nor the power to do it."³ It is no surprise, therefore, that the people failed to keep the terms of the covenant. Conversely, the great promise of the New Covenant is that—in addition to the command to love and obey—God promises to supply a new heart, one filled with desire for his law: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from

³Charles Leiter, *Justification and Regeneration* (Hannibal, MO: Granted Ministries Press, 2009), p. 66.

you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:26–27). Again God says through Jeremiah, “I will give them a heart to know me” (Jeremiah 24:7).

To prevent regeneration from being misunderstood as the new arrangement of something already in existence, Scripture also utilizes the imagery of a *new creation*. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Apostle Paul brings to mind the primordial command of creation and connects it to the regeneration of the believer: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Just as God created the universe out of nothing, so too the believer is an entirely new work of creation. God speaks into the void of the fallen soul and, by the sheer force of his word, brings into being that which was not previously there.

Overlapping and reinforcing the previous metaphors, Scripture paints a portrait of the regenerate man as one who has experienced resurrection from death, or one who possesses *new life*. Paul reminds the Ephesian believers, “You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world . . . But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (Ephesians 2:1–5). Moving beyond a merely reformed person, the Scriptures describe the Christian in terms of a corpse that has been resurrected to life. “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ” (Colossians 2:13).

Each metaphor used in Scripture to describe regeneration helps to illuminate another facet of this great work of God. But do these metaphors have any qualities in common? By putting this multi-faceted imagery together, a complete picture of biblical regeneration emerges.

REGENERATION IS PASSIVE

Babies do not assist their mothers as they give them birth. Creatures do not assist the Creator in his work of creation. A cadaver has no ability to resurrect itself. And human beings have no capacity to cause their hearts to want what it does not desire. Each of these biblical metaphors points to the utterly passive nature of man in the work of regeneration. This inward transformation is something that is done *to* the Christian, outside of the Christian, and apart from his aid or cooperation. The Christian no more cooperates or assists in his own regeneration than did Lazarus assist in his own resurrection. If, however, regeneration is not the work of man, then it follows that it is totally the work of God. As Wayne Grudem explains:

In some of the elements of the application of redemption that we discuss in subsequent chapters, we play an active part (this is true, for example, of conversion, sanctification and perseverance). But in the work of regeneration we play no active role at all. It is instead totally a work of God. We see this, for example, when John talks about those to whom Christ gave power to become children of God—they “were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). Here John specifies that 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.⁴

That regeneration is the work of God alone destroys any remnant of boasting in man and exalts the gospel of grace. What contribution can a corpse make to his resurrection? What boasting can an infant make in her birth? It is humbling to realize that even the very desire for God in the Christian’s heart is a gift that God has mercifully granted (Philippians 1:29).

⁴Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), p. 699.

Christians are spiritually alive, only because God has called them from the tomb and “raised them up in Christ” (Colossians 3:1). Christians pursue and desire the will of God, only because God causes them “to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

REGENERATION PRECEDES FAITH

The various illustrations that are used in Scripture to describe regeneration all point to an *initiating event* that precedes any action on the part of the Christian. The baby is born before she can cry out to her mother. The dead man is resurrected before he can take one step toward Christ. In the same way, God regenerates the sinner *prior* to the sinner turning to Christ in faith. A common misunderstanding in the evangelical church today is that a sinner must first come to Christ in faith and repentance before he or she can be born again. As Billy Graham states, “Thus, repentance is first, and absolutely necessary, if we are to be born again.”⁵ But how can a heart of stone repent and believe on Christ, unless it is first changed into a heart of flesh? Sam Storms replies to this misconception: “To suggest that a person can *act* spiritually before he *exists* spiritually, that he can behave before he is born, is not only ridiculous but also undermines the force of the analogy between physical begetting and spiritual begetting.”⁶ Thus, one can no more tell someone how to be born again than to instruct a pre-born child on how to come into the world. “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ *is* born of God” (emphasis added, 1 John 5:1). According to John, saving faith is not the cause of regeneration but, rather, it is the outward evidence that regeneration has already taken place.

⁵Billy Graham, *How to Be Born Again* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1977), p. 178.

⁶Sam Storms, *Chosen for Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), p. 152.

This belief that faith precedes the new birth (sometimes called decisional regeneration) can lead to a subtle form of works salvation. It undermines the biblical teaching that the sinner is utterly helpless regarding the matter of salvation to do anything to remedy his situation. It also weakens the understanding of the true depth of human depravity. The unregenerate man will never come to Christ prior to regeneration because he does not *want* Christ prior to regeneration (John 6:65). How then can God command a person to come to Christ if they are morally unable to do so apart from his intervention? This is possible because, in regeneration, God grants what he commands. Anthony Hoekema explains that God gives the powerless sinner the very ability to do what he commands:

A good illustration is Jesus' healing of the paralytic. Jesus said to the man, "Get up, take your mat and go home" (Matt. 9:6). But the poor man was not able to get up; he was paralyzed. Yet Jesus told him to get up. As Jesus did so, he bestowed on the man strength enabling him to get up.⁷

A proper understanding of God's initiative in regeneration—and man's helplessness to take even the first step in salvation—magnifies the mercy and grace of God in human redemption.

REGENERATION IS THE PREROGATIVE OF GOD

Jesus likens the operation of God in the new birth to the wind. "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). Like the wind, regeneration is mysterious and unpredictable. It is the sovereign choice of God to decide upon whom this wind of mercy will blow. As God proclaims to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Exodus 33:19). If God were

⁷Anthony Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), p. 111.

presiding over a mass of righteous humanity, his just nature would compel him to bless them all. But like Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, God moves over a cemetery of corpses and "gives life to whomever he pleases" (John 5:21). To an army of rebels, God owes nothing but his displeasure and righteous scorn. It is truly an act of amazing grace that God would choose to quicken some and transform them from God-haters into adopted sons and daughters (1 John 3:1).

REGENERATION IS NECESSARY

Contrary to the notion of some special category of Christian, the *born-again Christian* is the only kind of Christian there is. If (as it has been shown) regeneration precedes and enables the sinner to come to Christ in faith, then it becomes clear that regeneration is essential to salvation. The Scripture has no category for an unregenerate follower of Christ. Apart from this supernatural change of heart, the fallen man will never understand the kingdom (John 3:3), desire the kingdom (1 Corinthians 2:14), or turn to Christ and enter the kingdom (John 6:44).

REGENERATION IS A RADICAL CHANGE

The biblical images of resurrection, new birth, new creation and a new heart destroy any idea of regeneration as a casual step toward God. Unlike a new year's resolution or a decision to go on a diet (which represent a change of behavior) regeneration is a fundamental change of *nature*. To be sure, behavioral change will accompany this new life in Christ, but not because of greater resolve. Rather, external change will come as the result of a radical (or root) change within (Matthew 12:33). Hoekema's comments on this are helpful:

The heart in Scripture stands for the inner core of the person, the center of all activities, the fountain out of which all the streams of mental and spiritual experiences flow: thinking, feeling, willing believing, praising, and so on. It is this fountain which is renewed in regeneration.⁸

⁸Hoekema, p. 104.

CONCLUSION

Regeneration is that core change of nature that precedes and enables conversion of the sinner. It is the sovereign act of God alone that invades the fallen heart and takes it captive for Christ. In an era when nominal Christianity is common, everyone who professes faith must be confronted with God's descriptors of regeneration. Can one's experience in Christ be best described as a second birth or resurrection from the dead? The reality of regeneration will manifest itself differently in each believer, but every one who has been born from above will have this in common: they will desire Christ, run to Christ, and remain in Christ.

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