



The Salvation Equation: {Grace > Atonement} Man can now respond: + Repentance + Faith → (and God answers) Conversion + Regeneration + Justification + Adoption → Sanctification
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3/17 Grace

3/24 Atonement

3/31 Repentance

4/7 Pr. Robin's Testimony

4/14 Faith

4/21 Conversion

4/28 Regeneration

5/5 Justification

5/12 Adoption

5/19 Sanctification

BEGINNING

PROMO:

*Have you ever wondered if God really sees you?
 Have you ever wondered if God really can love you?
 Have you ever wondered if God could really forgive your horrible past?
 Have you ever felt worthless even though you love Jesus?
 If we ever have, then we do not understand what happened when we met Jesus at Salvation.
 Come, find out what Jesus' love really does:
 Soteriology – a.k.a. The Salvation Principle
 Beginning March 17th, Pr. Orleen and the Wednesday Night Crew as we unpack the meaning of our SALVATION.*

Soteriology is the branch of theology dealing with the study of salvation. The term comes from the Greek soterion, "salvation," and is also related to soter, "savior." **Soteriology** relates to several other branches of theology in that it asks who is saved, by whom, from what, and by what means.

- How I met Jesus:
- Biggest hurdle Jesus and I have walked over:
- Jesus surprised me with/when:
- Jesus shows His love to me when:

"Eternal life was the life which Jesus Christ exhibited on the human plane, and it is the same life, not a copy of it, which is manifested in our mortal flesh when we are born of God. Eternal life is not a gift from God, eternal life is the gift of God. The energy and the power which was manifested in Jesus will be manifested in us by the sheer sovereign grace of God when once we have made the moral decision about sin...The life that was in Jesus is made ours by means of His cross when once we make the decision to be identified with Him. If it is difficult to get right with God, it is because we will not decide definitely about sin. Immediately we do decide, the full life of God comes in. Jesus came to give us endless supplies of life: "that you may be fill with all the fullness of God"...The weakest saint can experience the power of the deity of the Son of God once he is willing to "let go". Any strand of our own energy will blur the life of Jesus. We have to keep letting go, and slowly and surely the great full life of God will invade us in every part, and men will take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus." Oswald Chambers

On forgiveness

I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says "Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology, I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before." But excusing says "I see that you couldn't help it or didn't mean it, you weren't really to blame." . . . Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.

From *The Weight of Glory* Compiled in *Words to Live By*

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“Eternal life is not a gift *from* God, eternal life is the gift *of* God.” Oswald Chambers

Hebrews 10:7 HCSB

Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the actual form of those realities, it can never perfect the worshipers by the same sacrifices they continually offer year after year. ² Otherwise, wouldn't they have stopped being offered, since the worshipers, once purified, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in the sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ **For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.**

⁵ Therefore, as He was coming into the world, He said:

You did not want sacrifice and offering, but You prepared a body for Me.

⁶ You did not delight in whole burnt offerings and sin offerings.

⁷ Then I said, “See— it is written about Me in the volume of the scroll—I have come to do Your will, God!”

⁸ After He says above, You did not want or delight in sacrifices and offerings, whole burnt offerings and sin offerings (which are offered according to the law), ⁹ He then says, See, I have come to do Your will. **He takes away the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ By this will of God, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.**

OPENING:

Where we have been

Tonight where we are going

HOW one can live this/Ramifications on/in our life

You've got about 30 seconds to capture people's interest or lose them.

- The best way to do this is to establish common ground.
- Tell a story.
- Talk about a tension or problem everyone faces.

Introduce the subject in a way that establishes why it matters.

Orient people to your topic (talk about the series, where you're at and why it matters).

“And I will give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”

John 10:28 (NKJV)

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- What happens when we pray the prayer of Salvation?
- Are we scrubbed clean? Or???
- Do you ever feel like you are not really saved?
- Do you question how much God has forgiven...if there are some things that He has not?
- Do you ever feel like your sins are just too big for God to forgive?
- Is there something you can do to lose your salvation?

Recap Last Week:

CONVERSION

1. What is Conversion? 2. How does it happen (What does it look like)? 3. What is the H.S. role? 4. Any external evidences?

[Conversion = Turning. Regeneration = Renew/Born Again].

Regeneration is the outward evidence of Conversion.

Your Knowledge of Christ and Your Faith in Christ move you to Conversion:

- God is the Originating cause of Conversion [**Grace + Atonement**]
- Man is the Moving cause of Conversion [**Repentance + Faith**]
- The Word is the Instrumental cause of Conversion. [Faith come by hearing the Word of God] Rom10:17

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Opening Prayer: **Luke 24:25**

Then He opened their mind to understand the Scriptures.

REGENERATION

[Conversion = Turning. Regeneration = Renew/Born Again].

Regeneration is the outward evidence of Conversion.

Christians are not just “Nice People”; they are, or are supposed to be, NEW people.

C. S. Lewis in his *Mere Christianity*,

¹**re•gen•er•ate** \-rət\ *adjective*

[Middle English *regenerat*, from Latin *regeneratus*, past participle of *regenerare* to regenerate, from *re-* + *generare* to beget—more at GENERATE] 15th century

1: formed or created again

2: spiritually reborn or converted

3: restored to a better, higher, or more worthy state—re•gen•er•ate•ly adverb—**re•gen•er•ate•ness** *noun*

²**re•gen•er•ate** \ri-'je-nə-,rāt\ *verb intransitive*

1541

1: to become formed again [Star fish?]

2: to become regenerate: REFORM

3: to undergo regeneration verb transitive

1 a: to subject to spiritual regeneration

b: to change radically and for the better

2 a: to generate or produce anew *especially:* to replace (a body part) by a new growth of tissue

b: to produce again chemically sometimes in a physically changed form

3: to restore to original strength or properties—re•gen•er•a•ble \-'je-nə-rə-bəl, -'jen-rə-\ *adjective*¹

“Regenerate REGEN'ERATE, verb transitive [Latin *regenero*; *re* and *genero*. See Generate.]

1. To generate or produce anew; to reproduce. Through all the soil a genial ferment spreads, Regenerates the plants and new adorns the meads. Blackmore.

2. In theology, **to renew the heart by a change of affections; to change the heart and affections from natural enmity to the love of God; to implant holy affections in the heart.** Scott. Addison.

Regenerate REGEN'ERATE, adjective [Latin *regeneratus*.] Reproduced. Shak.

1. Born anew; renovated in heart; changed from a natural to a spiritual state. Milton. Wake. Regenerated REGEN'ERATED, participle passive Reproduced.

2. Renewed; born again.

Regenerateness REGEN'ERATENESS, noun The state of being regenerated. Regenerating REGEN'ERATING, participle of the present tense Reproducing.”

Regeneration REGENERA'TION, noun Reproduction; the act of producing anew.

1. In theology, new birth by the grace of God; that change by which the will and natural enmity of man to God and his law are subdued, and a principle of supreme love to God and his law, or holy affections, are implanted in the heart.

He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. Titus ---.

¹ Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). [Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary](#). (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

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Regeneratory REGEN'ERATORY, adjective Renewing; having the power to renew; tending to reproduce or renovate. — *American Dictionary of the English Language by Noah Webster 1828*

IN SCIENCE: Starfish

COMMON NAME: Starfish (Sea Stars)

SCIENTIFIC NAME: Asteroidea

TYPE: Invertebrates

DIET: Carnivore

SIZE: 4.7 to 9.4 inches

WEIGHT: Up to 11 pounds

AVERAGE LIFE SPAN IN THE WILD: Up to 35 years



Marine scientists have undertaken the difficult task of replacing the beloved starfish's common name with sea star because, well, the starfish is not a fish. It's an echinoderm, closely related to sea urchins and sand dollars.

Population

There are some 2,000 species of sea star living in all the world's oceans, from tropical habitats to the cold seafloor. The five-arm varieties are the most common, hence their name, but species with 10, 20, and even 40 arms exist.

Defensive Adaptations

They have bony, calcified skin, which protects them from most predators, and many wear striking colors that camouflage them or scare off potential attackers. Purely marine animals, there are no freshwater sea stars, and only a few live in brackish water.

Regeneration

Beyond their distinctive shape, sea stars are famous for their ability to regenerate limbs, and in some cases, entire bodies. They accomplish this by housing most or all of their vital organs in their arms. Some require the central body to be intact to regenerate, but a few species can grow an entirely new sea star just from a portion of a severed limb.

Titus 3:5 HCSB

⁵ He saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Are we not a missing limb creature until we are REGENERATED by Christ's Love?

1.) What is REGENERATION? [Role of H.S. in Reg. Why do we need it? How do we respond to it?]

John 3:3 "Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again(from above)." **Footnotes:** a. [John 3:3](#) The Greek for *again* also means *from above*; also in verse 7. {Nicodemus John 3:1-23}

Reformation: human work, external change, changes conduct, self-effort, human attainment
(e.g. New Year's resolution)

Regenerate: divine work, internal change, changes character, transforms, new life, requirement
(born again)

An *inner* work in man's *nature*.

- It is not: **Restoration** (the action of returning something to a former owner, place, or condition)
Cleaned up. Redone. Scrubbed up brand new.

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- It is: **Born Again.**

Regeneration IS:

(a.) The beginning of new spiritual life, implanted in us by the Holy Spirit, enabling us to repent and believe.

John 3:3-8 HCSB

³ Jesus replied, "I assure you: Unless someone is born again [from above],^[a] he cannot see the kingdom of God."

⁴ "But how can anyone be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked Him. "Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?"

⁵ Jesus answered, "I assure you: **Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit,**^[b] he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I told you that you [plural-yous]^[c] must be born again. ⁸ The wind^[d] blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Footnotes: a. [John 3:3](#) The Greek for *again* also means *from above*; also in verse 7. {Nicodemus John 3:1-23}

b. d. The Gk word *pneuma* can mean wind, spirit, or Spirit, each of which occurs in this context.

Ezekiel 11:19 HCSB

And I will give them one heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove their heart of stone from their bodies and give them a heart of flesh,

Ezekiel 36:26-27 HCSB

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone^[a] and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will place My Spirit within you and cause[move] you to follow My statutes and carefully observe My ordinances.

a. [Ezekiel 36:26](#) Lit stone from your flesh

Ezekiel 37 :1-14 The Valley of Dry Bones

(b.) The first manifestation of the implanted new life

James 1:18

By His own choice, He gave us a new birth by the message of truth so that we would be the firstfruits of His creatures.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things [all new things] have come.

(c.) Instrumental Cause [Just like in Conversion]

1 Peter 1:23

since you have been born again—not of perishable seed but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God.

Ephesians 5:25b-27 HCSB

*just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her to make her holy, **cleansing her with the washing of water by the word.***

²⁷ He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless.

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“Regeneration is that supernatural and instantaneous change wrought by the Holy Spirit in the nature of the individual who receives the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not an evolutionary change, but a revolutionary one.”

Harold M. Frelich

What Regeneration is NOT: Does not happen during water or HS baptism. Not immediate perfection.

2.) What is the Role of the Holy Spirit in REGENERATION. [He is the AGENT of]

Titus 3:5 HCSB

⁵ He saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

[Not the washing of almost clean: Stained shirt or the Smell that never really goes away]

3.) Why do we need REGENERATION?

(a.) To Go from Flesh to Spirit

John 3:6 HCSB

Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.

1 Corinthians 15:45 HCSB

⁴⁵ So it is written: The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit.

[Gen 2:7]

(b.) To have our spirit born anew

1 Peter 1:3-5

³ Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to His great mercy, He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, uncorrupted, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. ⁵ You are being protected by God’s power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

(c.) To live our spiritual life NOW and inherit eternal life in the age to come.

Luke 18:29-30 HCSB

²⁹ So He said to them, “I assure you: There is no one who has left a house, wife or brothers, parents or children because of the kingdom of God, ³⁰ who will not receive many times more at this time, and eternal life in the age to come.”

Matthew 19:28 HCSB

*²⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the **renewal** of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*

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4.) What is our Response to REGENERATION? *LIVE Be Holy*

1 Peter 1:13-25

A Call to Holy Living

¹³ Therefore, with your minds ready for action,^[1] be serious and set your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires of your former ignorance. ¹⁵ **But as the One who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct;** ¹⁶ for it is written, Be holy, because I am holy.^[1]

¹⁷ And if you address as Father the One who judges impartially based on each one's work, you are to conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your temporary residence. ¹⁸ For you know that you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from the fathers, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. ²⁰ He was chosen^[2] before the foundation of the world but was revealed at the end of the times for you ²¹ who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

²² By obedience to the truth,^[1] having purified yourselves^[m] for sincere love of the brothers, love one another earnestly^[n] from a pure^[o] heart, ²³ since you have been born again—not of perishable seed but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For

All flesh is like grass,

and all its glory like a flower of the grass.

The grass withers, and the flower falls,

²⁵ *but the word of the Lord endures forever.^[p]*

And this is the word that was preached as the gospel to you.

- i. [1 Peter 1:13](#) Lit *Therefore, when you have the loins of your mind girded*
- j. [1 Peter 1:16](#) [Lv 11:44-45](#); [19:2](#); [20:7](#)
- k. [1 Peter 1:20](#) Or *foreknown*
- l. [1 Peter 1:22](#) Other mss add *through the Spirit*
- m. [1 Peter 1:22](#) Or *purified your souls*
- n. [1 Peter 1:22](#) Or *intensely*
- o. [1 Peter 1:22](#) Other mss omit *pure*
- p. [1 Peter 1:25](#) [Is 40:6-8](#)

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO LIVE HOLY?

ANY TESTIMONIES ABOUT A CHOICE MADE OR NOT MADE TO DO THIS?

What are supposed to do now that we know this:

Remind people of the call to action, reflect on what will happen if they do it (some inspiration), and then often repeating the bottom line of the message.

Closing Prayer:

Jude 24 HCSB

²⁴ *Now to Him who is able to protect you from stumbling
and to make you stand in the presence of His glory,*

blameless and with great joy,

²⁵ *to the only God our Savior,*

through Jesus Christ our Lord,

be glory, majesty, power, and authority before all time, now and forever. Amen.

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NOTES:

1 Peter 1:3

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. [Ⓐ] According to His great mercy, [Ⓑ] He has given us a new birth [Ⓒ] into a living hope [Ⓓ] through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [Ⓔ]

Romans 6:4

⁴ Therefore we have been [Ⓐ] buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was [Ⓑ] raised from the dead through the [Ⓒ] glory of the Father, so we too might walk in [Ⓓ] newness of life.

Galatians 6:15

¹⁵ For [Ⓐ] neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a [Ⓑ] new [Ⓒ] creation.

John 1:13; 3:3, 3:5, 3:8; 1 John 2:29, 3:9, 5:18, 4:7, 5:1

Words used to describe Regeneration: John 1:13, 3:5, 3:7, 3:8, 5:24; Ephesians 2:10, 4:24; 1 John 2:20, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 5:18

2 Peter 3:13 Holman Christian Standard Bible

¹³ But based on His promise, we wait for the new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell.

Regeneration

Greek expression: *paliggenesia*

Pronunciation: *pahl eeng gehn eh SEE uh*

Strong's Number: 3824

KEY VERSES

Matthew 19:28; Titus 3:5

Anyone who experiences any kind of winter looks forward to springtime, for that is a season of “regeneration.” Flowers bud and bloom, birds return and sing. Unfortunately, it never lasts. Spring goes into summer, summer into autumn, autumn into winter.

People throughout the ages have longed for an eternal spring, a “regeneration” of the pristine earth. Secular writers spoke of such a regeneration. For example, the Stoic philosophers considered regeneration to be a return to a former state of existence. For the biblical writers, however, regeneration means a renewal on a higher level. It is a “radically new beginning,” rather than a mere restoration of previous conditions. **This renewal is twofold: it occurs within people’s spirits and it will occur when God recreates a new heaven and a new earth.**

The regeneration of a person is spoken about in Titus 3:5. Paul said, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” The Greek word for “washing” can signify the receptacle of washing (the *laver*) or the act of washing itself. In Ephesians 5:26, the only other New Testament occurrence of *paliggenesia*, the natural meaning is “washing.” Quite simply, the text says that “regeneration” is characterized by, or accompanied by, the action of washing. The regenerative activity of the Holy Spirit is characterized elsewhere in Scripture as “cleansing and purifying” (Ezek. 36:25–27; John 3:5). The Greek term for regeneration, *paliggenesia*, literally means “birth again”—indicating a new birth effected by the Holy Spirit (John 3:6; Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6). Thus God saves people through one process with two aspects: the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Regeneration is not just a nice idea or a good philosophy. The Bible insists that regeneration is absolutely necessary. Apart from it, all persons are dead in trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1–3). An unregenerated person is unable to understand the things of God, and no amount of good works can change him or her (1 Cor. 2:14; Titus 3:5). This is why Jesus insisted, in His dialogue with Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (John 3:7, NASB). God’s first plan is to regenerate people. Then, He will regenerate the universe, in that He will establish a new world order at His return (Matt. 19:28). The ultimate goal of regeneration is the creation of a new heaven and earth that will be totally

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righteous and without sin (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). The present working of the Holy Spirit in the believer is a foretaste of this future cosmic regeneration (Eph. 1:13–14).²

regeneration *Spiritual rebirth caused supernaturally by the Holy Spirit. Some Christian groups believe that regeneration takes place through or is symbolized by baptism or justification (John 1:12; 3:1–10; Gal. 4:23–29; James 1:15–18; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23; 1 John 2:29). Regeneration, decision for Christ, conversion, and being born again are commonly used as synonyms. However, R. A. Torrey defined regeneration as the new life entering the inner person whereas conversion refers to the outward state of restoration and baptism of the Spirit to the empowerment for Christian service.*³

III. REGENERATION

A. The Meaning of Regeneration

The word, used only twice in the New Testament (Matt. 19:28; Titus 3:5), means to be born again. To be born from above (*anōthen*) occurs in John 3:3 and probably includes the idea of being born again also (see the use of *anōthen* in Gal. 4:9). It is the work of God that gives new life to the one who believes.

B. The Means of Regeneration

God regenerates (John 1:13) according to His will (James 1:18) through the Holy Spirit (John 3:5) when a person believes (1:12) the Gospel as revealed in the Word (1 Pet. 1:23).

C. The Relation of Regeneration and Faith

In the Reformed statement of the *ordo salutis*, regeneration precedes faith, for, it is argued, a sinner must be given new life in order to be able to believe. Although this is admittedly stated only as a logical order, it is not wise to insist even on that; for it may as well be argued that if a sinner has the new life through regeneration, why does he need to believe? Of course, there can be no chronological order; both regeneration and faith have to occur at the same moment. To be sure, faith is also part of the total package of salvation that is the gift of God (Eph. 2:9); yet faith is commanded in order to be saved (Acts 16:31). Both are true.

D. The Fruit of Regeneration

The new life will bear new fruit. In 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, and 18, some of the results of the new life include righteousness, not committing sin, loving one another, and overcoming the world.⁴

BAPTISM—a ritual commanded by Christ to be practiced in the church (Matt. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16). It is applied in various forms by different denominations and branches of the Christian church. Baptism involves the application of water to the body of a person. It is essentially an action of obedient response to Christ's lordship, following repentance and faith (Acts 2:38–39). It is frequently seen as the act by which the believer enters the fellowship of the church. While widely differing interpretations of the act exist among Christian groups who have different views on the nature of baptism, the importance of this practice should never be minimized in the light of Christ's command.

The nature of baptism. Four positions on the nature of baptism and the early church's practice (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 36–39; 9:18; 10:48, etc.) exist among Christian groups.

The sacramental view—According to this belief, baptism is a means by which God conveys grace. By undergoing this rite, the person baptized receives remission of sins, and is regenerated or given a new nature and an awakened or strengthened faith. Both Roman Catholics and Lutherans have this view of the nature of baptism, born of their interpretation of John 3:5.

The traditional Roman Catholic belief emphasizes the rite itself—that the power to convey grace is contained within administration of the sacrament of baptism. The Lutheran view concentrates on the faith that is present in the person being baptized; awakened faith due to the preaching of the Word of God.

² Carpenter, E. E., & Comfort, P. W. (2000). In *Holman treasury of key Bible words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew words defined and explained* (p. 375). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

³ Kurian, G. T. (2001). In *Nelson's new Christian dictionary: the authoritative resource on the Christian world*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁴ Ryrie, C. C. (1999). *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (p. 376). Chicago, IL: Moody Press.

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The covenantal view—Some other Christian groups view baptism as a sign and seal of God's covenant, or God's pledge to save man. That is, because of what He has done and what He has promised, God forgives and regenerates. Thus, on the one hand, baptism is a sign of the covenant; on the other, it is the means by which people enter into that covenant and its benefits are obtained.

In the covenantal view, baptism serves the same purpose for New Testament believers that circumcision did for Old Testament believers, these two procedures being linked in Colossians 2:11-12.

The symbolical view—This view stresses the symbolic nature of baptism by emphasizing that baptism does not cause an inward change or alter a person's relationship to God in any way, but is a token or outward indication of an inner change already occurred in the believer's life. It serves as a public testimony.

This position explains that the church practices baptism and the believer submits to it because Jesus commanded that this be done and He gave us the example by being baptized Himself. Thus, baptism is an act of obedience, commitment, and proclamation (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, 16).

The dynamic view—Increasing numbers of Christians see elements of truth in other viewpoints, but find their focus on the power (dynamic) inherent in the Holy Spirit's presence at baptism. While repentance and faith must precede the moment, and new birth has been experienced, water baptism is seen as a moment (1) at which a breaking of past bonds to sin may be severed, as Israel's oppressors were defeated—1 Cor. 10:2; (2) when a commitment to separate from the past life of carnal indulgence is made, as circumcision symbolized—Col. 2:11-15; and (3) when the fullness or overflowing of the Holy Spirit's power may be added to enhance the believer's power for witness and ministering (Acts 2:38, 39). This position sees baptism as both a witness and as an encounter. It is symbolic (burial to the past—Rom. 6:3-4) but it is also releasing and empowering for the future.

The subjects of baptism. Christian groups differ as to who should be baptized. Should only those who have come to a personal, conscious decision of faith be baptized? Or, should children be included in this rite? And if children are proper subjects, should all children, or only the children of believing parents, or only children professing personal faith, be baptized?

Infant baptism—Groups that practice baptism of infants baptize not only infants but also adults who have come to faith in Christ. An argument in favor of baptizing infants is that entire households were baptized in New Testament times (Acts 16:15, 33). Some conclude these households must have included children; consequently this practice should be extended to the present day.

A second argument cited is Jesus' treatment of children. Jesus commanded the disciples to bring the children to Him. When they did so, He blessed them (Mark 10:13-16). Because of this example from Jesus, it would seem inconsistent to deny baptism to children today. Interestingly, this same text is the grounds quoted by those who will baptize a child, but only one old enough to have made a personal profession of faith in Jesus.

A third argument put forth by covenant theologians is that children were participants in the Old Testament covenant (Gen. 17:7). Since baptism has now replaced circumcision, these say it seems proper that it should be administered to children, according to those who practice infant baptism.

Those who believe in baptismal regeneration (Catholics especially) argue that baptism of infants is necessary. In traditional Roman Catholic teaching, unbaptized infants who die cannot enter heaven in this state, but are instead consigned to a state of limbo. If this fate is to be avoided, they must be baptized in order to remove the guilt of their sins and receive new life.

Most of the Lutheran tradition would apply baptism only to children of believers, and are careful to emphasize that this whole area of belief is a mystery, known only to God.

Regarding the matter of baptizing infants, the most generous Christian view seems to be in the willingness of many to (1) honor the concerns that prompt infant baptism, and not denigrate the practice, and (2) emphasize the need for personal faith in Jesus Christ, at the earliest possible age of understanding, faith, and repentance.

Believer's baptism—Those who hold to this view believe that baptism should be restricted to those who actually exercise faith. This approach excludes babies or infants, who could not possibly have such faith, but in many cases receives children. The proper candidates for baptism are those who already have experienced the new birth on the basis of their personal faith and who give evidence of this salvation in their lives.

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Both positive and negative arguments are advanced in support of this view. The positive approach argues from evidence in the New Testament. In every instance of New Testament baptism in which the specific identity of the persons was known, the persons being baptized were adults. Further, the condition required for baptism was personal, conscious faith; without this, adherents of believer's baptism point out, baptism was not administered. This is especially evident in the Book of Acts (2:37-41; 8:12; 10:47; 18:8; 19:4-5), as well as Matthew 3:2-6 and 28:19. In the New Testament church repentance and faith came first, followed by baptism.

The form of baptism. A final major issue is the method or form of baptism—whether by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. On this issue, Christian groups organized into two major camps—those which insist upon the exclusive use of immersion, and those which permit and practice other forms.

The immersionist position—This group insists that immersion is the only valid form of baptism. Their position revolves around the Greek word for baptism in the New Testament. Its predominant meaning is “to immerse” or “to dip,” implying that the candidate was plunged beneath the water. In addition, the circumstances involved in some of the biblical descriptions of baptism imply immersion. Thus, John the Baptist was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, “because there was much water there” (John 3:23). Jesus apparently went down into the water to be baptized by John (Matt. 3:16). The Ethiopian said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36).

The symbolism involved in baptism also seems to argue that immersion was the biblical mode, according to those groups that practice immersion exclusively. Romans 6:4-6 identified baptism with the believer's death (and burial) to sin and resurrection to new life, as well as the death and resurrection of Christ. Only immersion adequately depicts this meaning, according to the immersionist position.

Further strong evidence suggests that immersion was the form of baptism used in the early church. The *Didache*, a manual of Christian instruction written in A.D. 110-120, stated that immersion should be used generally and that other forms of baptism should be used only when immersion was not possible.

The pluralistic position—Holders of this view believe that immersion, pouring, and sprinkling are all appropriate forms of baptism. They point out that the Greek word for baptism in the New Testament is sometimes ambiguous in its usage. While its most common meaning in classical Greek was to dip, to plunge, or to immerse, it also carried other meanings as well. Thus, the question cannot be resolved upon linguistic grounds.

These groups also argue from inference that immersion must not have been the exclusive method used in New Testament times. For example, could John have been physically capable of immersing all the persons who came to him for baptism? Did the Philippian jailer leave his jail to be baptized? If not, how would he have been immersed? Was enough water for immersion brought to Cornelius' house? Or, did the apostle Paul leave the place where Ananias found him in order to be immersed?

Those groups that use sprinkling or pouring also point out that immersion may not be the best form for showing what baptism really means. They see the major meaning of baptism as purification. They point out that the various cleansing ceremonies in the Old Testament were performed by a variety of means—immersion, pouring, and sprinkling (Mark 7:4; Heb. 9:10). Others note the close association between baptism and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which was from above. Thus, in their view, true baptism required the symbolism of pouring rather than immersion.

Again, the most generous-spirited among Christians accept the validity of baptism when living faith in Christ is present, irrespective of the form of baptism employed. *Also see ch. 55, §5.5., 6.*

New Birth

NEW BIRTH—inner spiritual regeneration or renewal as a result of the power of God in a person's life. The phrase new birth comes from John 3:3, 7, where Jesus told Nicodemus, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Jesus meant that all people are so sinful in God's eyes that they need to be regenerated—recreated and renewed—by the sovereign activity of God's Spirit (John 3:5-8).

The activity of God's Spirit that regenerates sinful man comes about through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:10-21). Without faith there is no regeneration, and without regeneration a person does not have eternal life. Regeneration

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occurs at the moment a person exercises faith in Christ. At that point, his sins are forgiven and he is born again by the power of the Holy Spirit working on behalf of Christ. The new birth is a decisive, unrepeatable, and irrevocable act of God.

Similar words are used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the same general concept. Paul said, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). Although our "outward man" is perishing, the Christian's "inward man is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16).

Regeneration

REGENERATION—New Birth, the begetting of new life, the rebirth of the human spirit to a restored relationship with God by an act of God's Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. In regeneration a person's sinful nature is changed, and he is renewed to life and salvation in God by faith.

The word regeneration occurs only in the New Testament (Matt. 19:28; Titus 3:5), but the concept or idea is common throughout the Bible. The literal meaning of regeneration is "born again." There is a first birth and a second birth. The first, as Jesus said to Nicodemus (John 3:1-12) is "of the flesh"; the second birth is "of the Spirit." Being born of the Spirit is essential before a person can enter the kingdom of God. Every biblical command to man to undergo a radical change of character from self-centeredness to God-centeredness is, in effect, an appeal to be "born again" (Ps. 51:5-11; Jer. 31:33; Zech. 13:1).

Great religious experiences like that of Jacob at Jabbok (Gen. 32:22-32), Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:1), Josiah on hearing the reading of the Law (2 Kin. 22:8-13), or Isaiah in the temple (Is. 6:1-8) might well be regarded as Old Testament pictures of "new birth" to the limits under the Old Covenant. In the New Testament, regeneration extends to the total nature of man, bringing the inner being to life by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Regeneration changes a person's desires because "newness of life" is begotten in the person (Rom. 6:4; 7:6), as well as a right relationship with God in Christ.

Thus, regeneration is an act of God through the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5), resulting in an inner, personal resurrection from sin to a new life in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).⁵

What is regeneration according to the Bible?

Another word for regeneration is rebirth, from which we get the phrase "born again." To be born again is opposed to, and distinguished from, our first birth, when we were conceived in sin. The new birth is a spiritual, holy, and heavenly birth signified by a being made alive in a spiritual sense. Our first birth, on the other hand, was one of spiritual death because of inherited sin. Man in his natural state is "dead in trespasses and sins" until we are "made alive" (regenerated) by Christ when we place our faith in Him (Ephesians 2:1). After regeneration, we begin to see, and hear, and seek after divine things, and to live a life of faith and holiness. Now Christ is formed in the hearts; we are now partakers of the divine nature, having been made new creatures. God, not man, is the source of this (Ephesians 2:1, 8). It is not by men's works, but by God's own good will and pleasure. His great love and free gift, His rich grace and abundant mercy, are the cause of it and these attributes of God are displayed in the regeneration and conversion of sinners.

Regeneration is part of the "salvation package," if you will, along with sealing (Ephesians 1:14), adoption (Galatians 4:5), reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20), and many other salvation concepts. Being born again or born from above is parallel to regeneration (John 3:6-7; Ephesians 2:1; 1 Peter 1:23; John 1:13; 1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). Simply put, regeneration is God making a person spiritually alive, a new creation, as a result of faith in Jesus Christ. The reason regeneration is necessary is that prior to salvation we are not God's children (John 1:12-13); rather, we are children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3; Romans 5:18-20). Before salvation, we are degenerate. After salvation we are regenerated. The result of regeneration is peace with God (Romans 5:1), new life (Titus 3:5; 2 Corinthians 5:17), and eternal sonship (John 1:12-13; Galatians 3:26). This regeneration is eternal and begins the process of sanctification wherein we become the people God intended for us to be (Romans 8:28-30).

⁵ Hayford, J. W., Thomas Nelson Publishers. (1995). [Hayford's Bible handbook](#). Nashville, TN; Atlanta, GA; London; Vancouver: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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The Bible is clear that the only means of regeneration is by faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. No amount of good works or keeping of the law can regenerate the heart which from birth is “deceitful and wicked above all things” (Jeremiah 17:9). This concept of the new birth is unique to Christianity. No other religion offers a cure for the total depravity of the human heart, preferring instead to outline an often massive body of works and deeds that must be done to gain favor with God. God has told us, though, that “by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Romans 3:20). Total regeneration of the heart is necessary for salvation. Paul explains this concept perfectly in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” This is true regeneration.⁶

REGENERATION The transformation of a person’s spiritual condition from death to life through the work of the Holy Spirit. Although the concept of regeneration appears in both the Old and New Testaments, the word itself (παλιγγενεσία, *palingenesia*) stems from the Pythagoreans (fifth century BC), who used it to indicate that the human soul does not perish with the body but is born again in new incarnations.

Regeneration in Ancient Philosophy and Religion

People throughout antiquity customarily accepted the association between “regeneration” (παλιγγενεσία, *palingenesia*) and Pythagorean philosophy. For instance, in his *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Meon*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*, Plato (428–348 BC) embraced the concept of regeneration. In the Myth of Er, Plato records Socrates recounting how souls, after being separated from their bodies, spend an indefinite period of time in Formland and then return to Earth, assuming new bodies.

Orphic religion in northeastern Greece and Bulgaria held that the immortal soul aspires to regeneration (παλιγγενεσία, *palingenesia*) while the body keeps it prisoner. As the wheel of death and birth revolves in the cycle of necessity, the soul oscillates between liberation and bondage. Orphic religion maintained that humans need a combination of the grace of Dionysus (plus the other Greek deities) and self-purification for the soul to complete the upward spiral of destiny that leads to eternal life (Henderson, *Wheel*, 17–23).

Regeneration in the Old Testament

The term “regeneration” does not appear in the Old Testament; however, the Old Testament attests to the concept of regeneration in God’s work of circumcising and softening the Israelites’ hearts. Circumcision of the heart results in people loving Yahweh with all their heart and soul and becoming spiritually alive (Deut 30:6). Through regeneration, Yahweh puts His law on people’s minds and writes it on their hearts; the people gain intimate knowledge of Yahweh, and they are granted forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:33–34). Regenerated people are inspired to fear God so that they never turn away from Him (Jer 32:40).

The prophet Ezekiel summed up the work and results of regeneration as follows: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezek 11:19–20 NIV; compare Ezek 36:26).

Brought about by the personal energy of God’s creative breathing out, regeneration is a monergistic (accomplished only by God) and sovereign act of purification from human defilement (Psa 51:10; Ezek 39:29; Packer, “Regeneration,” 1000). Describing the grace of regeneration, Ezekiel states that God’s Spirit not only renews a person’s soul but also takes up residence there forever (Ezek 36:27). Jeremiah predicted that widespread regeneration throughout Israel would herald God’s new covenant with the people and its administration by the Messiah (Jer 31:31).

Moses foreshadowed the Spirit’s abiding presence in all followers of God, as he longed that the Israelites of his day would experience this anointing: “The Spirit also rested upon ... two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad ... and they prophesied in the camp.... Joshua son of Nun, who had served as Moses’ aide since youth, said, ‘Moses, my lord, stop them.’ But Moses rejoined, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all Yahweh’s people were

⁶ Got Questions Ministries. (2002–2013). [Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered](#). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

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prophets and that Yahweh would put his Spirit on them' ” (Num 11:26–29; author’s translation). In this passage, Joshua is concerned because Spirit-directed persons are ultimately answerable to God alone (Burkhardt, *Regeneration*, 20–25).

Intertestamental Developments

Graeco-Roman and Jewish thinkers of the Intertestamental period applied the term “regeneration” on a corporate scale, either to the renovation of the entire universe or to the return of a people from exile. In Graeco-Roman philosophy, the Stoics used “regeneration” (παλιγγενεσία, *palingenesia*) to designate the Demiurge’s (or creator’s) perpetual recreation of the universe following its absorption into the Demiurge. Anticipating a theme of later Neoplatonism, the Stoics postulated a constant cycle of creation going out from a god and then returning to him. They depicted the seasonal renovation of the earth as regeneration (παλιγγενεσία, *palingenesia*), particularly the onset of spring, when the earth awoke in full bloom from its winter sleep and death. In 57 BC, following his return from exile, the Roman orator Cicero (106–43 BC) described his restoration to civic dignity and honor as his rebirth (παλιγγενεσίαν, *palingenesian*).

The Jewish philosophical theologian Philo (ca. 20 BC–AD 50) described Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth as leaders of the Earth’s regeneration (παλιγγενεσία, *palingenesia*). Moreover, Philo frequently used “regeneration” (παλιγγενεσία, *palingenesia*) to depict the resurrection of the material world out of fire, based on the analogy of the mythological phoenix. The Jewish historian Josephus (ca. AD 37–100) categorized the restoration of the Jewish nation following the Babylonian exile as the “regeneration” (παλιγγενεσία, *palingenesia*) of the fatherland (Trench, *Synonyms*, 60–62).

New Testament and Later Christian Views

The concept of regeneration receives its fullest expression in the New Testament, where it is seen as the transformation of an individual’s soul from estrangement from God to right relationship with Him. The New Testament individualized regeneration to a greater degree than either the Old Testament or intertestamental Judaism. An exploration of the New Testament authors’ doctrine of human nature (or anthropology) provides insight into the nature of regeneration wrought by the Holy Spirit.

According to the Apostle Paul, a person alienated from God is a “soul-ish human” (ψυχικός ἄνθρωπος, *psychikos anthrōpos*; normally rendered “natural/carnal/fleshly human”), while a person in right relationship with God is a “spiritual human” (πνευματικός ἄνθρωπος, *pneumatikos anthrōpos*). Paul clarifies these terms in 1 Cor 2:14–15: “The natural person (ψυχικός ἄνθρωπος, *psychikos anthrōpos*) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him.... The spiritual person (πνευματικός, *pneumatikos*) judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one” (ESV). Here we find that “natural” (ψυχικός, *psychikos*) and “spiritual” (πνευματικός, *pneumatikos*) represent opposite dominating principles toward which a person can be fundamentally oriented: either the person’s own “soul” (ψυχή, *psychē*) or the “Spirit” (πνεῦμα, *pneuma*) of God. Thus, a “natural person” (ψυχικός ἄνθρωπος, *psychikos anthrōpos*) is someone who is inclined primarily toward their selfish desires on an individual level and their own group—be it family, nation, or race—on a communal level. Conversely, a “spiritual person” (πνευματικός ἄνθρωπος, *pneumatikos anthrōpos*) is someone who is inclined primarily toward the desires of the Holy Spirit and therefore is God-centered rather than self-centered (MacGregor, “Anthropological Look,” 143–44).

According to New Testament anthropology, every person is either born with a damaged soul (the Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed interpretation) or has damaged their soul by sinning (the Anabaptist interpretation). This damage is so severe—making a person a “bad tree” (Matt 7:17–18 NIV) and a “slave to sin” (John 8:34 NIV)—that only the Holy Spirit can repair it. Humans originally were created with free choice, acting within the spectrum of living for self and living for God. The fall resulted in the self-living orientation becoming more desirable for humans and constituting their default position. This orientation of living for self is what Paul termed the “flesh” or “sinful nature” (σάρξ, *sarx*). The vast majority of “flesh”-centered people’s actions are rooted in self-centeredness, even those that appear spiritual. Such a person is designated as unregenerate or “once-born” and cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Since humans cannot operate on their own souls, no one can save themselves from this condition (Toon, *Born Again*, 2–9).

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The only way for someone to enter the kingdom of God is for the Holy Spirit to bring about “new creation” or “new reality” (καινή κτίσις, *kainē ktisis*) in the person’s soul (2 Cor 5:17), reversing that person’s condition. This soteriological operation—regeneration (παλιγγενεσία, *palingenesia*; or ἀναγεννάω, *anagennaō*; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3; 1:23; Jas 1:18)—greatly empowers individuals to live for God rather than self. Regeneration causes a person to genuinely want to live for God and to consistently behave in ways that demonstrate this desire (Swindoll and Zuck, *Understanding*, 862–866). This strengthened orientation toward living for God is what Jesus (Mark 14:38; John 4:24) and Paul (Rom 8:16; 1 Cor 14:2, 14–15; 2 Cor 4:13; Gal 5:16–24) termed “spirit” (πνευ, *pneûma*, *ma*) in contrast to the “flesh” or “sinful nature.” The phrase “born again” or “born from above” (γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, *gennēthē anōthen*) also denotes regeneration (John 3:3, 7). This phrase illustrates not only that entering God’s kingdom involves receiving birth for a second time—now spiritual rather than physical—but also that such a new birth can be accomplished only by God Himself via the Spirit (Dunn, *Baptism*, 167–169). Further, it is through regeneration that God adopts humans into his family, such that all who have received the Spirit’s revivifying nourishment are adopted sons and daughters of God (Rom 8:15–17; John 1:13).

Regeneration and Sin

The New Testament portrays regeneration as affecting the whole person such that “the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17 NIV). As God gives believers new being through regeneration, it follows that regeneration is an instantaneous event that occurs only once in a person’s life (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 701). Moreover, regeneration necessarily results in spiritual fruit (Gal 5:22), a fact emphasized by John’s writings. John’s first letter describes the regenerate as consistently practicing righteousness (1 John 2:29), loving their neighbors (1 John 4:7), being personally committed to Christ, and experiencing victory over the world through their faith commitment (1 John 5:4). First John also indicates that regenerated people sin less frequently than they did prior to regeneration, as God-centered actions now dominate their life (1 John 3:9; 5:18). First John 3:6–10 states that all whose lives are not marked by this rule, regardless of their claims, are still once-born children of the devil. God does not relate to such persons as Father (1 John 2:23), and such persons lack any share in the hope of glory that God’s children inherit (1 John 3:1–3; Packer, “Regeneration,” 1000–01).

The Holy Spirit regenerates a person under the impact of the gospel message. Peter claimed that believers have been born again “through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet 1:23 NIV), which is “the word that was preached to you” (1 Pet 1:25 NIV). James stated that God “chose to give us birth through the word of truth” (Jas 1:18 NIV). God speaks through the gospel to summon people to Himself and enables them to respond in faith, thus forming the context in which regeneration occurs (Dunn, *Baptism*, 37–38). Hence, as Peter was preaching the gospel to Cornelius’ household, “the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message” (Acts 10:44 NIV), such that they spoke in tongues and praised God (Acts 10:46). Born of the Holy Spirit, regenerated persons thus fall under the control of the Spirit, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus: “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 NIV). Regenerated persons will display the unconditional, suffering love uniquely emanating from God (ἀγάπη, *agapē*; 1 John 4:7–8, 19–21). They will also exhibit joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22–23).

Three Views on Regeneration and Faith

Augustinian-Calvinist Position. A major controversy surrounding regeneration is whether it is the cause or the result of the believer’s faith. Theologians in the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition, such as Wayne Grudem, R. C. Sproul, and John Piper, assert that regeneration precedes saving faith and gives people the spiritual ability to respond to God in faith. Grudem points to John 3:5 to argue that a person must be born of the Spirit before they can become a Christian: “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (NRSV). He also views John 6:44 as indicating that humans are unable to come to Christ apart from the prior work of regeneration: “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me” (NRSV; compare John 6:65; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 702).

Augustinian-Calvinist theologians interpret being “dead through our trespasses” (Eph 2:5; compare Col 2:13) as lacking the faculty of the will to freely believe in Christ or do anything else spiritually good. This exegesis is

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consistent with the Augustinian-Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, which holds that in the fall, the primal human couple destroyed their mental faculty to perform spiritual good and passed on this corrupted state to their descendants. Since the same passages that teach humans were dead through their trespasses go on to assert that, in this state of lifelessness, God made us alive with Christ, Augustinian-Calvinist theologians claim that God gives persons new spiritual life (i.e., regeneration) before they can and do believe (Sproul, *Essential Truths*, 172).

Arminian-Wesleyan Position. Theologians in the Arminian-Wesleyan tradition, such as Roger Olson, Thomas Oden, and Jerry Walls, assert that saving faith precedes regeneration, as the Holy Spirit responds to persons' exercising faith by regenerating them. Arminian-Wesleyan theologians deny the equation of becoming a Christian with entering the kingdom of God; rather, they see a cause and effect relationship between the two. By becoming a Christian, people place themselves under God's reign (Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 578).

Arminian-Wesleyan theologians concur with the Augustinian-Calvinist position that humans are unable to believe in Christ without the prior drawing of the Holy Spirit; however, they deny that this drawing is the same as regeneration. They instead maintain that this drawing is prevenient grace, or prior ability-supplying grace, that the Spirit gives to all humanity (John 12:32). As Olson explains, "humans are dead in their trespasses and sins until the prevenient grace of God awakens and enables them to exercise a good will toward God in repentance and faith" (Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 159). But this grace is resistible, which accounts for some people choosing to believe in Christ and other people choosing not to. Arminian-Wesleyan theologians equate regeneration with the gift of the Holy Spirit and identify regeneration as the beginning of eternal life and salvation. They support their position by pointing to texts affirming that one must believe in order to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39; Acts 2:38; Eph 1:13–14) and eternal life or salvation (Luke 7:50; John 3:15–16; 3:36; 5:24, 39–40; 11:25; 20:31; Acts 16:31).

Anabaptist Refinements to the Arminian-Wesleyan Position. Theologians in the Anabaptist tradition, such as Thomas Finger and Kirk MacGregor, concur with the Arminian-Wesleyan position that regeneration is the Holy Spirit's response to the believer's faith. However, they reject the understanding of original sin common to the Augustinian-Calvinist and Arminian-Wesleyan traditions. Anabaptist theologians typically hold that original sin is a resistible inclination toward sin that humans inherit from the primal human couple, not the destruction of the mental faculty by which humans can perform spiritual good (Finger, *Contemporary Anabaptist*, 480–499; MacGregor, *Systematic Theology*, 25–37). In this view, even though it is still possible for humans to exhibit faith, God foreknows that no one will freely place faith in Christ apart from the special prompting of the Holy Spirit. Humans can resist this prompting, which is analogous to prevenient grace, such that only some freely believe and receive regeneration from the Spirit.

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5

ARMINIAN SYNERGISM IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Jacob Arminius (1559–1609) once said in his *Sentiments*,

In his lapsed and sinful state, man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good; but it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will, and in all his powers, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will, and perform whatever is truly good.

Perhaps for many Calvinists, such an affirmation of spiritual inability by Arminius is surprising. However, though there are notable exceptions, many Arminians and Wesleyans who followed Arminius would likewise affirm total depravity and the necessity of God's grace to precede the will of man. Why then does such a chasm exist between Calvinism and Arminianism if both camps agree on a doctrine as vital as man's depravity and bondage to sin? The divide exists because, as William Cannon observes, though Calvinists and Arminians come so close together, in reality they are worlds apart due to the doctrine of prevenient grace. One could ask, for example, how it is that the Arminian can, on the one hand, affirm total depravity and spiritual inability, and yet, at the same time—and while avoiding Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian notions of cooperation—affirm that man's free will is able to accept or resist God's grace (synergism).³ For the Arminian, the answer lies in the doctrine of prevenient grace because it is here that a free will ability to cooperate with or resist subsequent grace is restored to man. The idea is that God provides a *gratia praeveniens* which mitigates depravity and enables man to either resist or cooperate with the Spirit. Therefore, while the Calvinist views God's grace as effectual, the Arminian disagrees, arguing that while grace must be the initiator, nevertheless, the efficacy of grace is ultimately conditioned upon man's free will and is therefore synergistic. Consequently, prevenient grace is no small doctrine, but the very hinge of an Arminian and Wesleyan soteriology which diverges so drastically from Calvinism. As Robert Chiles confesses, "Without it, the Calvinist logic is irrefutable."⁶ And Thomas Schreiner suitably concludes that "if prevenient grace is not taught in Scripture, then the credibility of Wesleyan theology is seriously undermined." In this chapter our goal is to represent Arminianism accurately, then to offer a critique of synergism in chapter 6.

ARMINIANS AND TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Before examining Arminian synergism, it is necessary and essential to recognize where Arminians stand on original sin. As discussed in chapter 2, original sin is comprised of two aspects: guilt (*reatus*) and corruption (*vitium*), the latter of which is sometimes referred to as pollution or depravity. Regarding the former, Calvinists and Arminians have disagreed on the imputation of guilt from original sin. While most in the Reformed tradition have argued that *both* guilt and corruption (pollution) are imputed to Adam's posterity, many in the Arminian tradition have affirmed the imputation of corruption but have denied the imputation of guilt. But even within the Arminian tradition there has been disagreement over exactly *why* it is that mankind does not inherit Adam's guilt. For instance, John Miley argued that original sin does not include guilt or condemnation. Though there is "native depravity," there is not "native demerit."¹¹ The reason why guilt is not imputed is because no guilt actually exists to be imputed. It is impossible for mankind to be held guilty or culpable for a sin it did not commit. However, not all Arminians agree or explain the absence of original guilt as Miley does. John Wesley, John Fletcher, Richard Watson, William Pope, and Thomas Summers have argued that the guilt of original sin does exist but is set aside, abrogated, and mitigated by the atoning work of Christ, which provides prevenient grace to all sinners. This view seems to be the most faithful to Arminius himself, who, contrary to the Reformed tradition, preferred to speak of the result of Adam's sin in terms of "privation" rather than "depravation."¹⁴ Despite this disagreement between Calvinists and Arminians over the imputation of guilt, most agree on the inheritance of corruption, a discussion to which we now turn.

Jacob Arminius

According to Arminius, man is dead in sin and the severity of sin has penetrated every aspect of man's being due to the corruption inherited from Adam. For Arminius, man's will is in bondage to sin, unable to accomplish anything spiritually good toward God.¹⁶ Arminius is very clear that every aspect of man must be renewed since he is infected

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by sin. Arminius is not content with saying, as the Semi-Pelagians do, that man's will is merely wounded, maimed, infirmed, bent, and weakened.¹⁸ Rather, he goes farther, describing man's will as imprisoned, destroyed, and lost. Apart from grace the will is debilitated and useless.

Arminius denied the charges of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism, accusing both groups of ignorance in spiritual matters, and argued that "what they attributed to natural free will, his theology attributes to divine grace." Medieval Semi-Pelagianism argued that "God will not deny his grace to any one who does what is in him." Arminius called such a saying "absurdity," unworthy of "sacred matters,"²² and instead modified the medieval slogan, saying: "To him who does what he can *by the primary grace already conferred upon him*, God will bestow further grace upon him who profitably uses that which is primary." Arminius taught that due to man's radical corruption and bondage of the will, it is God, not man, who must initiate salvation (see Private Disputation 44). Until God provides prevenient ("preventing") grace man can in no way cooperate with God.²⁴ Therefore, while Arminius does affirm synergism, it is a God-initiated and God-enabled synergism.

The Arminian Remonstrants

Arminius was not lacking followers who sought to be true to his doctrine, as is evident in the Arminian Articles of 1610 (see especially Article III). And when the Synod of Dort called upon the Remonstrants to more fully articulate their beliefs, the Remonstrants, led by Simon Episcopius, would in the *Sententiae Remonstrantium* again affirm man's pervasive depravity, corruption, and inability. Though these *Sententiae* were condemned by Dort, Episcopius would again reiterate the Remonstrance articles in his 1621 confession, clearly affirming man's inability apart from grace.

However, not all Remonstrants would agree. Philip Limborch (1633–1712), whom Olson describes as one who "defected from Arminius's theology," upheld an "optimistic anthropology" as opposed to Arminius's "pessimistic anthropology." While Arminius argued that man's will is in bondage to sin apart from God's grace, Limborch denied the total bondage of man's will. Influenced by the Enlightenment and the development of seventeenth-century Socinianism, Limborch argued that Adam's sin merely resulted in a "universal misery." This universal misery or "inherited misfortune" does not put man in bondage to sin but merely inclines people toward sin. Therefore, Limborch denied not only inherited guilt but inherited depravity.³⁰ Moreover, when Limborch did affirm special grace, he made prevenient grace (i.e., that which excites man's free will) synonymous with common grace, thereby relinquishing prevenient grace of its supernatural nature. Limborch is an example of the tendency of some Arminians to adopt Semi-Pelagianism. Despite Limborch, however, later Arminians would repudiate this stance, siding instead with Arminius.

John Wesley and Wesleyan-Arminianism

John Wesley (1703–91) wrote more than two hundred pages defending the doctrine of original sin against John Taylor, who denied the doctrine. Though Wesley did not affirm the imputation of the guilt of original sin, he did affirm the corruption of original sin. Man is dead in sin until God supernaturally calls him to new life.³⁴ Wesley even equated human nature as it was in his own time with man's sinful nature at the time of the flood. "In his natural state every man born into the world is a rank idolater." Man has inherited from Adam a corrupt nature so that "every one descended from him comes into the world spiritually dead, dead to God, wholly dead in sin; entirely void of the life of God; void of the image of God, of all that righteousness and holiness wherein Adam was created." Consequently, "Every man born into the world now bears the image of the devil in pride and self-will; the image of the beast, in sensual appetites and desires."³⁶ To deny man's total corruption, says Wesley, is to show that "you are but a heathen still." Moreover, not only did Wesley affirm man's inherited and pervasive corruption, but he also asserted the bondage of man's will. After the fall, "no child of man has a natural power to choose anything that is truly good."³⁸

Wesleyans in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries have likewise affirmed Wesley's doctrine of man's pervasive corruption and inability apart from grace. Perhaps no one is as clear as Richard Watson (1781–1833), who said, "The true Arminian, as fully as the Calvinist, admits the doctrine of the total depravity of human nature in consequence of the fall of our first parents." Watson concludes, "Man is so totally overwhelmed, as with a deluge, that no part is free from sin, and therefore whatever proceeds from him is accounted sin."⁴⁰ William Pope (1822–1903), Thomas Summers (1812–82), John Miley (1813–95), H. Orton Wiley (1877–1961), and even Wesleyans of our own time, such as Thomas Oden, all agree.

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Nevertheless, despite such affirmations of total depravity, today a number of prominent Arminian theologians still deny the doctrine in order to preserve the libertarian freedom of man. Arminians like Jack Cottrell, Bruce Reichenbach, and Clark Pinnock argue that though the fall has devastating effects, some degree of libertarian freedom remains afterward. There is no need, they say, to turn to a doctrine like total depravity when such a doctrine cannot be found in Scripture and only serves to destroy libertarian freedom, which is essential to Arminian synergism. Reichenbach, Cottrell, and Pinnock demonstrate that Semi-Pelagianism continues to have a strong influence within Arminianism today.

To summarize, man's radical, inherited depravity is a matter of debate within Arminianism. While a majority of Arminians clearly affirm total depravity, others do not. For those who do, such an affirmation seems to provide common ground between Calvinists and Arminians. Indeed, in a letter to John Newton, dated May 14, 1765, John Wesley states that there is not a hair's breadth separating his own position from that of John Calvin.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the hair's breadth is the doctrine of prevenient grace. Such commonality on total depravity is quickly forgotten by the introduction of prevenient grace into the Arminian and Wesleyan traditions.

ARMINIAN VIEWS ON GRACE AND FREE WILL

The Nature of Prevenient Grace

The Source of Prevenient Grace. The term "prevenient grace" can be easily misunderstood, for the term gives the impression that something or someone must be prevented. To the contrary, the word is used by Arminians to describe a grace that comes before salvation. The word "prevent" is derived from the Latin *venio*, meaning "to come." The word "pre" is a prefix meaning "before." "Pre-venient" grace is a grace that "comes before" salvation (*prevenire*). Thomas Summers explains that prevenient grace is that influence which "precedes our action, and gives us the capacity to will and to do right, enlightening the intellect, and exciting the sensibility." The question that inevitably follows is what event in the history of redemption is the source for prevenient grace? For Arminians and Wesleyans, the source is in the atonement of Christ.⁵⁰ As John 12:32 states, it is when Christ is lifted up (on the cross) that he draws all men to himself. Leo Cox explains, "Rather than holding that the good found in man apart from salvation is a goodness left over from the fall of man, Wesleyan-Arminianism has always taught that God has supernaturally restored to all men a measure of His Spirit through the grace that flows from Calvary."

The Recipients of Prevenient Grace. If the atonement of Christ is the source of prevenient grace, who is the recipient of it? Do all people receive prevenient grace, or only some? There is disagreement between those in the Arminian and Wesleyan traditions over the scope or extent of prevenient grace. Though the point has been debated, Arminius himself viewed prevenient grace as being restricted to where the gospel is preached. Prevenient grace for Episcopius is restricted to the evangelized as well. However, many Wesleyan-Arminians, such as John Wesley, John Fletcher, and later Wesleyans like John Miley, have argued that prevenient grace is universal in scope, common to all mankind.⁵³ The universality of prevenient grace is directly tied to the universality of Christ's atonement. Because the extent of Christ's atoning work is universal rather than particular, it follows that prevenient grace is universal rather than particular. Why would Christ die for all people, but his grace be given only to some? All must have the opportunity to be saved, to choose or reject God's grace through Christ. As Grant Osborne explains, "God is an 'equal opportunity' convictor who, in drawing all to himself, makes it possible to make a true decision to accept or reject Jesus."⁵⁵ Therefore, the extent of Christ's atonement and the extent of prevenient grace are universal in scope.

Those who view prevenient grace as universal find textual support in a number of places. John 12:32 says, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." Commenting on this passage Thiessen states, "There issues a power from the cross of Christ that goes out to all men, though many continue to resist that power." When Jesus states that he will draw "all people" to himself, he means all men without exception. Osborne states, "All people are equally drawn to the Father."⁵⁷ He not only dies for all men, but then also applies the grace from his atoning work to all men. He draws them to himself, but such a drawing is not an irresistible drawing as the Calvinist affirms; rather, it is a drawing that can be resisted. Therefore, such a drawing of all men in no way secures or guarantees salvation, but rather provides the opportunity for man to be saved if he should so choose to cooperate.

Also consider John 1:9, "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." Jesus is this true light and the light he gives to every person is the light of prevenient grace. John continues by stating that some

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rejected the light, not receiving the Christ (John 1:11), but others responded to Christ (the light) by receiving him (John 1:12). To the surprise of many Calvinists who appeal to John 6 in support of effectual calling and grace, Arminians like Thomas Oden also appeal to such a passage in support of prevenient grace. Jesus states, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44; cf. 6:65). Oden concludes that such a “drawing and enabling is precisely what is meant by prevenient grace.”

Arminians also believe that prevenient grace is supported by Titus 2:11, which states that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” Paul seems to be saying that God’s grace is universal, coming to all men so that they may be saved. Oden concludes from Titus 2:11, “To no one, not even the recalcitrant unfaithful, does God deny grace sufficient for salvation. Prevenient grace precedes each discrete human act.”

Finally, Arminians also appeal to Philippians 2:12–13, a text which Oden, following Wesley, says is the “most important homily that touches upon prevenient grace.” Paul states, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”⁶³ Oden interprets Paul as saying, “God working in us enables our working and co-working with God.” Since God works in us by giving us prevenient grace, it is now on us to cooperate with all subsequent grace, for the “chief function of prevenient grace is to bring the person to a state of nonresistance to subsequent forms of grace.” Stated otherwise, “Prevenient grace is that grace that goes before us to prepare us for more grace, the grace that makes it possible for persons to take the first steps toward saving grace.”⁶⁶ Taking these first steps, however, requires that we must do something to arouse the grace within us. “All are called to be ready to stir up whatever grace is in them that more grace will be given.”

The Content of Prevenient Grace. If, at least for some, the extent of prevenient grace is universal (common even among those who have never heard of Christ, rather than restricted to the preaching of the gospel), the content of prevenient grace can be defined by several characteristics. First, Wesleyans argue on the basis of texts like Romans 1:19 that a general, basic knowledge of God is given to all of mankind due to prevenient grace. Second, not only is a basic knowledge of God distributed through prevenient grace, but so also is the moral law, as it is written on the human heart. Even after the fall, Wesley says, God reinscribed the law on the sinner’s heart via prevenient grace.⁶⁹ Third, not only the law but the human conscience also is imprinted with God. Fourth, prevenient grace’s universal scope also results in the restraining of sin worldwide. As Collins states, prevenient grace places a “check on human perversity.”⁷¹ These four characteristics demonstrate that universal prevenient grace shares many similarities with the doctrine of common grace, though many Wesleyans insist that these two loci remain distinct.

The Purpose of Prevenient Grace

The Mitigation of Original Sin and Restoration of the Will. As already discussed, for the Arminian the guilt of original sin is either (1) not imputed to Adam’s posterity (John Miley) or (2) is mitigated by the atoning work of Christ so that no man actually inherits Adam’s guilt (Wesley, Fletcher). While some contemporary Arminians (such as Bruce R. Reichenbach⁷⁴) accept the first view, many Arminians accept the second view and go further to argue that not only is the *guilt* mitigated by Christ’s atonement, but so also is the *corruption* of Adam’s sin. Olson explains that the Arminian doctrine of universal prevenient grace means that because of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit *no human being is actually in a state of absolute darkness and depravity*. Because of original sin, helplessness to do good is the natural state of humanity, but because of the work of Christ and the operation of the Holy Spirit universally *no human being actually exists in that natural state*.

Olson’s statement is revealing. For the Arminian, due to prevenient grace, no person actually exists in a state of total depravity. Collins traces such a view of the mitigation of depravity back to Wesley himself. And it is evident that Wesleyan-Arminians today agree with Wesley.⁷⁸

Furthermore, Wesley’s belief that prevenient grace abrogates depravity, so that no man is in such a state, is crucial for human responsibility. Wesley is seriously concerned that men might excuse themselves by arguing that there is nothing they can do since it is God who regenerates and they are depraved and unable to regenerate themselves. However, the fact that all men are dead by nature excuses no one, says Wesley, because “there is no man that is in a state of mere nature.”⁸⁰ Wesley then brings in prevenient grace, showing that man has been lifted from a state of depravity in order to choose for God if he so desires. Since everyone “has some measure of that light” it is the case that “no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.” As

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Wesley states in his “Some Remarks on Mr. Hill’s ‘Review of All the Doctrines Taught by John Wesley’ ” (1772), “We [Wesley and Fletcher] both steadily assert that the will of man is by nature free only to evil. Yet we both believe that every man has a measure of free-will restored to him by grace.”⁸² Wesley will not tolerate the Calvinist logic which ultimately attributes belief and unbelief to whether or not God decides to give sinners grace. If man is not saved it is because he did not exercise his free will to do so.

To summarize, prevenient grace (1) mitigates total depravity so that no man is in a state of mere nature and (2) restores to every man a measure of free will so that he can cooperate or resist God’s plea to be saved.

The “Intermediate State.” Prevenient grace, by mitigating total depravity, also places sinners in an “intermediate state,” where, according to Arminians like Olson, the process of regeneration has begun due to the application of prevenient grace, but is incomplete because regeneration is still contingent upon whether or not man will cooperate with God. Therefore, the sinner in this stage is neither unregenerate nor regenerate. Olson, claiming that Arminius himself taught this intermediate state, explains,

The intermediate stage is when the human being is not so much free to respond to the gospel (as the semi-Pelagians claimed) but is freed to respond to the good news of redemption in Christ. Arminius thus believes not so much in free will but in a freed will, one which, though initially bound by sin, has been brought by the prevenient grace of the Spirit of Christ to a point where it can respond freely to the divine call. *The intermediate stage is neither unregenerate nor regenerate, but perhaps post-unregenerate and pre-regenerate.* The soul of the sinner is being regenerated but the sinner is able to resist and spurn the prevenient grace of God by denying the gospel. All that is required for full salvation is a relaxation of the resistant will under the influence of God’s grace so that the person lets go of sin and self-righteousness and allows Christ’s death to become the only foundation for spiritual life.

The sinner is not unregenerate because regeneration has already been initiated by prevenient grace. However, since the sinner is able to resist God (i.e. *gratia resistibilis*), the finality of regeneration is pending. It is not until the sinner decides to cooperate that he moves from this intermediate status, where he is neither unregenerate nor regenerate, to a regenerated status.

Prevenient Grace Irresistible, Cooperating Grace Resistible

Is grace, for the Arminian, resistible or irresistible? Depending on what stage of grace is being referred to, the answer is both. Grace in its first coming or arrival as “prevenient” is irresistible. God bestows *prevenient* grace on sinners independent of whether they want it or not. However, once prevenient grace has been given by God, *subsequent* or *cooperating* grace can then be resisted. Such a distinction is crucial to understanding the Arminian view correctly. The Arminian and Calvinist differ on exactly where grace is irresistible in the *via salutis*. For the Arminian, God bestows a prevenient grace which, in its first stage, is irresistible, in order to enable man’s faculties to cooperate. However, in the second stage, now that man is enabled to cooperate, he can accept or resist this subsequent grace (synergism). Not so for the Calvinist. Special, saving grace is always irresistible and, in one instantaneous act, God works monergistically not only to call but also to regenerate the sinner completely.

This two-stage process, the first irresistible and the second resistible, is also affirmed by Arminius. While prevenient grace, says Arminius, is given to man whether he desires it or not, once it is given it is up to him to decide whether or not he will give or withhold his assent to it. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Arminians would follow Arminius in this distinction, as is evident in Wesley and Fletcher. Richard Watson, in his *Theological Institutes*, would say the same. Such a distinction is apparent in contemporary Arminians also.⁹⁴ Thomas Oden distinguishes between prevenient grace and saving grace, stating, “*Prevenient* grace is the grace that begins to enable one to choose further to cooperate with *saving* grace. By offering the will the restored capacity to respond to grace, the person then may freely and increasingly become an active, willing participant in receiving the conditions for justification.” What Oden calls “saving” grace is also referred to as “cooperating” grace (*gratia cooperans*). Therefore, God initiates prevenient grace, and once it is given man must decide of his own free will whether he will cooperate “with ever-fresh new offerings of grace.”⁹⁷⁸

⁸ Barrett, M. (2013). *Salvation by Grace: The Case for Effectual Calling and Regeneration* (1st ed., pp. 207–224). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

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THIS IS REFORMED THEOLOGY/CALVINISM:

Some good phraseology but strongly disagree with process. Man has freewill in order to make choices. “Choose this day whom you will serve!” God cannot, will not, ignore our freewill when it comes to relationship with Him. We must want it, not have it dropped on us. We make a choice. Conversion comes BEFORE Regeneration. Pr. Orleen

The theological standpoint represented in this book is that of evangelical Christianity from the Reformed or Calvinistic perspective. Reformed soteriology has much in common with other evangelical soteriologies, but it does have certain distinctive emphases. Among these emphases are the following:

(1) The decisive factor in determining who is to be saved from sin is not the decisions of the human beings concerned, but the sovereign grace of God—though human decision does play a significant role in the process.

(2) The application of salvation to God’s people has its roots in God’s eternal decree, according to which he has chosen his people to eternal life, not on the basis of any merits on their part, but solely out of his good pleasure.

(3) Though all who hear the gospel message are invited to accept Christ and his salvation, and are earnestly summoned to such acceptance, the saving grace of God in the strict sense of the word is not universal but particular, being bestowed only on God’s elect (those who have been chosen by him in Christ to salvation).

(4) God’s saving grace is therefore both efficacious and unlosable. This does not mean that, left to themselves, believers could not drift away from God, but it does mean that God will not permit his chosen ones to lose their salvation. The spiritual security of believers, therefore, depends primarily not on their hold of God but on God’s hold of them.

(5) Although the application of salvation to God’s people involves, in the aspects distinct from regeneration in the narrower sense, human willing and working, this application is nevertheless primarily the work of the Holy Spirit.

These distinctive emphases shape Reformed soteriology all along the line. While stressing the sovereignty of God’s grace in the application of salvation, however, Reformed theology does not negate human responsibility in the process of salvation.⁹

CHAPTER 7

Regeneration

CHRISTIANS ARE NOT JUST “NICE PEOPLE”; THEY ARE, OR ARE SUPPOSED to be, new people. C. S. Lewis in his *Mere Christianity*, borrowing two Greek words, distinguishes between two kinds of life: *Bios* and *Zōē*. *Bios* is the kind of life every person has—biological life, which is kept going by food, air, and water, but which eventually ends in death. *Zōē*, on the other hand, is spiritual life, the kind of life God gives us when we are born again—life that lasts forever. These two kinds of life, Lewis goes on to say, are not only different; they are actually opposed to each other. *Bios* is basically self-centered, whereas *Zōē* is God-centered and other-centered.

This leads us to a consideration of our next topic: regeneration, or the new birth—God’s bestowal of what Lewis calls *Zōē*. This is a most important topic, since it deals with the very beginning of the process of salvation.

REGENERATION IN THREE SENSES

The Bible speaks of regeneration in three different but related senses: (1) as the beginning of new spiritual life, implanted in us by the Holy Spirit, enabling us to repent and believe (John 3:3, 5); (2) as the first manifestation of the implanted new life (Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23); and (3) as the restoration of the entire creation to its final perfection (Matt. 19:28, KJV, ASV, NASB). In the last-named passage the word *palingenesia*, translated “regeneration” in the versions mentioned, and found in only one other New Testament passage (Titus 3:5), is used to describe the renewal of the entire universe—the “new heaven and new earth” of 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1–4.

In this chapter I will deal only with the first two senses described above. It should be noted that in earlier Reformed theology regeneration was viewed in a wider sense than it often is today. Calvin, for example, used the term to describe our total renewal, including conversion and sanctification. The Belgic Confession of 1561 also identifies regeneration with the Christian’s entire new life. Many seventeenth-century theologians equated regeneration with conversion. More recently, however, Reformed theologians have felt the need to distinguish

⁹ Hoekema, A. A. (1994). *Saved by Grace* (pp. 3–4). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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between regeneration in the narrower sense (meaning [1] above) and the broader sense (meaning [2] above)—that is, between the implanting of new life by the Spirit and the first manifestations of that new life in conversion.

I plan now to deal with regeneration primarily in its narrower sense. In this sense regeneration may be defined as that work of the Holy Spirit whereby he initially brings persons into living union with Christ, changing their hearts so that they who were spiritually dead become spiritually alive, now able and willing to repent of sin, believe the gospel, and serve the Lord.

BIBLICAL TEACHING ON HUMAN DEPRAVITY

As has often been said, one's doctrine of man is determinative for his or her doctrine of salvation. Nowhere is this more true than in the consideration of regeneration. For our understanding of regeneration hinges on our conception of human depravity. If human beings today are not depraved at all, regeneration or new spiritual life is not really necessary. If human depravity is thought of as being only partial—that is, if fallen man is conceived of as still having the ability to turn to God in faith apart from a special working of the Holy Spirit—regeneration will be understood in a way quite different than if “natural” (or unregenerate) human nature be thought of as totally depraved. If, however, human beings are seen as being totally or pervasively depraved—that is, as totally unable to turn to God in faith apart from a special working of the Spirit—one's understanding of the nature of regeneration will be different still.

The Bible clearly teaches that human beings are indeed totally or pervasively depraved. We note briefly some of the passages which teach this. According to Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” As little as the Ethiopian can change his skin, or the leopard can change its spots, so little can the people of Israel do good, who are accustomed to doing evil (Jer. 13:23).

The New Testament teaches the pervasive depravity of fallen human nature in unmistakable terms. In Romans 7:18 Paul, describing his unregenerate state, says, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but cannot carry it out.” In the next chapter his description is even more vivid: “The sinful mind [the mind of man or woman by nature] is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7–8). “The man without the Spirit [unregenerate man] does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Jesus had already said to the unbelieving Jews who were listening to him, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). Not willing to grant that we are only sick or half alive spiritually by nature, Paul tells the Ephesians, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1). A few verses later, however, he goes on to affirm, “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” (vv. 4–5).

Since this is our condition by nature, it is abundantly clear that we can no more give ourselves or help give ourselves spiritual life than a corpse can give itself biological life. In the light of the biblical description of fallen human nature, regeneration must be understood, not as an act in which God and man work together, but as the work of God alone.

BIBLICAL TEACHING ON REGENERATION

What does the Bible teach about regeneration? Already in the Old Testament we are taught that only God can bring about the radical change which is necessary to enable fallen human beings again to do what is pleasing in his sight. In Deuteronomy 30:6 we find our spiritual renewal figuratively described as a circumcision of the heart: “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.” Since the heart is the inner core of the person, the passage teaches that God must cleanse us within before we can truly love him. What we would call regeneration is described by Jeremiah in these words: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (31:33). Ezekiel uses a figure to describe regeneration which, though reflecting Old Testament modes of thought, we still often use today: “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” (36:26; cf. 11:19). Here God, through Ezekiel, promises the Babylonian exiles that in the future he will renew them within.

The New Testament provides us with fuller and richer teaching on regeneration than does the Old. In the Synoptic Gospels the word “regeneration” is not used in the sense of “new birth.” The thought is, however, present. When Jesus says, “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matt. 7:17), he implies that the tree

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must be made good before it can bear good fruit. When he affirms, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots” (Matt. 15:13), he implies that those plants which his heavenly Father has planted will not be uprooted. Statements such as these clearly suggest the necessity of regeneration.

No New Testament writer refers more frequently to regeneration or the new birth than does the Apostle John.

We look first at John 1:12–13:

(12) To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—

(13) children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

Arminian theologians often quote verse 12 to prove that faith must precede regeneration: “To those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God.” But we must not separate verse 12 from verse 13. The latter verse tells us that being children of God is not the result of natural descent or human decision, but of divine activity alone. It is, of course, true that those who believed in Christ did receive the right to become children of God—but behind their faith was the miraculous deed of God whereby they were spiritually reborn. They were born not of man but of God.

Perhaps no New Testament chapter teaches the sovereignty of God’s activity in regeneration as clearly as does the third chapter of John’s Gospel. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus by night. His introductory statement evidenced high regard for Jesus as a teacher but a lack of understanding of Christ’s real mission: “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him” (John 3:2). Jesus’ reply (in v. 3) sounds the keynote of the entire discussion: “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (or “from above,” mg.; Gk. *gennēthē anōthen*). *Gennēthē* is an aorist passive form of *gennaō*, which may mean either “to beget” or “to be born.” The versions commonly render the verb here in the second sense, “be born”; verse 4 indicates that this is the sense that was here intended. *Anōthen* literally means “from above”; it may also mean “again” or “anew.” In John’s Gospel the word *anōthen* is used three times in chapter 3 (in vv. 3, 7, and 31); it is also used in 19:11 and 19:23. In the last three instances it unquestionably means “from above.” I conclude that here in verse 3, as well as in verse 7, Jesus’ words should be translated, “born from above.” The expression would then include the thought that one must be born again, but would point specifically to the fact that this new birth is a birth from above.

Jesus is here telling Nicodemus that he cannot even begin to see the Kingdom of God which the former is ushering in, and the spiritual realities of that kingdom, unless he has been born from above. The aorist form of the verb, *gennēthē*, indicates that this new birth is a single occurrence, happening once for all. The passive voice of the verb tells us that this is an occurrence in which human beings are wholly passive. In fact, the very verb used, even apart from the passive voice, tells us the same thing. We did not choose to be born; we had nothing to do with our being born. We were completely passive in our natural birth. So it is also with our spiritual birth. The adverb *anōthen* tells us further that this new birth is a birth from above: a birth from heaven, in distinction from an ordinary birth which is from the earth.

Summing up, from verse 3 we learn that regeneration is absolutely necessary if one is to see the Kingdom of God, and that it is a change in which human beings are completely passive—as passive as they are in their natural birth. We also learn from verse 3 that this new birth is from above—that it must therefore be brought about by a supernatural and superhuman agency.

After Nicodemus had expressed his amazement, and had asked his question about the possibility of entering a second time into his mother’s womb, Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (v. 5). Though some interpreters see in the word “water” a reference to baptism, it seems more likely that water should here be understood as a symbol of inner purification, as it often was in the Old Testament. The expression “born of ... the Spirit” designates the divine agent of this new birth: the Holy Spirit. Though previously Jesus had only said that this was a birth “from above,” here he specifically identifies the divine author. In this new birth we are therefore utterly dependent on the sovereign activity of the Spirit of God.

When we come to verse 6 we must resist the temptation to interpret the word “flesh” (*sarx*) in the usual Pauline sense, as meaning human nature totally enslaved by sin. For John the word “flesh” often means “the physical weakness inseparable from human existence,” and that is what it seems to mean here. So when Jesus affirms, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v. 6, RSV), he is saying that what is

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merely born physically continues to be unregenerate human nature and nothing more, whereas what is born of the Holy Spirit is spiritual in its essence. One can pass from the lower level to the higher only through a supernatural new birth. Regeneration, in other words, brings about a radical change in our nature.

“You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’ ” (v. 7). These words are often understood as meaning that we must do something in our own strength in order to be born again. But this is not what Jesus meant. He was telling Nicodemus here that he and all others (the second “you” is in the plural) need to be born from above (*anōthen*) in order to see and enter into his kingdom.

In verse 8 Jesus describes both the sovereignty and the mystery of the action of the Spirit in regeneration: “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.” The action of the Spirit in regenerating people is as sovereign as the wind which blows wherever it pleases. But this action is also deeply mysterious, as are the movements of the wind. Yet, Jesus goes on to say, “you hear its sound”—did Jesus and Nicodemus perhaps hear a gust of wind at this point? You don’t understand the movements of the wind, but you can hear its sound. Similarly, you don’t understand the mysteries of the new birth, but you can tell from certain outward signs whether you have been born again. What these outward signs are we shall learn when we look at John’s first epistle.

Summing up again, from verses 5 to 8 we have learned that the divine agent of regeneration is the Holy Spirit, that the new life received in this new birth is radically different from mere biological life, and that, though regeneration is a mysterious happening, we can know that it has occurred through observing its fruits.

What does Paul teach about regeneration? In Paul’s writings the word “regeneration” (*palingenesia*) occurs only once, in Titus 3:5, “He saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit” (RSV). In John 3 regeneration was pictured as a new birth or a birth from above; here we have a similar figure: *palingenesia*, from *palin*, meaning “again,” and *genesia*, meaning “genesis” or “birth.” The word points to a new beginning. The expression “the washing of regeneration” is probably an allusion to baptism, pointing to the spiritual reality for which baptism stands. The words “renewal in the Holy Spirit” tell us that regeneration involves not only purification from sin but also a spiritual renewal which is wrought in us by the Spirit and which continues in the process of sanctification.

Though this is the only place where Paul uses the word “regeneration,” allusions to regeneration in his letters are frequent. In Ephesians 2:5 Paul affirms that when we were dead in transgressions, God made us alive together with Christ. In Ephesians 2:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul uses a new figure for regeneration: it is such a startlingly different kind of existence that it can only be compared to a new creation: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus”; “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” From these Pauline statements we learn that regeneration is the fruit of the Spirit’s purifying and renewing activity, that it is equivalent to making dead persons alive, that it takes place in union with Christ, and that it means that we now become part of God’s wondrous new creation.

Peter also deals with regeneration in his first epistle. He uses the word *anagennaō*, which could mean either “to beget again” or “to cause to be born again”: “In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3). Peter here ties in regeneration both with Christ’s resurrection and with our hope. We were made to be born again, he says, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Christ’s resurrection is indeed the source of our new spiritual life; since God made us alive together with Christ, our new life is a sharing of Christ’s resurrection life. Through this wondrous event we have been born again into a living hope—a hope that we shall someday enter into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade (v. 4). Peter thus sees regeneration in an eschatological perspective: the beginning of our new life in Christ opens up a glorious vista of our eternal inheritance.

John makes a number of references to regeneration in his first epistle. These passages all stress that regeneration is bound to reveal itself in certain specific types of behavior. From 1 John 2:29 we learn that the regenerate person is one who keeps on doing right things: “If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.” The verb translated “has been born” is in the perfect tense (*gegennētai*), indicating that this person has been regenerated in the past and continues to show evidence of that regeneration in the present.

From 1 John 3:9 we gather that one who has been regenerated does not continually live in sin: “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

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born of God.” “Continue to sin” translates *hamartian ou poiei*; the present tense of the verb describes continued action. The meaning is: does not keep on doing and enjoying sin, with complete abandon. “Cannot go on sinning” is a rendering of *ou dynatai hamartanein*; the verb for “sinning” is again in the present tense. What John means is: he or she is not able to keep on sinning with enjoyment, to keep on living in sin. “The believer may fall into sin, but he will not walk in it.”

1 John 4:7 tells us that one who has been regenerated loves his or her fellow believer: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” The word for “love” used here, *agapaō*, points to a self-giving love, the kind of love exemplified by Christ. Someone who has been born again, John is saying here, keeps on loving fellow believers unselfishly.

In 1 John 5:1 we read that the regenerated person is one who has faith: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God [literally, has been born of God].” In opposition to the views of those who claim that faith must precede regeneration, this passage tells us that faith is the outward evidence of regeneration.

From 1 John 5:4 we learn that one who has been regenerated overcomes the world: “For everyone born of God overcomes the world.” “World” here, as often in John’s epistles, means the world at enmity with God, as the source of temptation and sin. In 2:15 John warns his readers: “Do not love the world or anything in the world.” In the passage before us, however, John assures us that those who have been born again will not be defeated by the world’s temptations but will win the victory.

John affirms in 1 John 5:18 that the regenerate person is so guarded by Christ that he or she does not fall away from the faith: “We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin (*ouch hamartanei*; the verb is again in the present tense); the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.” As in 3:9 John here tells us again that the born-again person does not continue to live in sin. By “the one who was born of God” John means Christ, who was the Son of God in a unique way. Christ guards the regenerate person so that the devil cannot harm him or her—cannot administer a deadly wound (Calvin). A person who has been born from above, in other words, will not fall away from grace, since he or she is kept from doing so by Christ.

From John’s first epistle we have learned that the regenerate person is someone whose outward life is marked by the following characteristics: he or she does what is right, does not continue to live in sin, loves his or her fellow believer, believes that Jesus is the Christ, and keeps on overcoming the world. If, therefore, someone should ask, How can I know whether I have been regenerated? the person should be told to look for these evidences, since John tells us that these are the marks of a person who has been born again.

We sum up now what we have learned from our biblical study of regeneration: regeneration is a radical change from spiritual death to spiritual life, brought about in us by the Holy Spirit—a change in which we are completely passive. This change involves an inner renewal of our nature, is a fruit of God’s sovereign grace, and takes place in union with Christ.

On the basis of this exegetical study, we must affirm strongly that regeneration in the sense in which we have been discussing it (as the implanting of new spiritual life) is not an act in which human beings cooperate with God, but an act of which God is the sole author. Regeneration, in other words, is “monergistic,” the work of God alone, not “synergistic,”¹⁷ something which is accomplished by God and man working together. We saw that regeneration is described in John’s Gospel and first epistle by means of verbs in the passive voice: *gennēthē*, *gennēthēnai*, *gegennētai*, *gegennēmenos*. We have noted the striking figure found in Ephesians 2:5, “God ... made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.” How, now, could dead people make themselves alive? How could dead people cooperate with God in making themselves alive? Regeneration, the Bible teaches, is a work of God in which human beings are passive. From these biblical teachings about regeneration we learn God’s total sovereignty in soteriology: our salvation is God’s work from the very beginning. Therefore to him be all the praise!

THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF REGENERATION

Regeneration is deeply mysterious—first, because it is by definition a supernatural work of God; second, because we can never observe or experience regeneration; we can only observe its effects. Understanding regeneration in the narrower sense, as the implanting of new life, we can never be certain when it occurs; we can only deduce from certain evidences with greater or lesser certainty (greater with respect to ourselves, lesser with respect to others) that it has occurred.

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I should like to make three comments about the essential nature of regeneration:

(1) *Regeneration is an instantaneous change.* It is not a gradual process, like progressive sanctification. How can it be, if it is the change from spiritual death to spiritual life? We think again of Ephesians 2:5, where regeneration is described as the making alive of dead sinners; the verb there translated “made us alive with Christ,” *synezōpoiēsen*, is in the aorist tense, signifying momentary or snapshot action. In Acts 16:14 we read about the conversion of Lydia: “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.” The opening of the heart obviously describes regeneration. The verb rendered “opened” (*diēnoixen*) is also in the aorist tense. Though we cannot be sure when regeneration occurs, it must be instantaneous, since there is no middle position between death and life.

(2) *Regeneration is a supernatural change.* The Arminians (then called Remonstrants) at the Synod of Dort contended that regeneration was a change brought about by moral persuasion. The synod rejected this position as being Pelagian and unbiblical:

The Synod rejects the errors of those ... who teach that the grace by which we are converted to God [here the word “conversion” is used as a synonym for “regeneration”] is nothing but a gentle persuasion, or (as others explain it) that the way of God’s acting in man’s conversion that is most noble and suited to human nature is that which happens by persuasion....

The way in which the theologians of Dort answered the Arminians and set forth what they deemed to be the Scriptural view of regeneration is worth quoting:

This is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead and the making alive so clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures, which God works in us without our help. But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God has done his work, it remains in man’s power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not lesser than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead, as Scripture ... teaches.

(3) *Regeneration is a radical change.* Since the term “radical” comes from the Latin word for “root” (*radix*), this means that regeneration is a change at the very root of our nature.

(a) *Regeneration means the giving or “implanting” of new spiritual life.* As we saw earlier, human beings are by nature spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13; Rom. 8:7–8). It is at the moment of regeneration that the dead sinner becomes spiritually alive, that resistance to God is changed to non-resistance, and that hatred for God is changed to love. Regeneration means that the person who was outside of Christ is now in Christ. Hence this is a radical, not just a superficial change.

(b) *Regeneration is a change which affects the whole person.* Most Reformed theologians opposed the view of John Cameron (1579–1625), a French theologian, that the Holy Spirit in regenerating a person merely illumines the mind or intellect in such a way that the will inevitably follows the guidance of the intellect in moral and spiritual matters. Not only does this view represent an erroneous type of faculty psychology; it is also quite unrealistic. I may be thoroughly convinced in my mind that a certain course of action is proper, but if I am still “dead in transgressions and sins,” I will never follow that right course of action. The Arminians at the Synod of Dort also had an inadequate view of the role of the will in regeneration when they insisted that man’s will was not at all affected by sin, so that all that was necessary was the removal of certain hindrances to the proper functioning of the will: “the darkness of the mind and the unruliness of the emotions.”

Over against these inadequate conceptions, Reformed theologians insisted that regeneration is a total change—a change which involves the whole person. In Scriptural terms, regeneration means the giving of a new heart. And 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, praying, praising, and so on. It is this fountain which is renewed in regeneration. It should be added, however, that this does not mean the removal of all sinful tendencies. Though regenerated persons are new, they are not yet perfect.

(c) *Regeneration is a change which takes place below consciousness.* This is evident, first, from the way the Scriptures describe our natural state. If we are, as the Bible says, by nature dead in sin, corrupt, not subject to God’s law, not able to accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, we cannot consciously decide to change ourselves into the opposite of our natural state. We must be changed at the very root of our being, in a supernatural way.

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Hence this must be a change in what psychologists would call the subconscious—a change which, however, is bound to reveal itself in our conscious life.

Further, that this change takes place below consciousness is also evident from the terms used in the Bible to describe regeneration: “I will give you a new heart”; “unless he is born from above”; “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”; “made us alive with Christ.” Expressions of this sort denote a transformation so radical that it must be a change in the subconscious roots of our being. In regeneration in the narrower sense, therefore, we are not active but passive.

“IRRESISTIBLE GRACE”

It is commonly said that Calvinists believe in “irresistible grace.” This expression is, in fact, part of the “TULIP” acronym, which stands for the so-called “Five Points of Calvinism”: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. The term “irresistible grace” conveys an important biblical truth. As we saw, regeneration is monergistic and not synergistic. It is not a work in which God and man cooperate, but it is the work of God alone. All that was said about the natural state of fallen human beings, about effectual calling, and about the way in which God regenerates his people supports the affirmation that the grace which regenerates us is indeed irresistible.

Objections, however, have been raised against the use of the expression “irresistible grace.” The first objection is that this term suggests a kind of overpowering domination on God’s part, giving the impression that God violates our wills and deals with us as if we were things instead of persons. A second objection is the contention that God’s grace may indeed sometimes be resisted—does not the Bible speak of those who resisted the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51)?

These objections, however, can be answered. I dealt with the first objection earlier, in connection with effectual calling. In reply to the contention that God violates our wills in regeneration, we may say that since we are by nature dead in sin, our wills need to be renewed so that we may again serve God as we should. God’s action in regenerating us, therefore, is no more a violation of our wills than is the artificial respiration applied to a person whose breathing has stopped. Herman Bavinck has put it well: God’s [effectual] calling “is so powerful that it cannot be conquered, and yet so loving that it excludes all force.”²⁴ Or listen to C. S. Lewis: “The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.”

In connection with the second objection, it should be noted that the expression “irresistible grace” did not originate with the Calvinists. It was the Remonstrants (or Arminians) at the Synod of Dort (1618–19) who used this expression, which they had gotten from the Jesuits, to characterize the Reformed position on regeneration. Bavinck goes on to say that Reformed theologians did not wish to deny that God’s grace was often resisted. Therefore they preferred to speak of “invincible” or “unconquerable” grace, or to say that God’s saving grace was “finally irresistible.”²⁷ The grace of God may indeed be resisted, but it will not be successfully resisted by those whom God has chosen in Christ to salvation from before the creation of the world. As Cornelius Plantinga aptly says, “Nobody can finally hold out against God’s grace. Nobody can outlast Him. Every elect person comes ... to ‘give in and admit that God is God.’ ”

REGENERATION RELATED TO OTHER DOCTRINES

(1) *The relation between regeneration and effectual calling.* Some Reformed theologians wish to distinguish between regeneration and effectual calling. Louis Berkhof, for example, prefers to say that effectual calling follows regeneration in the narrower sense. John Murray, however, thinks that it is best to say that effectual calling precedes regeneration.³⁰

I prefer to think of regeneration (in the narrower sense) and effectual calling as identical. There is precedent for this view. Seventeenth-century theology generally identified the two. More recently the same position was taken by Augustus Hopkins Strong³² and Herman Bavinck. Since effectual calling is the sovereign work of God whereby he enables the hearer of the gospel call to respond in repentance and faith, it is not different from regeneration. These two expressions describe the change from spiritual death to spiritual life by means of different figures: the bestowal of new life (regeneration) or the bestowal of the ability to respond to the gospel call in faith (effectual calling).

We may note that these two are parallel in that both are new beginnings which lead to continuing spiritual growth. Regeneration issues in conversion and leads to a life of obedience and consecration. Effectual calling, as we saw above, summons us to a distinctive kind of life: a life of fellowship with Christ, holiness, freedom, and peace.

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(2) *The relation between regeneration and conversion.* Regeneration, in the narrower sense in which we have been discussing it, must not be identified with conversion but distinguished from it. Regeneration leads to and issues in conversion (that is, in faith and repentance). Putting it the other way, conversion is the outward evidence that regeneration has taken place.

By way of illustration, we look again at Acts 16:14:

One of those listening (*ēkouen*, imperfect) was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened (*diēnoixen*, aorist) her heart to respond (*prosechein*, present) to Paul's message.

Since the heart stands for the inner core of the person, we may assume that the opening of the heart describes regeneration. This led Lydia to respond believingly to what Paul was saying—to accept it, to embrace it, and to act upon it. This type of response is what we call conversion. Note the tenses used by Luke: while Lydia was listening to Paul (continuing action), the Lord in a moment of time opened her heart (snapshot action), so that she now began to give heed (continuing action) to what Paul was saying.

Regeneration and conversion, as in Lydia's case, occur simultaneously. But *causally* regeneration must be "prior" to conversion. One can only respond in repentance and faith after God has given new life. The situation can be compared to what happens when we turn on the faucet and the water starts running: the turning on of the faucet and the running of the water are simultaneous, but, in causal terms, the faucet must be turned on before the water starts running.

Regeneration, therefore, as we learned from the first epistle of John, will make itself felt in the new direction of our lives. This new life will result in "new views of God, of Christ, of sin, of holiness, of the world, of the gospel, and of the life to come."

(3) *The relation between regeneration and sanctification.* In one sense the two are identical. As I hope to show later, there is a sense in which sanctification is *definitive*. Definitive sanctification occurs at a point in time rather than along a time line; it means that at a certain moment we die to sin and are raised with Christ. It does not mean being able to live in sinless perfection, but it does mean that those who are in Christ have made a decisive and irreversible break with sin as the sphere in which they live, and are now enabled to serve God in the newness of the Holy Spirit. When sanctification is thus understood, it is identical with regeneration.

More commonly, however, sanctification is thought of as a lifelong process. When sanctification is seen in this way, regeneration must be understood to be the beginning of sanctification. Regeneration is not a process but is instantaneous; however, it leads to a life of growth in holiness and obedience. Such growth is one of the blessings of sanctification. In this sense, then, regeneration is the first step in progressive sanctification. The two are related to each other as initial newness and progressive newness.

We should not fail to note here that regeneration has a social aspect. We often think of being "born again" as referring primarily to "personal salvation" in an individualistic sense. But we must remember that regeneration makes us members of the body of Christ. It therefore has social implications. It means that we owe love to one another as fellow members of Christ. Peter ties this in with our regeneration: "Love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again" (1 Pet. 1:22–23). And Paul extends this obligation of love to all whom our lives may touch: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10).

(4) *The relation between regeneration and baptism.* The New Testament often associates baptism with new spiritual life. Paul does so in Romans 6:3–4: "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." He also does so in Colossians 2:11–12, "In him [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, ... having been buried with him in baptism." Peter, in fact, affirms that the water of the flood "symbolizes baptism that now saves you also"—presumably, from sin (1 Pet. 3:21).

Some churches, indeed, teach baptismal regeneration. This, for example, is the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church: "Other effects of Baptism are the remission of original and actual sin and of the punishment due to

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them (Denzinger, 1316) and regeneration in Christ or adopted sonship.” Lutherans also teach baptismal regeneration. This is how one Lutheran systematic theologian explains this teaching:

Baptism is a means imparting the remission of sins... Baptism ... is a means to awaken and strengthen faith and therefore also a washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost (Tit. 3:5)... Observe also that even as the remission of sin and regeneration are bestowed through Baptism as a means, ... so also the implantation into the body of Christ ... is wrought, and not merely portrayed, by the Holy Ghost through Baptism.

Both Roman Catholics and Lutherans, however, teach that the regeneration received in baptism may again be lost.

The Reformed view of the sacraments, however, is that they are “holy signs and seals for us to see. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and might put his seal on that promise.” In Reformed theology baptism is not considered a means whereby regeneration is bestowed, but rather a sign and seal of our regeneration: “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament ... to be unto him [the person baptized] a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life....”

Baptism, therefore, does not automatically bring about regeneration, but it pictures (its function as a sign) and confirms (its function as a seal) that blessing. For those baptized as adults, it confirms the blessing as these adults continue to accept by faith God’s promise of new life in Christ presented in the gospel. For those baptized as infants, the sacrament confirms the blessing as they later on accept by faith what their baptism stood for.

REGENERATION AND THE PREACHER

We now face a problem. If regeneration, as has been shown, is totally the work of God and not in any sense the work of man, what can the preacher do about it? He may tell his hearers that they must be born again (John 3:7). But he cannot urge them to regenerate themselves, since they cannot do this. Neither can he urge them to become regenerated, since only the Holy Spirit can bestow regeneration. How, then, must the preacher handle the doctrine of regeneration?

By way of reply, I would like at this point to discuss *the relation between regeneration and the word*. Regeneration usually occurs during the preaching, teaching, or reading of the Bible. From Acts 16:14 we have learned that Lydia’s regeneration took place as she was listening to Paul’s gospel message.

We look next at James 1:18, “He [God] chose to give us birth (*apekyēsen*) through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” The verb here used, *apokyein*, does not mean “to beget” but “to give birth to.” It is used earlier in verse 15 of this chapter, where James says that sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. God the Father, however, who is the source of every good and perfect gift (v. 17), has shown us his unfathomable mercy by giving us new birth—a birth which is the evidence of our having received new spiritual life. The new birth as James here describes it is not regeneration in the narrower sense—the implanting of new life—but in the broader sense, namely, the first manifestation of the new life in conversion. Regeneration in this broader sense, James is here saying, is produced in us through the word of truth, through the Bible.

Peter makes a similar point:

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again (*anagegennēmenoi*), not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring work of God (1 Pet. 1:22–23).

The verb *anagennaō* means either “to beget again” or “to cause to be born again.” In this passage, as well as in the third verse of this chapter, it is commonly understood in the second sense, and it is so translated in the New International Version. You have been born again, Peter tells his readers, “through the living and enduring word of God”; from verse 25 it is evident that Peter is referring to the preached word. We note again that regeneration in the broader sense is brought about through the preaching of the Bible. The gospel is, in fact, called “the seed of regeneration” in the Canons of Dort.

We conclude, therefore, that though God by his Holy Spirit works regeneration in the narrower sense in us immediately, directly, and invincibly, the first manifestations of that new spiritual life come into existence through the word—whether it be preached, taught, or read. New spiritual life, in other words, is bestowed immediately by God; but the new birth is produced mediately, through the word.

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What, then, is the preacher's duty as far as regeneration is concerned? He must preach the gospel. Such preaching and teaching is essential: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Rom. 10:14). The preacher cannot demand regeneration from his hearers, but he can and should call them to faith in the gospel and repentance from sin.

This is precisely what Jesus did. After having told Nicodemus about the need for regeneration (John 3:3, 5), Jesus went on to say, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (v. 16). This is also what Peter did on the Day of Pentecost: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you" (Acts 2:38). This, too, is what Paul did. When the Philippian jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30–31). When Nicodemus and the jailer believed the gospel message, they came to realize that God had given them new life in regeneration. They became aware of their regeneration through its results.

But, you may say, how can I ask a person to do something he or she cannot do in his or her own strength? We must trust that God will give the hearer the ability to repent and believe. A good illustration is Jesus' healing of the paralytic. Jesus said to this 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. So the preacher must trust that God will enable the hearers of the gospel to respond in faith. And the hearer must trust that God will give him or her strength to accept the preached word with a believing heart.

With respect to his believing hearers, the preacher's duty and privilege is to remind them of the amazing dimensions of the miraculous new birth they have experienced. We often fail to recognize these dimensions. There is often little appreciation for the newness we have in Christ. Our lives often fail to glow with the radiance of God.

The preacher should set forth the full biblical teaching on regeneration, thus helping his hearers to be more and more what in Christ they already are. Regeneration means *new life*. After the apostles had been imprisoned, an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and said to them, "Go ... and tell the people the full message of this new life" (Acts 5:20). Paul tells us that we have been made one with Christ so that "as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4, RSV). And in Romans 7:6 he reminds us that we now serve "in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."

As regenerated people we now live and walk *in the light*. "Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light" (John 3:21). We who claim to have fellowship with God "walk in the light, as he [God] is in the light" (1 John 1:7). As those who have been born again, we must "put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Rom. 13:12).

Born-again people are part of God's *new creation*. We have been created anew in Christ (Eph. 2:10). "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation" (Gal. 6:15). And this is what we are. Listen to Paul's exhilarating trumpet call: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Let the people of God, then, see themselves in this light. This is what it means to be born again. It does not mean sinless perfection, but it does mean newness. Those who are in Christ are genuinely new, though not yet totally new.¹⁰

Regeneration

Greek expression: *paliggenesia*

Pronunciation: *pahl eeng gehn eh SEE uh*

Strong's Number: 3824

KEY VERSES

Matthew 19:28; Titus 3:5

¹⁰ Hoekema, A. A. (1994). *Saved by Grace* (pp. 93–112). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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Anyone who experiences any kind of winter looks forward to springtime, for that is a season of “regeneration.” Flowers bud and bloom, birds return and sing. Unfortunately, it never lasts. Spring goes into summer, summer into autumn, autumn into winter.

People throughout the ages have longed for an eternal spring, a “regeneration” of the pristine earth. Secular writers spoke of such a regeneration. For example, the Stoic philosophers considered regeneration to be a return to a former state of existence. For the biblical writers, however, regeneration means a renewal on a higher level. It is a “radically new beginning,” rather than a mere restoration of previous conditions. This renewal is twofold: it occurs within people’s spirits and it will occur when God recreates a new heaven and a new earth.

The regeneration of a person is spoken about in Titus 3:5. Paul said, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” The Greek word for “washing” can signify the receptacle of washing (the *laver*) or the act of washing itself. In Ephesians 5:26, the only other New Testament occurrence of *paliggenesia*, the natural meaning is “washing.” Quite simply, the text says that “regeneration” is characterized by, or accompanied by, the action of washing. The regenerative activity of the Holy Spirit is characterized elsewhere in Scripture as “cleansing and purifying” (Ezek. 36:25–27; John 3:5). The Greek term for regeneration, *paliggenesia*, literally means “birth again”—indicating a new birth effected by the Holy Spirit (John 3:6; Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6). Thus God saves people through one process with two aspects: the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Regeneration is not just a nice idea or a good philosophy. The Bible insists that regeneration is absolutely necessary. Apart from it, all persons are dead in trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1–3). An unregenerated person is unable to understand the things of God, and no amount of good works can change him or her (1 Cor. 2:14; Titus 3:5). This is why Jesus insisted, in His dialogue with Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (John 3:7, NASB). God’s first plan is to regenerate people. Then, He will regenerate the universe, in that He will establish a new world order at His return (Matt. 19:28). The ultimate goal of regeneration is the creation of a new heaven and earth that will be totally righteous and without sin (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). The present working of the Holy Spirit in the believer is a foretaste of this future cosmic regeneration (Eph. 1:13–14).¹¹

CHAPTER

SEVEN

“UNLESS A MAN IS BORN AGAIN”

JOHN 3:3

THE DOCTRINE OF REGENERATION

I. INTRODUCTORY CONCERNS

In the present chapter we continue our study of the application of Christ’s atoning work on the cross. Our attention turns to another crucial aspect of salvation, namely, the new birth or the creation of new life in those who repent and trust Christ. In his book *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis observed that every person born into the world possesses *bios*, or biological life, that is sustained by oxygen, water, and food. But only those who are born again by God’s Spirit move beyond natural existence to possess *zoe*, new spiritual life that endures forever. In the natural realm there can be no life without physical birth; likewise, in the spiritual realm there can be no spiritual life without a supernatural rebirth.

Initially, we inquire into the need for new birth. Given man’s breathtaking technological achievements, why need we call for the transformation of human life? Have humans not proven that they can control their environment and their future? A further important issue is the nature of the new birth. Is the focus of regeneration the individual or, as many political theologians aver, society as a whole? If the former, what does it mean to say that the one who repents and believes is born again? With Nicodemus of old we ask, “How can a man be born when he is old?... Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” (John 3:4). Some may respond to this question as did that Pharisee, who in bewilderment said to Jesus, “How can this be?” (John 3:9). What actually happens to the person when God transforms him or her from spiritual death to spiritual life? It

¹¹ Carpenter, E. E., & Comfort, P. W. (2000). In *Holman treasury of key Bible words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew words defined and explained* (p. 375). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

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will be instructive to consider the manifold results of the Holy Spirit's regeneration in a life. When a person is regenerated, is the fallen, sinful nature replaced by a new, metaphysical nature? What do we mean by the 'old nature' and the 'new nature'?

In addition, we ask whether regeneration is a work of God alone (monergism), or whether the individual cooperates in the new birth (synergism). What role, if any, does the human will play in regeneration? Can pre-Christians via their human resources contribute anything to their spiritual renovation? Can the modern conviction that psychotherapy and personal improvement schemes bring about new life and dispositions be sustained? A further matter for consideration is whether regeneration in OT times was a promise or a reality. Were OT saints such as Adam, Abraham, and David truly reborn by the Spirit of God? Or must regeneration in some sense have awaited the full flowering of salvation under the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus?

In addition, we explore whether God works regeneration through human instrumentalities such as the sacrament of baptism, membership in a church, or birth to Christian parents in a godly family. What role, if any, does water baptism play in the new birth? How shall we understand biblical texts such as John 3:5, Acts 22:16, and Tit 3:5 that link regeneration to water and washing? In Scripture is water baptism identical to or concurrent with Spirit baptism? Can the claims of baptismal regeneration, historically made by Roman Catholics and other sacramentalists, be sustained? As a matter of practical, pastoral concern, are children who die in infancy assured a place in God's heaven? What answer will we give to grieving parents at the grave site of a deceased infant? These are some of the issues we will consider in the remainder of this chapter.

II. HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF REGENERATION

Several important interpretations of regeneration, or the new birth, have been proposed in the broad history of the Christian church. In order to clarify our own understanding of this important doctrine, we summarize five major views on the subject of the new birth.

A. *Self-Actualized Regeneration (Pelagians and Liberals)*

We saw in an earlier chapter that Pelagians and liberals repudiate original sin and depravity; hence they envisage little need for radical, spiritual rebirth in all persons. Liberal authorities maintain that each person born into the world is a child of God and thus is indwelt by the divine principle. Pelagians and liberals broadly envisage regeneration as the process of ethical development stimulated by the ideals of Jesus. Liberal preachers and theologians in the early decades of the twentieth century focused on social regeneration—i.e., the collective renewal of humanity in the kingdom of God. Liberals both old and new identify regeneration as a process of self-improvement realized by self-effort and the example of Christ. Some believe that regeneration is brought about by the inexorable forces of spiritual evolution.

Pelagius (d. 419) claimed that every person is born into the world free from the taint of inherited sin. Consequently, Pelagius vigorously opposed the early church practice of infant baptism for the remission of sins. Many persons sin when, following the example of Adam, they willfully violate God's law. According to Pelagius, salvation occurs as people forsake sins and obey the divine law. The stimulus for such action comes from the illuminatory power of the truth upon human minds and from the example of Jesus. Pelagius' soteriological agenda, then, was not supernatural regeneration but personal, moral reformation. Because of his high view of human capabilities, Pelagius "made God only a spectator in the drama of human redemption."

Walter Rauschenbusch (d. 1918) rejected original sin and depravity and claimed that by natural birth all people are children of God. Since sin is a social force (chiefly the denial of human fraternity), so also is salvation. Rauschenbusch optimistically envisaged "the salvation of the collective life of humanity, the fulfillment of the theocratic hope." He defined regeneration as the gradual transformation of the social order—specifically, as "the spread of the spirit of Christ in the political, industrial, social, scientific, and artistic life of humanity."

Lyman Abbott (d. 1922) claimed that regeneration describes the awakening of the virtue latent in all people as God's children. The rekindling of life in the human heart through the force of spiritual evolution as the Eternal Energy, concentrated in Jesus, continually enters into human consciousness. Abbott wrote that "Christ comes, not merely to show divinity to us, but to evolve the latent divinity which he has implanted in us." Abbott explained his understanding of regeneration as the progress of spiritual evolution in the following words:

Regeneration does not mean to me a new faculty miraculously given to man by some magic formula, as baptism, or by some supernatural experience for which man must wait. In every normal man is the capacity for goodness and truth, for love and service, for hope and joy. But this sleeping capacity is naught unless it is awakened into life. It is a seed, but a lifeless seed until it is given life by a divine power above itself.

According to Abbott, history attests the spiritual evolution of men and women at two separate levels: the evolution of the *individual* into divinity and the evolution of *humanity* corporately into the kingdom of God.

While there exists no official liberation theology, the movement embraces a theology not of discourse but of concrete action in specific social contexts. The literature of liberation theology contains few references to the spiritual regeneration or salvation of persons. Proponents allege that people as social groups are corrupted by political, economic, racial, and sexual oppression born of the capitalist system. Thus salvation, or the recovery of human wholeness, occurs when dehumanizing injustices are

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swept away by revolutionary action (sometimes violent). Liberationists generally explain regeneration as people remaking themselves by dismantling oppressive structures and creating a more humane and humanizing society. In other words, regeneration is man's self-creation of a new social order that embodies the hopes and dreams of the marginalized and the oppressed. It involves the creation of a "little utopia" in anticipation of the "absolute utopia" in the kingdom of God. Liberationists follow Hegelian philosophers in viewing history as the process whereby humans free the divinity within them and progress to the union of the finite with the infinite.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian father of liberation theology, argues as follows: "By working, transforming the world, breaking out of servitude, building a just society, and assuming his destiny, man forges himself." The Brazilian priests Leonardo and Clodovis Boff aver that regeneration is "the struggle for the transformation of the world into one more worthy of the human being and more like the new world of the kingdom of God." According to the American black theologian James Cone, new life involves the black Christ liberating oppressed blacks from the shackles of white racism. Writes Cone, "Faith is the response of the community to God's act of liberation. It means saying yes to God and no to oppressors."⁸

Within the framework of a pantheistic worldview (whereby God is a part of the world and the world a part of God), process theology asserts that the divine Eros presents to all persons the lure or initial aim that provides for their maximum fulfillment. Lewis Ford asserts, "Everywhere God's creative urging toward the establishment of increased levels of intensity is present, but only with intelligent life can there be any awareness of this." The presentation of novel initial aims may come through Jesus, Plato, the Buddha, or other prophets and philosophers. According to process thinkers, personal re-creation results from positive human response to the novel initial aims God presents at every moment to his intelligent creatures. Reflecting on John 3:3, Ford makes the following observation about the new birth: "In terms of the perishing occasions of our temporal life, we are being born anew and from above as we receive novel initial aims from God originating our subjectivity from moment to moment." According to Norman Pittenger, positive human response to the divine lure "ennobles and enriches, vitalizes and makes new."¹¹ Since the novel initial aims offered by the cosmic Lover are persuasive and not coercive, salvation or regeneration is self-salvation. So Pittenger asserted that as persons respond to the divine lure constantly presented to them, we "make ourselves."

B. *Baptismal Regeneration (Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Anglo-Catholics)*

Citing Scriptures such as John 3:5 and Tit 3:5, these traditions claim that God gives regenerating grace via the sacrament of baptism. Although differing in some details, the sacramental traditions agree that baptism confers cleansing of sin, the infusion of regenerating grace, and union with Christ. In children, baptismal regeneration generally turns on the faith of the sponsor, whereas in adults the good disposition of the recipient (faith, repentance, and in some cases good works) is required. Richard P. McBrien, a prominent Roman Catholic theologian, asserts that "The Church has always taught that Baptism is necessary for salvation."

Some early church authorities drifted toward ceremonialism by linking regeneration with baptism. According to Hermas (d. 140), "Your life was saved and shall be saved through water." Justin Martyr (d. 165) referred to baptism as "the washing that is for the remission of sins and unto regeneration." Irenaeus (d. 200) claimed that God gave the OT story of Naaman the leper washing in the Jordan river (2 Kings 5) as a type of baptism. "We are made clean by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord from our old transgressions, being spiritually regenerated as newborn babes." Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) spoke rapturously of baptism as "a ransom to captives, a remission of offenses, a death to sin, a new spiritual birth, a chariot to heaven, the delight of paradise, a passport to the kingdom."¹⁷ Cyril judged that only martyrs can be regenerated and saved apart from baptism.

Augustine (d. 430), the great theologian of the western church, held that God's unmerited gift of grace regenerates, creates faith, and effects repentance. Baptism, however, is an outward, visible sign of the Gospel of grace. Those who receive baptism properly consecrated receive the Gospel. At the baptismal font ("the saving laver of regeneration") the elect receive both the external sign (the water of baptism) and the spiritual reality (regeneration and union with Christ); the non-elect, however, receive only the physical sign. For these reasons Augustine insisted that "the sacrament of baptism is undoubtedly the sacrament of regeneration." By the fourth or fifth century infant baptism had become customary practice in the church. Augustine held that at baptism infants die to original sin and adults to original sin and sins personally committed. He held that God via baptism "cleanses even the tiny infant, although itself unable as yet with the heart to believe unto righteousness and to make confession with the mouth unto salvation."²⁰ Unbaptized infants, however, remain under the control of the Devil. In the case of elect infants, Augustine claimed that personal conversion will inevitably follow baptismal regeneration. In the case of adults, like Augustine himself, the new convert gladly receives (i.e., does not resist) the water of baptism. For Augustine, then, salvation consisted of baptismal regeneration, conversion, and growth in grace. In baptism we die to sin and "live through being reborn at the baptismal font."

In the scholastic era it became settled that the sign of the sacrament accomplishes what it signifies. According to Thomas Aquinas, baptism effects spiritual generation, confirmation spiritual growth, Eucharist spiritual nourishment, and penance and

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extreme unction spiritual healing. Assuming that the recipient imposes no obstacle, baptism efficiently regenerates when administered on church authority (the *ex opere operato* concept). Thus Thomas claimed that the visible sign of water imparts to the baptized infant invisible, regenerating grace. “Through baptism, which is a spiritual generation, not only are sins taken away ... but also every guilt of sin. For this reason, baptism not only washes away the fault, but also absolves from all guilt.” In short, “Baptism opens the gates of the heavenly kingdom to the baptized.”²⁴ Where the sacrament was not available or where a person died before being baptized, Thomas upheld the so-called “baptism of desire.” Thus he wrote, “Such a man can obtain salvation without actually being baptized, on account of his desire for Baptism ... whereby God ... sanctifies man inwardly.” For simple folk who have not developed a faith that is explicit, Thomas held that implicit faith suffices for salvation.²⁶

Regeneration, which Catholicism confused with justification and sanctification, came to be viewed as a process whose outcome was not established until the end. The Council of Trent (1545–63) stated that regeneration commences with the sacrament of baptism. “If anyone ... denies that the said merit of Jesus Christ is applied, both to adults and to infants, by the sacrament of baptism rightly administered in the form of the Church, let him be anathema” (Sess. V.3). “Even infants, who could not as yet commit any sin of themselves, are for this cause truly baptized for the remission of sins, that in them that may be cleansed away by regeneration, which they have contracted by generation” (Sess. V.4). In the Tridentine scheme, infants are baptized in the faith of the church. In the case of adults, penitence for sins and faith augmented by hope and love should precede baptism (Sess. VI.6). “For faith, unless hope and charity be added thereto, neither unites man perfectly with Christ, nor makes him a living member of his body” (Sess. VI.7).

The Second Vatican Council (1963–65) insisted that for Roman Catholics faith and baptism are necessary for salvation. But given its bent toward a panentheistic worldview—where humankind is oriented to the life of God—post-conciliar Catholicism claims that all people are saved by the “baptism of desire.” The baptism of desire is equivalent to the non-specific implicit faith all human beings possess. Thus the Council affirmed:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.

In a similar vein Gregory Baum commented, “One may seriously wonder whether baptism of desire is not the way of salvation for the great majority of men in this world, chosen to be saved.” Likewise the Notre Dame theologian McBrien writes, “Everybody does not strictly ‘need’ baptism to become a child of God and an heir of heaven. Every person, by reason of birth and God’s universal offer of grace, is already called to be a child of God and an heir of heaven.”²⁹ Do the sacraments, then, retain any saving relevance? McBrien responds, “The sacraments signify, celebrate, and effect what God is, in a sense, doing everywhere and for all.”

While rejecting the Roman synergism of sacramental grace and meritorious works, Luther nevertheless upheld the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. For the Reformer, God’s usual way of regenerating a life is at the baptismal font. Baptism effects justification and the forgiveness of sins, imparts the gift of the Spirit, and re-creates in the divine image. Wrote Luther, God “himself calls it [baptism] a new birth by which we are ... loosed from sin, death, and hell, and because children of life, heirs of all the gifts of God, God’s own children, and brethren of Christ.” In the customary infant baptism, regeneration occurs at the moment when the invoked Word of God unites with the sign (water) and as the infant responds to the Gospel with rudimentary faith. Baptism does not regenerate simply because performed (the Roman *ex opere operato* concept); Luther judged that baptism without faith is useless. Rather, the infant believes in a simple way the word of the Gospel presented in the sacrament. “In baptism children themselves believe and have faith of their own. God works this within them through the intercession of the sponsors who bring the child to the font in the faith of the Christian Church.” At the age of maturity children must ratify their new birth by repentance, mature faith, and obedience. In the rarer cases of adult baptism, the individual is made new by the word received in faith (*regeneratio prima*) and by the strengthening of the new life through baptism (*regeneratio secunda* or *renovatio*).

In *The Small Catechism* (1529) Luther wrote the following: “Baptism is not merely water, but it is water used according to God’s command and connected with God’s Word” (IV). To the question, “How can water produce such great effects?” Luther responded, “It is not the water that produces these effects, but the Word of God connected with the water, and our faith which relies on the Word of God connected with the water.... When connected with the Word of God [the water] is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit” (IV). Melancthon advanced a similar view in *The Augsburg Confession*, art. IX.

Post-Reformation Lutheranism upheld Luther’s view of baptismal regeneration. The Lutheran theologian David Hollaz (d. 1713) typically argued that the Spirit works regeneration through the word of God at the baptismal font. Thus, “the intellect of

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infants in regeneration is imbued with a saving knowledge of God by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and their will is endowed with confidence in Christ." Hollaz added, "In infants, as there is not an earnest and obstinate resistance, the grace of the Holy Spirit accompanying Baptism breaks and restrains their natural resistance that it may not impede regeneration; wherefore their regeneration takes place instantaneously." In our century the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer (d. 1945) insisted that baptism incorporates the infant or adult into the body of Christ. "In baptism man becomes Christ's own possession.... From that moment he belongs to Jesus Christ. He is wrestled from the dominion of the world, and passes into the ownership of Christ."³⁵ The Missouri Synod Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper similarly wrote that baptism "is a means to awaken and strengthen faith and therefore also a washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost (Tit 3:5).... Observe also that even as the remission of sin and regeneration are bestowed through Baptism as a means ... so also the implantation into the body of Christ ... is wrought, and not merely portrayed, by the Holy Ghost through Baptism."

The Church of England officially teaches the regeneration of infants via baptism. Thus *The Thirty-Nine Articles* (American revision, 1801) states, "Baptism is ... a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed" (art. XXVII). As prescribed by *The Book of Common Prayer*, the priest prior to baptism prays that God would "Give thy Holy Spirit to this child, that he may be born again, and be made an heir of everlasting salvation." Following baptism, the priest gives thanks that God was pleased "to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit, to receive him for thy own child, and to incorporate him into thy holy Church."

C. Presumptive and Promissory Regeneration (Covenant Reformed)

This view, although rejecting the high sacramentalism of Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, often posits a close relation between baptism and regeneration. Covenant theologians, with other evangelicals, define regeneration as that radical change of nature from spiritual death to spiritual life wrought in us by Christ through the power of the Spirit. The new birth is the impartation by the triune God of a new heart. In this supernatural work the elect are entirely passive. Regeneration is not a *cooperative* work between God and sinners (synergism); rather, salvation is God's work from beginning to end (monergism). Hence most theologians in the tradition place regeneration before conversion in the scheme of salvation (*ordo salutis*).

Some covenant theologians subscribe to *presumptive regeneration*, which asserts that infants of believing parents are baptized not to become regenerated but because in some important sense they already possess the seeds of faith and regeneration. The sacrament of baptism is a sign or promise of the covenantal grace God is working in the elect, including infants born within the Christian community. According to this view, the unconscious, divine work of regeneration precedes the conscious, human responses of faith and repentance. The more common view, however, is *promissory regeneration*, according to which baptism is judged a visible sign of God's covenant promise of new life to believing adults and their children. Proponents insist that baptism does not effect regeneration; rather, it portrays as a sign and confirms as a seal the blessing of redemption. Thus understood, baptism introduces the baptized into the visible church and promises future regeneration. In the case of both hypotheses, divine regeneration logically precedes the human responses of faith and repentance. Conversion, justification, sanctification, and perseverance all presuppose the existence of new spiritual life.

John Calvin (d. 1564), a precursor of the covenant view, defined regeneration broadly as the whole process of spiritual vivification, inclusive of the new birth, conversion, and sanctification. Begun in baptism, regeneration "does not take place in one moment or one day or one year." Rather it is accomplished "through continual and sometimes even slow advances." Calvin painted a rudimentary picture of presumptive regeneration. He argued that the Spirit's work of regeneration often commences at the very beginning of life in the womb, as illustrated by the yet-unborn John the Baptist who was filled with the Spirit in Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:15). Whether in the womb or in earliest infancy, God can give regenerating grace to his elect by the Spirit's inner illumination apart from the preached Word. According to Calvin, OT circumcision and NT baptism are related. Although differing in external details, both circumcision and baptism signify spiritual regeneration. In the case of infants of believing parents, the sacrament connotes forgiveness of sins, union with Christ, and Spirit regeneration. Calvin insisted that infants are not capable of faith and repentance, but as members of the covenant family they are able to receive the seed of regeneration and sanctification. In response to the question, What does baptism signify? Calvin responded: "It has two parts. For there is remission of sins; and then spiritual regeneration is symbolized by it (Eph 5:26; Rom 6:4)." The purpose of infant baptism is "to testify that they are heirs of the blessing promised to the seed of the faithful, and that, after they are grown up, they may acknowledge the fact of their Baptism, and receive and produce its fruit."⁴³ For Calvin, baptism "is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight, be recalled, or charged against us."

The Scots Confession (1560), the first Reformed standard in the English language, presents the elements of presumptive regeneration. It asserts that as the old covenant under the law had the two sacraments of circumcision and Passover, so the new covenant instituted by Christ possesses the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. Baptism is a seal or sign that God's saving action

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has begun to operate in the souls of the elect, including infants of Christian parents. “We assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted” (art. 21).

The Westminster Confession (1647) favors the perspective of promissory regeneration. Thus baptism is “a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life” (chap. 28.1). Not only may adult believers receive baptism, “but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized” (chap. 28.4). In chap. 28.5 the Confession states that it is possible to be regenerated without being baptized and that not all those baptized (i.e., faithless covenant breakers) are regenerated.

W.G.T. Shedd (d. 1894) insisted that infant regeneration is taught *scripturally* in Luke 1:15, 18:15–16, Acts 2:39, and 1 Cor 7:14 and *symbolically* via OT circumcision and NT infant baptism. In adults, “Regeneration immediately exhibits its fruit in the converting acts of faith and repentance. In the case of infant regeneration, there is an interval of time between regeneration and conversion.” Added Shedd, “The regenerate infant believes and repents when his faculties will admit of the exercise and manifestation of faith and repentance. In this ... instance, regeneration is *potential* or *latent* faith and repentance.”

Virtually all Reformed, covenant theologians uphold the logical priority of regeneration to conversion (faith and repentance). Shedd insisted that regeneration—the origination of spiritual life—precedes conversion—the effect of spiritual life. Persons are not regenerated because they first believe and repent; rather, they believe and repent because first regenerated. Shedd wrote that “The Holy Ghost is not given as a converting and a sanctifying Spirit, until he has been given as a regenerating Spirit” (Matt 12:33; John 3:3). John Murray spoke for many covenant theologians when he asserted, “Without regeneration it is morally and spiritually impossible for a person to believe in Christ, but when a person is regenerated it is morally and spiritually impossible for that person not to believe.” Louis Berkhof flatly added that “A conversion that is not rooted in regeneration is no true conversion.”

D. Synergistic Regeneration (Arminian Theologians)

The usual order of elements in Arminian soteriology is prevenient grace, repentance, faith, the new birth, and continued obedience. Regeneration—viewed by some Arminians as a change of moral purpose but by many as a change of nature from sin to holiness through the synergism of human willing and divine working. God regenerates when the pre-Christian believes by a free act of the will, which involves ceasing to resist the moral influence of the truth presented to all persons everywhere. This action is said to be possible by means of prevenient grace, which works in sinners universally to remove intellectual blindness and volitional hardness. On this showing, every person allegedly is born in a state of grace. Since this divine grace can be resisted, ultimately it is the will of the pre-Christian that determines whether or not the person will be reborn. The saved are those who choose to cooperate with God’s (resistible) prevenient grace; the unsaved are those who fail to cooperate. “This grace will shepherd one to repentance, regeneration, entire sanctification, and final perseverance if not resisted somewhere along the way.” Some Arminians view regeneration as inclusive of everything from conversion to sanctification, or what the Wesleyan-holiness tradition calls the first and second works of grace. Many Arminians deny assurance of final destiny in heaven, since regenerating grace may be lost by willful sin.

John Wesley (d. 1791) held that the unregenerate are corrupted by sin and lack knowledge of God and love for him. Yet he also held that “preventing grace,” which allegedly flows from Christ’s cross, reverses the debilitating effects of original sin. Thus Wesley argued that the unregenerate, since blessed by prevenient grace, are able (1) to hear the voice of God in conscience, (2) acknowledge responsibility for sins, (3) seek righteousness, and (4) trust Christ for salvation. “Preventing grace [includes] the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation.” Pre-Christians cooperate with this prevenient grace to work out their own salvation (Phil 2:12), namely, to repent of sin and believe in Christ. Thus for Wesley the enlightened human will is one of the causes of the new life breathed into the soul at regeneration. Whereas justification changes the sinner’s outward relation to God, regeneration changes the inward nature so that believers are initially made holy. Wesley added that renewal in the image of God, or the new birth, can be lost due to deliberate sin. Hence assurance of forgiveness of sins extends no further than the present moment.

John William Fletcher (d. 1785), a contemporary of Wesley and a leading Wesleyan spokesman, set forth the essential theology of early Methodism. In his major work *Checks to Antinomianism* (1771–75), Fletcher argued that the gift of universal, prevenient grace (John 1:9; Tit 2:11) frees the human will to cooperate with God in the work of salvation. Human free will and divine grace work together to produce the new birth, or regeneration, which consists of justification and sanctification.

In the following century, Charles Finney (d. 1875) rejected the Reformed belief that regeneration is totally a work of God in which the human subject is passive. Positing a bold synergism, Finney insisted that both God and sinners are active in regeneration. The Spirit presents the truth of God to the soul, and sinners change the disposition of their hearts and then turn themselves to God. Tending toward Pelagianism, Finney defined regeneration as a change in the attitude of the will, a change of moral character, or the inauguration of a new spiritual direction. “Regeneration consists in the sinner changing his ultimate

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choice, intention, preference; or in changing from selfishness to love or benevolence.” Finney’s view of pre-Christians actively engaged in regeneration in obedience to God rests on his rejection of human depravity. Non-Christians possess a natural ability to choose God, alter their fundamental affections, and obey all God’s commands. Given his unique view of regeneration, Finney made the following observation concerning the duty of preachers: “Ministers should ... aim at, and expect the regeneration of sinners, upon the spot, and before they leave the house of God.”

E. Regeneration a Work of God in Response to Faith (Reformed Evangelicals)

Evangelicals in the Reformation tradition maintain that sinners, afflicted with holistic depravity, must receive a new spiritual nature in order to gain eternal life. They view regeneration as an instantaneous work of God, not a humanly generated process. Advocates claim that the Spirit regenerates not on the basis of the faith of godly sponsors, church membership, or performance of the sacraments. Rather, God grants new spiritual life by virtue of the individual’s conscious decision to repent of sins and appropriate the provisions of Christ’s atonement. Some note that in the early church born-again believers subsequently were baptized, and the public rite that attested this conversion came to be called (by the figure known as metonymy) a “regeneration.” The sacrament of baptism, however, is not the efficient cause of regeneration. Furthermore, proponents of this view uphold the monergism of regeneration: the new birth is entirely the work of the sovereign God. As we have seen, some authorities view regeneration as logically prior to conversion. Others identify the first wish to please God as the result of effectual calling, and so place conversion prior to regeneration in the *ordo salutis*.

George Whitefield (d. 1770), the Calvinistic Methodist, protested the nominal Christianity of his day that trusted in church membership or baptism for salvation. His sermon “The Nature and Necessity of our New Birth in Christ Jesus” played a crucial role in the evangelical awakening in England. Whitefield stated in this sermon, “it [is] too plain, beyond all contradiction, that comparatively but few of those who are ‘born of water’ are ‘born of the Spirit’ likewise; or, to use another scriptural way of speaking, many are baptized with water which were never, effectually at least, baptized with the Holy Ghost.” For Whitefield, regeneration is that instantaneous creation wrought on the soul by the Holy Spirit producing new inclinations, new desires, and new habits. As the Spirit quickens people dead in trespasses and sins, they become partakers of the divine nature, thereby being renewed in the divine image. Whitefield added, in the new birth “our souls, though still the same as to essence, yet are so purged, purified and cleansed from their natural dross, filth and leprosy, by the blessed influence of the Holy Spirit that they may properly be said to be made anew.”

The great British preacher C.H. Spurgeon (d. 1892) likewise inveighed against the view that baptism regenerates. He stated in his sermon “Baptismal Regeneration,” “Facts all show that whatever good there may be in baptism, it certainly does not make a man ‘a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven,’ or else many thieves, whoremongers, drunkards, fornicators, and murderers are members of Christ.” Moreover, Spurgeon opposed the view that birth in a Christian family guarantees regeneration. “There can be no such thing as sponsorship in receiving Christ or in faith. If you are an unbeliever, your father and your mother may be the most eminent saints, but this faith does not overlap and cover your unbelief. You must believe for yourself.” Spurgeon was firmly persuaded that each person individually must be born again by God’s Spirit through faith. Regeneration involves the spiritual renovation of one’s entire being, the implantation of the divine life, and mystical union with Christ. The new birth is “a change of the entire nature from top to bottom in all senses and respects.”⁶⁰

The baptist theologian A.H. Strong (d. 1921) viewed regeneration and conversion as chronologically simultaneous events, although logically the former precedes the latter. “Regeneration, or the new birth, is the divine side of that change of heart which, viewed from the human side, we call conversion. It is God turning the soul to himself,—conversion being the soul’s turning itself to God, of which God’s turning it is both the accompaniment and cause.” Conversion, consisting of repentance and faith, is the human act that attests the regenerating work of the Spirit on the sinner’s heart. According to Strong, the resuscitation of Lazarus in John 11 illustrates the relationship between the new birth and conversion. Lazarus was made alive by the power of God; in this event his soul was passive. But Lazarus came forth from the tomb; in this his soul was active.

Millard J. Erickson’s position is similar to Strong’s, with the exception that conversion logically precedes regeneration. Temporally conversion and regeneration occur simultaneously, but logically repentance and faith represent the condition for God’s work of regeneration and come first. Erickson attributes the enablement to repent and believe not to regeneration but (as we saw in chap. 5) to the Spirit’s effectual calling.

In the case of the elect God works intensively through a special calling so that they do respond in repentance and faith.

As a result of this conversion, God regenerates them. The special calling ... is not the complete transformation which constitutes regeneration, but it does render the conversion of the individual both possible and certain. Thus the logical order of the initial aspects of salvation is special calling—conversion—regeneration.

Against competing hypotheses, Erickson insists that regeneration is not a process, but an instantaneous work wrought in the soul by the Spirit as God applies salvation to elect believers.

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The following study of the biblical data will show that this final view of regeneration most thoroughly comports with the evidence given by divine revelation.

III. EXPOSITION OF THE DOCTRINE OF REGENERATION

A. *The Need for Regeneration*

In his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the American psychologist and philosopher William James (d. 1910) claimed that there are some healthy-minded and well-adjusted people who have no need of conversion or new birth. James said that this is particularly true of congenitally happy people who harbor no ill-will toward God or others and who have no consciousness of sin. Still other persons are of such a temperament as to be incapable of undergoing a regenerative change. For many people, being “once-born” is an adequate basis for a rich and satisfying life. At bottom James judged that “Protestantism has been too pessimistic as regards the natural man.”

With candid realism Scripture paints a very different picture of the human condition. God’s Word states that (1) the unregenerate are morally evil (Gen 8:21; Matt 7:11; 12:34; John 3:19) and need to be made pure and clean. As Jesus said, “every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matt 7:17). Moreover, (2) the unsaved are spiritually sick and need to be made spiritually healthy (Matt 9:12). Major spiritual surgery is required to bring about spiritual wholeness. In addition, (3) pre-Christians live in spiritual darkness (Matt 4:16; John 3:19; Eph 5:8a) and need to be made light in the Lord (2 Cor 4:6; Eph 5:8b). Unbelievers, furthermore, (4) are slaves to sin (John 8:34; Rom 6:6, 16–20; 2 Tim 2:26) and must be liberated to become free men and women (John 8:32, 36; Rom 6:18; Heb 2:15). Finally, the unsaved (5) are under the sentence of physical (Rom 5:12; 8:10), spiritual (Eph 5:14), and eternal (Rom 6:23a; 2 Thess 1:9) death and need to receive eternal life (John 3:15–16, 36; Rom 6:23b).

Furthermore, due to hereditary depravity the minds of the unsaved are blinded (Rom 3:11a; 1 Cor 2:14), their wills are predisposed to sinful choices and actions (John 6:44a; 2 Pet 2:19), their emotions are disordered (Isa 57:21; Tit 3:3; 1 Pet 2:11), and their relationships with God (Gen 3:8–10; Jas 4:4) and others (Jas 4:1–2) are broken or strained. From the biblical perspective, ‘once-born’ persons cannot see God (Matt 5:8; Heb 12:14), and they cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. As Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3; cf. v. 5). The unconverted need to be made entirely new in order to know, love, and serve the Creator and their fellow human beings. Psychotherapy and human potential movements may make the unsaved temporarily feel better and perhaps function more adequately, but they fail radically to transform fallen natures. Neither can education or higher learning apart from knowledge of Christ fundamentally change depraved hearts. The same verdict applies to so-called cultural evolution. Apart from regenerating grace, sinners are incapable of changing their hearts and dispositions (Jer 13:23). We can no more will spiritual birth by a volitional act than we can cause our physical birth. As Jesus said, “Flesh [i.e., fallen human nature] gives birth to flesh” (John 3:6).

These considerations indicate that the spiritual condition of pre-Christians is grave; superficial remedies cannot redress such a cluster of problems. The only hope lies in a radical, spiritual solution. What ‘once-born’ people need is supernatural transformation of their lives by the power of God. This transformation the Bible calls regeneration or the new birth.

B. *The Language and Meaning of Regeneration*

Regeneration is that work of the Spirit at conversion that renews the heart and life (the inner self), thus restoring the person’s intellectual, volitional, moral, emotional, and relational capacities to know, love, and serve God. The noun *palingenesia* (“rebirth,” “regeneration”) occurs only twice in the NT. Jesus used the term in Matt 19:28 eschatologically concerning the renewal of the world at his second advent. The implication of this usage is that the new heavens and new earth belong to an entirely new order of things. Relevant to the topic at hand, Paul used the noun in a soteriological sense in Tit 3:5, where he wrote that God “saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth [*palingenesia*] and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.” The NT describes regeneration via several descriptive figures and word pictures that employ other instructive nouns and verbs.

Paul represented the new birth (1) as a *re-creation*, a radical inner change wrought by God’s power, whereby one becomes a new spiritual being. In the key text on the subject, the apostle wrote to the Corinthians, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation [*kainē ktisis*]; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17). In Gal 6:15 he said to the Galatian believers, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation” (*kainē ktisis*). See also Eph 2:10. (2) A *spiritual revivification and resurrection* from death to life by identification with the risen Christ. “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive [aorist of *syzōopoieō*] with Christ” (Col 2:13). Paul also wrote, “because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive [aorist of *syzōopoieō*] with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.... And God raised us up [aorist of *synegeirō*] with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:4–6; cf. 1 Pet 1:3). Regeneration is not the addition of a new element to human nature; it is the making alive of what was dead. (3) A *circumcision of the heart* or an inner spiritual transformation born out of penitent faith, not a mere cutting of the flesh. “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature ... with the circumcision done by

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Christ" (Col 2:11). (4) A *washing*, signifying the cleansing of former sins. "But you were washed [aorist of *apolouomai*], you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11; cf. Eph 5:26).

Another image of regeneration, favored by John, is (5) a *new spiritual birth*. John wrote of "children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:13). The aorist passive of *gennaō*, "be born," denotes that instantaneous event whereby believers receive the new nature—an event qualitatively different from ordinary physical birth. Later in dialogue with Nicodemus, an orthodox Jew, Jesus explained the meaning of the new birth (John 3:3–8). The Lord began the conversation by astutely shifting the discussion from the inquirer's materialistic understanding of the kingdom to his need for a radical, spiritual transformation. "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Does the phrase *gennaō anōthen* mean "born again" or "born from above"? *Anō*, an antonym for *katō*, means "up" or "above" (John 8:23; 11:41; Acts 2:19; Col 3:1). Elsewhere in John *anōthen* clearly bears the spatial meaning "above" (John 3:31; 19:11; cf. *anōthen* in John 19:23). In addition, John envisaged believers as born of God (John 1:13; 1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). As Ladd noted, the Fourth Gospel reflects "the tension between the above and the below, heaven and earth, the sphere of God and the world" (John 3:12–13, 31; 6:33, 62; 8:23). Thus Jesus probably meant that Nicodemus must be "born from above," which includes the idea of a rebirth.

Jesus explained the nature of this new birth from above to Nicodemus, who had difficulty understanding the teaching. "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit [*ex hydatos kai pneumatos*]" (John 3:5). The Greek construction closely links the agencies of the water and the Holy Spirit. Historically several interpretations of the "water" have been proposed: (a) water as a symbol of purification (Lightfoot, Murray, Bruce, Carson); (b) the water of John's baptism (Bengel, Godet); (c) the water of Christian baptism (Luther, Cullmann, Barrett, Guthrie); (d) water as a synonym for the Spirit (Calvin); (e) water as a symbol for the Word of God (Ironside, Pink, Boice); and (f) the water that accompanies physical birth (a popular view). The first interpretation is preferred, for the following reasons: As a studious Jew, Nicodemus was familiar with the OT use of water as a symbol for purification from the defilement of sin (Lev 14:8–9; 2 Kgs 5:10; Ps 51:2–3; Zech 13:1). Moreover, the purifying function of water and the renovating power of the Spirit are juxtaposed in the prophecy of the new covenant in Ezek 36:25–27. Hence by "water and the Spirit" Jesus likely meant that in order to enter God's kingdom Nicodemus must be purified from sin and be spiritually renewed. Note that John's baptism also involved water and the Spirit; the Baptist applied the water, and the coming Messiah would baptize with the Spirit (John 1:33). Jesus' further statement—"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6)—pointed up the radical difference between a natural, human birth and supernatural rebirth by the Holy Spirit. Jesus insisted that not only Nicodemus but all Jews "must be born again" (v. 7).

Other biblical texts describe regeneration in terms of a new birth. Jas 1:18 depicts the new birth by the verb *apokyeō*, to "give birth" or "bear," whereas 1 Pet 1:3, 23 employ the verb *anagennaō* (only here in the NT), in the sense of "cause to be born again." According to these verses, the instrument by which the new birth is effected is the Word of God or the truth of the Gospel.

It should be clear that regeneration differs from conversion in several important respects. (1) Conversion involves a synergism of divine and human working, whereas regeneration is strictly a *monergistic operation*. Independently of any human agency, God re-creates, imparts new life, circumcises the heart, and washes away sins. (2) Whereas conversion is a sinner's conscious act of turning to God in penitent faith, regeneration is an *unconscious* transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit. Like a variable wind, "you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going" (John 3:8). (3) Conversion generally occurs over a period of time, whereas regeneration is an *instantaneous* work. (4) If we consider a secondary use of the term, the conversion of believers from sin may be repeated again and again, but regeneration is a uniquely *unrepeatable event* in a life.

C. Does Water Baptism Regenerate?

Does the NT support the regeneration of sinful people, either children or adults, via the ceremony of baptism, as Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and some Episcopalians claim? Does Scripture represent baptism as the necessary means by which the Spirit effects the new birth?

Some proponents of this position appeal to Mark 16:16, which says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." We respond that Mark 16:9–20 is not found in the most important early Greek manuscripts. Thus it is likely that this portion of the Gospel, including v. 16, is not an authentic part of Mark's inspired writing. Lacking divine inspiration, Mark 16:9–20 at most reflects the conviction of a segment of the apostolic church. In addition, the presence of the verb *pisteuō* ("believe") and *apisteuō* ("disbelieve"; see also vv. 11, 13) in v. 16 indicates that the emphasis lies on the act of believing and not upon the rite of water baptism. The latter is secondary to the primary emphasis of belief in the Gospel (v. 15).

The account of the conversion of Cornelius and his relatives begins with hearing and believing the Gospel message (Acts 10:33, 36, 42–44; 11:14). Then occurred the outpouring and reception of the Holy Spirit (10:44–45, 47b), followed by water baptism (10:47a, 48a). The record of Lydia's conversion states that the woman heard Paul's message (Acts 16:14), responded to it in faith (vv. 14–15), and with members of her household was baptized (v. 15). Consider also the account of the Philippian jailor's

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conversion in Acts 16. When in *extremis* the jailer asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?” the missionaries responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (vv. 30–31). The jailer and his family were instructed in the faith, thereafter were baptized, and experienced great joy in believing (vv. 32–34). Note that the jailer was told he must believe in Christ to be saved, not that he must be baptized in order to be saved. Acts 18:8 states that “Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him [Paul] believed and were baptized.” These four accounts endorse salvation (or new birth) by faith, not by the sacrament of baptism.

A superficial reading of Acts 22:16 might suggest that baptism effects regeneration. Ananias said to Saul, who had just met the risen Christ and undoubtedly had been born anew, “What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” The first two aorist verbs literally may be translated: “Permit yourself to be baptized and have your sins washed away.” In the NT the symbol (baptism) and the reality it symbolizes (new birth and cleansing of sins) are closely connected (Acts 2:38; Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 3:21). In this text Ananias urged baptism as a visible sign of the invisible cleansing of sins through the blood of Christ. The final verb in Acts 22:16 is the aorist middle participle of *epikaleō*, to “call upon”—the tense signifying that Saul’s act of calling on the Lord temporally preceded the two previous verbs. Saul should permit himself to be baptized and have his sins forgiven *by first* calling on the Lord in faith.

Does the focal text Tit 3:5 (where alone the word *palingenesia* appears) teach the doctrine of baptismal regeneration? Paul wrote that Christ in mercy “saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Consider first the phrase, “through the washing of rebirth” (*dia loutrou palingenesias*). The converts Titus served had “trusted in God” (v. 8). The phrase in question, analogous to the cleansing action of water specified in 1 Cor 6:11 and Eph 5:26, likely signifies the cleansing of sins effected at the new birth by the Word of God. In a secondary sense, given the close connection between the reality (new birth) and the symbol (baptism), Paul may have thought of water baptism as the outward sign of this inward cleansing. The second phrase, “through ... renewal (*anakainōsis*) by the Holy Spirit,” does not describe the subsequent process of sanctification. Rather, it is an amplifying description of the new birth in terms of a making new (cf. 2 Cor 5:17 and Gal 6:15, which use *kainē*). Jesus similarly linked water and the Spirit in his teaching on regeneration in John 3:5. In that text we concluded that John cited “water” as a symbol for purification of sins. Thus neither John 3:5 nor Tit 3:5 offer adequate support for the hypothesis that baptism effects the regeneration of the person baptized.

Neither do other texts that link water and salvation teach that the rite of baptism regenerates. The intricate argument of 1 Pet 3:18–22 affirms that the Flood, by cleansing the world of wickedness and delivering the faithful in the ark, is a picture of salvation, a salvation symbolized by the rite of baptism. What saves sinners is not the external rite of baptism, but the completed work and resurrection of Christ (vv. 21b–22) appropriated by faith.

The preponderance of evidence leads us to conclude that the order of events in the NT appears to be conversion and regeneration followed by water baptism (see Acts 2:38, 41; 10:47). Acts 2:38 records Peter’s words, “Repent and be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ for (*eis*) the forgiveness of your sins.” The preposition *eis* may mean “because of.” The apostolic order followed the practice of John the Baptist, who baptized those who heeded his message and repented of their sins (Mark 1:4–5). So F.F. Bruce concluded, “baptism in water continued to be the external sign by which individuals who believed the gospel message, repented of their sins, and acknowledged Jesus as Lord, were publicly incorporated into the Spirit-baptized fellowship of the new people of God.” He added, “It is against the whole genius of Biblical religion to suppose that the outward rite had any value except in so far as it was accompanied by true repentance within.” In sum, no ceremony—even an important Christian rite such as baptism—is able to regenerate fallen human nature and remit sins. What changes hearts is the powerful, inner work of the Spirit, not a humanly administered ceremony or even the Spirit *and* the religious ceremony.

D. The Holistic Results of Regeneration

What are the effects of Holy Spirit regeneration on repentant sinners? In brief, regeneration breaks the paralyzing bonds of holistic depravity and radically renews the sinner’s heart, mind, and soul into the image of Christ. As in the case of sinful depravity, the transformation wrought by the new birth is *holistic*; not merely some, but all of the sinner’s capacities are significantly renewed and enabled. The new spiritual life, being supernatural in origin, manifests itself in renewed abilities and righteous actions. In some people the visible evidences come to light soon after regeneration; in other lives time is required for their manifestation. Whether sooner or later, Jesus’ promise holds true: “every good tree bears good fruit.... A good tree cannot bear bad fruit” (Matt 7:17–18).

Consider the following results of Holy Spirit regeneration. (1) *Intellectually*, regeneration enables minds of sinners once blind and ignorant of spiritual truths to comprehend the things of God (1 Cor 2:12, 14–16; 2 Cor 4:4, 6; Col 3:10). The new birth effects renewal of the human capacity to know, love, and affirm God’s purposes. Holy Spirit transformation results in spiritual discernment formerly incapacitated by sin. (2) *Volitionally*, the new birth liberates believers’ wills from moral bondage, enabling them to affirm and pursue kingdom values (Rom 6:13; Phil 2:13; 2 Thess 3:5). Lesser loyalties give way to supreme loyalty to God and his purposes. In the twice-born, enmity toward God is replaced by a new passion to glorify the King of kings and Lord of lords.

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(3) *Emotionally*, regeneration initiates the reintegration of disordered affections and feelings (Rom 8:15). As Paul wrote, “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Tim 1:7). Twice-born persons are far more capable of manifesting love, empathy, compassion, etc., than once-born persons. (4) *Morally and ethically*, regenerate believers are freed from depraved and enslaving passions. Indeed, the saved progressively become like Christ in thought, word, and deed. Spirit-transformed people exchange the sordid works of the flesh (Gal 5:19–21) for the attractive fruits of the Spirit: i.e., “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (vv. 22–23). And (5) *relationally*, the new birth establishes genuine fellowship with the triune God (1 Cor 1:9; Eph 2:22; 1 John 1:3) and meaningful relationships with other believers (Rom 12:5; Eph 2:14–15, 19–20). The twice-born come to know experientially that God created them to enjoy community. Spirit regeneration motivates newborn children of God to move from lonely isolation to rejuvenating fellowship. In sum, the new birth effects a significant transformation and renewal of the capacities inherent in man and woman as *imago Dei*.

E. Regeneration and the ‘New Nature’

Thinking of Spirit regeneration, Peter made the bold statement that God “has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature [*theia physis*] and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Pet 1:4). Prior to the new birth we possessed only an “earthly nature” (Col 3:5), a “sinful nature” (*sarx*, Rom 7:5, 18; 8:3–5, 8–9, 12–13; Gal 5:13, 16–17; etc.) or an “old self” (Rom 6:6; Eph 4:22). These phrases describe the unregenerate state: the self arraigned against God, oriented toward the base elements of the world, consumed by sinful cravings, and driven to evil deeds. In this regard the NIV translates Paul’s phrase *kata sarka peripatountas* (2 Cor. 10:2) as, “live by the standards of this world.” The biblical terms “earthly nature,” “sinful nature,” etc., describe the unconverted person turned in on himself and energized by Satan to corrupt works. By the antithetic phrase “divine nature,” Peter borrowed from current hellenistic language to describe new spiritual life with Christ that imparts to the soul transformed capacities and godly virtues. As a result of the Spirit’s regenerating work, the believer receives a new disposition, a new set of affections, new moral qualities, and new aspirations. The NT describes the result of this transformation as the “new self” (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10), which is the glorified Christ living his life in the believer (Gal 2:20). This new being expresses itself in an entirely new manner of life and conduct (Rom 6:4; 7:6). Aquinas claimed that at baptism God injects into the soul a new nature (“created grace” or “habitual grace”), viewed almost as a new substance. But the new birth creates no new, metaphysical entity. Rather, it effects the transformation and revitalization of intellectual, volitional, moral, emotional, and relational capacities inherent in the person as *imago Dei*, as indicated in the previous section. For example, the new birth energizes and redirects *love* from preoccupation with self to a new focus on God and others. As Strong commented, “Regeneration does not add to, or subtract from, the number of man’s intellectual, emotional or voluntary faculties. But regeneration is the giving of a new direction or tendency to powers of affection which man possessed before.”

Significantly, Peter stated that the twice-born “participate in the divine nature” (*physis*) rather than in the divine being (*ousia*). He meant that by Spirit regeneration believers become partakers of God’s grace, mercy, holiness, etc., *not* of God’s essence. Participation “in the divine nature” is Peter’s way of describing the reality Paul set forth in Rom 8:9—“You ... are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.” It is Peter’s way of describing what the anonymous writer conveyed in Heb 3:14—“share in Christ,” in Heb 6:4—“shared in the Holy Spirit,” and in Heb 12:10—“share in his holiness.” No NT writer suggested that the new birth alters the sinner’s essential constitution. Regeneration does not change the sinner’s substance by forming a new metaphysical entity, such as a ‘spirit.’ Evidence is lacking to support the view that by the new birth dichotomous sinners become trichotomous saints. Neither did Peter imply that Christians in any sense become divine. God’s own divine nature and our renewed human nature are not commingled in the new man or woman. The human and divine personalities remain forever distinct. And certainly Peter never envisaged any pantheistic notion of the Christian’s absorption into the whole.

Calvin’s insightful comment on 2 Pet 1:4 highlights the figurative sense in which Peter used the phrase “divine nature.”

Let us then mark that the end of the gospel is to render us conformable to God, and if we may so speak, to deify us....

The word *nature* is not here essence but quality. Only fanatics imagine that we thus pass over into the nature of God....

The image of God in holiness and righteousness is restored to us for this end, that we may at length be partakers of eternal life and glory.

The formation of the “new self” or new nature via Spirit regeneration does not totally efface the old nature. The born-again believer struggles with the old self and unfortunately often ratifies it, as Paul testified from painful, personal experience in Romans 7. Our discussion in chap. 10 of the doctrine of sanctification treats in detail how the Spirit works in Christians to diminish the power of the old nature and to strengthen the graces of the new nature.

F. Were Old Testament Believers Regenerated?

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An interesting but perhaps not a crucial issue is whether faithful souls in OT times were regenerated by the Spirit and given a new nature. The OT refers to the phenomenon of spiritual circumcision. Often God is the one who circumcises (Deut 30:6). In other instances the people were to circumcise (*mûl*) their own hearts (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4). Both a divine work and a human response, spiritual circumcision is a figure signifying the deepest spiritual reality of the Hebrew religion, namely, the opening of the heart to God (Col 2:11). This event undoubtedly includes repentance and communion with God, but we submit that it falls short of regeneration in the full Christian sense.

First Sam 10:9 speaks of a work of the Spirit on the heart of Saul: “God changed (*hāpak*, to “turn” or “bend”) Saul’s heart” (cf. v. 6). The NRSV translates this, “God gave him another heart.” The language likely speaks of God reshaping Saul’s heart in preparation for leadership and battle. That is, God gave Saul a new heart in the sense of a new attitude and new courage for the task to which he was called. The record shows that Saul turned way from the Lord (1 Sam 15:11) and flouted his law (13:12–13; 15:20–23). Hence God rejected Saul as king (15:26–28) and removed his Spirit from him (16:14). Tormented by an evil spirit (16:15–16, 23; 18:10; 19:9), Saul experienced fits of jealousy, depression, and paranoia. He sought to kill David (1 Samuel 19) and committed atrocities against innocent Gibeonites (2 Sam 21:1). Unable to defeat the Philistine army, Saul sought help from a medium (1 Samuel 28). What kind of a man was Saul?

King Saul ... was basically carnal, willfully disobedient, insanely jealous, and bloodthirsty in the later years of his reign.

The purpose of Saul’s reign was to prepare Israel to appreciate all the more the reign of a true man of God, David, son of Jesse, who came from the tribe of Judah, and who was determined to serve as a faithful theocratic ruler and an obedient servant of Yahweh.

God used Saul for a time to deliver Israel from heathen oppressors, even as Satan used the man for his own purposes. It is quite unlikely that Saul experienced Spirit regeneration as described in the NT.

The OT prophets vividly expressed the hope of future spiritual rebirth. Yahweh promised his people that he would create in them a new heart: “I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord” (Jer 24:7). In Jer 31:31–34 the Lord stated that in coming days he would make a “new covenant” (v. 31) with his people that would be far superior to the old covenant. The latter, instituted at Sinai, was (1) a national covenant (made with “the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,” v. 31); (2) an external covenant, inscribed on stone or parchments; and (3) a conditional covenant that Israel repeatedly broke (v. 32). Sealed by circumcision, the old covenant could not give life (Gal 3:21). In this prophecy God promised that the new covenant (inaugurated by Jesus, Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24) would transform the human heart as the old covenant could not. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (v. 33). This internalization of the law on the heart would be realized through regeneration and union with Christ in the new age of the Spirit. “The entire transformation implies the new birth set forth in the gospel.” Jeremiah added that as a result of the Spirit’s regenerating work Yahweh “will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (under the old covenant sins were remembered). In sum, the law inscribed within by the Spirit “gives intimate knowledge of and fellowship with God, forgiveness of sins, and peace of heart.” These promises came to fruition in the age of the Spirit through Christ’s cross, resurrection, and ascension to heaven.

Ezek 36:25–27 extends a further promise of future, spiritual transformation. Consistent with the comprehensive nature of biblical prophecy, Yahweh’s promise to restore Israel to the land also anticipated a qualitatively new work of the Spirit on the heart. The text promises (1) complete purification of sins: “I will sprinkle clean water on you ... ; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols” (v. 25; cf. Jer 31:34). There follows the promise (2) of a radically new nature: “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” (v. 26; cf. Ezek 11:19; 18:31). In the future God will replace the old heart with a spiritually transformed heart. The Lord promised (3) a permanent bestowal of the Spirit in the Gospel era. Said Yahweh, “I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (v. 27; cf. Ezek 37:14; 39:29; Joel 2:28–29). A distinctive feature of existence under the new covenant would be the permanent, indwelling ministry of the life-giving Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 3:6). Finally, the outcome of the Spirit’s ministry is (4) instinctive obedience to the law in a God-honoring life (v. 27b; Jer 31:33). In OT times God was *with* his people. But the glorious promise is given that in the future God would dwell *in* his people by virtue of the Spirit’s transforming work. The reader is impressed by the number of times in Ezekiel 36 that the phrase “I will” occurs with God as the subject—a dozen times in vv. 24–30 alone. This, of course, indicates that the divine activity is the efficient cause of spiritual regeneration.

The vision of Ezek 37:1–14 anticipated, proximately, Israel’s restoration to the land and, ultimately, the Spirit’s regenerating work under the new covenant (cf. Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 11:19). God gave Ezekiel a vision of a valley filled with dry bones. Like the host of bones in the vision, Israel in Babylon was spiritually dead. Yet at God’s first word through Ezekiel the bones came together (vv. 7–8), signifying immediately Israel’s national restoration (vv. 12–14). At God’s second word “the breath [*hārûah*] came into them” (v. 10, NRSV), and the lifeless forms came alive and stood on their feet. The latter aspect of the vision likely anticipates the

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spiritual renewal of believers in the Gospel era and perhaps the end-time conversion of multitudes of Jews (Rom 11:25–32). Again it is God who breathes the dry bones into life and wholeness (vv. 5, 10).

Turning to the NT, Jesus explained to Nicodemus the necessity of new birth by water and the Spirit (John 3:3–8). Judaism acknowledged the coming of the messianic kingdom (Dan 2:44; 7:14, 27), which they defined as a new creation or “regeneration” (*palingenesia*, Matt 19:28) in the future age. But of a personal, spiritual regeneration in the present the learned Nicodemus was totally ignorant, as his bewildered reply confirms (vv. 4, 9). This argument from silence may suggest that Spirit regeneration was not a conscious feature of Jewish spiritual life under the old covenant. Tenney agrees with this judgment, in the following words: “In Old Testament teaching, the Spirit came upon the prophets or other specially chosen men for unusual reasons, but nowhere in Judaism was taught the coming of the Spirit upon all men for their personal regeneration.”

Jesus made a distinction between the Spirit’s occasional ministry prior to Pentecost and his permanent, transformational ministry thereafter. In John 14:17 Jesus instructed his disciples about the ministry of the “Counselor” or “the Spirit of truth,” saying, “you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you” (*hymeis ginōskete auto, hoti par hymin menei kai en hymin estin*). Prior to Pentecost the Spirit was “with” or “beside” (*para*) the disciples and OT saints as a variable influence. But after this eschatological event the Spirit would be “in” (*en*) them permanently as a transforming and indwelling presence. Jesus added, “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (v. 20; cf. Rom 8:9). While Jesus was with his disciples, they did not fully possess the Spirit, as John 14:26 and 16:7, 13 make clear. But after Jesus was glorified, the life-transforming ministry of the Spirit would take place (John 7:38–39). Following Easter and Pentecost, Christ would take up his abode in believers and they in him in a manner analogous to the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son.

Although it is best not to be dogmatic on this issue, we propose the following conclusion as befitting the biblical data. God set believing men and women in OT times in a right relationship with himself. Their sins were forgiven (Ps 32:1–2; 85:2), they communed with the Lord, and they anticipated the blessings of heaven (Heb 11:13–16, 39). But before the completion of Christ’s work and the Pentecostal outpouring, OT believers did not possess the Spirit as a permanent endowment (Ps 51:11), and they were not completely transformed thereby. A principal benefit of the new covenant is the qualitatively different ministry of the Holy Spirit—including a radical, spiritual transformation that the NT identifies as the new birth. Expressed in other words, it seems unlikely that NT texts such as 2 Cor 5:17 and 2 Pet 1:4 could be applied to OT believers. We recognize that there are not two ways of salvation. The saving of the soul in both the pre-Christian and the Christian eras is achieved by faith in God’s faithful word of promise. But salvation under the new covenant is a fuller, richer reality than that experienced under the old. Otherwise, it would have been unnecessary for Christ to enter this hellish scene, suffer, die a cruel death, and rise victoriously from the grave.

G. Are Children Who Die in Infancy Saved?

A variety of answers have been given to this difficult question of the spiritual condition of infants who succumb to death. (1) For most liberal theologians the question is moot, in that they believe infants are born into the world free from sin and en route to salvation. Modernists claim that the loving God accepts into heaven all people, who are all his children by birth. (2) Traditional Roman Catholics, on the other hand, maintain that infants inherit from their parents the contagion of sin. The sacrament of baptism administered to children is said to remove the guilt and penalty of original sin. Thus children who receive a legitimate baptism are united with Christ and inherit heaven’s glory. Infants who are not baptized will endure a just penalty in the netherworld. (3) Many Arminians accept the reality of original sin, depravity, and punishment. But through the benefit of prevenient grace, guilt and punishment are said to be removed, such that no infant is condemned eternally. Blessed by universal grace, those who die in infancy are freely welcomed into God’s heaven. (4) Covenant Reformed, or high Calvinists, likewise view infants as defiled by Adamic sin. But God is said secretly to work regeneration in those infants who are elect. Many, such as John Owen, identify infants born into a Christian family and so blessed by the covenant of grace as among God’s elect. At death these are said to inherit heaven’s glory, whereas non-elect infants are justly damned. The Westminster Confession of Faith (chap. X.3) states that “Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth.” (5) Moderately Reformed Christians acknowledge that infants are born with the affliction of original sin. Many, such as Charles Hodge, A.A. Hodge, and A.H. Strong, recall that infants have not deliberately flaunted God’s will for their lives. Thus by virtue of the absence of premeditation, *naïveté*, and trustfulness in children prior to the “age of moral accountability,” God applies to them the benefits of Christ’s saving work at their death. Thus all little ones who die in infancy, as well as adults who are mentally incompetent, are regenerated and saved by Christ. Arminians and moderately Reformed thus arrive at the same conclusion, albeit by different lines of reasoning.

The Baptist and broadly Reformed theologian A.H. Strong argued that since infants prior to the age of moral accountability have not personally and volitionally transgressed God’s law, they are characterized by “a relative innocence” and “trustfulness.” If children should die in the state of infancy, they become the objects of special, divine compassion and receive a secret application of the Atonement. Thus, “those who die in infancy receive salvation through Christ as certainly as they inherit sin

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from Adam.”⁷⁹ Strong surmised that this transaction occurs at the infant soul’s first view of Christ in the heavenly world. Strong further theorized that the reason for Scripture’s silence on this issue may be that if Scripture had spoken more directly to this issue, some Christian parents might have killed their infant children to guarantee their entry into the kingdom.

We affirm straightaway that Scripture provides no explicit answer to this debated matter of great practical concern. Implicit biblical statements, however, lead us to the probable conclusion that the proposal of Strong and others may be the most viable. Consider the following. When God consigned most of the people of Israel to death in the wilderness, the children who had not come to a state of personal accountability were exempted from execution of the penalty. Thus the Lord said to the people of Israel through Moses, “your children who do not yet know good from bad—they will enter the land. I will give it to them and they will take possession of it” (Deut 1:39). In one text the age of responsibility is given as twenty years (Num 14:29). Later, after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, God caused the child of that illicit union to become ill and to die (2 Sam 12:15–19). David then said to his servants, “Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me” (v. 23). At the child’s death David was encouraged in his spirit, likely at the prospect of seeing his child in heaven one day.

Our Lord’s attitude toward little children is also instructive. During his final ministry in Galilee, Jesus placed a little child among his disciples and said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Matt 18:3–6). Jesus added, “your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost” (v. 14). Later in Judea, when the disciples rebuked those who brought little children to Jesus for blessing and prayer, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matt 19:14). Jesus accorded special worth and status in the kingdom to children by virtue of their dependence, humility, and lack of pretension.

The most cogent explanation of this problem is that children incapable of committing willful and responsible violations of God’s law may receive a special application of Christ’s universal atonement and so be welcomed into heaven’s glory. In other words, children who die in infancy prior to becoming responsible moral agents prove to be among God’s elect. If true, this judgment is a source of great comfort and consolation to godly parents who grieve over the premature death of an infant child.

IV. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF REGENERATION

A. *Don’t Trust Christian Parentage or Baptism for New Life*

Contrary to Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and high Anglican views, the water of baptism applied to infants and adults does not of itself regenerate and unite souls with Christ. We noted above that the sign of the sacrament (i.e., water) and the reality symbolized (i.e., washing of sins and new birth) are closely related. Yet the sign of the sacrament does not of itself accomplish what it signifies. For example, a wedding ceremony does not create love or commitment; it celebrates and seals existing love and commitment between a man and a woman. Likewise, a Christian funeral does not promote the deceased saint to glory; it celebrates God’s great work of glorifying his departed son or daughter. Biblical Christians thus will avoid all forms of ritualistic religion that claim that baptismal water, applied on ecclesiastical authority, works spiritual regeneration. Although some churches teach the *ex opere operato* concept (i.e., that the mere performance of baptism regenerates the soul), Scripture stops well short of such a claim. Water baptism under the aegis of a church or birth into a Christian family cannot produce a new creation, quicken a dead soul, circumcise a proud heart, or cleanse deeply ingrained sin. This is to say that water baptism is not the indispensable condition by which God regenerates sinful souls. External ceremonies, however rich in religious symbolism, are impotent to bring new spiritual life to depraved hearts. The evangelist should not cite the requirement of water baptism in the invitation to receive Christ and spiritual life.

B. *Rely on the Holy Spirit to Make Sinners New Creations*

We have seen that regeneration is not a matter of personal re-education, nor is it a self-wrought process of moral reformation and character enhancement. Neither is regeneration achieved by birth in a Christian family, by baptism, by psychotherapy, or by a host of modern self-improvement schemes. If regeneration is not achieved by humans alone, neither is it a synergistic affair, i.e., of a person’s cooperation with God to accomplish the desired end. The Bible is absolutely clear on this; no carnal means can effect supernatural regeneration from above. Flesh cannot give birth to spirit; sinners cannot alter their depraved dispositions. God’s Spirit alone must effect the radically new creation of which the NT speaks (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

The responsibility of Christians in all this is to *proclaim* to sinners that they must be born again (John 3:7). We must *explain* clearly the Gospel offer of new birth and life from above (Acts 5:20). Disciples also must *plead* with sinners to trust Christ and become God’s forgiven children (2 Cor 5:20). We must do the work of an evangelist in the power of the Spirit of life (1 Cor. 12:3–11), for even Jesus, the Son of God, needed the Spirit’s power in his ministry (Matt 3:16–17; Luke 3:21–22), as did his immediate disciples (Luke 24:48–49; John 20:22; Acts 1:8). Our task as Jesus’ followers is to proclaim the Gospel clearly and persuasively (Acts 2:38; 16:30–32; Rom 10:14), trusting the Spirit of God to bring forth new life as it pleases him. Faithful disciples will know

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(and God answers) Conversion + Regeneration + Justification + Adoption → Sanctification

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that the *basis* of regeneration is Christ's death and resurrection (1 Cor 6:11; 1 Pet 1:3); the *means* of regeneration is the Word of God (Eph 5:26; Jas 1:18); the *providential instrument* is the preacher or herald of God's truth (Rom 10:13–15); and the *agent* of regeneration is the Spirit of God (John 3:5; Tit 3:5).

African believers help us western Christians understand the full scope of preaching and witness. By "preaching" they mean everything from sharing one's personal testimony with a needy soul, to telling the story of Jesus under a tree in the market, to delivering a sermon in a crowded church. In disagreement with Finney and certain other revivalists, we do not dictate to the Spirit of God when he must regenerate a soul. We dare not command God to regenerate sinners before the close of a given evangelistic service, for example. The creation of new spiritual life is God's gracious work done in God's good time. Our task is to be faithful witnesses and fervent prayer-warriors and to leave the results to the sovereign, wise, and loving God.

C. Personal Regeneration Followed by Social Transformation

Viewing sin primarily as deprivation caused by institutionalized injustice, social gospel proponents and liberationists call for the transformation or regeneration of society. Those of liberal theological persuasion allege that the replacement of corrupt social, political, and economic structures with just ones will humanize society and in time inaugurate the kingdom of God. These social idealists identify the instruments of social transformation as better housing, law enforcement, health care, job training, and the like.

Historic Christians will insist on the primacy of personal conversion and regeneration as the only sound basis for social transformation. Institutional change alone cannot solve the intractable problems caused by human sinfulness. Absent personal regeneration that changes individuals' motives, passions, and behavior, society's institutions will go from bad to worse. History amply attests that social improvement without personal regeneration is a romantic dream and a forlorn hope. Society will continue to be deranged, despotic, and demonic unless founded on sound biblical principles and shaped by twice-born people. Eighteenth-century England was characterized by illiteracy, poverty, rampant crime, mob violence, wild orgies, brutal treatment of offenders, and general debauchery.

It was the England of the slave-trader, the kidnapper, the smuggler; the England of gin-shops, sodden ignorance and incredible child neglect; the England of bestial sports, mad gambling and parading wantonness. It was the England of corrupt politics and soulless religion: the England of "materialism," "dim ideals" and "expiring hopes."

Yet the spiritual revival God's Spirit wrought through John Wesley and others radically changed the whole of English society. The power of the Gospel brought about genuine reform of the economy, the educational system, land ownership, medical care, the penal system, and the nation's moral climate, to name a few areas of change. Wesley's revival of Christian faith "made the selfish man self-denying, the discontented happy, the worlding spiritually minded, the drunkard sober, the sensual chaste, the liar truthful, the thief honest, the proud humble, the godless godly, the thriftless thrifty." Wesley's class meetings and Sunday schools created the middle class in a society that knew only a privileged aristocracy and an impoverished, laboring underclass. The Wesleyan revival was the primary impetus for the abolition of the slave trade in early nineteenth-century Britain. Many historians judge that Wesley's spiritual revival saved England from the social chaos of the French Revolution (1789–1799). A further example of social transformation via personal regeneration is the Welsh revivals (1904–1905), where 100,000 conversions to Christ reduced drunkenness by 60 percent and the jail population by 40 percent and fortified Britain for the trauma of World War I.

Even the World Council of Churches, anticipating its Fourth Assembly at Uppsala in 1968 under the theme of "Behold, I make all things new," stated that "neither the renewal of the world nor of the church can be adequately understood without the reorientation of people as persons." This is a significant admission from an international religious organization noted for its commitment to transformation via social and political action. Latin American evangelicals remind us that when radical liberation movements have swept away unjust institutions, the replacement structures often are more corrupt and oppressive than the originals. It appears true that the decency and compassion of a society is directly proportional to the number of its twice-born people. Reflecting on history, Francis Schaeffer concluded, as a rule of thumb, that no society manifests decency, compassion, and stability unless at least 10 percent of its populace are born-again followers of Christ. Evangelical Christians thus regard personal regeneration as the non-negotiable basis for constructive social change. To adopt any other solution is to build on a foundation of shifting sand that cannot withstand the destructive forces of a fallen world (Matt 7:24–27). Social action grounded in personal, spiritual transformation under God's good hand will lead to success. Programs that attempt to renew society without changing the hearts of the people are doomed to disappoint and frustrate.¹²

¹² Demarest, B. A. (1997). *The cross and salvation: the doctrine of salvation* (pp. 276–311). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.