

REGENERATION

One of the most amazing words of grace is “regeneration.” Probably the most pointed and clearly stated statement concerning the necessity of this key word comes from Jesus Christ who said “you must be born again” (John 3:7).

It is a shame that the concept of being “born again” or the concept of receiving the “new birth” is oft times only viewed as a remedy for human failures and sin, because God places a much higher perspective of this than just that. **This is an amazing grace work in which He actually creates a new life in an individual so that he becomes a “son of God.”**

QUESTION #1 – What does the word “regeneration” actually mean?

The actual specific word “regeneration” (παλιγγενεσια) is used two times in the New Testament.

- 1) Matthew 19:28–Jesus speaks of disciples who have followed His regeneration program.
- 2) Titus 3:5–Paul speaks of regeneration as an important individual part of salvation grace.

The actual word “regeneration” is one that refers to a new creation, a new birth that brings a person into a brand new, renewed and restored condition with God (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 335). **This is not just a reference to a restorative makeover; this is an actual moment when one has a completely new life existence in a relationship with God.**

In fact, the basic meaning of the word is to beget new life or to give birth to a new life. This is the word that is closely connected to the Biblical words “born again” (I Pet. 1:3, 23).

Peter uses the theological concept of regeneration, as does the Apostle Paul. However, the one Apostle who really emphasizes this concept is the Apostle John. It is clear from his writings that he developed his idea of regeneration from Jesus Christ. John uses the word or a form of the word in various passages:

- 1) John 1:13 - Those who have believed have been born of the will of God.
- 2) John 3:3 - Jesus said unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.
- 3) John 3:3-5 - Jesus stresses the importance of a Spirit-produced born again reality.
- 4) I John 2:29 - John speaks of being born of God.
- 5) I John 3:9 - John speaks of the impossibility of one born of God being continually in sin.
- 6) I John 4:7 - John speaks of loving fellow believers indicates one has been born of God.
- 7) I John 5:1 - John says whoever believes Jesus is the God/Savior/Messiah/King is born of God.
- 8) I John 5:1 - John says whoever has believed is born of God and overcomes the world.
- 9) I John 5:18 - John says whoever is born of God does not continually sin.

Regeneration is the moment one is born again and the moment when God gives a person a brand new life in which one becomes a new creation and is made spiritually alive having been spiritually dead.

In a simple definition, regeneration may be understood as the work of God in which He gives spiritual life to one spiritually dead.

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Floyd Barackman said, “Regeneration is the act of God whereby He cleanses gospel believers of the defilement of sin, renews their personhoods and the immaterial parts of their human natures (soul, spirits) and imparts to them spiritual life” (*Practical Christian Theology*, p. 354).

QUESTION #2 – What are some key observations we may make concerning regeneration?

There are four observations we want to make:

Observation #1 - Regeneration takes place because of the will of God, not the will of man.
John 1:13; James 1:18

The credit for any person being born again must go to the will of God and not the will of man.

Observation #2 - Regeneration takes place because of the work of the Holy Spirit. John 3:5

It is the Holy Spirit that actually causes one to be born again.

Observation #3 - Regeneration is produced through a presentation of God’s Word. James 1:18;
I Peter 1:23

This certainly shows the importance of accurately communicating the Word of God.

Observation #4 - Regeneration occurs at the moment a person believes in Jesus Christ.
John 1:12-13; 6:53

Some theologians believe that regeneration is a pre-salvational grace work of God in which God converts the sinner’s heart. The argument is that sinful man is depraved and incapable of choosing God or seeking God in salvation. The conclusion is that God must create new life before one believes. But it would certainly appear from Scripture that regeneration occurs the moment one partakes of the bread of life and blood of Christ through faith in Jesus Christ (John 6:53).

QUESTION #3 – What are the Biblical pictures of regeneration?

There are three pictures of regeneration:

Picture #1 - Regeneration is presented in a context of a new birth. **John 3:3-7**

It is very clear that the comparison is between a real physical birth and a real spiritual birth. One birth is a flesh birth and the other birth is a Spirit of God birth.

Picture #2 - Regeneration is presented in a context of a spiritual resurrection. **Eph. 2:1, 5-6;**
Rom. 6:13; I Pet. 1:3

The clear image presented is that a believer who was once previously dead is now given a new life. One is raised up with a new life from having been dead. So being born again is a spiritual resurrection from death to life.

Picture #3 - Regeneration is presented in the context of a new creation. **II Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24**

Regeneration is the work of God in which He gives a brand new life to one who was spiritually dead. As the Word of God is presented, the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the will of God, does a creative work of giving life to a dead sinner.

As Dr. Walvoord said, “Regeneration meets the need created by the presence of spiritual death. ... There is no visible method or process discernible. By its nature it is supernatural and therefore its explanation is beyond human understanding. ... The important fact, never to be forgotten in the doctrine of regeneration, is that the believer in Christ has received eternal life.” (*Regeneration*) “is...the very heart of salvation” (Cited from Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 6, pp. 116-117).

Dr. Walvoord further states, “It (*regeneration*) reaches the essential problem of absence of eternal life without which no soul can spend eternity in the presence of God. Regeneration supplies this lack of eternal life. It is a smashing blow to all philosophies which hold that man has inherent capabilities of saving himself. Regeneration is wholly of God. No possible human effort however noble can supply eternal life. The proper doctrine of regeneration gives to God all the glory and power due His name, and at the same time it displays His abundant provision for a race dead in sin” (*Ibid.*, p. 117).

Regeneration may be understood as the work of God in which He gives a brand new created spiritual life to one spiritually dead. Once God has given a person this life, he is guaranteed everlasting life. Regeneration is not something that is felt, it is something that is a fact, which should lead to producing fruit (Eph. 2:10; I John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4).

Two key theological areas which need to be analyzed in connection with this doctrine are:

- 1) How does regeneration relate to saving faith?
- 2) How does regeneration relate to personal experience?

Theological Area #1 - Regeneration as it relates to saving faith.

Serious students of the Bible have always done their best to carefully understand doctrines with precision. **When the doctrine of regeneration is studied, careful consideration demands an investigation as to how and when this connects to saving faith.**

There are some theologians who suggest that regeneration occurs when the human will somehow partially recognize the need for regeneration. Other theologians believe that regeneration occurs after one has chosen to believe (Floyd Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology*, p. 153). Still other theologians suggest that faith and regeneration occur at the same moment and both are a gift of God as part of the grace salvation package (Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 326).

In New Testament grace salvation, the only charge given to the lost person in order to gain everlasting life is the charge to believe in Jesus Christ. From a human perspective, this is the only prerequisite given for receiving eternal life. Although we learn that saving faith is in fact a gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9), we also see that this message is presented from an angle of human responsibility (Acts 16:30-31; John 3:16).

Regeneration, on the other hand, is clearly presented as a divine act of God, not connected in any way to human will or effort (John 1:13; 3:8; James 1:18). Dr. Walvoord said, "In the act of regeneration, ...the human will is entirely passive. There is no cooperation possible. The nature of the work of regeneration forbids any possible human assistance" (Chafer, Vol. 6, p. 118).

A good illustration of this may be seen when comparing physical birth to spiritual birth. In the physical birth of a new baby, the baby is born and given life totally apart from his will, volition or help. He is conceived without any knowledge on his part and he is born the same way.

When all is analyzed on the subject of natural birth, the baby is just the recipient of the gift of life. Regeneration, the gift of spiritual life, works much the same way. Apart from a person's will, volition or help and apart from his knowledge or feeling, the new babe in Christ actually is the passive recipient of the gift of eternal life. **When it comes to regeneration, the human will has absolutely nothing to do with it; however, when it comes to saving faith the human will is admonished with the responsibility to believe.**

When regeneration is analyzed as being a total work of God, and when saving faith is seen as a gift of God (Eph. 2:8), it seems logical that saving faith and regeneration are part of one divine package, which occurs at the moment of salvation.

There is a moment in the mind of God when a person is transformed from being a child of darkness into a child of light; a child of damnation into a child of everlasting life. This moment, in God's mind, is the moment regeneration imparts new spiritual life to one spiritually dead. This moment occurs simultaneously at the moment the person believes.

Theological Area #2 - Regeneration as it relates to personal experience.

Here is a critical doctrine that needs to be clearly and carefully understood. Since regeneration is an instantaneous work of God, apart from any human action or emotion, it is only accurate to assume that there is nothing immediately experienced or reasoned from a human perspective. In other words, as Dr. Walvoord states, "...experience proceeds from the accomplished regeneration" (*Ibid.*, p. 118).

There is a popular, misunderstood notion that in order for one to be truly saved, he/she must "feel" different. There are many who look for some lightning bolt feeling as a sign of true salvation. However, this doctrine of regeneration completely contradicts this thinking.

Again Dr. Walvoord states, “While the regenerated soul may become immediately conscious of new life, the act of regeneration itself is not subject to experience or analysis, being the supernatural instantaneous act of God” (*Ibid.*, pp. 118-119). There are many people who look for some special feeling or something experiential to happen when they believe. Unfortunately, this thinking has been fueled by evangelists and preachers who do not have a clear understanding of “sound doctrine.”

A fruitful life, personal development and the experience of Christianity are all things which occur as a result of regeneration, not at the moment of it. Since regeneration is an act of God, which is wrought apart from human emotion, intellect or will, it is not experienced by human emotion, intellect or will. It is true that one may sense something has taken place, but the real experience of a transformation will only be evidenced as one develops after regeneration.

When a new baby is born, there are some new potentials that exist. The new babe has a potential to move differently, makes sound differently, breathe differently and eat differently. Sometimes a new born struggles with one or more of these potentials, but that does not negate the reality of his new physical life. The babe is not aware of what is going on at this point. He has no idea of the changes that just occurred at his moment of birth. He grows and develops and over time begins to understand more and more about himself and life.

So it is with spiritual birth. When a person is born again he is a new babe in Christ and has some new potentials. The new babe has a new capacity for spiritual food and growth. Most times the new babe will sense something new has taken place, but he will have no idea as to what changes have instantly occurred. As he grows and develops, he will begin to experience and enjoy a new life. Regeneration is not, in itself, an experience; it is something that is experienced as one matures. To demand that new babes “feel” different is to demand something not consistent with regeneration. **Regeneration is a fact and not a feeling.**

One matter that often is theologically discussed is the matter of “infant death.” Often people discuss the subject of whether or not a baby who dies goes to heaven or hell. If a person makes salvation an act of man, then any baby who dies, who did not make a choice to believe in Jesus Christ, is one destined to eternal condemnation. However, if regeneration is an act of God, then God can work in the soul of a baby and grant the baby eternal life.

When a baby dies, it has not reached an age when it has a volitional ability to reject Christ or believe on Jesus Christ. If we conclude that saving faith and eternal life are in fact gifts of God, then we may also conclude that God may give that gift to a baby. Regeneration is by God’s will, not by man’s will. God may impart new life to even a baby if He sovereignly wills it.

Dr. Walvoord took the position that normal regeneration is given to a person the moment a person believes, but infant regeneration would be given the moment a baby dies. This would explain how no sheep can be missed or lost in the saving program of God, including the sheep who are infants. We must always remember that regeneration is not by the will of man. Nothing man can do will cause one to be born again. No human religious act (baptism, confession of faith, communion, church membership) causes one to be born again. This is solely and completely a work of God.