

**REGENERATION:
BEGINNING WITH GOD**

by

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I spent the first fifteen years of my ministry in a small country town in Ayrshire in Scotland. Not far from there, in the seventeenth century, a godly young man named David Dickson ministered in a town called Irvine. Some remarkable revivals broke out, associated with a series of sermons on the subject of regeneration. That often seems to have happened in times of revival. The history of revival bears witness to the frequency with which regeneration was a theme accompanying it. David Dickson preached twenty-seven sermons in his series, which is more like the time scale for the subject of regeneration, I would think, than one occasion. But in the midst of it he gave this definition:

Regeneration is the work of God's invincible power and mere grace, wherein by his Spirit accompanying his Word he quickeneth a redeemed person lying dead in his sins and reneweth him in his mind, his will and all the powers of his soul, convincing him savingly of sin and righteousness and judgment, and making him heartily to embrace Christ and salvation, and to consecrate himself to the service of God in Christ all the days of his life.¹

It would be difficult to find a more satisfying summary of regeneration than that. I want to try to come to grips with it biblically by turning to the third chapter of John's Gospel where our Lord is presenting this truth to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews and a teacher in Israel. Not that the teaching of Jesus in John 3 is unique or out of harmony with the rest of his teaching in the Gospels! Indeed, the doctrine of regeneration which is taught in this chapter is really the logical link--as Professor John Murray points out--between our Lord's teaching on the pollution and depravity of the natural human heart, on the one hand, and the demands and requirements of membership of his kingdom, on the other. There is a tremendous gulf between the teaching of our Lord on the depravity and sickness of the human heart, including the inability of man by nature, and the requirements which he urges upon us as members of his kingdom. The logical and vital link between these two is regeneration.

¹ David Dickson, *Select Practical Writings of David Dickson*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Printed for the Assemblies Committee, 1845), p. 211.

You Must Be Born Anew

The necessity of regeneration could scarcely be put more categorically than in Jesus' words in verses 3, 5, and 7: "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. . . . You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" This necessity has certain specific characteristics.

First, it is an *indispensible* necessity. I mean by that, that there are some things more important than others, even amongst the things which Scripture presses upon us, and that regeneration is among those items of utmost importance. That is the significance of our Lord's words in verses 3 and 5--"I tell you the truth [literally, verily, verily]." They are a kind of underlining. Here Jesus is underlining his words to score their significance for us. There are some things, you see, that a man may dispense with and still enter the kingdom of God. He may enter the kingdom of God without ever being baptized or sitting at the Lord's Table. They are important although not indispensable. But what Jesus is here describing is an indispensable necessity, for a man will never in all eternity enter the kingdom of God without being regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

Second, it is a *universal* necessity. Not everything Jesus says is a universal necessity. For example, he said to the rich young ruler that he must sell all that he had and give to the poor. But Jesus does not tell everybody to sell all that he or she has and give to the poor. That was necessary for him but not for everybody. However, Jesus' words about regeneration are of a different order. Jesus said, "Unless a man is born again," and this means that regeneration was a necessity for Nicodemus personally precisely because regeneration is a necessity for all men universally. It derives from the fact that by nature every man is defiled, deadened and corrupted by sin. This is what Jesus is referring to in verse 6: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Flesh here means human nature as it is dominated and polluted by sin. So what Jesus is telling us is that unrenewed human nature dominated by sin can only reproduce itself. Regeneration is a universal necessity because man by his own fleshly effort has a universal inability to produce anything except the flesh. No amount of education will produce regeneration. No amount of external religion will do anything to change this basic position. This is the law of generation, which you find illustrated in the first part of Genesis: "Creatures . . . according to their kinds" (Gen. 1:21). Man brings forth flesh from his flesh, and sinful flesh remains sinful flesh. So Jesus says in verse 7, "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" The new birth is a universal necessity because the disabling, defiling power of sin is universal.

You will notice in verse 4 that Nicodemus misunderstands. He thinks that Jesus is speaking about a new start. If only a man could be born again in the sense of entering his mother's womb a second time! Nicodemus thinks that Jesus is referring to this kind of new beginning. But Jesus says that this would not help in the slightest, because a thousand new starts would only produce the same weary tale of defeat, pollution and disablement. It is a new nature, a new heart which man needs. That is, he needs to be born of the Spirit.

This is a very important thing for us to grasp, because the point is not merely academic. It is significant for our evangelism. We need to recognize that man is not just confused and needing to be sorted out in his thinking, nor is he merely needing to be redirected into the ways of God, nor is it only the fact that he is guilty and needs to be forgiven. Basically his problem is that he is dead and needs to be resurrected. He needs new life. Our evangelism needs to be based on this foundation. We need rightly to diagnose the problem of man before we even begin rightly to understand the gospel that he needs. We may help a man to understand his confusion and lead him into the right way. We may indoctrinate him. But the one thing that we can never do is regenerate him, and this is why our Lord is at pains to lay down the universal necessity of regeneration.

But regeneration is not only an indispensable and universal necessity; it is also an *unchangeable* necessity. It is unchangeable because of the issues with which it deals. I refer to verses 3 and 5 particularly, for these show that regeneration deals not with passing, changing things but with the unchanging laws of God concerning his kingdom--how a man may perceive the kingdom and enter it. The kingdom of God is the sphere in which God brings rebel sinners into subjection to his gracious rule and authority. It is the realm in which God's grace is to be tested and experienced. To see the kingdom is to grasp or understand it, to have the glory and wonder of it dawn upon one. But the glory of the kingdom will never dawn upon a man until he has been born again. Similarly, to enter the kingdom of God means to experience the blessings of the kingdom, to be admitted to its privileges and joys both present and future. But apart from the new birth, says Jesus, we shall never experience any of these joys. This is an unchanging necessity because it deals with these unchanging laws of God's kingdom.

A New Creation

What, then, is this work of grace which is an indispensable, universal and unchangeable necessity? That leads me to the nature of regeneration, which is a radical, total change in sinful man accomplished solely by God the Holy Spirit, producing new life--what Paul calls "a new creation." The very metaphor that our Lord uses in his conversation with Nicodemus leads into the nature of it, for he is saying that regeneration is as momentous as birth itself.

It is significant that the New Testament uses such radical language to describe Christian beginnings, language like resurrection, regeneration and re-creation. For it is teaching that being brought out of darkness into light is something that can only be paralleled by a birth. It is like a new life beginning. It is parallel, if you like to a new creation. "God, who said, 'Let light shine out darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

One of the things we need so much to grasp in our day is the wonder of what happened to us when we were born into the kingdom of God's grace. I am sure that one of the reasons people are looking for additional, secondary thrills offered at some future stage in their

spiritual experience is that they have devalued the initial work of grace. We speak as though it were something we had done, something anyone can do. But the Bible describes it as the miracle of resurrection, as the miracle of a new creation.

This is something which we greatly misunderstand when we speak, as we often do, about people who have been saved from some particularly dissolute level of society and some particularly debauched kind of life. I remember a young boy who had been a gang leader in the district where I originally served as a pastor. He had committed just about every sin you could imagine, but he was saved by Christ and was brought into the church. People used to say to me, "Well, you know, it really took a miracle to save him!" I was very interested when I heard that because the implication was, you see, that it took something less of a miracle to save respectable sinners like us. These people had not really understood the nature of man's total depravity, whatever form it takes, or the miracle that God performs when he raises anyone into newness of life in Christ.

This is what is involved in the well-known phrase "born again," which occurs in verses 3 and 5. It is what old Henry Scougal called it, in the title of that famous book which had such an astonishing influence on men like George Whitefield, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. That title expresses exactly what regeneration is. As John himself said in 1 John 3:9, it is having God's nature abiding in you because you are "born of God."

Regeneration is characterized by both cleansing and renewal. That is the truth of verse 5: "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'" Being born of water does not refer to baptism, since that would be to interpret Jesus as reinforcing the Pharisees' false notion that inward spiritual problems can be resolved by external physical rites. We need to look rather at verse 10 for help in understanding verse 5. In verse 10 Jesus is gently chiding Nicodemus for not understanding him despite Nicodemus' being a teacher of Israel. What was God's great promise to Israel to which Jesus refers? Well, in Ezekiel 36:25, 26 the prophet says from God, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. [This is the promise of the new age of the Messiah's coming.] . . . I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. [That is the double promise of spiritual cleansing and spiritual renewal.]" Similarly, this is how Paul characterizes the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in Titus 3:3-5: "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passion and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit."

Regeneration deals with two things then: the pollution of our nature and the perversity of our will. God implants a spirit of obedience to give us a new heart, and he grants us a cleansing to take away our defilement. The essence of the new birth is this miraculous work of grace akin to the creation of new life by God the Holy Spirit. And the character of it is that it is a dual miracle of cleansing and renewal.

Born from Above

Who is the author of the new birth and to whom do we look for it? This question leads us to the source of the new birth and to our Lord's clear teaching in verses 5, 6 and 8, that the author of the new birth is God the Holy Spirit: "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit. . . . The Spirit gives birth to spirit. . . . 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." As someone has put it, the Holy Spirit is the womb out of which the new birth comes.

Jesus emphasizes the same truth in another way when he speaks of being born "from above" (v. 3). Most of the translations say either "born again" or "born anew." But Jesus really says, "Unless one is born from above." The Greek word is *anōthen*.

One of my friends who has been instrumental in the growth of a real work of grace among evangelical ministers in Scotland, the Reverend William Still of Aberdeen, had a large poster put outside his church. Providentially the buses stop outside his church on Union Street in Aberdeen; they stop there for quite a long time. So he had a monstrous sign erected which one day bore this message: "You must be born *anōthen*." Many people stopped and stared at this. The morning it went up he had a telephone call from a business house in Aberdeen, and the man on the line said to him, "Sir, I was passing your church this morning and saw this ridiculous notice you have up. What does it mean? You must be born *anōthen*."

"Oh," Still said, "it means you must be born from above. It means that from below, that is, from man, there is no hope of eternal life. It must come from above, from God."

His caller chided, "Well, why couldn't you simply have put *that* up in your notice?"

He answered, "Then people like you would never phone me up and give me the opportunity of telling you what I have just said."

The word *anōthen* is the same word, incidentally, that is used by Jesus with Pilate in John 19:11 ("You would have no power over me if it were not given to you *from above*") and again in John 3:31 ("The one who comes *from above* is above all"), where Jesus is contrasting coming from the earth, that is, from man, and coming from God. The implication is clear. The new birth has its source in God alone. The very metaphor makes this even stronger. Jesus is saying that a man can no more procure his own spiritual birth than he was able to undertake his own physical procreation and conception. So the one thing that is necessary for us is the one thing we cannot do for ourselves.

Now some might say, "But that would drive us to despair, if we believed that. How are we to preach this to men?" But that is precisely the point. It is the effect we want. Spurgeon writes, "Do I hear someone complain when I preach on the new birth being from above? This will be discouraging. But from what will it discourage us? It will discourage

us from trying to save ourselves, and that is exactly what I want to discourage you from."

This is not an academic question. It affects me if I am *not* born anew. To whom do I look for the new birth? To whom shall I apply for it? It affects me if I *am* born anew. To whom shall I give all the glory, honor and praise for the new birth? It affects me if there are *other people* whose new birth I desire. To whom shall I look for their regeneration? What is the work that is going to be significant in producing regeneration? The proper answer to those questions will make us realize that prayer is fundamental and not supplemental in the work of evangelism.

The theological terms to which this question points particularly are monergism and synergism. Monergism means "one person (as in *monotheistic*, one god) working (as in energy)." Synergism means "several persons working together." Our Lord is saying that regeneration belongs to the realm of monergism. Only God is at work in regeneration. Do we contribute anything? Oh, yes, we do! The one thing that you and I contribute to our salvation is the sin which makes it necessary.

Where and When God Wills

The manner of the new birth is taught in verse 8 where our Lord draws a comparison between the activity of the wind and the activity of the Spirit: "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."

You will know perhaps that the word for wind and the word for spirit are the same in Greek, the language in which the Gospel is written. But the Lord nevertheless seems to be making a comparison. He is saying that the manner of the Spirit's work in regeneration is like the operation of the wind. And that is marked by several things. First, it is marked by *efficacy*. The wind blows; it has a dynamic within it. There is an effect when the wind is blowing. In some parts of the world the wind has a tremendous efficacy. When it blows things bend before it that nothing else will bend. Jesus is saying that wherever the Spirit of God is blowing he leaves new creations in his wake. There is an efficacy in the Spirit's power as he moves in regenerating grace.

There is also a *sovereignty* to the Spirit's work, for the wind blows "where it wills." We sometimes wish we could command the wind to come. I used to do a bit of sailing on the Firth of Clyde, a beautiful part of Scotland, where on some days we were becalmed and used to wish that we could command the wind to come. But the wind cannot be commanded like that. Or, on the other hand, some days there may be wild storms and you might wish to command the wind to stop. But the wind has a sovereignty; it blows where it wills. And so does the Holy Spirit, who is sovereign in his work of regeneration. That is why we are often completely surprised by the way God is working and why we must not try to drag the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit down to the level of our manipulation. If you had taken a poll in the churches of Judea in the period before that of Acts 9, asking who was the least likely man to be converted, Saul of Tarsus would have

come pretty close to the top of the poll. But in his sovereignty the Holy Spirit moved where he would and regenerated Paul.

There is also a *mystery* about the wind. You cannot tell, says Jesus, where it comes from or where it is going. We must never seek to remove either this element of sovereignty or this element of mystery from the Spirit's work. God by his Holy Spirit often comes in mysterious ways to bring people to new birth.

The Marks of Regeneration

C. R. Vaughan, who was R. L. Dabney's successor in Richmond, Virginia, speaks of the reality of regeneration as an inference to be drawn from evidence. He urges in his book *the Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, which I commend to you, that the inference be drawn cautiously and deliberately, not hurriedly. We can see some of the evidence for which we look in our Lord's own words to Nicodemus: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (v. 6). That is, there are works of the flesh (which Paul elaborates in Galatians 5:19-21) by which the flesh is recognized. And there are works of the Spirit (which Paul elaborates in Galatians 5:22, 23) by which the Spirit is recognized.

All spiritual activities depend on God's Spirit. Dr. Packer has put it with typical neatness in this way: "There are no spiritual activities without regeneration." But here is the other side to it: "There is no regeneration without spiritual activities." No spiritual activities without regeneration and no regeneration without spiritual activities. The sound of the Spirit blowing, that is, the recognizable signs of his presence, is the fruit of the Spirit. And basically, these are the marks of regeneration. John spells out some of these in his first epistle, for example in 1 John 2:29, which teaches that *the practice of righteousness* is one evidence of regeneration: "If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him." Another mark is *a departure from the practice of sinning*, as in 1 John 3:9: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin," that is, the way he did before. First John 4:7 speaks of *the practice of love*: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." We find *the exercise of faith* in 5:1: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." So faith, too, is an evidence of regeneration. First John 5:4 says that *the victory over the world* is an evidence of regeneration: "Everyone born of God has overcome the world."

This, too, is not mere theology. It is precisely what we see happening when true regeneration takes place. Our church, in the center of the city of Glasgow, is next door to the Royal Academy of Music, and we have seen God begin to do some remarkable things through the Christian Union in the Academy of Music. I regularly get telephone calls asking, "Could you see so and so? Could you go and see someone?" Recently one of the girls rang me and said, "I've made an appointment for somebody to see you." (It's one of the lovely things students do. They imagine that you don't have anything else scheduled.) She said, "I've made an appointment for you to see so and so today at two. I think he's wanting to become a Christian, and we're trying to help him." I met this young man at

two, and we got to know each other a little. Then I said to him, "Now, tell me about what's been happening to you."

He said, "Well, that's what I want to know. I don't know what's been happening to me. But I've suddenly discovered that I'm longing to read the Bible. I've found that Jesus has become everything in life to me! I want to know God! The things I longed to do before have begun to die away, and things I never thought I would be found longing after, these are beginning to be the great things in my life!"

I said, "But somebody said to me that you wanted to *become* a Christian! You already are!" There were all the evidences of regeneration in the boy's heart, you see. God had given him newness of life in Christ.

Through the Word of Truth

Jesus presents the truth of rebirth to Nicodemus in the context of verses 11-16, which is really the context of the preaching of a crucified Savior. "I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

The context of regeneration of our Lord's conversation with Nicodemus is the preaching of such a gospel as this. Indeed, the sovereign Spirit employs the instrumentality of the Word in the production of regeneration. As Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 1:23, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." Similarly, in James 1:18 we have: "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth." This means that the context in which God creates newness of life is the reading, preaching of and testimony to the Word of God, whether publicly or privately. The Word of God is the instrument the Holy Spirit is pleased to use.

Professor John Murray says, "Regenerating grace is carried to us in the bosom of the effectual call, and since the latter is by the Word we must never think of regeneration . . . as wrought outside of a context that has reality and meaning only as a result of the Word."² That is why, in connection with his writing on regeneration, Stephen Charnock, the great Puritan, urged us to prize the Word of God as the Spirit's mighty instrument in regeneration. He says it is an instrument to unlock the prison doors and take them off the hinges, to strike off the fetters and draw out the soul into a glorious liberty. Nothing else ever wrought such miraculous change. Therefore

² John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 2, *Select Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh and Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), pp. 197, 198.

prize the word of truth which works such great effects in the soul. Value that as long as you live which is the cord whereby God has drawn any of you out of the dungeon of death. . . . How should the law of God's mouth be better to us than thousands of gold and silver? How shall we prize that word whereby any of us have seen the glory of God in his sanctuary, the glory of God in our souls! When corruptions are strong, it is an engine to batter them. When our hearts are cold, it is a fire to enflame them. When our souls are faint, it is a cordial to refresh them. It begins a new birth and maintains it. . . . Have a great regard to it, keep it in the midst of your hearts, for it is life.³

That is why we are concerned with a ministry, life and evangelism that are utterly biblical, not only conforming to biblical truth but with biblical content. Our confidence must be in the Word of God in its saving power under the ministry of God's Holy Spirit.

What should this doctrine of regeneration do for us then? It should thrill our souls with a new sense of worship as we observe the sheer miracle that God has performed in us in this regenerating grace. It should enlarge our understanding of what it means to be redeemed. It should drive us to God in a new way for those who are yet without eternal life, recognizing that it is he and he alone who can bring it to men. It should bow us down before him in wonder that the God of all the ages, the creator of the universe, should apply such mighty works of power to the souls of men in order that he might raise us into new life to conform us to the beautiful image of his Son.

³ Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), pp. 326, 327.