

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

Regeneration

C. Regeneration, or the New Birth

It is of the utmost importance that we have a clear understanding of this vital doctrine. By regeneration we are admitted into the kingdom of God. There is no other way of becoming a Christian but by being born from above. The doctrine, then, is the door of entrance into Christian discipleship. He who does not enter here, does not enter at all.

I. *The Nature of Regeneration*

Too often do we find other things substituted by man for God's appointed means of entrance into the kingdom of heaven. It will be well for us then to look, first of all, at some of these substitutes.

1. **Regeneration is Not Baptism.**

It is claimed that John 3:5—"Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit," and Titus 3:5—"The washing of regeneration," teach that regeneration may occur in connection with baptism. These passages, however, are to be understood in a figurative sense, as meaning the cleansing power of the Word of God. See also Eph. 5:26—"With the washing of water by [or in] the word"; John 15:3—"Clean through the word." That the Word of God is an agent in regeneration is clear from James 1:18, and 1 Pet. 1:23.

If baptism and regeneration were identical, why should the Apostle Paul seem to make so little of that rite (1 Cor. 4:15, and compare with it 1 Cor. 1:14)? In the first passage Paul asserts that he had *begotten* them through the Gospel; and in 1:14 he declares that he *baptized none of them* save Crispus and Gaius. Could he thus speak of baptism if it had been the means through which they had been begotten again? Simon Magus was baptized (Acts 8), but was he saved? Cornelius (Acts 11) was saved even before he was baptized.

2. **Reformation is Not Regeneration.**

Regeneration is not a natural forward step in man's development; it is a supernatural act of God; it is a spiritual crisis. It is not evolution, but involution—the communication of a new life. It is a revolution—a change of direction resulting from that life. Herein lies the danger in psychology, and in the statistics regarding the number of conversions during the period of adolescence. The danger lies in the tendency to make regeneration a natural phenomenon, an advanced step in the development of a human life, instead of regarding it as a crisis. Such a psychological view of regeneration denies man's sin, his need of Christ, the necessity of an atonement, and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

3. Regeneration is a Spiritual Quickening, a New Birth.

Regeneration is the impartation of a new and divine life; a new creation; the production of a new thing. It is Gen. 1:26 over again. It is not the old nature altered, reformed, or re—invigorated, but a new birth from above. This is the teaching of such passages as John 3:3–7; 5:21; Eph 2:1, 10; 2Cor 5:17.

By nature man is dead in sin (Eph. 2:1); the new birth imparts to him new life—the life of God, so that henceforth he is as those that are alive from the dead; he has passed out of death into life (John 5:24).

4. It is the Impartation of a New Nature—God’s Nature.

In regeneration we are made partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). We have put on the new man, which after God is created in holiness and righteousness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Christ now lives in the believer (Gal. 2:20). God’s seed now abides in him (1 John 3:9). So that henceforth the believer is possessed of two natures (Gal. 5:17).

5. A New and Divine Impulse is Given to the Believer.

Thus regeneration is a crisis with a view to a process. A new governing power comes into the regenerate man’s life by which he is enabled to become holy in experience: “Old things are passed away; behold all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). See also Acts 16:14, and Ezek. 36:25–27; 1 John 3:6–9.

II. The Imperative Necessity of the New Birth

1. The Necessity is Universal.

The need is as far—reaching as sin and the human race: “Except a man [lit. anybody] be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, cf. v.5). No age, sex, position, condition exempts anyone from this necessity. Not to be born again is to be lost. There is no substitute for the new birth: “Neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature” (Gal. 6:15). The absolute necessity is clearly stated by our Lord: whatever is born of the flesh, must be born again of the Spirit (John 3:3–7).

2. The Sinful Condition of Man Demands It.

John 3:6—“That which is born of the flesh is flesh”—and it can never, by any human process, become anything else. “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil” (Jer. 13:23). “They that are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:8); in our “flesh dwelleth no good thing” (Rom. 7:18). The mind is darkened so that we cannot apprehend spiritual truth; we need a renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2). The heart is deceitful, and does not welcome God; we need to be pure in heart to see God. There is no thought of God before the eyes of the natural man; we need a change in

nature that we may be counted among those who "thought upon his name." No education or culture can bring about such a needed change. God alone can do it.

3. The Holiness of God Demands It.

If without holiness no man shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14); and if holiness is not to be attained by any natural development or self—effort, then the regeneration of our nature is absolutely necessary. This change, which enables us to be holy, takes place when we are born again.

Man is conscious that he does not have this holiness by nature; he is conscious, too, that he must have it in order to appear before God (Ezra 9:15). The Scriptures corroborate this consciousness in man, and, still further, state the necessity of such a righteousness with which to appear before God. In the new birth alone is the beginning of such a life to be found. To live the life of God we must have the nature of God.

III. The Means of Regeneration

1. Regeneration is a Divine Work.

We are "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, *but of God*" (John 1:13). It was of His own will he begat us (Jas. 1:18): Our regeneration is a creative act on the part of God, not a reforming process on the part of man. It is not brought about by natural descent, for all we get from that is "flesh." It is not by natural choice, for the human will is impotent. Nor is it by self—effort, or any human generative principle. Nor is it by the blood of any ceremonial sacrifices. It is not by pedigree or natural generation. It is altogether and absolutely the work of God. Practically speaking, we have no more to do with our second birth, than we had to do with our first birth.

The Holy Spirit is the Divine Agent in our regeneration. For this reason it is called the "renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Tit. 3:5). We are "born of the Spirit" (John 3:5).

2. And Yet There is a Human Side to the Work.

John 1:12 and 13 bring together these two thoughts—the divine and the human in regeneration: Those who received Him (i. e., Christ) ... were born of God. The two great problems connected with regeneration are the efficiency of God and the activity of man.

(a) Man is Regenerated by Means of the Acceptance of the Message of the Gospel.

God begat us by "the word of truth" (James 1:18). We are "born again," says Peter (1 Peter 1:23), "of incorruptible seed, by the word of God." We are "begotten through the gospel" (1 Cor. 4:15). These scriptures teach us that regeneration takes place in the heart of man when he reads or hears the Word of God, or the Gospel message, or both, and, because of the Spirit working in the Word as well as in the heart of man, the man opens his heart and receives that message as the Word of life to his soul. The truth is illuminated, as is also the mind, by the Spirit; the man yields to the truth, and is born again. Of course, even here, we must remember

that it is the Lord who must open our hearts just as He opened the heart of Lydia (Acts 16:14). But the Word must be believed and received by man. 1 Pet. 1:25.

(b) Man is Regenerated by the Personal Acceptance of Jesus Christ.

This is the clear teaching of John 1:12, 13 and Gal. 3:26. We become “children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” When a man, believing in the claims of Jesus Christ receives Him to be all that He claimed to be—that man is born again.

“Man therefore is not wholly passive at the time of his regeneration. He is passive only as to the change of his ruling disposition. With regard to the exercise of this disposition he is active. A dead man cannot assist in his own resurrection, it is true; but he may, and can, like Lazarus, obey Christ’s command, and ‘Come forth!’ ”

Psa. 90:16, 17 illustrates both the divine and human part: “Let thy work appear unto thy servants,” and then “the work of *our* hands establish thou it.” God’s work appears first, then man’s. So Phil. 2:12,13.