

Correcting Erroneous Teachings

Erroneous Teaching concerning Regeneration

Regeneration, a crucial term in the New Testament, signifies and is experientially synonymous with the new birth referenced in John 3:6: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Being born again is more than a mere metaphor for regeneration through faith; instead, “regeneration means that in addition to his original life man obtains the life of God... The moment we are regenerated is the very moment that God’s life enters into us. Regeneration, therefore, is the entering into us of God’s life” (Lee, *Experience* 11-12).

The Reformed Teaching of Regeneration

One variation in the Reformed tradition’s discussion on regeneration is too narrow, and another variation is too broad. Both of these variations promote erroneous teachings concerning regeneration. The narrow view focuses on the moment of regeneration: “We believe that a person is born again BEFORE they accept the gospel while many other Christians believe that it is after” (Neostarwcc).¹

In an article entitled “Faith or Regeneration—Which Comes First?” Steve R. Cook writes,

There are many Christians who believe that regeneration precedes faith in Christ. The reasoning is that an unregenerate person has no ability within himself to do anything, and even believing is made possible by means of the regenerating work of God the Holy Spirit.²

Cook then quotes J. I. Packer:

J. I. Packer states, “Jesus’ point throughout [John 3:3-8] is that there is no exercise of faith in himself as the supernatural Savior, no repentance, and no true discipleship apart from this new birth.” In this formula, Packer places faith in Christ after regeneration. At another point he states, “Regeneration is a transition from spiritual death to spiritual life, and conscious, intentional, active faith in Christ is its immediate fruit, not its immediate cause.”

Packer is correct that “regeneration is a transition from spiritual death to spiritual life”—“made possible by means of the regenerating work of God the Holy Spirit.” It is misleading, however, to assert that a “conscious, intentional, active faith in Christ is its immediate fruit,” because even Packer’s

use of the word *fruit* suggests that regeneration, involving the impartation of the divine life, is a necessary precursor to receiving the same divine life associated with being born again through faith. In effect, receiving life through regeneration is required to receive life through faith. This is an oxymoronic situation in the process of regeneration.

Charles Caldwell Ryrie states,

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. (376)

In contrast to the narrow view that requires the impartation of the divine life for a subsequent impartation of faith, an impossibility given the total depravity of humanity, the broad view focuses on the consequences of regeneration, not the action of receiving the divine life through being born again. Concerning this, Packer writes,

Regeneration is the spiritual change wrought in the heart of man by the Holy Spirit in which his/her inherently sinful nature is changed so that he/she can respond to God in Faith, and live in accordance with His Will (Matt. 19:28; John 3:3, 5, 7; Titus 3:5). It extends to the whole nature of man, altering his governing disposition, illuminating his mind, freeing his will, and renewing his nature.

Regeneration, or new birth, is an inner re-creating of fallen human nature by the gracious sovereign action of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8). The Bible conceives salvation as the redemptive renewal of man on the basis of a restored relationship with God in Christ, and presents it as involving “a radical and complete transformation wrought in the soul (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23) by God the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5; Eph. 4:24), by virtue of which we become ‘new men’ (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), no longer conformed to this world (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9), but in knowledge and holiness of the

truth created after the image of God (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; Rom. 12:2)” (B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, 351). Regeneration is the “birth” by which this work of new creation is begun, as sanctification is the “growth” whereby it continues (I Pet. 2:2; II Pet. 3:18). Regeneration in Christ changes the disposition from lawless, Godless self-seeking (Rom. 3:9-18; 8:7) which dominates man in Adam into one of trust and love, of repentance for past rebelliousness and unbelief, and loving compliance with God’s law henceforth. It enlightens the blinded mind to discern spiritual realities (I Cor. 2:14-15; II Cor. 4:6; Col. 3:10), and liberates and energizes the enslaved will for free obedience to God (Rom. 6:14, 17-22; Phil. 2:13).

The broad view, while acknowledging an initial impartation of the divine life, mistakenly extends the act of regeneration to include subsequent spiritual manifestations that organically spring forth from the experience of the divine life. These manifestations include transformation (Rom. 12:2), renewing³ (Eph. 4:23), conformation (Rom. 8:29), and glorification (v. 17).

The New Testament Teaching of Regeneration

Neither the narrow view nor the broad view associated with the Reformed teaching on regeneration is correct, and both are overly laden with complicated theological permutations to justify the claim that regeneration precedes faith. The New Testament treatment of this term, in contrast, is clear and simple: regeneration speaks to the fact that a person obtains the life of God in addition to the natural human life. “The first and primary thing we receive through regeneration is the life of God. All of the capabilities, functions, and activities of a living being originate with its life” (Lee, *What Is Regeneration?* 14). Regeneration is the initiation of all further spiritual experiences in God’s full plan of salvation (Rom. 13:11; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:2, 9; 2:2). “By regeneration we begin to experience the very life of God. Before we were regenerated, we had no dealings with the life of God. But now we have many experiences of the life of God because the moment we were regenerated, His life came into us” (2).

The divine life received through regeneration is the source of all spiritual growth; consequently, regeneration should be regarded as more than a minor milestone in a contrived *ordo salutis*. Rather than being a minor point, it has been said that D. L. Moody spoke of regeneration as being the greatest miracle in the universe (Lee, *The Christian Life* 45). And indeed it is! **AFC**

Notes

¹Initially, Calvin had a broader view of regeneration, but it was subsequently narrowed:

Calvin’s use of “regeneration” was more broad, covering all the renewing acts of God in the believer including sanctification. In later Reformed thinking, regeneration was narrowed

down in definition to the initial act [of] being “born again” in order to prevent confusion. So what later Reformed thinkers would call conversion and sanctification, Calvin would have included under his definition of regeneration. (Puritan Sailor)

²Such a view ignores the brooding of the Holy Spirit over the death waters to prepare an environment for the emergence of life (Gen. 1:2-3).

³Renewing includes transformation by the renewing of the spirit of the mind (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23) and transformation according to “the image of Him [Christ] who created him [the new man]” (Col. 3:10). Lee says,

The washing of regeneration begins with our being born again and continues with the renewing of the Holy Spirit as the process of God’s new creation, a process that makes us a new man. It is a kind of reconditioning, remaking, or remodeling, with life. Baptism (Rom. 6:3-5), the putting off of the old man, the putting on of the new man (Eph. 4:22, 24; Col. 3:9-11), and transformation by the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23) are all related to this wonderful process. The washing of regeneration purges away all the things of the old nature of our old man, and the renewing of the Holy Spirit imparts something new—the divine essence of the new man—into our being. In this is a passing from our old state into a wholly new one, from the old creation into the status of a new creation. Hence, both the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit are working in us continually throughout our life until the completion of the new creation. (*Recovery Version*, Titus 3:5, note 4)

by John Pester

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