

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#51—Pneumatology—Part V¹
The Work of the Holy Spirit in Salvation Part II: Regeneration
 Paul Karleen
 September 14, 2008

Helpful for this study are R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), Reymond, pp.703-739; House, Section 37; David Steele and Curtis Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 2004), 48-56; and John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984) 79-94, 95-105. The next study will be on the Baptizing Work of the Holy Spirit. Helpful for that study are House, Section 37 and Reymond 703-739.

To best present the biblical doctrine of regeneration I want to ask and answer four questions.

1. Why is regeneration necessary?

Why is it that when the Gospel is presented some respond with faith and some do not? Why do some answer the call and others do not? To answer this question we have to remember that the Bible teaches that we start life 1) unable to do anything to please God (and so unable to exercise faith), 2) under his condemnation, 3) possessing a defiled heart, 4) unable to see God because we are spiritually dead, 5) having a will that wants to please self, 6) at enmity with God and hating him and 7) having a corrupted mind that cannot understand the things of God. According to Rom. 3:11 no one seeks after God, and according to Eph. 2:1 everyone is dead in trespasses and sins. Being spiritually dead means that we have no ability to do anything to respond to God or seek him. How then can such a person exercise faith, which is in part an acknowledgement that God is right in asking sinners to accept what he has done in Christ? It is impossible for the unsaved person to do this. God has to provide something that will enable a sinner to believe in Christ. It is God's gracious provision, regeneration that solves this problem.

2. What is regeneration?

The biblical doctrine of regeneration is actually an umbrella doctrine that encompasses several related concepts that center on God's work in changing an individual during the process of efficacious grace. The term regeneration itself comes from the King James translation of Tit. 3:5—"the washing of regeneration." As a starting point for understanding this doctrine, here is my simple definition of regeneration:

Regeneration is the unseen and unfelt work of the Holy Spirit that overcomes depravity and brings spiritual life and the capacity to please God and exercise faith.

Our understanding of regeneration is constructed from four changes that God brings about: a new heart, a new birth, a new creation and new life. For each of the four changes we will indicate briefly the main result(s) from God's act.

1. God gives the sinner a new heart.

Dt. 30:6

¹ Copyright 2008 by Paul S. Karleen. Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

⁶The 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.

Ezek. 36:24-27

²⁴ For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Both of these passages describe future acts with regard to Israel—prophecies of the saving of a remnant of the nation to enter the kingdom after the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. But the principles and basic acts of God are the same as during this age: God provides a new heart that wants to and is able to please him. Water was used in Jewish rituals for physical cleansing that represented spiritual cleansing. So preceding the giving of a new heart is God’s spiritual cleansing—spiritual not physical, since it operates on impurities and idols, which are actually in the heart.

The result of receiving a new heart: The provision of a new nature that is able to do God’s will, love him and please him.

We must be careful here. There are some who say that the sinner’s nature is changed. This won’t work: God imparts a new nature and leaves the old one in place. The result is the conflict that we see in Rom. 8, Col. 3 and many other passages. The sinner as a whole is changed, but not his sinful nature.

2. God brings about a new birth by the instrument of Scripture.

Jn. 3:1-8

3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “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.”

³ In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.^a”

⁴ “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^b gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You^c must be born again.’ ⁸ 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.”

To see the kingdom of God Nicodemus has to be born again—a mysterious life-giving work of the Holy Spirit that is not directly explained here. In v. 5 the figure of water must refer to cleansing² and is based on

^a Or *born from above*; also in verse 7

^b Or *but spirit*

^c The Greek is plural.

² Jesus would not have been referring to baptism here, since Nicodemus could not have understood what was to be introduced at Pentecost. In addition, water baptism is an external rite that cannot bring about the change Jesus was describing. Nor could this have been a reference to water associated with birth. We use the term ‘water’ to refer to amniotic fluid, but I have no information that this was done in the first century. It is very likely that Nicodemus would have caught the allusion to Ezekiel and so would

Ezek. 36:25 (see the previous section). Before Nicodemus could see the kingdom of God he had to be cleansed spiritually. Something unclean had to be removed, and that is sin. In addition to a need for cleansing, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has to have a change so drastic that it is called a new birth.

Jn. 1:12-13

¹² Yet 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.

As much as any other this verse teaches the *monergistic* work of God in regeneration: the new birth is entirely a work of God. No human being can will it. This is the same truth as Jesus gives in Jn. 3:8—the Holy Spirit is sovereign in giving the new birth. He does what he pleases. The sinner is passive in regeneration. This is hard for many to accept and the objection has been formalized in Arminianism. The Arminian position is that faith precedes regeneration and comes as a result of God's grace helping a person to make a personal decision to receive Christ (God's prevenient grace comes to all who hear the gospel; the ultimate decision to accept or reject rests with the individual). The Holy Spirit regenerates a person only after he has exercised faith. This makes regeneration dependent on what the individual has already done. This is *synergistic*: man and God cooperate.

Gannon Murphy has written about this outlook at length in his "A Defense of Monergistic Regeneration"³

Charles Spurgeon once made the statement that, "we all, by nature, are Arminians."⁴ While on the surface this statement may seem needlessly polemical to some, perhaps experience and a little reflection suggest that it is more than just a little bit accurate. Anyone who has had the opportunity to witness the typical reaction manifested in those hearing the Calvinistic doctrines explicated for the first time can't help but wonder, if for a moment, whether Spurgeon may just have hit the nail squarely on the head. For, as soon as predestinarian buzzwords such as elect, chosen, and predestined are brought out, there is almost invariably a rather militant and visceral recoil on the part of the hearer that objects, "Why, then, does God still blame us? This just doesn't seem right or fair to me!" Indeed, there is often an immediate effort made to eviscerate the predestinarian language found in Scripture of its import and to creatively cast it in another interpretive mold. This fact should prove instructive to any person interested in these matters regardless of whether they ultimately pitch their tent in the Calvinist or Arminian camp. What is it, precisely, in the so-called "Calvinistic system" that causes people (believers and unbelievers alike) to so quickly revile its teachings and respond so paroxysmally? What do we learn of human nature and its habits by virtue of these nearly ubiquitous reactions to an aged church teaching? Clearly there is something that swells in our natures, compelling us to protect whatever it is that Divine monergism threatens. What is it exactly?

From the vantage point of Biblical anthropology, it cannot be anything other than our innate desire for autonomy. The fallen nature of humankind is such that we have a natural aversion to anything that smacks of overwhelming authority and control and which threatens to derogate our sense of freedom and liberty to choose for ourselves our own destinies. But was this not, after all, the primordial sin in the Garden and precisely the spiritual cancer that Adam has past [*sic*] on to us, his distant progeny? Ah, yes! Things begin to make sense. There is a natural angst that forcefully conjures up within us

have understood Jesus as referring to ritual cleansing. Of course, Jesus would not say that an external rite could bring about entrance into the Kingdom. The cleansing of water here would have to be figurative: God cleanses spiritually after the manner of OT physical cleansing rituals.

³ Available at <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/Murphy01.html>.

⁴ *A Defense of Calvinism*

when first introduced to the fundamentals of Reformation theology and its teachings on grace which inalterably entails predestination in the plain sense of the word. Concerning this initial shock and avoidance, one Lutheran theologian puts plainly what many experience saying,

To find out that God has no interest in allowing our destiny to remain in our hands is a scary thought when we trust ourselves more than God. It might cause sleepless nights. It might inspire heated arguments. We might wish to avoid these for the sake of love-but love of what? Certainly not God. God is the primary one to whom we relate, and He will not have one of his creatures loved above Himself. To avoid dealing with central questions concerning salvation out of love is not spiritual, it is carnal.⁵

Simply stated, human beings don't like to be told that they're not in charge and that, in fact, are quite literally at nothing less than the unmitigated mercy of God and the agents of His means. St. Paul labors to drive this point home to the congregates of the churches in Rome proclaiming unambiguously that, given God's absolute sovereignty, Divine favor "does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" and that "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom 9:16, 18). Of course, being the apologist par excellence, the apostle immediately anticipates the aggrieved words of those who would object to this authoritative teaching saying, "One of you will say to me, 'then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?' " (Rom 9:19). And to this, Paul delivers a most humbling and forceful rejoinder somewhat reminiscent of Job's famous interchange with God so many centuries earlier:

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath-prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory (Rom 9:20-23).

Tit. 3:5

⁵ 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 renewal by the Holy Spirit,

Here is the source of the umbrella term 'regeneration'—the Greek word *palingenesia*, translated here 'rebirth' but translated 'regeneration' in the King James Version.

1 Pet. 1:3

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! 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. 1:23

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

⁵ Rick Ritchie, "A Lutheran Response to Arminianism," *Modern Reformation*, May/June, 1992.

Here we see that God uses his written Word as the instrument of regeneration. The Bible itself does not cause regeneration: the Holy Spirit uses it as he performs the work of regeneration.

1 Jn. 5:1-4

5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ²This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.

The issue here is how one can identify a true Christian, or how do I know who my brother or sister in Christ is? John does not say that everyone who believes becomes born of God or enters a state of being born of God. No, 'born of God' comes before the believing. We can translate v. 1 this way: "Everyone who is a believer is already in a state of having been begotten by God."

The result of the new birth: Cleansing from the defilement of sin; provision of the life of God—a new life principle that overcomes spiritual death. In terms of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus, it makes it possible for a sinner to see the kingdom of God, which comes by exercising faith.

3. God makes the sinner a new creation.

Gal. 6:15

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.

Eph. 2:10

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

2 Cor. 5:18

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

The result of the new creation: a desire to please God, a changed mind and will. We now have a capacity to want to do the will of God. The Apostle Paul describes in Eph. 5:22-23 what we can and should be like after this change:

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control.

4. God makes the sinner alive.

Jn. 5:21

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.

Everyone—saved and unsaved—will live forever, with or without God. To receive life from God means to get something good from him. The 'life' here is spiritual life, which replaces spiritual death.

Eph. 2:1-5

2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Col. 2:13-14

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

The result of receiving life is the replacement of spiritual death with the ability to live eternally with God.

3. What is the relation of regeneration to faith? When does regeneration occur? When does faith occur?

When the gospel requests that the sinner believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, put his faith in the Savior's work on the Cross, it is asking him to do something that pleases God and obeys him. It should be clear by now that it is impossible for anyone to do this without being changed by something or someone outside of himself. This change, of course, is regeneration, and must come before it is possible to exercise faith. In fact, faith is one of the inevitable results of the provision of a new nature that can and wants to please God. Regeneration leads to faith so regeneration precedes faith. R. C. Sproul has written about his experience in seminary with regard to the doctrines of regeneration and faith:⁶

One of the most dramatic moments in my life for the shaping of my theology took place in a seminary classroom. One of my professors went to the blackboard and wrote these words in bold letters: "Regeneration Precedes Faith."

These words were a shock to my system. I had entered seminary believing that the key work of man to effect rebirth was faith. I thought that we first had to believe in Christ in order to be born again. I use the words in order here for a reason. I was thinking in terms of steps that must be taken in a certain sequence. I had put faith at the beginning. The order looked something like this:

"Faith - rebirth -justification."

I hadn't thought that matter through very carefully. Nor had I listened carefully to Jesus' words to Nicodemus. I assumed that even though I was a sinner, a person born of the flesh and living in the flesh, I still had a little island of righteousness, a tiny deposit of spiritual power left within my soul to enable me to respond to the Gospel on my own. Perhaps I had been confused by the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Rome, and many other branches of Christendom, had taught that regeneration is gracious; it cannot happen apart from the help of God.

⁶ R. C. Sproul, "Regeneration Precedes Faith," available at <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/sproul01.html>.

R. C. Sproul had entered seminary thinking that faith brought about regeneration. I exited seminary with that same error because it is what I was taught. After many years the Spirit of God showed me what Scripture really says: regeneration precedes faith, because without regeneration and all that it accomplishes faith is impossible. Ephesians 2:5 shows that when we are spiritually dead and so cannot respond to God, he makes us alive. Here is Sproul's description of this:⁷

Here Paul locates the time when regeneration occurs. It takes place 'when we were dead.' With one thunderbolt of apostolic revelation all attempts to give the initiative in regeneration to man are smashed. Again, dead men do not cooperate with grace. Unless regeneration takes place first, there is no possibility of faith.

4. What is the place of regeneration in the *ordo salutis*?

We are now able to expand on our understanding of the *ordo salutis*, which we began to think about in our consideration of efficacious grace in the previous study. Since efficacious grace—God's work of calling—brings a person to faith in Christ, it must include regeneration as well as the faith that follows. Regeneration must precede faith, so we have the following sequence and groupings (with justification and other acts following) of things that God does for sinners:

- 1) Calling, including
- 2) Regeneration
- 3) Repentance/Faith

- 4) Justification
- 5) Adoption
- 6) Union with Christ
- 7) Sealing
- 8) Indwelling
- 9) Positional sanctification (and other acts)

- 10) Progressive sanctification

- 11) Glorification

Our next study will address the work of the Holy Spirit in effecting union with Christ.

⁷ Ibid.

Study questions

1. What needs does regeneration meet?
2. What is the Arminian view of God's role in regeneration? What does Eph. 2:1 contribute to the evaluation of this position?
3. What is monergism as used in connection with salvation? What evidences do we have for its validity?
4. How do we know that regeneration precedes faith? Why is this important?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation

30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.
39. God's decree: The decree of God is his plan for the universe that includes all things and is certain to come to pass.
40. Providence: God's care for and upholding of his creation.
41. Sovereignty: God's control over his universe.
42. Christology: The study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
43. Incarnation: The joining of deity and humanity in one person forever. The word is based on the Latin word for flesh: the Lord Jesus Christ is God joined with human flesh.
44. Pre-existence: Used of the Son, it means that he existed before Bethlehem.
45. Theophany: An appearance of God.
46. Christophany: An appearance of Christ.
47. Priesthood: The system that God established to remedy the problem of alienation between a holy God and sinful human beings.
48. Son of God: A name for Jesus that describes his deity and his approval by the Father at the resurrection.
49. Son of Man: A messianic name for Jesus that emphasizes his humanity backed by deity and his role of taking humans to God through suffering and humiliation.
50. Messiah: A transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed one'; used of the expected national deliverer of Israel; the linguistic equivalent of Greek *christos*, 'Christ'.
51. Efficacious grace: Efficacious grace is the working of God in an individual that cannot be thwarted and that leads that person to faith in Christ. It is also described as effective calling and irresistible grace.
52. Regeneration: Regeneration is the unseen and unfelt work of the Holy Spirit that overcomes depravity and brings spiritual life and the capacity to please God and exercise faith.