Regeneration

What is regeneration?

Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit imparting spiritual life to those who are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). While the Greek word *palingenesia* appears only twice in the New Testament (Matt. 19:28 and Titus 3:5), the doctrine of the "new birth" is clearly taught in Scripture:

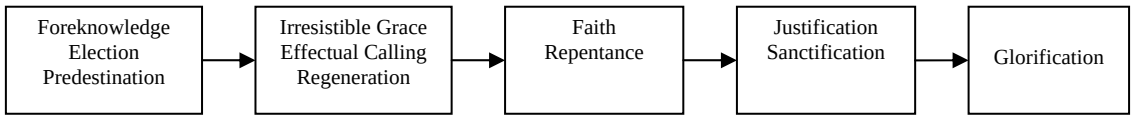
- God's message of hope to the Jews through the prophet Ezekiel points to the day when He will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them, taking away their heart of stone and giving them a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26). "I will place My Spirit within you," He tells them (v. 27).
- In Titus 3:5, Paul uses *palingenesia* to denote the change of heart spoken of elsewhere in Scripture as passing from death to life (1 John 3:14); becoming a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17); being born again or born from above (John 3:3, 7); and being made alive with the Messiah (Eph. 2:5).
- The new birth is ascribed to the Holy Spirit and originates with God (John 1:12-13, 6:63; 1 John 2:29, 5:1, 4).
- Scripture affirms the necessity of regeneration (John 3:3, 5; Rom. 8:9).
- Peter writes that God the Father mercifully has granted us "a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3).
- He emphasizes that the basis of our regeneration is "the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).
- And he likens the regenerated to "newborn infants" (1 Peter 2:2).

In Matt. 19:28, Jesus uses the term *palingenesia* to refer to the future Messianic age, when the fallen creation is restored and "all things (are put) in subjection under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:27 NASB; see also Acts 3:21; Rom. 8:18-23; Rev. 21:1). Likewise, the apostle Peter uses the terms "seasons of refreshing" (Acts 3:19) and "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21) to describe the completion of God's plan for the whole creation (see also 2 Peter 3:13).

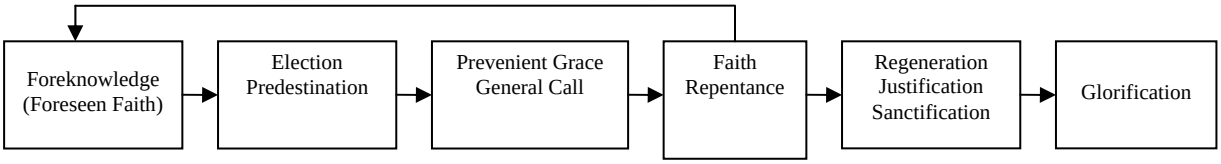
Is regeneration a prerequisite for salvation?

But for individuals, is regeneration a *prerequisite* for justification? That is, must God regenerate the elect so they will believe and repent, resulting in justification? Or are belief and repentance the conditions upon which God grants regeneration? Let's explore this issue more closely. The chart on the next page shows the logical order of events in salvation from the Reformed and Arminian points of view. Note that for Calvinists, regeneration precedes faith and repentance, while Arminians see the order of events reversed.

The Reformed View



The Arminian View



Most Calvinists understand Scripture to say that since lost sinners are dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1), blinded and bound by Satan (2 Cor. 4:4; 2 Tim. 2:26), and unable to please God (Rom. 8:6-8), their wills are in bondage to their sin nature. Therefore, God must open their spiritual eyes, liberate them from Satan's snare, and breathe spiritual life into them before they can respond in belief and repentance to the gospel message. In other words, unbelievers must be born again in order to trust in Christ for salvation. Calvinists point to passages such as John 1:11-13 and 1 John 5:1 to support their position:

John 1:11-13 - He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, He gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in His name, who *were born*, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God.

- Calvinists argue that "all who did receive Him" and "those who believe on His name" received Christ because they were "born … of God." Regeneration, they say, results in saving faith.

1 John 5:1 – Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah *has been born* of God ….

- Just as being born of God is a prerequisite for doing what is right (1 John 2:29), being born again is a prerequisite for believing in Christ, say Calvinists.

Arminians counter that these passages simply teach regeneration as an accomplished fact for believers, not as a precursor to salvation. Further, they "believe that at the time of the hearing of the general gospel call, every sinner has the free will either to accept or reject it. This is in essence a denial of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. Some Arminians believe that no sinner is ever totally depraved; others believe that all people are initially afflicted with total depravity but that God through universal preparatory grace mitigates the depravity and restores a measure of freedom. Either way the result is the same: when the moment of choice comes, sinners have a freedom of the will to meet or not to meet the conditions for salvation" (Jack W. Cottrell, *Perspectives on Election*, pp 120-121). Put another way, while unbelievers are

spiritually dead, they are alive in body and in soul, where the will resides. Though depraved, the sinner can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, repent and believe in Christ.

Arminians further understand Scripture to teach that regeneration is an inseparable part of God's work of salvation – along with justification, sanctification, and glorification – and cannot be considered a prerequisite for salvation. They challenge the Calvinist view with such questions as:

- How long must a person be regenerated before he or she can believe?
- Is there an example in Scripture of a regenerated person who is not justified?
- Can the regenerated person successfully resist the Holy Spirit? If so, for how long?
- Is the regenerated-but-not-yet justified person saved?
- If regeneration precedes faith and irresistibly draws unbelievers to Christ, hasn't God taken away that person's moral responsibility?

Calvinists have ready answers for these questions, but both sides agree that the real issue is what the Bible teaches about regeneration. This much seems clear:

- Regeneration is the work of God imparting spiritual life to unbelievers; people do not regenerate themselves any more than they justify, sanctify or glorify themselves.
- Faith and repentance are gifts from God *and* must be exercised freely and willingly by sinners to receive eternal life.
- All regenerated people are saved; there is no Scriptural evidence that any regenerated person fails to enter the kingdom of heaven.
- Apart from Reformed inferences from passages such as John 1:11-13 and 1 John 5:1, Scripture does not say that regeneration produces saving faith, or that regeneration is a prerequisite for justification.
- Paul describes salvation as including regeneration, justification and adoption, saying God "saved us … through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit … so that having been justified by His grace, we may become heirs with the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5-7).
- Further, Paul describes unbelievers as "dead *in* trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). Therefore, salvation necessarily involves God's work of making us spiritually alive (regeneration) *and* freeing us (through justification) from the cause of our spiritual death – trespasses and sins. Again, there is no reason to separate – logically or chronologically – regeneration and justification.

Consider also:

- The Old Testament concept of washing/cleansing implies the removal of sin along with the new heart God gives His people. Peter alludes to the flood as a type of saving through water (1 Peter 3:20-21) as God purged the human race of sin. In regard to Israel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak of God removing sins while giving His people hearts that desire Him (see, for example, Ezek. 36:25-27). Even John the Baptist's proclamation that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire brings into focus the Old Testament foreshadowing of God's new work of regeneration and purging (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16;

John 1:33). Separating regeneration from justification, or making one contingent upon the other, seems inconsistent with Old Testament teaching about the Spirit's ministry.

- Finally, Jesus teaches that when the Holy Spirit comes, He will "convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:8). He describes the work of the Spirit in confronting unbelievers with the stark reality of their lost state but does not distinguish between the Spirit's work in the hearts of the elect and non-elect. The same convicting work applies to all sinners equally.

Conclusion

In regard to the individual, regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit bringing sinners from spiritual death into spiritual life. Scripture seems to teach plainly that regeneration occurs at the same time as justification as sinners, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, willingly exercise their God-given gifts of faith and repentance.

Next week: Atonement – did Christ die only for the elect?

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