

Regeneration

from *Foundation Truths of the Gospel* by John Ritchie



Regeneration, or the new birth, is the initial act of true Christian life. Apart from this, there is no Christianity according to God. Yet this vital and fundamental truth is sadly obscured in popular theology, and frittered away alike by rationalism and ritualism. Nevertheless, it abides as that great operation of Divine power by which fallen man is created anew "in the image of God," and brought from death in sin to life in Christ. There is in the Word of God the fullest, clearest testimony given to this great foundation truth.

The doctrine was spoken of first by the Master Himself to Nicodemus, the Jewish ruler, in that midnight interview recorded in the third chapter of John's Gospel. Nicodemus was a religious as well as an educated man. He came to the Lord acknowledging Him as a Teacher sent from God, but in His reply the Lord would not acknowledge him as a subject of God's Kingdom. It was not education, but regeneration that Nicodemus needed. It was not reformation, but a new birth. Had the Lord acknowledged this teacher of Israel as a subject of the Kingdom, and proceeded to instruct him, he would have been flattered, but when the Lord struck at the root of the tree by saying "Ye must be born again," he was perplexed, and had to take his place as a *sinner* in the presence of the *Saviour*.

The Necessity of Regeneration.

"Ye must be born again" (John 3:7). "Neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Gal. 6:15). "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6), and can neither be improved nor got rid of. "The flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63); it is corrupt, unclean, and [not] subject to God (Romans 8:7). Man's *nature* -- not only his acts -- is contrary to God. He is part of a fallen race (Rom. 5:12). "Born like a wild ass's colt" (Job 11:12). "As an unclean thing" (Isa. 64:6). By *nature* a child of wrath (Eph. 2:3). "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one" (Job 14:4). Not reformation, not religiousness, not morality. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). This is the great necessity.

Nothing short of a birth from Heaven meets man's need. Apart from this, man remains outside God's family and Kingdom, no matter what his knowledge or creed may be. The religion of unregenerate men is dead works. A corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit; its production must be according to its nature. We do not expect to gather grapes from thistles, or to find roses on a nettle. No more can good works or holiness or the fruits of the Spirit be found on one whose nature is enmity against God. Man's religion may reform, but it cannot regenerate. Philanthropy may cleanse from outward vice, but it cannot renew. Reformation may change the current of the stream, but it cannot cleanse the source.

The Nature of Regeneration.

What is this new birth? It is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17); the workmanship of God (Eph. 2:10). It is the germ of a new existence; the dawn of a new life. At regeneration a new nature is implanted (2 Peter 1:4); a new man is formed in the image of God (Eph. 4:24, with Col. 3:10). It is not the old improved, but the new begotten, leaving the born-again one a complex being, possessed of two natures, perfectly distinct, and entirely different in origin and character. The result of this is incessant conflict (Gal. 5:17).

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It is of the utmost importance to understand what regeneration really is. By some it is understood to mean a change of creed, with others a change of conduct, but in Scripture it means a *re-creation*, a heavenly birth, the beginning of a new life. In nature the sinner is "alienated from the life of God" (Eph. 4:18); he is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). At regeneration the believer becomes a possessor of Divine life, a partaker of the Divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). The old is still there, but sin is no longer the law of his being. He is able to say, "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20). Christ becomes the object of his soul; he is able henceforth to say, "For to me to live is Christ." The flesh is not eradicated, it is not changed, but it no longer *reigns*. Like Nebuchadnezzar, who was deposed from his throne and driven from his palace, but was yet permitted to live within the borders of that land over which he once held sway, so the flesh is *in* the believer, but not in dominion *over* him.

How Regeneration is Effected.

"Born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). "It is the spirit that quickeneth" (John 6:63). "The Spirit giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:6). The "renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5). The SPIRIT is the operator; the WORD is the instrument. "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth" (James 1:18). "Born again ... by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Peter 1:23).

"Not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man," that is, not by natural descent: such as baptismal regeneration would have it, "but of God" (John 1:13). Born of God, born of the Spirit, born by the Word of God. The believer is created anew, regenerated. He is not merely *re-formed* without, but, a new nature is implanted within. This is effected instrumentally through the Word. It is not by "Sacraments," or prayers, or what men may call the "means of grace." There is no value or virtue in these to regenerate a sinner. "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth," is the testimony of the Spirit. "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me hath everlasting life," (John 5:24) are the words of the Lord Jesus. As of old, in the first creation, "He spake, and it was done," (Psalm 33:9) so it is in the new creation. "Thy word hath quickened me" (Psalm 119:50).

How the New Life is Received.

"Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26). "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). "Whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:15). It is not by prayer, or repentance, or penance, but by *faith*.

Faith receives God's testimony; faith believes God. The object of faith is Christ. It does not look *within* for evidences, it does not look *without* for signs: it looks to Christ and, looking, lives. As the serpent-bitten Israelite looked from himself and his wounds to the Divine remedy, the uplifted serpent on the pole, so the sinner looks from himself, from his sins and his religiousness alike, right away from sinful or righteous self, to Christ. He commits himself to Another, he casts himself on Christ. He receives God's testimony concerning His Son. He believes what the Word says about Christ, and then, instead of examining himself for evidences whether he has become God's child or not, he again receives the testimony of the Word, which says, "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). To seek assurance of this new birth by examining one's frame and feelings is no wiser than for a sailor to cast his anchor into the hold of his ship. Good anchorage is to be found without. The foothold of faith is the eternal Word of the eternal God. This abideth for ever.

The Fruits of Regeneration.

"Whosoever is born of God doth not commit [practice] sin" (1 John 3:9). "Ye have your fruit unto holiness (Rom. 6:22). "In this the children of God are manifest" (1 John 3:10).

The new life implanted at regeneration has for its present vessel "the mortal body" of the believer (2 Cor. 4:10), and through the deeds of the body it is made manifest. The members, once the servants of sin, are henceforth to be controlled by the new life, and used as instruments of righteousness unto God.

"Whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God" (1 John 3:10), no matter what he may profess. Of the believer, as of his Lord, the word will be fulfilled, "the life was manifested, and we have seen it."

The Counterfeits of Regeneration.

Here then we have the testimony of God regarding this great foundation truth of the Gospel and of Christianity. "Baptismal regeneration" virtually denies all this. It says that regeneration takes place by passing an unconscious infant through a form for which there is neither Scripture command nor example, but which was first instituted by an apostate Church when it had given up the very fundamental doctrines of the Gospel and supplanted, God's Word by its own traditions. How any man can practice this deception of the devil and believe the Bible is a mystery. No less, how one, said to be regenerated by water in infancy and become "an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven," needs to be told in later years, "Ye must be born again." Is it any wonder that honest, thoughtful men, seeing the inconsistency of this prevailing sham, turn from it with disgust and abhorrence. Would to God that they would turn to the Word of Truth to seek their light and guidance in all things spiritual and eternal there, but, alas! infidelity receives its largest contribution of admirers from the ranks of those who were at one time camp followers in the ranks of traditional religion.

Copied by Stephen Ross for WholesomeWords.org from *Foundation Truths of the Gospel* by John Ritchie. 2nd ed. Kilmarnock: Office of "The Believer's Magazine," [1904].