

God's Sovereignty Revealed in Regeneration

By Mark Hoeksema

The whole matter of regeneration has been in the past and still is today the subject of much disagreement, particularly between those of Baptist and Arminian leanings and those of the Reformed faith. It is also an aspect of salvation which has been ill-understood, also by those of the Reformed faith. Yet it is a most important part of the knowledge of our salvation, and when properly conceived is a source of joy and comfort to the child of God. We of the Protestant Reformed Churches believe that we understand this doctrine as the Scriptures teach it and as every child of God should know it. We therefore briefly share this idea with you in the Reformed Witness.

The Necessity of Regeneration

The question may be asked, "Why is regeneration necessary?" To that question we may give a two-fold answer. First of all, regeneration is necessary from the viewpoint of God's counsel. In all things God wills that He be glorified; He seeks all the praise and honor and thanksgiving of all creatures. To that end He has decreed the salvation of the elect in the way of sin and grace, in order that in and through that salvation He may be glorified. Such is the sovereign and unchangeable will of God. He also wills according to His counsel the accomplishment of that salvation. And He does that not simply in the sense that He wills the redemption of His people through the death of Christ, but in the sense that He wills the complete salvation of the elect in all of its aspects. Therefore regeneration is necessary from God's viewpoint, for it is an integral part of the salvation of His chosen and elect people.

Regeneration is also necessary from the viewpoint of man. The negative aspect of this necessity is the sin of man. It is the clear teaching of Scripture and the Reformed Confessions that man is totally depraved, conceived and born in sin, incapable of doing any good at all, and inclined to every way of sin and evil. This is true not only from the viewpoint of man's original sin inherited from his first parents, Adam and Eve, but also from the perspective of his own actual sins, those transgressions which every man constantly commits. Certainly this above all must be remembered: Man is completely dead in sins and trespasses, and can do nothing but sin and increase his guilt and punishment before the living God. Moreover, that sin and that sinful nature which man possesses has a center, and that center is his evil heart. The heart in Scripture is pictured as being the center of man's life and existence from a spiritual ethical point of view. "Out of the heart are the issues of life," says Solomon in Proverbs 4:23. And that heart, that very center of man, is evil, according to the Bible, cf. Genesis 6:5, 8:21, Psalm 51:5 and many others. It therefore follows that this heart of man must be changed, for when it as the center of man is changed, the whole man is changed. And without this change in the heart and entire life of man, salvation is completely impossible.

Secondly, and closely connected with this idea is the positive necessity of regeneration. This positive necessity consists in the fact that regeneration is necessary in order to see and to enter the kingdom of heaven. This is the direct teaching of Christ in John 3:3: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Notice carefully what Jesus says. He does not say that a man cannot go into the kingdom; this of course is also true. But he says much more: He cannot even see the kingdom. Jesus does not mean that the unregenerated, wicked, natural man cannot outwardly see the kingdom of heaven, for he can. What Christ says is that the unregenerated cannot spiritually perceive that kingdom. The spiritual reality of the kingdom of God is hid from them so that they cannot understand nor partake of that kingdom. Only through regeneration is it possible to see that kingdom. How necessary then is that rebirth!

The Character of Regeneration

We may define regeneration as the saving act of the Triune God through the Spirit of Christ whereby He changes the heart of the sinner (who is in himself dead in sins but elect in Christ) and infuses into him the principle of the life of Jesus Christ, so that in principle the sinner is translated from sin and punishment and death into holiness and grace and life. The key word is change; regeneration is a radical change in the very center of the existence of the sinner, so that the life of Satan and sin is replaced by the life of Christ. This change is so radical that the Lord in John 3

compares it to a rebirth in the physical sense of the word. Such a rebirth is such a radical change that in the eyes of man it is impossible, as Nicodemus is quick to comprehend. Nevertheless, such is exactly the nature of the change which takes place in regeneration. Scripture speaks in many places of this tremendous change. God is able to create a clean heart in man, Psalm 51:10; He is capable and willing to give His people a heart to know the Lord, Jeremiah 24:7; He will take away the stony heart out of them, and give them a heart of flesh, Ezekiel 11:19-20, 26:25-27; He is able to circumcise the heart of His people, Deuteronomy 30:6. Indeed, to be born again is a great thing, a wonder of God bestowed on His elect.

And it is wonderful because to be born again is to be born from above. When Jesus speaks in John 3:3 of being born again, he uses a word which has a two-fold meaning. It certainly means to be born over again, to be born for a second time. In this sense Jesus refers to the fact that although man is born the first time of Satan, the second time he is born of God in Christ. But the word also means "from above," i.e., from God in heaven. This points at once to the spiritual nature of the change which takes place in man, as well as to its heavenly and divine origin. And it means that the life of this earth, the life below, the life of sin, is replaced with the life of heaven, the life that is from above, the life of Christ.

That heavenly life the regenerated possess in seed form. But just as in the natural sense the seed is the complete plant in potential form, so in the spiritual sense regeneration is principally all of salvation, for it is the life of Christ. This seed of the new life of Christ is presently called into consciousness through the preaching of the Word of God, and the child of God has a conscious and active faith. By that faith comes the knowledge and assurance of justification, and out of that faith springs the life of sanctification which leads to life eternal. Indeed, this wonder of regeneration is salvation.

The Author of Regeneration

Many in our day present this wonder, however, as being the work of man, either wholly or in part. The Arminians make this rebirth the work of man, most probably because they confuse it with conversion. They say, "You must be born again," i.e., you must be converted from your evil ways and turn to God. But you, man, must do it. Others, not willing to go quite so far, make the cooperation of man necessary in regeneration. But those who say and teach such ideas are contrary to Scripture, for they teach that regeneration is at least in part the work of man. But this cannot be, for the simple reason that the unregenerated man is dead in sins and trespasses, and cannot make himself alive spiritually. Even in the natural sense of the word no sane man tells a dead man to rise up out of his grave and walk about. So also in the spiritual sense it is absolutely impossible for the dead sinner to raise himself to spiritual life of or by himself. Moreover, the very idea that man can somehow save himself is sinful, for it is the basic error of pride. The very thought that man can save himself is a denial of the truth of God's sovereign salvation as revealed in the Scriptures, and is the exaltation of the creature over against God.

Rather, we must maintain with the Bible that the Triune God is the sole Author of regeneration. The same God who elected his people and predestinated them in love now according to his divine counsel regenerated them, giving them the seed of the life of heaven. This he does through the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit given Him at His exaltation that he might through that Spirit work in his body, the church. That Spirit works in the hearts of God's people, implanting in them the new life of Christ, turning them from sin and its service to God and His service, removing the heart of stone from them and giving them a heart of flesh.

Thus Jehovah God receives all the praise for His sovereign work of regeneration. When we understand and believe that God is sovereign in all the work of salvation, also in regeneration, then we are comforted and assured of the certainty of our salvation; it cannot fail, because God Himself is our Savior. And we return all thanks and honor to Him alone for His great and sovereign work of regeneration. For such is His will for us!