

The New Birth

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The term “born again” is known to most Americans. There has even been a president who claimed to be born again. Most evangelicals and fundamentalists like to refer to themselves as “born again” Christians. Yet these words have little or no meaning to many people. Even among professing Christians there is wide disagreement over just what these words mean. How is a person born again? Is it something that man does? Or is it something that only God can do? In order to understand the new birth (or regeneration¹) we must carefully examine the biblical passages which deal with this very important subject. In our study we shall consider first, the necessity of the new birth; second, the nature of the new birth; and third, the fruit of the new birth. The important question regarding the new birth is “What saith the Scriptures?” (Gal. 4:30 KJV).²

The Necessity of the New Birth

The new birth is necessary before a person can believe in Jesus Christ. To understand why, an examination of what the Bible teaches regarding the fall of man into sin and its consequences is necessary. When Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden he sinned against God and died spiritually (Gen. 2:17). As the first man, Adam represented all mankind before God. When Adam fell, mankind fell. “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). One aspect of the curse that sin brought upon all mankind was a change of man’s heart from being good, holy, and upright to being evil, unholy, and corrupt. “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was *only evil continually*” (Gen. 6:5). A brief examination of the biblical teaching regarding unregenerate man will prove that regeneration is necessary before a person is enabled to believe in Jesus Christ, and that regeneration is something that only God can accomplish.

The Unregenerate Are Spiritually Dead

¹ The word “regeneration,” which literally means “to beget again,” has been used by orthodox Protestant theologians in different ways over time. The older usage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries included the Holy Spirit’s implantation of new life in man’s heart as well as conversion (repentance and faith) and sanctification. In order to avoid confusion Reformed theologians eventually narrowed their usage of the term regeneration to its strict biblical usage alone. “In present day Reformed theology the word ‘regeneration’ is generally used in a more restricted sense, as a designation of that divine act by which the sinner is endowed with new spiritual life, and by which the principle of that new life is first called into action” (L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949], p. 467). Passages such as 1 Pet. 1:23 and Jas 1:18 discuss the regenerated heart as it comes in contact with the Word of God, “in which the new life first becomes manifest” (ibid., p. 475). Because most of the biblical passages which deal with regeneration define it in its strictest sense as *solely an act of God*, this narrow definition is used throughout this booklet (cf. objection 4, p. 15).

² Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), unless otherwise noted.

“And you He made alive, who were *dead* in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we [Christians] all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by *nature* the children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were *dead* in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Eph. 2:1-5). Because of man’s fall into sin, men are dead. Unregenerate man can no more choose Christ or see spiritual truth than a rotting corpse can play tennis or debate philosophy. There is no middle ground between being alive and being dead. Unregenerate men are not just sick, handicapped, or impaired but dead. The biblical view of the unregenerate is totally at odds with most fundamentalist pastors and teachers who teach that unregenerate man has the ability to choose Christ. “You may use all human persuasion possible, but you cannot give spiritual life where death reigns. God alone, by a creative act, can bring life out of death. Spiritual arguments to an unregenerate man are only warm clothes to a corpse.”³

The Unregenerate Cannot Repent

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jer. 13:23). “They are spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions...having eyes full of adultery and *that cannot cease from sin*.... It has happened to them according to the true proverb: ‘A dog returns to his own vomit,’ and, ‘a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire’” (2 Pet. 2:13-14, 22). “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for *it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be*. So then, those who are in the flesh *cannot please God*” (Rom. 8:6-8). Without the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit applied to a man’s heart, no one would ever believe in Christ and repent. Genuine repentance is the fruit of a regenerate heart. “They glorified God, saying, ‘Then *God has also granted* to the Gentiles repentance to life’” (Acts 11:18).

The Unregenerate Do Not Seek God

“The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. They have all turned aside, they have all together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no not one” (Ps. 14:2-3). “There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God” (Rom. 3:11). The idea that unregenerate men are objectively examining different philosophies and religions in search of the truth is totally false. Unregenerate men turn to false religions, philosophies and ideologies to escape reality, to escape from the true God (Rom. 1:21-28). Those who seek God do so only because God first sought them out and changed their stony hearts into hearts of flesh: “I [God] was found by those *who did not seek Me*; I was made manifest to those *who did not ask for Me*” (Rom. 10:20, cf. Isa. 65:1).

³ W. E. Best, *Regeneration and Conversion* (Grand Rapids: Guardian), p. 11.

The Unregenerate Cannot Understand or Receive Spiritual Truth

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he *cannot see* [comprehend, perceive] the kingdom of God’” (Jn. 3:3) “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; *nor can he know them*, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). The unregenerate man can study the Bible and learn what it teaches regarding history and God’s way of salvation. He may even teach a course on the Bible as literature at a major university. But to him the Bible is mythological nonsense; it is foolishness. Apart from the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, people are completely incapable of discerning spiritual truth: “The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile. Therefore let no one boast in men” (1 Cor. 3:20-21).

The Unregenerate Are under the Power of Satan

“But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, *whose minds the god of this age has blinded*, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Cor. 4:3-4). “I [Jesus Christ] will deliver you [the Apostle Paul] from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the *power of Satan* to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:17-18). “Man is loyal to the god of darkness and loves darkness rather than the Light. His will is, therefore, not at all ‘free.’ It is bound by the flesh to the prince of darkness.”⁴ Men who have “been taken captive by [Satan] to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26) can only be set free by someone stronger than Satan—Jesus Christ and His Spirit (Mt. 12:29).

The Unregenerate Dwell in Darkness

“In Him [Jesus Christ] was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the *darkness did not comprehend it*” (Jn. 1:4-5). “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and *men loved darkness rather than light*, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil *hates the light and does not come to the light*, lest his deeds should be exposed” (Jn. 3:19-20). “They...became futile in their thoughts and *their foolish hearts were darkened*.... God gave them over to a *debased mind*, to do those things which are not fitting” (Rom. 1:21, 28). Pure darkness is the absence of all light. Those who are not born again dwell in spiritual darkness. How can those who are in total darkness, who hate the light, choose or cooperate with light? The unregenerate *will not* choose the light because he *cannot* choose the light. It is impossible with man. “Non-existent spiritual life cannot give being to itself. Light is not brought out of darkness, neither does love come from hate. Every seed bears its own kind. ‘That which is of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit’ (Jn. 3:6). A new creature, therefore, cannot be the product of natural power.”⁵

⁴ Duane Edward Spencer, *Tulip: The Five Points of Calvinism in the Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker), p. 26.

⁵ Best, p. 14.

The Unregenerate Are Deaf and Blind to Spiritual Truth

“Keep on hearing, but *do not understand*; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed” (Isa. 6:9-10; cf. Mk. 4:12, Lk. 8:10). “Why do you not understand My speech? Because *you are not able to listen to My word*. You are of your father the devil... He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God” (Jn. 8:43-44, 47). The preaching of the gospel is useless to the deaf. The written word is of no effect to the blind. Only God can open blind eyes and deaf ears. “The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the LORD has made them both” (Pr. 20:12).

The Unregenerate Are Helpless

“For when we were still *without strength*, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). “And when I [God] passed you by and saw you *struggling in your own blood*, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ Yes, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’” (Ezek. 16:6).

The Unregenerate Heart Is Wicked, Corrupt and Defiled

“[Jesus] said, ‘What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. *For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts*, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man” (Mk. 7:20-23). “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and *that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (Gen. 6:5). “The heart is *deceitful* above all things, and *desperately wicked*; who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9). “Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin’?” (Pr. 20:9). In the Bible “heart” represents the whole human nature; therefore, the corruption of sin extends to the intellect and emotions as well as the will of man. The heart of man is depraved. Men can and may do *outwardly good* deeds. But these “good” deeds are not done to please God but self and others. Even “the plowing of the wicked [is] sin” (Pr. 21:4). “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). Given the choice between Christ and the lusts of the flesh, the unregenerate heart will *always* choose evil. Therefore the idea that unregenerate man can regenerate himself by “making a decision for Christ” is totally false. Conversion and belief in Christ *follow* regeneration. They cannot and do not precede it.

The Unregenerate Has an Uncircumcised Heart, a Heart of Stone

“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!” (Acts 7:51). “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter My sanctuary’” (Ezek. 44:9). “Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 11:19). “I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26). An uncircumcised heart is a heart still enslaved to the filth and pollution of the flesh. A heart of stone is totally unresponsive to spiritual truth. An unregenerate man will no more respond to the gospel than will a rock. Regeneration is absolutely essential if fallen man is to believe.

The Nature of the New Birth

How does God the Holy Spirit change a person who is dead spiritually (Eph. 2:1-5), who hates the truth, who hates Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:19-21), who dwells in darkness (Jn. 1:4-5), who has a heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19), who is helpless (Ezek. 16:4-6), who cannot repent (Jer. 13:23), who is a slave to Satan (Acts 26:17-18), who cannot see or comprehend divine truth (1 Cor. 2:14)—into someone who can not only understand the truth, but who is drawn to it and embraces it: a person who one moment is an enemy of Jesus Christ and the next moment loves Jesus Christ with all his heart? Such a radical, all-pervasive change in man's heart is something that only God can do: “*No one* can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.... *No one* can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (Jn. 6:44, 65). “For unless God by sovereign, operative grace had turned our enmity to love and our disbelief to faith we would never yield the response of faith and love”⁶

Regeneration is *solely* an act of God in which man *does not cooperate*. One would think that this point would be rather obvious after examining the passages which teach the necessity of regeneration. Yet most professing Christians believe that man must *do something* before he can be regenerated. Roman Catholics, Episcopalians and others teach that man is regenerated through baptism. Protestant liberalism, which is a rejection of God's Word in favor of secular humanism, statism and relativism, often speaks of regeneration as merely a self-reformation or renewal (the higher spiritual element of man overpowers the lower animal element that dwells in man). Fundamentalists or evangelicals tend to fall into two categories. Some teach that regeneration is solely an act of the human will. Others teach that man cooperates with the influence of the Holy Spirit and the Bible, chooses Christ and is then regenerated. Both views make regeneration synonymous with conversion; both views make man the ultimate decider of who is and who is not saved.

Why do evangelicals, who have such a high view of Scripture, err so badly on such an important aspect of Christian doctrine? It is because they teach a defective view of original sin and reject God's absolute sovereignty over man in salvation. If man is dead, helpless, a hater of God who is blind and deaf to spiritual truth (as the Bible clearly teaches) then man *cannot* cooperate with God at all in regeneration. An unregenerate man can no more choose Christ as Savior than can a rotting corpse.

Evangelicals are offended by the biblical doctrines of predestination and election. Yet if men are dead spiritually only those whom God sovereignly chooses to regenerate will repent and trust Christ. The idea that men cooperate with God in regeneration is as absurd as teaching that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead because his corpse was willing to be raised. Jesus said, “The wind blows where it *wishes*, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8). God the Holy Spirit regenerates those whom God has given unto the Son. “I [Jesus Christ] pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those *whom You have given Me*, for they are Yours” (Jn. 17:9). Those who believe in Jesus Christ “were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:13). If you believe in Jesus Christ it is not because of your lineage or parents, or because of a choice of your own will but because you were regenerated by the Spirit of God. The Bible teaches that in regeneration the person does absolutely nothing; the person is

⁶ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), p. 100.

totally passive. “God comes with regeneration to all the elect; and the non-elect He passes by. Hence this act of God is *irresistible*. No man has the power to say, ‘I will not be born again,’ or to prevent God’s work or to put obstacles in His way or to make it so difficult that it cannot be performed.”⁷ Thus in the biblical doctrine of regeneration God is exalted; God receives all the glory. “This, of course, does not mean that man does not cooperate in later stages of the work of redemption. It is quite evident from Scripture that he does.”⁸

Regeneration is an act of God upon man’s heart. “The Holy Spirit comes and does something to the soul of man.... He penetrates into the innermost recesses of man, into his soul, spirit, or heart.”⁹ The biblical use of the word “heart” is different than today’s English usage. In the Bible, “heart” represents every aspect of man’s nature, including the intellect, will and emotions. Because man’s heart is totally depraved, only an act of God upon the *whole nature* of man is sufficient to draw him in a Godward direction. Therefore, any view of regeneration that teaches that only part of man (e.g., the will) is affected is unscriptural. How the Holy Spirit changes man’s nature is mysterious. It is clear that man’s substance or essence is not changed. There is no metaphysical change in man. The Bible also teaches that man is not made perfect or sinless through regeneration. Even the best Christians such as the Apostle Paul had to struggle against sin and temptation (Rom. 7:15, 25). In an instantaneous act the Holy Spirit implants in man the principle of a new, spiritual life. This change is so radical that the Bible refers to it as a new birth, regeneration, and a quickening.

This change in man’s heart has two aspects: purification and renewal: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the *washing* of regeneration and *renewing* of the Holy Spirit” (Tit. 3:5). “These elements, the purificatory and the renovatory, must not be regarded as separable events. They are simply the aspects which are constitutive of this total change by which the called of God are translated from death to life and from the kingdom of Satan into God’s kingdom, a change which provides for all the exigencies of our past condition and the demands of the new life in Christ, a change which removes the contradiction of sin and fits for the fellowship of God’s Son.”¹⁰

Purification

The passages in the Bible which discuss regeneration present the cleansing aspect in different ways. There is the sprinkling of clean water in Ezekiel: “Then *I will sprinkle clean water* on you, and you shall be clean; *I will cleanse you* from all your filthiness and from all your idols” (Ezek. 36:25). The New Testament parallel to Ezekiel’s teaching is Christ’s statement to Nicodemus: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is *born of water* and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). The religious use of water to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, would without question be one of purification. Sprinkling with water and the washing with water in the Old Testament symbolically represented God’s internal purification of the sinner. Purification is sometimes represented as a circumcision of the heart: “In Him you were also circumcised with *the circumcision made without hands*, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11). Purification is also represented as a removal of the heart of

⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, 1899), p. 159 (emphasis added).

⁸ Berkhof, p. 473.

⁹ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Holy Spirit: His Person and Ministry* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958 [1974]), p. 81.

¹⁰ Murray, p. 100.

stone: “I will take *the heart of stone out of your flesh* and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26). The stony heart is the heart hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, which represents man’s inability to move in a Godward direction. Christ taught in the strongest language possible that “entrance into the kingdom of God could only be secured by purification from the defilement of sin. The water of purification is as it were the womb out of which must emerge that new life which gives entrance into and fits for membership in the kingdom of God. This is the purificatory aspect of regeneration. Regeneration must negate the past as well as reconstitute for the future. It must cleanse from sin as well as recreate in righteousness.”¹¹ The precious blood of Jesus Christ which was shed for God’s elect is the foundation of regeneration. The application of redemption by the Holy Spirit flows forth from Christ’s atoning sacrifice.

Renovation

The second aspect of the change which the Holy Spirit effects upon man’s heart is one of renovation. The scriptural terms used to describe man’s spiritual birth are “born again” (Jn. 3:3), “regeneration” (Tit. 3:5), and “made alive” or “quicken” (Eph. 2:5). The person regenerated by God is called a “new creation” (Gal. 6:15, 2 Cor. 5:17), and a “new man” (Eph. 4:24). This aspect is represented in the heart of stone becoming a heart of flesh (Ezek. 32:2), and the uncircumcised heart becoming a circumcised heart (Col. 2:11). Jesus Christ referred to the new birth as being “born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:5-6). The Apostle Paul calls it a “renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Tit. 3:5).

When Jesus Christ declared to Nicodemus, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn. 3:6), He was telling Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit was the author of regeneration and that the regenerated person *has become a spiritual person*. “The spiritual man has a spiritual mind, he is possessed with a Person who indwells, seals, intercedes, and empowers.”¹² The person who is regenerated has spiritual reality opened up to him. When he reads or hears biblical truth he knows that it is true and immediately believes in Jesus Christ. The regenerating power of the Holy Spirit enables the sinner to see, hear and live; therefore, after regeneration the sinner can repent and turn to Christ. Conversion is the fruit, not the cause of regeneration: “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, *that we might know* the things that have been freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). Without this spiritual renewal, which is purely a gift of God dependent upon nothing that we do, no one would turn to Christ. “For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts *to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God* in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). If you are a Christian, it is because God renewed your heart, *enabling* you to believe in Jesus Christ. Why did Lydia believe in the gospel preached by the Apostle Paul? Because God first *opened her heart and enabled her to respond* to the gospel. Paul “sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (Ac. 16:13-14). Those who pervert the biblical doctrine of regeneration by making man the cause of regeneration are guilty of serious error. Because *God alone* deserves the credit, and the glory for man’s salvation, “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jon. 2:9).

¹¹ Best, p. 29.

¹² Murray, p. 100.

The Fruit of the New Birth

Regeneration is the beginning, the starting point, the fountain of all the saving graces which are subjectively applied to the sinner. When Jesus told Nicodemus, “That which is born of the Spirit *is* spirit” (Jn. 3:6), He was saying that being born again *invariably* will lead to a person becoming a *spiritual* person. Regeneration will without fail lead to conversion. Jesus *did not* say that regeneration would make salvation a possibility if one cooperates with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit’s power is invincible; it is irresistible. This does not mean that men are forced or coerced into God’s kingdom against their will; their heart is changed in such a way that the unwilling become willing and the unable become able. The person who is regenerated by the Holy Spirit embraces Jesus Christ because he *wants* to. After he is regenerated, Christ becomes the most important person in his life. The Savior becomes to him like a hidden treasure and a pearl of great price (Mt. 13:44, 46).

After the Holy Spirit regenerates a man’s heart, it is impossible for that man *not* to respond to the preaching of God’s Word. Regeneration always leads to conversion. “Regeneration is the act of God and of God alone. But faith is not the act of God; it is not God who believes in Christ for salvation, it is the sinner. It is by God’s grace that a person is able to believe but faith is an activity on the part of the person and of him alone. In faith we receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation.”¹³ Faith is the instrument whereby the sinner lays hold on the person and work of Jesus Christ. True faith is always accomplished by genuine repentance. The Apostle John makes it very clear that a regenerated person cannot lead a life characterized by sin: “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9 NASB). John is not saying that Christians never sin (cf. 1 Jn. 1:8); he is saying that if you are born again your life is not characterized by sin. As Jesus said, “A good tree *cannot* produce bad fruit” (Mt. 7:18 NASB). Someone who before regeneration lived to party, smoke pot, get drunk and fornicate; after regeneration would forsake such activities and instead practice righteousness, because “everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him” (1 Jn. 2:29 NASB).

The biblical doctrine of regeneration teaches that not only what Christ has accomplished *for* us objectively through His sinless life and atoning death is a free gift of God, but also what the Holy Spirit accomplishes *in* us subjectively (the fruits of regeneration) is a free gift from God. Salvation from start to finish is a work of God. If faith in Christ and repentance are something that man can do *apart* from regenerating grace, then salvation is not wholly a work of God. Those who believed in Christ and repented by their own power would have reason to boast. They could say, “I was wise enough to choose Christ, I was moral enough to repent.” But the Bible teaches that regeneration is wholly a work of the Holy Spirit, and that faith and repentance are gifts from God. “Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, *to give repentance* to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). “Then God has also *granted* to the Gentiles *repentance to life*” (Acts 11:18). Those who believe in Jesus Christ do so only because they were ordained or appointed to eternal life. Only the elect receive God’s regenerating power. “And as many as *had been appointed* to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48).

¹³ Murray, p. 106.

Objections

1. If only God can regenerate man, and those that are not regenerated by God cannot believe in Christ, then how can God hold the unregenerate responsible for not believing in Christ?

A very popular misconception in our day among professing Christians is that *ability limits obligation*. Men conclude that it would be most unreasonable for God to require men to do something which they are unable to do. This viewpoint, however, ignores the covenantal relationship that God had with mankind in the Garden. Adam and Eve sinned of their own free will. It was man not God who rebelled, who sinned, who broke the covenant of works. Man brought upon himself a *wicked, corrupt and polluted heart, dead* in sins and trespasses. The fact that man has murdered himself spiritually does not and cannot make God alter or change His perfect law and blessed gospel. Man is unable to keep God's moral law. Yet he is still responsible to keep every jot and tittle of the law (Mt. 5:18). Man will be judged for every infraction of God's law in thought, word and deed on the day of judgment. There is nothing unreasonable for God to require men to obey His law and gospel when men are unable, *because man rendered himself unable*. It is man's fault and man's problem. We should be thankful that God in His mercy enables some to believe and be saved. The Bible says, "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48 NASB). If God can only command what men have the ability to accomplish, then every person has the ability to be perfect. This assertion is absurd. And that is the point. Those who say that man must have the ability to regenerate himself and believe, of his own intrinsic power, based on the assertion that ability limits obligation, are arbitrary in their application of this rule. We are to do whatever God says, because God says it. The unregenerate who reject the gospel will be held totally responsible for their rejection of Jesus Christ.

2. How can God change a man's heart without his permission? Wouldn't this change be a violation of man's free will?

The Bible teaches that the heart of man, which includes a man's intellect, emotions and will, is thoroughly corrupt. Man is a free agent in the sense that he has rational self-determination. He analyzes matters and then determines his course of action. But "man freely acts in harmony with his previous thoughts and judgments, his inclinations and desires, and *his whole character*."¹⁴ Man chooses and acts according to his heart, nature and character. Because man's nature is wicked and polluted, man can never choose a true, spiritual course of action. So in one sense man has true freedom. Yet when it comes to spiritual truths and actions man is most *unfree*. Man's will is in bondage to his wicked heart (this matter was clearly established above under the necessity of the new birth).

The idea that God needs a person's permission before He can change his heart is totally unbiblical. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign even over the human heart: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Pr. 21:1). An excellent example of God's sovereign control over the human heart is the case of Pharaoh. God said, "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.... And Pharaoh's heart grew hard, and he did not heed them [Moses and Aaron],

¹⁴ Berkhof, p. 106 (emphasis added).

as the LORD had said” (Ex. 7:3, 13; cf. 9:12, 35; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4). God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he would not let Israel go; as a result, God had an opportunity to glorify Himself with many signs and wonders. God did not ask for Pharaoh’s permission before He hardened his heart. Not only did God harden Pharaoh’s heart, He also held him totally accountable for his wicked actions. “The LORD has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom” (Pr. 16:4).

The idea that man must let God change his heart has more in common with secular humanism than with biblical Christianity. God is sovereign over everything; there are no areas of chance or contingency outside of His control. “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Pr. 16:33). Even when a person makes detailed plans for the future, it is the Lord who ultimately determines what occurs in his life. “The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps” (Pr. 16:9 NASB). Because God created, upholds and sustains everything that exists, areas or pockets of chance are an impossibility. Those who teach that a man must allow God to change his heart are inconsistent every time they pray for God to save a person. If God can’t change the human heart, then why do people pray as though He can?

3. Doesn't the Bible say that Christ stands at the door and knocks, and that we must let Him in?

In Revelation chapter 3 Christ says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (v. 20). This statement was *not* directed to unbelievers but to the church of Laodicea (v. 14). “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says *to the churches*” (v. 22). Laodicea was a backslidden church; it was lukewarm (v. 16) and proud (v. 17). Christ describes the church as “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (v. 17). The Laodicean church by its behavior had broken the blessed fellowship between itself and Jesus Christ; therefore, Christ tells the church to “be zealous and repent” (v. 19) and asks the church to “open the door” (v. 20) in order to restore that blessed fellowship between the bride and bridegroom: “I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (v. 20). This passage was given specifically to the church of Laodicea, a real church with real problems. While this passage can and should be applied to all lukewarm churches throughout history, it cannot and should not be applied to unbelievers.

4. Are there not passages of Scripture which teach that regeneration is not an act of God in which man is totally passive? Does not the Bible teach that regeneration is dependent upon hearing the Word of God?

There are passages in Scripture which, if superficially considered, *appear* to contradict the point established above, that regeneration is solely an act of God in which man does not cooperate. These passages are found in 1 Peter, James and Romans. “Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever” (1 Pet. 1:23). “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth” (Jas. 1:18 KJV). “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Having already noted that the Bible teaches the total spiritual inability of man apart from regeneration (cf. Gen. 2:17, 6:5; Ps. 14:2-3; Pr. 20:9, 21:4; Isa. 6:9-10, 65:1; Jer. 17:9, 13:23; Ezek. 11:19, 16:6, 36:26, 44:9; Mk. 4:12, 7:20, 23; Lk. 8:10; Jn. 1:4-5; 3:3, 6, 19-20; 8:43-44, 47; Acts 7:51, 26:17-18; Rom. 1:21, 28, 3:11, 8:6-8, 10:20; 1 Cor. 2:14, 3:20-21; 2 Cor. 4:34; Eph. 2:1-5; 2 Tim. 2:26; 2 Pet. 2:13, 14, 22; etc.) and that regeneration is a sovereign work of God upon man in which man

does *not* cooperate (Jn. 1:13; 3:5, 8; Ezek. 36:25-26; Tit. 3:5; Col. 2:11; Eph. 2:5), how are we to explain the texts which connect regeneration with hearing the Word of God?

The answer lies in the simple fact that regeneration is viewed in Scripture from two different perspectives. Many passages discuss what Reformed theologians call the first stage of regeneration. During this stage “There is no co-operation of the sinner in this work whatsoever. It is the work of the Holy Spirit exclusively, Ezek. 11:19; John 1:13; Acts 16:14; Rom. 9:16; Phil. 2:13.”¹⁵ The Holy Spirit comes to a man who is dead, blind and deaf to spiritual truth and quickens him, implanting new life into the dead heart. The inner disposition of the soul is renewed and made holy. “In this act of God the ear is implanted that enables man to hear the call of God to the salvation of his soul. *This is regeneration in the most restricted sense of the word.* In it man is entirely passive.”¹⁶ During the first stage of regeneration the Holy Spirit works *without means*; that is, He works directly upon the soul apart from the preaching of the Word. The second stage of regeneration, spoken about by Peter (1 Pet. 1:23), describes the point in time when regeneration issues forth into conversion. “Having received the spiritual ear, the call of God in the gospel is now heard by the sinner, and is brought home effectively to the heart. The desire to resist has been changed to a desire to obey, and the sinner yields to the persuasive influence of the Word through the operation of the Holy Spirit. *This is the effectual calling through the instrumentality of the word of preaching, effectively applied by the Spirit of God.* This effectual calling finally secures, through the truth as a means, the first holy exercises of the new disposition that is born in the soul. The new life begins to manifest itself; the implanted life issues in the new birth. *This is the completion of the work of regeneration in the broader sense of the word, and the point at which it turns into conversion.*”¹⁷ Thus, the first stage of regeneration can be compared to the implantation of a seed, and the second stage could be compared to giving birth. During the second stage God employs means: the preaching of the gospel.

The idea that regeneration occurs in two stages is both scriptural and logical. The Arminian or semi-Pelagian view of regeneration, which has man begetting himself by *cooperating* with the Holy Spirit’s influence during the preaching of the gospel, is a complete denial of the doctrine of man’s total depravity and inability as a result of the fall (cf. Jn. 5:42; Rom. 3:9-18; 7:18, 23; 8:7; 2 Tim. 3:4). Man is spiritually dead; therefore, regeneration logically proceeds or is coterminous with the preaching of the gospel. The preaching of the gospel, which can only work upon man’s conscious mind, has no persuasive power over a corpse. But once God opens the heart through regeneration, the regenerated person can and will believe the gospel. “The Lord opened her [Lydia’s] heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Furthermore, if regeneration can *only* occur through the preaching of the gospel, how then are elect infants who die in infancy saved?

It is obvious from 1 Peter 1:23 that Peter rejects the concept of decisional regeneration. There are two elements spoken of: the incorruptible seed which is implanted in the soul by the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God which is the instrumental means for the second stage of

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 473.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 471 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 475. Rom. 10:17 speaks of the necessity of first hearing the gospel, for people to have faith in Christ. Paul is saying that saving faith requires that people have a certain knowledge of the truth; that is, they must know who Christ is and what He has done. In order for a man to have faith, he must have an *object* to have faith in. As a seed that is planted needs water to grow, the regenerate heart needs the Word of God in order to exercise faith toward Jesus Christ. Faith is impossible without an object of faith. Regeneration in the first stage always (except in the case of elect infants) issues forth into conversion. The implantation of the incorruptible seed and the hearing of the gospel both are necessary for salvation.

regeneration—conversion. “Those who believe in His name...were born [aorist passive indicative], not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:12-13). Since Peter “refers to regeneration in a broad sense, then the passage offers no difficulty whatsoever in connection with the matter under consideration.”

5. *What about those who “believe” in Christ for a season and then reject Him? Doesn’t this indicate that people have the ability to resist the Holy Spirit’s regenerating power?*

No, it does not. The Bible teaches that those who profess Christ and then reject Him were *never* true Christians in the first place. In John 2:23-25 Jesus refused to commit Himself to some people in Jerusalem who “believed” in Him. Why? Because “He knew what was in man” (Jn. 2:25); Jesus knew that their faith was counterfeit. In John 6:26 Jesus rebuked a group of people who sought Him because He provided food for them. In John 6:66 Jesus purposely delivered a hard message to drive away false disciples. In Acts 8:13-23 a man the Bible says “believed and...was baptized” was rebuked as a false Christian by the Apostle Peter because his belief was false. Many people “believe” in Christ but they believe in a Christ of their own imagination. True faith lays hold of Christ as He is presented in the Scriptures. True faith lays hold of Christ as He has revealed Himself. True faith does not pick and choose which teachings of Christ and the Bible are acceptable, while setting aside the hard sayings. Christ and His teachings cannot be received piecemeal; they must be wholly embraced. The Apostle John says that those who abandon the faith were *never real Christians* to begin with. “They went out from us, but *they were not of us*; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that *none of them were of us*. But *you* [real Christians] *have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things*” (1 Jn. 2:19-20).

A person who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit cannot reject the faith and fall away. Jesus said, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.... This is the will of the Father who sent Me, *that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing*, but should raise it up at the last day.... No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.... *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing*. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (Jn. 6:37, 39, 44, 63).

So why is it that some people remain faithful to Christ, and others reject Him and leave the church? Because only those who have been chosen by the Father, atoned for by the Son and regenerated by the Holy Spirit are able to persevere to the end. “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own...and *I lay down My life for the sheep*. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and *they will hear My voice*; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.... But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and *they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand*. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and *no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand*” (Jn. 10:14-16; 26-29). If regeneration is something that man does of his own power, then how could Christ guarantee that His sheep would *never perish*? The Holy Spirit’s power cannot be resisted. The only places in Scripture which refer to resisting the Holy Spirit (e.g., Ac. 7:51) refer to rejecting the external preaching of the gospel, not the Spirit’s internal work of regeneration.

6. *If God regenerates whomever He desires, and the rest He passes by, doesn't this indicate that God only intends to save some people, and the rest He leaves to destruction?*

The fact that regeneration is solely a work of God in which man contributes nothing clearly indicates that God, not man, is sovereign over salvation. The reason the doctrine of the new birth has been perverted by fundamentalists and evangelicals is because it clearly leads to the doctrines of election and predestination. While these doctrines are rejected by the vast majority of professing Christians, they are clearly taught in the Bible. "For the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, *not of works but of Him who calls*, it was said to her, 'The older shall serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.' What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, '*I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.*' So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show My power in you, and that My name might be declared in all the earth.' Therefore *He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens*. You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?' But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory" (Rom. 9:11-23; cf. Rom. 8:28-29; Eph. 1:4; Jn. 15:16; 1 Tim. 1:9; 1 Cor. 1:26-29; Jn. 6:37, 44, 65-66). God requires us to believe *all* of His Word, whether we like it or not.

Conclusion

A proper understanding of the new birth is crucial to the Christian faith. An unbiblical view of the new birth will compromise and pervert many other important doctrines (e.g., the doctrines about God, original sin, human ability, predestination, perseverance of the saints, etc.). It is remarkable that most fundamentalists and evangelicals who champion the new birth have completely perverted the doctrine. They have made it dependent on man's choice rather than God's choice. There is no excuse for anyone to misunderstand this doctrine; the Bible is very clear in this area, as we have seen. If you do not believe what the Bible teaches regarding the new birth, then you must repent and submit to Christ's teaching. If you have changed your view of the new birth and yet find yourself in a church that rejects the Bible's teaching in this area, it's time for you to find a new church. Jesus Christ clearly implied that men who did not understand this doctrine were not fit to be teachers of His people (cf. Jn. 3:10).

The churches that have been most faithful to biblical doctrine and New Testament Christianity are those which still accept the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible and adhere to the historic Protestant creeds and confessions (e.g., the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession of Faith). Please contact the address on the back cover to find such a church.

