

## Session 3

### Chapter 3     Regeneration

As said earlier, without being regenerated, the spiritually dead person (a.k.a., the natural man) cannot respond to God.

#### I. Why is Regeneration Needed?

Paul states in 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they spiritually discerned.”



In 2 Corinthians 4:4, he adds, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

#### A. Three principal reasons

1. To the natural man living in modernity, God’s truth is foolishness to him, particularly because he has an inordinate and unwarranted trust in scientific claims.
2. His mind, having being blinded by the “basic principles of this world” (Col. 2:20) whose god is the devil, the natural man can neither understand nor see God’s truth.
3. Subsequently, the natural man does not accept God’s truth, including the gospel.

#### B. Actual reasons offered so as not to accept God’s truth

1. To the natural man steeped in the myth of the omniscience of science, the miracle stories of the Bible are nothing more than pious legends.

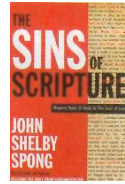
Rudolf Bultmann, renowned German theologian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, offered the following rationale for rejecting the factuality of miracle narratives.

“Man’s knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world—in fact, there is no one who does. . . .

The resurrection of Jesus is just as difficult for modern man if it means an event whereby a living supernatural power is released. . . . These are most certainly later embellishments of the primitive tradition.”

2. To others, biblical morality is antiquated, if not downright offensive.

Retired Episcopalian bishop John Spong, who entitled his 2006 book, *The Sins of Scripture*, accused the Bible of justifying “such ‘sins’ as overbreeding, degradation of the environment, sexism, child abuse and anti-Semitism.”



3. Popular these days is rejecting the existence of hell by proclaiming, “Love is God” (thereby making love His only attribute) instead of “God is love.”

Rob Bell, in his controversial book *Love Wins* (2011), stated, “Love is what God is,”<sup>1</sup> which, then, leaves no room for His justice; this explains why he later declared, “Smile there is no hell.”<sup>2</sup>

**Discussion<sup>1</sup>:** Share examples of what some people actually say or believe that shows that they have no intention of believing in God no matter the evidence?

4. What does regeneration have to do with helping those whose minds have been blinded by erroneous teachings so that they cannot “see the light of the gospel”?

The answer is found by way of comparing Islam and Christianity.

a. Human nature in Islamic viewpoint.

- In the Koran (30:30), the human nature is described as either good or at least neutral (everyone born Islam).
- Therefore, if *people—even though they may be little weak—know* the law of God, they can be “perfectible” (*Adam forgot!*)
- In Islam, there is no doctrine equivalent to regeneration in the Christian faith.
- Instead, Islam stresses the reading and memorization of Koran, believing that the knowledge of the will of Allah will restore people to their original nature.

b. What Christianity advocates.

- The knowledge of God’s will is critical to transforming the mind.
- However, the nature of fallen man isn’t changed by the knowledge itself.
- In fact, knowledge without being regenerated can be spiritually fatal.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> *NoticiaCristiana.com*, March 25, 2011. Retrieved April 4, 2011, from <http://www.noticiacristiana.com>.

- The corrupted nature can only be regenerated by the Spirit.

## II. What Regeneration Accomplishes

Paul declares that the things of God are spiritually discerned. This means that individuals who “diligently study the Scriptures” (Jn. 5:39), as the Pharisees did, but without the discernment of the Spirit, may still “refuse to come to [Christ] to have life” (40).

### A. The work of the Holy Spirit

In order for sinners to believe Jesus for salvation, thereby being united with God through him, they must first become spiritually alive.

1. This is called “regeneration,” which is accomplished solely by God through the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul makes this point abundantly clear, declaring:

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins . . .” (Eph. 2:1).

“. . . God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved (Eph. 2:4-5).

“When you were dead in your sins and in . . . your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ” (Col. 2:13).

2. This means that the Holy Spirit (i.e. the Spirit of God) enters the inner-being or the heart of a sinner so that he can understand and be receptive to the gospel.



2 Cor. 1:21-2: “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, <sup>22</sup> set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”

1 Cor. 2:12: “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.”

This moment can be emotionally charged or not emotional at all.

3. This is called the “new birth” (1 Pet. 1:3) or being “born-again.” Jesus says to Nicodemus, a spiritually desperate teacher of the Law:

“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to



flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (Jn. 3:5-6).

- a. When the spiritually “blind” and “deaf” Nicodemus failed to understand the words of Jesus, this expert on the Scripture responded with a nonsensical statement: “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”
- b. Jesus didn’t make him feel any better when he said, “You are Israel’s teacher and do not understand these things?” (3:10).

## B. The absolute need for regeneration

It may surprise some diehard Calvinists to discover what Arminius actually said about the need of the spiritually dead to be regenerated.

How would he have responded to the question of, “Is regeneration necessary to know and believe God? *Absolutely! Regeneration renews the image that was damaged at the Fall.*

1. “It is necessary that by God, in Christ and through his Holy Spirit [the spiritually dead] be born again and renewed in understanding, affections and will and in all his faculties, that he may be able to understand, think, will and perform what is truly good, according to the Word of God.”<sup>3</sup>
2. “[The] grace of God is the beginning, the progress and the end of all good; so that even the regenerate man can neither think, will nor effect any good, nor withstand any temptation to evil, without grace precedent (or prevenient), awakening, following and co-operating.”<sup>4</sup>



*Sounds like a good Calvinist.*

A Calvinist couldn’t have said it any better.

## C. What is their actual difference?

### 1. Calvinism

- Regeneration by the Holy Spirit **CANNOT** be resisted.
- Regeneration necessitates that a person believes; that is, he **WILL** believe.

### 2. Arminianism

- The Holy Spirit regenerates the **WILL** that was damaged at the Fall.

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<sup>3</sup> Bettenson, ed., p. 268

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

- The regenerate whose will has been restored can now **CHOOSE** to believe.

3. What does the Bible appear to teach?

- a. Arminius view on regeneration (i.e., the will of regenerate man is so enabled that he can choose to believe or not believe) certainly is mindful of human responsibility.
- b. Nevertheless, the biblical idea behind regeneration seems to equate regeneration with being saved.
- c. While Arminianism better captures our actual experiences (accepting/rejecting the gospel), Calvinism better reflects the Scripture.

4. A clarification

- a. Some opponents of Arminianism mischaracterize it as semi-Pelagian.

Pelagius, a 4<sup>th</sup> century British monk, taught:

- Adam's sin hurt him only, not the rest to all men; that is, his fall into sin injured no one but himself.
  - It left human nature unimpaired for good.
- b. Sometimes they go as far as to say Arminius denied original sin.
  - c. As noted earlier, these were never part of Arminius' teaching.

**D. The result of regeneration**

1. Through it, sinners are enabled to respond to God's call for salvation because God made them spiritually alive through the Holy Spirit "beforehand."
2. In this manner, all the glory goes to God for saving us since the entire salvific process begins and ends with Him.

**Discussion<sup>2</sup>:** We believe that salvation is a gift of God. How is the doctrine of regeneration helps us to really live in that reality (that salvation is God's unconditional gift)?

**III. What is the relationship between regeneration and believing the gospel?**

Just like a coin, there are two complementary sides to salvation:  
Regeneration and believing the gospel.

To that end, Paul tells the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:13) that we are "saved through the

sanctifying work of the Spirit” (i.e., regeneration) “and through belief in the truth” (i.e., gospel).

This is to say, while regeneration itself is not sufficient for salvation, it is necessary. To be saved, one needs to believe the gospel, as Paul declares to the Corinthians, “By this gospel you are saved” (1 Cor. 15:2).

### **A. The Gospel**

1. The premise of the gospel is that Jesus became sin for us so that through his death, we might be saved when we believe in the person and the work of Christ done on the cross.
2. This “message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” [a.k.a., the spiritually dead (1 Cor. 1:18<sup>a</sup>)], but upon being regenerated, they are able to believe it. Thus, Paul says, “But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18<sup>b</sup>).

### **B. The chicken or the egg?**

1. It is important to know that regeneration and believing the gospel happen simultaneously.
2. There is no such thing as a regenerated person who does not believe the gospel.

*“I am regenerated but I don’t believe the gospel” makes just as sense as saying “I am a married bachelor.”*

3. So, if a person sincerely wants to know whether or not he is regenerated, all he needs to do is believe the gospel.

### **C. A confession of a theologian**

A Reformed theologian, who had attended my church in the 1990s and taught in a Reformed seminary for several years after finishing his Ph.D. studies, shared changes in his theological thinking in an e-mail sent to me in 2013.

“I [was] not certain whether ‘regeneration precedes faith.’  
I believe that regeneration and faith occur at the same time.”

**Homework 3**

Read over the material covered in the last class and the additional Bible reading (if any). If you have any questions, please note them here and ask me later.

1. How does regeneration capacitate the spiritually dead to respond to the offer of salvation?
2. What is the relationship between regeneration and believing the gospel?
3. Having read what Arminius actually believed, what would you say to a typical Calvinist who would consider his teaching as humanistic (as in, man can save himself)?