

REGENERATING REGENERATION: RESOURCING REFORMATION INSIGHTS

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## Introduction

Jesus famously said to Nicodemus, “unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup> This new birth, also called regeneration, has been a major theme of evangelical Christianity, as well as the wider tradition of Reformation theology from which it has descended. The radical nature of claiming even the existence of such thing as a “rebirth” often goes unnoticed. Nicodemus recognized this, asking how a man can climb back into his mother’s womb to be born a second time.<sup>2</sup> Since then, other questions about the doctrine of regeneration have proliferated. Indeed, the doctrine has been a source of considerable discussion. Christology, justification, and eschatology have been more controversial, but regeneration still comes rather close. Questions about baptism alone have generated near endless controversy.

In modern Reformed and evangelical theology, regeneration has usually been defined as the act where God gives an individual a new nature and a new heart, possibly including the origin of faith. This account, however, is not without difficulties. This paper will attempt to look at some problems in modern discussion about regeneration. In particular, the research will overview three major questions in modern discussion on regeneration, relating to faith, justification, and redemptive history, and resource the three early Reformers Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli to find possible solutions. From there it will use them constructively to argue for a refreshed and renewed doctrine of regeneration for future Reformed theology which injects space between regeneration and faith, connects regeneration and justification with a relational ontology, and places regeneration within a broader redemptive-historical context focused on the once-for-all eschatological event of Christ’s resurrection. To initiate this study, then, the modern discussions about regeneration will first need to make themselves seen.

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from *The Holy Bible: New English Translation*.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:4.

## Modern Debate and Context

### Regeneration and Faith

The doctrine of regeneration in modern theological discourse usually involves one of two questions. The first is the relation of faith to regeneration, a question which usually activates during debates between Calvinists and Arminians. The second is the relation of regeneration to baptism, a question more associated with Catholic/Protestant debate.<sup>3</sup> This latter question will receive little attention for the purposes of this paper, but the former will be relatively important, and thus it warrants discussion.

Calvinists and Arminians debate in particular, “Does regeneration precede or follow faith?” To the Calvinist, faith is impossible for natural man (total depravity). Therefore, regeneration is first necessary. God must give the soul new birth so that it might become able to believe. R. C. Sproul represents this view in the following:

The logical priority of regeneration in Reformed theology rests on the doctrine of total depravity or moral inability. Because fallen man is morally unable to incline himself by faith to Christ, regeneration is a logical necessity for faith to occur. If we were to posit that faith precedes regeneration, then we would be assuming that unregenerate people, while still in an unregenerate state, have the moral ability to exercise faith. If the unregenerate can exercise faith, then it follows clearly that they are not fallen to the degree of moral inability, as claimed by classical Augustinian and Reformed theology. This would involve an Arminian or semi-Pelagian view of the fall.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to this, Arminians (and other non-Calvinists) insist that regeneration comes through or as a result of faith. Free will can, when the Spirit so enables, believe in Christ, and by this faith man receives a new birth from above.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, this wording excepts Lutherans.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 194, cited in David R. Anderson, “Regeneration: A *Crux Interpretum*,” [hereafter “Regeneration”] *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (2000): 44-45.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, “Regeneration,” 60-61.

This particular debate about regeneration consists of two main parts. First, this debate pits monergism against synergism, with the Calvinists claiming the former. Second, this debate involves the very definition of “regeneration.” Even if monergism is correct, does regeneration include in its domain the act by which the Spirit awakens faith? Is that perhaps the very essence of the term? Dialogue with the early Reformers will help to address both of these questions constructively.

### Regeneration and Justification

There are also debates at present, somewhat connected to the former, about the relationship between regeneration and justification. Which of the two is first, and does either cause the other? The bulk of the Reformed tradition, placing regeneration before faith, also thereby puts regeneration before justification, for justification is by faith. However, for those who do not hold to a Calvinistic soteriology, and even some of the more reformist ones who do, this question is not so easy to answer. If faith does precede regeneration, then justification or regeneration might just as well be simultaneous or ordered, and either could come first or even serve as the other’s origin.

This particular debate has been revived for multiple reasons, but two particular contributors are Peter Leithart and Bruce McCormack. Both have suggested that justification more rightly precedes regeneration, and that to suggest otherwise reintroduces a covertly Catholic soteriology in which justification depends, at least in part, on a quality existing in the believer, infused by grace.<sup>6</sup> Peter Leithart has assented to McCormack’s basic charge as well, and

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, “What’s at Stake in Current Debates over Justification?” in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, Wheaton Theology Conference (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 102.

while not giving a great deal of time to regeneration by name, has argued along similar lines in recent works.<sup>7</sup> Archibald Alexander Hodge also apparently belongs to this company.<sup>8</sup>

If Leithart, McCormack, and Hodge are right on this point, or even may be, then this aspect of the debate is essential. Rightly relating regeneration and justification will have important wider ramifications in Protestant and Reformed theology. This paper also, then, will attempt to glean some useful insights into this difficult question from the early Reformation.

### Regeneration and Redemptive History

As a final area of modern difficulty, there is the increasing focus on regeneration not simply as an event in the life of an individual believer, a matter of the *ordo salutis*, but as a singular event in the history of God's wider redemptive and creative purposes, a matter of the *historia salutis*. This kind of thinking seems to still be more or less in infancy (at least in today's form), and thus there are many variations, but they all share a common theme. The question, "What is regeneration?" receives answer in terms more of eschatology, covenant, and redemptive history, with a focus on Christ's resurrection, rather than the more individualistic terms of custom.

There is diversity in this understanding. For example, T. F. Torrance could count as such a thinker. When asked if and when he had been born again, he replied that he "had been born again when Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary and rose again from the virgin tomb, the first-born from the dead."<sup>9</sup> In this sense Torrance seems to have a view of regeneration as the

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<sup>7</sup> Peter J. Leithart, "McCormack on Justification," First Things, December 22, 2004, accessed April 26, 2017, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2004/12/mccormack-on-justification>. Also see Peter J. Leithart, *Delivered from the Elements of the World: Atonement, Justification, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Scott Robert Wright, "Regeneration and Redemptive History," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 1999, 227-228, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304535509/abstract/embedded/6ABTL970CXM8MJP7?source=fedsrch>.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 96.

once-for-all rebirth given to humanity in Christ's incarnation and atonement, and thus it functions more as a redemptive-historical reality into which believers are incorporated by union with Christ than as a personal experience.

Others frame a redemptive-historical view of regeneration in slightly different terms. The present author has suggested in the past an angle of regeneration as involving the corporate rebirth and reconstitution of Israel of the people of God from flesh to Spirit in Christ.<sup>10</sup> This paper will also look at the conclusions of Robert S. Wright who argued for a redemptive-historical view of regeneration as "a participation in the eschatological powers of heaven that have pierced time and space in the arrival of the kingdom of God that became present through the death and resurrection of Christ."<sup>11</sup>

As will become evident, the early Reformers did not make much use of redemptive-historical themes in their articulations of regeneration. However, this does not mean that their doctrine will prove fruitless in constructing a redemptive-historical account of regeneration. This, too, will require careful consideration, and there may yet be a few surprises along the way.

This final point, then, makes for three areas which will be of interest in mining the work of the early Reformers on regeneration. How did they treat the doctrine? Can they elucidate the meaning of the term, along with its relations to faith, justification, and redemptive history? Three classic representatives—Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli—will receive a chance to address these key questions, beginning with the firstborn, Martin Luther.

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<sup>10</sup> Caleb D. Smith, "Hypothesis: The Church Is Reborn Israel," *The Nicene Nerd* (blog), July 21, 2016, accessed April 26, 2017, <http://thenicenenerd.com/2016/07/hypothesis-the-church-is-reborn-israel/>.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, "Regeneration and Redemptive History," 221.

## A Survey of Regenerates

### Regeneration in Martin Luther

As the man credited with igniting the flame of the Reformation, no historical look at Reformation doctrine would be complete without Martin Luther. Luther is, of course, most famous for *sola fide*, not anything on regeneration. Yet in the course of addressing Scripture and theology, Luther did discuss his doctrine of regeneration from time to time, and to these occasions the next few paragraphs shall turn.

The first notable (and, outside Lutheranism, infamous) feature of Luther's doctrine of regeneration is its connection to baptism. Luther had the strongest baptismal doctrine of any Reformer, willing to make such explicit statements as this: "[B]y the Word such power is imparted to Baptism that it is a laver of regeneration."<sup>12</sup> By itself, of course, this does not contribute a great deal to the three questions of interest here, but it does point vaguely toward some answers. For example, if baptism regenerates, then one might expect that faith would have to precede regeneration, for how can anyone be baptized without faith? Nonetheless, Luther's account of regeneration seems a bit more complex than that.

So how did Luther conceive of regeneration? In his crusade for the doctrine of *sola fide*, it seems that Luther placed regeneration after faith, for all graces must follow faith. On one occasion, he seems to have made this explicit: "Faith in Christ regenerates us into the children of God."<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere he spoke of faith as creating the inner man in the image of God<sup>14</sup> and as cleansing the soul.<sup>15</sup> In Luther's thought, it seems that faith initiates union with Christ, and from

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, "The Larger Catechism," in *The Martin Luther Collection: 15 Classic Works* (Waxkeep Publishing, 2012), Kindle ebook, "Part 4: Of Baptism."

<sup>13</sup> Luther, "Commentary on Galatians," in *Luther Collection*, 3:26.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, "Theological Writings," in *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, ed. Denis R. Janz (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 112.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 113.



that union flows the new life of regeneration. This is not to deny that faith comes from the work of the Spirit, which Luther certainly admitted even if he rarely, if ever, tied this to regeneration *per se*.

For Luther, then, justification was also apparently first to regeneration. The new garments of Christ's righteousness, received by faith at baptism, bring with them new birth and new life.<sup>16</sup> Justification comes first, and regeneration (and sanctification) come as consequence, as he said, "Christ alone can make us innocent of any transgression. How so? First, by the forgiveness of our sins and the imputation of His righteousness. Secondly, by the gift of the Holy Ghost, who engenders new life and activity in us."<sup>17</sup> Some have even argued that for Luther, justification in fact *is* regeneration.<sup>18</sup> This, however, is harder to establish with any certainty.

Did Luther make any room for a redemptive-historical conception of regeneration? The answer to this is also unclear. If there is any place where Luther specifically addressed questions such as the eschatological nature of regeneration or its presence (or lack thereof) in the Old Testament, they hide well. A brief discussion in a sermon on John 3 hints that he *may* have regarded regeneration as a new reality brought by the reconciling work of Christ.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, he also mentioned having an "example of this new birth in Abraham,"<sup>20</sup> something which could mean either that he thought Abraham was regenerate or that he thought Abraham's story typified the coming regeneration. On this point a study of Luther must for now remain inconclusive. With this note, the time comes to turn to Calvin.

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<sup>16</sup> Luther, "Commentary on Galatians," in *Luther Collection*, 3:27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 3:10.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, "The divine birth is therefore nothing else but faith." Martin Luther, "Third Christmas Day," in *Sermons of Martin Luther*, trans. John Nicholas Lenker, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), 205, accessed April 27, 2017, [http://www.martinluthersermons.com/Luther\\_Lenker\\_Vol\\_1.pdf](http://www.martinluthersermons.com/Luther_Lenker_Vol_1.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, "Sunday After Pentecost, or Trinity Sunday," in *Sermons of Martin Luther*, trans. John Nicholas Lenker, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), 411-412, accessed April 27, 2017, [http://www.martinluthersermons.com/Luther\\_Lenker\\_Vol\\_3.pdf](http://www.martinluthersermons.com/Luther_Lenker_Vol_3.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 381.

## Regeneration in John Calvin

Given that the Calvinists bear Calvin's name, there would be no surprise in finding that Calvin's doctrine of regeneration mostly corresponded to that of the modern Reformed tradition. This, though, is not strictly the case. Many have noted that Calvin often used the term "regeneration" in a broader sense than the one which is common today. For Calvin, regeneration involved the whole change of sinful man back into man reflecting the image of God, and thus it was nearly synonymous with "repentance" and "sanctification."<sup>21</sup> He did not speak of regeneration as an instant change like later Reformed folk. Instead, he said the renewal of regeneration happens

...not...in a moment, a day, or a year, but by uninterrupted, sometimes even by slow progress God abolishes the remains of carnal corruption in his elect, cleanses them from pollution, and consecrates them as his temples, restoring all their inclinations to real purity, so that during their whole lives they may practice repentance, and know that death is the only termination to this warfare.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, Calvin did not always speak of regeneration in long terms, and sometimes he does indeed seem to have meant the initial moment of conversion or call. This variability in his talk of regeneration leads to the odd phenomenon in which Calvin appeared to place regeneration both and after faith. This he discerned, though, and addressed in a commentary on John. He noted that John 1:12-13 places regeneration before faith, even though it is more naturally an effect of faith. He explained this by saying that, strictly, faith is an effect of the Holy Spirit's regenerating renewal in the life of a Christian, but that from another perspective man receives Christ by faith, and thus gains access to sanctification and adoption.<sup>23</sup> Calvin's broad concept of regeneration allowed him to regard the renewal which brings forth faith as included,

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<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Signalman Publishing, 2009), Kindle ebook, 3.3.9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.3.9.

<sup>23</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on John - Volume 1*, trans. Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 1:12-13, accessed April 27, 2017, [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm\\_vol34/htm/i.htm](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm_vol34/htm/i.htm).

even while given a unique status to regeneration as the further and ongoing renewal of the man in the image of God which strictly results from a faith-union with Christ.

This leads to a raging debate in Calvin scholarship. For Calvin, what was the relationship between regeneration, sanctification, justification, and union with Christ? A common interpretation is that Calvin saw union with Christ as the fount for both justification and sanctification (which, as a reminder, he equated with regeneration).<sup>24</sup> However, not all agree. Others have argued that Calvin saw justification as having some precedence over all other benefits of Christ, regeneration included. As a more prominent example, Michael Horton wrote:

Regardless of whether union temporally preceded justification, Calvin is clear that the latter is the basis for the former: “Most people regard partaking of Christ (*Christi esse participem*) and believing in Christ as the same thing. But our partaking of Christ (*participatio quam habemus cum Christo*) is rather the effect of believing (*fidei effectus*).” ...Forensic justification through faith alone is the fountain of union with Christ in all of its renewing aspects.<sup>25</sup>

Who is correct? This author remains mostly convinced of the former position. Calvin did indeed treat union with Christ as prior to and including both justification and regeneration (though, again, understood here as sanctification). This, of course, excepts the more ambiguous role Calvin placed upon regeneration in the origin of faith.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, he clearly put justification and renewal as twin benefits of a singular, preceding union in multiple places. Johnson explained, “Union with Christ *includes* justification and *includes* sanctification... This soteriological union is the causal priority of both the forensic and transformative; that is, the

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<sup>24</sup> This view is present in many Calvin readers, and it funds McCormack’s criticism of Calvin in McCormack, “What’s at Stake?”, 102. For an appreciative reading, see Marcus Johnson, “The Highest Degree of Importance,” in *Evangelical Calvinism: Essays Resourcing the Continuing Reformation of the Church*, ed. Myk Habets and Bobby Grow (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), Kindle ebook, “The Benefits of Union with Christ: Justification.”

<sup>25</sup> Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 262.

<sup>26</sup> Given this ambiguity, it is rather ironic that this aspect of regeneration has become the dominant theme in later Calvinism.

incarnate Christ is the source of both justification and sanctification.”<sup>27</sup> Many statements of Calvin’s see to affirm this view,<sup>28</sup> and if there is any possibility that the alternative interpretation is correct, then the charge would be rather plausible that Calvin was not entirely consistent.

So, does Calvin’s view of regeneration have any redemptive-historical dimensions? Like for Luther, this was not a major concern for Calvin, but there are hints in his work. For example, in his commentary on John 7:39, Calvin indicated that the “newness” of the Spirit’s coming is particular to His regenerating work. In examining the sense in which the Spirit was not yet given until Christ’s glorification, he said:

Does he mean here the visible graces of the Spirit, or the regeneration which is the fruit of adoption? I answer: The Spirit, who had been promised at the coming of Christ, appeared in those visible gifts, as in mirrors; but here the question relates strictly to the power of the Spirit, by which we are born again in Christ, and become new creatures.<sup>29</sup>

This one passage is, naturally, not sufficient to settle much, but it hints that Calvin regarded regeneration as something new to the New Covenant which resulted from Christ taking “the solemn possession of his kingdom.”<sup>30</sup> If so, this may prove fruitful later. For now, Zwingli must receive the stand.

### Regeneration in Ulrich Zwingli

In moderate jest Zwingli has sometimes received the name “Nobody’s favorite Reformer,” and there may be some truth to this. Calvin and Luther certainly receive much more attention. This is, however, a bit ironic given the way that Zwingli’s doctrine, particularly his sacramentology and iconoclasm, have profoundly shaped evangelical theology today. Few

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson, “The Highest Degree of Importance,” in *Evangelical Calvinism*, “The Benefits of Union with Christ: Justification.”

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 7:39.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 7:39.

Baptists seem to recognize that they owe their symbolic view of their namesake ordinance to this man.

Given this influence, however, Zwingli's views on the present question are worth consideration. How did Zwingli view regeneration? How did he relate regeneration to faith? This question is one of several issues in Zwinglian soteriology which Wolf Jaeschke tackled in his doctoral dissertation.<sup>31</sup> In analyzing Zwingli's soteriology, Jaeschke claimed that Zwingli more or less identified "regeneration" with faith or the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. He condensed Zwingli's view thusly: "The renewal of the elect is brought about by Spirit-wrought faith. Faith is regeneration."<sup>32</sup> Zwingli tended to focus heavily on the need for Christian works, though not as justifying, and in this way, he emphasized regeneration while denying to it a place beyond faith in Christ by the Spirit. Thus, regeneration was, as for Calvin, something of a process of renewal, namely the process of faith itself. This makes moot the question, "Does regeneration precede faith?" If faith is regeneration, then such a question is meaningless.

What stands out the most about Zwingli's doctrine of regeneration is its decidedly relational ontology. Talk of a "new nature" or a "new creation" is common in modern Reformed articulations of regeneration, but this rarely is the subject of clear description. Perhaps unintentionally, this tends to invite undesirably essentialist/substantialist notions into the doctrine. Zwingli bypassed this problem altogether. By framing regeneration as equivalent to faith in Christ and/or the coming of the Spirit, Zwingli implicitly invoked a relational ontology in which man's objective relationship to God is in fact constitutive of his being. Christ did not posit a magical/invisible transformation of some inner, hidden "stuff" called his "nature." Instead, He

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<sup>31</sup> Wolf Christian Jaeschke, "The Application of Redemption in the Theology of Huldrych Zwingli: A Study in the Genesis of Reformed Soteriology," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 1992, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304003104/abstract/embedded/6ABTL970CXM8MJP7?source=fedsrch>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

brings new birth and new life by placing the believer in relationship to Himself by His Holy Spirit, and these relations redefine him, even give him a new nature.

The promising nature of Zwingli's relation ontology in regeneration will need to take a seat for one moment, however, to ask about redemptive history. Was there a redemptive-historical angle to Zwingli's doctrine of regeneration? To an extent, the answer to that question *might* be "Yes," but the evidence is mixed. On the one hand, defining regeneration essentially as faith and in relational terms allows easily the possibility that the Old Testament saints were regenerate. On the other hand, if Zwingli focused on regeneration more as the coming of the Spirit, perhaps he would account regeneration as new to the New Covenant, who had not yet been given before Christ was glorified. If this is correct, Christ's coming upgraded the previous practice of the Spirit coming upon men and expanded the whole sweep of redemption history.

With Zwingli's view, then, regeneration appeared as faith itself and the breaking in of the Holy Spirit into a dead life. It cannot strictly follow or precede faith since it properly is faith. This bypasses notions of substance metaphysics and/or infused graces and dispositions. Some possibilities also seem to arise for understanding regeneration in redemptive-historical terms. All of this then demands that the three Reformers speak together, as they will in the next section, to come to some tentative conclusions about how, if at all, modern Reformed articulations of regeneration ought to adjust to the wisdom of these fathers

### **Toward a Resourced Development of Reformed Regeneration**

#### Regeneration and the Origin of Faith

Perhaps the first place to look for an improvement in the doctrine of regeneration is the relation to faith. The conventional Reformed doctrine of regeneration gives considerable focus to

the generation or enablement of faith in the regenerate individual, but as the survey above demonstrates, this was not so with the first Reformers. Out of the three major sources, only Calvin seems to have ever placed regeneration prior to faith, and he only did so infrequently. On multiple occasions, he spoke of regeneration as an effect of faith. There may or may not be inconsistency here, but in either case there is little ground in these early teachings for conceiving of regeneration in the narrow, punctiliar sense of a sudden awakening by the Spirit which creates faith *ex nihilo*.

There are also biblical problems with casting regeneration as the act by which God calls forth faith. As the final part of this section will demonstrate, there is very good biblical reason to believe that regeneration is a blessing unique to the New Covenant brought about by the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This is quite obviously a serious problem if regeneration is the awakening of faith. There was certainly faith under the Old Covenant, after all. The way past this serious biblical issue, which the theology of the early Reformers permits, is to entirely dissociate the notion of the effectual call and awakening of faith from regeneration. This raises questions about the real significance of regeneration when faith-generation has been its primary role in Reformed *ordos* for many years. The rest of this paper will offer some suggestions in this regard.

The other biblical issue which plagues the idea of regeneration as creating faith is simply a lack of biblical evidence toward such a connection. Faith and regeneration do occasionally receive mention together,<sup>33</sup> but reading from these texts any specific causal connection or temporal/logical order tastes mostly of dogmatically schematized eisegesis. Thus, again, the theological heirs of the Reformation would do best to look ahead (and behind) to find a more

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<sup>33</sup> John 1:12-13, 1 John 5:1.

biblical understanding of the nature and purpose of regeneration, not simply as the act of God which generates faith.<sup>34</sup>

### Regeneration, Justification, Union, and Ontology

What does this survey of the Reformers reveal about the nature of regeneration *vis-à-vis* justification, union with Christ, and the ontology of regeneration? First of note is that Luther almost equated regeneration with justification, or at the least gave justification something of a fundamentally active role in bringing about regeneration. For Luther, as for Leithart, McCormack, and Horton, God's declaration in justification that a man is righteous does not change status alone, but creates a new reality, a regenerate man. For Calvin, who more or less equated regeneration with sanctification, man's renewal flowed out of a union with Christ wrought by faith. Being in Christ meant receiving His new life alongside His righteousness, both by faith. For Zwingli, regeneration seemed mostly synonymous with faith itself and with the reception of the indwelling Spirit. Thus, in a sense, this makes justification follow regeneration, but only inasmuch as justification follows faith, in the end establishing a rather similar account to Calvin's.

There remains among these accounts a difference in the priority of justification and regeneration, and the place of union with Christ is also not uniform, but some commonalities remain, especially on the ontological side. Whatever metaphysics these Reformers may have taken for granted, all of these conceptions (Zwingli's perhaps most clearly) make room for a relational ontology in which man in what and who he is in relation, particularly and especially to God in Jesus Christ. No substance metaphysics or ontologically ambiguous essentialism is truly

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<sup>34</sup> This, by the way, is not to suggest that faith can happen without an act of God. The dichotomy of Sproul quoted at the beginning of this paper is common in Reformed polemic, but in truth it makes no sense. That regeneration is not the spiritual event in which man receives faith does not imply that man can summon faith on his own. One can be a monergist without identifying the generation of faith with regeneration. This point is so obvious that much of the Reformed insistence to the contrary feels disingenuous.



necessary. A relational ontology of regeneration can overcome the vagueness of which the Reformed tradition has been guilty in explaining such concepts as a “new nature.” Man’s relations constitute his being, at least in part, and no relations are more fundamental than those to God as Creator, Redeemer, and Regenerator. So, for God to justify a man, to declare him in right relationship to Himself, is to give him a new nature without mystical tinkering or metaphysical shenanigans which have no clear correspondence to real affairs. Peter Leithart is a contemporary proponent of something like this who, while having a different emphasis, nonetheless has affirmed the ontological nature of relational states even as an articulation of regeneration:

If we are hard atoms of human stuff, then changing the network of relations in which we live has little effect on us. We still are what we are what we are. But if we are open-ended beings, incomplete in ourselves and complete only in fellowship with others (and ultimately Others), then changing our network of connections and becoming part of a new network is a radical change in identity, character, person. If our being is communion, then extraction from one communion and insertion into another is a change in our being. It is a new birth.<sup>35</sup>

If a relational ontology has any biblical and theological feasibility, which is beyond the scope of this paper to substantiate, then regeneration need not have any ambiguous ontology, and if it can finalize its divorce with the origin of faith, then it can even smoothly tail from justification. By faith a man receives his justification from God, a declaration of a right relationship, with the presence of the Holy Spirit, and in this new web of relations he has been regenerated into a new man. This way forward seems to include strengths from Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and the later Reformed tradition seamlessly and, more importantly, biblically.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *The Baptized Body* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2007), 80.

<sup>36</sup> Time and space afford no opportunity to survey the quite vast biblical support for relationally constituted human nature. For now it should suffice to note that the biblical concepts of covenant, family, and union with Adam or Christ all seem to presuppose such an anthropology.

## Regeneration in a Redemptive-Historical Key

A final area of interest for this survey of regeneration in the early Reformers is the question of redemptive history. As became clear above, none of them seemed particularly concerned with this topic. Nonetheless, there are hints in both Calvin and Luther that they may have regarded regeneration as a blessing of the New Covenant. If so, they have a great deal of biblical support for this position. To this the focus must now briefly turn.

The word “regeneration” (Greek *paliggenesia*) itself appears in the New Testament only twice, once in reference to the eschatological age<sup>37</sup> and once in connection with renewal and the appearance of God’s salvation in the Incarnation.<sup>38</sup> Linguistic and thematically it clearly belongs either by identity or close association with the new birth. The overall evidence points to its introduction into redemptive history with the coming, and particularly the resurrection, of Christ, and the consequent outpouring of the Spirit. For example, to Nicodemus Jesus said that the new birth is of water and Spirit,<sup>39</sup> connecting to later imagery of Spirit and water in John’s Gospel which explicitly delays its significance until Jesus’ glorification.<sup>40</sup> Paul specified that he and readers were saved through a new birth “when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared,”<sup>41</sup> a certain reference to the Incarnation. Peter both stated and implied that God gave new birth specifically through Christ’s resurrection.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, if the common contention that Ezekiel and Jeremiah prophesied eschatologically of regeneration<sup>43</sup> is correct, as seems likely, then those who seek to nonetheless qualify that regeneration was already an Old Testament reality seem more driven by theological eisegesis connected to a view of regeneration

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<sup>37</sup> Matt. 19:28.

<sup>38</sup> Titus 3:5.

<sup>39</sup> John 3:5.

<sup>40</sup> John 7:37-39.

<sup>41</sup> Titus 3:4.

<sup>42</sup> 1 Pet. 1:3, 3:21.

<sup>43</sup> Ezek. 11:19-20, 36:26-27, Jer. 32:38-40.

as faith-creation than by any exegetical sincerity. Rather, that Christ's resurrection as an eschatological event initiated regeneration fits the data much more directly. If Christ is truly the firstborn from the dead,<sup>44</sup> then this includes the spiritually dead as well, and the case that regeneration is a New Covenant blessing seems rock solid.

Scott Wright grasped this redemptive-historical issue well in his doctoral dissertation. He wrote that clearly in Scripture Christ's death and resurrection marked the initiation of the eschaton, and that with reference to this reality the classical Reformed understanding of regeneration was therefore deficient.<sup>45</sup> Instead, before Christ's work was accomplished, regeneration was primarily *anticipated* as an event connected to the kingdom and Christ's exaltation which would transform those who believe.<sup>46</sup> Afterwards, the New Testament treated regeneration as something which came and was accomplished in Christ's resurrection.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, Wright continued to affirm that individuals in the Old Testament were regenerated personally in a "preexperience of the redemptive effect of Christ's work."<sup>48</sup> Whether this final claim is true or not needs assessment in an investigation beyond the scope of this paper, but either way the accent of regeneration falls upon its eschatological character bound up with Christ's once-for-all work of dying and rising.

T. F. Torrance, as noted earlier, also treated regeneration is a more redemptive-historical way, although in his own incarnational and participationist style. For Torrance, the new birth of humanity was accomplished once-for-all in course of Christ's regeneration of human nature from virgin birth to birth from the dead. For example, he wrote, "[O]ur new birth, our regeneration...is what has taken place in Jesus Christ himself, so that when we speak of...our regeneration we are

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<sup>44</sup> Col. 1:18.

<sup>45</sup> Wright, "Regeneration and Redemptive History," 121-123.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 212.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 215.

referring to our sharing in the...regeneration of our humanity, brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake.”<sup>49</sup> Interestingly enough, Torrance also seems to have connected this closely, or even identified it, with justification.<sup>50</sup>

From this perspective, then, regeneration is an expression of resurrection, not just resurrection in general but Christ’s own. His obedient life, atoning death, and resurrection from the dead were the foundation and source for the renewal of all things. For a man to be regenerated means that he receives by the Spirit through faith in Christ a verdict of righteousness from the Father which changes his very being into a participant in the new creation order. The once-for-all work of Christ in fulfilling the covenant history of Israel and establishing the new heavens and earth led to His own justification by the Father, and by the union with Him which consists of faith, believers come to share in His righteous status and His resurrection life as they are reborn into a new web of relations to the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the Bride.

### **Conclusion**

This inquiry into regeneration seems to have been productive. The structure was straightforward: identify and overview the current issues surrounding the doctrine of regeneration in modern Reformed theology, survey the doctrine of regeneration as found in Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, and resource these figures for constructive proposals in answer to the issues identified in the beginning. The issues identified became questions about three relationships. The first question was of the relationship between regeneration and faith. Which precedes which? Does regeneration cause faith? The second question was of the relationship between regeneration and justification? Again, the question pertained to the *ordo salutis*. Finally, what is the redemptive-historical significance of regeneration?

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<sup>49</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (IVP Academic, 2014), 130 & 225.

Then the regeneration doctrines Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli were surveyed for assistance. Luther apparently put faith and justification prior to regeneration, if not even subsuming regeneration under them. Calvin construed regeneration in a very broad sense of renewal, and he placed it depending on the context either before or after faith, but union with Christ was the one fount of regeneration, justification, and all benefits. Zwingli more or less equated regeneration with faith and receiving the Spirit. None of them gave much attention to the redemptive-historical aspects, though they did drop some tantalizing hints.

The results from the early Reformer survey then became helpful material from which to build toward a regenerated theology of regeneration. The proposal included separating regeneration from the origin of faith as separate and mostly dissociated aspects of salvation, understanding the relationship between regeneration and justification by means of a relational ontology which allows judicial declarations to change being itself, and confessing that regeneration originated redemptive-historically in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the foundation of new creation.

In sum, then, the project of resourcing Reformed regeneration has led to an account along these lines: with Luther, part of Calvin, and sort of Zwingli, regeneration can be placed after faith, for faith effects union with Christ. This faith results in justification, as all the Reformers taught. In turn, with support from Luther and perhaps even Zwingli, this justification may be seen as effecting regeneration, but by means of a relational ontology which does not involve ambiguous metaphysics. All of this originated with the accomplishment of Christ in His obedient life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection which inaugurated the eschatological kingdom and added unto them the promise and future of new creation. When a man by faith is united to Christ, God declare him righteous, and this declaration sets him in a relationship which effects

his participation in kingdom and in new creation. This result is a thoroughly Reformed, thoroughly biblical, and thoroughly consistent account of regeneration. It could use improvement or supplement, especially in relation, for example, to baptism in dialogue with Luther, but that remains for another time. Amen.

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