

CHAPTER 8.

CALLING AND REGENERATION

Someone may ask you, “What must I do to be saved?” How would you respond? Perhaps you would refer to the well-known words of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Or you might also point to Romans 10:9, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Both of these verses present the way of salvation clearly and concisely: believe in the Lord Jesus Christ who died and arose for us and you will be saved. To be sure, this *is* the heart of the doctrine of salvation.

At the same time, if you read through the book of Romans, for instance, you will soon realize that the gift of salvation is far richer than first imagined. Indeed, it is hard to grasp “what is the breadth and length and height and depth . . . [of] the love of Christ” (Eph 3:18). There is always a straightforward simplicity about salvation in Christ. The crystal-clear truth remains: “Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Yet at the same time, there is an unfathomable profundity about God’s rescue of sinners, which should never cease to leave us awestruck. In the remaining five chapters of this volume, we hope to explore that simple profundity in as much joyful detail as we can.

Studying these details of salvation brings us into an area that is sometimes called soteriology. There is a close link between soteriology and

the other two main topics in this volume: Christology (the person and work of Christ) and pneumatology (the person and work of the Holy Spirit). The link between the three can be expressed as follows: we are saved because of the work of Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit. In other words, soteriology is the study of the atoning work of Christ applied to our lives by the power of the Spirit.

As we explore the doctrine of salvation, we will aim to remain God-centred, or theocentric, in our approach. Having studied the work of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit at length, it is tempting to think that it is now time to concentrate on what *we* must contribute toward our salvation. However, the Reformed confessions caution us against drifting off in that direction. Already in Lord's Day 17 the Catechism reminds us that the risen Christ makes us "share in the righteousness which he had obtained for us by his death." Next, Lord's Day 20 identifies the Holy Spirit as the one who makes "me by true faith share in Christ and all his benefits." Moreover, all of this culminates in Lord's Day 32 where we learn in Q&A 86 that not only has Christ redeemed us by his blood but he is also renewing us by his Holy Spirit. In short, the author of our salvation is not us, but Christ (Heb 2:10).

This theocentric approach to soteriology is also intimately bound up with our assurance of salvation. Nearly all Christians go through periods of doubt in which they wonder whether they are truly saved. You may well have wrestled with such thoughts yourself. Now, if we include ourselves as the authors, or even co-contributors, of our redemption, then our assurance of salvation begins to plummet immediately. The miserable fact of the matter is that sinful human beings are equal parts fickle and fallible. We all like sheep go astray—again and again. Thus, the psalmist is entirely correct when he urges us: "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation." Instead, steadfast joy and quiet confidence fill those who live by these words, "Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God" (Ps 146:3, 5).

THE ORDER OF SALVATION

In Romans 8:30 the apostle Paul writes that those whom “he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” This verse is sometimes called the Golden Chain of Salvation. Each phrase in the verse is another link in the sequence of undeserved gifts that brings someone from entire guilt to eternal glory. It is also clear that there is a certain chronological progression in this chain. Predestination occurred before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4–5). Full glory will not be enjoyed until after this life, and ultimately on the new heavens and new earth (Rom 8:18–21).

However, matters become more complex when further details are added to the Golden Chain of Salvation. For the moment, let us set predestination and final glorification off to the side and simply focus on the aspects of salvation that Christ by his Spirit accomplishes in this present life. A typical list would include the following: calling, regeneration, repentance or conversion, faith, justification, adoption, and sanctification. Sometimes such a list is called the order of salvation, or in Latin, the *ordo salutis*. Taking a closer look at this list, we can see how questions might arise. For example, can we say with confidence that repentance occurs before faith begins to grow? Don’t many Christians experience repentance and faith simultaneously? What about calling and regeneration? Is someone regenerated by God’s call? Or is he regenerated in order that he willingly responds to God’s call? The point is this: with some aspects of salvation, it is hard to nail down a precise chronology. To be sure, Christ is at work to redeem and renew, but the precise timing of his Spirit’s work in our heart is often shrouded in mystery. The Canons of Dort wisely comment, “In this life believers cannot fully understand the way in which God does this work. Meanwhile, however, it is enough for them to know and experience that by this grace of God they believe with the heart and love their Saviour” (3/4.13).

In addition, even if the precise order of salvation is not always clear to us, what is evident is that all these benefits flow to us from being united with Christ. In this regard, a common NT phrase, occurring more than

seventy-five times, deserves our attention. It is the simple expression “in Christ.” The Holy Spirit declares each aspect of our salvation to be in or through Christ: predestination (Eph 1:4–5), calling (Phil 3:14), regeneration (1 Pet 3), repentance (Eph 4:20–23, esp. 21), faith (Gal 2:16), justification (Rom 8:1), adoption (Gal 3:26), sanctification (1 Cor 1:2), and glorification (Rom 8:17). The Catechism underlines this truth with its repeated reference to sharing in “Christ and all his benefits” (Q&A 20, 53, 65). In other words, even though the *how*, that is, the precise mechanics of salvation, may sometimes be more than we can comprehend, the *who* is never in doubt. It is all from and through Christ.

Having said that, there is still a certain logical or, perhaps better, theological order that needs to be maintained in the order of salvation. Faith deserves to be mentioned before justification because it is only by faith that we are justified in God’s sight (Rom 3:20–22). Moreover, sanctification does not precede justification but rather proceeds from it since good works do *not* establish a basis upon which someone can claim a right to God’s favour (Gal 3:10–12), but they do prove the genuineness of a living faith (Matt 7:18–20). Finally, and most obviously, salvation does not commence with glorification but rather culminates in it. So, in sum, it is wise to study the doctrine of salvation in an orderly fashion. Accordingly, it is also helpful to speak of an order of salvation. However, we must be careful that we do not press this order into a strictly chronological grid. Salvation is not a set of spiritual dominos that fall in strict sequence, one after the other. Rather, it is a complete set of garments with which the LORD clothes us from head to toe in his grace (Isa 61:10).

CALLING: “COME TO ME, AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST”
(MATT 11:28)

The Necessary Starting Point

Ever since the fall into sin, it has been obvious that if sinners are to be saved, sinners will first need to be called by God. In the Garden of Eden, after they ate the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve hid when they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the cool of the day (Gen 3:8). Please

note that our first parents did not come to the LORD, confessing their sins and asking for forgiveness. On the contrary, they deliberately ran away from the LORD. It was rather the LORD who called to Adam, “Where are you?” This divine summons led to the exposure and, admittedly half-hearted, confession of their sins (Gen 3:12, 13). It also led to the first promise of salvation (Gen 3:15). These events in the Garden demonstrate, from the start, that salvation is entirely God’s initiative. That is why we begin the order of salvation, as it pertains to this life, with calling. The phrase “as it pertains to this life” is added because, as Romans 8:30 indicates, our salvation is ultimately rooted in eternity with God’s predestination; however, we already dealt with that doctrine in chapter 12 of the first volume of *Growing in the Gospel*.

Similar divine summons, which initiate salvation, are heard repeatedly throughout Scripture. For example, Abram, along with his father’s family, were sinfully content in their worship of idols as they lived in Ur of the Chaldeans (Josh 24:2). However, the LORD suddenly summoned him to leave his home, trusting in God and his promised blessings (Gen 12:1–3). To put it differently, this patriarch’s salvation began with God’s call not Abram’s decision. The same pattern repeats itself in the days of the exodus from Egypt. As the LORD later explains through his prophet Hosea, “out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos 11:1). It was the LORD who sent Moses to them to rescue them from their slavery. The Israelites did not walk out and meet the LORD in the wilderness, rather the LORD brought them out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (Deut 5:15). This was also the order of events when God’s people needed to be rescued from their exile. The LORD summoned them with his divine whistle (Zech 10:8), and those once scattered were again gathered.

Finally, how did the fullness of salvation in the NT era begin? With the voice of the LORD’s prophet, John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness (Matt 3:3; Isa 40:3). Yes, by God’s grace, many stepped forward and confessed their sins (Matt 3:6), but that was in response to, not in preparation for, the divine call. Taking all these passages into consider, it is not at all surprising that the first link after predestination in the Golden Chain of Salvation is God’s calling (Rom 8:30).

Gracious and Sovereign

Having seen something of the importance of beginning with God's call, it is only fitting that we now describe this calling. To begin with, the LORD does not call those who are somehow, in themselves, more desirable or devout than others. Abram was not less of an idol worshipper than the rest of the residents in Ur. Along the same lines but much later in history, the apostle Paul urges the members of the church in Corinth to remember what they were like when they were called: "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor 1:26). So, it is clear that the motivating source of God's call is his own good pleasure not the piety of those summoned. Succinctly put, God is the one "who called you in the grace of Christ" (Gal 1:6).

It is also a call that comes to us, so to speak, free of charge. The price has already been paid since the cost of atonement is Christ's own blood, which has already been shed (1 Pet 1:18, 19). For this reason, already the prophet Isaiah could proclaim, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isa 55:1). Normally, when you buy something it will always cost you something, whether more or less. Yet here we are called to enjoy the greatest feast of all, the feast of eternal salvation, and the cost to those summoned is precisely nothing. This also explains how our Lord can invite "the poor and crippled and blind and lame" off the streets and into his banquet (Luke 14:21). These are not the kind of people who could pay a handsome sum for an admission ticket. However, the banquet of salvation does not require the purchase of any special ticket. The Host of the banquet gives the thirsty something to drink without cost (Rev 21:6).

This leads us to the fundamental reason that this call is graciously free. It can be summed up in one word: Christ. In other words, Christ is the content of the call. Notice, for instance, how the Lord Jesus Christ beckons the burdened when he says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from

me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28–30). He calls people to himself. Abram was called to a land called Canaan, but today we are summoned to a Saviour called Christ. In this way the call is also intensely personal, not only in the sense that it is directed toward our hearts, but also because we are called to come to rest in one particular Person who is Christ the Lord and not in a philosophy or a moral program.

Since the God who calls us is not only gracious but also sovereign, it is not surprising that his call contains much more than just an appeal. The Lord who calls has the power and determination to move forward from appeal to accomplishment. As the apostle Paul writes, “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess 5:24; see also 1 Cor 1:9). Of course, with human beings this is drastically different. We summon, but we do not always succeed. Since God is categorically different than we are, so is his call. In fact, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). For this reason, theologians sometimes speak of the effectual call of God. This means that when God calls it also has the desired effect, and people come. As the Canons of Dort remind us, the effectiveness of this call is not to be ascribed to man and his free choice for that was the error of Pelagius in the early church and Arminius in the seventeenth century. Rather it is to be ascribed to God (CoD 3/4.10).

The Call Rejected?

However, at the same time both the Word of God and daily experience teach us that not all who hear God’s call respond positively in faith. Some hear the gracious summons and yet walk stubbornly away. In fact, at one point the LORD said, “The more they were called, the more they went away” (Hos 11:2). So, the unavoidable question is the following: why do some respond to the call in faith while others do not? Admittedly, this is a difficult question. Some have tried to answer it by distinguishing between an internal and an external call. Following this line of thinking, the one who rejects God’s summons only receives an external call; the call enters his ears but does not penetrate into his heart. The person who

receives the internal call, though, experiences the work of the Holy Spirit in the very core of his being. The call enters, and indeed, transforms him from the inside out. Therefore, it is described as an internal call.

Distinguishing between an external and internal call leaves us with the impression that the critical difference lies in the kind of call that one receives. While the external call remains on the surface, the internal call is, literally, life altering. The difficulty with this explanation is that it does not easily square with the way in which the Lord Jesus himself spoke about this matter in his parable of the farmer who went to sow seed in his fields (Matt 13:1–23). The seed is the message of the kingdom and is directly connected to God’s call (Matt 13:19). To be sure, some seeds took root, grew, and eventually produced a crop, yielding thirty, sixty, or even one hundred times what was sown. Other seeds did not germinate at all, or if they did germinate, they quickly died due to the oppressive heat or tenacious weeds. However, the key point for our purposes is that the farmer did not have two kinds of seed in his bag. It was all the same seed, and it was all sown in earnest. That is to say, the farmer never intended to sow any seeds in vain. Rather, he genuinely sowed his seed for a harvest. The critical difference, then, was not in the seed but in the soil. Some soil was rich and fertile; there the seeds grew and produced a harvest. Other soil was hard and rocky; there the seed soon died.

How does the parable of the farmer sowing his seed apply to God’s call? In the first place, just as there is one seed in the parable, so there is one and the same message of salvation that is indiscriminately preached to all, both to those who accept it and those who reject it. Moreover, since God never speaks out of two sides of his mouth (2 Cor 1:18), his summons is sincere. The Canons of Dort sums it up in this way:

But as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in his Word what is pleasing to him, namely, that those who are called should come to him. He also earnestly promises rest for their souls and eternal life to all who come to him and believe (3/4.8).

Since the message is the same, the difference lies in the one who is called. In the words of the parable, someone's heart is either rocky, and the call is rejected, or someone's heart is receptive, and the summons is embraced in faith. However, as soon as we say that, someone might fear that we are swimming back into Pelagian or Arminian waters. Now it again sounds like the response to God's call depends entirely on us and the choices we make. How should this *valid* concern be answered? At this point a crucial truth must be brought into the picture. By nature all of us are hard and rocky soil. We are not neutral ground, which may freely decide to become either rocky or fertile. By no means! Due to sin, our hearts are stone—all of them. So if anyone's heart is transformed from flinty to fertile, then that transformation must be fully ascribed to the sovereign and gracious work of God (Ezek 11:19; 36:26).

To be sure, this still leaves us with the intellectually uncomfortable truth that for those who do not come when they are called, "the fault lies in themselves," but when those who are called do come, "it is to be ascribed to God" (CoD 3/4.9–10). According to human reason, this may sound unfair. If the guilt for rejecting the call lies with us then, so it would seem, the credit for accepting the call should also lie with us. However, this line of reasoning assumes that all people start off, spiritually speaking, in some kind of neutral, no-man's land where they can choose the direction in which they want to go: either toward God or away from God. Instead, if we reckon with the full implications of total depravity, then it is clear that human beings cannot, of themselves, make their hearts receptive to the gospel. In short, if you are the kind of field that has received the seed of God's call and is producing a harvest of spiritual fruit, then give all the glory to the only Re-creator who turns sterile soil into fertile fields.

REGENERATION: "YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN" (JOHN 3:7)

One night a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus. It was a night that he, and we, should never forget. During those evening hours, Jesus Christ taught about regeneration. The basic message was abundantly clear: you *must* be born again. In fact, no one will either see or enter the

kingdom of God unless he is born again by the power of the Spirit (John 3:3, 5). To put it simply: no rebirth means no redemption.

Yet, before we go any farther, we should clear up one possible point of confusion. Today when Christians use the word *regeneration*, they are usually referring to the very beginning of their new life in Jesus Christ. Often they also tend to have a rather specific point of time in mind. Even if they cannot pinpoint an exact hour or day, they still think of regeneration as a special event on their spiritual calendar. This idea gives rise to the popular question, “When were you born again?” However, as we begin, we need to realize that in the past, Christians did not always have such a chronology-dominated view of regeneration. For example, Article 24 of the Belgic Confession says, “We believe that this true faith, worked in man by the hearing of God’s Word and by the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man.” The same article continues by speaking about how the regenerate man lives a “good and holy life” and applies himself “to those works which God has commanded in His Word.” Normally speaking, we talk about holy living and good works as part of our sanctification. However, in the Belgic Confession, and in other confessions of the sixteenth century, regeneration does not refer specifically to the starting point of the Christian life, but rather to its continuation throughout life. As we will see, both uses of the word *regeneration* are legitimate. The key thing is that we need to discern which meaning people have in mind when they use it.

The Necessity of Rebirth

To Nicodemus the notion of having to be born again was definitely a surprise, if not a shock. His response to Jesus says it all, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4) For this Pharisee, it was simple: just as you die once, you are born once. *Again* may apply to many things, but not birth.

The mental hurdle that Nicodemus could not overcome, at least not at that moment, is that there is more to life than a beating heart and breathing lungs. To be sure, there is physical life, which begins with concep-

tion in a mother's womb and takes on a completely new dimension when the baby is born and begins life outside of the womb. Concerning this physical life, Nicodemus was correct: you are only born once. However, in addition to physical life there is also spiritual life. That is why Jesus explains, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh [i.e., physical life], and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit [i.e., spiritual life]" (John 3:6). The Belgic Confession puts it this way:

Those who are born anew have a twofold life. One is physical and temporal, which they received in their first birth and is common to all men. The other is spiritual and heavenly, which is given them in their second birth and is effected by the word of the gospel in the communion of the body of Christ. This life is not common to all but only to the elect of God (Art. 35).

Also relevant in this context is the teaching of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 2. From that letter we learned that we were dead in our transgressions and sins (v. 1). The miraculous transformation from death to life is usually called resurrection (v. 6), but it can also be described as being made alive (v. 5), which is akin to being born. In short, we need to be re-born because, by nature, we are not spiritually alive to God (Rom 6:11). That new life, which Scripture also calls the "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17) or the raising from the dead (Eph 5:17), is generated in us by the Spirit of God.

The Nature of Rebirth

Since it is commonly called regeneration, or being born again, it is easy to assume that spiritual rebirth is much the same as physical birth, apart from the fact that one happens to our flesh and the other to our spirit. This line of logic also lies behind the question, "When were you born again?" Everyone was physically born on a certain day. So, if spiritual birth closely parallels physical birth, should we not also expect that our rebirth is a dramatic, unforgettable event that occurs on a certain day?

However, a closer look at John 3 indicates that Jesus does not emphasize *when* rebirth occurs but *who* causes it to happen. Perhaps it is stating the obvious, but being born is not something you do to yourself. It is, most

decidedly, something that happens to you. Moreover, in vv. 5–6 Jesus says that in order to enter the kingdom one must be “born of water and the Spirit,” and then adds, “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Jesus emphasizes the miraculous and mysterious (3:8) activity of the Spirit. He is the one *who* causes rebirth to happen. However, the *when*, the precise timing of this rebirth, is not in the spotlight here.

In addition, the matter becomes even clearer if we connect the third chapter of John back to the first chapter. Already in his introductory chapter, John mentions spiritual rebirth and natural, physical birth side-by-side. To be exact, the words are: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13). Notice again that timing—whether more or less precise—is not the key issue here. Rather the point is that the source of rebirth is not a husband or any human for that matter, but God, and him alone. In fact, turning back to John 3, the original Greek word which Jesus uses can be translated as “born again” or “born from above” (v. 3). Both translations are legitimate, but the latter is certainly commendable. Once this connection between the first and third chapters of John is established, the pressing question is not so much when were you born again but who caused you to be born again. The answer is consistent for all God’s children: the Spirit of God caused me to be born again.

This emphasis on the Spirit as the cause of regeneration also fits well with God’s revelation in the OT. We do not hear the exact language of being born *again* in the OT, but we do hear, a number of times, that God is the Father of his people, or conversely, that his people are the children of God. Deuteronomy 32:18 is a striking example because the word *birth* is even used. “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.” Similarly, in Hosea 11:1–4 the LORD is portrayed as the Father who nurtured his son Israel from infancy to adulthood. Mention could also be made of the special privilege given to David’s sons. Even though they were born from the wombs of their earthly mothers, it was also the LORD who said, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” (Ps 2:7).

Furthermore, as the Holy Spirit teaches us in Titus 3:5 rebirth and renewal are intimately connected to each other. “He saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” Renewal by the Spirit is not finished in one day; it continues for a lifetime. In other words, even though birth, by the very meaning of that word, will bring our minds back to the beginning of this new life, we should never forget that what begins at birth continues throughout life. Regeneration is not just an event to remember, but also a new life to be lived—each day again.

The Means of Rebirth

We have already discovered that the Holy Spirit is the one who works regeneration. So, naturally, the next question is this: how does he do it? To be sure, there will always be an element of mystery surrounding this work of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus himself said, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). In other words, if someone is reborn, there will be clear evidence that he is reborn (“you hear its sound”), but you cannot necessarily trace back exactly when, where, or how it all happened (“you do not know where it comes from or where it goes”).

One thing that we can certainly say is that the Holy Spirit’s normal course of action is to use the gospel to regenerate those who are dead in their sins and transgressions. In 1 John 3:9, the apostle links rebirth to “God’s seed” which remains in the child of God. At the same time, he had already earlier indicated that it is “the word of God” which lives or, literally, remains in God’s people (1 John 2:14). Therefore, as the apostle Peter also confirms, we are born again “through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet 1:23). Bearing this in mind, no one should sit around waiting anxiously and hoping that one day the Spirit of God will suddenly regenerate him in a mystical manner. Rather, as the Canons of Dort wisely advise us, we should not “dare to tempt God by separating what he in his good pleasure has willed to be closely joined together” (CoD 3/4.17). True to character, the Holy Spirit works the extraordinary

miracle of rebirth through the most ordinary preaching of the gospel, including both its promises and admonitions (1 Cor 1:21–25).

This also means that human beings cannot use their own intelligence or observations to begin the process of regeneration in themselves. Some people suppose that certain pious pagans can hone their natural sense of what is honourable to the point that they can gain an even greater grace from God and that all of this happens *before* the Holy Spirit begins his work of renewal (CoD 3/4, RE 5). Clearly, this contradicts passages such as 1 Peter 1:23 and 1 Corinthians 1:23. The Holy Spirit does not work rebirth through the light of nature (CoD 3/4.4) but through the gospel of Christ crucified.

The Human Will and Rebirth

Two important questions remain. The first is this: what is the role of the human will in regeneration? When someone is physically born, it is the mother who is doing all the hard work. However, in spiritual rebirth the person who is being reborn somehow feels more directly and actively involved. After all, does the new life not begin when someone despises the vile ways of sin and longs for a more holy life? Is it not true that someone can say, in all sincerity, “There is nothing on earth that I desire besides you,” O LORD (Ps 73:25)? In short, does human will, also known as the desiring “I,” not contribute, at least something, to the whole process of regeneration?

At the fall the human will was completely corrupted but it was not entirely eradicated. The sinful man is not deprived of a will. On the contrary, he has a stubbornly strong and sinful will (Gen 11:6). To say it differently, the sinner is a rebel not a robot (see also CoD 3/4.16). Therefore, when the Holy Spirit begins to work his miracle of regeneration, he must completely renew the entire human being, including his will. The apostle also says as much to the church in Philippi when he writes, “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13).

The Reformed fathers at the Synod of Dort phrased it in this way: “The same regenerating Spirit penetrates into the innermost recesses of man . . . [and] instills new qualities into the will. He makes the will, which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient” (CoD 3/4.11). After the Spirit renews the will, then indeed “the will so renewed is not only acted upon and moved by God but, acted upon by God, the will itself also acts” (CoD 3/4.12). So, in answer to the question posed above, yes, someone can sincerely say, “*I desire to serve the Lord,*” so long as he also adds, “And it was the Holy Spirit who sovereignly and graciously renewed the entire ‘me,’ including my will, which now desires to serve the Lord.”

Infants and Rebirth

The second question that still needs to be addressed is this: does the Holy Spirit cause young babies to be born again? If so, when and how? It is not hard to understand how this question arises. On the one hand, Jesus stated unequivocally, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). On the other hand, the Holy Spirit works rebirth through the preaching of God’s Word (1 Pet 1:23, 25), and little infants cannot yet understand this preaching. Therefore, someone might come to the disturbing conclusion that infants cannot be reborn and thus will not see the kingdom of God. Moreover, if your own child dies in infancy this question is no longer hypothetical; it is a burning, urgent reality.

The promises of salvation extend not only to believers, but also to their children (Acts 2:39). This includes very young children as well, for Jesus even took time to bless little babies (Luke 18:15). Therefore, believing parents, resting in the faithfulness of God and his covenant promises, ought not to doubt the salvation of their little children, if those children should die while they are still young (CoD 1.17). It follows, then, that the Spirit of God does indeed regenerate those little covenant children who are called out of this earthly life at a young age. Presumably, the Holy Spirit uses different means to accomplish this rebirth than the normal means of the preaching of the Word. However, we would only be

speculating if we tried to pin down exactly how the Holy Spirit does this, and if that is already speculative, then it is most certainly irresponsible to use the exception of children who die in infancy as a foundation upon which to build our entire doctrine of regeneration. God has revealed how the Holy Spirit normally brings about regeneration. He does it “through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet 1:23). How this same Spirit regenerates children who die in infancy belongs to the secret things of God, and we can safely and securely leave it in his most capable hands (Deut 29:29).

Suggested Readings: Matthew 11:25–30; John 3:1–15

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. The Heidelberg Catechism joins the work of the Holy Spirit and the aspects of our salvation when it says that the Spirit “is also given to me, to make me by true faith share in Christ and *all his benefits*” (LD 20). Choose three of those benefits and describe the specific role of God’s Spirit in making you participate in them.
2. Is it wise to speak of an *order of salvation*? What dangers arise from using this terminology? What advantages are gained by using it?
3. In Hosea 11:2 the LORD says, “The more they were called, the more they went away.” Yet at the same time in Romans 11:29 we learn that God’s call is “irrevocable.” How do those two passages fit together? How do we maintain the truth that God is sovereign over everything and, at the same time, do justice to what the LORD reveals through Hosea?
4. Imagine someone asks you, “When were you reborn?” How do you answer? Things may become complex if one person in the conversion experienced a dramatic turn from unbelief to faith, while another grew up in a Christian home always worshipping the Lord. Are there two different kinds of rebirth then?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Let us say that a new convert joyfully announces, “I decided to follow and serve the Lord Jesus Christ.” Is this statement incorrect,

- partially correct, or entirely correct? Explain your answer, using at least one reference from Scripture and one from the confessions. How would you convey your answer to that exuberant new convert?
2. It is undeniable that some unconverted people still have a strong desire to do what is right. For example, they may work passionately to see justice upheld or charity extended. How can we say that such people are dead in their sins (Eph 2:1)? Spiritually speaking, they appear to be at least partially alive. How do we explain this? References that may help include CoD 3/4.4 and RE 3/4.4, 5. Also, if you can find it online, what do you think of Article 18 of the Augsburg Confession, which might be described as the Lutheran equivalent to the Belgic Confession of the Reformed Church?
 3. In Titus 3:5 the Holy Spirit not only pulls together regeneration and renewal, but also washing which alludes to baptism (see LD 26, Q&A 71). What is the precise connection between baptism and regeneration? Are all those who are baptized regenerated? If so, why do some baptized Christians turn away from the Lord at some later point in time? If not, then what does the apostle mean when he speaks of the “washing of regeneration”?

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