



The Holy Spirit's work of regeneration

Regeneration can be defined as *"the subconscious implanting of the principle of new spiritual life in the soul, effecting an instantaneous change in the whole man, intellectually, emotionally, and morally, enabling the elect sinner to respond in repentance and faith to the outward or public gospel proclamation directed to his conscious understanding and will."*¹ (What is meant by Dr. Reymond's use of the word "subconscious" is that regeneration is the sovereign operation of the Holy Spirit apart from the use of any means or man's doing — see Canons of Dort, III & IV, XII.)

A new life

The Greek term for regeneration (*palingenesia*) is found in only two verses of the New Testament: Matthew 19:28 and Titus 3:5. And only in Titus 3:5 does it refer to the beginning of the new life in the individual Christian. The idea of this new birth in the sinner is more commonly expressed in the Greek terms *gennao*, *anathen*, and *anagennao*, and these terms mean either to beget, to beget again, or to bear or give birth.² Such a birth is *"from above"* (John 3:3) and is the direct result of the intervention of the Spirit of God upon the hearts of wicked sinners. A spiritual change must take place in order for the sinner to come to faith, and believe the Gospel of Christ. It is the Spirit of God who is the author of this new birth. *"...all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, or to dispose themselves to reformation."* (Canons of Dort, 3rd & 4th, III) Just as there is a remarkable event in the conception and birth of a human being, so even to a greater degree there is a spiritual "event" of sorts that parallels natural birth, but into the realm of the kingdom of God's beloved Son. And as a newborn infant has nothing to do with its birth into the world, so also we have nothing to do with our spiritual rebirth into the kingdom of God.

The new birth is the liberation of the soul from Satan, spiritual bondage, and eternal death by the work of the Holy Spirit, and is absolutely necessary in order for a sinner to be translated into the Kingdom of God. In John 3, Jesus makes clear the fact that man is so totally depraved and fallen that his spiritual birth must take place prior to his ever perceiving or understanding the spiritual realities of the kingdom of heaven (John 3:3-5). And this spiritual change is impossible with men, but possible with God *"...by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit He pervades the inmost recesses of man; He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised; infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions."* (Canons of Dort, 3rd & 4th, XI) Without a manifestly true change of a person's mind by the Spirit of God, men cannot and will not believe (1 Corinthians 2:14) nor trust on Christ for salvation. As Jesus declares in John 3, *"No unregenerate man can see the kingdom of God unless God wills he should see it and converts him to be able to see it."*

An essential gift

Therefore, we can safely say that the work of the Holy Spirit is as needful and important as the work of Christ Himself.

Christ said in John 16:7, *"Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you."*

After His Ascension, Christ promised to send the Spirit to replace His corporeal presence until His Second Coming. The Spirit, then, is the agent by which the work of God is completed and accomplished on earth in this interim period. In Acts 1:8, Jesus states, *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* Such a power was the direct effect of Christ's kingly enthronement and subsequent order of the redemptive plan. This is why John writes, *"But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."* (John 7:39) Not that the Spirit was not already present or working, but that He was not dispensed by the enthroned Messiah; for Christ had not died, been buried, raised from the dead, and seated at the right hand of God.

Conviction

The design of the Spirit's work is found in John 16:8-11. Here Christ teaches,

"And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged."

The Spirit does this by shedding abroad the gift of His work in the hearts of men convincing them of the truth of Christ's person and work. He does this through the Word of God and through the preaching of the Gospel. Such an act is seen very clearly in the case with Lydia at the preaching of the Apostle Paul, *"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."* (Acts 16:14) The first part of the Spirit's work is to convince a sinner of His misery. *"When He has come, He will convict the world of sin."* (John 16:8) The Spirit convicts men of their state as sinners before God, but this is not enough to transform the soul. Conviction of sin, such as with Esau, Cain, and Judas, is not enough unless one is born from above, and repentance and faith all accompany such a work. *"For godly sorrow works repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world works death."* (2 Corinthians 7:10)

However, in conviction, the work of the Spirit is accomplished in light of the Law of God. As Paul says, *"I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death."* (Romans 7:9-10) After this, the Spirit presses the sinner to look to Christ who alone can save the soul through His death and resurrection. In this way, the Spirit of God brings a sinner to understand his need of a Savior.

Illumination

After the Spirit has convinced a man of his sin and misery, He then illumines his mind in the knowledge of Christ.

"But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect, or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, but powerfully illuminates their minds by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God."

(Canons of Dort, 3rd & 4th, XI)

Here the Spirit teaches sinners the person, character, offices, and the work of Jesus Christ, as Paul says, *"But the Scripture has confined all under sin that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."* (Galatians 3:22)

It should also be stated that even though there is a conviction of sin, and men are illumined to the reality of the person, office and work of Christ, they may not be saved. Felix trembled before Paul, and many were made partakers of the Holy Spirit and of the blessings of the age to come as recorded in Hebrews 6, but these were, in fact, still lost (Acts 24:25; Hebrews 6:1-8). The illuminating work of the Holy Spirit may be said to be the groundwork of all His other operations. It's through the truth, which must be known and believed, that the Spirit fulfills all the functions of His

office in the minds of men. By enlightening the mind, He lays the groundwork for the conviction of conscience. This obviously implies a previous state of spiritual deadness and darkness, which is the natural state of all men.

Paul says, *"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..."*

(Ephesians 2:1-2)

This darkness, which affects every man born into this world (Christ accepted), is not just the absence of light, but also a blindness of mind.

"Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright, all his affections pure, and the whole man was holy. But, revolting from God by the instigation of the devil and by his own free will, he forfeited these excellent gifts; and in the place thereof became involved in blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment; became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections."

(Canons of Dort, 3rd & 4th, I)

When men are converted, the veil of darkness is taken away (1 Corinthians 3:14-16) and the glorious light of the Gospel of Christ shines upon their minds (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

As the One who illumines the soul, the Holy Spirit is the revealer of truth, and the author of the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21), which are used as the instrument of His work. The efficacy of the Word depends completely on the gracious work of the Spirit upon men. In other words, just hearing the Gospel's call does not ensure that a person will believe. The Holy Spirit must apply His Word to the soul. As Jesus said in John 6, *"the Spirit is the One who gives life..."* He alone illumines and quickens by the light of His Word. And these operations are directed towards man's conscience. His moral faculty is arrested by divine truth to the reality of its sinful state and need of saving grace. This is the direct operation of the Spirit's use of the law. The law is the schoolmaster, Paul said, that brings the sinner to Christ (Galatians 3:24). Sin, then, becomes vile in the mind of the enlightened conscience as the Spirit convinces a man of the sinfulness of his sin (Romans 7:13).

A new creation

Regeneration is not a partial work on any one part of the human faculty, but a change in every faculty and the whole man *"infusing new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions."* (Canons of Dort, 3rd & 4th, XI) The man becomes a new creation as Paul clearly states, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."* (2 Corinthians 5:17) However, this change does not immediately perfect the sinner as if he had no further need of sanctification. As the Belgic Confession, Article 15, states: *"Nor is it (sin) altogether abolished or wholly eradicated even by regeneration."* And the Canons of Dort read, *"...though in this life He (God) does not deliver them altogether from the body of sin and from the infirmities of the flesh ... Hence spring forth the daily sins of infirmity, and blemishes cleave even to the best works of the saints."* (5th, I, II) Rather, it places the believer in opposition to the life he once lived and translates him from one spiritual life to another — from one kingdom to another. *"He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love."* (Colossians 1:13)

Conversion, the third plank in the Ordo Salutis, rightly consists in a sinner being brought intelligently (not by blind faith) to some knowledge of God's truth imparted to the mind by the Holy Spirit, who in turn grants understanding. Sinners are made willing to come to Christ. Every sinner's heart is resistant to the truth (John 3:19-20), and in this way they *"resist the Spirit"* as Stephen said of the Pharisees (Acts 7:51). This does not mean that the sinner can overpower the work of the

Spirit, but that the outward preaching of the Gospel is always and continually resisted by the sinner's depraved and wicked heart. However, once the Spirit regenerates a sinner's heart by sovereign grace, that heart will response to the call of the Gospel. Ezekiel 36:26 clearly says, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."* The Canons of Dort also speaks to this issue: *"regeneration does not treat men as senseless stocks and blocks, nor take away their will and its properties, or do violence thereto; but it spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it, that where carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign; in which the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consist."* (3rd & 4th, XVI)

United to Christ

This is obviously far more than a moral change or an amendment of life. It's a transformation of the whole faculty of the sinner's soul from death and darkness to life and light. The result of the Spirit's work on an individual sinner is the creation of a new being (2 Corinthians 5:17). When a sinner is saved by the work of the Holy Spirit he is then united to Christ, or as Scripture reads, *"Baptized into Christ."* (Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 6) This union with the Lord Jesus Christ is the life-giving power and sustenance of the believing sinner. The sinner receives life through the spiritual head of the church, Jesus Christ, by being a branch attached to the vine.

Christ explains this union and its benefits in John 15:4-5, *"abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."* This new creature has acquired a new life, a new view of himself and the world, new affections in the soul for the things of God, and new spiritual insight that he did not possess before. His desires and aims are entirely new, and he now has the desire to continue the new relationship he has with God, and to grow in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. He now says with the psalmist,

"My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."

(Psalm 42:2)

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¹ Robert Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*. 720-21.

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*. 465.