

# **Once Saved, Always Changed**

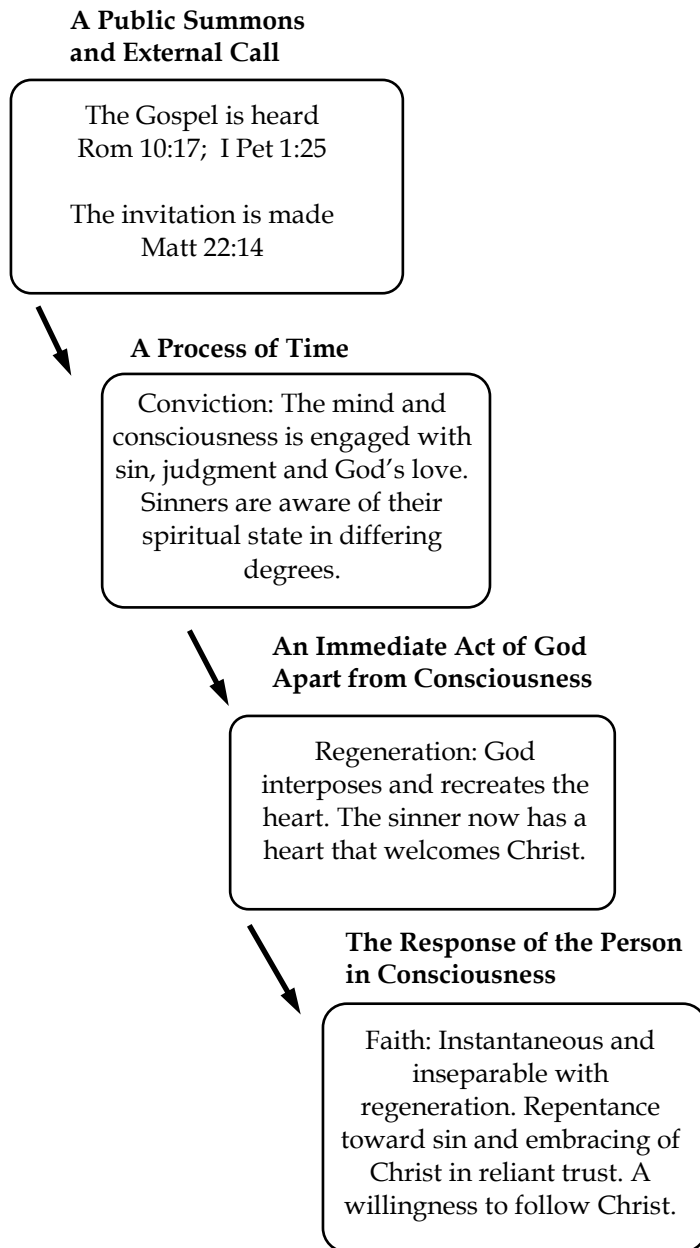
**What does it really mean  
to be born again?**

**Steve Fernandez**

© March 2001, April 2003 Steve Fernandez  
Printed by Permission

Published by  
EXALTING CHRIST PUBLISHING  
710 Broadway Street, Vallejo, CA 94590  
[www.cbcvallejo.org](http://www.cbcvallejo.org)  
email: [publications@cbcvallejo.org](mailto:publications@cbcvallejo.org)

The chart below, hopefully will illustrate the process in which God sovereignly and with love and mercy calls a person to salvation.



# Contents

**Chapter One** ..... 4

The Significance of Regeneration: A Crucial Truth

**Chapter Two** ..... 10

The Necessity of Regeneration: Sin, Depravity and the Gospel

**Chapter Three** ..... 17

The Character of Regeneration: Radical Renewal

**Chapter Four** ..... 25

The Consequences of Regeneration: Changed Lives and Sin in the Church

**Chapter Five** ..... 34

The Order of Regeneration: Conviction, Regeneration and Saving Faith

**Chapter Six** ..... 41

The Implications of Regeneration: Evangelism, Discipleship and Counseling

**Notes & Charts** ..... 48

## CHAPTER ONE

## The Significance of Regeneration: A Crucial Truth

In a country where almost half of the adults claim to be “born again,” it is obvious that there is great confusion about the meaning of regeneration.<sup>1</sup> This misunderstanding is widespread within the evangelical church. The concept has been so weakened and diluted of its biblical meaning that people without any concrete evidence of lasting spiritual change are routinely regarded as being “born again Christians.”

The unbroken sinfulness and rebellion of professing Christians is commonly explained by the fact that they have not yet “surrendered” to Christ. The result of all this is that there has been a devaluing of the radical nature of God’s renewing work. As we shall see, the new birth (or regeneration, to use the theological term) is a radical change of the core disposition and nature of a person that fundamentally transforms both their attitudes and behavior for life.

In this study, I will look at several key aspects of regeneration. I will begin by looking at the critical importance of rightly understanding the biblical teaching regarding regeneration. Next I will discuss the necessity of regeneration because of man’s depraved sinful condition. After that I will examine the characteristics and nature of regeneration, followed by a look into the unfailing consequences and evidences of

### The Biblical View of Regeneration

A direct creative act of God apart from the consciousness of the passive recipient.

A recreating of the core nature and disposition of a person that renews the heart and the will in a Godward direction.

A pervasive change in the nature that inevitably shows itself in a new life, with a spirit of obedience to Christ and submission to Scripture.

A breaking of the reigning power of sin as the dominant tendency of the nature.

The basis of saving faith. It gives to saving faith the element of a new will and allegiance toward Christ. It gives to saving faith a heart and willingness to obey. Saving faith is an expression of the whole person not just the intellect.

### The Popular View of Regeneration

The power and persuasion of the truth enlightening the mind, in which the person somehow jointly cooperates in their new birth.

The giving of a new capacity that is added alongside the old nature but does not fundamentally change the core disposition of the person.

A giving of a new inclination and nature inferior in tendency to the old nature.

A change in nature that may or may not show itself in a life of obedience. A nature less dominant and prevailing than the old nature that remains.

A change that only gives a limited desire to follow Christ but not necessarily an active willingness to follow Christ.

A result of saving faith. Saving faith is thus not an expression of the whole entire renewed person, but only of an enlightened mind. Saving faith is not the whole renewed man receiving Christ, but an enlightened understanding of truth about Christ. Faith has no element of the will and allegiance.

method was sealed by the Holy Spirit in the conviction and conversion of a considerable number of persons, at various times and in different places in that part of the county. Dallimore, 417.

The state of the church today parallels, in many ways, the church of Tennant's time. In many ways it congratulates itself on increased attendance, apparently unaware that a diluted gospel has filled many churches with evangelical unregenerates. As in Tennant's day, the need is for a message that will cause many to be, as Tennant said, "awakened out of their security."

regeneration in a person's life. The relationship between regeneration and faith will be examined in chapter five. In the closing chapter, I will discuss the practical ramifications of what we have learned about this great work of the Holy Spirit.

### **Regeneration Is Crucial Because of the Nature of Salvation**

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself stressed this in His encounter with Nicodemus. Jesus told this self-righteous Pharisee, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). And then again He said, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." To see involves comprehension and understanding. To enter involves access to and enjoyment of. Christ stated the same idea in two different ways to emphasize the fact that no one will be saved unless God intervenes and recreates them with a new birth. Heaven and hell, then, are the issues! Therefore it is imperative that our understanding of regeneration is what the Bible teaches. A sub-biblical doctrine of regeneration has grave consequences. First and foremost is that it leads to false assurance. People believe, and are encouraged by others to believe, that they are saved when in fact their continually disobedient lifestyle should warrant no such assurance (I John 2:4, 5).

The issue is this: does regeneration simply impart divine life as an added capacity alongside

the old nature, which may or may not effect radical change? Or does regeneration impart divine life that fundamentally reworks and recreates a person's core nature so that a new disposition and behavior inevitably follows?

My thesis is that the biblical and historical Christian position is that regeneration actually breaks and dethrones the general controlling power of sin so that the believer's basic life-direction is now away from self and sin and toward God and holiness. Anything less is sub-biblical and will lead to false assurance and a discounting of what constitutes a true Christian. It will also help populate churches with people like those Christ spoke of when He said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name cast out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:22, 23). Christ says there will be many who sincerely believe they are saved, who hold to right beliefs about the person and work of Christ, who do things in His name (in the church and out), but manifest their lost condition by their disobedient lives. Christ characterizes them as those who lack a heart which "does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21), but which rather "practice lawlessness." In other words regeneration, the root of obedience and holiness, has never taken place. Their desperate appeal to their works and profession of faith in the final analysis means nothing to Christ. It is my belief that the present-day evangelical church is filled with such self-deluded people, even in leadership positions.

disposed, will be speaking peace to them: he will be like the false prophets, saying, Peace, Peace, where there is no peace. So men will be hardened. It is a dismal thing to give men sleep potions and make them sleep the sleep of death." Iain Murray, 131.

3. R.C. Sproul, addressing the common practice of classifying people as carnal Christians, writes, "Here the carnal Christian is one who is said to believe in Christ but lives a life of consistent carnality, giving no evidence of the fruit of the Spirit. This represents a fatal contradiction in terms. Such a person may not be called a carnal Christian, he must be considered a carnal non-Christian. If a person manifests a life of pure and consistent carnality he is no Christian. He has not the Spirit of Christ living in him. It is a flat impossibility to be born of the Spirit and have no change in one's life. A Christian with no fruit is simply not a Christian." R.C. Sproul, *Pleasing God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publications, 1988), 153.
4. Gilbert Tennant's preaching in New England in the 1730s shook a slumbering, self-satisfied church. His account reads: "After I was raised up to health, I examined many about the grounds of their hope of salvation, which I found in most to be nothing but as the sand; with such I was enabled to deal faithfully and earnestly, in warning them of their danger, and urging them to seek converting grace. By this method many were awakened out of their security; and of those, divers were to all appearance effectually converted; but some that I spoke plainly to were prejudiced. And here I would have it observed, that as soon as an effectual door was opened, I found many adversaries, and my character was covered with unjust reproaches, which through Divine goodness did not discourage me in my work.

"I did then preach much upon Original sin, repentance, the nature and necessity of conversion, in a close, examinatory and distinguished way; laboring in the meantime to sound the trumpet of God's judgments, and alarm the secure by the terrors of the Lord, as well as to affect them by other topics of persuasion: which

The important thing to note is the realization that a sinner is brought to see and feel his need. There is a process (very quickly or over a period of time) in which there is a consciousness of the guilt that sin incurs. Without recognizing this reality, conversions will often be superficial.

- Jonathan Edwards knew that in his words it was important not to “take every religious pang and enthusiastic conceit for saving conversion.” True conviction must be experienced. He writes, “When awakenings first begin, their consciences are commonly most exercised about their outward course, or other acts of sin; but afterwards are much more burdened with a sense of heart-sins, the dreadful corruption of their nature, their enmity against God, the pride of their hearts, their unbelief, their rejection of Christ, the stubbornness and obstinacy of their wills: and the like.” Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970) Vol. 1, 422, 423.

## Chapter Six

- John Piper, writing on this common practice of “making decisions” or telling someone they are saved because of some outward act, says, “Could it be that we are so bent on having immediate, measurable results that we have defined the gospel and evangelism in a way that enables people to understand and respond even without spiritual comprehension and heart change? I fear this is largely why we are so weak as a church. The very foundations have been laid wrongly.” Piper, 289.
- Prior to the first awakening in Northhampton, Massachusetts, Solomon Stoddard, Jonathan Edwards’ grandfather and predecessor, lamented the problem of assuming too quickly that someone is saved. Note his concern: “A man that knows there must be work of preparation will be careful how he encourages others (to believe) that they are in Christ; he will inquire how God has made a way for their receiving of Christ; but another that is a stranger to it, will be ready to take all for gold that glitters, and if he sees men religiously

## Regeneration is Crucial Because of the Nature Of Grace

The biblical teaching on regeneration is also central to the doctrine of grace. It destroys and discredits any attempt at salvation by a “works righteousness.”

There probably has never been a person more assured that his own works would earn his way to heaven than Nicodemus. Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, was steeped in his law keeping as a basis of righteousness before God. In fact, he had achieved prominence even among the most religious and dedicated of law workers. Jesus Himself referred to him as “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10). Yet Christ totally discredited his efforts.

His purpose with Nicodemus (as with the entire Sermon on the Mount) was to show that external righteousness is totally inadequate. All the works of the unregenerate person are polluted by a corrupt heart. They are as filthy rags in the sight of God (Isaiah 64:6). Christ’s words are a sweeping rejection of Nicodemus and his entire life of law works and of any others like him as well.

Christ’s analysis of man’s sin is that he has a double problem. He is not only under condemnation legally, but his very nature is corrupted morally. He not only needs his judicial guilt removed, but he also needs his heart depravity replaced. He not only needs a pardon for his sins, but also a purification from his sinfulness. Christ makes it very clear that a person must come to grips with their corrupted heart.

This is exactly what Nicodemus and the Pharisees refused to do. They evaluated themselves only by the external, giving no concern to the state of their inner heart and thoughts. Yet Christ dictates that heaven is barred from a person whose heart is left in its natural corrupted and unrenewed state. The author of Hebrews stated the same basic idea like this, "Pursue sanctification without which no man will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). The sanctification here is a practical holiness. We do not pursue positional holiness; this is given to us. The context clearly speaks of a practical growth in holiness without which no one will see the Lord. This is fundamentally in principle what the Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus. Man does not just need his guilt pardoned, he needs his nature purified. The root must be transformed to bring forth the new fruit, or he will not see heaven. Practical holiness is nothing more nor less than the inevitable outcome of the mighty working of the "washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

So while Christ discounts law works for salvation, He demands a renewed heart instead. This is of course something completely beyond the capacity of man to accomplish, and Nicodemus knew it. There must be a washing (I Corinthians 6:11)—a purification (I Peter 1:22) of the inner man—by God's own creative power. Without it, there is no salvation.

We are saved by grace, through faith, plus nothing (Ephesians 2:8). However, where there is faith there is regeneration, and where there is regeneration there is the new life that follows (I John 3:7-10). Any other teaching misrepresents Scripture and gives false assurance. A correct

unto holiness.' The holiness of Christ is not a thing to follow; I mean, if we look at it imputatively. That we have at once; it is given to us the moment we believe. The righteousness of Christ is not to be followed; it is bestowed upon the soul in the instant when it lays hold of Christ Jesus. This is another kind of holiness. It is, in fact, as every one can see who chooses to read the connection, practical, vital holiness which is the purport of this admonition. It is conformity to the will of God, and obedience to the Lord's command. It is, in fine, the Spirit's work in the soul, by which a man is made like God, and becomes a partaker of the divine nature, being delivered from the corruption which is in the would through lust. No straining, no hacking at the text can alter it. There it stands, whether men like it or not. There are some who, for special reasons best known to themselves, do not like it, just as no thieves ever like policemen or gaols; yet there it stands, and it means no other than what it says: 'Without holiness,' — practical, personal, active, vital holiness — 'no man shall see the Lord.'" C. H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1978) Vol. 50, 457.

### Chapter Five

1. Iain Murray, writing of Jonathan Edwards and Gilbert and William Tennant, said, concerning their preaching and their concept of the conviction of the Holy Spirit: "But they also believed that it was God's usual way and manner, in bestowing grace, to work in sinners prior to their regeneration in order to reveal their false security and bring them to conscious emptiness and need.... Such conviction in their view is not a qualification which entitles a sinner to believe, nor can it savingly separate a man from sin, but it brings those who are destined for salvation to the acknowledgment of their need of mercy." Edwards' own words were that men have to be so dealt with that "their conscience stares them in the face and they begin to see their need of a priest and a sacrifice." Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards – A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 127-129.



6:14, “What then is the connection between this fourteenth verse and verses 12 and 13. Some say that this is a command. They read it this way, ‘Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin; but yield yourselves unto God as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin must not be allowed to have dominion over you.’ That, it seems to me, is one of the false expositions of this verse. It is not a command.... It does not merely inform me of the results that will accrue to me if I carry out and apply the exhortations. No, Paul is telling me to do these things because of what is true of me now and will be true of me in the future. He really tells us that this will not happen to us because it will not be allowed to happen. ‘Sin (says the Apostle) shall not have dominion over you’—it will not be allowed to have dominion over you.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans Chapter Six* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 179, 180.

#### Chapter Four

1. Charles Spurgeon addressed this fact in a sermon preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in 1862. He clearly saw the tendency to minimize the words of the text. Listen to his words: “There has been a desperate attempt made by certain Antinomians to get rid of the injunction which the Holy Spirit here means to enforce. They have said that this is the imputed holiness of Christ. Do they not know, when they so speak, that, by an open perversion, they utter that which is false? I do not suppose that any man in his senses can apply that interpretation to the context, ‘Follow peace with all men, and holiness.’ Now, the holiness meant is evidently one that can be followed like peace; and it must be transparent to any ingenuous man that it is something which is the act and duty of the person who follows it. We are to follow peace; this is practical peace, not the peace made for us, but ‘the fruit of righteousness which is sown in peace of them that make peace.’ We are to follow holiness—this must be practical holiness; the opposite of impurity, as it is written, ‘God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but

profession of faith is meaningless in the context of continual, unbroken sinfulness, whether in or out of the church. The word “continual” is chosen carefully. Christians can sin, even grievously. This cannot be denied. The issue, however, is not sin, per se. The issue is the unbroken pattern of sin and rebellion of those who profess to be Christians, even leaders in the church, and the casual assumption that such people are saved.

The church must return to a biblical doctrine of regeneration or our churches will become increasingly filled with those who can recite all the right doctrine, while having no heart for obedience to Christ, the real evidence of new life. People with ongoing lifestyles of sin will continue to be quickly regarded as saved and casually assured that they are. No thought will be given to the fact that their continual inability to submit to God’s Word and obey the commands of Christ may very well indicate their lost state.<sup>2</sup> The church, rather than casually assuming someone’s salvation and giving assurance where there is a continual inability to follow Christ’s commands, must once again heed Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves, or do you not recognize this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you unless indeed you fail the test” (II Corinthians 13:5). Paul obviously assumed that the presence of Christ within meant a new life demonstrated without. Any other teaching is defective with no biblical basis.

## CHAPTER TWO

## The Necessity of Regeneration: Sin, Depravity and the Gospel

The Lord Jesus Christ calls for a new birth. Apart from God's recreating work of regeneration, no one will enter or see the kingdom of heaven (John 3:3, 5). Christ's call for regeneration is understood in light of two realities about man's sinful condition.

### Man's Inborn Sin and Depravity

According to Scripture, man is born with a sin-corrupted nature, depraved in his essential being. David, when acknowledging his double sin of adultery and murder, said, "Behold I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). He recognized the truth that man's nature is conceived in sin. He is born with a disposition toward evil and rebellion against God. Job said, "Man who is born of woman is short lived and full of turmoil, who can make clean out of unclean?" Solomon said, "Who can say 'I am pure, I have cleansed my heart?'" (Proverbs 20:9). The biblical teaching is that man, from the point of conception, is morally unclean and depraved in his fundamental nature.

Man's depravity is essentially a heart attitude and disposition toward God. It finds its primary expression in his response to God's person and

brings a dominant, prevailing tendency toward righteousness. This renewal is not a complete or total renewal because sin remains extensively but not dominantly. A born-again believer can sin but he cannot live out his life in sin (I John 3:9).

6. Robert Dabney, the great theologian of the nineteenth century, states, "Regeneration works a prevalent, but not absolute revolution, in the moral disposition regulative of the Christians motives.... Regeneration established a new and prevalent (though not exclusive) law of disposition." Robert Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 676.

Notice J. I. Packer's description of the change brought about by the new birth: "They have been changed by the dethroning in them of that allergic, negative reaction to the law of God, which is called sin, and the creating in them...of a deep, sustained, desire to know God, draw near to God, seek God, find God, love God, honor God, serve God, please God." He goes on to say that "holiness is the naturalness of the spiritually risen man, just as sin is the naturalness of the spiritually dead man, and in pursuing holiness by obeying God, the Christian actually follows the deepest urge of his own renewed being." J. I. Packer, *Keep In Step With the Spirit* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell Company, 1984), 107.

The above quotes state clearly the belief that regeneration is not just an addition. It is a transformation: a basic renewal of the whole person.

7. Murray's comments on Romans 6:14 are worth noting. He says, "In Romans 6:14, Paul is not simply giving an exhortation, he is making an apodictic statement to the effect that sin will not have dominion over the person who is under grace. He gives exhortation in very similar language in the context, but here he is making an emphatic negative—'sin will not have dominion.'" John Murray, 142.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in the same vein, says of Romans

salvation is the basis of all second blessing, or two stage views of sanctification. The renewal of the nature, that Baxter rightly sees in Scripture (because it is taught there), does not occur subsequent to salvation, to a select few who meet some special conditions. It is the birthright and possession of all believers. The importance of accurately understanding regeneration cannot be overstated. Misunderstandings here are the basis of false ideas of sanctification and holiness.

3. Speaking of the nature and effects of regeneration, John Murray writes, "Hence the fundamental principle, the governing disposition, the prevailing character of every regenerate person is holiness—he is 'spiritual' and he delights in the law of the Lord after the inward man (I Corinthians 2:14, 15; Romans 7:22). This must be the sense in which John speaks of the regenerate person as not doing sin and as unable to sin (I John 3:9, 5:18). It is not that he is sinless (cf. I John 1:8; 2:1)." John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 142.
4. Murray's words on the reality of indwelling sin are, "There must be a constant and increasing appreciation that though sin still remains it does not have the mastery. There is a total difference between surviving sin and reigning sin, the regenerate in conflict with sin and the unregenerate complacent to sin. It is one thing for sin to live in us: it is another for us to live in sin. It is one thing for the enemy to occupy the capital; it is another for his defeated hosts to harass the garrisons of the kingdom." *Ibid.*, 145.

Murray's point is that Scripture clearly recognizes the remaining presence of indwelling sin in the believer. However, while recognizing its presence, it is always described as no longer having reigning power (Romans 8:22). The consequence is that the believer is not potentially new, he/she is actually new and it will be demonstrated in lifestyle (Romans 6:17-21).

5. By "nature," I mean a prevailing tendency, a dominant inclination and direction of life. By "renewal," I mean a radical, pervasive renewal of a person's nature that

authority. His fundamental disposition—his inmost desires and motives—are all inclined to evil and self-will, away from God. Paul says, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God" (Romans 3:10, 11). Jesus said, "You do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God" (John 5:44). Man simply will not seek God or His glory.

Man's evil nature is pervasive, affecting all his faculties. His will, intellect and emotions are predisposed toward sin and against God. He is an incorrigible rebel. Paul describes it this way, "The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God for it is not able to do so" (Romans 8:7). Man has a fundamental hostility to God. He is a hater of God (Romans 1:30; 5:10). He often cloaks it, hiding (either consciously or unconsciously) behind good deeds and religion. However, confront him with the claims of Christ and the authority of God, and he will manifest his true nature every time. The self-righteous Pharisees hid behind their religion and pseudo spirituality until confronted with Christ and His claims. However, they were intolerant of Christ's demand for repentance, and eventually revealed their true character when they nailed Christ, who was God incarnate, to the cross. The Bible says this is the latent heart attitude of all men toward God that simply has to be exposed and provoked to full expression.

Man's sinfulness and insubordination to God makes him, by nature, an object of God's wrath. Paul writes, "Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the

rest" (Ephesians 2:3).

Apart from any specific concrete acts, man arouses God's indignation. His very disposition to sin, his self-will, and his obstinate refusal to acknowledge God's rightful authority makes him a worthy object of God's wrath.

The concise biblical analysis of man's sin problem is in Ephesians 4:18: "being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart."

Paul traces man's root sin problem to his hard heart. The heart in this context is referring to the basic disposition, motives and desires that influence the mind. The problem is not just that man needs the truth or that he lacks spiritual understanding. The problem is a heart that will not receive the truth. Man has an inward non-susceptibility to God and His truth (I Corinthians 2:14). Affection for God simply cannot be excited within him. A woman's view of Black Widow spiders will never be changed by bringing them closer to her or giving her more information about them. Neither will man's view of God change by simply exposing him to truth. There must be regeneration: a mighty recreating of his root desires and nature. Jesus said the same thing Himself: "'This is the judgment, that the Light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds are evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed'" (John 3:19, 20). Jesus says that it is the heart's love of darkness that prevents men from coming to the light. Notice the problem is not a lack of light. In fact, in Jesus' case, the light was right before them. The reality of man's

helpful at this point. J. I. Packer gives a concise definition of the nature of regeneration. He states it negatively, then positively. He says, "It is not an alteration of, or addition to, the substance or faculties of the soul; but a drastic change wrought upon fallen human nature which brings a man under the effective dominion of the Holy Spirit and makes him responsive to God, which previously he was not." J. I. Packer, *God's Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 151.

B. B. Warfield describes it as "a radical and complete transformation wrought in the soul (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23) by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5; Ephesians 4:24), by virtue of which we become 'new men' (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10), no longer conformed to this world (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9) but in knowledge and holiness of the truth created after the image of God (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10; Romans 12:2)." B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1952), 351.

Both descriptions, in keeping with the biblical evidence, emphasize that regeneration is a "drastic" or "radical" transformation of the whole fallen human nature. The idea of a new nature added alongside the old simply is not involved.

2. J. Sidlow Baxter states perhaps the common view of regeneration in the church today: "...that besides the impartation of new life at regeneration, there may be renewal of our very nature, with all its inclinations, through entire sanctification." J. Sidlow Baxter, *His Deeper Work in Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 97.

Baxter limits the nature of regeneration to the impartation of life. While this is indeed a reality of regeneration, it limits its scope. It therefore diminishes its true character as a renewal of the nature. This leads Baxter to the conclusion that the nature of the believer will be renewed later in some second work of the Spirit. This diminished idea of regeneration and

## NOTES

### Chapter One

1. A recent poll states, "Forty-six percent of Americans describe themselves as born again. Thirteen percent say their conversion was sudden." *U.S. News and World Report*, 4 April 1994, 50.
2. Addressing the problem of false assurance, John Piper in a response to a letter from a friend says, "I am puzzled that you are so hesitant to consider that thousands of professing Christians are not saved, when this is what Jesus very strongly suggests was true in His day (Matthew 7:13, 14) and will be true at the end of the age—our day (Matthew 24:12, 13). We shrink back from calling anyone's assurance into question if they are a professing believer. And we shrink back from telling new believers anything about the demands of Jesus that would cause them to wonder if they are really saved. We are not in sync with Jesus or the epistles at this point." John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1991), 290, 291.

I agree with Piper. Because of a false idea of faith, a faith without moral resolve, and a defective view of regeneration, most, if not all, professions of faith are quickly accepted as genuine. This seems to be one of the characteristic features of American Evangelicalism and perhaps a main reason for its powerlessness.

To show how ingrained this thinking has become, think of how often statements such as the following are made concerning a person in flagrant sin, or with no spiritual interest: "Oh, he/she is saved! He/she accepted Christ, but has never surrendered, or been followed up, disciplined, found a good church, etc." Is this how Jesus or Paul would respond (Matthew 7:13-15; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5), in light of their view of the power of God exercised in salvation?

### Chapter Three

1. A description and definition of regeneration would be

spiritual depravity is that his mind cannot welcome truth that his inner disposition of heart detests.

Therefore, both Jesus and Paul are agreed. The root problem is a hard, God-hating heart. Therefore, the need is for the recreating and reworking of man's core nature through regeneration by God Himself.

### Man's Inability to Change

Man is helpless and incapacitated in his sin. He cannot bring himself out of it. Paul described man's state like this, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked...according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:1, 2). Man is dead in his sins. Obviously man's deadness is not physical, nor is it that he does not have the required faculties and capacities. His deadness is in the moral bent of his motives and will. His moral state is fixed in its alienation and hostility toward God.

Man is spiritually dead. There is no spark; there is nothing left to revive. A corpse does not initiate or even participate in its own resurrection. A body cannot reanimate itself. Man's moral bent is so fixed to evil and self-will that only a direct intervention of God can raise him out of it.

Man is spiritually blind. "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving that

they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3, 4). Darkness cannot dispel darkness. Turning on the light does not produce light to the blind. The eye blinded by cataracts cannot be restored simply by providing more light. The obstruction must be removed by the skillful hand of the surgeon. God must operate directly on man's moral nature. Only the mercy of God operating in regeneration will suffice. As Paul says, "God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)..." (Ephesians 2:4). The amazing marvel is that God has any concern for man, the defiant rebel that he is. God's love and mercy and His great saving work is only fully appreciated when man's self-willed, morally destitute state is fully understood.

### **The Heart of the Gospel**

The church must reclaim and reaffirm the doctrine of man's sinfulness. It must once again recognize that God does not approach men simply as men in the abstract. He deals with men as sinners, those in hostile, self-willed rebellion against His rightful authority. The church has ignored this fact to its own great peril.

The underlying spirit of self-will and resistance to the authority of God that characterizes man's nature has not been taken into account. People are flocking to churches to have their felt needs met while their core hostility

### **Definitions:**

*Regeneration:* the radical transformation of a person's nature, accomplished by the direct and immediate exertion of God's creative power, in conjunction with the gospel truth, by which the fundamental disposition, impulses and desires of the heart are made holy, so that the new tendency and life direction of the heart is away from self and sin and toward God and holiness.

*Effectual Calling:* the work of the Holy Spirit where He first convicts the sinner, engaging their mind and consciousness concerning sin and judgment, through the hearing of the gospel, making them aware of their guilt before God, and the love and mercy of God in Christ, and then interposes to directly recreate the heart and renew the will in regeneration so that the sinner of his own accord and under no coercion turns from sin and embraces Christ in reliant trust as his savior from sin.

power of the Holy Spirit, who alone is sufficient to overcome any sin. The emphasis on demon possession or the techniques of much *Christian psychology* often unwittingly promotes sin in unrepentant hearts that have yet to give unqualified allegiance to Jesus.

## Conclusion

It can be seen that a faulty view of the radical nature of the new birth has led to many abuses and excesses. False conversions and assurance have inundated the church. Professing Christians are confronted as if they could be demon possessed, and psychological techniques are borrowed from the world and practiced under the name of *Christian Psychology*. We have all of this in order to deal with the phenomena of legions of professing believers who know nothing of the Holy Spirit's delivering power; people who give lip service to Jesus but are unwilling and unable to give Him allegiance.<sup>4</sup> More often than not, these are people, who in another era and in other parts of the world in our day, would be seen as what they are: professors, but not possessors. These are people who follow Jesus from a distance; people to whom Jesus Himself will one day say, "Depart from me you who practice lawlessness, I never knew you."

to God is still unchanged and unchallenged. This is evidenced by the incapacity of multitudes of professing Christians to give true obedience and allegiance to Christ. The church has minimized the doctrine of the sinfulness of man. In its effort to *relate* culturally to man, it has only catered to his innate selfishness and self-will. Men quickly and casually give profession of faith to a message which ministers to their felt needs while also allowing them to remain unbowed in their sin and pride. Ignore or minimize these central doctrines of the gospel, and the church can expect to see a crop of tares among the wheat—people who outwardly parrot all the right things, but inwardly their pride is unbroken and their hostility to Christ's authority is unchanged. I believe this is what has occurred, and on a large scale, in the evangelical church in America today.

While congratulating herself on her new *insight* into reaching the culture through marketing, business techniques and *user-friendly* churches, the church of the 1990s has actually accommodated to the culture. Unwittingly, with its obsession to make Christianity palatable to a *baby boomer* culture, it has brought the world into the church in the legions of people who give lip service to Christ but whose unchanged hearts still cherish sin. The church must be indeed flexible within biblical principles as it ministers in our culture. We must never ignore the realities of man's sinfulness and his core heart hostility to the authority of Christ. We must never ignore the fact that the gospel assumes the sinful, self-will of men and God's merciful recreating work of regeneration.

Therefore, under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, the church must call men to

repentance and faith that only comes through regeneration. Anything less is to accommodate a culture that in its rebellion will not acknowledge its sin or the Lord's authority. But worse, failing to do so is to abandon the essence of true Christianity.

However, ongoing bondage to sin is more biblically assessed as an indication of an unregenerate state. In counseling such people, it should not be concluded that a true believer can be demon possessed. A correct, and even clearly enunciated, mental understanding of the gospel does not mean the person is saved. Satan can mimic biblical theology! Unhesitatingly accepting a person's word that they are saved (even when they seem so sure and convinced) while they have a continual inability to obey Christ may only foster deception. What is the alternative? Are we to conclude that salvation, the Scriptures and the power of the Holy Spirit and prayer are not sufficient to deliver from bondage? Many have indeed concluded this and looked for something more. A direct confrontation with demons or some technique from psychology is often said to be the answer. Instead of concluding that the *professing Christian* needs something more than the Word and the Spirit, the other alternative should be considered. Perhaps that person's profession of faith is false. The reigning power of sin and Satan is broken at salvation (Colossians 1:13; Acts 26:18-20). Does not Christ promise to set free (John 8:32-34)? Does not Paul say that the believer is no longer a slave of sin (Romans 6:14-18)? In scriptural terms, it seems to me that many cases of demon possession in professing believers are actually demon activity or possession in unregenerate people who are deluded about their spiritual state because of faulty theology.

It is my belief that many hours of counseling are expended with people looking for relief without repentance. For the truly born again Christian, it is only repentance that releases the



remembered that in salvation the Holy Spirit creates a new disposition. The will is renewed and is now directed to God and holiness. There are no Christians who are under the dominion of sin as a totally life-dominating power (Romans 6:14). Therefore, while Christians act carnally, no Christian can be classified as *carnal* in a permanent or characteristic sense.<sup>3</sup> Sanctification and spiritual growth, therefore, cannot be separated from regeneration and salvation. The reigning power of sin has been broken in the new birth (Romans 6:14, 18-20). The flesh is indeed incessant in its desires and often overcomes the Christian. However, its dominating strength has been broken. Sin is an aberration and temporary lapse in the overall growth of the Christian. The sanctification of the believer in an ultimate and final sense is not contingent on man's will (although the believer must continually be active in submitting to God). The pervasive nature of regeneration as well as God's active work in their life assures that sanctification will flow out of salvation. It is often assumed a person can be saved without manifesting it with growth in holiness. The fact is, if there is no growth in holiness, then there has been no new birth (Hebrews 12:14).

### *Counseling and Demonism*

One final area needs to be mentioned where faulty theology has led to faulty practice. Many counselors and pastors, in attempts to deal with professing Christians who remain in bondage to sin, have concluded that the answer to this dilemma must be found in demon possession or in the need for some insight from psychology.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The Character of Regeneration: Radical Renewal**

What happens in the new birth? That is, to what degree does the new birth change the human heart? I will try to show that the Bible teaches that regeneration radically and pervasively changes a person's essential nature. The Bible does not teach that the Christian possesses an "old nature" and a "new nature" as is commonly taught. He possesses a single nature, radically transformed, but with sin remaining as a vestige and remnant of the old man. Before regeneration sin was the dominant inclination of the heart. This is the description given of the miracle of the new birth. First it was revealed as a covenant promise in the Old Testament, and then it was proclaimed and affirmed in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Anything less is not full biblical regeneration. Anything less gives a diminished representation of God's work in the heart that leads to lowered expectations of holy living from professing Christians. Worse still, it leads to a false assurance to professing Christians who remain in sin.

This is not a matter of quibbling over theological definitions and meanings. Our understanding of the nature of the new birth has direct, practical effects in the life and ministry of the church.

## The Distinguishing Mark of the Christian

The new birth is the distinguishing mark of the Christian. A person becomes a Christian through the new birth. The words of the apostle John state this clearly: "By this, the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God [i.e., born of God] nor the one who does not love his brother" (I John 3:10). There is no ambiguity in regeneration. It does not make a person potentially new. It does not merely give him a new capacity. It makes him a new creation, and new conduct always follows. In John's words, it makes them "obvious." John even warns us about being deceived. He says, "Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous [through the new birth] just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil [unregenerate]" (I John 3:7). John recognizes that Christians can and do sin (I John 1:8-10). However, he also asserts that the basic life direction of the regenerate person is now away from self and sin and toward Christ and holiness (I John 3:4-10). If this is not true, John's words are not understandable and the "new creation" is not new in any real sense.

## The Fundamental Change of Nature

Regeneration is a supernatural quickening, a giving of life (Ephesians 2:4; John 5:25). God by His own power directly imparts divine life into the

inadequate follow-up. Much planning and energy is expended trying in vain to get professing Christians to follow Christ. The fact must be faced that, while follow-up is important, the problem more often than not is faulty, man-induced conversions. People are assumed to be saved because they prayed a prayer or went forward, but their unwilling heart reveals otherwise. Once again, it must be reiterated that the Holy Spirit works a new heart and a renewed will. In the New Testament they gladly received the apostles' teaching and willingly sought out fellowship. The demoniac of Gadara was sent home by Jesus (Luke 8:39) and the Ethiopian Eunuch was left to go on without Philip (Acts 8:39). Apparently it was taken for granted that truly saved people will have initiative and willingness to go on with Christ. While follow-up is important, it did not include pleading and begging people to do what they have no heart to do in the first place.

## *Sanctification and Growth*

Misunderstanding the nature of regeneration has also wrecked havoc in the area of sanctification. Because the new birth has been diluted of its full meaning, the concept of a carnal Christian has risen, which separates sanctification from regeneration. Obedience has been made the response of the minority, the select few who are surrendered to Christ. The rest are viewed as carnal Christians. However, the fact is that conversion is itself a surrender! Why call it a conversion if they are not converted? What are they converted to if their heart is not changed and their will is not redirected? It must be

either immediately, or at some point later, will refuse to follow Christ and he will turn back to the old life (Luke 8:13).

### *External Signs and Tokens of Salvation*

Another problem is that a person's salvation is too quickly judged by external things such as going forward at a meeting, raising the hand, or saying a prayer. The fact is that since the Holy Spirit works a willingness in the heart, the inward act of faith and complete trust in Christ can only be outwardly indicated by an immediate willingness to follow Christ! A person should never be told they are saved simply because of an external act!<sup>1</sup> It must be clearly indicated to them that their faith is real only if they have a heart that is now willing to follow and obey Christ. Telling people they are saved without clarifying in this way leads to a false assurance. It blinds those who are not actually saved to their need and calluses them in the future to the gospel.<sup>2</sup> Remember, a person unwilling to turn from sin and follow Christ is a person not yet brought to see their need and the desperateness of their state before God. This is a person not yet called by the Spirit.

### **Follow-Up and Sanctification**

A wrong concept of regeneration has caused great confusion in the area of follow-up as well. When new, professing Christians do not show a willingness to seek out Christian fellowship and pursue growth the problem is often attributed to

spiritually dead sinner. The person once dead to God is now alive and in living union with God and Christ.

The fact that regeneration quickens and makes alive is only part of the picture.<sup>2</sup> The central issue and point of controversy is the nature of the transformation that this quickening brings about.

The Bible describes regeneration as a fundamental change in a person's nature. It is described as a washing (I Corinthians 6:11), a purification (I Peter 1:23) and a renewal (Titus 3:5). Speaking of regeneration, Peter says, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God." Peter refers to the new birth as something by which you "purified your souls." Paul conveys the same idea when he says, "Such were some of you; but you were washed, you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (I Corinthians 6:11). Paul, when he says, "you have been washed," was speaking of something that has occurred to all the Christians, to all who were justified. In the context, the washing is a practical and personal change. It is the reason they are now former thieves, drunkards, etc. This washing is a reference to his renewing cleansing work of regeneration. He says it plainly in Titus 3:5: "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." These references clearly say that the new birth brings a deep and pervasive change to

the whole person. The inner man is purified, washed and renewed. Paul emphasizes this when he states, "Put on the new self which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of truth (Ephesians 4:24). "Created" is in the past tense. It states a fact, a present reality.

The moral nature of the Christian has undergone a broad-based transformation. What was before unrighteous and unholy is now fundamentally righteous and holy. Regeneration, of course, does not eliminate the reality of the remaining presence of indwelling sin and the ongoing struggle that this involves (Galatians 5:17). The biblical teaching of regeneration does not eliminate the need or reality of the ongoing transformation into Christ-likeness in spiritual growth. This is the basis of Paul's appeal to put on the new man. It does bring, however, a fundamental reconstruction of the hearts disposition.<sup>3</sup> To speak, as is commonly done, of a new nature being added beside the old nature or of a new capacity is to greatly diminish God's mighty renewing work. It is to speak of a regeneration that does not really regenerate but only counterbalances an old nature. This would be a new creation that is only potentially new. The Christian is not someone with a new nature and an old nature. The amazing reality of regeneration is that by God's own creative power there has been a transformation of the core nature itself. Indwelling sin does remain, but only as a deposed and inferior power.<sup>4</sup> In Hebrews 8:10 God says, "I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts." Notice the heart itself, the core nature<sup>5</sup> of the person, will be reformed. The Christian is now so constituted

## CHAPTER SIX

# **The Implications of Regeneration: Evangelism, Discipleship and Counseling**

The new birth is a central feature of God's saving work in the Christian. Faith, sanctification and growth in Christ-likeness flow out of and take on their character from it. To misunderstand the nature of the new birth is to misunderstand salvation itself, in all its facets including sanctification. The following are areas where a faulty view of regeneration has adversely affected ministry in the church.

### **Evangelism and Witnessing**

#### *Manipulation and Pressure Tactics in Evangelism*

Perhaps the most common abuse is that people are pressured to pray a prayer or go forward at a meeting, short-circuiting the work of the Holy Spirit and substituting a man-produced conversion in its place. In salvation the Holy Spirit works upon and renews the heart; therefore a person will be willing to come to Christ. If a person must be pressured in any way to come to Christ then God's Spirit has not finished His calling. Such conversions usually prove to be faulty and non-saving. The person

God. In his first letter John says, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (I John 5:1). John attributes belief in Christ to the fact of the past occurrence (the perfect tense) of the new birth.

## Conclusion

Salvation is the work of God on behalf of man, not the work of man on behalf of God. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated and affirmed than in the relationship of faith to the new birth. The sovereignty of God in salvation is clearly demonstrated. Moreover the love and mercy of God is greatly extolled. It is His love and mercy that is the reason why, as Paul says, "even when we were dead in our transgressions made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Ephesians 2:5). Paul declares that our salvation can be attributed to God's sovereign act of regeneration. His words are, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Notice that we were saved by regeneration. The reason we exercised saving faith, the reason we have come to salvation, is God Himself, in His love, interposed and regenerated and renewed our hearts. It is to Him that all the glory goes! Truly all boasting has been removed. Truly it is His doing. Truly we can say, "Salvation is of the Lord!"

that he is someone who has a heart which the Bible says will "cause you to walk in my statutes and you will be careful to observe my ordinances" (Ezekiel 36:27).

## The Promise Proclaimed by Christ

Jesus spoke of this cleansing renewal of the new birth in his encounter with Nicodemus when He spoke of being "born of the water and of the Spirit" (John 3:5). In addressing the issue most pertinent to Nicodemus' need, Jesus was most likely making reference to the Old Testament promise of the future work of the Holy Spirit.

The prophet Ezekiel said, "'Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh'" (Ezekiel 36:25, 26). Ezekiel foretold of a work of God that would miraculously change the human heart. He used the analogy of the sprinkling of water to convey the idea of the cleansing of man's inner moral pollution. As a product of God's recreating power, there would be a fundamental remaking of a person's nature from moral filth to moral uprightness.<sup>6</sup>

Nicodemus, as the teacher of Israel, would have known this and realized his need of it. In fact it was for this reason that Jesus admonished him for his ignorance (John 3:12). Nicodemus had no consciousness of his need. He was completely blind to his inborn moral corruption. Jesus,

therefore, flatly told him that his nature needed to be washed by the new birth. He must, as the prophet foretold, be sprinkled with water, the water of the Spirit's cleansing in regeneration.

This transforming character of regeneration is a prominent theme of Scripture. The Old Testament promised and anticipated it. Christ proclaimed and demanded it and the Apostles Paul and Peter affirmed and elaborated on it. It was, in fact, that which clearly defined and characterized Paul's ministry. Paul stated this when he said, "For neither is circumcision or uncircumcision anything, but a new creation" (Galatians 6:15). In Paul's thinking the new creation, people radically and pervasively changed by God's power, is the distinguishing feature of the saving power of the gospel. Anything else is a sham—a so-called new birth, a new creation in name only.

### **The Practical Impact on Ministry**

The failure to understand the true nature of regeneration has led to grave consequences in many churches. Often there is no clear line of demarcation between the Christian and non-Christian. This has resulted in the common assumption that everyone who makes a profession of faith in Christ is a Christian. There is a widespread assumption in the church today that a recipient of God's resurrection power in the new creation can remain unchanged; at times throughout an entire lifetime (Ephesians 1:17-19). This has resulted in an amazing accommodation to the so-called *non-committed Christian*. A great

the new birth. Paul says that God "is the one who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6). Instantly at the point of the new birth, and inseparable from it, the sinner, who was before convicted but unwilling to come, exercises saving faith and gladly welcomes Christ. While under conviction, the person formerly uninterested in spiritual things is now conscious of his sin and is aware of Christ's love and his own worthiness of judgment. However, he is unable and unwilling to commit himself to Christ. Therefore, God sovereignly interposes and by His creative power directly renews and recreates his heart. Instantly and inseparably the sinner now renounces sin and exercises trusting, reliant faith as he gladly embraces Christ.

There are a number of Scriptures which show this relationship of the new birth and saving faith. Christ said, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God...unless one is born...of the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, 5). Clearly Christ says no one can enter the kingdom, which must be entered through faith, unless he is born again. Regeneration must precede faith which is itself a pre-condition of entering the kingdom. John, after saying, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12), goes on to explain the source of their faith when he says, "who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (1:13). In other words, the faith exercised in receiving Christ is the result of the fact they were born not of the will of man but the will of

everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:19-20). Jesus says men will not come to the light because they love darkness. That is, their heart's basic disposition and its love of evil is the barrier to coming to the light. More light is not the answer. The need is for a new heart, a heart that wants the light. The convicting work of the Holy Spirit is preparatory. It engages the mind and causes people to listen, to think, and to become conscious of their guilt and of Christ's love. However, because of their hard heart and its love of darkness, they will not come. Regeneration must occur. The heart must be renewed before the will and the mind receive Christ and exercise saving faith.

### Saving Faith

Faith is exercised as the immediate and inseparable result of the new birth. While faith is the byproduct of regeneration, it is not separated in time from it. It occurs instantly and inseparably. The new birth is the direct creative act of God. The word of God is the instrument (I Peter 1:2), and the Holy Spirit is the agent, but the new birth itself is totally the work of God acting directly upon and in the person. Man is a passive recipient of God's sovereign creative renewing of the heart. James says, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth" (James 1:18). John says we were "born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). It is God who is the initiator. He is the source and giver of our faith through

deal of ministry is now directed toward professing Christians whose heart attitude toward Christ bears all the marks of those still in their sins. There are preaching and evangelistic methods consciously designed for people whose hearts detest Christ's rightful claims and refuse to give Him allegiance. There are counseling philosophies and methods for professing Christians struggling in sin which often accommodate the sin and rebellion of an unregenerate heart. Some church growth principles unwittingly cater to fleshly desires for the security of religion and a pacified conscience apart from submission to the rightful rule of Christ.

The Bible knows nothing of regenerate people who do not change. God's saving work truly breaks the hold of sin and renews the inner man. God so restructures man's governing disposition that sin is now a deposed guerrilla futilely waging war against the new monarch. Sin may gain control for a while. There will be struggles and conflict, but its hold is temporary and futile. Paul says it this way, "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14, NKJV). Notice, Paul does not say sin *should* not have dominion. He says emphatically, sin *shall* not have dominion.<sup>7</sup> The operation of God's grace, which includes regeneration, breaks the hold of sin. The Lord Jesus Himself said, "So if the Son makes you free [from sin], you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). What else could he mean except that the controlling power of sin is broken in the work of regeneration and salvation? To teach anything less is to legitimize empty professions and encourage tickling ears instead

of true gospel ministry (I Timothy 4:1-4). This, I believe, is happening in many evangelical churches today.

There is widespread acknowledgment of the miraculous nature of regeneration in evangelical churches today. But too often, practice contradicts what is taught. There are professing Christians who manifest no love for Christ's commands and sin regularly, even scandalously, without true remorse. And yet in the minds of many, this does not arouse even the slightest suspicion that they may be unregenerate. We must not compromise the Bible's clear teaching on the new birth in the midst of an epidemic of empty profession in the church. When God's mighty creative power operates in a life it is changed forever. The words of the Apostle John must speak with full force as God's standard in the church: "And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says I know Him and does not keep His commandments is a liar and the truth is not in Him" (I John 2:3, 4).

## Regeneration

There are two Scriptures that speak to this issue and shed light on why the Holy Spirit's work in bringing a person to Christ must also include regeneration. In Ephesians 4:18, Paul says that the unsaved are "darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart." Paul states that man's problem goes beyond the darkened mind to a hardened heart. In other words, the mind will not receive and act upon what the inner disposition of heart detests. For a person to become willing to renounce sin and receive Christ, the heart's disposition must be changed. As was said previously, a woman's view of spiders will not be changed by bringing the spider closer or giving more information about them. Likewise, God will not be more inviting and appealing to a sinner simply because he knows more about Him. If you are going to truly and fully change the mind so that it welcomes Christ then you must also change the heart, and this is not conviction; this is regeneration. The problem is not simply that man needs enlightenment, although that is true. The greater problem is a heart that will not receive and welcome the truth. Conviction is preparatory and preliminary. It brings the sinner to a certain point at which he will not turn and receive Christ. God must do a further work in regeneration, or there will be no embracing of Christ in saving faith. Jesus says, "This is the judgment, that the Light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than Light, for their deeds were evil. For



sinfulness, the person and work of Christ, and God's judgment. He causes them to listen to, and muse upon, the spiritual truths of their personal sin, unbelief toward Christ and eternal judgment. The person becomes aware, and even concerned, of their need to turn to Christ and of their guiltiness before God. Conviction however is not efficacious. That is, it does not bring a person to saving faith.<sup>1</sup> It may eventually lead to saving faith, but in and of itself it is not enough to bring a person to Christ. Apart from the further work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, a sinner will not turn to Christ. The Greek term for conviction in John 16:8 is the same word translated *reprove* in Matthew 18:15 where Christ says, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you." Christ refers to a situation where a person is reprovved and convicted, yet does not listen. The point is that the term in and of itself does not necessarily convey that the convicting or reprovving is effective. It is much like the drunkard, who knows drinking will eventually destroy him, who knows what he ought to do, and who even believes he deserves what he will bring upon himself, but nonetheless will not and cannot give it up. People under conviction know the gospel is true, know that Christ is the sin bearer, and often are acutely aware they deserve judgment, but because of a hardened heart they will not turn to Christ.<sup>2</sup>

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **The Consequences of Regeneration: Changed Lives and Sin in the Church**

Because of the radical nature of the new birth, any and all who are born again are inevitably characterized by life transforming change. This is a recurring theme of the Lord Jesus Christ and the New Testament authors. There is no confusion or hesitation in their minds as there seems to be in churches today. Of course, the evidences of the new birth are not perfect nor the same in every case. Christians are continually growing and maturing at different rates. Moreover, because of disobedience and the deceptions of Satan, there are periods of varying lengths in which the flesh and indwelling sin gains the upper hand. The fact of the matter, however, is that all believers are marked by specific changes and characteristics. Without them the salvation of a person may be questioned. A right doctrinal understanding of the gospel is not enough. A profession of trusting in Christ alone may be rooted in a deceived heart that intellectualizes the gospel with a non-saving faith (James 2:14-22). Over and over the New Testament warns of false professors—people who have the right intellectual faith, who claim and believe they are saved, but whose lives prove otherwise (Matthew 7:23). Paul's word to Titus is just one example; he said, "They profess to know God but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any

good deed" (Titus 1:16). It is with purpose and design that the Bible clearly sets forth the characteristics and marks of the new birth. They distinguish the phony from the real or, as Paul says, the professors from the possessors.

### **The Principle of Likeness**

It was the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who first asserted that there is a necessary connection between the new birth and an observable lifestyle change. His words addressed to Nicodemus are, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). The flesh, when used ethically in the New Testament, refers to human nature, bound and under the dominion of sin (Romans 8:6-9). Jesus says the flesh always produces the flesh. Human birth always produces another fallen sin-dominated nature. Jesus is stressing the fact that man cannot transcend and rise out of his own sinfulness. Always, and in every case, the flesh produces the flesh. None can and none will, apart from God's intervention, escape this reality. Jesus goes on to speak of the work of the Holy Spirit when He says, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The Holy Spirit, like the flesh, always produces after His nature and likeness. The regenerated person, born of the Holy Spirit, will himself be characterized by the qualities and characteristics of the Spirit. This too is inevitable with no exceptions. Jesus stated it clearly, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." In this sense the spiritual realm is no different from the physical. Like always produces like.

out in calling a person to salvation and the central place of the new birth in that process.

### **Proclamation**

The initial step is the external call through the preaching and sharing of the gospel (I Peter 1:25). In the parable of the marriage feast (Matthew 22:1-13), the Lord Jesus Christ spoke of many who were called and invited by the king to a wedding feast but who refused to come (22:3). Jesus when concluding the parable explained the refusal by saying, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14). The external call is an invitation to receive salvation that may or may not be accepted. The external call to salvation occurs when a person is brought under the hearing of the gospel. This is where the process begins.

### **Conviction**

Next is the conviction process. Being brought under the hearing of the word of God, the person is then also exposed to the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit. Jesus referred to this work of the Spirit when he said, "And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). Conviction is a term with various shades of meaning but the basic idea is to "find fault, to call to account or to expose." Conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit where He engages the mind and consciousness of a person to consider their

## CHAPTER FIVE

## **The Order of Regeneration: Conviction, Regeneration and Saving Faith**

Perhaps in no other area is the new birth more misunderstood than in the matter of its relationship to saving faith and personal salvation. The relationship of the new birth to saving faith has direct bearing on our concept of evangelism, discipleship, follow-up and other important matters in the ministry of the church.

In this chapter the order in which God brings sinners, dead in their sins, to personal salvation and life in Christ will be considered. In the Bible the entire process is referred to under the general term of "calling." Paul says, "And these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified" (Romans 8:30). Notice that Paul moves from predestined to called to justified. The entire divine work of personal salvation is described under the comprehensive idea of being "called." God not only invites to salvation (the general external call heard by many through preaching the gospel); He also effectively brings specific people to saving relationship with Himself. This call is the internal or effectual call. It is an inward work accomplished by God Himself through the agency of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of the Word that actually results in salvation. The following describes the process that God works

The Lord's teaching here is the basis of the same teaching found elsewhere throughout the New Testament. The many references in Paul's epistles where he gives warning to those who practice unrighteousness are examples (Galatians 5:21; I Corinthians 6:9). In Ephesians 5:5-6 he warns, "For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." He says we are to "know with certainty" and we are not to be "deceived...with empty words." Why such finality and certainty? First it must be pointed out that he is not teaching works salvation or that a person can lose their salvation. He would not contradict what he teaches so clearly elsewhere. He is simply reiterating what Christ first taught. Like always produces like. People who have an ongoing lifestyle of the sins listed have not been born again. Do not be deceived, he says. They are not saved and never have been. Paul says they do not have an inheritance in the kingdom of God. The reference to the kingdom of God recalls the words of Christ to Nicodemus about not entering and not seeing the kingdom of God (John 3:3-5). Paul is not referring to rewards in the kingdom but to entering it. This is obvious for the alternative is not the lack of reward and degrees of inheritance but "the wrath of God coming upon the sons of disobedience."

Another example is from the book of Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews says we are to "pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the

Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). The author is not talking about positional sanctification and holiness, for that is not something we pursue. It is given to us at salvation.<sup>1</sup> He is simply stating that holiness must be demonstrated in a person's life as a proof of salvation and the new birth. The ongoing absence of holiness proves that a person has not been saved and therefore will not see the Lord. We seem to have here another allusion to the Lord's words, this time from the Sermon on the Mount where He said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). It can be seen that Paul and the author of Hebrews reiterated and reaffirmed the basic principle asserted by the Lord Jesus Christ. "Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit." Like always produces like. The birth of the Spirit produces the life of the Spirit. Without it there has been no salvation.

### **The Products of the New Birth**

The clearest description of the evidences and marks of the new birth are in the first epistle of John. He describes a number of prominent features that characterize those truly born of God. John, using solemn words and speaking with certainty says, "Little children let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose that He might destroy the works of the devil" (I John 3:7, 8). Once again we are warned not to be deceived about people who claim to have received Christ, but whose lives are

doubts about his soul. Remember John was one of those who had been duped by Judas. He remembered well the tell-tale signs in Judas' life—the obsession with money and power that was cloaked by a supposed concern for the poor and his irritations with Jesus over His strong teaching on repentance, sin and judgment. These same characteristics were in Diotrephes.

The message and call for discernment in the church today is clear. People may know the Bible, know doctrine, and even understand the gospel, while their heart knows nothing of submission to Christ and His interests. The church must wake up to this reality in its midst. The church must no longer glibly and casually assume that people are saved, even leaders, when their lives are so conspicuously void of those things that Scripture says mark those who are of God. The words and tests of Christ and the apostles must set the standard. This was the case in the early church. It was the case during the Reformation and during the Great Awakening. It must once again set the standard today.

Testament warns and gives examples of this as well. John, for example refers to the man Diotrephes (III John 9). He was an imminent leader in the church. Diotrephes, however, was a man who, John says, “loves to be first among them,” and as a result he continually opposed apostolic authority. In John’s words, “He does not accept what we say” (III John 9). In today’s terms, he would be a person who refuses to submit to the authority and commands of Scripture and to those whom God has put in authority over him. Because this man’s behavior was habitual and continual, John considered it a distinct possibility that he was unregenerate. John, with reference to him, said, “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God” (III John 11). How many are there like this in today’s churches? Men and women who in their heart resist and detest authority but who outwardly go along with the program. Often these present day Diotrephes go on into positions of deacons, elders, and pastors. If this occurred in apostolic times and ministry, are we so naive as to think that it does not occur in evangelical churches today?

The ongoing pattern of a defiant, insubordinate spirit to Christ’s authority, as represented by the apostles and Scripture, led John to the conclusion that Diotrephes was not of God. It did not matter to John if he was a leader in the church, understood all the doctrines, or could teach or lead in impressive congregational prayer. We all struggle with pride. That is not the issue here. This man continually took on spiritual authority. It was the unbroken pattern of his life. Therefore, the venerable aged apostle had grave

marked by ongoing sin. John says they are still of the devil. To say that a person can remain continually in sin and be born again is to deny the very purpose and objective of Christ’s work. Christ appeared to destroy the works of the devil and the fundamental work of the devil is sin, for he sinned from the beginning. If a believer can go on in sin then Christ’s death and the new birth did not accomplish His purpose on their behalf, which is impossible. John says, do not be deceived about this, words alone prove nothing, profession without proof proves nothing. A changed life and that alone proves whether a person is of God.

John describes six prominent features and characteristics of the new birth. First, the believer practices righteousness. John says, “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him” (I John 2:29). Righteousness means to do the right. For the Christian doing the right is doing God’s will, particularly as outlined in Scripture. It is doing as Jesus says, “the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Doing the right is as much an attitude as an activity. It isn’t simply a matter of externals such as church attendance, Bible study or even public worship. The Pharisees excelled at these. It’s a matter of the heart. A person who is born again submits to and does the will of God from the heart. These qualities are lacking in many who go through the motions in the church today. Next, they do not practice sin (I John 3:9). They also love God and fellow believers (I John 4:7). They continue to believe in Christ (I John 5:4), and the evil one, Satan, does not touch them (I John 5:18). It must be restated that these are general characteristics.

There are periods when sin gains the upper hand. However, they ebb and flow as they grow and develop to become the general direction and characteristic of the life. If they permanently cease, then the person was never saved to begin with. For example, John, referring to sin, says, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (I John 3:9). Clearly John viewed sin as losing out in the end to the more dominant force of the new birth and righteousness. He is not saying that the seed of God within the Christian cannot go on sinning but the Christian can. This is to miss the point. He is speaking of the children of God and the children of the devil being obvious (verse 10). He is talking of things noticeable. His point is to give a test by which to judge the reality of the new birth in a concrete and obvious way, and the most obvious feature of the new birth is that a person cannot continue in sin. John also states that a person cannot continue on in sin. John also states that a person who is born again continues to believe that Jesus is the Christ. He says, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (I John 5:1). The present tense indicates that the belief is ongoing and continuous. The new birth cannot be reversed, so faith, as a fruit and mark of the new birth, cannot cease. A person who once believed and then renounced it had a faulty non-saving faith to begin with.

### **The Peril of a False Faith**

The reality that we must come to grips with is

that people can practice a pseudo-righteousness. They can have a false faith. However, it is exposed by the fact that they eventually abandon it for a life of sin. Only regeneration supplies the dynamic that enables the believer to continue on in righteousness through a lifetime of trial and affliction. The Scriptures continually warn us of this. John said, "They went out from us but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us" (I John 2:19). The apostle says it was only their final departure that proved they were not of God to begin with. This was the case with Judas. No one but Christ ever suspected that he was not real. He was even put in charge of the money. Judas himself thought he believed in Jesus, in his own distorted way. Judas is the ultimate example of a false believer who comes to Jesus still cherishing his own sin and with his own agenda. When Christ does not meet his expectations, he either renounces Him or simply no longer follows Him. The true believer, on the other hand, is typified by Peter. When offered the chance to abandon Christ he said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (John 6:68). It is the ongoing perseverance in righteousness and the heart's submission to Christ and His word that demonstrates whether a person is of God. John could not say it any clearer: "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness [persevering lifestyle] is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother" (I John 3:10).

The peril of a false faith is all the more alarming when it is a church leader. The New