

## Regeneration and Conversion

by Rev. Tom Aicken

It's the desire of every Christian parent that his or her children should be born again and serve the Lord, and this longing, if unfulfilled, intensifies over time until it becomes a reality that their children do become new creatures in Christ. This is why by fervent praying, sound teaching, faithful example and every word of encouragement, such parents seek to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This is not to say that by these means the children will ever become Christians, necessarily, but there is no doubt that this kind of upbringing has an influence and makes a lasting impression upon them.

This is not enough, however, for many parents. Though they pray for their children, and may even plead persistently for them, they are not content to commit their children wholly to the Lord who judges righteously, but think that they can and should play a more active role in actually turning them into this new creation in Christ. If, after all, they were active in bringing their children into the natural realm – and they were – why should they not believe that they play a similarly active role in bringing them into the spiritual realm and giving them new life in Christ?

The answer to that question is found in John 1:13, the fact that this new birth is “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” These first three phrases, each beginning with the word ‘not’ or ‘nor,’ have been variously interpreted, but the most satisfying explanation for them I have found is by Matthew Poole. “Not of blood” means that they don't become children of God by virtue of their being the children of believing parents, and presuming one can trace them back by that means to Abraham. “Nor of the will of the flesh” means that they don't become children of God whether by the lusts of the flesh or by any natural means of procreation. “Nor of the will of man” means that they don't become children of God by a freewill decision of their own, as if they're free to do what is right and good and not bound by the dictates of their own indwelling sin.

What, then, is the sole cause and only power by which anyone dead in sin (Eph. 2:1) and at enmity with God (v. 15) is born again? It must be, as we're told in John 1:13, “of God” Himself. Indeed, it's all of God, and He does this great work through the quickening or life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. As He tells us, Rom.

9:15,16, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.' So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy."

If this is so, that the new birth is all of God, why are people commanded to repent of their sins, and even promised the gift of eternal life if they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Does that make any sense if the new birth is all of God and not of them? It's right here that we need to distinguish between regeneration (the new birth, which comes first) and conversion (the act of turning from sin to the Saviour, which is the result and inevitable response of the new birth). Nowhere in the Word of God are sinners commanded to be born again. Nicodemus was informed that he had to be born again (John 3:7), but that was a statement of what he needed from the Holy Spirit, not a command to which he could contribute anything of himself. Only if one is born again, receives new life in Christ and so made willing in a day of God's power, is he then able and eager to flee to the Lord Jesus for refuge.

It may be helpful at this point to understand the purpose of Old Testament circumcision, the bloody sign and seal of God's covenant (Gen. 17), as well as the purpose of New Testament baptism, the non-bloody sign and seal now given to replace it (Col. 2). Each of these signs under its own administration of God's covenant was given to represent regeneration, that is, the need to be regenerated, a blessing that the outward sign itself could never produce. Only if the sinner believed in the Lord Jesus Christ did this sign also seal to him that he was, by means of that faith, a child and heir of God.

These were things that Nicodemus, though a teacher in Israel, didn't understand. He and his peers thought that being Jewish brought them into the family of God, and that circumcision was the means of confirming it. Jesus, however, made it abundantly clear to him that being a circumcised Jew was not enough; he needed to be circumcised in heart (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4), to be born again, in other words, and only then could he see the kingdom of God. There are many people still today who think that growing up in the church brings them into God's family, and that baptism is the means of confirming it to them. Yet, in the same way, we should understand now, too, that being baptized with water, whether as a Jew or a Gentile, is still not enough; one needs to be baptized of the Holy Spirit (Rom.

6:4; Col. 2:12) – i.e. be born again, regenerated – in order to receive that new life which only God can give, and only then can he see the kingdom of God.

Again, if this is so, that the new birth is all of God and nothing of us or anyone else, why therefore should Christian parents seek by prayer, precept and example, to raise their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord? What good can that possibly do for children who, like all people everywhere, are dead in trespasses and sins? The answer is that such nurturing is what God is pleased to use to impart life (see Rom. 10:17); it will affect people in different ways (see 2 Cor. 2:14-17), but God's Word will always achieve what He sends it out to do and will never return to Him void (see Is. 55:10,11). This is what it means when the Shulamite maiden (the Church) cries out to her Lover (Christ), "Draw me, and we will run after You" (Song of Solomon 1:4). May we never stop praying for our children that the Lord our God would draw them and grant them such a heart for Him, and for ourselves that He would draw us ever closer to Himself, building our faith, increasing our hope, until we learn and experience at last what it is to love Him with all our being!

Do we understand how we must first be given life and made spiritually aware before we, as those formerly dead in sin and unresponsive to the call of God, will ever feel our need and be enabled to heed His gracious call in the gospel? This is regeneration; it comes before conversion. As with our first birth into the natural realm, so with this second birth now into the spiritual realm, we play no active part in it. Do we also understand how, once we are so alive and aware, we will be constrained to heed that call, how no power on earth could ever stop us from doing so? This is conversion; it comes after regeneration. It's something in which we clearly do play an active part, an indispensable role, and this is why we are commanded to repent of sin, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. No, this is not our being forced to do something against our will; it is, rather, God working in us to will and to do His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

We don't know whom the Lord will save beforehand. There is no promise or mathematical formula by which we can determine who the elect are before they come to faith in Christ. Yet what a comfort it is to know that all whom the Father gives to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, will indeed come to Him, and that each and every one who comes to Him, in turn, He will by no means cast out (John 6:37)!

