

Foundations II: Regeneration, Faith and Repentance

John 3:3, “*Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*”

J. C. Ryle on Regeneration

“Now, I say that on the face of the Bible, when fairly read, there stands out this grand doctrine, that each one of us must, between the cradle and grave—go through a spiritual change, a change of heart—or in other words be born again. And in the text you have heard, the Lord Jesus declares positively, without regeneration no man shall see the kingdom of God.”

Definition of Regeneration:

Regeneration is the spiritual change wrought in the heart of man by the Holy Spirit in which his/her inherently sinful nature is changed so that he/she can respond to God in faith and live in accordance with His will. It extends to the whole nature of man, altering his governing disposition, illuminating his mind, freeing his will, and renewing his nature.

Titus 3:4–7, “*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, [5] he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, [6] whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, [7] so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*”

The Necessity of Regeneration

1. Expressly asserted by the Bible

Scripture does not leave us in doubt about the necessity of regeneration but asserts this in the clearest terms. Jesus says: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” John 3:3.[Cf. also the verses 5-7.] This statement of the Saviour is absolute and leaves no room for exceptions.

The same truth is clearly brought out in some of the statements of Paul, as, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 2:14 “*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*”

2. It follows from what the Bible teaches about the natural condition of man apart from Jesus.

Holiness or conformity to the divine law is the indispensable condition of securing divine favor, attaining peace of conscience, and enjoying fellowship with God. Hebrews 12:14, “*Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.*” Now the condition of man by nature is, according to Scripture, both in disposition and act, exactly the opposite of that holiness which is so indispensable. Man is described as dead through trespasses and sins, Eph. 2:1, and this condition calls for nothing less than a restoration to life. A radical internal change is necessary, a change by which the whole disposition of the soul is altered.

Ephesians 2:1–3, “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—[3] among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*”

Regeneration precedes Faith

Ephesians 2:4-5, “*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ*” (vv. 4–5).

It is common for Christians to equate the new birth, or regeneration, with the new life in Christ that God provides to all who believe. Because of the way the Gospel is taught in many churches, it is easy to think that

regeneration is something that happens when we first confess Jesus as our Savior. We are accustomed to making the moment at which we are born again and the moment at which we repent and believe one and the same.

However, while we cannot usually distinguish the point at which the Holy Spirit changes our hearts from the point at which we come to Christ, it must be noted that regeneration always takes place before we exercise faith. Our new life — our love for and trust of the Savior — flows from the new birth, not vice versa. This is clearly taught in John 3:3 where Jesus tells us we cannot even see the kingdom of God unless we are first born again. If we cannot see the kingdom, we certainly cannot enter it; thus, regeneration precedes faith. In regenerating our hearts, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes, making us able to obey in faith.

Regeneration Is Totally a Work of God

In some of the elements of the application of redemption, we play an active part (for example, of sanctification and perseverance). But in the work of regeneration we play no active role at all. It is instead totally a work of God. We see this, for example, when John talks about those to whom Christ gave power to become children of God—they “*were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*” (**John 1:13**). Here John specifies that children of God are those who are “born...of God” and our human will (“the will of man”) does not bring about this kind of birth.

The fact that we are passive in regeneration is also evident when Scripture refers to it as being “born” or being “born again” (cf. James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:3; John 3:3–8). We did not choose to be made physically alive and we did not choose to be born—it is something that happened to us; similarly, these analogies in Scripture suggest that we are entirely passive in regeneration.

This sovereign work of God in regeneration was also predicted in the prophecy of Ezekiel. Through him God promised a time in the future when he would give new spiritual life to his people:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (**Ezek. 36:26–27**)

Which member of the Trinity is the one who causes regeneration? When Jesus speaks of being “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8), he indicates that it is especially God the Holy Spirit who produces regeneration. But other verses also indicate the involvement of God the Father in regeneration: Paul specifies that it is God who “made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5; cf. Col. 2:13). And James says that it is the “Father of lights” who gave us new birth: “*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures*” (James 1:17–18).¹ Finally, Peter says that God “*according to his abundant mercy has given us new birth... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*” (1 Peter 1:3, author’s translation). We can conclude that both God the Father and God the Holy Spirit bring about regeneration.

The Connection between Regeneration and Effectual Calling

“Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel” Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 31.

Effectual calling denotes the internal, special, life-giving call of the Spirit, experienced only by God’s elect, in contrast to the external, general call extended to all who hear the gospel. This effectual call is the “exercise of divine power upon the soul, immediate, spiritual, and supernatural, communicating a new spiritual life and thus making a new mode of spiritual activity possible” (A. A. Hodge).

The effect of this call is to persuade and enable us to receive Christ as He is freely offered in the gospel. That is, it leads us to repentance and faith. This order is important. Repentance and faith are acts of the regenerate man, whose ability to perform them is solely by virtue of the change wrought by the Holy Spirit in effectual calling.

Some are awakened suddenly, by very little and trifling things. God often raises up Christ's kingdom in a man's heart by a seed so small and insignificant, that all who see it are obliged to confess, "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes." A single text of Scripture sometimes; a few lines in a book taken up by accident; a chance expression or word dropped in conversation, and never perhaps meant by him who spoke it to do so much: each of these seemingly small events have been known to pierce men's hearts like an arrow!

Some are born of the Spirit gradually. They hardly know at the period what is going on within them; they can hardly recollect any particular circumstances attending their conversion—or fix any particular time—but they do know this, that somehow or other they have gone through a great change, they do know that once they were careless about religion, and now they hold it chief in their affections: once they were blind and now they see.

From Regeneration to Faith and Repentance

"No sooner is the soul quickened (born again), than it at once discovers its lost estate, is horrified, looks for a refuge, and believing Christ to be a suitable one, flies to him and reposes in him."

-C.H. Spurgeon

"If God has revealed a plan of salvation for sinners, they must, in order to be saved, acquiesce in its provisions. By whatever name it may be called, the thing to be done, is to approve and accept of the terms of salvation presented in the gospel." Charles Hodge

Ephesians 2:4–9

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—[6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Point: Born again leads to being saved through faith.

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 85. What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse, due to us for sin?

A. To escape the wrath and curse of God, due to us for sin, God requires of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption.

Mark 1:14–15, *"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, [15] and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*

Faith Defined

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 86. What is faith in Jesus Christ?

A. Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.

John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

The Protestant Reformers were careful to outline the biblical definition of faith in their writings. The Protestant Reformers recognized that biblical faith has three essential aspects: notitia, assensus, and fiducia.

1. **Notitia.** Notitia refers to the **content of faith**, or those things that we believe. We place our faith in something, or more appropriately, someone. In order to believe, we must know something about that someone, who is the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. **Assensus.** Assensus is our **conviction that the content of our faith is true**. You can know about the Christian faith and yet believe that it is not true. Genuine faith says that the content — the notitia taught by Holy Scripture — is true.
3. **Fiducia.** Fiducia **refers to personal trust and reliance**. Knowing and believing the content of the Christian faith is not enough, for even demons can do that (James 2:19). Faith is only effectual if, knowing about and assenting to the claims of Jesus, one personally trusts in Him alone for salvation.

Faith as a Gift

Ephesians 2:8, *“By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”*

Without a doubt, most modern evangelicals believe that human beings have an innate capacity for God-glorifying faith — that even unregenerate sinners are able to work up trust in the gospel and that faith comes before a changed heart. Despite the popularity of this view, it is inconsistent with biblical revelation. Romans 8:7–8 explains that it is impossible for minds set on the flesh to please God and obey Him. People who are not in Christ are in the flesh, so they lack the ability to do the Lord’s will. Since His will for us is that we trust in His promises, unbelievers are incapable in themselves of believing in Christ Jesus for salvation. Furthermore, John 3:3 says that we cannot even see the kingdom of God unless we are first born again by the Spirit. If we cannot see God’s kingdom, we can by no means enter it. In sum, faith can arise only from a new heart. To put it in theological categories: regeneration precedes faith.

Faith is a gift of the Lord to undeserving people, the outworking of God’s electing grace and the atonement of Jesus for His own. Ephesians 2:8 confirms the truth that faith is ultimately a gift of God. “The gift of God” in the original Greek appears in the neuter grammatical form, which means that it refers back to both grace and faith earlier in the verse. Grace and faith are divine gifts, and our Father does not give them to all people. Only this view of faith is consistent with the biblical teaching on the pervasiveness of our depravity and our desperate state apart from Christ.

Sinners are intellectually able to understand the basic content of the gospel, but they lack the moral ability to believe the gospel. That is, they are wholly unwilling to turn from their sin and rest in Christ alone until the Spirit changes their hearts and enables them to heed the preaching of the gospel of God (Acts 13:13–52).

Faith and Works

Faith and Works?

James 2:20, “You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?”

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Roman Catholic theologians leaned heavily on the second chapter of James to maintain that justification is not by faith alone but by faith and works. The Reformers were taking every opportunity to say that justification is a free gift, that we receive it by faith alone, and that Paul’s letters to the Romans and to the Galatians back them up. But James seems at first glance to teach that works are necessary.

There is no conflict between Paul and James. Paul taught us that salvation is by faith alone, and James tells us that there is a true and a false faith. A man who “claims to have faith but has no deeds” is a man who has false faith. True faith shows itself in good deeds.

Thus, said the Reformers, we are justified by faith alone, but justifying faith is never found alone; it always brings forth good fruit. Men such as Luther and Calvin said that we are not justified by making a profession of faith but by possessing faith. A person who professes faith and then lives a life characterized by unrighteousness is surely deluding himself with counterfeit faith.

Faith is not “mere assent.” Even the demons believe that God exists, said James, but rather than delighting in this knowledge, they respond with shuddering (James 2:19). The Reformers said that faith involves knowledge, assent, and trust or commitment. We must know something about God’s truth, and we must assent to the truth of it, but if that is all we do, we are no better than the fallen angels. True faith goes beyond mere assent and involves a personal relationship of trust and commitment to God, and such true faith will always show itself in deeds of love and obedience.

James used the verb justify when he wrote, “Was not our ancestor Abraham justified for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?” (James 2:21). The Greek word justify can mean “legal justification,” which Paul taught is received by faith alone, or it can mean “demonstrative justification,” which was James’ meaning here. Abraham’s good work demonstrated his justification and filled up the legal justification that James, as well as Paul, said he received by faith (James 2:23).

Repentance Unto Life

Repentance Defined

Westminster Shorter Catechism

Q. 87. What is repentance unto life?

A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

Psalm 51:1–4, *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”*

Repentance as the Gift of God

Acts 11:18, *“When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.””*

First and foremost, repentance is a gift. It is an act that the Holy Spirit works in us resulting in an act that flows out of us. Although it is our act, it does not originate from within us. In fact, in our naturally stubborn, rebellious hearts the whole notion of repentance is foreign. Just as our righteousness is a foreign, or “alien,” righteousness from Christ, so is our repentance. It is granted to us by God Himself. We would not even conceive of such a thing left to ourselves. Instead, we would come up with all sorts of excuses for our sin and would point our depraved fingers at everyone else around. But by His grace, God grants repentance to His adopted children whom He patiently disciplines: *“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent”* (Rev. 3:19). For even when our minds grow weary and our hearts doubt the promises of God, He remains faithful to His promises and patient toward His people in the church *“not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”* (2 Peter 3:9).

The Elements of Repentance

We distinguish three elements in repentance:

a. An intellectual element. There is a change of view, a recognition of sin as involving personal guilt, defilement, and helplessness. It is designated in Scripture as “knowledge of sin”, Rom. 3:20, cf. 1:32. If this is not accompanied by the following elements, it may manifest itself as fear of punishment, while there is as yet no hatred of sin.

b. An emotional element. There is a change of feeling, manifesting itself in sorrow for sin committed against a holy and just God, Ps. 51:2,10,14. This element of repentance is indicated by the word *metamelomai*. If it is accompanied by the following element, it is a “godly sorrow”, but if it is not so accompanied, it is a “sorrow of the world”, manifesting itself in remorse and despair, II Cor. 7:9,10; Matt. 27:3; Luke 18:23.

c. A volitional element. There is also a volitional element, consisting in a change of purpose, an inward turning away from sin, and a disposition to seek pardon and cleansing, Ps. 51:5,7,10; Jer. 25:5. This includes the two other elements, and is therefore the most important aspect of repentance. It is indicated in Scripture by the word *metanoia*, Acts 2:38; Rom. 2:4.

Acts 2:37–38, “*Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ [38] And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’*”

Fruits in Keeping with Repentance

Matthew 3:7–8, “*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for the baptism, he said to them, ‘... Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance’*” (vv. 7–8).

After centuries of silence, the covenant Lord spoke to His people again through John the Baptist. Beginning around 27 a.d., John prepared the way for the Messiah to inaugurate God’s kingdom, calling Israel to repentance because the nation as a whole had not shown contrition for the sins that led to exile from Palestine. In John’s day, the people were not ready for the kingdom to come.

John’s call is laid on all of us throughout the Bible. “Repentance” is the English translation of the Greek term *metanoia*, which literally means “change of mind.” Repentance expresses sorrow for the ways in which we have offended God (Ps. 51:4), but it is also much more. Repentance is a change of mind and actions wherein we cease our approval of wickedness and justification of bad behavior. It is foremost a decisive reorientation of one’s life away from the self and toward the Lord. This does not mean we repent only once at the start of the Christian life and then go our merry way, for confession of sin is needed until life’s end (1 John 1:8–9). But this subsequent repentance flows from and confirms the initial act wherein we realize our desperate state, admit our need of pardon, and come to Jesus in a childlike manner (Matt. 19:13–15).

John Calvin comments on this passage, saying, “Repentance is an inward matter, which has its seat in the heart and soul, but afterwards yields its fruits in a change of life.” It is not enough to profess sorrow for transgression; we have not truly turned from sin if our lives are unchanged (Isa. 29:13–14; James 2:14–26). Scripture does not teach that sinless perfection is possible before we are glorified, nor does it deny that some sins are harder to overcome than others. What it does say is that those who are truly repentant do what they can to “resist the devil” (James 4:7) and flee temptation. They also look for others to help them bear their burdens, to hold them accountable and help them find strength when they are weak (Gal. 6:1–2). The truly repentant lapse into sin on occasion, but they always return to the narrow path of righteousness. True converts will not find their assurance in denominational membership (Matt. 3:9–10) or in a past act of devotion. They find it in a justified life of repentance and faith.

Foundations II: Regeneration, Faith and Repentance

Regeneration

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Titus 3:4–7

The Necessity of Regeneration

1. Expressly asserted by the Bible John 3:3, 1 Corinthians 2:14
2. It follows from what the Bible teaches about the natural condition of man apart from Jesus. Ephesians 2:1–3

Regeneration precedes Faith Ephesians 2:4-5

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John 1:13, Ezek. 36:26–27

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Psalm 51:1–4

Repentance as the Gift of God Acts 11:18

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- a. An intellectual element. Romans 3:20
- b. An emotional element. Ps. 51:5,7,10
- c. A volitional element. Acts 2:37–38

Fruits in Keeping with Repentance. Matthew 3:7–8