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THE INWARD WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

By Stephen Bowen

The definition of regeneration

The word occurs twice in the New Testament, once once in Mt. 19:28, ‘at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne . . .’; and once referring to the individual believer in Tit. 3:5. ‘He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit’...

B.B. Warfield defines it like this:

‘It is a radical and complete transformation wrought in the soul by God the Holy Spirit, by virtue of which we become new men, no longer conformed to this world, but in holiness and knowledge of the truth created after the image of God. (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:10; Rom. 12:2).’

This renewing work goes on throughout a Christian’s life (‘yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day’ – 2 Cor. 4:16) – which is presumably why Calvin spoke of regeneration as a life-long process – but as a continuing process it is normally called sanctification.

John says most about it in the New Testament, using the word *gennao*, which can mean either ‘beget’ or ‘give birth to’. In Jn. 3:4 clearly new birth is meant; in 1 Jn. 3:9 clearly a new begetting. Sometimes, then, begotten; sometimes born *anathen*, again, anew or probably most accurately, from above; born of the Spirit in Jn. 3:8, or born of God, in Jn. 1:13, and nine times in 1 Jn.

It always refers to a completed act. Like natural birth, if it has happened at all, it has happened completely. At a certain time, a person is re-born; and thereafter he is spiritually alive – and growing.

What is the right way to think of regeneration? Not – although you will sometimes hear people toying with the idea – that we are given a soul or a spirit, or that the soul or spirit we already have is given some new additional element or faculty; but rather that our human nature is subject to a drastic change which brings us under the dominion of the Holy Spirit and makes us responsive to God. It is not caused by man, either by a man to himself or to another, John 1:12,13 – ‘Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.’ And so says the Church of England in Article 10 *Of Free-Will* :

‘The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God.’

The necessity of regeneration

Clearly one of the reasons why the teaching of the need for a new birth is unpopular is what it implies about the state of man in his unregenerate state. As long as man remains ‘flesh’ (Jn. 3:6, ‘Flesh gives birth to flesh’), he is unable to enter God’s kingdom. Without regeneration he cannot *see*, i.e. understand God’s kingdom, nor enter it, Jn. 3:3, 5. Without regeneration, no-one would believe, for ‘The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.’ – 1 Cor. 2:14.

Men have free-will; and they exercise that will in refusing to obey God. They are blind, for 'The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of God' – 2 Cor. 4:4. They are lost; they are dead, needing to be rescued, (Rom. 5:6); and enemies of God, needing to be made his friends, (2 Cor. 5:20).

Hence Jesus taught, 'No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him' (Jn. 6:44). Those who receive him are those who are born of God, Jn. 1:13.

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