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## **'REGENERATION'** **'Or The New Birth'**



By the late: C. D. Cole

John Ruskin (1819-1900) English art critic, author and political economist said that "the first and last and closest trial question to any living creature is, 'What do you like?' Go out into the street and ask the first man you meet what his taste is, and if he answers you candidly, you know him, body and soul. What we like determines what we are, and is a sign of what we are...." If the taste Ruskin speaks of applies to moral and spiritual things, then he has something, and his words are sober truth. Man has moral as well as physical taste. What one likes as a moral being—what he likes in relation to the true God and His word—determines what he is as a moral being and is a sign to others of what he is. One can know himself, and others can know him by this taste-test. Moral taste is moral desire and moral desire determines moral deed.

David's moral taste is revealed when he says, "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple" (Ps. 27:4). Also, when he says, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" (Ps. 42:1,2). This desire for God shows the Psalmist to be a man after God's own heart. Dr. Broadus gives a three-fold test of personal character: What one reads when he is tired, what he thinks about when he is alone, and where he goes when he is away from home.

This taste-test reveals the necessity of regeneration for every man. Man, in his natural condition, does not like God—the God of the Bible; he does not long for God's presence as David did; he rather shuns God, as Adam and Eve did when they sinned and hid themselves from Him. The natural man has no taste for the things of God. The carnal mind is enmity against God. Man in his natural and fallen state would not enjoy heaven if he should go there. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. Regeneration is the only remedy; every man must be born again—born from above—made a new creature—if he is to see or enter into the kingdom of God.

### THE NATURE OF REGENERATION

Regeneration is that aspect of salvation in which the dead sinner—the sinner with all the faculties of the soul in moral ruins, and paralyzed towards God and holiness, being unable to please God—is made a child of God with a taste for the things of God.

Regeneration, therefore, may be defined as the gracious work of God in the human soul by which the heart is enabled to love God, the mind is enabled to understand the gospel of Christ, and the will is brought to choose Christ as both Lord and Saviour.

Regeneration is not the bringing of a person into existence; it is the birth of one already in existence; therefore, a second birth. Nor is it the bringing of any new faculties or parts into existence. The unregenerate man has as many

parts or faculties to his being as the regenerate man has. No part of man was annihilated in the fall, but all parts were ruined or depraved. Regeneration is not based upon non-existence, but upon a depraved existence. The soul of man is endowed with heart, and mind, and will, and the unregenerate man has all these faculties, although in a ruined or depraved state. He has a mind and can think and understand, but he does not like to think about God, and cannot understand the things of God; he has a heart so that he can and does love, but he does not love God; he has a will so that he can and does choose, but he does not choose Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Regeneration is essentially a changing of the fundamental taste of the soul. By taste we mean the direction of his mind and bent of his affections, the trend of his will. And to alter that taste is not to impart a new faculty, or create a new substance, but simply to set upon God the affections which hitherto have been set upon self and sin. To borrow an illustration from Dr. Strong: The engineer who climbs over the cab into a runaway locomotive and who changes its course, does so, not by adding any new rod or cog, but by simply reversing the lever. So in regeneration God is reversing the lever of the soul. He is changing the taste so that a man loves what he once hated and hates what he once loved.

Regeneration is not the eradication of the sinful nature, but the impartation of a new nature—a sinless nature. The saved man has been born two times, and has a twofold disposition or nature. This creates a conflict between the fleshly and spiritual natures. "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (Gal. 5:17). Paul had this conflict in his own experience. He delighted in the law of God after the inward man, but was conscious of another law or force, so that he could not do the good he desired to do. Read Rom. 7:14-25.

## TWO ASPECTS OF THE NEW BIRTH

In the first aspect the soul is passive; it is simply acted upon. God changes the governing disposition by a creative act, that is, without the use of means, and without any cooperation on the part of the sinner. How could it be otherwise unless death contributes to life, unless filth purifies itself, and a corpse adorns itself? In a word, regeneration must be altogether of God unless nature acts contrary to nature. If the carnal mind hates God; if the things of God are foolishness to the natural man; if they that are in the flesh cannot please God, what hope is there that such a nature will act as though it were otherwise? There is no such thing as self-birth, either in the physical or spiritual realms. The mother gives birth to the child, and in the moral realm we are born of God.

In the second aspect of regeneration, God secures the initial exercise of the new nature, and in this the soul is active. Repentance and faith are heart exercises of the sinner in response to the quickening work of the Spirit. The two aspects of regeneration are simultaneous. At the very instant God gives a holy disposition to the soul, He pours in the light of Gospel truth and induces the exercise of the holy disposition He has imparted.

This distinction seems necessary from the twofold representation of the change in the Scripture. In some passages the change is ascribed wholly to God. "Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). In changing the fundamental taste of the soul there is no use of means or cooperation from the sinner. In fact, the truth is rejected until the disposition is changed. Now in other passages we find the truth is employed as means and the mind acts in view of the truth. "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1:18). "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (I Peter 1:23). To deny these two aspects you would have an unregenerated believer on the one hand, or a regenerated unbeliever on the other hand, neither of which is possible.

## THE NECESSITY OF REGENERATION

What we have already written reveals why the new birth is necessary, but we will amplify and illustrate:

The depravity of human nature makes the new birth necessary. The physical birth produces no qualities that are pleasing to God. "So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God." Paul reminds the Jews that being the fleshly descendants of Abraham did not make them the children of God (Rom. 9:8). Man has the inherited corruption of a fallen nature. David was not casting reflection upon his mother's virtue, but was confessing to inborn depravity, when he exclaimed, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." A man may say, "I know I do things that are wrong, but I have a good heart after all." But God gives a different verdict. Christ taught that the human heart was the very fountain of all that is sinful: "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these things come from within, and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23). The human affections are misplaced. Man naturally loves the things that are contrary to God. He must be born from above in order to love God. "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God; and everyone

that loveth is (Gk. has been) born of God, and knoweth God" (I John 4:7).

The human will is antagonistic to God. God's will should be supreme in every life, but man by nature is dominated by self-will. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." In the life of Christ, the one perfect life, the will of God was supreme. He came not to do His own will, but the will of the Father.

Moreover, man by nature, is in a state of moral darkness, ignorant of the things of God. He cannot understand the things of the Spirit: "For they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor. 2:14). There must be a spiritual birth before there can be spiritual understanding.

### THE EFFICIENT CAUSE OF REGENERATION

By the efficient cause we mean the power by which the effect is secured. What power brings about the new birth? The various answers to this question may be summed up in three general views.

1. Some put the efficient cause or power of regeneration in the human will. This view emphasizes the plan of salvation and makes response to the plan, that is, faith in the gospel, depend upon the human will. The sinner is told that if he will believe the gospel he will be born again. This confounds justification and regeneration. We read again and again that we are justified by faith, but never that we are regenerated by faith. Man's volitions—the exercise of his will—are practically the shadow of his affections. You cannot separate a man from his shadow and have him going in one direction and his shadow in another direction. Neither can you have a man's will going in the opposite direction from the way his heart goes. Men choose what they do because of the condition of the heart. John 1:13 is fatal to this view: "Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

2. Another view makes the truth the efficient cause of regeneration. This view puts the power of the new birth in the gospel. A. Campbell is one of the best exponents of this view. He says, "We plead that all the converting power of the Holy Spirit is exhibited in the Divine Record." This denies any subjective or internal work of the Holy Spirit on the heart of the sinner. The preacher is to make the gospel so attractive that the sinner, apart from any change in his heart, will accept it. But to the heart that hates God the plainer you make the gospel, the more he will hate it. If this were true then it would be absurd to pray to God to regenerate, for that is more than He can do—regeneration is simply the effect of the word preached. This is called "the word only" theory, which is refuted by Paul in I Thess. 1:5: "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word

only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost...." This view has led to a lot of silly and unscriptural expressions, such as, "energizing the truth", or "illuminating the truth." There is nothing wrong with the truth, the trouble is with the sinner's darkened understanding. God does not make the truth more true, but He opens sin-blinded minds to understand it (I Cor. 3:5; II Cor. 4:6). The word gives knowledge of spiritual things. The gospel is objective light; the Holy Spirit gives subjective light.

Dr. T.T. Shields once preached on the text, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." A few days later he received a letter from a man that ran like this: "I enjoyed your sermon last Sunday very much, and could not see why anyone in your audience could not be saved. But your prayer following the sermon spoiled it for me. You asked God by His Spirit to lead sinners to an acceptance of the gospel. I write to ask what the Spirit has to do with it? The way of salvation was presented; all they had to do was to accept it." This man was right, if the truth and the human will are all that is necessary, and prayer for God to do something in the sinner would be foolish. This view utterly ignores the truth of human depravity.

3. The position of the writer is, that the immediate agency of the Holy Spirit is the efficient cause of regeneration. The power of the Holy Spirit is immediate, that is, it does not depend upon or flow through anything, not even the gospel itself. The gospel is hated and rejected as foolishness until direct power of the Spirit changes the governing disposition of the heart. As someone has said, "Our natural hearts are hearts of stone. The word of God is good seed sown on the hard, trodden, macadamized highway, which the horses of passion, the asses of self-will, the wagons of imaginary treasure, have made impenetrable. ONLY THE HOLY SPIRIT can soften and pulverize the soil." The gospel is good seed, but good seed cannot make good soil. Paul may plant, Apollos may water, but God must give the increase.

Thy grace is unconfirmed;  
Dispel the gloomy shades of night,  
The darkness of the mind."

"Now to our eye display  
The truth Thy words reveal;  
Cause us to run the heavenly way,  
Delighting in Thy will."

"Thy teachings make us know  
The mysteries of Thy love;  
The vanity of things below,  
The joys of things above."

