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REGENERATION

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Regeneration may be defined as the gracious work of God in the human soul in which the heart is enabled to love the things of God, the mind is enlightened to gospel truth, and the will is brought to choose Jesus as both Lord and Saviour.

The above definition is in harmony with the New Hampshire Confession which says that “Regeneration consists of giving a holy disposition to the mind, that it is effected in a manner above our comprehension, by the power of the Holy Spirit of God in connection with Divine truth, so as to secure our voluntary obedience to the gospel; and that its proper evidence appears in the holy fruits of repentance and faith and newness of life.”

Dr. Strong says that “Regeneration is the act of God by which the governing disposition of the soul is made holy, and by which, the truth as means, the first holy exercise of this disposition is secured.”

Dr. Boyce gives this definition: “It is a work of God. In this work of God upon the soul a change is effected in the radical or ruling principle or disposition of the soul.”

The foregoing definitions are based upon the fact of the moral ruin of human nature. Regeneration is that aspect of salvation in which the dead sinner; the sinner with all his faculties 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.

The Scriptures uniformly represent the natural man as morally depraved. Romans 8:7, “*Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.*” He is therefore morally unable to please God. Verse 8, “*So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.*” I Corinthians 2:14, “*But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*” To the lost man, the gospel is said to be hid. II Corinthians 4:3-4, “*But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of*

them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.” So without regeneration nobody would be saved under anybody’s preaching, for nobody would appreciate and appropriate the good news of salvation through Christ and Him crucified.

THE NATURE OF REGENERATION

Considered negatively:

It is not reformation. Reformation is the work of man; regeneration is the work of God. Reformation is external; regeneration is internal. Reformation deals with symptoms; regeneration deals with the disease of sin. A man may abandon many evil habits without being saved. There may be reformation without regeneration, but there can be no regeneration without reformation of life.

It is not the eradication of the sinful nature. In regeneration the Divine nature is implanted; the old sinful nature is not eradicated. The new birth creates a conflict. Galatians 5:17, “*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.*” The believer does not have his standing in the flesh, but he does have the flesh in him. Compare Romans 7:18, “*For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not,*” with Romans 8:9: “*But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.*”

It is not the bringing of any new faculties or parts into existence. The unregenerate man has as many faculties or parts to his being as the regenerate man. No part of man was annihilated in the fall, but all the parts were ruined or depraved. Regeneration is not predicated upon non-existence of anything, but upon the depraved existence of all the faculties.

The soul of man is endowed with the power to think, and love, and choose, and the unregenerate man has all these powers, but they

are morally perverted; they are exerted in the wrong direction. The lost man 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 and can and does love, but he does not love God. I John 4:7, “*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.*” He has a will and can and does choose many things, but he does not choose Christ. John 5:40, “*And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.*”

Considered positively:

Regeneration imparts new qualities to all the faculties of the soul. It imparts a new quality to the mind for spiritual discernment. John 3:3, “*Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” II Corinthians 4:6, “*For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*” A new quality to the heart for holy affection. I John 4:7, “*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.*” A new quality to the will for a holy choice. I Corinthians 12:3, “*...no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.*”

Regeneration gives a new taste; a taste for God and the things of God. Ruskin once said, “The first and last and closest trial question to any living creature is, ‘What do you like?’ Go out in the street and ask the first man you meet what his taste is, and if he answers 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 here spoken of applies to man as a moral being, then Ruskin has spoken sober truth.

What a person likes as a moral being; what he likes in relation to God and religion; determines what he is and is a sign of what he is. We can know what we are and others can judge

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what we are by this taste-test.

Regeneration is in two aspects: a limited and a wider aspect. In the first the soul is passive; it is simply acted upon. God takes the initiative and, by His Spirit, creates new desires without any cooperation from the sinner. How could it be otherwise unless death begets life, unless filth helps to purify itself, unless the corpse lifts itself out of the grave, unless the Ethiopian changes his skin, and the leopard does away with his spots; in short, unless everything naturally acts contrary to nature? There is no such thing as self-birth, or self-help in birth. The mother gives birth to the child, and in the moral realm we are said to be born of God; born from above.

In the second or wider aspect of regeneration, God secures the initial exercise of the disposition He has created, and in this the soul is active, and the truth is used. These two aspects of regeneration are simultaneous. At the same time God creates the holy desires, He pours in the light of truth and induces the exercise of the holy disposition He has created.

This distinction seems necessary from the twofold method of representing the change in the Scriptures. In some passages the change is ascribed wholly to God, as in John 1:12-13, "*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*" In changing the fundamental taste of the soul there is no use of means. In fact the truth is rejected until the disposition is changed. Now in other passages we find the truth is employed as means in regeneration and the mind acts in view of the truth which is now seen. James 1:18, "*Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth...*" I Peter 1:23, "*Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.*"

To deny these two aspects you have an unregenerated believer on the one hand, or a regenerated unbeliever on the other hand, neither of which is possible. The first aspect is the narrower and is what some theologians mean by pre-regeneration. According to the New Hampshire Confession, repentance and faith are inseparable graces wrought in the soul by the regenerating Spirit of God.

THE NECESSITY OF REGENERATION

In His conversation with Nicodemus, our Lord emphasized the necessity of the new birth. He was not telling Nicodemus to do something, but that something had to be done for him before he could see or enter into the kingdom of God. John 3:3-8, "*Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he*

enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." To tell a man to do something to be born would be nonsense, and our Lord never engaged in talking nonsense.

Regeneration is necessary because of the nature of God. Salvation is to fit us for the presence and fellowship of a holy God. It is to fit us for the holy environment of heaven where everybody praises God and dwells in His presence, serving Him day and night with delight. And to be in fellowship with God we must share His view of sin and His Son. We must look at sin as God does, and we must regard Jesus Christ as He does. God hates sin and we must hate it. There can be no love for God unless sin is hated. God assigned to His Son the gigantic task of human salvation; the Son came and performed that task to the satisfaction of God. And to be saved we must be satisfied with what Jesus did when He put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. Hebrews 9:26, "*...but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*" God entrusted to His Son the work of a surety, and as the sinner's surety He paid the sin-debt, and the sinner must trust Him as having paid it. God gave His Son to die on the cross of Calvary, as a sacrifice for sin, and the sinner must trust Him. I Corinthians 5:7, "*...For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.*" God loves His Son, and we must love Him. And to bring about this harmony between God and the sinner, the sinner must be born again.

The nature of the kingdom of God makes regeneration a necessity. Without the new birth no man can see or enter into the kingdom of God. Henry Drummond, in his book, Natural Law in the Spiritual World, shows how even in the natural world it is impossible for a member of one kingdom to enter into a higher kingdom by its own inherent power. There must be a birth from above. Nothing in a lower kingdom reaches a higher kingdom by any process of evolution. The mineral kingdom cannot enter the vegetable kingdom of itself. The roots of the tree or plant must reach down into the soil and lay hold of the mineral elements and transmute them into wood, fibre, leaves, bark, and fruit. The vegetable kingdom cannot enter the animal kingdom by its own power. Only as the animal lays hold of the vegetable kingdom is the grass, the grain, and all the rest turned into blood and bone and muscle. And so the Holy Spirit, as the Agent of the spiritual kingdom of

God, comes into the human soul to translate it into the kingdom of God.

The moral depravity of the sinner makes the new birth a necessity. The physical birth produces no qualities that are pleasing to God, or that can please God. Romans 8:8, "*So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.*" All men have inherited the corruption of fallen human nature. Man is rotten at the very core of his being. Jeremiah 17:9, "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*" Matthew 15:19, Jesus said, "*For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.*" The heart is the very fountain of all that is corrupt and sinful. Men have a way of saying that even though they do not live right, they do have a good heart. But this is not God's verdict about the human heart. Men do not live right because the heart is bad.

The nature of salvation makes regeneration a necessity. In salvation God not only delivers us from the penalty and punishment of sin; He also delivers us from a nature that hates Him and shuns Him. Salvation consists of a work done for us and a work done in us. Redemption is the work of Christ for us; regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Redemption keeps us from hell; regeneration is the beginning of a work that fits us for heaven. No unregenerate person really wants to go to the heaven. He longs to escape hell, but he does not long for the presence of God. He longs for a heaven of sensual delights, but not for the heaven where God is worshipped and obeyed.

THE EFFICIENT CAUSE OF REGENERATION

Here again we enter the arena of controversy. Much as the writer dislikes controversy, he must deal with this aspect of the truth concerning the new birth. The different views as to the effectual cause, or the power of regeneration, may be summed up in three:

The first puts the efficient cause in the human will. The second puts it in the truth. The third puts it in the Holy Spirit. By the efficient cause we mean the power by which the effect is secured; the power that effects the new birth.

The popular view is the first view: the view that the human will has the inherent power to effect the new birth. This view lays emphasis on the plan of salvation, and makes the sinner the executor of the plan. The sinner is told that if he will believe the gospel, or accept the plan of salvation, he will be born again. This view, of course, denies depravity of human nature and makes the sinner the author of his second birth. Moreover, it makes no distinction between regeneration and justification. It is Scriptural to tell the sinner to believe on Christ for justification, but we know of no passage that tells the sinner to believe in order to be born

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again. This is putting the cart before the horse. It has been truly said that man's volitions; the exercise of his will; are particularly the shadow of his affections. You cannot separate a man from his shadow and have him going in one direction and his shadow moving in another direction. No more can you have a man's will going in the opposite direction from the way his heart goes.

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.*" The sinner does not have the power to make himself a new heart by any exercise of the will. Such an idea does away with any need of the Holy Spirit in the new birth, and nullifies the Scripture. John 3:6, "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*"

The second view makes the truth the efficient cause; the power of regeneration is in the truth considered as a system of motives. The Holy Spirit does exactly what the preacher does; He presents the truth to the sinner. Both work upon the soul from the outside. A preacher of this school is quoted as having said that if he were as eloquent as the Holy Spirit he could convert sinners as well as the Holy Spirit. A. Campbell, in his *Christianity Restored*, says, "We plead that all the converting power of the Holy Spirit is exhibited in the Divine Record."

The author once heard a well-known Baptist preacher, highly esteemed as a paragon for orthodoxy, illustrate the matter with this story. This man was a chicken fancier. One day he discovered an old stove in the poultry yard, and thought what a good place it would be for his pullets to lay their eggs. He went into the house, and in a gleeful mood told his wife that he had predestinated and foreordained that his pullets should lay their eggs in that old stove. And when she asked how he was going to bring it to pass, he said that he was going to make that old stove so attractive that the pullets would naturally want to lay in it. The only possible interpretation of this allegory, and what the speaker wished to be understood by it, is to make the pullets represent the sinner and the stove the gospel; and the only application is that the gospel should be made so attractive that sinners will naturally believe it. There is nothing to be done in the sinner's heart to cause him to believe; all is done to the gospel. The gospel must be dressed up to suit the man who hates God. But the sad and sober fact is that the plainer you make the gospel to the man that hates God, the more he will despise and reject it.

The Holy Spirit does not work on the truth; He works on the human heart. Oft used expressions, such as "energizing the truth," or "illuminating the truth," really make no sense, for God Himself cannot make the truth more true. It is the sinner's darkened understanding

that needs illumination, not the word of God. The power to make believers is not in the preacher, but in the Holy Spirit. Paul speaking, I Corinthians 3:6-7, "*I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.*"

We are not discounting the importance of clarity and earnestness in preaching. The gospel will be unpopular enough to the natural man without our trying to make it so by our slipshod manner of preaching. And to those whose heart the Lord may open, as He did that of Lydia, the Gospel will be attractive.

Thirdly, the conviction of the author is that the Holy Spirit is the efficient cause or agent in regeneration. And His power is immediate, that is, it does not depend upon or flow through anything, not even the gospel itself. The gospel is despised and rejected until the Holy Spirit changes the governing disposition of the heart.

The gospel is perfect as the means of conversion, but the power of conversion is not in the means, but in the Agent. The word of God is likened to a sword, but a sword must be wielded by a skillful hand if anyone is killed by it. A certain tool may be good as an instrument for a piece of work, but there must be somebody who can properly use the tool, if the work is properly done. The Holy Spirit gives capacity for spiritual truth; the word gives knowledge of spiritual truth. The Holy Spirit gives subjective or internal light; the gospel is objective or external light. But the blind man cannot see the light of the gospel, however brightly it may shine. In regeneration the Holy Spirit gives sight to the spiritually blind.

There is the story of a girl who had a defect of vision from birth. It was a long time before her parents discovered her eyes were not just right. She was almost grown before an oculist was consulted. He advised and performed an operation. For a long time she was kept indoors and in a darkened room with her eyes bandaged. One bright and balmy night she ventured out alone upon the lawn, removed the bandage and looked upward. Immediately she rushed back into the house in a glow of excitement. She cried out, "O come here and see what has happened to the sky!" Her parents hurried out with her, but saw nothing but the familiar glory of the stars; the stars she had never seen before. Nothing had happened to the sky, but something had happened to her eyes.

II Corinthians 4:3-6, "*But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of*

darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." There is an allusion here to the original creation, Genesis 1:2-3, "...and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." And we have the same order in the new creation as the Spirit of God moves upon the face of the darkened soul, giving capacity for the light that comes from the word of God.

The apostle Paul exhorting the saints at Ephesus; Ephesians 4:17-18, "*This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.*" Chapter 5:8, he says to these same saints; "*For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light.*"

In further proof of the Holy Spirit's power in giving life and light to the human soul, we cite I Thessalonians 1:4-5, "*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, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.*" I Corinthians 3:5, "*Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?*"

THE EVIDENCES OF REGENERATION

Such a marvelous work of God as we have in the new birth cannot be without marked results or evidences. Marked characteristics will be exhibited by those who have experienced the new birth.

There will be a living faith; the faith that works; in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone, for a faith that does not work is dead. James 2:14-18, "*What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.*" I John 5:1, "*Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is [Greek: has been] born of God...*"

There will be love for God and His children. I John 3:14, "*We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren...*" I John 4:7, "*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.*"