

Regeneration

by Asahel Nettleton

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He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave power to become the sons of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. — Joh 1:11-13

The important and simple doctrine taught by these words, is that those who receive Christ — who have power given them to become the sons of God and who believe in his name — are born of God. In other words, every real Christian becomes such by a special exertion of Almighty power to change his heart. The phrase *born of God, begotten of God*, so often used by the writers of the New Testament is figurative. Its propriety, when applied to things of a spiritual nature, arises from the analogy which exists between the beginning of our natural and spiritual existence. Believers are the sons of God and this must be understood in a peculiar sense. All men equally receive their existence and natural faculties from the Creator, and in this sense are all the children of God. But when the Scriptures apply the phrases *sons of God* and *children of God* to the saints by way of distinction, it must be to point out a relation to God which is not common to all men. This relation is wholly of a new and spiritual nature; and God is the sole author of it; and by virtue of it, they are his sons. They are said to be born of him; begotten of him, in allusion to the relation between earthly parents and their children.

The object of this text is to deny that our relation to God as his spiritual children, is produced in any way but by his own special and sovereign power. It was originally adapted to oppose the carnal prejudices of the Jews. For the common opinion was that all who could be counted as the children of Abraham, were heirs of the divine promises and entitled to eternal life. This notion was uniformly opposed by Christ and his apostles.

Leaving an attempt to ascertain the precise meaning of the phrases, “*not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man,*” ^{Joh 1:13} I observe that there were three ways in which individuals became the reputed children of Abraham: by regular descent, by unlawful connection, and by adoption. Let the method be whatever it might, the Jews supposed that whoever became a child of Abraham, of course became a child of God. The celebrated Lightfoot supposes the object of the Evangelist is to cut off the false hopes of the Jews by denying that either method, and of course *any* method of becoming the children of Abraham, would make them the children of God. Another birth is necessary; a new filiation from above. They must be born again — born of God. Whatever may be the particular meaning of the text, the obvious general impression from it, and the one designed to be made by the sacred writer, is that all other ways of becoming the sons of God are false and visionary, except that of being born of Him. It was spoken to meet the prevailing prejudices of the day, and may now be used in the same manner.

Of all subjects, that which respects change from death unto life, is certainly one of the most important and interesting to us. To have clear and definite ideas here, is of great moment. Error on such a fundamental point is awfully perilous.

In one sense, all things are of God. He is the Creator and Governor of all. All a man’s powers and faculties are from God, and all the means of grace and institutions of religion are ordained by him. But when the Scriptures speak of being *born of God*, they mean something more than that a man is influenced by these means and institutions in the use of his ordinary powers and faculties. To prevent misconception, I have said that regeneration is the special work of Almighty power. Errorists have never dared to deny directly, that saints are born of God; because this would be to

renounce all appearance of belief in the Scriptures. They have chosen a surer method of propagating their sentiments. While they retain the language of the sacred writers, they have attacked and frittered away their meaning, until regeneration becomes the mere application of an external rite, or a persuasion of mind affected in an ordinary manner, and a consequent reformation of morals.

To expunge error serves to illustrate the truth. I will briefly consider some false notions respecting regeneration, and then proceed to illustrate what it is to be born of God.

I need not consume the time in laboring to prove that baptism is not regeneration. Nothing is plainer than that an external rite cannot change the heart. Baptism is only a sign or token of the saving influences of the Holy Spirit, and is not that work itself. It cannot be the token of a thing, and the thing itself, at the same time. Both the Scriptures and experience show that all who are baptized are not regenerated; for in their lives and conversation, many who are baptized do not differ from the “world which lies in wickedness.” ¹Joh 5.19 On this, I shall only add the words of an eminent English divine, “This scheme,” he says, speaking of regeneration by water baptism, “is the utter rejection and overthrow of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And again, “The vanity of this presumptuous folly is destructive of the grace of the gospel; invented to countenance men in their sins; and to hide from them the necessity of being born again; and therein of turning to God. But my beloved Christian brethren, you have not so learned Christ.” ¹

The absurdity of substituting this and other things of a like nature, is so palpable and gross, that it is very likely to be seen and apprehended where any considerable degree of knowledge respecting the nature of religion exists. There is far less danger from such extravagant notions than from those which are more specious and imposing.

Pelagius in the 4th century first invented and advocated a scheme of regeneration which, with a few modifications — sometimes in the phraseology, and sometimes by partial additions or diminutions — has been the scheme of the great body of all sectaries who have dissented from orthodox evangelical sentiments. Authors have appeared in different periods and in various countries, who have brought forward this specious scheme of the new birth, as principally illustrated or defined by themselves; and many whose reading is superficial, have been deceived into this supposition. The fact is, that almost the whole system of vague and inadequate notions on this great subject is only the heresy of Pelagius, so universally condemned by the ancient Church, which has now been newly dressed up in the modern fashion, to secure a better reception.

The fundamental truths of the Pelagian and Arminian scheme (for they are in substance the same) are these:

1. That God not only proclaims the offers of grace and salvation to all men alike, but that the Holy Spirit is equally and sufficiently distributed to all men to insure their salvation, provided they duly improve the benefits bestowed upon them.
2. That the precepts and promises of the gospel are not only good and desirable in themselves, but so suited to the natural reason and interests of mankind, that they will of course be inclined to receive them, unless overpowered by prejudice, and a habitual course of sin.
3. That the consideration of the threatenings and promises of the gospel is sufficient to remove these prejudices and reform that course.
4. That those who thus seriously reflect and amend their lives, have the promise of the Holy Spirit, and are entitled to the benefits of the new covenant.

¹ John Owen, *Pneumatologia*, ch. I., Regeneration, London 1674.

Under this specious statement of fundamental principles, which is apt to strike an inconsiderate mind in a favorable manner, the very life and soul of gospel truth is taken away. On this scheme, all men are regenerated alike, originally; all having an equal measure of the Spirit, the difference between one man and another is then to be ascribed wholly to himself, and to the improvement he has made of the blessings granted. And *regeneration* is a reformation of life, induced by moral suasions, or it is commenced in consequence of the understanding being enlightened and the affections being moved by divine truth alone. If you ask how salvation proceeds from divine grace on this plan, the answer is that all the means of improvement are bestowed by God, and the grace is in this.

The whole scheme is simply this: God gives faculties and grace to all, and to all alike; and thus furnished, they work out their own salvation, being persuaded to do this by the promises and threatenings of the gospel. The dreadful mischief which this extensive and popular scheme has caused, springs from its plausibility — from such an appearance of truth, mixed with so many great and dangerous errors.

I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit makes use of the word and many other instruments to bring sinners to Christ. But that men are so *naturally* inclined as to approve of and obey the precepts of the gospel, unless some peculiar course of sin or prejudice prevents them, contradicts the whole tenor of the *gospel* — in which it is a fundamental principle, that by nature we are children of wrath, and that we are at enmity with God, and blinded to the light of his truth, and dead in trespasses and sins. To claim that the Holy Spirit is communicated to *all* in a sufficient manner to save them, entirely overthrows the idea of any special grace, and makes one man as much born of God as another! Our text says that *as many as received Christ, and believed on his name, were born of God*. If so, others who did not, were not born of God, and the undistinguishing influences of the Spirit cannot be maintained.

It is a great stumbling block in the way of many, that God should give more of his Spirit to one, than another. To remove this subject of prejudice, Pelagius and multitudes ever since, have maintained that all men receive gifts alike, and are alike furnished to work out their salvation. This effectually destroys the new birth, and makes it alike common to every man. On this scheme, Judas had as much grace as Paul; Ahab who sold himself to work wickedness, had as much as David, a man after God's own heart. All the difference between them, was owing to the different manner in which they improved their privileges.

I know such doctrine is agreeable to corrupt nature; and the easy reception it has met with ever since it was first preached, proves how agreeable it is to carnal reason. But neither the Scriptures nor experience afford us any reason to believe it. I do not doubt that the Spirit of God strives with all men who are not reprobates. I fully admit it. I admit that the promises and threats of the gospel would be sufficient to persuade us to a holy life, if our understandings were neither darkened, nor our affections depraved. But after all this, I deny that common grace makes us the sons of God; or that we are persuaded to be Christians without any special divine influence; or that all men receive the same measure of the Spirit.

After all preparatory means — all the promises and threats of the gospel, all the operations of common grace, and all exertions of unregenerate sinners — they must be *born of God* to become his children. There must be a *new creation*, a work accomplished by Almighty power — a sovereign, special, supernatural act, like making a world, or raising the dead, as to the power exerted — and without such an act, no one can ever see the kingdom of heaven. Persuasion is not sufficient to make men new creatures. If the Spirit operates on the minds of men *only* by setting persuasive arguments or motives before them — however diverse in kind or well adapted to this purpose they are — yet after all, *it would depend on the will of man* whether any will be regenerated or not. On this scheme, the glory of regeneration would belong to ourselves. It would also be uncertain whether Christ would have any spiritual seed, as after all, it would depend on

the uncertain determination of each individual before whom the motives were set. This then contradicts the Scriptures. God does not confine his operations to setting motives of persuasion before men, “Your people shall be willing in the day of *Your power*.” ^{Psa 110.3}

Moral persuasion to a better life confers no new real, supernatural strength to the soul, which may enable it thus to live. No new taste, no new spiritual discernment, springs from persuasion. If regeneration comes thus, then a man *begets himself*, he is *born of himself*, he makes *himself* differ from others. On this plan, the Spirit of God has no more to do than Paul or Apollos.

Besides, this is not what we pray for; we do not pray that motives may be set before us to regenerate ourselves, but that God would change us, create us anew. The ancient churches urged this prayer upon the heretics, who denied a supernatural work in regeneration, and they felt themselves sorely pressed without.

There is then only one way left for a creature dead in trespasses and sins to rise to life. This is by the power of God which quickens him, creates him anew. Observe in what language sacred writers have chosen to communicate their ideas on this subject: born of God; begotten of God; quickened (or made alive from the dead); created anew. If it is said that this is figurative language, I agree to it; but if there is any correctness in the figures, then the work of regeneration must be the commencement of a new spiritual existence. On any other grounds, the language of the Scriptures is of all books, the most fancied, unmeaning, and obscure.

You may suppose all the preparation, all the knowledge, motives, morality (in the common acceptance of the term), unregenerate strivings which you please. After all these, there must be a *new creation*. The dead must be *quickened*; believers must be *born of God*. The same energy which brought Christ from the dead, the exceeding great power of the living God, must perform the work. This is the apostle’s statement: “*That we may know what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which he wrought in Christ when he raised him from the dead.*” ^{Eph 1.19-20}

Indeed, my friends, where else can we look for the origin of such a change as makes believers pass from death to life, but the omnipotence of the divine Spirit? Is it our understanding which accomplishes this change? But our understanding is darkened: “*The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit, neither can he know them.*” ^{1Cor 2.14} Is it our will? But we are “*prone to evil as the sparks fly upward.*” ^{Job 5.7} Our wills are perverse and rebellious. Is it our strength? Christ died for the ungodly who are without strength. ^{Rom 5.6} We are not sufficient of ourselves to think a good thought. Is it our merits? We merit nothing but utter rejection. Is it the ministers of God who persuade us? Paul may plant and Apollos water, “*but God gives the increase.*” ^{1Cor 3.6}

Every effort has been made by the ingenuity of man, by palpably erroneous schemes and by plausible ones, to wrest the glory of this work from the hands of the divine Spirit, and claim the operation for ourselves — at least to share in the honor of it. After all, its origin can be traced only to the free and sovereign grace and Almighty power of God. The work is all His; and the glory must and *will* forever belong exclusively to Him.

It is a doctrine supported by the great light of the Reformation and by the pillars of the evangelical churches ever since — that regeneration is a physical work. And by this they mean there is an actual new creation, as absolutely so as when the world was created; that a new spiritual taste, or discernment and principle, is implanted by a sovereign creative operation, and not simply a new direction given to the old faculties.

Such a work being proved, the whole system of evangelical truth, the doctrines of grace — of divine sovereignty; of election; of redemption only by Christ; of human depravity, and others connected with them — all flow from it. There is one grand, harmonious, and perfect system; and God is the sum, the substance and the glory of all.

My friends, I am fully aware of the difficulties incident to the doctrines laid down here. I know full well how ready the natural heart is both to oppose and misconstrue them. But if the Bible supports them, it is enough. Here our carnal reason must bow. Here our proud hearts must submit. Charge them with mystery, with inconsistency, with unprofitableness, O sinner — and you assail not man, but God. Look at his word and read. There it stands; and it is written in characters of light, “*which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*”

This is the only birth which can fit us for heaven: “*Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” ^{Joh 3:3} We may please our fancies, and gratify our self-righteousness, by adopting loose Pelagian sentiments on this subject. We may remonstrate against such absolute dependence on the grace of God as has now been advocated. But a new heart and a right spirit will, after all, be found of such absolute necessity, that without them we must perish forever.