

The Doctrine of Regeneration

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I want to touch on a very basic doctrine. And, Let me just tell you what doctrine it is, right up front. It's the Doctrine of Regeneration, I want to touch on this. Regeneration. Somebody tell me. What's Regeneration mean? Talk to me about the word. If you just took the english word: Regeneration. What does "Re" mean? "Again" Generation? Re- The idea of again. Generation. What are other words that are similar to generation? Genesis. That's exactly right; Genesis. What do we think of when we think of Genesis? The beginnings. Creation Right, Regeneration has the idea of: born again. The new birth, these are other terms that we would find. We find in our english bibles the term regeneration. We find the concept of being made alive, from the dead. We find the concept of new birth.

When God saved me, it's almost been 25 years ago now. I had no problem with the doctrine of regeneration because I could see the past lifestyle. I could see the sin that God saved me out of. I could see the transformation. It was obvious to me that I had walked in the dark, and it was obvious to me that I had walked in spiritual death, that God had made me alive, and that all the sudden my eyes were opened to something.

We think of generation. David brought up the word creation or re-creation or a new creation. See, I looked at my life and I saw that. To me the doctrine of regeneration was: Wow, all things become new, the old things are passed away. It doesn't mean that there isn't still the vestiges of sin, and the flesh that hangs on, and we have to do warfare with. But we're new. The desires are new, the direction is new. We're headed in a new direction. The faith is new. The way we see and comprehend Christ is new. I didn't have a problem with that.

It wasn't until brother Charles Leiter did his book. On Justification and Regeneration. I can remember I had lunch with a pastor who I had given that book to. And I asked him what he thought of it. He said, "Well, the first three chapters were glorious! But after that, eh." The first three chapters deal with what? Justification, after that it deals with Regeneration. I looked at this pastor friend of mine, and I was amazed because I thought, what in the world does Charles say about regeneration that isn't sitting well with him? He says, "Well, I suppose that he was biblical." But what? What are you going to say after that? "I suppose he's biblical, but I don't like that."

Charles told me, the reformed community has attacked him, sometimes viciously so. Over regeneration. I'm surprised! The reformed community seems to be really uncomfortable with the doctrine of regeneration. I'll tell you this, it also seems to me that the reformed community, Charles says, one of these guys just keeps saying, "Justification and Sanctification," that's what they call the book. It's like the reformed community has a real difficult time, distinguishing between the doctrines of regeneration and the doctrine of sanctification. They're mixing them, they're confusing them.

Let me ask you this. What is the difference between regeneration and sanctification? One is instantaneous at the point in time when God brings the dead sinner to life. There is a point! Where life is infused - spiritual life, not physical. Spiritual. If you're watching with the

naked eye you don't see it happen. Not like they were a pile of dead bones like in Ezekiel, and suddenly they came to life that way. They were dead spiritually.

Where as sanctification is what? Progressive. The theologians like to speak about a positional sanctification which sanctification is in the word group with what words. Holy, Saint. There is a place, and the word has to do with what? What are those word groups of holiness, saint, sanctification? What do they have to do with? Being "set apart." There is a point in time, that which God sets us apart. That is instantaneous.

So there is an aspect of sanctification, that we would call positional. There's a time when God takes us out of, remember? We were with the rest of who? We were like the rest of what? At one time we were dead in trespasses and sins, and what, what was true? We followed the course of this world, we followed the prince of the power of the air. The spirit that's now at work in who? The sons of disobedience. Which what? We're part of the group. God takes us out. That is a positional sanctification.

But now typically when we talk about the word, what do we mean? Sanctification: what do we mean? Patrick was hitting on, one is instantaneous. Between regeneration and sanctification. Regeneration is instantaneous, whereas Sanctification is a process, right? It's a process of what? Being set apart? Being more set apart? Becoming more and more like Christ. From one degree of glory to another. We're predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ. It's this taking on the image of Christ.

I want to be clear about these doctrines. Because the thing is this. Although regeneration doesn't instantaneously make us glorified. It doesn't make us like we're going to be in heaven. It does make us altogether different than we were before. Old things pass away. That deadness is gone. We are recreated, the old you is gone. Now that doesn't mean we don't carry around, this bag of bones, and flesh. Which seems to be, according to Paul the root of sin. The desire is here. We do.

Now what's the difference? We're at war, and we're putting it to death by the spirit. We're putting those things to death. We bring out the spiritual knife, and we are slitting throats, we are in mortal combat with it. Before we were not. Before sin was enjoyable, we loved it. We all had our different forms that we loved. But we were under sin, we were slaves to sin. There was none that did good. Goodness was not in our repertoire. Regeneration. New Creations. Let's talk about this. I recently heard one of our own preachers say something about, believing being the precursor to regeneration.

Let me ask you this. What does scripture teach us about the position of regeneration and faith? Which is... are they simultaneous? Is one before the other? If they are simultaneous, does one take precedence over the other? In other words, is one responsible for the other? Is faith responsible for regeneration, or is regeneration responsible for faith? Do they happen at the same time, or do they not happen at the same time? Does scripture give us any sort of idea about sequence? Or priority? or which one springs from the other? Can you think of scripture?

Hey, you know, I want to recommend this to everybody. John Piper is now doing something helpful and valuable, to the people of God. He's now doing what is called "Look at the Book." I highly commend that to all of you especially to you guys that have any aspirations of preaching. Basically what he does is he takes texts, and he goes through, and he just breaks them apart, and opens them up, it's wonderful. It's what you need to do if you're going to teach

God's word. The reason I bring it up is because Piper, he deals, he hasn't done many of these yet, but in the ones he has done - he's done one on the first, I think, four verses of 1st John 5. Why don't you turn there? 1st John 5, and verse 1. Notice specifically the place of faith, or belief, or believing that Jesus is the Christ, and the idea of being born of God, being born again. The doctrine of regeneration. Watch this: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ." 1st John 5, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, has been born of God." Everyone who currently believes, "has been born of God." "Has been." I mean the idea there is "has been." If you currently believe, you have been born of God.

The basic thought, I mean you look at this, "has been born." Let me just tell you this about it. In the perfect tense. Do we have any Grammar experts? Anybody know what perfect tense is all about? (man answers) Right. It happened once, and it has future implications. But it's the idea of an action that has been in the past, completed. But the results of that completed action, continue on in full effect. In other words, the progress of that action has reached its culmination, and now the finished results of it are in existence.

Look, if you read this. Which one feels like it's responsible for the other one? Regeneration is responsible for faith. If you're gonna get an idea about, which proceeds from which. I mean what he's saying is this: If I find somebody who has faith, it tells me about something that has happened in their life. Isn't that exactly the idea that you get here? If I find somebody that believes that Jesus Christ - any body that believes that Jesus is the Christ, is the Messiah. If I find somebody that has a saving faith in Christ, it's evidence of the new birth.

Now, I want you to notice here in 1st John. Look at 1st John 2:29. We have exactly. Remember the verb? "Has been born." That we just saw in 1st John 5:1. That idea of "has been." We have precisely the same verb. Exactly the same verb. In the exact same form. In the exact same tense, and voice. It comes at us three other times in 1st John. I want you to see this, 1st John 2:29 "If you know that He is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of Him." Exactly, "has been born." Exactly.

Now you tell me this. Do we practice righteousness to be born again? Or are we born again, and the fruit is righteousness? Exactly. You can see by the use of this verb here, exactly which one takes precedence over the other. Which one came first. Which one spawns the other one. We have exactly the same verb again, 1st John 3:9 "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him." Now watch this. "and he cannot keep on sinning because." Here it is. "because he has been born of God." Does somebody not keep sinning, to be born of God? Or does somebody get born of God, and the result is they don't keep sinning?

Again, one more time. We have exactly the same "has been born" verb in 1st John 4:7. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, for whoever loves has been born of God." Again, if we say, think about all three of these verses. One is righteousness and being born of God. The other is not sinning, and being born of God; and one is loving, and being born of God. I tell you this; if you say we have to love in order to be born of God, you have what? A gospel of what? Works. If you say you have to do righteousness to be born of God. You have a gospel of works. It's no gospel at all, it's another gospel. If you say you have to quit sinning to be born again.

Obviously none of us have issues with any of these. We understand right away. You're born of God: The result: Righteousness. You're born of God: The result: You no longer practice

sin. You're born of God. The result: God's love works out through you. And so, you see when we come to 1st John 5, he uses exactly the same verb. He's not going to throw this thing on its ear, and turn it upside down, and say, "Oh, what I mean here is that faith actually precedes regeneration." That's not true. Just in the way that the other three verses work out, so will this verse work out. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, has been born of God." Just in the same way that being born of God produces righteousness. Produces a lifestyle where sin is no longer practiced. Produces love, it produces faith. It's what being born again does. One produces the other.

We need to be really clear on this, really clear. Listen, we do not believe that salvation is ultimately hinging on man's decision. God does not bow to man's decision. God's decision to breathe life is the controlling factor in who gets saved.

So let's think further. Let's look at John 1, verses 12 and 13. John 1, and just in case, I mentioned that, I heard one of our own preachers - It's none of you guys that are here. So don't be thinking, "Uh, I wonder if he's talking about me?" Now if you made this mistake, don't make this mistake again. One precedes the other. It's really important, and it has implications. It really has important implications about how we view salvation.

John 1 verse... let's start in verse 11. Jesus Christ, this eternal word of God. The Word who was in the beginning. "He came to his own, and his own, (people is not in the original) but, His own. Apparently, pointing primarily to the Jews. "did not receive him." Now notice this, verse 12. "But to all who did receive him..." - who believed. Receiving and believing are basically synonymous here. We must receive him, we must believe in his name.

The doctrine of regeneration does not in any way, shape, or form negate or lead us to understand that faith is not our responsibility. It is our responsibility. Absolutely, we are responsible to receive him, and believe on His name. "And to many as" do that, "He gave the right to become children of God." He gives the right of adoption. To those who believe. Notice this. John says, but these people were born... not of blood. I don't really want to sit there on what that means. But, not of blood lines. But notice this, "Nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

Now look, receiving Christ, and believing in his name, is an act of the will. That's something we do. That's something we're responsible to do. If you receive, that's a choice you are making. That happens by man's will, it happens by man's responsibility. Men are responsible to believe. In 1st John chapter 3, don't we even read - John tells us that God has given commandment for us? To believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ. God gives us commandment. To believe. Have you ever noticed that?

I was just recently going through the book of Acts in my family devotions. Do you know that when Paul and Barnabas took the gospel out into the Gentile world, he would often go into the synagogues first. And you know he proclaimed Christ, and the Jews rejected, and you know what Paul said? He said you guys count yourselves unworthy of eternal life. And He said, behold we are going to turn to the gentiles. Wow. You count yourself. This is your fault. You're responsible. Your rejection is on your head. In fact in another place, Paul says: your blood be on your own hands, I'm innocent. From now on I go to the gentiles. Your blood be on your own heads. Do you recognize that if you don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, your blood is on your

own head? That's another way of saying you are responsible for your own death. You're responsible for your own destruction.

Jesus dealt with men this way. In John 5:40, "You refused to come to me, that you may have life." In John 5:43, He says, "I've come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me." Now remember, in John 1 verse 12, "To as many as do receive Him, who believe on His name." They're given these rights of adoption. To become the children of God. And yet when men don't receive, Jesus holds them accountable. He holds them responsible. He says, "I came in my Father's name, and you do not receive me." He's finding fault with them. It's their responsibility to believe on Him.

But I'll tell you this, when you go back to John 1:13, being born of God has nothing to do with human will. Do you see that? Go back to John 1. John 1:13 If you have received Christ, and believed, and become children, it's because you were born, and you were born; notice the last two words in that verse. You were born of God. And the whole idea is; you were born of God's will, not of man's will. You see faith, has to do with appealing with the will of man. The new birth does not. The new birth is outside of the control of man's will. You know we can will to see somebody saved, but we cannot will to save them. We don't have that power. The Lord does this outside of the realm. This is not an act of the will.

Think about this. James 1:18, "Of His own will, He brought us forth." He does it by the Word of God. He does it through Scripture, through the word of truth. But it's of His own will. Remember John 3, being born again. What does he liken it to? Well for one: Being born again. Did you will your first birth? Obviously not, and there's a correlation here. But He goes even further. And He says that it's like what? It's like the wind, you have no control of the wind. You can see what the wind does. But you don't see the wind. Like you don't see the spirit, and you have no control of where it blows. When the wind blows, the tree shakes. I don't look and say the tree shook, and made the wind blow. I say the wind blew and made the tree shake. I see the wind blew, and the man believed. The wind blew, the man did righteousness. The wind blew, the man began to love. The wind blew, and he put away his practice of sin. You see that which was only according to the will of God, produced that effect. That's the order in Scripture, that's how we see these things.

John 3:8 "The wind blows where it wishes, you hear its sound, you do not know where it comes from, or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born..." you could say, "of God," or "born of the Spirit of God." That's the way it is with everybody.

Let me just throw something else at you. Doesn't Jesus on a regular basis use this idea of "fruit"? What do we know about a tree that produces apples? It's an apple tree. But it's an apple tree because it was first an apple tree, and that's why it produced apples. It wasn't a peach tree that produced an apple, determining it wanted to become an apple tree. The same reality. In Luke 6:43, "No good tree bears bad fruit." What do you have to have; to have good fruit? It first has to be a good tree. You see there's an order here. The order is: No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit. There's a starting point. He says in Matthew 12:33 "You either make the tree good..." (and "then"; there's no "then" there, but there's sequence). You make the tree good, and its fruit good. Or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad. There's an order there and that order matters. For the tree is known by its fruit.

Let's think about "depravity" for a second - "depravity." Is it not written in Scripture that there is none righteous? Is there even one? You should answer: No not one if you're gonna answer good biblical answers. No not one. There's none that does good. But you know what, something else is said in there in Romans 3. There is none, who does what? None seek after God. You say, but wait! Some seek after God. This is almost like it is in the beginning. He came into His own, and His own received Him not. But, to as many as received Him. Wait, John you just said none received Him. Now you're making an exception.

Well, none seek after God. How do we understand that? None in their natural dead in sin condition, seek after God. What has to happen for somebody to seek after God? They have to become a new tree, they have to be born of the Spirit. The wind has to blow on them. They need to be born again. They need to be regenerated. They need to become a new creation. If a new creation, you believe. If a new creation, you seek for God. If a new creation, your desires are different, they're new. You see Ephesians 2:1 says that, "We were dead in trespasses and sins," and we did just like the rest of the world. We did not seek God, we followed the course of the world, we followed the prince of the power of the air. We did that. We were just like all those who lived in the passions of their flesh. We carried out the desires of the body. We carried out the desires of the mind. We were by nature the children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. We were just like the rest of mankind, who doesn't seek after God. There's none in that group that seeks after God.

But, what happened? But God made us alive in Christ. That's the difference, and God did it. And we were born not of the will of man. Brethren, we need to remember this. We don't want to go wrong.

Not too long ago I did a series on Hyper-Calvinism. And I really emphasized something that I think needs to be emphasized in our day. We need to press sinners with their responsibility to flee to Christ at once, and we never take this doctrine of regeneration in any way back away from man responsibility to press in, and lay hold on Christ at once! Because if you don't, your blood be on your own head. We need to be able to preach just like that. Because it is their responsibility.

Listen, their inability is their depravity, and it is their fault. Yet, on the other hand we recognize that no man can come. Why can't they come? Well, they can't come because they're in love with their sin. Obviously some heart work has to take place. It is their sin. I mean just because their inability is their sin, doesn't mean we excuse them. I mean if somebody came along and said, "I could not help myself, I had to rape your daughter." Ah, then you're excused. You couldn't help yourself. That's what man's "dead in trespasses and sins" is like. He can't help himself, because all his desires are depraved. We don't excuse it, it's criminal. And yet at the same time, his bondage to sin is outside of his own control to break. He cannot break it. He cannot come unless the father sets him free. Unless the Father draws him, and when He draws him those cords with sin will snap. He gives him a new heart. He gives them a new mind. He gives them life. God must do that.

But because God does that, we don't come along and excuse the guy that's sitting in their sin saying, "I want to be saved, but I can't." This is the issue, we looked at this, when we looked at the series in Hyper-Calvinism. The "cannot" comes right out of Luke 14: "I have a wife, I cannot come." You see, that's the "cannot" of Scripture. I love something more than I love the

banquet of God. I love my oxen, and my field, and my wife. So I can't come. And that's right he can't, why? Because he's mastered by sin. He's mastered by love of the things that he ought not to love. He's mastered by the things that God hates. When we were yet weak. He has no ability, there is utter weakness there. He doesn't have the ability to do right. But you see, his inability has to do with his love for that which is wicked. It's his fault. It's his crime. His inability is criminal. But, it's inability nevertheless.

And if God does not give the "new birth," all of our wills can be set on seeing somebody saved, but it's not according to the will of man, but men are born of God, by His will. We need to be really straight. Regeneration is not justification. We already dealt with: it's not sanctification. It's not justification. We don't want confusion there either. We don't want to talk about regeneration, as though, well, the way you get it is by believing and we're justified by faith. You don't want to mix those together. Jesus didn't mix them together.

In John 3, He talked about something that you don't have control of, the Spirit has control of. But here's Nicodemus saying, what do I do? You see that inability set that sinner right where he needs to be. I'm helpless. I'm helpless. Lord give me so hope here. Am I supposed to go back into the womb again? I can't, how Lord, how? He said, "Just as that serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so I'm going to be lifted up." Whoever looks upon Me, their sins will be forgiven. Believe on the Son. "God so loved the world," He leads into John 3:16.

Brethren, that's Nicodemus's responsibility. He doesn't stop and tell him how he may be born again. But what he does is he goes to his responsibility and the reason. Regeneration takes salvation out of our hands and puts it all in God's lap. Regeneration is a humbling doctrine. Oh it's a glorious one, it's a powerful one. It is a humbling one to man. Salvation is not in our power. But it does not excuse man for his wickedness. If men will flee to Christ, just as Nicodemus was pressed to believe on that lifted up Christ. If you will believe, you will have eternal life, and you will not perish. But you are under condemnation if you will not believe. This is the truth of Scripture. We need to be absolutely straight, we need to be clear on this. We don't want to confuse this.

Well, we'll finish there. I just wanted to share a few thoughts on regeneration this morning. It is one of the foundational doctrines of our faith. Lack of clarity can lead to horrific error - even damnable error. It is a damnable error. Hyper-Calvinism. If we take regeneration, and we end up excusing the sinner, it also becomes a damnable error if we mix it with justification. Because we start implying man has the power to believe, and produce the new birth. That man is in control, that man can do this. We become confused at that point. If we mix it with sanctification, we end up with a Christianity where we say, "Well, there's really no change!" "The change is progressive, the change is something that happens in time". But when the new birth happens, "Well, there's really nothing." "We shouldn't expect that there would be this radical recreation in people. Eh, they're going to be pretty much like they used to be. They're going to be pretty carnal, and we hope that over time, you know, they'll more and more accept the Lordship of Christ, and they'll more, and more will do this." That's wrong, that's just not good theology.

We want to be straight. When we're not straight with Scripture, when we're not straight with truth. It leads us places we ought not to go. And look, doctrine is not harmless. We live by what we believe. Doctrine is teaching. We will live according to what we believe. We don't

separate the truth we believe from how we live. They go hand in hand. Everybody lives according to what they believe. Now you may believe a lie, but you live according to what you believe. In the Sunday School: As soon as I was done, the question came up. "Regeneration, and justification happen at the same time don't they?" Well, here's the thing. Regeneration, and faith, and justification. We can say, yeah! If you actually looking for a separation in time, I don't think you're going to find any kind of that reality in scripture. But it's the idea of which one produces which. Spontaneous? Yes. But think about it, we're justified by faith. And we know from 1st John 5:1, that everybody who has faith; everybody who believes that Jesus is the Christ, has been born of God. So you have the New Birth. That spiritually dead sinner is made alive. There is faith, and by faith they are justified. But then I was also asked this question: What if you are evangelizing, and somebody says, "How can I be born again?"

Listen, I think what we need to do... Here's the thing. We want to use regeneration the same way Jesus used it. You know what the doctrine of regeneration does? It actually helps us have a right perspective on faith. Because remember, Jesus dealt with Nicodemus about regeneration, being born again, born of the spirit, born of water and the spirit. He dealt with that first, and then he moves as you go through John 3, he moves in to believing on the Son. Think about how regeneration actually causes us to have a right view about faith. Do you know what regeneration did to Nicodemus? It just crushed him. It made him see, I can't do anything to save myself. And it puts faith in the proper perspective.

Oh brethren, don't we have so many people, they're out there. "Oh I have to believe" and they're trying to construct this thing. "I'm doing it... Why isn't God saving me! ...Oh, I've got to try harder to..." You see the right way to use regeneration is to crush that mentality. God saves whom He will. This is outside of the will, and power of man. And then when you've broken the sinner down, to where he sees, "I'm helpless in this." Then you lift up the cross. You see how that works? Now you point them to Christ to believe, which is their responsibility. But you've shown them that their faith needs to be the kind of faith that puts no confidence in themselves. It is that which has been brought to being utterly devastated in its own abilities, and that's what regeneration can do. When that sinner comes to you and says, "How do I be born again?" That's your perfect opportunity to show him, to just lay waste, his own ideas of effort. But that doesn't mean that you don't lift up the cross and tell him. "There is your safety from your weakness and inability. There is your rescue." That's how you use that. Oh, God help us to be just balanced in this, as our Savior was.