

## The New Genesis - R.C. Sproul

*Without the presence of the Spirit there is no conviction, no regeneration, no sanctification, no cleansing, no acceptable works . . . Life is in the quickening Spirit.* — W A. CRISWELL

BIRTH and rebirth. Both are the result of the operation of the Holy Spirit. Just as nothing can live biologically apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, so no man can come alive to God apart from the Spirit's work

In His discourse with Nicodemus, Jesus said this about the Holy Spirit:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3)

To be "born again" is to experience a second genesis. It is a new beginning, a fresh start in life. When something is started, we say that it is generated. If it is started again, it is regenerated. The Greek verb *gignauo* that is translated as "generate" means "to be," "to become," or "to happen." Regeneration by the Holy Spirit is a change. It is a radical change into a new kind of being.

To be regenerated does not mean that we are changed from a human being into a divine being. It does mean that we are changed from spiritually dead human beings into spiritually alive human beings.

Spiritually dead persons are incapable of seeing the kingdom of God. It is invisible to them, not because the kingdom itself is invisible, but because the spiritually dead are also spiritually blind.

### REGENERATION AS NECESSARY

When Jesus uses the word unless in speaking to Nicodemus, He is stating what we call a necessary condition. A necessary condition is an absolute prerequisite for a desired result to take place. We cannot have fire without the presence of oxygen because oxygen is a necessary condition for fire.

In the jargon of Christianity people speak of "born again" Christians. Technically speaking, this phrase is redundant. If a person is not born again, if he is not regenerate, then he is not a Christian. He may be a member of a Christian church. He may profess to be a Christian. But unless a person is regenerate, he is not in Christ, and Christ is not in him.

The word unless makes regeneration a *sine qua non* of salvation. No regeneration, no eternal life. Without regeneration a person can neither see the kingdom nor enter the kingdom.

When Nicodemus was puzzled by Jesus' teaching he replied:

*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?* (John 3:4)

Nicodemus's response almost seems like an attempt to ridicule Jesus' teaching. In crass terms he suggests that Jesus must mean that a fully grown person must attempt the impossible task of returning to his mother's womb.

Nicodemus failed to distinguish biological birth from spiritual birth. He didn't differentiate between flesh and spirit. Jesus answered his response by saying,

*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again."* (John 3:5-7)

Again Jesus prefaces His words by saying, "Most assuredly, I say to you . . ." The "most assuredly"— the Hebrew *amen*, carried over into the New Testament — indicates strong emphasis. That is, when Jesus spoke of regeneration as a necessary condition for seeing and entering the kingdom of God, he stated this necessary condition emphatically. To argue against the need of rebirth to be a Christian, as many of our contemporaries frequently do, is to stand in clear opposition to the emphatic teaching of Christ.

The word cannot is also crucial to Jesus' teaching. It is a negative word that deals with ability or possibility. Without regeneration no one (universal negative) is able to enter the kingdom of God. There are no exceptions. It is impossible to enter God's kingdom without a rebirth.

No one is born a Christian. No one is born biologically into the kingdom of God. The first birth is one that is of the flesh. Flesh begets flesh. It cannot produce spirit.

Later in John's Gospel, Jesus adds this comment:

*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing.* (John 6:2 3)

When Martin Luther was debating whether fallen man is utterly dependent upon the Holy Spirit for regeneration, he cited this text and added: "The flesh profits nothing. And that 'nothing' is not a 'little something.'"

The flesh is not merely weak with respect to the power of rebirth. It is utterly impotent. It has no power whatever to effect rebirth. It cannot aid or enhance the Spirit's work. All that the flesh yields is more flesh. It cannot yield an ounce of Spirit. The nothing is not a little something.

Finally Jesus says, "You must be born again." If there is the slightest ambiguity with the use of the conditional word unless, the ambiguity completely evaporates with the word must.

### REGENERATION IN EPHESIANS

In his Letter to the Ephesians the apostle Paul speaks of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit:

*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).* (Ephesians 2:1-5)

Paul provides a graphic description of our spiritual impotence prior to regeneration. He is addressing the Ephesian believers and describing a prior condition in which they all once shared. He adds the phrase "just as the others" (2:3), presumably referring to the whole of mankind.

He declares that this prior condition was a state of death: "You were dead in trespasses and sins." Again, this death is obviously not a biological death, as he enumerates activities that these dead, persons were involved in.

The characteristic behavioral mode of people dead in trespasses and sins is described in terms of walking a particular course. He calls it the "course of this world" (2:1-2). Here the course of this world obviously refers to a course or pattern that is opposed to the course of heaven. The words this world refer not so much to a location as to a style or a point of reference. It involves a this-worldly orientation.

Christians and non-Christians alike share the same sphere of operations. We all live out our lives in this world. The regenerate person's course, however, is guided from above. He has his eye on heaven and his ear attuned to the King of heaven. The unregenerate person is earthbound. His ear is deaf to any word from heaven; his eye is blinded to the glory from on high. He lives as a walking cadaver in a spiritual graveyard.

The course of this world is "out of the way" of God (Romans 3:12). Rather, it follows a path that is "according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2).

The spiritually dead have a master. Their master sets a course for them that they willingly — even eagerly — follow. This master is called the "prince of the power of the air." This sobriquet of royalty can only refer to Satan, the chief architect of all things diabolical. Paul calls him "the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience." Satan is an evil spirit, a corrupt and fallen angel who exercises influence and authority over his captive hordes.

Paul sets forth a principle of life. We either walk according to the Holy Spirit or we walk according to the evil spirit. Augustine once compared man to a horse who is either ridden by Satan or by the Spirit of God.

Paul continues his vivid description of the regenerate person's prior unregenerate lifestyle:

*Among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind. (2:3)*  
The attention now shifts away from the external course and the external influence of Satan to the internal state of the unregenerate person. Again we see this as a universal condition: "Among whom also we all once conducted ourselves . . ." The key descriptive word of this previous internal condition is the word flesh. Here Paul echoes the language Jesus used with Nicodemus.

The word flesh here must not be understood as a synonym for "physical body." Our bodies per se are not evil, since God made us as physical beings and became a human being Himself. The flesh refers to the sin nature, the entire fallen character of man.

Prior to regeneration we live exclusively in the flesh and by the flesh. Our conduct follows after the lusts of the flesh. That refers not exclusively to physical or sexual appetites but to a pattern of all sinful desires.

Paul caps this universal indictment of our fallen state by adding: "And were by nature children of wrath, just as the others" (2:3). When Paul speaks of "by nature," he refers to our state in which we enter this world. Biological birth is natural birth. Regeneration is a supernatural birth. Men were not originally created as children of wrath. Original nature was not fallen. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, however, the word natural refers to our state of innate sinfulness.

Every child who enters this world enters it in a corrupt state. David declared, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). We are all spiritually stillborn. We are born dead in trespasses and sin. In theology we call this inherent sinful condition original sin. Original sin does not refer to the first sin of Adam and Eve; it refers to the consequences of that first sin, with the transmission of a corrupt nature to the entire human race.

We are by nature "children of wrath." How different this sounds from the socially acceptable notion that we are all naturally the children of God! This misguided idea is both longstanding and widespread. It is a falsehood that gains credibility by its frequent repetition. If you repeat a lie often enough, people will begin to believe it.

The lie of saying that we are by nature children of God was a lie that distressed Jesus. He was forced to combat it and refute it in His debates with the Pharisees. The Pharisees raged under Jesus' criticism and said, *"We were not born of fornication; we have one Father — God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. . . . He who is of God hears God's words; therefore, you do not hear, because you are not of God. (John 8:41-47)*

Although the Bible acknowledges that God is the Father of all men in the sense of His being the Creator of all men, there is a special sense in which the Fatherhood of God is defined not in terms of biology but in terms of ethics. Obedience is the operative word. In the biblical view, our father is the one we obey. The relationship is established not by biological ties, but by willing obedience.

Since the Pharisees obeyed Satan rather than God, Jesus said of them, "You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44).

In Ephesians 2 Paul speaks both of "children of wrath" (v. 3) and "sons of disobedience" (v. 2). These phrases describe all of us in our natural unregenerate state.

When Paul completes his description of our unregenerate state, he moves abruptly and gloriously into a doxology that praises God for His mercy. The transitional word is the single word upon which our eternal destinies depend. It is perhaps the most glorious word in Scripture, the single word that crystallizes the essence of the Gospel. It is the word but. This tiny conjunction shifts the mood of the entire passage. It is the link between the natural and the supernatural, between degeneration and regeneration: *But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ*

*Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:4-10)*

### **THE DIVINE INITIATIVE**

Regeneration is the sovereign work of God the Holy Spirit. The initiative is with Him, not with ourselves. We notice that the accent with Paul falls on the work of God, not on the effort of man:

*But God, who is rich in mercy...*

We observe that the Apostle does not write:

But man, out of his goodness, inclines himself to God and raises himself to a new spiritual level.

One of the most dramatic moments in my life for the shaping of my theology took place in a seminary classroom.

One of my professors went to the blackboard and wrote these words in bold letters: **REGENERATION PRECEDES FAITH**

These words were a shock to my system. I had entered seminary believing that the key work of man to effect rebirth was faith. I thought that we first had to believe in Christ in order to be born again. I use the words in order here for a reason. I was thinking in terms of steps that must be taken in a certain sequence to arrive at a destination. I had put faith at the beginning of the sequence. The order looked something like this:

### **Faith — Rebirth — Justification**

In this scheme of things the initiative falls with us. To be sure, God had sent Jesus to die on the cross before I ever heard the gospel. But once God had done these things external to me, I thought the initiative for appropriating salvation was my job.

I hadn't thought the matter through very carefully. Nor had I listened carefully to Jesus' words to Nicodemus. I assumed that even though I was a sinner, a person born of the flesh and living in the flesh, I still had a little island of righteousness, a tiny deposit of spiritual power left within my soul to enable me to respond to the gospel on my own.

Perhaps I had been confused by the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic church. Rome, and many other branches of Christendom, had taught that regeneration is gracious; it cannot happen apart from the help of God. No man has the power to raise himself from spiritual death. Divine assistance is needed and needed absolutely. This grace, according to Rome, comes in the form of what is called prevenient grace. "Prevenient" means that which comes before something else.

Rome adds to this prevenient grace the requirement that we must "cooperate with it and assent to it" before it can take hold in our hearts.

This concept of cooperation is at best a half-truth. It is true insofar that the faith that we exercise is our faith. God does not do the believing in Christ for us. When I respond to Christ, it is my response, my faith, my trust that is being exercised.

The issue, however, goes much deeper. The question still remains: Do I cooperate with God's grace before I am born again, or does the cooperation occur after I am born again?

Another way of asking this question is to ask if regeneration is monergistic or synergistic. Is it operative or cooperative? Is it effectual or dependent? Some of these words are theological terms that require further explanation.

### **MONERGISM AND SYNERGISM**

A monergistic work is a work produced singly, by one person. The prefix mono- means one. The word erg refers to a unit of work. Words like energy are built upon this root. A synergistic work is one that involves cooperation between two or more persons or things. The prefix syn- means "together with."

I labor this distinction for a reason. It is fair to say that the whole debate between Rome and Martin Luther hung on this single point. At issue was this: Is regeneration a monergistic work of God, or is it a synergistic work that requires cooperation between man and God?

When my professor wrote, "Regeneration precedes faith" on the blackboard, he was clearly siding with the monergistic answer. To be sure, after a person is regenerated, that person cooperates by exercising faith and trust. But the first step, the step of regeneration by which a person is quickened to spiritual life, is the work of God and of God alone. The initiative is with God, not with us.

The reason we do not cooperate with regenerating grace before it acts upon us and in us is because we cannot. We cannot because we are spiritually dead. We can no more assist the Holy Spirit in the quickening of our souls to spiritual life than Lazarus could help Jesus raise him from the dead.

It is probably true that the majority of professing Christians in the world today believe that the order of our salvation is this: Faith precedes regeneration. We are exhorted to choose to be born again. But telling a man to choose rebirth is like exhorting a corpse to choose resurrection. The exhortation falls upon deaf ears.

When I began to wrestle with the professor's argument, I was surprised to learn that his strange-sounding teaching was not a novel innovation to theology. I found the same teaching in Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield. I was astonished to find it even in the teaching of the great medieval Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas.

That these giants of Christian history reached the same conclusion on this point made a tremendous impact on me. I was aware that they were neither individually nor collectively infallible. Each and all of them could be mistaken. But I was impressed. I was especially impressed by Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas is regarded as the Doctor Angelicus of the Roman Catholic church. For centuries his theological teaching was accepted as official dogma by most Catholics. So he was the last person I expected to hold such a view of regeneration. Yet Aquinas insisted that regenerating grace is operative grace, not cooperative grace. Aquinas spoke of prevenient grace, but he spoke of a grace that comes before faith, which is the grace of regeneration.

The key phrase in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians on this matter is this:  
*even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).* (Ephesians 2:5)  
Here Paul locates the time when regeneration occurs. It takes place when we were dead. With one thunderbolt of apostolic revelation all attempts to give the initiative in regeneration to man is smashed utterly and completely. Again, dead men. do not cooperate with grace. The spiritually dead take no initiative. Unless regeneration takes place first, there is no possibility of faith.

This says nothing different from what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Unless a man is born again first, he cannot possibly see or enter the kingdom of God. If we believe that faith precedes regeneration, then we set our thinking and therefore ourselves in direct opposition not only to Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, and others, but we stand opposed to the teaching of Paul and of our Lord Himself.

### **REGENERATION IS GRACIOUS**

In Paul's exposition of regeneration there is a strong accent on grace. It is necessary that Christians of all theological persuasions acknowledge willingly and joyfully that our salvation rests upon the foundation of grace.

During the Reformation the Protestants used two Latin phrases as battle cries: *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *so/a fide* (faith alone). They insisted that the supreme authority in the church under Christ is the Bible alone. They insisted that justification was by faith alone. Now Rome did not deny that the Bible has authority; it was the *sola* they choked on. Rome did not deny that justification involves faith; it was the *sola* that provoked them to condemn Luther.

There was a third battle cry during the Reformation. It was originally penned by Augustine more than a thousand years before Luther. It was the phrase *sola gratia*. This phrase asserts that our salvation rests on the grace of God alone. There is no mixture of human merit with it. Salvation is not a human achievement; it is a gracious gift of God. This formula is compromised by a synergistic view of regeneration.

It is not by accident that Paul adds to his teaching on regeneration that it is a gracious work of God. Let us look at it again:  
*But God who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) . . . that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* (Ephesians 2:4-10)

Have you ever second-guessed the Bible? I certainly have, to my great shame. I have often wondered, in the midst of theological disagreements, why the Bible does not speak more clearly on certain issues. Why, for example, doesn't the New Testament come right out and say we should or we shouldn't baptize infants?

On many such questions we are left to decide on the basis of inferences drawn from the Bible. When I am bewildered by such disagreements, I usually come back to this point: The trouble lies not with the Bible's lack of clarity; it lies with my lack of clear thinking about what the Bible teaches.

When it comes to regeneration and faith I wonder how Paul could have made it any more clear. I suppose he could have added the words to Ephesians 2, "Regeneration precedes faith." However, I honestly think that even that phrase wouldn't end the debate. There's nothing in that phrase that isn't already clearly spelled out by Paul in this text or by Jesus in John 3.

Why then, all the fuss? My guess is that it is because if we conclude that regeneration is by divine initiative, that regeneration is monergistic, that salvation is by grace alone, we cannot escape the glaring implication that leads us quickly and irresistibly to sovereign election.

As soon as the doctrine of election comes to the fore, there is a mad scramble to find a way to get faith in there before regeneration. In spite of all these attending difficulties, we meet the Apostle's teaching headon:  
*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Here the Apostle teaches that the faith through which we are saved is a faith that comes to us by grace. Our faith is something we exercise by ourselves and in ourselves, but it is not of ourselves. It is a gift. It is not an achievement.

With the graciousness of the gift of faith as a fruit of regeneration, all boasting is excluded forever, save in the boasting of the exceeding riches of God's mercy. All man-centered views of salvation are excluded if we retain the *sola* in *so/a gratia*. Therefore we ought never to grieve the Holy Spirit by taking credit to ourselves that belongs exclusively to Him.

### **REGENERATION IS EFFECTUAL**

Within traditional forms of Arminian theology there are those who agree that regeneration precedes faith but insist that it doesn't always or necessarily produce faith. This view agrees that the initiative is with God; it is by grace, and regeneration is monergistic. The view is usually tied to some type of view of universal regeneration.

This idea is linked to the cross. It is argued by some that one of the universal benefits of the atonement of Christ is that all people are regenerated to the point that faith is now possible. The cross rescues all men from spiritual death in that now we have the power to cooperate or not cooperate with the offer of saving grace. Those who cooperate by exercising faith are justified. Those who do not exercise faith are born again but not converted. They are spiritually quickened and spiritually alive but remain in unbelief. Now they are able to see the kingdom and have the moral power to enter the kingdom, but they choose not to.

I call this view one of ineffectual or dependent grace. It is close to what Thomas Aquinas rejected as cooperative grace.

When I maintain that regeneration is effectual, I mean that it accomplishes its desired goal. It is effective. It gets the job done. We are made alive into faith. The gift is of faith which is truly given and takes root in our hearts.

Sometimes the phrase effectual calling is used as a synonym for regeneration. The word calling refers to something that happens inside of us, as distinguished from something that occurs outside of us.

When the gospel is preached audibly, sounds are emitted from the preacher's mouth. There is an outward call to faith and repentance. Anyone who is not deaf is capable of hearing the words with his ears. These words strike the auditory nerves of the regenerate and the unregenerate alike.

The unregenerate experience the outward call of the gospel. This outward call will not effect salvation unless the call is heard and embraced in faith. Effectual calling refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Here the call is within. The regenerate are called inwardly. Everyone who receives the inward call of regeneration responds in faith. Paul says this:

*Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.* (Romans 8:30)

This passage in Romans is elliptical. That is, it requires that we supply a word to it that is assumed by the text but not explicitly stated. The big question is, Which word do we supply — some or all? Let us try some:

Moreover, **some** whom He predestined, these He also called; **some** whom He called, these He also justified; and **some** whom He justified, these He also glorified.

To add the word some here is to torture the text. It would mean that some of the predestined never hear the call of the gospel. Some who are called never come to faith and justification. Some of the justified fail to be glorified. In this schema not only would calling not be effectual, but neither would predestination nor justification be effectual.

The implication of this text is that all who are predestined are likewise called. All who are called are justified, and all who are justified are glorified.

If that is the case, then we must distinguish between the outward call of the gospel, which may or may not be heeded, and the inward call of the Spirit, which is necessarily effectual. Why? If all the called are also justified, then all the called must exercise faith. Obviously not everyone who hears the external call of the gospel comes to faith and justification. But all who are effectually called do come to faith and justification. Here the call refers to the inward work of the Holy Spirit that is tied to regeneration.

Those whom the Holy Spirit makes alive most assuredly come to life. They see the kingdom; they embrace the kingdom; they enter the kingdom.

It is to the Holy Spirit of God that we are debtors for the grace of regeneration and faith. He is the Gift-giver, who while we were dead made us alive with Christ, to Christ, and in Christ. It is because of the Holy Spirit's merciful act of quickening that we sing *sola gratia* and *soli deo gloria* — to the glory of God alone.

#### **Author**

Dr. R.C. Sproul, theologian, minister, teacher, is the chairman of the board of Ligonier Ministries. A graduate of Westminster College, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and the Free University of Amsterdam. Dr. Sproul is currently professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary and the director emeritus of Prison Fellowship, Inc. His many books include, *Pleasing God*, *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit*, *The Soul's Quest for God*, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, *The Glory of Christ*, and *If There's a God, Why are there Atheists?*

*This article is taken from Dr. Sproul's book, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Tyndale House: Wheaton, 1979).*