



# Born Again

The new birth is sometimes likened to the emergence of a butterfly. The truth is, however, that there is no adequate parallel in nature for the miracle of the regeneration of a sinner.

I was recently asked to review a book for a Christian paper. The book, *Regeneration*, is not the work of some modern theologian but a reprint of a little volume that first appeared in the nineteenth century. The author, Bishop J. C. Ryle, laments that there is so little understanding of what it means to be born again, and he sets out to address the problem. It is more than a hundred years since then, and little has changed. The secular media's portrayals of those claiming to be born-again Christians are invariably negative, but we cannot expect secularists to grasp the significance of this spiritual term. Sadly, many who use the expression in a much more positive way are equally ignorant. Worse still, some who apply the description to themselves have merely had a vague, subjective experience, an experience far short of what the Bible means when it speaks of being born again. We live in an age when many are only too familiar with the language of Scripture. But their ability to talk spiritually does not mean necessarily that they understand the concept or that they have personally enjoyed the experience of being born again. What, then, does it mean to be born again?

## Origin

Where does this new birth originate? Who is its author? Regeneration is entirely and exclusively the act of God. Man has nothing to do with it. He has no power to originate this new life, just as he has nothing to do with his physical birth. God alone brings about this rebirth. Sometimes the act is ascribed to God the Father (1 Peter 1:3), and sometimes to the Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 2:29), but commonly it is associated with God the Holy Spirit (John 3:6). The Holy Spirit is the agent by whom this act of regeneration is effected in a human soul.

Pride may balk at the thought, but man must understand that none of his efforts can contribute anything to this change. Those who become "sons of God" are "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12–13). How conclusively does this statement deal with the pretensions of the human heart! Regeneration is not "of blood." It has nothing to do with having the right blood-line; questions of parentage, family, and race are irrelevant here. The Jews made much of their lineage (John 8:33, 39, 41), but Christ left them in no doubt that something more was needed (John 8:42–45; cf. 31–32). Those first-century Jews have their successors among

many twenty-first century Gentiles: the multitudes who claim allegiance to Christ, but whose claims never get beyond consideration of history and tradition.

Regeneration is also not “by the will of the flesh.” These words point to the natural, sensual, and emotional impulses of man. While the regenerate soul will be stirred emotionally, the experience is about much more than the individual’s placing himself in circumstances where feelings and emotions are heightened. It is not about finding the type of religious service or partaking in the ritual or ceremony that will “do it” for you. Such a subjective understanding of regeneration makes man the author of his own rebirth and produces only disillusionment and ultimate spiritual disaster.

Nor is regeneration by “the will of man.” There is no doubt that man can accomplish much in this life by sheer volition and the dogged determination that goes with it. But this spirit of decision and persistence cannot make anyone a child of God. Try as he might, man cannot make the change that is necessary: it is purely an act of God’s grace.

All of this is illustrated in the interchange between Christ and the Jewish religious leader Nicodemus in John 3. Christ declares that Nicodemus must be born again (or “born from above,” as it is in the Greek) if he is to see the kingdom of God (v. 3). Nicodemus’ failure to understand prompts Christ to emphasize that this is not a physical birth but an act wrought by the Holy Spirit as He applies the word of God to the soul of the individual (vv. 4–8; cf. passages such as John 7:37–39; Ephesians 5:26; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23). Christ’s challenge to Nicodemus—“Ye must be born again” (John 3:7)—does not imply that this is something he can do

for himself. The context shows clearly that this is an act wrought by God, an act to which man in his sin cannot contribute.

### Operation

What is involved in this act of regeneration? We get some sense of what a dramatic and deep-seated operation it is when we remember that it brings about a new man, or an entirely new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Regeneration is a radical and permanent change that affects the entire moral nature of the individual concerned. The sinner’s mind is enlightened. In its sinful state, man’s mind lies in darkness and ignorance (Ephesians 4:18). He cannot receive things spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14). His understanding is so impaired that while he may see a certain logic in these truths, he cannot grasp their spiritual significance. But once he is regenerated, a man is brought into God’s marvellous light, and his mind is spiritually illuminated (1 Corinthians 2:12; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 1:18).

At regeneration, man’s heart is sanctified. While in sin, the heart is as stone, unable to perceive God in His goodness and loveliness. But, regenerated, the heart of stone is replaced by a heart of flesh. Thus the affections are sanctified, made holy, and drawn to God (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

At regeneration, man’s will is renewed. The will or inclination of the natural man is utterly against all that is good and godly. He has no natural disposition towards God. But in regeneration, God so works upon the will of man that he is “made willing and able freely to answer his call” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, Answer 67). The sinner is brought to the place where he readily assents to the truth of the gospel and receives Christ as He is offered. He is indeed an entirely new man.

### Outworking

Regeneration is not the end of God’s work in the individual. It causes certain actions to occur in the heart and soul of man. God’s act of regeneration is the immediate cause of conversion. Consider again the words of John 1:12–13; in them we learn that the human actions which are the mark of a truly converted soul—receiving Christ and believing on Him (v. 12)—are seen in one who has already been born of God, that is, one who has been regenerated (v. 13). Regeneration leads inevitably to conversion, which is the turning of the soul to God, through faith in Christ and repentance of sin. But conversion is impossible without the prior regenerating act on God’s part of imparting new life to the soul. ■



Rev. Timothy Nelson is the minister of Ballymagherney Free Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland and is the editor of *LTBS Quarterly*.