

CHAPTER 11

REGENERATION

[For the Calvinist definition of free will and for the bondage of the will in the state of sin, see above, Ch. 4, 6.]

Effectual calling and regeneration

General definitions

[This chapter on regeneration deals with the divine part of initial salvation; the next chapter, “Conversion,” will discuss the human side.]

The Arminian and inconsistent Calvinist positions redefine effectual calling so that it precedes regeneration; for the Calvinist, the two terms refer to the same process:

- “Effectual calling” emphasizes the power of this saving work, distinguishing it from the “general call” given to all people in the gospel.
- “Regeneration” (“new birth”) emphasizes the extent of this saving work, showing the total change made in the individual.

These terms are equivalent to the fourth point of Calvinism: “irresistible grace,” thus being distinguished from the Arminian view that people can resist the work of the Holy Spirit which leads them to conversion, while that same grace succeeds in others.

—Cf. Canons of Dort, 3rd-4th Heads, Arts. 10-17 (Schaff 3:589-92)

Effectual calling

There is a general call of the gospel to all people. E.g., Isa 1:18-20; 45:22; Matt 22:14; John 7:37; Acts 2:38-40; Rev 22:17.

But there is a special call given to the elect, whereby God effectually draws them to receive the gospel and come to Christ. See especially Rom 8:30, where the same ones who are called are also justified—none is lost: “And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

This effectual call normally comes through the preaching and hearing of the Word of God, 2 Cor 3:2-6; 2 Thess 2:13-14.

Regeneration

God’s effectual call does not bring us to Christ by force, against our nature; rather, it changes our nature so that we come willingly.

John 6:37, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.”

John 6:44-45, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God [cf. Isa 54:13; Jer 31:33-34].’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.”

Rom 6:16-18, “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.”

This entire change of nature is a divine work—regeneration, as in the classic passage, John 3:3-8. We notice that only the results of this divine work are visible to man.

Regeneration includes these elements (WCF 10:1):

- Enlightens the mind

Acts 26:18, to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

- Renews and purifies the nature (heart)

Ezek 36:26, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

- Results in a new will

Ezek 36:27, And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Deut 30:6, The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

When God begins his work of regeneration, man is passive, not active (Eph 2:5).

“This effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.” (WCF 10:2)

Relation of regeneration to faith

- Reformed view: regeneration precedes faith
- Arminian view: faith precedes regeneration

Much confusion comes through inadequate definitions. First, notice that regeneration is not the same as justification, sanctification, eternal life, etc. Rather, regeneration is limited to the work of renewing the mind, heart, and will to receive the gospel; the other blessings follow faith. Therefore, Calvinists allow for verses which put salvation and eternal life after faith—e.g., John 1:12 (but cf. v. 13); 3:36; 5:24, 40; Acts 11:18; 16:31; Eph 2:8. These verses do not contradict the Reformed view, which sees the necessity of the new birth as a prerequisite to faith, as in 1 John 5:1 (pf. Tense; same construction in 1 John 2:29).

We should also notice that the nature or heart is actually the person himself. An inadequate definition of effectual calling (held by some inconsistent Calvinists) declares that God changes the will without changing the nature, and that the nature is changed as a result of faith. Yet we see that this view fails in two points:

- (1) It denies the freedom of the will at the crucial point of conversion.

- (2) By denying that faith springs from the nature, it does not allow that the faith present is actually that person's own faith.

Regeneration results in the heart being set free from sin's bondage; the renewed heart then exercises faith and obedience.

Cf. Ps 119:32, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (רָחַב) Hiphil "enlarge"; translated literally in KJV and *BDB*)

Regeneration without knowledge

Biblical teaching

The Bible clearly teaches that all unbelieving adults are lost, even though they may not have heard the gospel. John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Rom 1:18-25; 3:19; Eph 2:12.

But the Bible does not give clear teaching regarding the fate of infants dying in infancy or of insane people—those incapable of rational response to the gospel message.

Westminster standards

The Westminster standards are properly undogmatic on this point. WCF 10:3:

"Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word."

By adopting the phrases "elect infants" and "all other elect persons," the Confession does not declare in how many such cases the person involved is actually elect. It is clear, however, that whoever is saved of this group, must be regenerated by God before dying (John 3:8; Rom 8:9; 1 John 5:12). This is possible: Jer 1:5; Luke 1:15, 41, 44.

The Bible Presbyterian Church has asserted its belief that all infants dying in infancy could possibly be saved, thus allowing the popular Presbyterian position that all are saved (as in Hodge 1:26-27). Declaratory Statement:

"In adopting the Confession of Faith this General Synod declares: . . . Second: with regard to the salvation of those dying in infancy we do not regard our Confession as teaching or implying that any who die in infancy are lost."

The B. P. statement was less dogmatic than that of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., which had gone ahead to say, “We believe that all dying in infancy are included in the election of grace, and are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who works when and where and how He pleases.”

Support for this position is seen in such passages as Matt 18:14; cf. vv. 1-6.

Suggested position

The position one takes on this issue is based on inference, and therefore cannot be certain. We must rest content in the knowledge that “the Judge of all the earth will do right.”

It is my personal belief that the infants of saved parents who would properly rear their children, are elect, according to the principle of Gen 18:25, quoted above; cf. also Exod 20:5-6; 1 Cor 7:14. 2 Sam 12:23 must be used with caution, since it is capable of two interpretations.

On the other hand, infants of unbelieving parents do not seem to appear in Scripture as elect. Normally they are pictured as sharing the judgment on their parents: Josh 6:21; 7:24; 8:26; Judg 21:10; Ps 137:9; cf. the plagues on Egypt and in Revelation.

However, we must confess ignorance in particular cases. God’s glory is the first factor.

One aspect of the death of infants or small children that may comfort the parents and others is that God sometimes takes in death those whom he actually favors:

Isa 57:1-2, “The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.”

Cf. Jeroboam’s son Abijah, who died because he was the most righteous member of his family (1 Kgs 14:1-13).