

THE BEARING OF REGENERATION  
ON SOME ASPECTS OF PASTORAL WORK

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The aim of this paper is twofold and two-tiered. First, and as a prior step, it attempts an examination of the vocabulary in the New Testament explicitly relevant to regeneration in the hope of building up a doctrinal statement on the subject. Secondly, and as the real goal, it aims to bring this material to bear on certain aspects of pastoral work and responsibility namely the admission of new members into the fellowship of the church and their subsequent shepherding where it becomes necessary to ask the painful question "Is so and so born again?"

On both parts of this subject John Owen wrote: *"it is a duty indispensably incumbent on all ministers of the gospel to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the nature of this work that they may be able to comply with the will of God and grace of the Spirit in the effecting and accomplishing of it upon the souls of them unto whom they dispense the word. Neither, without some competent knowledge hereof, can they discharge any one part of their duty and office in a right manner."* [Works Vol 3 p.227] As it is possible for mistakes to be made as a result of ignorance and even prejudice, it becomes important to gather the New Testament data and determine its significance for this purpose as we proceed.

1. The Use of Regeneration as a Noun (Παλιγγενεσίας)

In the sense in which we are considering this word, it occurs but once as a noun in the New Testament, namely Titus 3:5. There Paul is speaking of the source and application of salvation, and in the latter he refers to *"the washing of regeneration and*

renewing of the Holy Ghost." This statement is instructive for two reasons.

1. The Relationship it establishes between Regeneration and Renewing

This link serves to indicate that there is no re-generating which does not issue in renewing. There is an identity of general character between these two realities and points to the predominant element of regeneration. This means that a candidate for membership must have an element of newness or having been changed about him. Something transforming must have happened to him. He must be different from the world.

2. The Distinction which is made between these two realities in that Relationship

This is seen in two ways viz. in the nature of the elements themselves and the order in which they appear.

a) The Nature of the Elements

Renewing ( $\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\kappa\alpha\lambda\omega\sigma\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ ) as a Pauline term has a wider scope than Regeneration. cf. Rom.12:2; II Cor.4:16 and also Eph.4:23 (but there  $\alpha\nu\alpha\gamma\epsilon\omega$  is used). The concept of renewing includes the reality of sanctification as well as regeneration. It is therefore all the more striking that in Titus 3:5 regeneration is specified distinctly beside the all-inclusive term.

From this it follows that though Regeneration cannot be isolated from renewing, it can be considered in distinction from it. It is a distinguishable matter in the application of a procured salvation. It can be looked for by those who have oversight in the church. It does exist.

b) The Order in which they are Specified

Regeneration comes before Renewing. As the word necessarily implies, it is the beginning of the bestowal of salvation. It is the initial act of which renewing is the all-inclusive consequent

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process.

Therefore the evidences of its having occurred are the evidences of having life, of birth not growth, much less maturity. Just as some ask too little, or nothing at all, of would be members, to their injury and that of the church, so some ask too much with similarly sad results. Hence the importance of understanding the doctrine that it may regulate our practice to the good of all.

## II. The Use of Regeneration as a Verb

Here there are numerous texts to consider and in this case frequency of occurrence has a significance which is quite crucial for the formulation of the doctrine. A verb stresses an action, and primarily Regeneration is an act which is known by its effects and not an inward state to be analysed metaphysically or psychologically. It is "facts of life" which are to be looked for and not "frames or feelings". This is not to deny that there is an experimental element arising necessarily from being born again.

The primary verb employed in the New Testament is γεννωω with the prefix ἀνα or the additive ανωθεν. We shall examine its meaning and usage.

### 1. Meaning

This word is used in two senses in the New Testament. It can mean to beget or to bear i.e. give birth to, for example Matt.1:21 and 2:1. Prof. John Murray in his article on Regeneration in the second volume of his works lists the examples which go either way together with some which are uncertain indicating that to beget is a valid meaning. However he advances the view that to erect a distinction in theological terms between generation and birth on the basis of this two fold meaning of γεννωω is unwarrantable. He says: "*To be begotten again and to be born again are synonymous terms*" [p.178]. He has said earlier that: "*In later Reformed theology the term regeneration has been chosen to designate the initial act, that act in which God alone is active ...*" [p.172]. The term "later" is

used because earlier Reformed Theologians like Calvin, Owen, the framers of Dort included more under the heading of regeneration than the initial act, or subsumed Regeneration under the Effectual Calling. This brings Conversion to the fore in which man is active and so a clear statement on the divine monergism in Regeneration was blurred.

The activity of God and the passivity of man must be asserted in Regeneration and therefore perhaps something may be said for holding in our minds the distinction between conception and birth which Prof. Murray repudiates, and, to become more vile, even to think of a period of spiritual gestation between the two in some cases provided some caveats are borne in mind.

As there can be no gap between effectual calling, containing as it does irresistible grace, and conversion, some way must be found to understand the gradual coming to faith which many of God's people know, particularly the children of believers. As being generated is a secret work and therefore a non-discernible condition, provided no one were allowed to rest in such a position but urged on to repent and believe the gospel, does this not account for that without endangering any other doctrine? Some do see men as trees walking.

We should be prepared for people to ask for membership while in this condition. If God has generated them, they will be brought to birth apart from death intervening. They should be urged to sit under the Gospel for clearer light which will come if God has begun to work in their hearts. They should not be told that they have been born again.

## 2. Usage

This verb is used in the New Testament in two voices and two tenses.

### a) Two voices and their significance

These are active and passive. The active only

appears once viz. I John 5:1; the passive, many times (e.g. John 1:13). Clearly the emphasis is once more on Human Inactivity in the matter of Regeneration. In connection with these passives the following data appear.

- i. The Author of Regeneration - God (Jn.1:13) or Spirit (Jn.3:6)
- ii. Instruments in Regeneration - Water (Jn.3:5) and Word (I Pet.1:23)
- iii. Objects of Regeneration - Persons - "who", "a man", "us".

Under the first heading the inter-relationship of God and the Spirit presents no difficulty. What God does in people He does by His Spirit. We turn to the other two.

#### ii. Instruments in Regeneration

The question which arises here is as follows. Is Regeneration of which the Holy Spirit is the Author accomplished by Him alone or by Him through the instrumentality of water and the word?

##### a) Regeneration and Water

Dr. Leon Morris in his commentary on John and Professor Murray in the article on Regeneration already referred to, dismiss the only view of the significance of "water" which can claim to be regarded as an instrument in regeneration namely baptism. They point out that Nicodemus would not have understood our Lord to be referring to baptism by "water" and it was to him the Lord was speaking, and doing so at this point to clarify what he did not understand. This may therefore be dismissed and the conclusion drawn that one does not need to be baptized to be regenerated.

##### b) Regeneration and the Word

This is of great significance. Both James and Peter are referring to an instrument in James 1:18 and I Peter 1:23. James uses ἀποκνέω which actually means "emergence from the womb" i.e. brought to birth. Peter uses γεννώω which we have seen can have the same

meaning. In this the word is used by the Spirit.

In order to do these verses justice, either the distinction between conception and birth must be used, or regeneration must be regarded as including conversion as well as the recreative initial act. Professor Murray adopts the latter course, but without casting doubt on regeneration's monergistic character throughout. Yet it may be wondered whether it is necessary to say as does Professor Murray that "*regeneration is used in two distinct senses in the New Testament.*" The distinction in thought between conception and birth can do full justice to these two texts by referring them to the latter and perhaps make for a clearer statement as well. This would make (re)generation prior in the *ordo salutis* but Berkhof does this (p.471 Syst. Theol.) and so does Warfield. He says: "*At the root of all lies an act seen by God alone, and mediated by nothing, a direct creative act of the Spirit, the new birth. This new birth pushes itself into man's own consciousness through the call of the Word, responded to under the persuasive movements of the Spirit; his conscious possession of it is thus mediated by the Word. A man must be born again by the Spirit to become God's son. He must be born again by the Spirit and Word to become consciously God's son.*" [*The Biblical Doctrine of Renewal in Bib. Theol. Studies pp.369 & 70*]

While it is only those called by the Word who are to be admitted into church fellowship, due regard must be paid in this to what Archibald Alexander describes as "*many differing circumstances which cause a great variety in appearance and expression; such as the degree of vigour in the principle of life communicated ... There is as much difference in the original vigour of spiritual as of natural life.*" [*Thoughts on Religious Experience p.23*]. A factor in this is that some know more of the content of Scripture and its teaching than others. Consequently some have a greater understanding of what

has happened in them than others. So one man's experiences in regeneration are not to be the standard for others. But as the Word is used and moreover preached (Phm.10) knowledge of some things is essential, and this must be tested for, but more of this later.

### iii. Objects of Regeneration

The point to be made under this head is that by various designations persons are regenerated. This means to use Old Testament language that it is the heart that is changed. (Deut.30:6; Jer.24:7; Ezk.36:26) The heart is the person at source, in cameo, for *"out of it are the issues of life"* [Prov.4:23]. The result of regeneration is a new divine product (πνευμα - Eph.2:10); a new man. (καλως ανθρωπος - Eph. 4:24) and a new creation (καλην κτισιν - II Cor.5:17)

This means that regeneration is no change of substance, nor of mental outlook alone, nor even of mind plus will without affections. It includes and affects the whole of man. The chief mark of regeneration is a spontaneous delight in God and all that pertains to Him. Commenting on Jeremiah 31:31-33 Warfield writes in the work already quoted (p.355): *"God promises to work a subjective effect in the hearts of Israel, by virtue of which their very instincts and most intimate impulses shall be on the side of the law, obedience to which shall therefore be but the spontaneous expression of their own natures"*. It is life that is to be looked for.

### b) Two Tenses and their Significance

These are the aorist and perfect tenses. No other tense is used to describe Regeneration. Both are past instantaneous events. They refer to the completed and once for all nature of Regeneration, but do not necessarily carry the idea of suddenness.

The difference between the two tenses is important. While both stress finality of accomplishment, the Perfect also stresses the continuing effects of what has been done. The Aorist is like the stone plunging into the pond; the Perfect resembles the widening

concentric circles which result.

The Aorist appears in John 1:13; 3:3,4,5 & 7. Here the finality and perfection of Regeneration is indicated. It does not need to be repeated or augmented. The Perfect occurs in John 3:6. It means that what has its origin from unrenewed human nature displays its character in the kind of life it leads, and similarly with reference to what has originated from the Spirit.

The use of the Perfect presents us with the evidences that Regeneration has taken place. They comprise the cry of the infant in grace. They are found in I John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7 and 5:4 & 18. This grammatical argument is strengthened by the theological explanation in I John 3:9 of why that particular effect is so, and all other effects too, namely "*God's seed remains in him*". As Warfield says "*the new life will necessarily bear the lineaments of his new parentage*" [op.cit. p.195]. These evidences can be reduced to three namely faith, love and obedience, but all three must be, (and will be) present to some degree in the regenerated.

This faith contains an element of perception (I Jn.3:16) i.e. spiritual enlightenment, and of persuasion (I Jn.4:16) i.e. certainty. It has an object which is not the whole gamut of theology but that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh to take away sins by His death (I Jn.5:1; 3:5; 3:16) and thereby to give us life (I Jn.4:9).

This love is of a special kind and has special objects. As it is essentially "self-giving to" and not "getting for self from". God and the brethren are the objects of such love, and they are loved for what they are which is precisely why the world hates them (I Jn.3:13 & 14;16-18; 4:7 & 8 and 5:1).

This obedience is described positively and negatively (I Jn.2:29 and 3:9). Positively it means seeking to follow in Christ's steps (I Jn.2:6).or  
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doing the will of God (I Jn.2:17) which though expressed in commandments is not grievous (I Jn.3:3). Negatively it consists in opposing sin (I Jn.2:1) purifying oneself from it (I Jn.3:3) because sin's dominating power has been broken (I Jn.3:9). The world is thus overcome (I Jn.5:4).

Where these evidences appear together, however faintly, they proclaim as loudly and as clearly as any should require that regeneration has taken place. The person concerned is therefore to be warmly received as a brother or sister, or, as the case may be shepherded on the basis that they are sheep in Christ's flock. The Biblical facts which indicate that some mistakes will be made for example Acts 8:21, Matt.25:1-30 and Hebrews 6:4-8 should neither deter us from examining people nor dispose us to ask for more than these evidences. The solemn warning against causing one of Christ's little ones to stumble (Matt. 18:6) should weigh heavily upon us.

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