

# Regeneration Precedes Faith

by John Brian McKillop

## Introduction

In 1986, Tyndale House Publishers released R.C. Sproul's *Chosen By God*<sup>1</sup>. In 1999, Bethany House Publishers released Norman Geisler's *Chosen But Free*<sup>2</sup>, which, while not stating such, appears to be a refutation of Sproul's work. In 2000, Calvary Press Publishing released *The Potter's Freedom*<sup>3</sup>, James White's response to Geisler's work. Sproul wrote the foreword for *The Potter's Freedom*. In 2001, Geisler released a second edition of *Chosen But Free*, and responded to White in an addendum (Appendix 13). White responded to Geisler through an article on his website, titled *A Most Disappointing Response*<sup>4</sup>.

## Chosen By God

In *Chosen by God*, Sproul writes:

The cure for spiritual death is the creation of spiritual life in our souls by God the Holy Spirit. (112)

He then quotes Ephesians 2:1-10 and explains:

What is here called quickening or being made alive is what is elsewhere called rebirth or regeneration. The term *regeneration*, as the word suggests, indicates a "generating again." To generate means to cause to happen or to begin. We think of the first book of the Bible, the book of beginnings, which is called Genesis. The prefix *re* means simply "again." Therefore the word *regeneration* means to begin something again. It is the new beginning of life that we are concerned with here, the beginning of spiritual life. (113)

He gives further explanation by showing:

It is the beginning of new life but it is not the total sum of the new life. It is the crucial point of transition from spiritual death to spiritual life. (117)

When God regenerates a human soul, when he makes us spiritually alive, we make choices. We believe. We have faith. We cling to Christ. God does not believe for us. (118)

In regeneration, God changes our hearts. He gives us a new disposition, a new inclination. He plants a desire for Christ in our hearts. We can never trust Christ

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, <http://bit.ly/8XFIJD>

<sup>2</sup> Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, <http://bit.ly/d7xBVE>

<sup>3</sup> James White, *The Potter's Freedom*, <http://bit.ly/dmKDzt>

<sup>4</sup> James White, *A Most Disappointing Response*, <http://bit.ly/civQBt>

for our salvation unless we first desire him. That is why we said earlier that *regeneration precedes faith*. (118)

The process of salvation as expressed by Sproul is:

Regeneration – Faith – Salvation

### **Chosen But Free**

Geisler, in *Why Blame Me?*, Chapter 2 of *Chosen But Free*, writes:

Indeed, one response to the problem of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is that of extreme Calvinism. (19)

The footnote associated with the above sentence reads:

We use the term “extreme” rather than “hyper” since hyper-Calvinism is used by some to designate a more radical view known as “superlapsarianism,” which entails double predestination...

Nonetheless, we call them “extreme” Calvinists because they are more extreme than John Calvin himself (see appendix 2) and to distinguish them from moderate Calvinists (see chapter 7)

Not only does Geisler make the mistake of referring to *supra*-lapsarianism<sup>5</sup> as *super*-lapsarianism, he also creates two brand new categories of Calvinists: the extreme and the moderate.

In his foreword to *The Potter’s Freedom*, Sproul responds:

Apart from mislabeling his own views, Geisler makes a spirited defense of historic Arminianism, and in the process seeks to paint historic Calvinism as not only “extreme,” but false. (15)

Geisler’s asks the question, *Is Regeneration Prior to Faith?*, in Appendix 10 of his work:

A fundamental pillar in the extreme Calvinists’ view is the belief that regeneration is logically prior to faith. That is, we are saved in order to believe; we do not believe in order to be saved. (235)

The Appendix is broken into two sections:

1. Verses offered by extreme Calvinists in support of their view
2. Verses that demonstrate that faith is prior to salvation

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<sup>5</sup> Phillip R. Johnson, *Notes on Supralapsarianism & Infralapsarianism*, <http://bit.ly/2GhwwH>

Notice here that Geisler is using the terms regeneration and salvation synonymously. As such, his process of salvation can be expressed thusly:

#### Faith – Salvation/Regeneration

The confusion over the issue of regeneration preceding faith arises from the different understanding and usage of the term *regeneration*. Geisler and other non-Calvinists use their own understanding of the term to critique Calvinism, expressing their understanding of the Calvinist process of salvation thusly:

#### Salvation – Faith

My purpose in writing this article is to show that regeneration, as it is understood by Calvinists, must precede faith. To that end, we will first look at the Canons of Dordt, specifically the section presenting man's spiritual depravity. Following that, we will see from the writing and preaching of selected Calvinists that they affirm the idea of regeneration preceding faith. This article will conclude with a look at the story of the raising of Lazarus from John 11. In my opinion, it is one of the best illustrations of regeneration preceding faith.

#### **The Canons of Dordt<sup>6</sup>**

The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine are subtitled, *Human Corruption, Conversion to God, and the Way It Occurs*.

##### *Article 3: Total Inability*

Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform.

##### *Article 12: Regeneration a Supernatural Work*

And this is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, and the making alive so clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures, which God works in us without our help. But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God has done his work, it remains in man's power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not lesser than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead, as Scripture (inspired by the author of this work) teaches. As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is

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<sup>6</sup> Canons of Dordt, <http://bit.ly/90elxM>

not only activated and motivated by God but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, man himself, by that grace which he has received, is also rightly said to believe and to repent.

*Article 16: Regeneration's Effect*

However, just as by the fall man did not cease to be man, endowed with intellect and will, and just as sin, which has spread through the whole human race, did not abolish the nature of the human race but distorted and spiritually killed it, so also this divine grace of regeneration does not act in people as if they were blocks and stones; nor does it abolish the will and its properties or coerce a reluctant will by force, but spiritually revives, heals, reforms, and – in a manner at once pleasing and powerful – bends it back. As a result, a ready and sincere obedience of the Spirit now begins to prevail where before the rebellion and resistance of the flesh were completely dominant. It is in this that the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consists. Thus, if the marvelous Maker of every good thing were not dealing with us, man would have no hope of getting up from his fall by his free choice, by which he plunged himself into ruin when still standing upright.

*Rejection of the errors – IV*

Who teach that unregenerate man is not strictly or totally dead in his sins or deprived of all capacity for spiritual good but is able to hunger and thirst for righteousness or life and to offer the sacrifice of a broken and contrite spirit which is pleasing to God.

For these views are opposed to the plain testimonies of Scripture: You were dead in your transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1, 5); The imagination of the thoughts of man's heart is only evil all the time (Gen. 6:5; 8:21). Besides, to hunger and thirst for deliverance from misery and for life, and to offer God the sacrifice of a broken spirit is characteristic only of the regenerate and of those called blessed (Ps. 51:17; Matt. 5:6).

The Canons here, in that which they affirm and reject, show that the first work of salvation is a work of the Holy Spirit, without which no one would or could be saved. Ezekiel 36:26 describes regeneration as the act of God giving “a new heart, and a new spirit,” while at the same time removing “the heart of stone from your flesh.”

**Calvinists affirmation of regeneration preceding faith**

Abraham Kuyper<sup>7</sup> shows that “the word ‘regeneration’ is used in [both] a limited sense, and in a more extended sense.” He writes:

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<sup>7</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Regeneration*, <http://bit.ly/cks9Zx>

It is used in the limited sense when it denotes exclusively God's act of quickening, which is the first divine act whereby God translates us from death into life, from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son. In this sense regeneration is the starting point.

A.A. Hodge<sup>8</sup> explains the narrowing of the word's usage to refer to the opening stage of salvation:

In the development of Protestant theology the term has been still further narrowed: first, to express the opening stage of this subjective work as distinguished from its continuance in sanctification; and then, since the seventeenth century, to express the initial divine act in this opening stage itself, as distinguished from the broader term conversion, which includes, along with the act of God, revivifying man, also the act of man in turning to God.

In *Regeneration*<sup>9</sup>, Chapter 29 of Hodge's *Outlines of Theology*<sup>10</sup>, he uses a question and answer format:

*Question 11*

What is the difference between regeneration and conversion?

*Answer*

The term conversion is often used in a wide sense as including both the change of nature and the exercise of that nature as changed. When distinguished from regeneration, however, conversion signifies the first exercise of the new disposition implanted in regeneration, i.e., in freely turning unto God.

Regeneration is God's act; conversion is ours. Regeneration is the implantation of a gracious principle; conversion is the exercise of that principle. Regeneration is never a matter of direct consciousness to the subject of it; conversion always is such to the agent of it. Regeneration is a single act, complete in itself; and never repeated; conversion, as the beginning of holy living, is the commencement of a series, constant, endless, and progressive.

John Bunyan<sup>11</sup>, in what is reported to be his final sermon, shows from John 1:13 that regeneration is indeed the first necessity for salvation:

Suppose it be the gospel, he cannot see it before he be brought into a state of regeneration. Believing is the consequence of the new birth; 'not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God.'

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<sup>8</sup> A.A. Hodge, *Regeneration*, <http://bit.ly/cHiQUQ>

<sup>9</sup> A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology: Chapter 29*, <http://bit.ly/bYdQrM>

<sup>10</sup> A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, <http://bit.ly/9yynXu>

<sup>11</sup> John Bunyan, *Mr. Bunyan's Last Sermon: John 1:13*, <http://bit.ly/a71gTt>

...as soon as he has raised you out of the dark dungeon of sin, you cannot but cry to God, What must I do to be saved? As soon as ever God had touched the jailer, he cries out, 'Men and brethren, what must I do to be saved?'

James P. Boyce was the first president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, KY). In *Regeneration and Conversion*<sup>12</sup>, Chapter 32 of his *Abstract of Systematic Theology*<sup>13</sup>, he writes:

At the outset of a discussion of these two subjects we are met by the question, whether they are not one and the same thing. They are unquestionably so intimately associated that it is difficult to separate them and point out the distinctions between them. The Scriptures connect the two under the one idea of the new birth, and teach that not only is regeneration an absolute essential in each conversion, but that in every intelligent responsible soul conversion invariably accompanies regeneration. It is not strange, therefore, that they are often confounded. Yet, after all, the Scriptures also teach that regeneration is the work of God, changing the heart of man by his sovereign will, while conversion is the act of man turning towards God with the new inclination thus given to his heart. (373)

The relation of regeneration to conversion will, therefore, appear to be one of invariable antecedence. (380)

C.H. Spurgeon preached a sermon in 1871 titled *Faith and Regeneration*<sup>14</sup>. With 1 John 5:1 as his text, he stated it in this manner:

There never was a grain of such faith as this in the world, except in a regenerate soul, and there never will be while the world standeth. It is so according to the text, and if we had no other testimony this one passage would be quite enough to prove it. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God."

To believe in Jesus is a better indicator of regeneration than anything else, and in no case did it ever mislead. Faith in the living God and his Son Jesus Christ is always the result of the new birth, and can never exist except in the regenerate. Whoever has faith is a saved man.

John Piper, in a sermon titled *Regeneration, Faith, Love: In That Order*<sup>15</sup>, used the same passage as Spurgeon, and showed that "...regeneration is the cause of faith":

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<sup>12</sup> James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology: Chapter 32*, <http://bit.ly/9BWipv>

<sup>13</sup> James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, <http://bit.ly/d4TDDI>

<sup>14</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Faith and Regeneration*, <http://bit.ly/bPAJsD>

<sup>15</sup> John Piper, *Regeneration, Faith, Love: In That Order*, <http://bit.ly/blKa2e>

That's plain in 1 John 5:1: "Everyone who *believes* [that is, *has faith*] that Jesus is the Christ *has been* born of God." Having been born of God *results* in our believing. Our believing is the immediate *evidence* of God's begetting.

What is common to all of the above Calvinists is their affirmation that regeneration is a necessary prerequisite to faith and thus salvation.

### **The Raising of Lazarus**

*John 11:38-44*

<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." <sup>43</sup>When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." <sup>44</sup>The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

There are three distinct phases in the raising of Lazarus. I believe that they show, in a physical manner, that which happens spiritually in salvation. The three correspond to Calvinism's process of salvation: Regeneration – Faith – Salvation. We will look at: Lazarus in the grave, Lazarus leaving the grave, and Lazarus unbound.

#### *Lazarus in the grave*

It has always fascinated me to read that Jesus, after finding out that Lazarus was sick, did not immediately rush to him, but stayed where he was. He arrives in Bethany four days after the death and burial, enough time for the body to be in a state of decay, which Martha notes in verse 39. Jesus requests the stone be removed and commands Lazarus to "come forth." The Scripture does not give any detail about what happens inside the tomb in the interval between the command of Jesus to Lazarus and Lazarus' obedience to that command.

But Lazarus is dead, and therefore has no inherent ability to revive himself. In order for him to come to life, a force external to him, and which is able to overcome death, must work on his behalf. That force is clearly the life-giving command of God, in the person of Jesus. The command causes a halt to the physical decay, even reversing it, so that moments later when he is unbound, there is no evidence of the sickness that caused his death. Jesus does not do partial resurrections! Lazarus is restored to full health while still inside the tomb. But, it is not enough for him to stay in his tomb; the miracle is not yet complete.

The spiritual application is unmistakable. The unregenerate are spiritually dead, and have no ability to effect their spiritual resurrection. The Holy Spirit effects the resurrection, the restored

birth, the regeneration. He does that by means of the word of God proclaimed. Those who are given new life by the Holy Spirit do not choose to stay in their spiritual graves. They freely and willingly leave their tombs. We see then that regeneration, the coming to life of the spiritually dead, must be a first cause. It is a cause that is external to the individual, accomplished without the aid of the individual.

White, in *The Potter's Freedom*, explains:

On the level of spiritual capacity the unregenerate man is just like Lazarus: dead, bound, incapable of "self-resurrection." It would be patently absurd to demand that Jesus first ask Lazarus for "permission" to raise him to spiritual life. Corpses are not known for engaging in a great deal of conversation. No, before Lazarus can respond to Christ's command to come forth, something must happen. Corpses do not obey commands, corpses do not move. Jesus changed Lazarus' condition first: Lazarus' heart was made new; his mind revitalized. Blood began once again to course through his veins. What was once dead is now alive, and can now hear the voice of his beloved Lord. "Come forth!" (284)

#### *Lazarus leaving the grave*

Now that Lazarus has been restored to life, he does the only logical thing – he obeys the command to leave the tomb! Dead men who are brought to life have no desire to remain in their tombs. It is significant to note that no one goes into the tomb to carry Lazarus out. He is not dragged against his will from his tomb. He comes out of the tomb under his own power, but would not have had that power had he not been made alive by the command of Jesus. He exercises faith! It is unthinkable to imagine that he could have struggled with the decision to stay in the tomb or come out. The command was irresistible on two counts: first, it was Jesus who issued the command, and death was powerless against his command; and second, an alive Lazarus would never choose the grave over being restored to his loved ones. But the miracle is not yet complete, for Lazarus is still wearing his grave clothes.

Here again, the spiritual application is obvious. Those who have been brought to life always respond by exercising faith. Also, they do it most willingly and freely. Regeneration is the cause, while faith is the effect.

#### *Lazarus unbound*

In addition to the command to Lazarus, Jesus also issues a command to those present, the community of the living. They are given instructions to "unbind" him. Once that is accomplished he can begin his life again. The miracle of resurrection is complete, but the process of living his resurrected life is just beginning.

The spiritual application is clear. My pastor constantly references the need for Christian community, and it is that community that assists the resurrected one. The miracle of salvation does not end with our exit from our spiritual grave; it is just beginning. We now live and grow within the community of the resurrected, where each contributes to the other.

## **Conclusion**

Regeneration precedes faith and is the cause of faith. Those regenerated always and without fail exercise faith, and exercised faith is salvation. Let each of us who has been regenerated give praise to God for the mercy and grace he has shown in raising us to spiritual life.

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