

Soteriology: The Doctrine of Salvation

Regeneration

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INTRODUCTION

Fallen in Adam, all people are born dead in sins and trespasses and are incapable of spiritual renewal. Scripture teaches that regeneration (the new birth) is an essential part of the redeeming work of God in Christ. Spiritually dead men and women are utterly dependent on God to sovereignly give them spiritual life. The Holy Spirit is the agent of regeneration inasmuch as He convicts people of their sinful condition, of the wrath to come, and of their need for Christ. In the new birth, the Spirit implants in the souls of God's people new wills, affections, and desires. Scripture often speaks of regeneration under the figure of spiritual resurrection. This connects regeneration to the resurrection of Christ. By union with Christ, believers experience the application of what Christ accomplished in His life, death, and resurrection. Regeneration precedes faith, for no one can believe in Christ until they are given new hearts by the Spirit of God. The saving blessing of regeneration is signified and sealed in the sacrament of baptism. The symbolism of regeneration in baptism is drawn from God's typical works of water-judgment acts of re-creation in the Old Testament. Though regeneration is a one-time act of God, it is also the fountainhead of sanctification, the beginning of the ongoing process of spiritual renewal. Additionally, the regeneration of individuals is a prelude to the regeneration of the cosmos on the last day.



EXPLANATION

Scripture reveals that all people are born “dead in sins and trespasses” ([Eph. 2:1](#)). By nature, we are unable to do anything pleasing to God. No one naturally seeks after God ([Rom. 3:10–11](#)). The natural man or woman is unable to see the kingdom of God or understand the things of God ([John 3:3](#); [1 Cor. 2:14](#)). This means that [no one can trust in Christ](#) apart from the initiative of God's saving grace—namely, regeneration.

In regeneration, God implants a new heart—together with a renewed will, affections, and desires—in the elect to enable them to walk in a manner pleasing to Him. Regeneration is, therefore, one of the saving benefits of redemption purchased by Christ and applied

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to the elect by [the Holy Spirit](#). Westminster Confession of Faith 13.1 summarizes the nature of regeneration in the following way: “They who are once effectually called and regenerated, have a new heart and a new spirit created in them.” If a person [professes to be a Christian](#) but has not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, he or she is not a true believer.

In the Old Testament, God promised this work of grace through the prophet Ezekiel: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” ([Ezek. 36:25–27](#)).

The work of regeneration is further illustrated in [Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones](#) ([Ezek. 37:1–14](#)). Accordingly, theologians have commonly spoken of regeneration as spiritual resurrection. Reformation and revival occurs when the Spirit of God sovereignly moves to [change the hearts of men](#), bringing them from spiritual death to spiritual life.

In the Gospels, [John 3](#) is [the clearest passage on the doctrine of regeneration](#). Many theologians believe that Jesus alludes to [Ezekiel 36](#) when teaching Nicodemus about his need for the new birth. In [John 3:8](#), Jesus teaches that regeneration is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit who produces new hearts in [the elect](#). As the wind moves wherever it wills, [the Spirit moves in whomever He wills](#). In [John 16:8](#), Jesus teaches that the Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment in the process of regeneration and conversion. The New Testament gives ample examples of regeneration. For instance, the book of Acts recounts the regeneration of Saul of Tarsus ([Acts 9:1–9; 22:6–11; 26:12–18](#)), Lydia (16:14), and many others.

In the Epistles, regeneration is often represented by language denoting [spiritual resurrection in union with Christ](#) ([Rom. 6:4–6, 13; Eph. 2:5–6](#)). Union with Christ in His death and resurrection makes regeneration possible. Christ’s accomplishment of redemption undergirds the Spirit’s application of redemption to the elect. The spiritual resurrection of believers is grounded in the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

During the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, one of the great theological battles concerned the doctrine of regeneration. The Reformed vigorously defended the idea that regeneration precedes faith and that it is based on the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit. The Reformed doctrine of regeneration stands in stark contrast to doctrines of both the Arminians and Roman Catholic Church. The [Arminian position of regeneration](#) is that a person’s faith precedes his or her regeneration. In teaching this,

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they deny the Bible's teaching about the inability of man to believe in Christ by nature. The Roman Catholic Church—together with Lutherans—teaches that [regeneration is inseparably tied to baptism](#). Accordingly, Rome teaches that regeneration is conferred to individuals in the sacrament of baptism [ex opere operato](#) (through the work performed). The Reformed creeds and confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries carefully articulate the doctrine of regeneration in contradistinction to both of these aberrant views.

While Reformed theologians defended the doctrine of regeneration against the sacramentalism of Rome, they affirmed that baptism is [a sign and seal of the regeneration of believers](#). The waters of baptism symbolize the washing and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Water baptism points to the promise of the new creation. This aspect of new creation was typified in the Old Testament [water-judgment baptisms](#) of the flood and [the Red Sea](#) (1 Cor. 10:1; 1 Peter 3:18–20). With the waters of the flood, God washed away the wicked while delivering Noah and his family. In the Red Sea, God was delivering Israel while destroying His enemies in the waters. So, too, new covenant baptism symbolizes the washing away of the sins of God's people while delivering them.

Though regeneration is a one-time act in which God renews the nature, will, mind, and heart of the elect, it is the fountainhead of [progressive sanctification](#). The transformation of the nature is the beginning of the restoration of the whole man in union with Christ. The seed of sanctification is implanted in the souls of believers in their new birth.

In addition to individual regeneration, Scripture speaks of the regeneration of creation ([Acts 3:21](#)). This is the promise of the consummation based on the finished work of Christ. The regeneration of the elect in time is the first fruits of the recreation of the cosmos on the last day. The saving work of Jesus Christ will culminate in God's ultimately uniting "all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" ([Eph. 1:10](#)).

QUOTES

The Spirit regenerates. How often have the clear words of Jesus been misunderstood! People universally re-write 'You must be born again' so that the phrase reads instead, 'You must born yourself again!' Not only does this misinterpretation make no sense grammatically (an intransitive verb has no object); it makes nonsense of a profound spiritual truth. Just as you did nothing to cause yourself to be born into this fallen world, so you can do absolutely nothing to bring yourself into the divinely renewed world of redemption. You must be born 'of the Spirit' ([John 3:5, 8](#)). You cannot even coerce the Spirit of God to effect your regeneration. The wind blows where it will — and it is the Spirit's will, not yours, that causes a person to be born from above ([John 3:3](#)). Indeed, if your will is renewed by the regeneration of the Spirit, you will choose to cry out to God for salvation,

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just as the newborn baby cries out once born. But give the divine Spirit the glory He deserves! Your cry for salvation comes as a consequence of your new birth, and never could be the cause of regeneration. The Spirit Himself sovereignly does this great work of total renewal.

O. Palmer Robertson¹

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¹ [“The Wind Blows Where It Wills”](#) *Tabletalk* magazine.