

# Regeneration and Gospel Persuasion

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The Lord said to Nicodemus – ‘Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit’ (*John 3.7-8*).

We have sufficient information in the Scriptures to have a fairly good idea of the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), but we dare not be too precise and dogmatic because the Lord’s words to Nicodemus warn us we are on mysterious ground.

## The use of persuasion

We begin with Paul *disputing* with people at Athens (*Acts 17*), meaning that he laid out his case to convince people of their need of Christ. He presented arguments and reasoned with them. At Corinth also he *reasoned* and *persuaded* constantly (*Acts 18.4*), eventually being charged with *persuading* people to worship God (*Acts 18.13*). Apollos also *mightily convinced* people (lit: with well-stretched arguments, utterly proving his case).

In *Acts 19.8-9* there are two references to disputing and one to persuading, showing the degree of reasoned convincing and remonstrating carried out by Paul at Ephesus.

Before Felix, Paul famously ‘reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come’, until Felix trembled (*Acts 24.25*). This was typical apostolic preaching. Even when a prisoner, Paul turned the dock into a pulpit and persuaded his hearers.

At the very close of *Acts (28.23)*, Paul was still persuading and reasoning – to the very end. Are we preachers? Have we cultivated our skill in reasoning? Paul goes so far as to say – ‘Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men’ (*2 Corinthians 5.11*).

‘But Paul,’ we may say, ‘were you not wasting your time trying to change people’s minds? Did you not know your persuasion was useless? Why not confine yourself to pronouncing the basic elements of the Gospel, because salvation is surely entirely of the Lord, and people are completely passive in it?’

Two well-known writers in recent times, on either side of the Atlantic, and both admirable men, have virtually said this in print. One says it is a total waste of time trying to persuade or convince people about the Gospel, because they are incapable of understanding it. Hopefully, as they listen to the Word, God will just regenerate them and they will be fully converted immediately. The other says much the same in (of all things) an evangelistic booklet. Having told readers it was useless trying to persuade them about salvation, they are urged to go and place themselves under preaching in the hope that God would suddenly regenerate them to instant conversion.

Now this entirely passive view of regeneration has become extremely popular among Calvinists today. It is not mainline Calvinism, but it is becoming so, and is destroying biblical *persuasive* Gospel preaching. It says that you should state only the basic facts of redemption and leave everything to the Lord.

But Paul was not wasting his time nor were the other apostles when they preached persuasively, because they understood regeneration far better than we do. They knew, of course, that it came first in the work of salvation, imparting life, opening the mind and heart, inclining the will, and convicting of sin, but they still persuaded sinners and remonstrated as though their words would be instrumental.

We are often told that the reason we must make a free offer of the Gospel, a universal tender of salvation, is that we do not know who the elect are. While this is perfectly true, it is not the chief reason for the preaching of the Gospel. We must proclaim the Gospel with persuasive reasoning and urging because it is God's will that the elect (once enabled by regenerating life) should be personally convinced and persuaded in their conscious minds. It is not the way of God, as one described it, to just 'zap' people so that they are instantly and totally converted without any conscious, intelligent involvement in the event. It is the will of God that people will be consciously awakened and convicted to experience a sincere desire for God's mercy and a change of thinking. They must see their need, and what Christ has done, and come (as the old confessions say) most freely and willingly to Jesus Christ. Certainly they will only come because there has been an imparting of life by the Spirit's regenerating power, yet the way of conversion is conscious and willing.

## **It is God's way**

We are called to make a persuasive presentation of the Gospel because it is God's way of bringing the redeemed into his kingdom. When we are gathered into eternal glory, our cry of gratitude will be, 'I was humbled to the dust; I felt my spiritual emptiness and need; I saw my desperately sinful state; I grasped how evil and foolish I was; I saw the Christ of Calvary, and I came to him longingly, willingly and freely for salvation.'

It is the will of God that preachers, witnessing believers, and the printed page, should be instrumental in this. Of course, the vital work is performed by the Lord, so the apostle rises no higher than saying, 'we are labourers together with God.' But we are his spokespeople.

Do you wrestle with souls as a preacher? It is a wonderful calling to search the Scripture, foraging for evangelistic arguments and parallels to salvation in both Testaments.

The hallmark of the Reformation was evangelistic preaching. And soon afterward the Puritans reasoned with, appealed to and expostulated with souls. Evangelistic preaching was a defining characteristic of the rise of the Baptists, particularly through the golden age of Baptist expansion. We may read the classic sermons of John Bunyan to see the tender affection for souls, and the striving to gain them.

It was also the hallmark of preaching in the 18th-century Great Awakening (read the sermons of George Whitefield), not to mention the revivals of the 19th century and the high era of the Victorian pulpit, with all its persuasiveness.

Why has such a limiting view of regeneration seized many Calvinists today? One problem is that it comes from an undoubtedly good stable. One of its most influential promoters, long gone to be with the Lord, was John Murray, formerly professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, a great writer and theologian, who stood firmly for the free offer of the Gospel. But his book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* sets out a view of regeneration which is entirely out of step with mainline Calvinism, and this has been powerfully influential.

I remember when I first read it many years ago, I had been reading Puritan writers on the same subject, who gave real instrumentality and responsibility to the preacher. These authors, Goodwin, Flavel and Sibbes among them, urged the preacher to challenge the conscience, demonstrate the necessity of conversion, and seek to be instrumental in the turning of sinners to Christ. He must both warn and woo.

## **Preachers instrumental**

*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, on the subject of regeneration, was very different in tone. The preacher was almost an irrelevance. He appeared to need no great fire or passion, at least, not in the treatment of regeneration. There was no real instrumentality for him, because regeneration was not the initial, lifegiving act of God, putting in motion the elements of conversion,

but an act that accomplished every aspect of conversion instantaneously, and without the sinner's conscious involvement. The person was passive, until on 'waking' from the divine operation, he felt the need to repent and exercise faith.

The more common, traditional Calvinistic view, as we shall show, does not make regeneration, illumination, conviction, newness of life, and spiritual communion – the complete bestowal of salvation – an instantaneous matter, leaving repentance and faith as an end-fruit.

## Effect on the preacher

Think about how this modern, limiting view of regeneration affects the preacher. He can no longer say to his hearers, 'If you repent and put your trust in Christ, you will be saved and come to know him.' He cannot promise any further experience, because if people repent it shows that they have been entirely, fully converted. What, then, can the preacher say? He can no longer urge people to yield to Christ, or say that repentance and faith will lead to spiritual experience, for they are the 'end' response of an entirely accomplished salvation, imparted in an instant to the darkened heart.

When is the moment of the entry of life into the soul? The Continental divines said that it occurred at the beginning of the process. Regeneration begins everything, but conversion is not entirely enclosed within it.

The Puritans were different. For them, conversion began with preparation of heart and understanding, mixed with struggles, before the moment of regeneration came. This altogether enlivened the process, but often led to further conscious struggles as the sinner came through conviction to repentance and faith. Only then was spiritual life and communion fully revealed. What Continentals and Puritans had in common was that in both cases salvation involved a conscious process, not being entirely instantaneous and secret. There was a vital place for persuasion, and there was room for the struggles of the anxious seeker.

Both the Continentals and the English Puritans had a process, not a hidden, inner 'zap' conversion. And it was a process in which the preacher had instrumentality, because while he could not bring conversion about, he was God's mouthpiece for providing the arguments and the persuasions which the Holy Spirit would apply to the regenerated mind. He mattered. He had to convey the love of Christ, and the case for the Gospel. He was charged with a momentous task. He really was a fellow worker with God.

An older systematic theology like that of Louis Berkhof reflects all this, for it is the old orthodoxy, expressing the essence of the Reformers, the Continental dogmatists, Puritans, and those who followed them down the centuries. These matters are expressed with great care and balance. Regeneration is effectively divided into two related parts. There is the 'begetting again' (first part) and then there is 'the new birth' (second part). Theologians like Berkhof would say that 'regeneration issues in conversion'. It was like a comet and its tail. They are never really separated, because regeneration inevitably leads into complete conversion.

Berkhof says there is an *initial* process, followed by a *birthing* process (these are his terms) in which a person is brought to repentance, faith and then to 'visible' birth. Regeneration is up front, giving rise to the full process.

Regeneration, says Berkhof, is initially subconscious and invisible, leading to conviction, need and repentance, when 'new life is brought forth out of its secret depths'. He does not have the instantaneous, unconscious, all-embracing regeneration that is gaining ground today. True regeneration does not eliminate the mental, moral, spiritual crisis of conversion, but it certainly makes the outcome inevitable.

John Owen said that regeneration produced the will for conversion. He held to a prolonged process. People say, how prolonged? Weeks, months, years? More likely a very short time.

The question comes up – 'Supposing someone is regenerated, but dies before conversion is

complete?’ We can only reply with the words of *Philippians 1.6*: ‘he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it...’ God is the architect of conversion, and he surely would not regenerate someone and leave them to die before the work was accomplished.

## Conscious conversion process

Puritan Thomas Goodwin emphasised the gentleness of the whole conscious conversion process in these words: ‘God does not always come with a predominant power, but sweetly insinuates himself, and gently slides into a man’s heart, and mingles his power and Spirit with theirs, in compliance with the pace of the natural motions of their hearts.’ This is not the language of an instantaneous ‘zap’ event, in which there is little intelligent, conscious response from the sinner. Goodwin again, preaching on *Hosea 11.4* (‘I drew them with cords of a man’) says, ‘I did not excessively haul them, but just as one man would persuade another, so I insinuated my love and power to them.’ John Flavel agreed, saying, ‘God draws us by way of a rational conviction of the mind and conscience and an effectual persuasion of the will, in the ordinary way somewhat gradually.’

Puritans in general thought that regeneration was followed by further troubles, fears, temptations and delays in which the role of the minister was to continue urging the way of repentance and faith. Then, when fully awakened to his need, and convicted of his sin, the sinner would respond in repentance and faith. This might be the longest point of delay. How long, we may wonder, might the delay be that could lie between regeneration and repentance? The Lord’s words in *John 3.8* warn us to be careful. We cannot tell the moment of regeneration, but it will surely be quite closely connected with repentance and faith. As we have seen, to account for very protracted periods of seeking, the Puritans thought in terms of works of preparation.

The trouble with instantaneous, all-embracing regeneration is the curtailing of personal, conscious convincing of sin and of need, and there is certainly no scope for promising salvation’s blessings. Yet of the latter, the Bible is full.

Those who advocate the all-embracing, instantaneous view of regeneration appear to work with very few Scripture passages – usually no more than three. Yet there are scores of texts which present the more orthodox Calvinistic order of salvation. Think of the order inherent in *Isaiah 55.7* – ‘Let the wicked forsake his way...and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him.’ There is a definite order in texts such as this. God promises – if you will do this, I the Lord will do that; if you will repent, I will save and receive you. All these texts – and the Bible is simply full of them – say that there is something for the sinner to do before the fruit of regeneration is finally evident, the soul is birthed, the sinner is consciously Christ’s, and the new nature is manifested in him.

## The will inclined

‘Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto you’ (*Zechariah 1.3*). ‘Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ (*Matthew 11.28*). The great 17th-century confessions speak of the call, or regeneration, that awakens and convicts, but the writers of those confessions wrote extensively of conscious conviction, most often over a little time, and of possible struggles before repentance and faith, and finally of the conscious new birth. Their regeneration was part of a process rather than an instantaneous, all-embracing event.

Of course, we should not view this in an Arminian way, as though our unregenerate free will may choose to believe in Christ. Salvation must start with an invisible regenerating work, but this

does not instantly reveal spiritual new life, for it is God's will to open the mind, incline the will and give an overpowering sense of need and conviction, causing the sinner to be consciously moved, persuaded and convinced by the Gospel word.

If you have been appointed ministers – dispensers and persuaders – of the Gospel, do not merely wave the flag and announce the basic facts. Represent the heart of God with love and longing, to persuade, reason and appeal to souls. You have the entire Bible before you. Learn and develop the craft. Read other preachers and see how they go about it. Utter not just the bones of the matter, but 'wrestle with souls', that God may use you. Never forget that persuade, reason, exhort, dispute and mightily convince are all biblical words used to describe apostolic preaching.