

HOLY SPIRIT AND REGENERATION¹

Introduction

In the theological context of the order of salvation, effectual calling is the first stage of new life in Christ. Regeneration results from the call and produces the radical transformation of the person, a new life.

Modern individualism collapses regeneration into new birth, a personal conversion experience expressed in a decision "for Christ". Renewal is limited and weakened, the danger being a multiplication of conversions in the same person, or a loss of assurance and eventually a loss of faith.

In contrast, classical Reformed theology affirmed that human beings are spiritually regenerated by faith, which is a gift of God. Regeneration is not simply about the moment of conversion, but about the whole life that flows from it in union with Christ. It covers the whole subjective renewal, its beginning in new birth and continuation in sanctification. The whole life, in its personal and temporal dimensions, is radically transformed by faith. Regeneration is therefore sometimes defined in a narrow sense as new birth and in a broad sense as the regenerated life². John Frame's definition sums this up quite well:

“Regeneration is the re-creation of the inner nature of the sinner through the gracious action of the Holy Spirit. This renewal consists of a change of heart (Rom 12:2) by the Spirit of God, whereby the person becomes a new creature through knowledge, holiness and truth, in order to live in Christ (Eph 4:24, Col 3:10). The new birth introduces into a regenerated life; sanctification is the fruit of grace, with good works (1 Jn 2:29), through which the new life continues. My definition of regeneration, then, is this: it is a sovereign act of God, the beginning of a new spiritual life in us.....”³

1 The new birth, Biblical testimony largely in John

¹ Study given at a meeting of evangelical pastors at Mold in North Wales in 2022. Unpublished.

² Benjamin B. Warfield, “On the Biblical Notion of ‘Renewal’”, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952, p. 367-368.

³ John Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord. An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Phillipsburg, P & R, 2006, p. 186.

As Herman Bavinck noted, there is complementarity not an opposition between Johannine and Pauline notion of renewal. He affirmed that "Regeneration in the ethical sense of Paul's use of it cannot be separated from regeneration in the metaphysical sense that John frequently uses."⁴

The idea of renewal or new birth was already found in rabbinic Judaism, which explains why Jesus expressed himself in this way. The Midrash on the Song of Solomon (1:3) says: "When someone brings a man under the wing of the Shekinah, it is as if he had formed and created him." Elsewhere one reads, "A newly converted proselyte is like a newborn child." The comparison between creation and new birth is the background to the new birth in John and the renewal or new creation in Paul.

The begetting (*gennaō*) mentioned in Psalm 7:2, "I have begotten you this day" is applied to the exalted ministry of Christ in the Hebrews (1:5 and 5:5) to indicate the divine begetting by the work of the Spirit. The resurrection of Jesus opens the age of the Spirit and the beginning of the last days. In Paul's writings, for example in Romans 8:17 and 29, Christ is the firstborn of the brethren who will be formed in His image and will inherit life with Him. Titus 3.5 also speaks of the "washing of regeneration (*palingenesia*) and renewal (*anakainoseos*) of the Holy Spirit" and recalls Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3.3-7 and the Master's answers to this "ruler of the Jews" about the new birth:

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... Unless a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"

In John's writings, "being born" always indicates a point of origin. The regenerate are born *of the Spirit, of water, of the flesh, and born anew or from above*. Jesus insists on the divine character of the renewal of the Spirit⁵. The new birth is necessary to see the kingdom of God and to enter it. This repetition indicates that without the Spirit of God it is impossible even to discern the pre-

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace. The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration*, Grand Rapids, Reformed Heritage Books, 2008, p. 166.

⁵ *Ek pneumatos, ex hudatos*, John 3:5, *ek tes sarkos*, 3:6, *anōthen*, 3:3, 7, *ek tou pneumatos*, 3:8. Cf. There are four references in 1 John (*ek tou theou*, 1 Jn 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1).

sence of the kingdom. "Water and Spirit" refer to purification followed by new divine life⁶. Purification is one aspect of the change, the other complementary aspect is the birth by the Spirit. Both are spiritual and supernatural in character⁷.

Three observations can be made about the character of this new birth:

- It is a radical and decisive event, necessary because the old existence is dead due to sin. The old life is over, the new one has begun. Hence the contrast in John 3:6 between "that which is born of the flesh" and that which is "born of the Spirit";
- The monergism of birth by the unilateral action of the Spirit eliminates synergistic cooperation. Regeneration takes precedence over any human decision in conversion, either in repentance or faith. The priority is not temporal but "causative". If a person is converted, it is because of the action of God's grace;
- Just as human beings are passive at the time of natural birth, spiritually they depend on the divine work for birth from above. Just as we did not decide our natural birth, so birth from above is due to the decision and action of the Spirit. This interpretation is confirmed in John 3:8. The wind blows (the efficiency of action) where it wills (the sovereignty of the Spirit's gracious action).

To sum up: spiritual regeneration always precedes faith in a *logical* sense and sometimes also in a *temporal* sense. Repentance or works of righteousness according to the law do not "prepare" the way for regeneration. But once born again, as the newborn infant begins to breathe, the believer spiritually cries "Abba, Father". This is the first step of new life.

A misreading of John 1:12 - "to all who received him (the Word), he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name" has led to misunderstandings and an interpretation contrary to what the text says. It is not because one receives the Son that one becomes a child of God. On the contrary, as verse 13 states, one becomes a child of God "not of blood, nor of the

⁶ For the multiple interpretations of "water and Spirit", see Donald Carson on John 3.5. Carson indicates five interpretations before concluding that the meaning of Ezekiel 36 and 37 is decisive, *The Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991. It cannot be said either that water is the natural birth and the Spirit the second birth - a common idea in evangelical circles - or that water is a reference to baptism. The birth of water is a reference to the purification of Ezekiel 36:25-26, while the Spirit evokes the valley of dry bones reanimated by the Spirit in the subsequent chapter.

⁷ Is it paternal action in begetting or maternal action in birthing? It remains uncertain, but the fundamental meaning of the passage is fundamentally the same in both senses, since spiritual birth depends on the work of the Holy Spirit. John Murray says that "begotten again" and "born again" are synonymous. Cf. John Murray, *Collected Writings*, II, Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1977p. 178. Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1953 p. 465, 469.

will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” Negative statements about human impulses are followed by the expression "begotten of God" (*ek theou egennethen*). The word "begotten" is used for paternal action concerning posterity. Although John does not develop a theology of the new birth here, he emphasizes its "miraculous" character, which is "nothing but an act of God... those who receive the Word are identical with those who believe in His Name, and they are identical with those who are born of God.”⁸

The first *visible evidence* of regeneration is therefore to "receive the Word", to "believe in His name" as a child of God, because one is born anew. If regeneration is mysterious, like every divine miracle, it is not abstract; it is recognized in the new life which is its consequence. Am I regenerate? Do I exercise faith in the Word, love for God, hope in his promise? It's fundamentally the same question.

2. The action of the Spirit, mediate or immediate? Historical approaches

The relationship between Word and Spirit in regeneration has been raised by most of the major Reformed theologians: Hodge, Dabney, Kuyper, Bavinck, Warfield, Berkhof and Murray. Nearly all of them until recently come down on the side of immediate regeneration, that is the Spirit acts in prior fashion to the Word, with the exception of Warfield who has a more coordinate view of a dual action.

1. *How are we converted to Jesus Christ?* Is it possible to be more precise about the *modus operandi* of regeneration? As with any miracle in which divine power intervenes within the framework of created reality, questions arise about regeneration and the respective roles of the Spirit and the Word in the transition from death in sin to life from grace in Christ. In the reception of salvation, does the Spirit work *immediately* in people's hearts to permit reception the Word of grace, or does the power of the Word itself serve as the Spirit's instrument in changing the heart? The latter concept is called "mediate" to indicate the joint work of the Word and the Spirit. The issue here is not synergism, for these two models of classical Reformed theology maintain the sovereignty of divine action and its priority to the human reception of the Gospel.

⁸ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 181-182 on John 1:13.

2. *The background to these discussions* is the old debate between Lutheran and Calvinist theologies about the Means of Grace and the respective work of the Spirit and the Word⁹. Lutherans asserted that the Spirit works through the Word and in symbiosis with it, a position that rules out the action of the Spirit outside the Word and also the danger of illuminism. The emphasis of the Calvinist position is different. The Spirit works with the Word, concomitantly with it, thus distinguishing between the respective functions of the Word and the Spirit. If in the Lutheran position there is an identity of the two, in the Calvinist position they are distinct but complementary. These nuances are also present in the discussion on the Lord's Supper, with consubstantiation among Lutherans and spiritual presence among Calvinists.

3. *On the subject of regeneration*, faithfulness to the position "the Spirit works with the Word" and opposition to Arminian synergism after the Synod of Dordrecht and its "canons" have led to a further distinction between the two.

- Louis Berkhof proposed an "immediate" position by affirming that James 1:18 and 1 Peter 1:12, two texts that associate the work of the Spirit with the Word, refer not to regeneration as such, but to consciousness of new birth through the Word of God.
- Benjamin Warfield, on the other hand, reiterating the position of John Calvin, affirmed the joint action of the Word and the Spirit: "The new birth imposes itself on the conscience of the person following the call of the Word, to which corresponds the persuasive action of the Spirit; the conscious possession that the person has of it is thus mediated by the Word".
- A third position, which we adopt, is presented by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. It seeks to maintain the "immediate" position, with a strong distinction between the Spirit and the Word. Bavinck's main argument concerns the distinction between the seed and the Word in 1 Peter 1:23 and 1 John 3:9:

"You have been regenerated, not by (*ek*) corruptible seed, but incorruptible, by (*dia*) the living and permanent Word of God";
 "Whoever is born of God does not commit sin, because the seed of God dwells in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."

Bavinck points out that Peter does not dwell on regeneration itself, but on its imperishable character. He believes however that these texts support a distinction between the seed and the Word, despite their close relationship, a difference seen in the difference of the prepositions *ek* and *dia* used in

⁹ This discussion has recently become quite pointed. See for example: Ralph Cunnington, *Preaching With Spiritual Power: Calvin's Understanding of Word and Spirit in Preaching*, Christian Focus, Geanies House, Ross Shire, 2015 and Stuart Olyott, *Something Must be Known and Felt*, Bridgend, Evangelical Movement of Wales, 2014.

Greek. Believers are regenerated *by* an imperishable seed, *by means of or through* the living Word of God. The Word is regarded as the means by which regeneration takes place, but the seed is the principle from which regeneration proceeds¹⁰.

Thus the Spirit is the *effective* principle of regeneration, the origin and cause of new life, while the Word is the *instrumental means* by which change takes place.

In regeneration, therefore, the Spirit and the Word of truth are distinct in their respective actions, but without confusion or separation of their operations. Kuyper in his classic *Work of the Holy Spirit* brings eight considerations to support the distinction and the priority of the Spirit in the implanting of spiritual life in believers¹¹. We have selected five of these:

1. the condition of sin is death and does not change without the effective vivification of the Spirit;
2. the "new creation" is an act whose origin is from God, it is the miracle of his grace, without intermediate means;
3. the Spirit, who is sovereign and effective in his testimony, is sent by Jesus for this purpose. This is why Jesus "breathes" upon his disciples at the Johanne Pentecost (Jn 20:22);
4. the inspired Word of God comes in human words and therefore does not have a sovereignty comparable to that of the divine Spirit;
5. the Word which is the *instrumental* means of regeneration is the Word of truth; it is therefore appropriate to make the incorruptible seed of the Spirit bear fruit. But the Spirit itself is the *effective* means of regeneration.

To quote an instructive illustration by Bavinck:

"Just as the eye alone is insufficient and sees only when rays of light pass through it, and the ear alone is insufficient and hears only when it receives sounds from the outside, so also the seed which is sown in regeneration cannot progress to the act of faith without encountering the Word of the Gospel from the outside. Just as light suits the eye and sound suits the ear, so the object of faith offered in the Holy Scriptures suits the new life which the Holy Spirit breathes into the heart through regeneration"¹².

This position is also that of Charles Hodge and Robert Dabney who of course wrote before their Dutch fellows. Writing on the Means of Grace, Hodge affirms that the efficacy of the Word comes from the Spirit alone working through it: "The Scriptures clearly teach that there is an operation of

¹⁰ Bavinck, *Saved by Grace*, p. 162. Cf. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1950, p. 521-522.

¹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, p. 295-297.

¹² Bavinck, *Saved by Grace*, p. 150.

the Holy Spirit on the soul antecedent to the sanctifying influence of the truth, and necessary to render that influence effective.”¹³ If this were not so, asks Hodge, how would we account for the fact that many were converted under the teaching of the apostles and few under the teaching of the Master himself? This is an interesting observation and it serves to indicate the humility of Jesus in his humanity.

3. Practical implications

Why does this question matter? Beyond conformity to biblical teaching and giving due honour to the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, on the practical level one will rely less on verbal consistency and convincing demonstration in the communication of the Gospel than on the presence and effectiveness of the Spirit himself. This is no doubt an encouragement to prayer. Here are some possible ways in which the belief in the immediate work of the Spirit may provide a challenge to us:

1. Correct exegesis in exposing the truth does not convert sinners. We can get it totally right in understanding and expounding the Scripture and yet none may be converted.
2. This implies that dependence on the Spirit is primary *before* our preparation, *in each step* of it and *during* it when the Word is proclaimed. And *after* preaching the seed planted depends on the work of the Spirit in germination. It might be useful to spend Monday morning in prayer for each member of our community rather than otherwise!
3. Prayer, not study, is the number 1 calling of the minister. Prayer then study.
4. Is this the reason for the lack of effectiveness of the Gospel in our day? We have a better prepared, a more educated, and a more sophisticated ministry in terms of means than ever before and yet there is a spiritual dearth like never before. We have more books, more means and an abundance of media. But what we need is renewed power in preaching and only the Holy Spirit can confer this.

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¹³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III, London, James Clarke, 1950, p. 470-476.