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WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW (#WCSK), PART IX: REGENERATION

All Scriptures will be taken from The New American Standard Bible (NASB). Biblical references are examples and are in no way exhaustive. Also, the series What Christians Should Know is not a complete reference but is meant to provide basic beliefs, principles, and doctrines in the Christian faith. All of the lessons are best used as a general guide as you engage in your own Bible study.

“But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1).

Introduction

We are now near the end of *What Christians Should Know Volume I*. There will be one more lesson in this volume. I have written much so far about central *principles* of the Christian faith—ideas that, to some, may feel far away or removed from their personal experience. This lesson on regeneration by far contains the most palpable *applications* to each person’s existence because, in the end, one of the most central questions will be, “How will all of this affect my life?” Regeneration thus helps believers answer the question, “How do I know I am saved?” Think of the prior lessons being like a business’s overall motto—for example, “Finger lickin’ good.” That may sound great but provides no specific details or guidelines on how an employee’s day will look in pursuit of “Finger lickin’ good.” Regeneration does just that—by providing a glimpse of the daily experience—in the walk of the Christian.

Specifically, regeneration means being born again by the Holy Spirit and being given a new heart and mind. Wayne Grudem defines regeneration as “a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us; sometimes called ‘being born again.’”¹ Regeneration is part of the entire process of salvation that continues Christ’s atoning sacrifice in the cross—that is, Christ has paid the price for our sins, and the Holy Spirit actualizes that work in our lives so that He can put sin to death and raise us up to new

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 699.

life. Regeneration, or being “born again,” is totally and completely dependent on God² in the same way that our natural births were not an active, voluntary choice on our part.

Certainly, there is a very specific ordering of salvation, called the *ordo salutis*, and each other component (election, calling, [regeneration], conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification and perseverance) will be discussed separately in future volumes of *What Christians Should Know*. Because salvation has a specific order, confusion about the sequence will result in divergent beliefs about how someone enters into and engages in a relationship with God. Regeneration is part of a sequence and sets the tone of a Christian’s life after he or she has been elected and called. Furthermore, the Bible teaches us that in order to be regenerated, we had to be exposed to the Word of God and hear the gospel. James 1:18 says, “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth *by the word of truth*, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures” (italics mine). I Peter 1:23-25 says, “For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, *through the living and enduring word of God*. For, ‘ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER.’ And this is *the word which was preached to you*” (italics mine).

Calling can therefore be thought of as God speaking to us *from the outside* and summoning us to Him; regeneration, then, is the Holy Spirit working on us *from the inside* so that we can respond faithfully to God and live a Christ-centered life. As Jesus said in John 6:44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.”³ An example of this truth can be seen in Acts 10:44-48. Here, the apostle Peter preaches the good news to the house of Cornelius, *and then* all those who hear were overpowered by the Holy Spirit:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, in Acts 16:13-14, the apostle Paul preaches the gospel to a crowd of women, and one of the women, Lydia, had her heart opened by THE LORD. The text says, “and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” As Paul says in Romans 10:17, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”

² John 3:3-8; I Peter 1:3; cf. James 1:18

³ See also John 6:65.

Regeneration is total, not partial: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”⁴ Before regeneration, we were dead in our whole being.⁵ God thus aims to make us new creations in regeneration—not slightly used, or almost new—but brand new creations. The Greek word for new, *kainos*, implies freshness in respect to an unheard of or unprecedented novel *substance*. From this concept stems the conclusion that regeneration is a finite *event* in the Christian’s life, yet the effects of that regeneration will manifest *over time*. Hence, God’s work is always good, full, and complete while our response is gradual and a “work in progress.” Of course, regeneration does not mean that a Christian will live a perfect life. Rather, it means that the life of a Christian will not be characterized by continued indulgence in sin.

I. By Grace Alone

We spoke about the grace of God in a prior lesson. Specifically, regeneration is a special type of grace imparted on people who are otherwise totally undeserving.⁶ This act of grace is performed by the Holy Spirit,⁷ and without the grace of regeneration (i.e., without God), *no one could be saved* and therefore have eternal life.⁸ This is why the idea of God’s grace is so important. The Holy Spirit is the divine Helper⁹ and Teacher¹⁰ that not only gives us the power to become regenerated, but also to continually repent and turn toward God, set our minds on Christ, live according to the Spirit, and belong to Jesus.¹¹

Accordingly, no one can “self-regenerate” and live a more Christ-centered life by his or her own initiative. Titus 3:5 says, “*He saved us*, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (italics mine). In Matthew 19:28, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” The gift of this special grace to undeserving sinners is alluded to in the New Covenant in Jeremiah 32:38-41, which says:

They shall be My people, and I will be their God; and *I will give them one heart and one way*, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and for the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good;

⁴ II Corinthians 5:17

⁵ Ephesians 2:1

⁶ Ephesians 2:1-5

⁷ John 3:5-8

⁸ John 3:3, 5; cf. I Corinthians 2:6-16

⁹ John 14:26, 16:7

¹⁰ John 16:13

¹¹ Romans 8:4-13; Ephesians 5:18

and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul (italics mine).

The word heart (*leb* in Hebrew, meaning the center of everything) is used frequently in the Old Testament, and it symbolically denotes the essence of someone's being, their core identity and internal self. How we act;¹² how we think,¹³ know¹⁴ and understand;¹⁵ and what we say¹⁶ therefore stem from our heart condition. So, when the Old Testament speaks of the heart, it becomes clear how this is seen through the lens of regeneration and its profound internal work on our inner self. Deuteronomy 30:6 says, "Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live." Ezekiel 11:19-20 says, "And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God." Other examples of a regenerated heart in the Old Testament can be seen in Jeremiah 24:7, 31:31-33, and Ezekiel 36:26-27.

In the New Testament, regeneration is often referred to as being "born again." So, every human being is "born" in a natural sense as a general gift of grace from God. Only select people who have been elected¹⁷ by God and hear the gospel call¹⁸ receive the special gift of grace to be spiritually born again. I Peter 1:3 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Mark Driscoll says,

Regenerating grace is the source of all that it means to live as a Christian. As new creations with new hearts we have new passions, new desires, and new purposes, which culminate in a passionate life of joy and good works ... at its deepest level, the new heart longs for the desires of God and rejoices in the freedom that comes in replacing old sinful longings with new holy longings that give God glory and us joy.¹⁹

The clearest elucidation of being born again occurs in John 3, when Jesus speaks to Nicodemus. Christ explains that while we are all naturally alive, we are spiritually dead.²⁰

¹² Proverbs 4:4, 5:12, 10:8; Matthew 5:28, 6:21; Mark 7:21-23

¹³ Proverbs 6:14, 25; 16:1

¹⁴ Proverbs 2:10, 3:1-3, 23:15

¹⁵ Proverbs 2:2, 24:32

¹⁶ Matthew 12:34

¹⁷ John 15:16; Ephesians 1:4-5; Romans 8:28-30

¹⁸ Mark 16:15; Romans 10:14-17; I Corinthians 9:16; Revelation 3:20

¹⁹ Mark Driscoll, *Religion Saves* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 119.

²⁰ Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13

In order to become spiritually alive with Christ,²¹ we must experience another birth—that of our spirit—and hence, be born again. John 3:3-8 (NIV) says:

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Again it is important to recognize that it is the work of the Holy Spirit that executes this rebirth. Being born again means that a person becomes a partaker of the divine nature²² and is a new man²³ as well as a new creation where the old has passed away.²⁴ Someone who is born again is now the workmanship of Jesus, built to do good works.²⁵ (Many other passages of the New Testament speak about being born again.²⁶)

Hence, a person with a regenerated heart says, “I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart.”²⁷

II. The Effects

What this means in a practical sense is that regenerated people will turn away from what *they* want to do and what *their* desires are and seek to honor, praise, and worship THE LORD in *all* that they do. I John 3:9 says, “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” A prime example would be in regard to sexual immorality. An unrepentant, non-regenerated person would say, “I do what feels good.” A regenerated, repentant person would “flee immorality”²⁸ because, as Paul says in I Corinthians 6:19-20, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”

²¹ Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:13

²² II Peter 1:4

²³ Ephesians 2:15, 4:24

²⁴ II Corinthians 5:17

²⁵ Ephesians 2:10

²⁶ John 1:13; Romans 6:1-23; I Peter 1:3, 23

²⁷ Psalm 40:8

²⁸ I Corinthians 6:18

Regeneration, then, forces us to reconsider how we behave, because sin is an offense to God. When given the option to sleep with another man's wife, Joseph recognized that whatever he intended to do, at its core, the act was an offense to THE LORD: "How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?"²⁹ David expresses similar sentiments in Psalm 139. He recognizes that nothing is hidden from God, and therefore he pursues God in all that he does: "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there ... Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way."³⁰

Regeneration recognizes that our lives are no longer our own: we are living *for* God. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can put away the old, deceitful ways of sin and put on the new self, created in righteousness and truth.³¹ We put sin to death and consider the members of our earthly bodies dead to "immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed."³² We put aside "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech."³³ And we must never forget that these changes occur as a function of the Holy Spirit, not ourselves. This powerful realization frees us from any legalism or rule following that gives anyone a sense of earned righteousness or, even more dangerous, spiritual pride.

Regenerated people have a new God. If you worked in an office, you would have a boss. You would know your boss's personality, what he or she is like, and generally speaking, what he or she expects from you. If you switched to a different job, you would then have to learn a whole new set of guidelines for your new boss, who would undoubtedly be different. At this new work, you will adjust how you dress, how you speak, how you address others, and the overall way in which you carry yourself. With Jesus as our new Lord, God, and Savior, we no longer adhere to the old rules and expectations of our old "job." We are no longer slaves to sin, but we are free to obey God. We are no longer in bondage, but we are liberated in order to prepare ourselves to occupy (eventually) eternal life with God. At the core of every regenerated person's heart, they have an acute understanding that their boss is Yahweh, and they belong to Yahweh. From that heart condition grows an identity that says, "Yahweh is God, and I follow Him *alone*."

John 5:18 says, "We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him." Hence, we are no longer loyal to our old ideology, bad habits, and way of thinking. And because we now serve THE LORD and THE LORD alone, every other functional "savior" is destroyed. So, if you worshipped marriage, the functional savior of a mate is no longer a top priority. If you worshipped wealth, the functional savior of money is now dead. If you worshipped approval, then the functional savior of affirmation is destroyed.

²⁹ Genesis 39:9

³⁰ Psalm 139:8-9, 23-24

³¹ Ephesians 4:17-24

³² Colossians 3:5

³³ Colossians 3:8

Regenerated people have a new identity (internal condition) and behave differently (external condition). II Corinthians 5:17 speaks of being a new creation. Godly creations, then, mirror God’s characteristics such as holiness, truth, justice, and peace. But in order to begin *acting* like a new creation, one must first embrace the *internal change* in heart condition. If this were not the case, then we would *not* be saved by faith alone through grace alone but by works alone. Behavior proceeds out *from* a new identity. I John 2:29 says, “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.” Being born again comes first, and then the practice of righteousness.

Regeneration is always God-dependant and human exclusive. This is what Paul referred to in Galatians 6:15, where he writes, “For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” Circumcision is something we can do, *an act* that is an external sign. A new creation is something only God can do *on the inside*. In fact, regeneration causes such a change in people that often in the Bible, regenerated people are given a new name—for example, Abram is called Abraham, Jacob is called Israel, Cephas is called Peter, and Saul is called Paul.

Ephesians 4:22-23 says that we are renewed internally by laying “aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit” and are “renewed in the spirit of [our minds].” Verse 24 says that that new self is in God’s likeness. Our minds also change, and the new mindset is significantly different from the old mindset. I Corinthians 2:14-16 says,

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

If you’ve ever wondered why, no matter how hard *you* try, some unbelievers just don’t “get it,” this verse should give you some clarity.

Regenerated people will no longer seek natural satisfaction, but rather, they seek the nourishing “spiritual milk”³⁴ that they will now crave in order to grow up and mature in Christ. And instead of rejecting the Word of God as burdensome and restrictive, they “joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.”³⁵ They are more loving,³⁶ and they have new, Godly desires.³⁷ It’s important to note exactly what Galatians 5:16-17 says: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.” In other

³⁴ I Peter 2:2

³⁵ Romans 7:22

³⁶ I John 4:7

³⁷ Psalms 37:4; Romans 7:4-6; Galatians 5:16-17

words, the Spirit does not condemn, riddle with guilt, or attempt to add legalism to desire in an absolute sense. The Spirit *desires* to do what is of God. The Greek word for desire is *epithymeo*, or “to set the heart upon, or to long for.” Desire is morally neutral, but what makes *epithymeo* good or bad is *the target* of that desire (what one sets the desire upon). A life full of desire driven to do the things of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit is a very good thing indeed.

Of course, the temptation to sin always exists, and regenerated people will fall into sin. Regeneration does not make one sinless or immune to temptation. The difference between an unbeliever, who is not regenerated, and a believer, who is regenerated, is that the latter is uncomfortable with his or her sin, seeks repentance, and does not desire to do what is offensive to God. A sinner can sin and sleep very comfortably. A believer can sin, but then things just won’t feel right until he or she repents, asks for forgiveness, and runs back to God. This is why in Romans 7:15, Paul says, “For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.” A simple understanding of sin is that regenerated people change in their response to sin—they hate it, can’t stand it, want to break free from it, and seek to destroy it.

Regenerated people also seek out other Christians with whom to fellowship as the church.³⁸ In essence, they seek out a new community, a new group of others to “hang out with” in God’s family,³⁹ the body of Christ.⁴⁰ They also seek to worship God and to be in His presence.⁴¹ They have new freedom⁴² and new life, and that brand-new life looks, feels, and acts in a way that is very distinct from the old life. The new life bears the fruits of the Spirit since the Spirit regenerates us. A Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life turns away from, “immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” and instead is characterized by “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control.”⁴³ I John 4:7 says, “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” Regeneration imparts in us the ability to say no to sin and yes to God: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith because greater is He who is in [us] than he who is in the world,”⁴⁴ and therefore we are sheltered and protected by attacks from the enemy who lures us away from God, for “He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.”⁴⁵

³⁸ I John 1:3

³⁹ Ephesians 2:19-20

⁴⁰ Romans 12:5

⁴¹ Ephesians 2:22

⁴² Romans 6:6, 7:6

⁴³ Galatians 5:19-23

⁴⁴ I John 4:4

⁴⁵ I John 5:18b

Not everyone who says they believe in God, however, is in fact regenerated. Healthy trees produce good fruit, which is why Jesus warned in Matthew 7:15-20,

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.⁴⁶

In fact, we ought to never look for external signs as a barometer. Furthermore, *only God* knows who are His,⁴⁷ so trying to figure that out on our own is a futile endeavor. In Matthew 7:21-22, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not *prophesy* in Your name, and in Your name *cast out demons*, and in Your name *perform many miracles*?'"⁴⁸ (italics mine). It is important to note that the double use of the word Lord is a term of endearment. What Jesus was trying to tell us is that we should all look up to God and pursue Him so that the Holy Spirit can regenerate us. Don't look out for signs and wonders, because that can very quickly get you into trouble.

Jesus said that John the Baptizer was the greatest human being to have ever lived.⁴⁸ Guess what John never did? Perform any miracles or exercise any demons. John the Baptizer, Paul, and Jesus never suggested that miracles or activities within the church should act as a barometer for "Christianness." These three each pointed to *character traits* in life as an indicator. Wayne Grudem says, "Genuine love for God and his people, heartfelt obedience to his commands, and the Christlike character traits that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit, demonstrated consistently over a period of time in a person's life, simply *cannot* be produced by Satan or by the natural man or woman working in his or her own strength. These can only come about the Spirit of God working within and giving us new life."⁴⁹

What Christians should know is that regeneration focuses on the inward change of one's heart condition.

Our response to regeneration is a continual, day-by-day process. We will continue to be tempted to sin and will even fall into sin at times, but our response will be to repent and turn back toward God. Again, the apostle Paul clearly expresses this sentiment in Romans 7:15, where he writes, "For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate." The regenerated person

⁴⁶ cf. James 2:14-26.

⁴⁷ II Timothy 2:19

⁴⁸ Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28

⁴⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 706.

hates sin and feels distressed and uncomfortable when he or she does sin. Sin bothers regenerated people, and until they put sin to death, they will not be at peace.

The Bible prescribes that in order to be “filled” with the Holy Spirit⁵⁰ one ought to praise and worship God, address one another in psalms and hymns, and always give thanks to THE LORD. The Greek word for “filled” is *pleroo* that not only implies one is to be so filled that nothing else is wanted, but the term is often used in nautical terms as it pertains to cramming a net or filling a sail with wind. Therefore, in order to get to where you want to go, you can’t use one blast of wind. You need a constant, steady stream of wind while you navigate the waters of life in order to reach your destination. If you steer away from the direction the wind is blowing, you’ll end up stranded at sea.

God Bless and on to our last lesson (Part X) in *What Christians Should Know Volume I: Worship*.

Questions? Email us at dlcfchurch@gmail.com. Be sure to put WCSK (yes, all caps) in the subject line. We’d love to hear from you.

Dr. C. H. E. Sadaphal

⁵⁰ Ephesians 5:18