

Does Regeneration Precede Faith?

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Introduction

One of the fatal flaws of Calvinism (i.e., Reformed theology) is its twisting of the Biblical concept of faith. Calvinism reckons faith as a work that man does, and therefore constitutes a contribution by the sinner to his salvation. The reasoning is that since faith is a work, and works are the fruit of salvation, then faith exercised must be the result of regeneration. The argument is made that since lost men are spiritually dead in sins, they have no capacity for faith. Regeneration in the elect grants them the ability to believe, and they embrace Jesus Christ by faith as a result of regeneration. The example cited as the strongest proof of this is the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. He was summoned to life, and then came forth.

Calvinism also insists that placing regeneration before faith excludes man as a contributor to his salvation, and therefore preserves all the glory for God. The Reformed argument juxtaposes *monergism* (God is the only one who works in bringing salvation) over against *synergism* (God and man both work to bring about salvation), and insists that monergism alone is Biblical. The reasoning is that if regeneration is contingent upon faith, then man has worked to bring it about, and God does not get all the glory.

Analysis

Faith is Pleasing to God

The problem with this erroneous logic that continues to be propagated by R. C. Sproul and others is that faith pleases God (Hebrews 11:6). The Bible suggests that the stronger a man is in faith, the more God is glorified (Romans 4:20). Biblical faith speaks of man casting himself upon the mercy of God with an awareness of his total and absolute inability to contribute one iota to his salvation.

In passages such as Romans 4:5, 16, the apostle Paul paints a stark contrast between faith and works, and excludes faith from the works category altogether. Paul taught that it was faith that enabled grace to make the promise sure to all the seed (i.e., the elect). Reformed theologians who label as synergists and semi-Pelagians those who defend the Biblical position of faith before regeneration have absolutely no foundation upon which to stand!

Insight from John Wesley

John Wesley, in a message entitled *The New Birth*, speaks of the two great works of justification and regeneration in connection with our salvation. He rightly reasons that though both of these Divine acts take place instantaneously in a moment of time, justification must logically precede regeneration. His thought is that in justification God does something *for* us, clearing away our sin and guilt, so that in regeneration He is free to do something *in* us. It is admittedly a fine point to argue since the Scriptures represent faith as prerequisite to both righteousness and life. The point is that Wesley properly understood the relationship between faith and regeneration. Belief precedes birth!

Jesus and Nicodemus

Jesus Himself taught that this was the case. In John 3, Nicodemus had asked, "***How can these things be?***" in response to our Lord's teaching on the new birth. In His answer, Jesus reached back to the Old Testament incident involving a snake-bitten people, and a brass serpent on a rod in the middle of the camp (John 3:14-15). The word went forth that a provision had been made for snakebite. Those who had the death sentence in themselves could receive healing

and life for a look of faith! So which came first, the look or the life? Jesus taught that in the new birth (i.e., regeneration) the believing set the stage for the birthing!

John concluded this chapter saying: "**He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth upon him**" (John 3:36). Did you catch that phrase in the middle? He that *believeth not* the Son *shall not see life*! That single phrase alone slams the door shut on the regeneration-before-faith doctrine! According to Calvinism, a man must receive life before he can believe. According to Jesus and John, a man must believe before he can receive life! Who do you trust on the matter?

Jesus and Lazarus

The argument from John 11 regarding Lazarus appears rather formidable if you assume that Jesus meant it as a picture of the new birth. But did he? The problem with this assumption is the conflict it creates with John 3. The fact is that Lazarus' resurrection was intended to portray a *physical resurrection* in the future, not *spiritual regeneration*. When Jesus called Lazarus by name, he was not addressing the dead corpse. He was summoning the spirit of this saved man from Abraham's bosom in order to reunite body and spirit. In so doing, He demonstrated His power and glory as the Resurrection and the Life! Regeneration, on the other hand, takes place under an entirely different set of circumstances; that is, with soul and body still in tact.

Paul and the Ephesians

The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians concerning "**all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ**" (Ephesians 1:3). The operative phrase is "**in Christ**" or its equivalent. He included the relationship between the work of the Spirit and their faith, saying, "**In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in who also, after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise**" (Ephesians 1:13). The word *trusted* is italicized in the Authorized Version. The verb itself is not there, but the Greek construction implies that the Ephesians had trusted Christ in like manner as did Paul and his associates (1:12). The phrase *after that ye heard* is the translation of an aorist active participle. The literal rendering is, "having heard, ye also trusted in Him." The phrase *after that ye believed* is also an aorist active participle. The literal rendering is, "having believed, ye were sealed." In Paul's mind, the hearing comes first, then the believing, and then the sealing.

Three observations from Ephesians 1:13 are in order. First, both of the aorist (past) participles are active voice. Paul as easily could have used the passive voice in both instances to convey the sense of "having been made to hear" and "having been made to believe." That certainly would have played into the hands of Calvinism. But Paul employed the active voice under Spirit inspiration to indicate that sinners are *active participants* (not to be confused with *contributors*) in their salvation. Secondly, the Ephesians had *heard the word (logos)* of truth. It appears that, in Paul's mind, the *logos* and the *rhema* were interchangeable, both having the ability to ignite faith in the hearers.

Lastly, we have the sealing of the Spirit taking place after faith is exercised. This fact creates a serious dilemma for the Calvinist. If regeneration (i.e., the new birth) takes place in the elect prior to their exercise of faith, at what point do they become sons? Is not regeneration synonymous with sonship? Is it possible to have an unbelieving and unsealed son without the earnest of his inheritance? Galatians 3:6 says: "**ye are all the children [sons] of God by faith in Christ Jesus.**" In John 1:12, the **power** (authority) to become a son of God was granted to **as many as received** (aorist) Him. Sonship in Scripture is always the consequence of faith.

Conclusion

Let it be said that the regeneration-before-faith doctrine cannot be supported by the truth of Scripture. It is nothing more than philosophical rationalism—the child of human reason! The Calvinist is forced to take this position in defense of total depravity (i.e., total inability) and unconditional election.

God's eternal decree and sovereign good pleasure with regard to redemption is to save them that believe! The elect are those who have ***believed through grace*** (Acts 18:27). There is nothing meritorious or synergistic about their faith! God's work of regeneration takes place in response to faith wrought by grace in the heart of a believing sinner! This in no way detracts from the glory that God receives in redeeming His elect from the hand of the enemy! It rather affirms and promotes that glory!