

What is Regeneration?



Basics of
the Faith

S E R I E S

Matthew Barrett

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Sean Michael Lucas, Series Editor

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit to unite the elect sinner to Christ by breathing new life into that dead and depraved sinner so as to raise him from spiritual death to spiritual life, removing his heart of stone and giving him a heart of flesh, so that he is washed, born from above and now able to repent and trust in Christ as a new creation. Moreover, regeneration is the act of God alone and therefore it is monergistic in nature, accomplished by the sovereign act of the Spirit apart from and unconditioned upon man's will to believe. In short, man's faith does not cause regeneration but regeneration causes man's faith.⁶

With this definition in view, let's now look to Scripture itself, particularly with the monergistic nature of regeneration in mind.

The Circumcision and Gift of a New Heart

Deuteronomy 30:6. In Deuteronomy 30 Israel faces and anticipates the reality of coming exile and judgment for disobedience. However, Moses foretells of a time to come when Israel will experience restoration, redemption, genuine repentance, and new spiritual life rather than judgment and condemnation. Included in such a future restoration is liberation from the slavery of sin. However, liberation from bondage to sin comes only through the circumcision of the heart (i.e., regeneration). In Deuteronomy 30:6 we read, "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

▣ Regeneration

If the circumcision of the heart refers to regeneration (cf. Rom. 2:25–27), then to what purpose does God promise to circumcise the heart? He circumcises the heart “so that” his people will love the Lord. The Lord does not circumcise their hearts “because” they acted in repentance and faith by loving the Lord. Rather, it is God’s sovereign act of circumcising the heart that causes the sinner to love him. Nowhere in Deuteronomy 30:6 do we see any indication that God’s sovereign act of circumcising the heart is conditioned on the will of man to believe. Rather, it is quite the opposite. The Lord must first circumcise the heart so that the sinner can exercise a will that believes.

In Deuteronomy 29:2–4 Moses summons all of Israel and says,

You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

Why is it that those in Israel, who saw the many miracles God performed in saving them from Pharaoh, do not believe? Verse 4 gives the answer: “To this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” It is remarkable how much Deuteronomy 29 parallels John 10:26. As Israel saw the miracles and failed to hear and see spiritually, so also did the Jews in the Gospels see the miracles of Jesus and fail to hear and see spiritually. But again, notice the reason Jesus gives as to why they do not believe,

The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. (John 10:25–26)

As in Deuteronomy 29:2–4, the reason they do not see or hear is because God did not give them “a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” It is not man's choice or will that determines whether he will spiritually have a heart to hear and see; it is God's sovereign choice to give the sinner a heart to hear and see that is the cause and reason for belief.

Jeremiah 31:33 and 32:39–40. The concept of a new heart is also illustrated by the prophet Jeremiah. “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 31:33; cf. Heb. 8:10; 10:16). Similarly the Lord says in Jeremiah 32:39–40,

I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.

Unlike in Deuteronomy 30:6 (NIV), in Jeremiah the phrase “circumcise your hearts” is not used. Nevertheless, the phrase is used in Jeremiah 4:4 (NIV) and the concept is present in Deuteronomy 30:6 and 32:39–40, for the text does speak of the Lord writing his law on the hearts of his people (in contrast to writing

his law on tablets of stone), giving his people one heart, and putting the fear of the Lord in their hearts. As in Deuteronomy, in Jeremiah regeneration is in view. Notice that given the spiritual inability of the people (see Jer. 6:10), it is only when God writes his law within, on the heart, and places a fear of himself within that the sinner can follow after him.

Ezekiel 11:19–21 and 36:26–27. The concept of a circumcised heart in Deuteronomy 30:6 and a new heart in Jeremiah 31:33 is also taught in Ezekiel 11:19–21 and 36:26–27. God again promises a day to come when his people will experience restoration and renewal. He explains that in order for a sinner to walk in his statutes, keep his rules, and obey his law, God himself must first remove the dead, cold, lifeless heart of stone and replace it with a heart that is alive, namely, a heart of flesh. The Lord does not give the sinner a heart of flesh because the sinner obeys, but rather the sinner obeys *because* the Lord surgically implants a heart of flesh. Such an order is indicated at the beginning of 11:20. God removes the heart of stone and gives his people a heart of flesh that they may obey (11:21; 36:27). The same causal order is even more apparent in Ezekiel 36, where the Lord states that he will “cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (36:27). Once again, God does not put a new heart and spirit within in reaction to or because of the sinner’s faith, but it is God’s sovereign act of implanting a new heart, a new spirit, that causes the sinner to turn in faith and obedience (cf. Ezek. 37:1–14).⁷

The New Birth

John 3:3–8. Perhaps one of the most well-known and important texts on the new birth or regeneration is the encounter

Jesus has with Nicodemus. Nicodemus begins the dialogue by stating, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (3:2). It may appear that Jesus avoids answering the assertion made by Nicodemus when he responds, “Truly truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (3:3). However, Jesus is simply getting to the heart of the matter, directing Nicodemus’s attention to how it is that one can know God in a saving way. Nicodemus seems to be implying a question to which he is hoping for an answer—namely the question, who are you, Jesus?

The answer Jesus gives shows that the only way one can truly know who God is (and therefore who Jesus claims to be) is by being born again (or “born from above”). In other words, Nicodemus will never believe Jesus is from God (let alone that Jesus is the Son of God) unless he first receives the new birth from the Spirit. Therefore, rather than telling Nicodemus, “Yes, I am from God,” Jesus responds by saying that unless one is born by the Spirit he will never understand who Jesus is in a saving way. It is not by human reasoning but by spiritual rebirth that one comes to understand Jesus.

Moreover, Jesus is insistent that if Nicodemus is not born again he will not enter the kingdom of God. In theological language, Jesus is teaching the necessity of the new birth. The necessity of this new birth leads Jesus also to explain in 3:5–6 exactly what it means to be born again.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

“The doctrine of effectual calling is at the heart of what it means to confess that Jesus Christ is the sole and sufficient Savior of spiritually dead sinners. Matthew Barrett does a great job of condensing this doctrine into a readable form that all can understand.”

■ **Timothy George**, Dean, Beeson Divinity School of Samford University; Senior Theological Advisor, *Christianity Today*

Many people believe they can initiate their salvation, either through choosing to believe or on their own merits. Yet the Bible is clear that we can't take even the first step toward reconciliation with God on our own—we are spiritually dead and can do nothing unless we are given new life.

Matthew Barrett explores regeneration—the doctrine that describes this process—to show what truly happens to us when we are saved. He compares the gospel call with the effectual call of the Holy Spirit and explains how God's gift of a new heart and new birth, rather than anything we have done, initiates our salvation.

Basics of the Faith booklets introduce readers to basic Reformed doctrine and practice. On issues of church government and practice they reflect that framework—otherwise they are suitable for all church situations.

Matthew Barrett is assistant professor of Christian studies at California Baptist University.

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