

# REGENERATION

(Rev. Dr. R. D. Anderson, last revised 6 November 2014)

The intention of this handout is not only to say something about the concept of “regeneration” in the Scripture and the confessional standards, but also to show how we ought to be careful in our treatment of both the Scripture and the confessional standards. Neither are dogmatic textbooks and can therefore sometimes make use of the same words and images in different ways. Each passage must be read in its own context. We may not thoughtlessly read the content of one passage into another completely different passage. In this example of passages concerning “regeneration” we will see that this word does not always carry the same meaning in the confessional standards. Even the Bible also uses this word in various different ways. This, however, does not mean that the Bible contradicts itself! All the passages discussed are concerned with the mystery of the work of God’s Spirit in our hearts. In the various different ways in which “regeneration” is spoken of we see different aspects of God’s work in our hearts emphasised.

## 1) Regeneration in the Confessions

*Belgic Confession art. 24*

Word & Spirit → faith → process of regeneration

In the line of Calvin, regeneration is here considered as the process of sanctification which faith works. “Regeneration” is explained as “to make a new man.” The metaphor of the old man / new man is often used in Paul’s letters to explain this process of sanctification (see below). The Confession therefore has this process of sanctification, as explained by Paul, especially in view when it speaks of “regeneration.”

Ursinus, the author of the catechism, in his commentary on Lord’s Day 33, shows that he too considered regeneration as the process of conversion. Lord’s Day 33 uses the term “conversion” and “putting off of the old man / putting on of the new man” to explain this process. The catechism itself mentions regeneration in Q/A 8, 71 and 73, but there is no direct explanation of this concept further than the reference to the Bible texts where it is to be found.

*Canons of Dort III/IV:11-12 (cf. Refutation of errors art.8)*

Spirit (through the Word) → regeneration / conversion → fruits

The terms “regeneration” and “conversion” are used here to refer to the moment that God works in the heart of man to grant him faith. From this regeneration (and the faith that results from it) flow forth visible fruits.

It is important to note that the term regeneration is used to refer to God’s work in the heart. At the same time, faith is perceived as something which the believer does from his own will. For this reason it can be said that man himself believes and converts himself through the grace that is given him.

We may add that the Belgic Confession *also* uses the term regeneration in this way in article 35 on the Lord’s Supper when it says that the Lord’s Supper is only for those who are “already regenerated” (first paragraph). This shows us that both ways of speaking about regeneration were in use right from the beginnings of the Reformed churches.

In CD V:7 the “seed” of regeneration is mentioned. By comparison with CD V:6 we may notice that the Holy Spirit, who always remains in the hearts of believers, is referred to with the image of a “seed.” In the refutation of errors 3 the passage in 1 Joh. 3:9 is mentioned (see also below).

In our day it is the manner of speaking in the *Canons of Dort* which is most used in evangelical circles while the manner of speaking in the *Belgic Confession* (art. 24) is traditionally emphasised in Free Reformed circles. These two ways of speaking about regeneration ought not to be pitted against each other. Although the same word is used in two different ways, the *realities* with which they are concerned are both biblical. The process of daily regeneration is required of us by God. However, it remains God and only God who brings us to faith by His Word and Spirit and thereby regenerates us, that is, gives us a new birth.

## 2) Regeneration in the New Testament

Note first that the Greek terms for “regeneration” may denote either *re-birth* or *re-conception*. These two possible meanings need to be borne in mind when reading the relevant texts.

### a) Jesus (see John 3)

The origin of the imagery concerning regeneration seems to go all the way back to the teaching of Jesus himself, when He spoke with Nicodemus about the need to be born again by water and Spirit (John 3). Jesus is, of course, referring to the water baptism of John and of his own disciples, a baptism which functioned as a symbol of the change of life which the Spirit works (see John 3:22ff). This was an adult baptism unto repentance (i.e. life-changing, cf. Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:7ff). Regeneration is thus *recognised* by the fruits of conversion (Luke 3).

Jesus' words here are ambiguous in two ways. Firstly, the word 'again' in the phrase 'to be born again' can also mean 'from above'. It is quite possible that Jesus intended both meanings (cf. John 1:13). Nicodemus himself seems to have understood the word in the sense 'again', for he speaks of entering his mother's womb a second time.

In the second place the word 'born' in the phrase 'to be born again' can also mean 'conceived'. Although Nicodemus obviously understood Jesus to be speaking about birth (John 3:4), Jesus' apostles show that He really meant to speak of conception. In terms of this metaphor, the Spirit is God's seed (see below). This metaphor concerning re-conception also shows how the Bible emphasises the fact that life begins at conception, not at birth.

### b) John (see Joh. 1:12-13; 1 Joh. 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18)

The apostle John consistently speaks of being born of God. John 1 shows that we become *God's children* in this way. One is born of God because he believes in Jesus as the Messiah, God's Son from eternity. This birth from God is characterised by doing righteousness, in other words, obeying God's law (cf. the fruits of conversion of which John the baptist spoke) by love for one's neighbour, by faith in Jesus as the Christ / Messiah, and by not sinning (see 1 John 2:29; 4:7; 5:1, 18). The last mentioned characteristic does not mean that the person born of God is totally without sin. John also writes in 1:8 that if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and do not possess the truth. John's point is that a regenerated person is preserved by God and cannot fall into the hands of the devil such that he completely loses his faith. His point is also that through growth in the doing of righteousness, sins are progressively conquered.

In 1 John 3:9 the image is expanded by the mention of the *seed*. As already mentioned above, the Greek word for 'regeneration' can also mean 're-conception'. When 'seed' is mentioned, then we know that John intends to speak of conception where there is also a new ejaculation of seed. This seed remains in the believer. If we look at 3:24 then we see that it is probable that John uses the word 'seed' to refer to the Holy Spirit. God re-conceives us (1 John 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18) through the ejaculation of the seed of his Spirit. Might John have seen a connection between this image and the Holy Spirit who "came upon" the virgin Mary resulting in the birth of the "son of God" (Luke 1:35)?

There is yet another remarkable point to note about the way the apostle John speaks of re-conception. According to John, it is because of this re-conception that we are called God's children. God conceives us by his Spirit and in this way we become his own children and may rightly call Him our 'Father'! Paul too states that we have become God's children *by the work of the Holy Spirit*, although he prefers to speak of 'the Spirit of adoption' (Rom. 8:15) and does not connect the fact that we are God's children with regeneration / re-conception.

### c) Peter

Peter also uses the image of re-conception and he too mentions the seed. In 1 Peter 1:3 we see that regeneration (re-conception) leads to a living hope (= expectation) in the heavenly inheritance. In 1:23-24 we see that we are re-conceived through the imperishable seed of the (preached) Word of God. The seed of regeneration is thus at this point the Word of God that remains in us. Peter works this further out in the first three verses of chapter two by referring to newborn babies which long for their mother's milk. This pure milk also represents God's Word. Peter combines this with a reference to Psalm 34:8, 'Taste and see that the Lord is good'. God's Word (the preached Gospel) is both the seed which produces re-conception and also the milk which we as newborn babies need in order to grow in our salvation.

In 1:3 we notice that our re-conception has come into being 'by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.' Just as Jesus received new life, we are also re-conceived into new life through faith. This image therefore receives a deeper foundation in the time after the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>i</sup>

Nb. Without mentioning the element of 'seed', James also connects regeneration (re-birth) with the Word of God as the means (James 1:18).

i For the difference in the nature of faith before and after Pentecost see the handout on the Old Covenant vs the New Testament.

#### **d) Paul**

If the preached Word may be considered re-conception, then we may understand how Paul can say that *he*, through his preaching, has fathered children (1 Cor. 4:15; cf. Gal. 4:19).

In Titus 3:5 Paul speaks of (*lit.*) 'the bath-water of regeneration and renewal of (= through) the Holy Spirit'. He speaks here (as in Eph. 5:26) of baptism with a view to adults being baptised unto repentance such as we have also seen with John the baptist (see above under 'a) Jesus').<sup>ii</sup> In 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul also links baptism and the Holy Spirit. He states that we (by baptism) are 'irrigated' with the Spirit. In the letter to the Romans, he had worked out the relation between baptism and regeneration as the resurrection of the new man after the burial (= baptism) of the old man (Rom. 6). What is a completed fact in Christ in Romans 6 is presented in Romans 8:13 as a process of renewal that occurs in us. This process of renewal is also emphasised in 2 Corinthians 4:16.

#### *Questions to ponder*

What should we think of the Belgic Confession art. 24? Is this biblical language?

What should we say of Abraham Kuyper's doctrine of presumptive regeneration, which was made compulsory for the Reformed churches in the 1940s? (Kuyper argued that the children of believers are to be baptised on the ground that we ought to *presume* that they are regenerated).

#### *Interesting facts*

In the early church, about the end of the second century, the imagery of regeneration / re-conception was strengthened by giving those who had just been baptised as adults baby food to eat (honey mixed with milk)! (see Tertullian, *de Corona* 3; Hippolytus, *Traditio Apostolica*).

#### *Further Literature*

S. Greijdanus, "Actuele vragen in verband met de wedergeboorte" (brochure, 1944) 16 pages.

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<sup>ii</sup> For the difference between the baptism of John the baptist and Christian baptism, see section 2.4 of my article *The Laws for Uncleaness and New Testament Baptism*, to be found at [anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles](http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles)