

REGENERATION: *A CRUX INTERPRETUM*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In every “system” of theology there are certain doctrines so imbedded in that system that to uproot them would fell the entire tree. In his excellent work on epistemology, David Wolfe explains that good systematic theology requires four criteria to even qualify as a system.¹ He believes the adequacy, rationality, reliability, and suitability of a system of theology can be evaluated or validated on the basis of these four criteria. The failure of a system to meet these criteria indicates its weakness and the likelihood that theological reconstruction on a system-wide level is necessary or conversion to some other more suitable system is demanded for intellectual honesty. The four criteria are:

1. **Consistency**—the assertions, hypotheses, and opinions expressed by the system should be free from contradiction.
2. **Coherence**—the assertions and hypotheses should be related in a unified manner.
3. **Comprehensiveness**—the system should be applicable to all evidence.
4. **Congruity**—the system of assertions, hypotheses, etc. must “fit” all evidence. It must be accurate, adequate and precise to fit all data. In other words, the whole must equal the sum of its parts. If one part of the whole is out of sync with the whole, then the whole must be revised to include this part without throwing the other parts out of sync. We are searching for the interpretation which best “fits” all the data.

Another characteristic of any system of theology is what is called

¹David Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 50-55.

“ingression,” which simply means that some claims or hypotheses might be more deeply embedded or more crucially interconnected within a system than other assertions. We call this “depth of ingression.” Opinions that are not very deeply ingressed in a system may be relinquished or proven false without much change in the system. However, items that are more deeply ingressed are more dependent on the system, and the system is more dependent on them. The testing of these matters is thus more crucial to the system and must be conducted more carefully with a great deal of evidence before any changes in a system would be justified—or, at least, probably before they will be accepted by those committed to that system. For example, in Dispensationalism the doctrine of separation between Israel and the Church is deeply ingressive. Remove this separation and Dispensationalism dissolves faster than sugar in tea.

Likewise, in most Reformed theology the doctrines of Total Depravity and regeneration are deeply ingressed. As R. C. Sproul points out in his analysis of Lewis Sperry Chafer’s Dispensationalism, “When we turn to Chafer’s (and historic Dispensationalism’s) view of regeneration, we focus on what I believe is the most crucial point of the debate between Dispensationalism and Reformed theology.”² If the Reformed view of regeneration is in error, then their view of Total Depravity is also off center. And if their view of Total Depravity misses the mark, then the most “ingressed” of all their doctrines is uprooted, and the tree falls.

In the typical Reformed presentation of the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), regeneration precedes faith. This understanding arises out of the Reformed view of Total Depravity, which argues that man has no part at all in the salvation process because a completely fallen person is incapable of doing anything to help effect his own salvation. To assert otherwise would be tantamount to teaching salvation by works. Once again, we call upon R. C. Sproul to explain this point of view:

The logical priority of regeneration in Reformed theology rests on the doctrine of total depravity or moral inability. Because fallen man is morally unable to incline himself by faith to Christ, regeneration is a logical necessity for faith to occur. If we were to posit that faith precedes regeneration, then we would be assuming

²R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 193.

that unregenerate people, while still in an unregenerate state, have the moral ability to exercise faith. If the unregenerate can exercise faith, then it follows clearly that they are not fallen to the degree of moral inability, as claimed by classical Augustinian and Reformed theology. This would involve an Arminian or semi-Pelagian view of the fall.³

And it would not be unfair to say that the other four points of Dortian Calvinism⁴ (Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints) are an outgrowth of this doctrine of Total Depravity. We must remember that a “system” of theology must have not only consistency, it must also have coherence. Everything must hang together. Perhaps in our high tech world another way to describe “Systematic” Theology is “Spread Sheet” Theology. When one changes one item in a spread sheet, all the other items change as well. Coherence requires it. That is why when Augustine became amillennial (a change in the eschatological column), it changed his view of justification (a change in the soteriological column).⁵

Hence, we agree with R. C. Sproul: regeneration is one of the *crux* interpretations which distinguishes Reformed theology from Dispensational theology. Perhaps it would be helpful, then, to delve deeper into the background of the Reformed view of regeneration, especially in regard to the order of salvation. Where did their understanding of regeneration before faith actually originate? And what is their theological defense for such a view?

II. REGENERATION IN HISTORY

³Ibid., 194.

⁴We refer here to the brand of Calvinism which developed at the Synod of Dort (the city of Dordrecht) over half a century after John Calvin’s death in reaction to the tenets of Jacobus Arminius. There are many who believe the Calvinism which came from Dordrecht had moved a long way from that taught by John Calvin himself due to the influences of Theodore Beza’s supralapsarianism and William Perkins’ criteria for fruit inspecting (see R. T. Kendall, *Calvinism and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁵Augustine repeatedly uses Matt 24:13 as a proof text for his understanding of perseverance as a requirement for salvation and a proof of election (*Rebuke and Grace*, 10, 16; *To Vincentius*, 9).

A. AUGUSTINE

1. His Background.

We begin many of our studies with Augustine since he was the first of the Church Fathers to seriously delve into grace and doctrines other than trinitarian issues. And it was his teaching which has affected the RCC, Lutherans, and Anglo-Catholics right up until today. And Augustine taught baptismal regeneration, but he was not the first.

A completely heretical but very influential document in the early church was *The Shepherd of Hermas*. The writer claims to have been a contemporary of Clement, presbyter-bishop of Rome (A.D. 92-101). Hermas is instructed by the “angel of repentance” dressed up as a shepherd. The call is for a lackadaisical church to repent. The writing is thoroughly legalistic and never mentions the gospel or grace. He speaks of the meritorious system of good works and the atonement of sin through martyrdom. There is no mention of justification by faith, but water baptism is indispensable for salvation.⁶ And water baptism is the seal of repentance which “makes Christians into Christians... Asceticism and penal suffering are the school of conversion.”⁷ Faith is the fruit of repentance and the baptism which seals it.⁸

Justin Martyr followed on the heels of Hermas and also saw water baptism as the work of regeneration. He said: “Those who are convinced of the truth of our doctrine...are exhorted to prayer, fasting and repentance for past sins;... Then they are led by us to a place where there is water, and in this way they are regenerated, as we also have been regenerated;...For Christ says: Except you are born again, you cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.”⁹ The importance of water baptism for Justin Martyr is underscored when he says “the laver of repentance...is baptism, the only thing which is able to cleanse those who have repented.”¹⁰

Irenaeus (d. 200) also linked water baptism with regeneration

⁶P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5th ed. (N.P.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Christianity*, 684-87.

⁷J. Behm, “μετανοέω,” in *TDNT*, 1967 ed., 4:1008.

⁸*Ibid.*, 4:1007.

⁹J. Martyr, *Apol.* I., c. 61.

because of passages like John 3:5 and Titus 3:5. And Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) called water baptism the “chariot to heaven.” He believed the only way to get to heaven without water baptism was through martyrdom.

By the time of Augustine (d. 430) infant baptism was in full vogue. And at the baptismal font, “We are justified, but righteousness itself grows as we go forward.”¹¹ In the *ordo salutis* Augustine saw predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. But justification was the umbrella over everything from regeneration through sanctification.¹² And regeneration began at baptism. He actually called it “the saving laver of regeneration.”¹³ Here the elect receive the external sign (the water of baptism) and the spiritual reality (regeneration and union with Christ). For Augustine “the sacrament of baptism is undoubtedly the sacrament of regeneration.”¹⁴

But unlike Hermas and other predecessors, Augustine did not view regeneration as a work of man. It was the unmerited gift of grace which wrought regeneration, faith, and repentance in the sinner.¹⁵ But little children could definitely be regenerated through baptism, which “cleanses even the tiny infant, although itself unable as yet with the heart to believe unto righteousness and to make confession with the mouth unto salvation.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, elect children who had been baptized would inevitably go on to faith and repentance and growth in grace. All of these were elements of his understanding of justification. Since he was not familiar with Greek, he misunderstood *dikaioō* to mean “to make righteous” instead of “to declare righteous.”¹⁷ This misunderstanding also led to the Catholic belief that justification is a life-long process. Of course, with this approach one could not know whether he was elect or not until he died, which is exactly what Augustine¹⁸ and the RCC teaches.

The non-elect may receive the external sign of water baptism, but

¹⁰J. Martyr, *Dial.*, 14.1.

¹¹Augustine, *Sermon*, 158.5.

¹²Demarest, *Salvation*, 351.

¹³Augustine, *Sermon*, 213.8.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, *On Forgiveness of Sins, and Baptism*, II.43.

¹⁵Demarest, 282.

¹⁶Augustine, *On the Gospel of St. John*, 80.3.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 45.

¹⁸Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace*, 40.

there is no internal spiritual transaction. Augustine believed that infants are cleansed from original sin at water baptism. Unbaptized infants and baptized infants who are non-elect remain under the control of the devil. Baptized infants who are elect will inevitably go on to faith and repentance. So, although Augustine leaned on God's grace for salvation, water baptism was without question one means by which this grace was received.

Thus we can see that the historical background of water baptism is very important for understanding Augustine's view of regeneration before faith. But so is his logic.

2. His Logic.

Incredibly bright as Augustine must have been, his training was in rhetoric, not exegesis. His language was Latin, not Greek. We have already seen how his mishandling of the word *dikaioō* has had grave consequences in church history, at least from the Protestant perspective. Much of his theology comes from the sheer weight of his logic. He does little to defend his views of baptismal regeneration and infant baptism from the Scriptures. Like most of us, he filtered Scripture through his own experience. Realizing that he had been a slave of lusts before his conversion, from his experience he deduced that he was totally depraved, completely *unable* to extricate himself from his prison of passion.

Reasoning from his understanding of total depravity in opposition to Pelagius and his view of innocent until guilty, Augustine concluded that fallen man has no part at all in the salvation process, including faith. Fallen man cannot believe, he reasoned. Therefore, he must be born again (regenerated) in order to believe. Without a shred of biblical data, Augustine built his *ordo salutis* in the halls of logic, that is, human reason. With his understanding of total depravity (every area of man is affected¹⁹, including his reason), it is a wonder he put so much faith in his own logic. Nevertheless, it is important to see that his understanding of regeneration was born of a marriage between tradition and logic, not the Scriptures.

¹⁹An understanding with which Dispensationalists agree, by the way.

²⁰T. Aquinas, *ST*, III, q. 69, art. 7.

B. ROMAN CATHOLICS

The RCC followed Augustine's lead. Thomas Aquinas said, "Baptism opens the gates of the heavenly kingdom to the baptized."²⁰ Aquinas was the first to write of the "baptism of desire" when he said of those who for one reason or another could not get to water for baptism, "Such a man can obtain salvation without actually being baptized, on account of his desire for baptism...whereby God...sanctifies man inwardly."²¹

At the Council of Trent (1545-63) the waters became murky. Whereas Augustine saw regeneration as instantaneous and justification as a life-long process, this council decided that regeneration only *began* at water baptism. They sort of ran regeneration, justification, and sanctification together into one gathering pool of God's grace. Of course, this pool was only accessible through the channels of the sacraments (water baptism, eucharist, etc.).

The Second Vatican Council (1963-65) required faith and baptism for salvation. However, the Vatican tower has tilted in the direction of inclusivism in which all of mankind can be oriented to the life of God and all men can be saved by the "baptism of desire." This baptism of desire is equivalent to the *implicit faith* possessed by uneducated people. Thomas Aquinas taught that this implicit faith would suffice for salvation.²² And post-conciliar Catholics equate this implicit faith with the baptism of desire, thus opening the door for all men to go to heaven:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.²³

²¹Ibid., III, q. 68, art. 2.

²²Ibid. II-II. q. 2, arts., 6-7.

²³Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, II.16.

²⁴G. Baum, "Baptism," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise*

The same dogma has been confirmed by Catholic theologians like G. Baum who says, “One may seriously wonder whether baptism of desire is not the way of salvation for the great majority of men in this world chosen to be saved.”²⁴ And from Notre Dame we read, “Everyone does not strictly ‘need’ baptism to become a child of God and an heir of heaven. Every person, by reason of birth and God’s universal offer of grace, is already called to be a child of God and an heir of heaven.”²⁵

C. LUTHERANS

It would appear to be a great contradiction, but Luther died still believing in baptismal regeneration for infants. He said God “himself calls it [baptism] a new birth by which we are . . . loosed from sin, death, and hell, and become children of life, heirs of all the gifts of God, God’s own children, and brethren of Christ.”²⁶ In *The Small Catechism* (1529) Luther wrote:

Baptism is not merely water, but it is water used according to God’s command and connected with God’s Word. . . . How can water produce such great effects? It is not the water that produces these effects, but the Word of God connected with the water, and our faith which relies on the Word of God connected with the water. . . . When connected with the Word of God [the water] is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit. (IV)²⁷

But not only does regeneration come with water baptism, but also faith and justification. This is the same justification which Luther so defended as occurring at a moment in time and that which declared a person righteous before God so as to effect forgiveness for all sins,

Sacramentum Mundi, K. Rahner, ed., (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 77.

²⁵McBrien, *Catholicism*, 738.

²⁶Luther, *Works*, 53:103.

²⁷Melanchthon expressed a similar view in *The Augsburg Confession*, art. IX.

²⁸Luther, *What Luther Says*, comp. E. M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 51. So also with D. Hollaz (d. 1713) as cited by H. Schmid, *The*

past—present—future. (Of course, one has to wonder how on earth this view of justification is consistent with Luther’s teaching that one can lose his salvation at some point after he is baptized.)

But if one asks how an infant can exercise faith, the answer is that regeneration occurs at the moment when the invoked Word of God unites with the water and the infant responds to the gospel with rudimentary faith. Baptism does not automatically regenerate (this would be the RCC concept of *ex opere operato*). It must be combined with faith: “In baptism children themselves believe and have faith of their own. God works this within them through the intercession of the sponsors who bring the child to the font in the faith of the Christian Church.”²⁸

Notice now the introduction of *sponsors* to the baptismal event. Notice also that God works faith into the infants through the “intercession” of the sponsors. Hence the great concern of parents that their children be baptized, not just for the significance of the event itself, but also because they become responsible for the salvation of their children if indeed they are the intercessors through whom God will effect faith within their little children. Luther definitely instigated a reformation which led to Protestantism, but at times it seems he was only a stone’s throw from the walls of the Vatican. These baptized infants must ratify their regeneration and rudimentary faith as they get older through repentance, mature faith, and obedience.

So let’s get the picture here. An infant or little child is water baptized. As he grows up he is told that at water baptism he was regenerated and exercised an elementary faith in Christ because of the intercession of his sponsors, most likely his parents. Now, if he is truly elect, all this which occurred within him before he had any conscious awareness of what was going on will be confirmed by his repentance, mature faith, and obedience. Obviously, if he is not obedient, it proves that he is not

Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Augsburg, reprint, 1961), 463-64, who said, “In infants, as there is not an earnest and obstinate resistance, the grace of the Holy Spirit accompanying Baptism breaks and restrains their natural resistance that it may not impede regeneration; wherefore their regeneration takes place instantaneously”; D. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 206; and F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 3:264, 269-70.

²⁹*The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1945), 270, 280.

truly elect and for some unknown reason his infant baptism did not “take.” But the fires of hell await such a one. Hence, be obedient to make your calling and election sure. It all goes right back to a works-oriented approach to salvation, especially since through certain egregious sins one can lose this hard wrought salvation. To fall back on Phil 2:13 at this point to try to prove that it is by God’s grace that one is able to work out his own salvation is pure exegetical sophistry.

The Church of England also teaches baptismal regeneration of infants. In *The Thirty-Nine Articles* (American Version, 1801) we read: “Baptism is... a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed” (art. XXVII). And the priest, as prescribed in *The Book of Common Prayer*, prays just prior to baptism thusly: “Give thy Holy Spirit to this child, that he may be born again, and be made an heir of everlasting salvation.” After baptism, the priest gives thanks that God was pleased “to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Sprit, to receive him for thy own child, and to incorporate him into thy holy Church.”²⁹

D. COVENANT REFORMED

We must remember that many of the Reformed persuasion are determined to preserve their view of the sovereignty of God at all costs, even if that makes God directly responsible for sin and evil. As this relates to their soteriology, they are careful to argue for the position that God does everything in man’s salvation (monergism) rather than including man in the process at any point (cooperation or synergism). Thus it is very important in their system that regeneration precede repentance, faith, and justification.

Some of them believe in what we call *presumptive regeneration*, which says regeneration itself does not take place during infant baptism, but their baptism is a sign that they already possess the seeds of regeneration and faith. Their baptism is also a sign that God is dispensing grace in the covenantal community of the church. As such, the divine act of regeneration, which is not a conscious reality within the baptized, precedes the conscious response of faith and repentance.

³⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, III.3.9.

³¹Ibid., IV.16.19.

Still others of this persuasion believe in *promissory regeneration* in which baptism is a sign and seal that future regeneration will come to the baptized.

Calvin himself defined regeneration as the entire process of new birth, repentance, faith, justification, and sanctification. Regeneration for him was the umbrella over all the others. It began at water baptism, but regeneration “does not take place in one moment or one day or one year.” Instead it was accomplished “through continual and sometimes even slow advances.”³⁰ He referred to the filling of the Holy Spirit in John the Baptist while the latter was still in the womb of his mother, thus proving that regeneration can take place in infants before they even hear the Word of God.³¹ So he thought regeneration could take place in the womb or during early infancy. He paralleled circumcision and baptism, likening both of them to regeneration.

For the infants of believing parents, baptism connotes forgiveness of sins, union with Christ, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Infants cannot actually believe, but they can receive the seeds of regeneration and sanctification.³² For Calvin, baptism “is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight, be recalled, or charged against us.”³³ If all this is true of an infant, one surely wonders why an adult baptized as an infant needs faith or justification. Sounds like it was all accomplished at their baptism when an infant.

The Scots Confession (1560), which was the first Reformed standard in English, leans toward *presumptive regeneration* when it says, “We assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted” (art. 21). On the other hand, *The Westminster Confession* (1647) leans toward *promissory regeneration* when it says baptism is “a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his engrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life” (chap. 28.1). And W. G. T. Shedd (d. 1894) defended baptismal regeneration of infants from Luke 1:15, Acts 2:39, 1 Cor 7:14, and the parallel of OT circumcision

³²Ibid, IV.16.17-20.

³³Ibid., IV.15.1

³⁴W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., reprint, n.d.), 2:508, n. 1.

with NT baptism of infants. “In the case of infant regeneration, there is an interval of time between regeneration and conversion...The regenerate infant believes and repents when his faculties will admit of the exercise and manifestation of faith and repentance.”³⁴

Again, so much of this *ordo salutis* is an effort to make sure man has no part whatsoever in his salvation. In order to ensure this fact, regeneration as a sovereign and independent act of God in the individual must take place before repentance and faith. One is not regenerated because he believes; one believes because he has been regenerated. Shedd comments that “The Holy Ghost is not given as a converting and a sanctifying Spirit, until he has been given as a regenerating Spirit” (Matt 12:33; John 3:3).³⁵ J. Murray sums up the position of covenant theologians pretty well when he says, “Without regeneration it is morally and spiritually impossible for a person to believe in Christ, but when a person is regenerated it is morally and spiritually impossible for that person not to believe.”³⁶ And L. Berkhof says in no uncertain terms that “a conversion that is not rooted in regeneration is no true conversion.”³⁷

In order to be fair, it must be stated that many modern Reformed theologians reject the concept of baptismal regeneration.³⁸ But they have retained the logic of saying that regeneration must precede faith. Once again R. C. Sproul is representative of this line of thinking:

Remember that in Reformed theology’s *ordo salutis* regeneration precedes faith. It does so with respect to *logical priority* not *temporal priority*. Reformed theology grants that God’s act of regeneration and the believer’s act of faith are simultaneous, not separated, with respect to time. The *ordo salutis* refers to logical dependency. Faith logically depends on regeneration; regeneration does not logically depend on faith. Again, the *priority* is logical, not temporal. Regeneration is the necessary condition of faith; faith is not the necessary condition of or for regeneration.³⁹

³⁵Ibid., 2:514.

³⁶J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), 106.

³⁷L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 485.

³⁸Allen Mawhinney, “Baptism, Servanthood, and Sonship,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (Spring 1987): 47-48.

³⁹Sproul, 193-4.

⁴⁰Ibid., 194.

E. SUMMARY

Often it appears that differences in theology or even theological systems hinge on the different ways key words are understood. Justification is a great example. It would seem that the Reformation hung on a difference in understanding of the meaning of “to justify.” Regeneration is another term which is used in many different ways. Some groups want it to serve as an umbrella arching over the whole Christian experience. Others limit it to a two-tiered approach: presumptive or promissory regeneration at the water baptism of infants and full regeneration some time later in life. Still others narrow their understanding down to one instantaneous act of new birth which occurs at the moment of faith.

However, what is conspicuous by its absence in the foregoing discussions is a close look at the Scriptures themselves. We have seen that Augustine arrived at his conclusions primarily through the influence of tradition and his own powers of logic. The Reformers cried *Sola Scriptura*, but they too had difficulty escaping the tentacles of RCC tradition.

Yet without a solid foundation in the Scriptures themselves is the building secure? Another way to envision Systematic Theology is as mighty river. But this river has two branches which feed it: Historical Theology and Biblical Theology. If there is pollution in one of these branches, then the main river is polluted as well. This is another way of saying that one’s Systematic Theology is only as good as his Biblical Theology, since the latter is a building block of the former. Though Systematic Theology does incorporate General Revelation in its fold, its primary source is the Special Revelation of the Scriptures. Thus solid exegesis of the Scriptures is paramount in developing Systematic Theology which is comprehensive, consistent, coherent, and congruent. It only makes sense, then, to turn to the Scriptures to see regeneration in its biblical context.

III. REGENERATION IN THE BIBLE

A. TITUS 3:5

⁴¹Ibid., 196.

The NT uses a number of different words and images to convey the doctrine of regeneration. The noun *palingenesia* is used just twice: Matt 19:28 and Titus 3:5. In Matthew Jesus is speaking of the regeneration which will occur at His second coming. He refers to setting up His kingdom, placing the twelve over the twelve tribes of Israel, and rewarding those who have sacrificed for His cause. But in Titus 3:5 we have a direct reference to the rebirth of the believer: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of *regeneration* and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” Of course, it is this reference to washing which convinces so many that the actual physical act of water baptism effects regeneration. But the near proximity of the reference to the Holy Spirit combined with other passages on the same subject help us understand that this regeneration is a ministry of the Holy Spirit, not something directly connected with water.

B. 1 PETER 1:3, 23

Just as with the noun, the verb for regeneration (*anagennaō*) is used only twice in the NT: 1 Pet 1:3 and 23. The first verse says, “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has *begotten* us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Here it is the Father who does the begetting. In 1 Pet 1:23 we read, “Having been *born again*, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.” This time the focus is on the Word of God which is the tool used by God to give us new birth. But notice that in none of these four references (nouns and verbs) do we read about faith in connection with regeneration. Not that our faith is not involved, but there is nothing in these texts that would indicate that regeneration leads to our faith or that our faith leads to our regeneration. However, in this final reference in 1 Peter there is mention of the tool used by God to accomplish this regeneration: the Word of God. This would suggest that until one hears and understands the message, one cannot be born again. Of course, it must be asked how an infant could possibly hear and understand the message.

C. JAMES 1:18

James 1:18 uses another verb (*apokueō*) to depict the new birth:

“Of His own will He *brought us forth* by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.” The fact that this is not a reference to physical birth should be obvious from the instrument used: the Word of Truth. This is a spiritual birth, and it is accomplished through the agency of God’s Word. Once again, we must ask how this would be accomplished in infants, since hearing and understanding are prerequisites for this rebirth if the agent of birthing is God’s Word. It is passages like this which force those who practice infant baptism to reach out to far-fetched concepts like “seeds of faith” and the faith of the “sponsors” as explanations for how the new birth could be connected with God’s Word in an infant.

D. THE TENSES

Another aspect of the three verbs mentioned (1 Pet 1:3, 23 and Jas 1:18) is the tenses used. In Jas 1:18 and 1 Pet 1:3 we find the aorist tense. Though the aorist tense is really a non-descript tense as far as the aspect of a verb is concerned, it is generally not one of the tenses used to describe a process, an on-going action. The aorist tense in 1 Pet 1:3 is found in a participle dependent on the understood present copula (“to be”). When the aorist participle is dependent on a present tense main verb, the action of the participle is antecedent to the action of the main verb. In other words, these Jewish believers of the diaspora had already been born again as Peter writes. Their birthing had already taken place.

The entire image of birthing should convey something that is not a process. Though the gestation period can be described as a process, not so with birthing. Even though the event might take a day if we speak of a prolonged delivery, the birth itself is understood to be the consummation of the pregnancy, something that happens once at a particular moment in time. The aorist tense in the case of 1 Pet 1:3 just says it happened, and it happened at a time prior to Peter’s writing. This picture is incongruous with any understanding of regeneration which spans several years of development.

The verb used in 1 Pet 1:23 also mitigates against any concept of process in the birthing of believers. This time the verb is in the perfect tense, which speaks of completed, past action with on-going results up to the present. The point here is that the action is complete and in the past. There is no process still going on in the life of the believers which could be described by a verb for regeneration.

E. JOHN

1. John 1:13.

Though we do not have the preposition on the front of *gennaō* used to indicate “again” (*ana*), we do have reference to spiritual birth in this verse: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who *were born*, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” Here it refers to people who already exist receiving Christ and thus having the right to become children of God. People become children by birth, so the verb for birthing is used. Again, it is in the aorist tense, not a tense we would use to indicate a process. And if this verse teaches us nothing else, clearly the regeneration work is a work of God. Men may “receive” Christ, but it is a passive picture on the part of man, although an active picture on the part of God. God becomes the divine obstetrician who very actively delivers the child. Is it pressing the imagery too far to say that babies are relatively passive in the event of being birthed?

2. John 3:3-8.

Of course, this is the best known passage for the concept of being “born again.” Oddly enough, it has the least linguistic support for *rebirth* because the word for “again” (*anōthen*) probably means “from above” (3:31; 19:11, 23) as opposed to “again.” Nevertheless, the same verb for birthing (*gennaō*) that we found in John 1:13 is used eight times in these verses. In each case either the aorist or perfect tense is used, again emphasizing the fact that this birth is not a process.

One thing these verses also make clear is the connection between rebirth and the Holy Spirit (vv 6-8). The Holy Spirit regenerates all who believe in Christ (vv 14-18).

F. SUMMARY

We conclude that there is zero biblical support for placing regeneration before faith in the *ordo salutis*. And to say it takes *logical priority* without taking *temporal priority* is contradictory. The very word “priority” in this context speaks of time. It is a “temporal” word. Unless one switches the meaning of “priority” to “first in importance” (which is obviously not intended), then a statement about “logical priority”

without “temporal priority” is non-sensical. And certainly in Historical Theology regeneration was seen to have *temporal priority* over faith, since infants were thought to be regenerated when water baptized. It was not until Reformed theologians realized how little biblical support there is for infant baptism that they began arguing for *logical priority* instead of *temporal priority*.

Sproul argues for *logical priority* because he sees the only other option as Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, or some form of what he calls *synergism* (God and man working together to effect salvation). “If we were to posit that faith precedes regeneration, then we would be assuming that unregenerate people, while still in an unregenerate state, have the moral ability to exercise faith... This would involve an Arminian or semi-Pelagian view of the fall,” he writes.⁴⁰ He cites writings from Chafer and Walvoord in which they eschew *synergism*, but accuses them of *red herring* argumentation by focusing on who effects regeneration (God alone—*monergism*; God and man working together—*synergism*). Rather he claims one is *synergistic* if faith precedes regeneration in the *ordo salutis*.⁴¹ He accuses Walvoord and Chafer of being “vague” and “unclear” when they make statements like “regeneration is wholly a work of God in a believing heart.” He thinks this is unclear because he understands the issue to be whether faith precedes regeneration or vice versa: “Is the heart already believing, or is it believing because it has been regenerated? The answer to this question defines the difference between Calvinism and semi-Pelagianism.”⁴²

The problems here are multitudinous. The first is with the word *synergism*. Coming directly from the Greek word *sunergeō*, which means “to work together,” the very definition of the word should be enough to cause any evangelical Protestant theologian to reject categorically a synergistic approach to salvation. Neither Chafer nor Walvoord would say that man and God work together to accomplish man’s salvation. How, then, can Sproul accuse them of that very thing? It is because in his understanding any *ordo salutis* which puts faith before regeneration is synergistic. How can this be, unless *faith* is understood to be a *work*? Of course, that is precisely what Sproul is suggesting, because he thinks if man can believe prior to regeneration, then man

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of*

is *morally capable* of making a contribution to his own salvation. And if man is capable of making any contribution to the salvation process before regeneration, then his salvation is not all of God. Hence, it must be synergistic.

Is this biblical thinking? Absolutely not. This kind of ratiocination makes faith a work. Is that biblical? God forbid! The Scriptures contrast faith and works so often the concept hardly needs documentation. Can Eph 2:8-9 and Rom 4:4-6 be any more clear? If salvation is by faith, then works are nowhere to be found in the process. Again, to argue that faith precedes regeneration is synergistic would only be valid if faith = works.

But what can we say about the statement that faith precedes regeneration presumes that man is *morally* capable of making a virtuous choice? That this is what certain Reformed theologians contend is transparent from these words by the late John Gerstner:

According to the Reformed doctrine, total depravity makes man *morally* incapable of making a virtuous choice. While Dispensationalism seems to go along with this idea to a degree, this “totally depraved” man is nevertheless able to believe. We shall see that his faith precedes or is at least simultaneous with (and not based upon) his regeneration. As long as that doctrine is maintained, the nerve of total depravity is cut...If the dispensationalist maintains, as he does, that man is *morally* able to respond to the gospel, then Dispensationalism does not believe that man is totally depraved after all.⁴³

How can Walvoord and Chafer and Billy Graham, whom Sproul calls the most famous Dispensationalist of all, contend that man is totally depraved and that faith precedes regeneration? The key is that they do not believe that man is capable of believing in Christ apart from God’s drawing.

So here is what it comes down to. Both Reformed thinkers of the Sproul/Gerstner ilk and Dispensationalists like Chafer and Walvoord agree that a totally depraved human being is incapable of making a moral choice on his own. But the latter would call the divine enablement

which makes man capable of such a choice “divine persuasion,” while the former would call this divine enablement “regeneration.” But our biblical theology has demonstrated that there is no biblical support for putting regeneration before faith. That is why some systematic theologians with Reformed leanings switch the order.⁴⁴ Their biblical theology demands it. But what about this concept of “divine persuasion”? Is it biblical?

R. C. Sproul realizes the argument comes down to this single point, precisely. Does God, in fact, draw/woo men to Himself, as John 6:44 appears to teach, or does He drag/force them into His kingdom in order to prove it is all of Him and none of them? Sproul argues that God drags men into His kingdom against their will.⁴⁵ He interprets the key verb of John 6:44 (*elkō/elkuō*) to mean “drag, force, or coerce.” His support seems biblical. The verb *elkō* occurs only twice in the NT (Jas 2:6 and Acts 21:30). In both cases believers are being dragged against their will into a hostile situation before and by unbelievers. The same is true of *elkuō* in its only non-Johannine use (Acts 16:19 where Paul and Silas are dragged before the authorities).

Sproul concludes that the use of *elkuō* in John 6:44 also means to “drag” in the sense of force. This is the exegetical fallacy known as the “illegitimate totality transfer.”⁴⁶ Just because the word means “drag against one’s will” in James and Acts does not necessitate the same meaning in another context such as John 6:44. In Biblical Theology we seek to find John’s meaning for the word in the context where he uses it. Other uses of the word in John would be more helpful than uses from writers such as James and Luke.

John uses *elkuō* four other times in his gospel. John 12:32 is a context very much like John 6:44, so it would be begging the question to determine the meaning of John 6:44 from John 12:32. In John 18:10 we find Peter *drawing* his sword from its sheath in order to cut off the ear of the soldier. And in John 21:6-7 the fishermen are *drawing* their nets with fish in them. The use of *elkuō* with inanimate objects or subhuman creatures will probably not be determinative. How, then,

⁴⁴Demarest, 291.

⁴⁵R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Tyndale, 1994), 69-72.

⁴⁶M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 25-27.

can one decide the meaning of *elkuō* in John 6:44?

Sproul appeals to an article in Kittel to support his understanding that the word means “to compel by irresistible superiority.”⁴⁷ We are not sure if this conclusion was a hasty reading on Sproul’s part or not, but the article concludes just the opposite in regard to John 6:44. Albrecht Oepke⁴⁸ refers to two readings from 4 Maccabees and one from Jer 31:3 to establish that in a familial context or a lover context *elkuō* means “to woo” or “to draw with love.” In Jeremiah it is God the Lover drawing His Love, Israel, with His lovingkindness, and in Macc 14:13 and 15:11 it is a Jewish mother as she watches her seven sons martyred for their faith. In both cases the verb is used in connection with strong cords of love drawing the beloved to the one loving. Once again we see that context is king. John 6:44 speaks of people coming to Jesus only if His *Father* draws them. This is not a hostile context. It is the familial context, a context of love.

Why is this so important? Because love precludes force. Does any groom wish to drag, force, or coerce his bride to the altar? I think not. He may have sovereignly initiated the relationship, but then a period of courting and wooing took place in which the future groom *persuaded* his future bride of his many virtues.

We conclude that “divine persuasion” is exactly what the Bible depicts as the divine enablement necessary for a totally fallen being to believe in Christ for salvation. This is not *synergism*. God initiates the relationship, and God is the Persuader, the Wooer. Man is the responder. His ultimate faith is passive. He is a receptor, a receiver (John 1:12) of a divine gift. As Roy Aldrich argued long ago, *receiving* a gift can never be construed to be a meritorious work.⁴⁹ And never is this “divine persuasion” called “regeneration” in the Bible.

Millard Erickson came to this same conclusion in his study of Systematic Theology:

The conclusion here, then, is that God regenerates those who repent and believe. But this conclusion seems inconsistent with the doctrine of total inability. Are we torn between Scripture and

⁴⁷Sproul, 69.

⁴⁸A. Oepke, *TDNT*, 1968 ed., VII:503.

⁴⁹Roy L. Aldrich, “The Gift of God,” *BibSac* 122 (July–September, 1965): 252-53.

logic on this point? There is a way out. That is to distinguish between God's special and effectual calling on the one hand, and regeneration on the other. Although no one is capable of responding to the general call of the gospel, in the case of the elect God works intensively through a special calling so that they do respond in repentance and faith. As a result of this conversion, God regenerates them. The special calling is simply an intensive and effectual working by the Holy Spirit. It is not the complete transformation which constitutes regeneration, but it does render the conversion of the individual both possible and certain. Thus the logical order of the initial aspects of salvation is special calling-conversion-regeneration.⁵⁰

And Robert Pyne expresses a similar understanding when he writes:

Many theologians, particularly those who are more Reformed, would insert regeneration between calling and faith. While there is clearly a divine work that comes before faith and is directed only toward the elect, it seems better to restrict oneself to more specific terminology in the description of that work. It may be argued (persuasively, in the opinion of this author) that regeneration takes place through the indwelling of the animating Holy Spirit. Since that indwelling comes through faith (Acts 2:38; Gal 3:2), it seems appropriate to regard regeneration as a consequence of faith, not as its cause.⁵¹

IV. CONCLUSION

We have grappled in this discussion with one of the crucial differences between what is called Reformed Theology and Dispensational Theology, that is, regeneration as it relates to faith in the *ordo salutis* and the impact this *crux interpretum* has on one's understanding of Total Depravity. Both Reformed Theology and

⁵⁰M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983-85), 3:933.

⁵¹R. Pyne, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Conversion," *BibSac* 150 (April 1993): 215, n. 29.

Dispensational Theology are systems of theology. By definition a good system must have consistency, coherence, comprehensiveness, and congruity. Some doctrines in any system are deeply ingressive, that is, if one of these doctrines proves faulty, then the entire system is faulty and needs revision, at the least, or rejection, at the most.

We have also explained that Systematic Theology is only as good as the Historical Theology and the Biblical Theology on which it builds. If aspects of a system conflict with clear biblical data, then the system will have inconsistency, incoherence, incomprehensiveness, and incongruity. By their own admission, Sproul and Gerstner tell us that their view of Total Depravity governs the other four points of their Five Point Calvinism. But essential to their view of Total Depravity is their doctrine that regeneration must precede faith in the elect. If this crux interpretation falls, their understanding of Total Depravity is deficient. And if their understanding of Total Depravity is deficient, their entire five point system is shaky, to say the least.

We have tried to demonstrate that the modern Reformed teaching that regeneration precedes faith developed in a world of infant baptism and baptismal regeneration. It was also more the result of human logic than biblical exegesis. Hopefully we have shown that there is no biblical data to support the doctrine that regeneration precedes faith.

We have also tried to explain that the use of the pejorative term *synergism* to describe Dispensationalism is a misnomer, since no Dispensationalist would even suggest that man “*works* together with” God to accomplish his salvation. Faith is not a meritorious work, by definition. In essence, the two are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, to speak of regeneration as the divine enablement required for a totally depraved being to believe for salvation is also a misnomer. It is using biblical words in an unbiblical way. Is it not more biblical to stick to the biblical terminology for the work of the Holy Spirit or the Father in this divine enablement: calling, convicting, wooing, persuading (Luke 14)? This kind of biblical data leads to good Biblical Theology. And good Biblical Theology helps build solid Systematic Theology.

