

Confirmation of Regeneration

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This doctrine that is scoffed at by the culture and ignored by the professing church, is a doctrine that is so foundational, it's just absolutely essential. Of course, all essential doctrines are essential, that's kind of redundant, isn't it? But if this one's not right, nothing else matters, and it's particularly special to people who became known as Baptists. Baptists in some organized fashion can be traced to about the 16th century, perhaps even the 15th century, but at least the 16th century, and the early Baptists of Europe during the 16th century were a group of roughly disorganized, not very scholarly, certainly were not of the educated class, relatively poor people, who were sensing that the great state churches of Europe had lost the things of God. They were people who looked at the rituals and the systems and the organized religion of the state churches and saw how they would sprinkle babies, and when that baby was sprinkled, he became a part of the Church of England or the church of whatever country. So your religion and your statehood were one thing and that's why there was so much bloodshed and hatred and difficulty during the Reformation when there was a new reforming of doctrine, if you will, because to go against the doctrines of your church, and particularly to go against infant baptism, was to reject your nationality. It was to be a traitor to your country. They were one and the same, so Baptists found themselves in a very difficult spot. There was no Baptist state church. There were Presbyterian state churches and Catholic state churches, but no Baptist state churches in Europe in that day, so they were just in no-man's land, they were just out there by themselves, and they did not want to be called Baptists, they did not pick the name Baptist. They were called baptizers because they said, "You must preach the Gospel and you must look for the Spirit to bring a man to sense his sin and sense his lostness before God, and the Spirit must bring that man to place his faith in Christ, and when he does believe, when he has placed that faith in Christ, then we will baptize him by immersion, not sprinkle him as a baby before he knows anything about what he's doing." So as a mockery of them, they started calling them the baptizers and the name just more or less stuck through the ages.

So Baptists particularly are founded on this doctrine that I want to talk to you about tonight, and that is the doctrine of regeneration. The doctrine of regeneration or sometimes you could call it the doctrine of the new birth because if there is no work of God in the heart of man and if God is not the initiator to bring men to repentance and faith, if it is just some steps you take, if it is simply some motions you go through, then you come up with nothing more than the great denominations of our age that hold to works salvation they've come up with: you go to the priest, you take the sacraments, you

perform the ritual, you go through the motions, you give the money, whatever the church prescribes and they say, "Well, you've done these things, now God is obligated to save you, or at least we hope you've done them enough and well enough that God is obligated to save you." Well, true Evangelical Christianity, and Baptists in particular, fought against that notion and began just to preach Christ and they were out on a limb, I mean, because if God's Spirit did not regenerate people's hearts under the preaching of the Gospel, they would have no following. I mean, everybody would stay in the state churches. But God did bless their work and a lot of great things began to happen.

Now Baptists have had probably four written statements of faith in our history in America and actually they're just a revision of one another. There is no real substantial difference between any of them. The New Hampshire Confession of Faith that you and I have as our Statement of Faith here in our church is really sort of the foundational Statement of Faith for Baptists in America. Then you have the Baptist Faith and Message of 1925, I think 1963, and then the last time it was revised in 2000, but really they don't say much different. We chose the New Hampshire Confession here, the first Baptist Statement of Faith in America because it's a little more exhaustive, it's a little more thorough, and particularly in the area of repentance. It has a good weighty paragraph on biblical repentance and the last three Baptist Faith and Message Statements have only one sentence on repentance, and while it's not wrong, it's good, it's not full, I do not believe. But nevertheless, good men like Adrian Rogers and Jerry Vines and Dr. Al Mohler are the men who helped us get this last writing of our Statement of Faith, and when I say our Statement of Faith, they say in the preamble to the Southern Baptist Faith and Message that this is not a creed that's imposed on anyone. Baptists are autonomous. We have no hierarchy that gives us these things. It was just written as a way for us to say we're coming together on these basic doctrines.

Anyway, here's what they wrote, and I think it's excellent, about the doctrine of regeneration.

"Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus."

Notice the initiative of God there.

"It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."

Did you see that? These men in line with all of our Baptist forefathers in the great Statements of Faith that had been handed down to them, said, "We affirm again this truth that we're calling regeneration." Now the word "regeneration" does not appear in the Bible, just like the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible, but the truth of it is all in the Bible. But they're saying, "We affirm again that there is this change of heart wrought by the Spirit of God by which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

The second part of the Baptist Faith and Message that deals with regeneration, at least to an extent, is about election. Here's what those men wrote in 2000 as what we as Southern Baptists believe.

"Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners."

Again showing the initiative of God.

Now I'm telling y'all this because these things are so thoroughly entrenched in our history but this is a doctrine that is radically ignored. I think it would be fair to say that in most quarters today in Baptist life or Evangelical life, you could go a long long time without hearing even a part of a sermon that expresses the doctrine of regeneration. I mean, it's just not there. There's a weighty emphasis on the man's side of the conversion equation but almost nothing on this other side which the Confessions of Faith put such weight on, and I wonder why that is. But I think it's caused unimaginable damage in the church today as we now have, as I've said to you so many times before, over 16 million Southern Baptists and 10 million of those don't go to church. Why? I can tell you exactly why: they've never been regenerate; they've never been born-again. They've done some things they've been told to do, they probably did those things in good faith and with a genuine intent, but they're still in the natural man. There has not been the new birth wrought by the Spirit of God and if we would be more like early Baptists and say, "We're looking for real biblical evidence of the new birth before we could receive you as a member," we wouldn't have this problem today. And I believe one of the reasons why our culture, as a matter of fact, it's the reason why our culture is just plunging down the sewer, it's because the church has no credibility. We're not salt and we're not light, we're a joke. They don't take us seriously. They know we don't practice what we claim to practice. They know we don't hold to the convictions we claim to hold to. They've looked at our churches, they've looked at our memberships, they've looked at the way "professing Christians" live, and they say, "There's no difference." And there's a reason for that: we've lost the doctrine of regeneration and we've dumbed things down to a couple of simple hoop jumps and declared men the children of God.

Now looking at Colossians 1, let's look at it together and I'll not be too long tonight and I think my voice is going to do okay. In Colossians 1 and I want to say this because folks will be watching this on the internet and television and iPods and whatever you watch and listen with today, but I'm not trying to give tonight an exhaustive systematic understanding of the biblical doctrine of regeneration; that would take many many hours. I'm just giving you a sermon on regeneration, alright? So I'm not covering everything that can be covered but just some of the things.

Well, we see here as Paul writes to the church at Colossae, verse 1, chapter 1,

1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father. 3 We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,

Now here is what I want you to see, verse 4 and 5,

4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel

Now the doctrine of regeneration was strongly taught in the Old Testament As a matter of fact, if you go over to the book of Ezekiel, right before the book of Daniel, Ezekiel right quick, Ezekiel 36, there is a powerful prefiguring, if you will, of this work of God in human hearts that God would perform and how he would change hearts, and it's a beautiful picture of the doctrine of regeneration.

Ezekiel 36 and we'll look at verse 25. He's talking to Israel and then he says,

25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

Now we know "flesh" is a bad word but here it's a good word. It means, "Instead of the hardness that can't receive the things of God, I'll give a soft, pliable heart that can be impressed and receive the things of God and the truths of God."

Verse 27,

27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, [now I want you to notice the verbiage here] I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

That's a powerful Old Testament prophetic statement of the new birth or the doctrine of regeneration.

Of course, one of my favorite sections of Scripture, I refer to it often and one of my heroes though I disagree on some points of doctrine with him, is John Wesley, and John Wesley everywhere he would go would preach, "You must be born-again." Well, let's think about why did John Wesley, let's talk about the middle part of the 18th century, John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Wesley and their followers began thundering the Gospel across England and Europe and early America and God was doing amazing things. It was called "The Great Awakening." Why did they so preach, "You must be born-again"? Because they looked at the established denominations and they saw the spiritual life was gone and they saw that people were not being changed, and they saw that they had boiled it down to a few ritualistic steps and you're in the church, and John

and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield and the men of that day began to thunder and preach, "You must come to sense your sin. You must come to a saving faith in Christ. There has got to be a work of the Spirit in your heart." And I think that's for every generation. I think we're a part of that today. I don't think we've arrived at it but I think we're a part of that, calling the church to wake up. Get out of your man-made things you're doing to try to help and get back to the Gospel.

Let me ask you tonight, let me ask you tonight: do you believe in the power of the Spirit? Do you believe it? Or do you believe that God's Spirit can't work unless you manipulate the message? Unless you toy with the truth? God said, "I will put a new Spirit in you, and I will cause you to love My law and to walk in My statutes."

Anyway in John 3, Jesus said it very simply, "You must be born-again to see the kingdom of heaven," and then, of course, you have books like 1 John. 1 John gives us the evidences of a true believer, there are new changes in their life that they begin to look for. That's what brings me to Colossians 1 for the remainder of our time. In Colossians 1, I think we have some of the things that the Apostle Paul is saying to the church at Colossae as they receive the Gospel. Now you can't imagine what a dark place Colossae was as a Gentile culture steeped in immoralities and in childish idolatries. They worshiped statues and stones and things made of marble and wood, all kinds of stuff, and Paul comes through Colossae, or at least Epaphras, his coworker comes through Colossae and preaches this Gospel and they're changed. Not all of them but a remnant, a group in Colossae is different. How do you explain that? Paul's persuasive ability? The cleverness of his invitation? No, it's the power of the Gospel.

Here's what he begins to say there in verse 3, notice it there. Paul says,

3 We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,

First of all, I want you to note that Paul's in prison while he writes this and there's a note of joy, there's a note of contentment. He's happy about them. I think one of the things that you have to realize about the Apostle Paul was he lived what he wrote. I believe he lived out, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live yet not I but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." So Paul's living for Christ kept the joy even when he was in jail. Paul said, "I die daily." Paul said, "To live is Christ and to die is gain."

Also the Apostle Paul knew that you can't imprison the Gospel. You can't imprison the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, the Gospel prospers under persecutions. The persecutor's bars and chains are but water and fertilizer to Gospel seed. Dictators through the ages have tried to squelch the Gospel under pressure but then the Gospel just goes underground like an underground stream that can literally force its way through solid rock and come up pure on the other side. I remember years ago hearing about how, not so much today though it's still definitely there, but 20, 30, 40 years ago the Communists in China put great oppression on true believers and the church went underground and good

estimates today are that there are upwards to 100 million professors of faith in Jesus Christ in China today. You can't imprison the Gospel.

Paul is in prison but his disciple, Epaphras, is preaching in Colossae and many are being saved and Paul can see behind the bars and the shackles and the chains that God is working, and I believe Paul has a joy in this. It leads me to a question for you to just contemplate on just a moment. Let me ask you: what determines your joy? I can tell you what determines your joy, what you value. What you value determines your joy. Paul valued Christ being glorified, his Gospel being spread, and so if he's in jail and that's happening, he has joy. It's what you value that determines your joy.

Now he begins to affirm them and I think what he's doing here is he's helping them understand the evidences that they truly are regenerate of God; they have come to true saving faith. Well, let's look at these evidences beginning in verse 4, they are in verses 4 and 5. There are three of them. He says in verse 4,

4 since we heard of your faith [that's number 1] in Christ Jesus and the love [that's number 2] which you have for all the saints; 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven,

When you're truly saved, there are at least the seeds of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in your heart. There at least the seeds of true love for other Christians in your heart. Something strange begins to happen to you after you're saved, you begin to be drawn to people who love Christ. Then there's a hope that wells up in you, at least the seeds of that hope. Now don't misunderstand me. Some of you are so obsessive about this thing, you try to look for great amounts. I'm not talking about great amounts and these things may ebb and flow but they're there: faith and love and hope that are evidences that God has changed you.

He has made a new man out of you because these things are unnatural. The natural man can't produce these. Man doesn't naturally embrace Christ as Savior and Lord. Man is not naturally going to dethrone self and make Christ Lord. Man does not naturally have a love for the church of God and the saints of God. Man does not naturally have a hope of eternity with Christ in heaven. Only God can put those there. These are the hallmarks and proper evidences of the work of God in the soul of man.

Faith is the first one Paul mentions here. Faith is that consequence of the regenerating work of God. Notice how he says it here in verse 4, he says, "since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus." Now that's very important. It's not just faith, it's faith in Christ Jesus. There is a lot being said today about people of faith and I'm so weary and so tired of seeing people pray at public gatherings and not praying in the name of Jesus. I've never done it. I will never do it. I remember Dr. Gray Allison, our President at Mid-America Seminary, was asked to pray at a meeting one day and they got upset because he closed his prayer, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," and they said, "Well, you shouldn't have done that." He said, "I thought you wanted me to pray?" That's the only way to

properly pray because it's not just faith, it's faith in Christ. The object of faith is essential and all this is the work of the Spirit.

Well, secondly, he talks about love here. Love. He says in verse 4, "since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints." This is the second remarkable feature of the regenerate, it's love for other Christians. This is a remarkable thing. Men, women, boys and girls, young, the old, different cultures, different backgrounds, different past experiences, but you find yourselves coming together because of Jesus Christ. Christian love binds us all together beneath the banner of the cross of Jesus Christ. You see, when the regeneration of God has occurred in a man's heart, he will begin to love those he would not otherwise have anything to do with. I found that so true in my own life.

Now most people today know familial love, the love of family. That's of the natural man. It's a good thing but it's very natural. You're born with that basically. Some even know sacrificial love. You can discipline yourself to do something for others. But Paul is not talking about the amount of love but a particular type of love for a unique group of people, other believers, and that's what the Lord Jesus was talking about when he talked about, "When I was hungry, you fed Me. When I was naked, you clothed Me. When I was in prison, you visited Me."

Now the liberals have taken that and run off with it and they've just raped the truth of the text when they do. That's not about loving mankind in general, though Christians should and do love mankind in a way, we're to do good to all men the best we can the Bible says, but it's talking about that unique love for other Christians because after Jesus says those things, he says, "When you do it for the least of these My brothers, you do it unto Me."

It's just like when I married Pam, I want to do good for other people in the city and other people in the community, but I'm especially focused on taking care of her. When you become a Christian, there's a special focus, a unique drawing, a unique love for other Christians.

Now this is real challenging and I just want to be real transparent and confessional to you: probably for 15-20 years after my conversion, I just didn't get it. I thought, "Lord, what is wrong with me? I don't feel this special bond and this affection for so many Christians." Then I began to learn the truth, a lot of those folks weren't Christians. I mean, we do acknowledge today and understand, Billy Graham says it, Paige Patterson, the President of Southwestern Seminary says it, and Dr. Gray Allison, the President or past President of Mid-America Seminary said it, that the majority of our church members are not Christians. So if you come into a Christian church and you feel like, "I don't sense this," it's because it's not there because perhaps the majority of churches are not true Christians.

Now I do think, by God's grace, he's let us be something of an exception to that. I don't know about you but my love for you has grown immeasurably. I just love being here. I love being around you. When I'm away taking some time off or down time, I took a little

bit around Christmas, I miss the saints of God. John MacArthur said in an interview the other day, I think he's been at his church 40 years and he said, "I'm finally beginning to learn what a mature church looks like." I think I know what that means.

Let me ask you: where does that love come from? You can't have the kind of joy and harmony we enjoy here at Grace Life unless many many times every week in love you deny yourselves for the good of the body. There are 1,001 things you would do differently or you may not agree with or you wouldn't approach it that way, but you think, "Ah, it doesn't matter. Major Bible truths are upheld and followed, I don't have to make an issue out of that." Where does that kind of love come from? God put it there. Now he's had to mature it but God put it there.

Only the regenerate know the unique and special love for the brotherhood and others cannot share in that love. It's the distinct gift of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is? What's the first one? Love. It's unique. God gave it to us. No one else has it.

I will never forget, I was supposed, this has been 20+ years ago, I know it's been at least 20 years. I was in the Soweto Township in South Africa, one of the most violent places on earth. I mean, that was when the apartheid issue was just getting going. I was there because the missionary said, "You're gonna go worship with these people on Sunday." So we go in the Township, we come to a little block building, and I come in and meet several of the people and I'm not preaching, I'm just there, and I'm sitting on a pew and in their church the pastor's wife led the singing but she led the singing from wherever she was sitting. She begins to sing and I recognized the tune, I didn't know the words but I recognized the tune, and I felt so in harmony with those people. I felt such a oneness there. I was the only white-skinned person in the whole region and there had been tons of bloodshed between blacks and whites but I felt love.

Where does that come from? Did all of those people, including myself, just decide we're going to do better than the others? Just there's some genetic, inherent, moral superiority about us so that we had a virtuous love and care for others? No. God changed hearts and love was there. Jesus said, "All men will know you're My disciples by the love that you have for," the world? No, we should love the world. "All men will know, know you're My disciples because you have a love for one another." God put that there and even though you get weary, and I know you get weary, I get weary, Jesus had 11 times in the Gospels where he tried to get away from the people, he got weary of them. I get weary of you and you get weary of me. You get weary of each other. But something in you draws you back. You want to be with those people. You want to be around them. God did that.

Listen to this statement: it is just as much a miracle to be brought into the fellowship of believers as it is to be brought into fellowship with God. Did you hear that? It takes the miracle work of God in changing your heart to put you into fellowship with God and the fellowship with God's children. Brothers and sisters, we've experienced it over and over and over and over again those that come in among us and they stay for a while, then they go chasing off to something else, often God leads them other places to serve and do other things and we applaud that and thank God for that, but a lot more of them than perhaps

you would like to admit leave because they're not one of us. They're not drawn. I'm going to mention it in my message next Sunday morning, Lord willing, that Jesus is the great magnet of the universe. He draws some men and he repels some men. But only God can make you thirsty and hungry and love the people of God in the church of God.

Well, thirdly here, hope. Hope. It's a manifestation of those who are truly regenerate. Because of the hope, he says, "I'm happy. I'm thanking God and praying for you," verse 5, "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel."

Someone defined hope as "a certainty that is yet to be apprehended or comprehended." A certainty but yet apprehended and not yet comprehended. Is that not true? I have a certainty about my eternal destiny but I haven't apprehended or comprehended all that that means yet. Hope is a prize we have not seen, paid for by Jesus, and put on layaway in our name. It's definitely ours yet it's hidden in the future. It's out of our present reach but there's something in there. There's something in there.

Have you not had those seasons, I don't know, maybe things weren't good in the marriage, maybe things weren't good in your finances, maybe you're having troubles with a child, and maybe you got just tired and exhausted, kind of at the end of your rope, then you came and heard a sermon or you read the Scriptures and all of a sudden hope came into your heart. There was just that assurance that came in that says, "I don't know how this is going to work out except I know I'm God's and I know He has a future, I know I'll be with Him one day." Where did that come from? God put that there. God does that in the heart.

The hope. Brothers and sisters, they cannot scoff it out of us, or criticize it out of us, or blaspheme it out of us, or demean it out of us, or slander about us, they can't take away our hope. No matter what they do, they can't take away our hope.

Well, Christ truly is our hope. I don't want to lose you in this but I want you to think about these things. Think about the fact that Christ is seated at the right hand of God. He is, the Bible says that. He went up and sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, the Scripture says. Christ is seated at the right hand of God, however, he's presently dwelling in his own people. Christ is seated in heaven and he's dwelling in us. He's in both places at one time. So he's the hope I'm looking to apprehend and he's the presence of hope in me now. He's both. It's all Christ. He's the embodiment of my hope and he's the culmination of my hope. He's the means and the agency of my present hope. He's all of the hope.

Heaven holds most of what Christ has won for us. Did you realize that? Most of what you're going to get that Jesus bought for you through his work on the cross, you've got a tiny down-payment of it. You've gotten a tiny taste. You see through a glass dimly right now. You don't know anything about what it's going to be yet, just a little bit of it. Most of what's been won for us is yet awaiting us in heaven. Is that not glorious to think about? Only a little bit do we taste now.

Well, our present experience in the body of Christ, it's precious and I'm so glad in God's grace I got to stay in a church 30 years so I could grow up a little bit and we could mature together and begin to experience some things that I can't put into verbalization that gives me just a little foretaste of heavenly fellowship. These are just little foretastes, though, as sweet and precious as they are. And it's not that we're looking for the activity of heaven. Oh, we hear the talk, "I'm gonna fish in heaven. I'm gonna do this in heaven." I don't know what you're going to do in heaven, but that's not the issue here. As a matter of fact, let me look at 1 John real quickly, 1 John 3:1-2,

1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us,

Now did you get that? The natural men, the men of the world are not going to understand what you're about. They're not going to understand your values, your priorities, your love for the things of the church. Now they understand religion and they want to put on a certain amount of religion and they want to go through some religious hoop jumps, but they don't understand loving the things of God and loving the church of God.

the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.

So he's saying we know it, it's a certainty, our hope is not maybe so, it's certain, but we don't know all that it's going to be. The glory and comfort and satisfaction of this present Christian life is but a shallow veneer, but the future, what is waiting is pure gold through and through. Romans 8:18 says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

We live in hope of Christ above and we live with the hope of Christ within and God did that. Why do you have this settled rest, this faith in Christ that keeps you? Yes, you wonder and you stray and you have weak seasons but he keeps you. Your hope never dies out. God put it there. Where did you get this love for the church, this love for other Christians? You keep being drawn back to it? It's a miracle, God put it there. Where do you get this hope that you know that though you can't describe it and you have not apprehended it and you cannot comprehend it, but it's yours and it lasts forever? God put it there. Those are the evidences of regeneration that God does in the hearts.