

Born Again: The Doctrine of Effectual Calling

Elder Michael L. Gowens

"The hour is coming and now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live." John 5.25

"Sovereign Grace" is an expression calculated to suggest that God is sovereign in the salvation of sinners. What does that mean? It means, specifically, that He takes the initiative, moving toward man to bestow salvation, not because He is obligated to bless, but because it is His sovereign pleasure to bless. There is no external compulsion upon the Almighty to bestow salvation on sinners. It also means that God is in absolute control of the work of salvation and nothing can thwart His plans. There are no external limitations upon His power. God is sovereign in the salvation of sinners.

Scripture teaches that man could not save himself, but, according to His good pleasure, God made every provision necessary for salvation in the Covenant of Grace, before the world began. He chose a people in His Son. Election is a work of grace. He sent His Son to atone for the sins of the elect upon the cross. Redemption is a work of grace. Finally, He sends His Spirit to call the redeemed into new life in Christ, personally and vitally applying salvation to the soul. Regeneration, like election and redemption, is a work of God's sovereign grace.

In this essay, I will attempt to explain and defend the following principle of the doctrine of grace: **Regeneration is immediate, i. e. without the use of means or media; consequently, regeneration precedes faith and conversion.** Birth is the necessary prerequisite of belief, in the same sense that life must come before activity. For the sake of this study, I will examine the subject first positively, then negatively. In Part I, the positive side of this study, I will attempt to define and explain the Biblical doctrine known as effectual calling. Part II, the negative side, is an attempt to demonstrate the inherent problems in the position that makes man's act of believing the cause of his new birth. Finally, in Part III, I will attempt to outline a position regarding the purpose of the gospel that is Scripturally accurate.

PART I

A Definition of the Doctrine

Regeneration, new birth, quickening, effectual calling, and irresistible grace are synonymous theological terms referring to the work of the Holy Spirit in the radical transformation of the soul. When one of God's elect is "born of the Spirit" (Jno. 3:8), he is, at that moment, saved, personally and vitally. Of course, every heir of God was saved at the cross, legally and positionally, but redemption accomplished must also be applied. Regeneration is the personal application of the blood of Christ to the "inner man" so that the soul is cleansed, really and individually, from sin: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done' but according to His mercy He saved us by the washing of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5). The "new man" is thus created "in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:24), for sin has been washed away. It is this cleansing efficacy of the blood of Christ upon the soul to which Jesus referred when he spoke of being "born of water, and [even] of the Spirit" (Jno. 3:5). It involves an actual change of nature, not just a change of mind, a change of direction, or a change of behavior. The regenerate person is made a new creation in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:10; I Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24). "A change of direction does not make one a new creation. Only a basic change of one's nature can account for and explain that fundamental spiritual work which is wrought in the soul by the quickening power of God" (Elder R. V. Sarrels, *Systematic Theology*, p. 307). Regeneration makes the person who was previously dead in trespasses and in sins alive to God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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The Lord's conversation with Nicodemus provides us with a theology of regeneration in crystallized form. John 3:3-8 is crucial to an understanding of the Biblical doctrine of the new birth. From the Savior's teaching, we can extract at least four major components of this great doctrine: (1) The Source of the New Birth; (2) The Nature of the New Birth; (3) The Necessity of the New Birth; (4) The Method of the New Birth.

(1) The Source of the New Birth: "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jno. 3:3). The word "again" literally means "from above." Unlike one's first birth, which is a horizontal matter, Divine rebirth is a vertical matter. It comes "from above." What does that mean? It means that regeneration is supernatural, as opposed to natural, in origin. It is something miraculous and heavenly, not something commonplace and biological. Later in the conversation, Jesus said, 'we speak; that we do know, and testify that we have seen, and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not [that is, if I have illustrated spiritual truths in terms you are capable of understanding], how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?' (Jno. 3:11-12). Regeneration is a "heavenly thing," something supernatural, expressed in language that man can understand (i.e. the metaphor of birth) in order to communicate to man's finite mind. So, God is the source of the new birth.

James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights...." Every blessing, whether physical or spiritual in nature, comes "from above," from the hand of a Sovereign God. Regeneration is no exception. Salvation, in all of its constituent parts, is the work of God. He is active. Man is the passive recipient.

Only God can regenerate. "God...hath saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (2 Tim. 1:9). In unmistakable language, Paul argues that God's gracious purpose, not man's works, is the source of salvation. 2 Timothy 1:9 is Paul's version of Psalm 100:3, "It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves." In the prologue to his gospel, John likewise traces the origin of regeneration to God: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jno. 1:12--13). The new birth is not the product of human lineage ("not of blood"), nor is it the result of a human relationship ("nor of the will of the flesh"), nor the result of a human decision ("nor of the will of man.") Man's will is not instrumental in his new birth. Man is born "of God" the preposition "of" denoting source or origin. People are not born again as a result of something they do, but solely on the basis of God's sovereign will and power.

(2) The Nature of the New Birth - "Nicodemus saith unto Him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered. Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (Jno. 3:4-6). Nicodemus was puzzled by the imagery. Notice his question. It is a question regarding the nature (that is, the kind) of this birth. Nicodemus was thinking in terms of the birth process (that which hospitals call "labor and delivery"), but Jesus used a word (Gr. *gennao*) that refers to the concept of generational descent. In other words, Jesus focuses not on the experience of birth but on the fact that the father's nature is passed to his child. What happens in the new birth? What kind of birth is it? It is a birth in which the Divine nature is imparted to the soul. Your first birth, says Jesus, reproduced in you the nature of your parents: "...that which is born of the flesh is flesh." Your new birth, he concludes, implants within you the Divine nature: "...and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Just as children possess the nature of the parents, God's children are given a new nature, a spiritual and Divine nature, when they are born again. This new nature is sinless and holy:

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"Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for His seed [i.e. the Divine nature] remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 Jno. 3:9). The thrust of the argument is clear: Regeneration is something supernatural. Only the Holy Spirit can effect a change of nature in the heart. That leads us to the next point.

(3) *The Necessity of the New Birth* - "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again" (Jno. 3:7). Regeneration is necessary because people are by nature totally depraved. Without the new birth, no one will be saved. *Dei*, the Greek word translated "must," indicates logical necessity. By the use of such a strong term, Jesus indicates that regeneration is essential, imperative, and absolutely necessary for salvation. It is a vital link in the chain of sovereign grace. Some Bible students have erroneously concluded, however, that because the word *dei* refers to logical necessity, it also expresses the idea of human responsibility. In other words, they think that Jesus is suggesting that Nicodemus take personal responsibility for his own new birth. Notice however, that Jesus did not tell Nicodemus to do anything in order to be born again. He did not instruct him to make a decision or even to repent and believe the gospel. "Ye must be born again" is simply a statement of fact, not a command to be obeyed. It is a declarative, not an imperative, sentence. In fact, the words of the Lord Jesus, instead of suggesting that Nicodemus should assume personal responsibility for his own salvation, teach exactly the opposite idea. The purpose of the entire passage might be summarized like this: *Regeneration is not something any man can do, for flesh can only produce flesh. It is a miraculous work of God's Spirit, who blows when and where He pleases.* Jesus is saying, "Yes, Nicodemus, the new birth is a necessity, but neither you nor any other man can cause it to happen, even if you could think of a way to return to the womb of your mother. Only God can perform this work."

Perhaps someone will object, "To tell a man about the necessity of being born again in one breath, then, that he is utterly helpless to produce such a work in his own soul in the next, is self-defeating and contradictory." On the contrary, our Lord's goal was to expose the fallacy of trusting in one's own efforts and works for salvation. If mere religiosity or devotion to a life of law-keeping could save a person, Nicodemus would have been safe. But, Jesus says, No one is safe, regardless of their achievements, family history, social status, or religious fervor. Because of the universality of sin, the new birth is necessary before anyone will see the face of God in peace. Further, because of sin's debilitating effect upon men, no one has the ability to rescue himself. John 3:7 does not teach that man must assume responsibility for his own salvation. It teaches rather that the sinner's only hope of eternal bliss is the sovereign grace of God.

There is another side to this truth about the necessity of regeneration. God, in His grace, has so arranged the work of salvation that everyone who was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world will be called into new life at some point in their personal history. The new birth is sure and certain to all of the elect. To everyone for whom Christ died, God will "send the Spirit of His Son into their hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6). Just as surely as God requires it, He provides it. To say that the Father did His part in the salvation of sinners, and the Son did His part, but the Holy Spirit will fail to do his part, disrupts the unity of the Trinity. Romans 8:28 demonstrates the certainty of regeneration: "And we know that all things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." Who loves God? "The called." Why are they called? Because God "purposed" to call them. The new birth is a provision of the everlasting covenant: "God hath saved us and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (2 Tim. 1:9). Now trace the "whom's" and the "them's" in Romans 8:29-30. The same group of people God foreknew, He predestinated. The same people He predestinated, He called. The same people He called, He justified, and the same people He justified, He glorified. The end of verse thirty includes exactly the same number of people who were embraced at the beginning of verse twenty-nine. This indicates that everyone that God loved and Christ Jesus redeemed, will be quickened by the Spirit. The past

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tense ("called") is employed to show that since God decreed it, it is just as sure to occur as if it had already taken place.

(4) *The Method of the New Birth:* "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whether it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (Jno. 3:8). This verse addresses three important principles regarding the doctrine of the new birth. First, the verse teaches that God is sovereign in regeneration ("The wind bloweth where it listeth [pleases]..."). Just as the wind blows unrestrained by political, racial, geographical, or cultural obstacles, so the Spirit of God cannot be foiled or frustrated in His regenerating activity. No man can resist or handcuff the Spirit of God. No potential hurdle can thwart God's work of grace in the soul. Secondly, the verse teaches that regeneration is a Divine mystery ("...cannot tell from whence it cometh and whither it goeth..."). It seems to be the rule that most people are unaware of the moment when the new birth occurred. Although many trace their new birth back to a certain date or time, such dates generally mark the moment when the person first understood the gospel or first committed himself to the Savior in gospel obedience. If so, the date to which the individual has attached significance as the date of regeneration is in fact the date of gospel conversion, a separate event entirely. To say that regeneration is a Divine mystery is to say that there is more to it than we can understand. Such mystery should prompt a spirit of reverential awe and worship from our hearts. Thirdly, the text teaches that everyone who is born again is born again in precisely the same way ("...so is every one that is born of the Spirit..."). Arminianism requires a separate method of saving sinners in different circumstances. For example, it requires one method to save the unevangelized heathen, another to save the infant that dies in infancy, another to save the mentally retarded, another to save the individual who lived prior to the Law, another to save the one who lived under the Mosaic Law, and another to save the person who lives on this side of the cross. Salvation by God's sovereign grace through the direct work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart is a method of salvation that will reach the infant, the infidel, the heathen, the mentally deficient, the Old Testament Jew, and the individual who has all the privileges of New Testament Christianity available to him. All are born again in precisely the same way, by the sovereign and mysterious operation of the Holy Spirit within the soul.

So what is the method by which men are born again? It is nothing more or less than the sovereign and direct work of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration is immediate. God does not use the works of the sinner, on the one end, neither the efforts of the gospel preacher, on the other end, as either the basis or the method for imparting life to the soul. Faith is the gift of God in regeneration (Eph. 2:8). What does that mean? It means that the sinner responds to the life giving voice of the Lord Jesus Christ (Jno. 5:25) like Lazarus responded to the command of Jesus in John 11. It is an involuntary response, below the level of consciousness, a perfect obedience to the Divine imperative of Jesus. The Lord God is the active cause; the sinner is the passive recipient. This is irresistible grace! The gift of faith enables the newborn soul to function in the spiritual realm, an ability he did not have prior to his quickening (Jno. 3:3b,5b; I Cor. 2:14). It also gives the individual the ability to believe, or, if you please, "ears to hear" (Rev. 2:7,11; Pro. 20:12; Mt. 11:15). The gospel is, subsequently, addressed to the regenerate (Acts 2:39; Acts 13:16, 26), for the unregenerate cannot believe (Jno. 8:43; Jno. 10:26; Rom. 3:10-18). Before an exploration of the purpose of the gospel in relationship to regeneration, let's further develop the concept of the immediacy of regeneration.

Immediate Regeneration

The New Testament writers develop three metaphors to describe the mysterious work of God, which is regeneration. First, as we have already noted, it is a birth (Jno. 3:3-8; Jno. 1:13; I Pet. 1:23-25; I Jno. 3:9; I Jno. 5:1). Secondly, it is a creation (Eph. 2:10; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24), the Divine act of speaking into existence that which previously did not exist. Thirdly, it is a resurrection (Eph. 2:1; I Jno. 3:14; Jno. 5:24), the

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Divine act of giving life to one who is dead in trespasses and in sins. All three images demonstrate the immediacy of God's work of grace in the soul. Does the baby play an active role in his own birth, or is he a passive party in the work of external factors? What about creation? Did man help God in the creation of the universe or was creation the work of God alone? What about resurrection? Can man raise the dead to life? Does the corpse play an active role in his own resurrection? No, God and God alone is active. He is the only Creator. Just as the universe is the product of special creation, not evolution, so the work of God in the soul is a work of Divine creation, not spiritual evolution. Further, only God can give life to the dead. He and He alone has resurrection power.

John 5:25 deserves special consideration because of its clarity: "The hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live." The doctrine of effectual calling is stated nowhere more plainly than here. This verse teaches that God is always successful when he calls one who is dead in sin to spiritual life. Notice three truths contained in this verse: **(1) The Condition of the Sinner.** He is "dead" in trespasses and in sins. He is not sick, wounded, or unconscious. He is dead. He is spiritually incapacitated and unresponsive to stimuli. **(2) The Command of the Savior.** The dead hear "the voice of the Son of God..." He initiates the call, not the preacher, or the parent, or the personal worker. The God who said "Let there be light" also says "Let there be Life" and there is Life. When He speaks, it is done. **(3) The Certainty of Success.** The dead "shall hear...and they that hear shall live." The verb "shall" indicates absolute certainty. When the Lord speaks to the dead sinner, the dead comes to life, irresistibly. He does not woo or entice the dead. He draws him to Himself by sovereign power: "No man can come unto me except the Father which hath sent me draw him..." (Jno. 6:44).

The word "draw" suggests the picture of someone drawing water out of a well. Does a man beg and plead for the water to get into the bucket? No, he reaches down and by an act of His own strength, he acts upon the water, dipping the bucket and pulling it to Himself. In the same way, sinners are regenerated. Interestingly, by comparing the Greek word for "draw" in John 6:44 with the few other places it is used in the New Testament, it becomes readily apparent that the idea of force, not invitation, was the popular usage of the term. For example, Acts 16:19 says that the masters of the demon-possessed girl "caught Paul and Silas and **drew** them into the marketplace unto the rulers." Acts 21:30 says that the Jews "took Paul, and **drew** him out of the temple...and...went about to kill him..." It doesn't sound like they were begging and pleading with Paul. He was acted upon by external force. Finally, James 2:6 uses the word to describe the persecution of early Christians, as "rich men...**draw** you before the judgment seats." Though some commentators argue that the word "draw" in John 6:44 does not necessarily imply the idea of external force, the way the word is used in the larger context of Scripture suggests that this is not only the possible meaning, but the probable sense of the word. The Holy Spirit effectively and successfully draws the sinner to Christ in regeneration. There is no exception to this rule. The call of God in regeneration is always effectual.

The Effectual Call Illustrated

The writers of the Gospels include three resurrection accounts in the narrative of Jesus' personal ministry. These three episodes demonstrate the life-giving power of the Lord Jesus Christ and illustrate the efficacy of His call to spiritual life. In every case (i.e. the son of the widow of Nain, Jairus' daughter, and Lazarus of Bethany), Jesus spoke directly to the dead without the use of media. His call was personal ("Young man, I say unto thee arise;" "Damsel, arise;" "Lazarus, come forth."). His call was effectual ("He that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes."). His call was direct and immediate. He did not ask the disciples to speak for Him. He did not send a message through some messenger. There was no human agency invoked and there was no voluntary cooperation from the deceased. Jesus spoke, by sovereign fiat, and it was done. Jesus, on the contrary, did not always heal the deaf, or give sight to the blind in the same

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way. To a blind man on one occasion, Jesus made clay, anointed his eyes, and told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. On another occasion, He healed the blind man in stages (Mr. 8:22ff). Each episode of resurrection, however, occurred in precisely the same way. Jesus spoke. He spoke directly. He spoke personally. He spoke effectually. He spoke sovereignly. In the same way, Christ raises dead sinners to spiritual life. He speaks the life-giving voice, calling His own by name. The dead hear, and the dead live.

Furthermore, Jesus always went to the dead. The dead did not come to Him personally, neither were they brought to Him by some concerned friend or relative. He always went to the dead. The sick, the blind, and the palsied, on the contrary, were brought to Him. In the work of raising dead sinners to life in Christ, the pattern is the same. The sinner does not come to Christ to get salvation. He is not brought to Christ by the prayers of some concerned friend or the efforts of some Christian worker. Christ goes to the sinner and meets him at the point of his need. He walks into the sepulchre of the depraved heart and breathes life into man's deadness and the sinner comes forth, Lazarus-like, into new life. Once the dead is raised, the gospel serves to release that newborn soul from bondage. The preacher cannot raise Lazarus, but he can, once Christ has given him life, "loose him and let him go." This distinction between the work of the Lord and the work of the gospel minister is crucial. Only when one understands that he did not contribute toward his own salvation can he properly honor God. God does everything necessary for salvation; therefore, He receives all the glory. From first to last, salvation is of the Lord.

Part II

The Effectual Call Distinguished from The Gospel Call

The immediate regeneration position outlined in the preceding pages is not popular in the Christian community. Undoubtedly, the most common view within evangelicalism is what might be termed "decisional regeneration". This view, often called "gospel regeneration", presents the preached gospel as the means that God employs to call dead sinners to life in Christ. The sinner, according to the gospel-means position, must hear and believe the gospel in order to be born again. He must make a conscious decision for Christ if he will be saved. I believe that this position is in error and now proceed to support that conviction by five theological arguments.

1. The Gospel-means position does not adequately satisfy the tension between Total Depravity and the act of believing. Because man is totally depraved, he does not have the ability to believe. I Corinthians 2:14 says, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned." The context of I Corinthians 2 describes two different types of people, "the natural man" (v. 14) and "he that is spiritual" (v. 15). Because the natural man has no spiritual capacity ("neither **can** he know them"), he cannot grasp the spiritual message of the gospel. The spiritual man, on the contrary, has the ability to discern spiritual things (v. 15). Paul clearly establishes the principle in this passage that a change of nature must precede the ability to receive the gospel. Spiritual life must be given before one can understand the "spiritual thing" which is the gospel.

Regeneration must come before faith. The same power that raised Jesus Christ from the grave is necessary to enable a sinner to believe (Eph. 1:19-20). In theological terms, the order of salvation, the *ordus salutis*, is birth first, belief second: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God..." (I Jno. 5:1); "Whosoever heareth my words and believeth on Him that sent me hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life" (Jno. 5:24). The verb tenses in both of these verses suggest that the individual who presently believes already possesses spiritual life. Notice that the writer does not say "whosoever believes will be born of God." He says the believer **is** born of God. His belief is the evidence of his new birth. Jesus does not say that the man who hears and believes will get everlasting life,

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but that he already has it - "he **is passed** from death unto life." His belief is the evidence of his spiritual resurrection.

The sinner who is dead in trespasses and in sins is spiritually incapacitated, unable to function in the spiritual realm. It is not that the unregenerate merely will not believe. He **cannot** believe. It is not merely that he refuses to respond. He doesn't have the ability to respond to the gospel call. Jesus asked, "Why do ye not understand my speech? even because you cannot hear my word...He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God" (Jno. 8:43,47). This verse declares that an individual who has not experienced a change of nature is utterly incapable of a believing response to the gospel. Ephesians 2:1 describes man by nature as "dead in trespasses and in sins." The image of death suggests that the unregenerate man, like a dead corpse, is unresponsive to stimuli. Is the gospel a kind of external stimuli? Isn't it an appeal to man's mind? Until the sinner is given new life, consequently he will remain unresponsive to the gospel. I Corinthians 1:18 says, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God." Again, this verse presents a contrast between two types of people, "them that perish," or the unregenerate, and "us which are saved," or the regenerate. According to this verse, what effect does the gospel have on the unregenerate? Is it "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16) to him? No, it is "foolishness" to him. It is only the power of God unto salvation unto the man who has already been saved. The gospel will save the saved man, **if** he keeps it in memory (I Cor. 15:1-3). The salvation (or deliverance) the gospel effects in the life of the believer is not, however, new birth, but a salvation "from this untoward generation" (Acts 2:40), an escape from the "pollutions of the world through the knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord" (2 Pet. 2:19-20). It is, if you please, sanctification, not regeneration: "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth" (Jno. 17:17). How we should rejoice in the truth of Romans 1:16! But we must not assign a meaning to this verse that contradicts I Corinthians 1:18. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to the believer, not the unregenerate. To the unregenerate, it is foolishness. But once an individual is given spiritual life, once he is saved, it is the power of God to transform his life (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Does the sinner's eternal destiny depend upon his belief in Jesus Christ? If so, what if his faith is shaken by false teachers? What if he is deceived? Does he then lose the eternal life he once possessed? Thanks be to God that the eternal destiny of the elect does not depend upon man's faith, but on God's sovereign covenant decrees: "What if some do not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid... [Hymaneus and Philetus] have erred concerning the truth saying that the resurrection is past already, and have overthrown the faith of some. **Nevertheless** the foundation of God standeth sure having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His..." (2 Tim. 2:13,19). Belief in Jesus Christ comes after, not before, regeneration. Faith cannot be both the cause and the effect of life. It cannot be both the "root" from which the Spirit grows in one's heart, and the "fruit" that the Spirit generates in the heart. The Spirit of God is the cause of regeneration. Faith is the effect, the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22). An understanding of total depravity makes belief in the doctrine of immediate regeneration a necessity, for the dead sinner does not have the ability to exercise faith until he is born again. This leads us to the next argument.

2. Gospel regeneration leads to the conclusion that salvation, because it depends on man 's faith, is an act of man 's will since faith is by definition volitional, i.e. an act of the will. Such a position contradicts the testimony of Scripture which attributes salvation to God's will, not man's. Consider, for example, the following verses: "...even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood' nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jno. 1:12--13); "So then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy" (Rom. 9:16); "...Lo, I come to do thy will, O God...By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:9-10); "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good

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pleasure of His will" (Eph. 1:5; see also vs. 9,11). These four verses plainly affirm that salvation is the effect of which God's will, not the sinner's, is the cause.

Does a man by nature have a free will? Romans 8:7 answers 'no': "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."

Man, created in God's image, possesses a mind, a heart, and a will. The mind, or intellect, allows him to think rationally, not by sheer instinct like an animal. The heart, or emotion, enables him to feel, unlike a robot or machine, human experience. The will, or volition, enables him to make decisions and choices that have moral consequences. It is his capacity for action, a capacity that allows him to choose this over that and those instead of these.

In his unfallen state, man was good and very good. The fall, however, affected every part of man's being. Man's mind, by virtue of his fallen nature, is now darkened, incapable of understanding the things of the Spirit of God (Eph. 4:18; I Cor. 2:14). Further, his emotions are now deceptive and untrustworthy (Jer. 17:9) and his will, that is, his ability to choose good over evil and right over wrong, is bound. The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith reads, "Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation, so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to commit himself, or to prepare himself thereto."

So, is man free? If by the word 'free' one means that people have the ability, 'to make certain choices on their own (ices free from compulsion, force, or coercion), then the answer is 'yes.' For example, people have the ability to choose to go to the store or to stay home, to buy a newspaper or not, to eat beef or to eat fish, etc.; such choices are within the natural capacity of human beings. People are free to act according to their nature.

If by the word 'free,' however, one means free without any limitation, then the answer is 'no.' People are not free to act contrary to their nature. I cannot choose to fly. Yes, I can choose to travel by airplane, but I cannot choose to sprout wings or become a bird. My will, you see, is not entirely free. It is bound by the limits of my nature. We do not have the freedom to be anything we are not.

Man, in other words, is not free to act outside the boundaries of his human nature. He cannot live the life of a fish in the ocean or fly like a bird in the air without external resources enabling him to duplicate his natural environment. Just as that is true on a natural level, it is also true on a spiritual level. In his fallen state, man cannot choose to be righteous. The Ethiopian cannot by his own sheer willpower, change the color of his skin, nor the leopard his spots. Neither can those whose nature is depraved voluntarily do good Jer. 13:23). Man's will is enslaved to his sinful nature. Left to himself, his only capacity is fleshly.

Unregenerate people are not free to choose righteousness or wickedness; they are, on the contrary, "free from righteousness" (Rom. 6:20). By nature, man's will is a "will not" (Ps. 10:4; Ps. 58:3; Jno. 5:40; Is. 26:10). His only inclination is toward carnality. The natural man will never choose anything but sin, because he cannot operate outside the parameters of his sinful nature (Rom. 8:7). The nature of man's will is not free.

Not until his nature is changed does he have the desire or the capacity to choose righteousness. Prior to God's work of regeneration in the soul, therefore, man's will is bound by the old nature. In regeneration, the fallen sinner is made "willing in the day of God's power" (Ps. 110:3). He is given a new nature, a righteous nature, capable of responding to God. Because the old nature is not eradicated, however, a warfare between the Spirit and the flesh ensues (Rom. 7) - requiring deliberate and decisive efforts of the will for

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righteousness (Rom. 6:11-23). In other words, the believer must choose, every day, between the options of serving sin or righteousness (Jos. 24:15, Rom. 6:13). With such a conflict facing us, we should be glad that the Holy Spirit will continue to work within us "both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phi. 2:13).

Because man's will, apart from the new nature given in the new birth, is bound, it is incapable of choosing eternal life. Man's only hope of eternal life, then, is rooted in God's initiative and choice. Salvation depends on God's choice, not man's and upon His sovereign will, not man's fallen will. That, my friend, is a firm foundation!

3. Gospel regeneration adds an element of inconsistency to the economy of the Godhead (i.e. the combined operation of the three Divine Persons) in the salvation of sinners. In other words, the gospel-means position disrupts the unity of the Trinity. For example, to say that the Father, sovereignly and independently, chose a people, and that the Son sovereignly and independently redeemed a people, but that the Spirit employs human agency to call that people into new life, presents a disunity within the Godhead. Immediate regeneration is the only doctrinal position that is consistent with the economy of the Godhead.

Father, Son, and Spirit work together, as a Divine Team, each fulfilling their respective covenant offices, in the salvation of sinners. Notice the Trinitarian cooperation in the following scriptures: Galatians 4:4-6; I Corinthians 1:30-31; 2 Corinthians 5:19; I Peter 1:1-2; Jude 1; Romans 8. The Father planned the work in the covenant, the Son executed the work at the cross, and the Spirit applies the work in the effectual call. Every one that the Father elected, and the Son redeemed, the Spirit will regenerate. Sovereign grace is an exclamatory sentence. The introduction of a human element (e. g. a preacher, soul winner, etc.) in the work of regeneration turns the exclamation point (!) into a question mark (?). What if some do not hear because of some failure in the human dimension of this equation? What if in hearing, they do not believe and obey? Could that happen? Romans 10 says it can: "But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah saith, Lord, who hath believed our report" (v. 16). Paul proceeds in Romans 10 to prove that Israel willfully rejected the gospel: "But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people" (v. 21). Is this an effectual call? Absolutely not! Does God "stretch forth His hands" to the sinner, wooing him to eternal life? No again! When He speaks life to the dead, the dead hear and live (Jno. 5:25). Romans 10 is not a "regeneration" passage, else one is forced to conclude that the human will is the decisive factor in the work of regeneration and that the entire work of the Trinity in the salvation of sinners may be nullified by one obstinate sinner. Since a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, the introduction of human agency into the work of the Godhead in salvation makes the covenant of grace uncertain and inconclusive.

4. Gospel Regeneration confuses the Effectual Call and the Gospel Call. Compare the following verses: "...the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God and they that hear shall live" (Jno. 5:25); "...Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts" (Heb. 3:15). Did you notice a similarity between the two? Both verses speak of God's "voice," His call. Now consider the verses again. Do you see a difference between the two? Though both verses assert the fact that God calls, the response to the call is different in the second verse. John 5:25 says that the dead "shall hear" God's voice. That is the language of certainty. Hebrews 3:15, on the contrary, says "if you will hear His voice." That is the language of appeal. Do you notice a difference between the expression "they shall hear" and the phrase "if you will hear"? The difference is the outcome of the call. In John 5:25, the outcome is certain and irresistible ("they shall hear"). In Hebrews 3:15, the outcome is uncertain and vague ("if you will heard. Why is the outcome different? Because the nature of the call is different. John 5:25 is a call from death to life, an effectual call; Hebrews 3:15 is a call to enter into God's rest, a gospel call. Failure to distinguish between the Do will inevitably produce glaring theological

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inconsistencies. The effectual call is not the gospel call, neither is the gospel call the effectual call. Yes, the same God speaks in both, but the nature of the call is different. In fact, the effectual call must precede the gospel call, that is, the dead sinner must be raised to life before he can respond to the gospel appeal. Biblically this is always the pattern. Before Philip called Nathanael, the Lord Jesus saw him under the fig tree (Jno. 1:49). Before Philip the evangelist preached to the Ethiopian eunuch, God had already visited him and given him a hunger for spiritual understanding (Acts 8:27-28). Before Ananias opened Saul's eyes, the Risen Christ arrested him on Damascus road and changed his heart (Acts 9:1,11). Before Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius, God gave him a new heart, evidenced by the character description given of him in Acts 10:1-4. Before Lydia responded to Paul's preaching, the Lord opened her heart (Acts 16:14).

The gospel call is an external appeal to the mind (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 1:12; 2 Cor. 4:4). Luke says that Paul "reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ" (Acts 17:2-3). Do you see the element of logic, the rational dimension of the gospel, in those words? Read any sermon in Acts (Acts 2, 17, 26) and note the appeal to the mind. Why was Agrippa "almost persuaded to become a Christian" (Acts 26:28)? Because the sheer weight of Paul's testimony was so persuasive and compelling. Now this is not to say that the Gospel is strictly an appeal to man's natural intellect, but the fact that the gospel call is by its very nature rational (that is, it is a verbal communication which must be processed through the mind before it has an impact on the emotions) is unavoidable.

The effectual call, on the contrary, is not an external appeal to the mind, but an inward creative act in the soul. The effectual call is a call, in Augustine's words, by "Divine Imperative." It is an act of creation in exactly the same way that the origin of the universe was an act of creation. How did God create the universe? By the sheer power of His command, His creative fiat: "And God said, Let there be..." and there was. "Let there be" is a command, an imperative. In the beginning, "God commanded the light to shine out of darkness." It was a command, a fiat. By the mere utterance of His voice, galaxies, solar systems, planets, oceans, mountains, trees, rocks, air, atoms, and molecules were called into existence out of nothing. What awesome power!

The effectual call is also a creation (Eph. 2:10; 2 Cor. 5:17). It is the creation of spiritual life where no life existed by the power of God's command. When He speaks, it is done. When He commands, it stands fast. By the mere utterance of His voice, the dead sinner comes to life. Divine imperative is the thought conveyed in I Peter 1:23-25, a text frequently employed by those who teach gospel agency: "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever...This is the word, which, by the gospel is preached unto you." When Peter says we are born again by the word of God, does He mean that the gospel is the means God uses to quicken the dead sinner? No. The word by which we are born again is not the Bible, nor the gospel, but the spoken voice, the creative fiat of God. Think of I Peter 1:23 in terms of Psalm 33:6: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth." Does that mean that the universe was created by the Bible, or by the gospel? No. It means it was created by the sheer power of God's command. The same God who called the widow's son, Jairus' daughter' and Lazarus to life, still calls sinners who are 'dead in trespasses and in sins' to life in Christ. That is the power of Divine imperative. The gospel, then explains what has happened (1 pet. 1:25).

The effectual call is a call to eternal salvation; the gospel call is a call to repentance and faith (Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19; Acts 17:30; Acts 20:21; Acts 26:20). The effectual call is a call to sonship; the gospel call is a call to discipleship. God speaks directly in the effectual call; God speaks through men in the gospel call. The effectual call is always obeyed; the gospel call is frequently disobeyed, shunned, and resisted. The effectual call is a creation; the gospel call is a communication. The effectual call is directed to the dead; the gospel

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call is directed to the living. The effectual call is an internal call; the gospel call is an external appeal. The effectual call produces life (2 Tim. 1:9); the gospel call produces light (2 Tim. 1:10). The sinner responds involuntarily in the effectual call (like Lazarus). The gospel call, however, calls for a voluntary, decisive response ("...harden not your hearts" - Heb. 3:15). The conclusive testimony of Scripture is that the effectual call precedes the gospel call and that the effectual call gives a man spiritual life, while the gospel call gives a man knowledge and understanding. This distinction between regeneration and gospel conversion is essential.

5. The Gospel-means position confuses the doctrine of Regeneration with the doctrine of Justification lay Faith. In Romans 4, Paul employs the experience of Abraham to teach the great doctrine of justification by faith: "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness." Most proponents of the gospel-means position use this verse to teach that the sinner must believe the gospel in order to be saved, or, if you please, born again. But is this verse talking about regeneration? No, it's talking about justification. Justification is a legal term. It speaks of something that takes place in a court room. Regeneration, on the contrary, is a biological term. It speaks of something that takes place in the delivery room. To use Romans 4 to teach that a sinner can be saved if he will believe the gospel is to ignore this important fact.

Of the three times that Abraham's experience is cited in the New Testament as an example of the life of faith (Rom. 4, Heb. 11, Jas. 2), not one can be employed to suggest the idea that he was born again by his act of believing. Romans 4 describes an experience in the life of Abraham that is recorded in Genesis 15. Genesis 15, of course, occurred several years after Abraham initially left Ur, by faith (Gen. 12). Does Romans 4 teach that a sinner may receive eternal salvation when he believes the gospel? No. Why not? Because the example the writer cites for justification by faith, Abraham, had been walking by faith for several years before the experience described in this chapter. In other words, Abraham was already a regenerate man before "he believed God and it was accounted unto him for righteousness."

PART III

The Purpose of the Gospel

If the gospel is not the means God uses in regeneration, what is the purpose of the Gospel? I offer for the reader's consideration the following answer.

1. The Gospel Delivers the Believer from the Practice of Sin. Romans 1:16 calls the gospel "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." It is the power of God. God uses it to transform the thinking and the behavior of His people (Rom. 12:2). The Holy Spirit applies it as a means of spiritual growth into Christ's likeness: "But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15). In what specific terms does the gospel deliver the believer? Acts 26:18 suggests at least five ways. First, it delivers them from ignorance to understanding - "To open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light" (v. 18a). Secondly, it delivers them from Satan's power, that is, from his strangle-hold upon their lives - "and from the power of Satan unto God" (v. 18b). The individual who comes to gospel understanding has a resource in the truth that equips him to "stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:10), to "resist the devil" (Jas. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:9), and to "overcome the devil" (Rev. 12:10). Thirdly, it delivers them from the pressing bondage of guilt - "that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (v. 18c). It brings a peace to the heart and the conscience that nothing else can provide. This peace of conscience, this justification by faith (Rom. 5:1), such as the Publican received in Luke 18, may very well be the dominant utility of the gospel. Fourthly, it delivers them from a life of lonely selfishness into the warmth of Christian fellowship with other believers - "that they may receive an inheritance among them which are sanctified by

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faith" (v. 18d). Fifthly, it delivers them from spiritual immaturity to a life of growth and progressive conformity to the image of Christ -"sanctified by faith that is in me" (v. 18c). The gospel is spiritual food for the believer's growth (I Pet. 2:2). God, through the gospel, can transform attitudes, mend broken relationships, encourage the downcast, comfort the bereaved, strengthen the weak, and change the lives of those who hear. The gospel is heaven's powerful resource for living the Christian life.

2. *The Gospel Informs the Mind and Instructs the Understanding:* Its purpose is to illumine: "The entrance of thy words give light; it giveth understanding to the simple" (Ps. 119:130). 2 Timothy 1:10 says that the gospel brings "life and immortality to light." Note it does not give "life and immortality" but it brings it to "light," that is, to manifestation. It is God's means of imparting knowledge, guidance, and counsel to His people (Jer. 3:15; Ps. 25:5; Ps. 119:24).

3. *The Gospel is the Instrument of Conversion.* I Corinthians 4:15 says, "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." Paul was the father of the Corinthians in the same sense that Timothy and Titus were described as "his sons in the faith" (I Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4). He was, in other words, instrumental in bringing them to a knowledge of the truth and in their early spiritual development. They came to gospel understanding under his ministry. The ministry is like parenting (I Ths. 2:7,11) in this sense. God uses his word to change a person's mind (Ps. 15):7; Ps. 119:25). That is conversion.

4. *The Gospel is God 's Means of Giving Hope, Joy, and Peace to the Soul.* What good does it do to believe the gospel? Romans 15:13 says, "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost." Joy, peace, and hope come through believing.

5. *The Gospel is God 's Means of Nourishing the Inner Man.* Three times Jesus commanded Peter to "feed my sheep." The chief business of the pastor to the flock is to preach the word unto them. "Feed the flock of God which is among you," urged Peter (I Pet. 5:1). Paul said, "Feed the church of God which He bath purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). The gospel is food for the hungry soul, the bread of life, the means by which believers "taste the good word of God" (Heb. 6:3).

6. *The Gospel Liberates the Believer from the Oppressive Yoke of Legalism.* Jesus said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free..." (Jno. 8:32). The proclamation of God's grace to sinners in Jesus Christ has an emancipating effect on the heart. Jesus is the ultimate Liberator (Gal. 5:1).

7. *The Gospel Heralds and Proclaims Christ's Finished Work.* In 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, Paul distinguishes between the "work of reconciliation" and the "word [or ministry] of reconciliation." The work of reconciliation has already been accomplished. It is finished (Jno. 19:30). It is an objective fact. The gospel is the report of that fact, the publication of redemption accomplished and applied: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that publisheth peace, that publisheth salvation, that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth" (Is. 52:7). The Gospel is the victory cry of a successful Savior.

8. *The Gospel Urges Men to Turn from Idolatry and to Worship the True God.* The Thessalonians responded to Paul's preaching by "turning to God from idols to serve the living and the true God" (I Ths. 1: 9). The call to repentance is inherent in the gospel message. The gospel not only proclaims Christ's finished work, but calls upon the hearer to respond to that message by believing it, obeying it, and committing himself to a life of godliness, out of gratitude for God's grace. The gospel summons men to a life of good works, not in order to gain salvation, but in order to glorify the God of our salvation.

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The relationship that exists between God's immediate and effectual work in regeneration, and man's subsequent responsibility to believe and obey the gospel, is said by the poet better than I could say it:

*"I will not work my soul to save,
For this my Lord has done;
But I will work like any slave,
For love of God's dear Son. "*

That, dear reader, is the message of sovereign grace!

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