

REGENERATION

a sermon by

Asahel Nettleton
(1783 – 1844)

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“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.”

—John 1:12-13

The important and simple doctrine taught by these words, is that those who receive Christ—who have power given them to become the sons of God and who believe on his name are born of God. In other words, every real Christian becomes such by a special exertion of Almighty power to change his heart. The phrase born of God—begotten of God, so often used by the writers of the New Testament is figurative. Its propriety, when applied to things of a spiritual nature, arises from the analogy, which exists between the beginning of our natural and spiritual existence. Believers are the sons of God and this must be understood in a peculiar sense. All men equally receive their existence and natural faculties from the Creator, and in this sense are all the children of God. But when the Scriptures apply the phrases sons of God and children of God to the saints by way of distinction, it must be to point out a relation to God, which is not common to all men. This relation is wholly of a new and spiritual nature; and God is the sole author of it, and by virtue of it they are his sons, they are said to be born of him; begotten of him, in allusion to the relation between earthly parents and their children.

The object of this text is to deny that our relation to God as his spiritual children is produced in any way, but by his own special and sovereign power. It was originally adapted to oppose the carnal prejudices of the Jews. For the common opinion was that all who could be counted as the children of Abraham were heirs of the divine promises

and entitled to eternal life. This notion was uniformly opposed by Christ and his apostles. Leaving an attempt to ascertain the precise meaning of the phrases “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man,” I observe that there were three ways in which individuals became the reputed children of Abraham: by regular descent; by unlawful connection; and by adoption. Let the method be which it might, the Jews supposed that whoever became a child of Abraham, of course, became a child of God. The celebrated Lightfoot supposes the object of the Evangelist is to cut off the false hopes of the Jews, by denying that either method and of course any method of becoming the children of Abraham would make them the children of God. Another birth is necessary, a new filiation from above. They must be born again—born of God. Whatever may be the particular meaning of the text, the obvious general impression from it, and the one designed to be made by the sacred writer is that all other ways of becoming the sons of God are false and visionary, except that of being born of him. It was spoken to meet the prevailing prejudices of the day, and may now be used in the same manner.

Of all subjects, that which respects change from death unto life, is certainly one of the most important, and interesting to us. To have clear and definite ideas here is of great moment. Error on such a fundamental point is awfully perilous.

In one sense all things are of God. He is the Creator and governor of all. All a man’s powers and faculties are from God, and all the means of grace and institutions of religion are ordained by him. But when the Scriptures speak of being born of God, they mean something more than that a man is influenced by these means and institutions in the use of his ordinary powers and faculties. To prevent misconception, I have said that regeneration is the special work of Almighty power. Errorists have never dared to deny directly that saints are born of God because this would be to renounce all appearance of belief in the Scriptures. They have chosen a surer method of

propagating their sentiments. While they retain the language of the sacred writers, they have attacked and frittered away their meaning, until regeneration becomes the mere application of an external rite, or a persuasion of mind affected in an ordinary manner and a consequent reformation of morals.

To expunge error serves to illustrate the truth. I shall briefly consider some false notions respecting regeneration and then proceed to illustrate what it is to be born of God.

I need not consume the time in labouring to prove that baptism is not regeneration. Nothing is plainer than that an external rite cannot change the heart. Baptism is only a sign or token of the saving influences of the Holy Spirit, and is not that work itself. It cannot be the token of a thing, and the thing itself at the same time. Both the Scriptures and experience show, that all who are baptized are not regenerated; for in their lives and conversation many who are baptized differ not from the "world which lieth in wickedness." On this, I shall only add the words of an eminent English divine, "This scheme," says he, speaking of regeneration by water baptism, "is the utter rejection and overthrow of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." And again, "The vanity of this presumptuous folly is destructive of the grace of the gospel; invented to countenance men in their sins; and to hide from them the necessity of being born again; and therein of turning unto God. But my beloved Christian brethren, you have not so learned Christ."

The absurdity of substituting this and other things of a like nature is so palpable and gross, that it is very likely to be seen and apprehended, where any considerable degree of knowledge respecting the nature of religion exists. There is far less danger from such extravagant notions than from those which are more specious and imposing.

Pelagius in the 4th century first invented and advocated a scheme of regeneration, which with a few modifications, sometimes in the phraseology, and sometimes by partial additions or diminutions, has been the scheme of the great body of all sectaries, who have

dissented from orthodox evangelical sentiments. Authors have appeared in different periods and in various countries, who have brought forward this specious scheme of the new birth, as principally illustrated, or defined by themselves; and many whose reading is superficial have been deceived into this supposition. The fact is, that almost the whole system of vague and inadequate notions on this great subject is only the heresy of Pelagius, so universally condemned by the ancient Church, which has now been newly dressed up, after the modern fashion, to secure a better reception.

The fundamental truths of the Pelagian and Arminian scheme (for they are in substance the same) are these:

(1). That God not only proclaims the offers of grace and salvation to all men alike, but that the Holy Spirit is equally and sufficiently distributed to all men to insure their salvation, provided they duly improve the benefits bestowed upon them.

(2). That the precepts and promises of the gospel are not only good and desirable in themselves, but so suited to the natural reason and interests of mankind, that they will of course be inclined to receive them, unless overpowered by prejudice, and an habitual course of sin.

(3). That the consideration of the threatenings and promises of the gospel is sufficient to remove these prejudices and reform that course.

(4). That those who thus seriously reflect and amend their lives have the promise of the Holy Spirit, and are entitled to the benefits of the new covenant.

Under this specious statement of fundamental principles, which is apt to strike an inconsiderate mind in a favorable manner, the very life and soul of gospel truth is taken away. On this scheme, all men are regenerated alike, originally; all having an equal measure of the Spirit, and the difference between one man and another is to be ascribed wholly to himself; to the improvement he has made of the blessings vouchsafed. And regeneration is a reformation of life, induced by moral suasions, or commenced in consequence of the understanding being

enlightened and the affections being moved by divine truth alone. If you ask, how does salvation proceed from divine grace on this plan, the answer is that all the means of improvement are bestowed by God and herein is the grace.

The whole scheme is simply this, God gives faculties and grace to all, and to all alike and thus furnished, they work out their own salvation, being persuaded to do this by the promises and threatenings of the gospel. The dreadful mischief which this extensive and popular scheme has caused springs from its plausibility—from such an appearance of truth, mixed with so many great and dangerous errors.

That the Holy Spirit makes use of the word and many other instruments to bring sinners to Christ, I have no doubt. But that men are naturally so inclined, as to approve of and obey the precepts of the gospel, unless some peculiar course of sin or prejudice prevent them, contradicts the whole tenor of the gospel, in which it is a fundamental principle, that by nature we are children of wrath, and that we are at enmity with God and blinded to the light of his truth and dead in trespasses and sins. That the Holy Spirit is communicated to all in a sufficient manner to save them, entirely overthrows the idea of any special grace, and makes one man as much born of God as another! Our text says that as many as received Christ, and believed on his name, were born of God. If so, others who did not, were not born of God, and the undistinguishing influences of the Spirit cannot be maintained.

It is a great stumbling block, in the way of many, that God should give more of his Spirit to one, than another. To remove this subject of prejudice, Pelagius and multitudes ever since, have maintained that all men receive gifts alike, and are alike furnished to work out their salvation. This effectually destroys the new birth, and makes it alike common to every man. On this scheme Judas had as much grace as Paul, Ahab who sold himself to work wickedness, as David, a man after God's own heart. All the difference between them was owing to the different manner in which they improved their privileges.

I know such doctrine is agreeable to corrupt nature; and the easy reception it has met with ever since it was first preached proves how agreeable it is to carnal reason. But neither the Scriptures nor experience afford us any reason to believe it. I do not doubt that the Spirit of God strives with all men who are not reprobates. I fully admit it. I admit that the promises and threats of the gospel would be sufficient to persuade us to a holy life, if our understandings were neither darkened, nor our affections depraved. But after all this, I deny that common grace makes us the sons of God, or that we are persuaded to be Christians without any special divine influence; or that all men receive the same measure of the Spirit.

After all preparatory means—all the promises and threats of the gospel—all the operations of common grace—and all exertions of unregenerate sinners, they must be born of God to become his children. There must be a new creation,—a work accomplished by Almighty power—a sovereign-special-supernatural act, like making a world, or raising the dead, as to the power exerted, and without such an act no one can ever see the kingdom of heaven. Persuasion is not sufficient to make men new creatures. If the Spirit operates on the minds of men only by setting persuasive arguments or motives before them, be the kinds never so diverse or well adapted to this purpose, yet after all, it depends on the will of man whether any shall be regenerated or not. On this scheme the glory of regeneration would belong to ourselves. It would be uncertain also, whether Christ would have any spiritual seed, as it would depend after all upon the uncertain determination of each individual before whom the motives were set. This then contradicts the Scriptures. God does not confine his operations to setting motives of persuasion before men; thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power.

Moral persuasion to a better life confers no new real, supernatural strength to the soul, which may enable it thus to live. No new taste—no new spiritual discernment springs from persuasion. If regeneration comes thus, then

a man begets himself, he is born of himself—he makes himself to differ from others. On this plan the Spirit of God has no more to do than Paul or Apollos.

Besides, this is not for what we pray; we pray not that motives may be set before us to regenerate ourselves, but that God would change us, create us anew. The ancient churches urged this prayer upon the heretics, who denied a supernatural work in regeneration, and they felt themselves sorely pressed without.

There is then only one way left for a creature dead in trespasses and sins to rise to life. This is by the power of God, which quickens him—creates him anew. Observe in what language sacred writers have chosen to communicate their ideas on this subject: born of God; begotten of God; quickened; or made alive from the dead; created anew. If it be said this is figurative language, I agree to it, but if there be any correctness in the figures, the work of regeneration must be the commencement of a new spiritual existence. On any other grounds the language of the Scriptures is of all books the most fancied, unmeaning, and obscure.

You may suppose all the preparation, all the knowledge; motives; morality (in the common acceptance of the term); unregenerate strivings which you please; after all there must be a new creation—the dead must be quickened—believers must be born of God. The same energy which brought Christ from the dead—the exceeding great power of the living God must perform the work. This is the apostle's statement that we may know what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead.

Indeed, my friends, where else can we look for the origin of such a change as makes believers pass from death to life but the omnipotence of the divine Spirit? Is it our understanding which accomplishes this change? But our understanding is darkened. "The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit, neither can he know them." Is it

our will? But we are “prone to evil as the sparks fly upward.” Our wills are perverse and rebellious. Is it our strength? Christ died for the ungodly who are without strength. We are not sufficient of ourselves to think a good thought. Is it our merits? We merit nothing but utter rejection. Is it the ministers of God who persuade us? Paul may plant and Apollos water, but God gives the increase.

Every effort has been made by the ingenuity of man, by palpably erroneous schemes, and by plausible ones, to wrest the glory of this work from the hands of the divine Spirit, and claim the operation for ourselves; at least to share in the honor of it. After all, its origin can be traced only to the free and sovereign grace and Almighty power of God. The work is all his; and the glory must and will forever belong exclusively to him.

It is a doctrine supported by the great light of the Reformation and by the pillars of the evangelical churches ever since: that regeneration is a physical work. And by this they mean there is an actual new creation, as absolutely so as when the world was created; that a new spiritual taste or discernment, and principle is implanted by a sovereign creative operation, and not simply a new direction given to the old faculties.

Such a work being proved, the whole system of evangelical truth; the doctrines of grace; of divine sovereignty; of election; of redemption only by Christ; of human depravity and others connected with them, all flow from it. There is one grand, harmonious, and perfect system: and God is the sum—the substance and the glory of all.

My friends, I am fully aware of the difficulties incident to the doctrines here laid down. I know full well how ready the natural heart is both to oppose, and misconstrue them. But if the Bible supports them, it is enough. Here our carnal reason must bow. Here our proud hearts must submit. Charge them with mystery—with inconsistency—with unprofitableness, O sinner, and you assail not man, but God. Look on his word and read. There it stands; and it is written in characters of light, “which were born not of

blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

This is the only birth which can fit us for heaven, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” We may please our fancies, and gratify our self-righteousness, by adopting loose Pelagian sentiments on this subject; we may remonstrate against such absolute dependence on the grace of God as has now been advocated, but a new heart, and a right spirit will after all be found of such absolute necessity, that without them we must perish forever.

A Brief Look at the Life of Asahel Nettleton

by Jon Cardwell

Perhaps one of the most anointed evangelists of the 19th century’s “Second Great Awakening,” Asahel Nettleton preached very solemn, reverent, dignified messages without written notes, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit through the reverent exposition of Biblical doctrines of sovereign grace through faith.

Born in North Killingworth, Connecticut on April 21, 1783, Nettleton was the second child and eldest son in a family of six children. Very little is known of his early childhood, except that his father was a farmer, and being the son of Congregationalist parents, young Asahel was baptized as an infant and was required to memorize the Westminster Assembly’s Catechism growing up. Quite often in later life, Dr. Nettleton would comment how useful the memorization of the catechism was when once his soul was awakened to the concerns of religion.

The day after attending a ball at the annual Thanksgiving in 1800, while thinking pleasurably upon the previous nights events, “the thought suddenly rushed upon his mind, we must all die, and go to the judgment, and with

what feelings shall we then reflect upon these scenes!”¹ With that overwhelming thought, young Nettleton began to be anxious for his soul.

He started searching the Scriptures to see if he could find a contradiction, but he felt all the more lost and hopeless. “He prayed, and wept, and promised, but”² to no avail. He read Jonathan Edwards’ narrative on revival of religion in Northampton as well as Edwards’ memoir of David Brainerd, which served to deepen his conviction concerning his lost condition. “The doctrines of the Gospel, particularly the doctrines of sovereignty and election, were sources of great distress to him.... He would sometimes say to himself, if I am not elected, I shall not be saved, even if I do repent—then the thought would arise, if I am not elected, I never shall repent. This would cut him to the heart, and dash to the ground all his self-righteous hopes. For a long time he endured these conflicts in his mind. Meanwhile, he became fully convinced, that the commands of God are perfectly just, that it was his immediate duty to repent, and that he had no excuse for continuing another moment a rebel against God. At the same time he saw that such was the wickedness of his heart, that he never should repent, unless God should subdue his heart by an act of sovereign grace.... For several hours, his horror of mind was inexpressible. Not long after this, there was a change in his feelings. He felt a calmness for which he knew not how to account.”³

For someone who had converted to Christ as Nettleton had, through the doctrines of sovereign grace: total depravity, unconditional election, repentance, regeneration, and etc., it would seem ludicrous to suggest that, as an evangelist, Nettleton would use tactics such as coaxing, cajoling, or charming sinners into the kingdom. Contrary to Rick Warren’s erroneous assertion that Asahel

¹ Bennet Tyler, D.D., *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.*, Boston, MA; Fifth Edition, 1856; pg. 16

² *Ibid*, pg. 20

³ *Ibid*, pg. 21

Nettleton began using the “altar call” in 1817 and was popularized later by Charles Grandison Finney (*The Purpose Driven Church*, pg. 305), Nettleton loathed such gimmicks and innovations as Finney’s “anxious bench,” the forerunner to today’s unscriptural “altar call.”

Sermons such as “Ashamed of Christ” (Luke 9:26), “Total Depravity” (Genesis 6:5), and “Perseverance of the Saints” (Philippians 1:6), indicate Mr. Nettleton’s method of evangelism was to preach a series of messages upon the doctrinal truths of the Bible. From this method of conveying Biblical truth with dignity, and without overzealous outbreaks, he would remain consistent until his Lord took him home. After his graduation from Yale University in 1809, Mr. Nettleton’s ministry as an itinerant evangelist in New England witnessed an estimated 30,000 converted souls between 1810-1821.

Taking ill from typhus fever in 1822, Mr. Nettleton’s life was spared; nevertheless, he never quite recovered and he remained in a poor state of health until his death on May 16, 1844. Dr. Nettleton never married.

Wherever the Lord is ministering revival and working powerfully and marvelously, the enemy is right there with his malicious counterfeit. During the first “Great Awakening,” in the days of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield, a preacher from Long Island, New York, James Davenport, visited the towns and villages that were being awakened. Though Davenport was a pious young man with an apparent zeal for God, a love for souls, and a passionate desire for the advancement of God’s kingdom, during his services he promoted unrestrained emotional outcries, whether of joy or distress; and after a few questions of inquiry of those whose emotions shifted from distress to delight, Davenport would pronounce them converted. Through this method, the numbers under Davenport’s preaching were greatly inflated; however, those “converted” had “returned to their old way of living—were as carnal, wicked, and void of Christian experience as they ever were. Again: [Davenport] was a great favourer of *visions, trances, imaginations, and powerful*

impressions upon the mind in others; and made such inward *feelings* the rule of his conduct in *many respects*; especially if the impression came with *a text of Scripture*, which he looked upon to be *opened* to him at such a time, and in such cases pointing out his duty, which he would accordingly pursue.”⁴

Likewise, as with Davenport in the days of, and immediately following the first “Great Awakening” of the 1740’s, America’s “Second Great Awakening” the authentic and lasting conversions under Nettleton’s ministry were overshadowed by the flamboyant methods of Charles Finney.

Although Nettleton was the most outspoken critic of Finney’s “new measures,” Mr. Nettleton always addressed his opposition with charity and brotherly kindness. A July 1827 meeting between Nettleton and Finney failed to expose Finney’s methods as unbiblical largely because Mr. Nettleton never took Mr. Finney to task on doctrinal issues. Sadly, Nettleton’s poor health kept him from attending most of the appointments.

Contrariwise, Charles Finney would have taken offense doctrinally to “Regeneration” by Asahel Nettleton. This was evident from Mr. Finney’s outspoken opposition to the expositions and treatises of Jonathan Edwards is apparent in his *Systematic Theology*, especially with regard to such doctrines as the total depravity of man, the sovereignty of God, and the regeneration of the converted soul.⁵

Dr. Andrew Bonar provides insights into Mr. Finney’s career in his “remodeled” work of Dr. Tyler’s original 1845 memoir of Nettleton.⁶ Dr. Bonar writes,

⁴ Tyler & Bonar, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours*; Banner of Truth; Carlisle, PA; 1996; pg.443

⁵ See Charles Finney’s *Systematic Theology* (1851), particularly Lectures 41, 48, & 50

⁶ Andrew Bonar, D.D., having access to more resources, such as correspondence, diaries and testimonies, &c., rewrote, added, and edited Nettleton’s memoir to produce *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours*, first published in 1854.

“Mr. Finney’s doctrines soon deviated from the truth as much as his measures did from scriptural order and wisdom.... No doubt [Finney] published works that contained rousing and startling truths; but even truth was given forth alongside of much error which counteracted all.”⁷

Dr. Bonar also includes a quote from an American minister, “whose information and character are alike such as entitle him to be depended on:—

“A class of evangelists arose, of whom the Rev. C. G. Finney was a distinguished leader, who adopted Pelagian, or Semi-Pelagian views of doctrine, and introduced a system of measures adapted to produce excitement. The consequence was, that great excitement was produced, and multitudes of converts were proclaimed. But a large proportion of these proved to be like seed sown on stony places. *Moral desolation succeeded these excitements. Some of these evangelists have lost their character, and most of them have lost, in a great measure, their influence. Very few of them would now be invited to preach in those places where their labours were said to be so remarkably successful.* This is true of Mr. Finney himself. If our English brethren who are giving Mr. Finney their countenance and support, are not making work for repentance, many of the most sound and judicious ministers of this country will be greatly mistaken. I am happy to be able to state that, in the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches generally, in our country, the “*New Measure System,*” as it has been called, has gone into disrepute, and revivals are becoming more like those which were witnessed at the beginning of the present century.”⁸

⁷ Tyler & Bonar, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours*; Banner of Truth; Carlisle, PA; 1996; pg.449

⁸ *Ibid*, pg.450

The revivals mentioned by the American minister above are, no doubt, speaking of the revivals of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Asahel Nettleton and other like-minded brethren.

RECOMMENDED READING:

Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.

By Bennet Tyler, D.D.⁹
1845

Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours

By Bennet Tyler, D.D., Andrew A. Bonar, D.D.¹⁰
1854

Village Hymns for Social Worship: Selected and Original

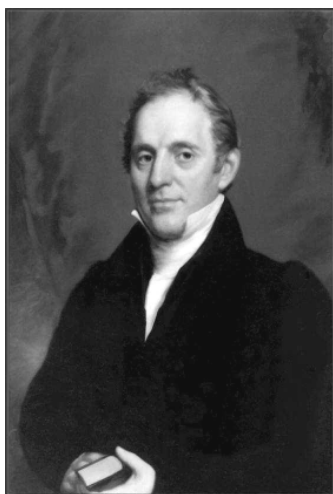
By Asahel Nettleton
1827

*Remains of the Late Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.:
Consisting of Sermons, Outlines and Plans of Sermons,
Brief Observations on Texts of Scripture, and
Miscellaneous Remarks*

By Bennet Tyler, D.D.
1845

⁹ Dr. Bennet Tyler was President and Professor of Christian Theology in the Theological Institute of Connecticut

¹⁰ Dr. Andrew Bonar, younger brother of Horatius Bonar, ministered in several churches in Scotland, including Glasgow, and was close friend and classmate of Robert Murray McCheyne, writing his memoir after his death.



A. Nettleton ..

Asahel Nettleton, D.D.

