Does Regeneration Precede Faith?

Regeneration is the sovereign act of God whereby He imparts His very life and His very nature to the believing sinner (John 1:12-13; Titus 3:5). Man's first birth is natural; his second birth is spiritual and supernatural. His first birth makes him a member of a fallen race; his second birth makes him a member of a redeemed race. His first birth gives him a depraved nature (Eph. 2:3); his second birth makes him partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). The moment a person is born again he receives a new life (John 6:47; 1 John 5:12) and a new position as a child of God (John 1:12; 1 John 3:1-2). In short, he is a new creature in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

It's impossible to be saved and not be regenerated. It's impossible to be regenerated and not be saved. Every born again person is saved. It is a Biblical absurdity to suggest that a person is saved and regenerated and at some later point of time becomes a believer in Christ. Faith and regeneration take place simultaneously. They both take place at the same instant of time. One is the response of a lost, sinful man to the gospel; the other is the supernatural work of God.

Today there are those of a Reformed persuasion who teach that regeneration precedes faith. They would say that a person must be born again before he believes. They would say that a person must have God's LIFE before he can believe on Christ. C. D. Cole states it this way: "The Calvinist says that life must precede faith, and is logically the cause of faith. Faith did not

cause the new birth, the new birth caused faith."[1]

Why do such men teach this? "Extreme Calvinists put the new birth before faith, since they believe that spiritually dead humans cannot exercise faith and, therefore, need to be born again before they can believe."[2] The doctrine of man's total depravity has been carried to the extreme by some Calvinists resulting in a wrong understanding of man's inability. They believe that the sinner is dead in sin and therefore he is like a corpse, totally unable to do anything. They believe he first must be regenerated and have life and only then will he be able to believe the gospel. But the Scripture teaches that he must believe in order to have life (John 20:31).

The Philippian jailer once asked, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). If Paul had been an extreme Calvinist he might have said, "You can do nothing to be saved, absolutely nothing. You are dead in sin and a dead man can do nothing. If God doesn't regenerate you, then you are doomed." How different was the answer Paul gave: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31).

The common Calvinist argument is this: "The depraved sinner is said to be DEAD (Eph. 2:1). Since he is dead it is impossible for him to believe. A dead corpse cannot do anything." But Paul in Ephesians 2:1 is speaking of spiritual death and to compare spiritual death with physical death is problematic. A person who is physically dead cannot speak, cannot breathe, cannot laugh, cannot walk, etc. But a spiritually dead person can do all of these things. It's wrong to say that a spiritually dead person can do nothing. Even the Calvinist would have to admit that he can reject Jesus Christ, he can pray, he can read the Bible, he can sin and he can even do good works in an effort to earn his salvation. He has ability to do all of these things.

The following comments were written by Douglas K. Kutilek and are used

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[1]From a tract entitled *Which Comes First In Conversion—Life or Faith?* By C. D. Cole, published by Chapel Library, Venice, Florida.

[2]C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism*, p. 39.

with his permission:

> While the unsaved man is described by Paul as "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1), I believe that this is a metaphor that is vastly over stressed by some of the Calvinistic writers of my acquaintance. Their typical justification for their "regeneration before faith" view (albeit, immediately before, which results inevitably and immediately in saving faith) is that "a dead man cannot respond to anything--he cannot hear, see, feel, think, touch, taste, act, OR BELIEVE. and therefore, God MUST regenerate him/make him alive before he can believe."
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> I see what to me is an insuperable problem with this view--these very Calvinists have no problem with a man being convicted of sin before regeneration, in some cases conviction enduring for many days, months, even years--yet how can a "dead" man (as they understand the term) anymore come under conviction, feel guilt, sense a drawing to Christ, than he can believe? To be consistent, they would have to also teach regeneration before conviction--but then there would be no need for conviction!
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> Paul uses a metaphor when he says that the sinner is "dead"--man is separated from God by his sin, guilt, etc., and is corrupted and tainted in all parts of his being by sin--his body, emotions, intellect, will, etc. are all corrupted. This is not to say that he is as evil in all his thoughts and acts as he might in practice be, nor that unregenerate man is incapable of acts of love, self-sacrifice, kindness, morality, etc. But like Adam, he is separated from God by sin, and is not capable, in himself, of reconciling himself or restoring himself to God's favor.

C. H. Mackintosh, highly esteemed brethren writer, made a similar observation (from his comments on the Great Commission of Luke 24:44-49 in his miscellaneous writings):

> Our divine Master called upon sinners to repent and believe the gospel. Some would have us to believe that it is a mistake to call upon persons dead in trespasses and sins to do anything. "How," it is argued, "can those who are dead repent? They are

> incapable of any spiritual movement. They must first get the power ere they can either repent or believe."
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> What is our reply to all this? A very simple one indeed--our Lord knows better than all the theologians in the world what ought to be preached. He knows all about man's condition--his guilt, his misery, his spiritual death, his utter helplessness, his total inability to think a single right thought, to utter a single right word, to do a single right act; and yet He called upon men to repent. This is quite enough for us. It is no part of our business to seek to reconcile seeming differences. It may seem to us difficult to reconcile man's utter powerlessness with his responsibility; but "God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain." It is our happy privilege, and our bounder duty, to believe what He says, and do what He tells us. This is true wisdom, and it yields solid peace....Our Lord preached repentance, and He commanded His apostles to preach it; and they did so constantly.

Wherein lies the inability of the depraved sinner? **He can't because he won't**. An example of this is found in Genesis 37:4--Joseph's brothers "could not speak peaceably unto him." They were unable to speak peaceably unto him. What kind of inability was this? Were their mouths being held shut by some outside force so that they could not talk? Were they carried hundreds of miles away from Joseph so that it was impossible to talk to him? No, they could not because they would not. They did not want to speak to him in this way because of the depravity of their sinful and jealous hearts. Why can't men believe? Why don't men come to Christ? "And ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life" (John 5:40). Or literally, "And ye are not willing to come unto Me that ye may have life" (William Kelly's translation). Their inability to come to Christ was due to their refusal to come to Him that they might have life. [*Important note*: The extreme Calvinist, if consistent with his belief, should re-write John 5:40 in this way: "And ye will not have life that ye may come to me." This is because Calvinism teaches that a dead sinner cannot come to Christ or believe in Him unless he first has life]. For a more detailed study on the willingness of God to save depraved men, see our study, *God's Willingness and Man's Unwillingness–A Problem for Extreme Calvinists* (40 cents).

We agree that no one can believe on Christ apart from God's great and gracious working in the heart which involves both enabling and enlightenment (John 6:44,65; Matthew 11:27; 16:16-17; Acts 16:14). It is interesting that God sometimes commands a person to do what in himself he is totally unable to do. One example involves the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-5). Christ gave him the command, "Stretch forth thine hand!" How could he do this if he suffered from paralysis? Christ commanded, the man obeyed and God enabled! Christ enabled him to do the impossible! So also the sinner is commanded to believe on Christ. If the sinner fails to obey this command then he is guilty of disobeying the gospel (2 Thess. 1:8). He will never be able to use this excuse: "Lord, the reason I did not believe on Christ was because I was totally depraved and unable to believe."

Does regeneration precede faith? Actually they both take place in the same moment of time. The moment a person believes on the Lord Jesus Christ he is regenerated (born again). The moment he receives Christ by faith he also receives God's gift of eternal life. It all happens in an instant of time. Yet logically as we think about this great transaction, we must put an order to it. Does the Bible indicate that a person must be regenerated so that he can believe or does the Bible teach that a person must believe in order to be regenerated? Do we need life in order to believe or do we need to believe in order to have life?

The Bible clearly teaches this: BELIEVE AND THOU SHALT LIVE! "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on Me hath everlasting life" (John 6:47). "That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:15). The extreme Calvinist says, "LIVE AND THOU SHALT BELIEVE!" Please notice that John 1:12 does **not** say this: "But as many as have been regenerated, to them gave He the power to believe on His Name, even to those who have become the children of God." Notice also that John 20:31 says, "believing ye might have life." It does not say, "having life ye might believe." In his helpless and hopeless condition the sinner is told to LOOK to the Lord Jesus Christ AND LIVE (John 3:14-16; Numbers 21). [We sing the hymn, *Look and Live*. The extreme Calvinist should rename the hymn: *Live and Look*.]

The extreme Calvinist teaches that a person must have life in order to

believe. The Lord Jesus taught that a person must believe (come to Christ[3]) in order to have life (John 5:40). Why do people not believe on Christ? Is it because they have not been regenerated or because they refuse to come to Christ by faith (John 5:40; 2 Thess. 2:10,12)?

R. C. Sproul believes that regeneration precedes faith. But in spite of his doctrine, he once wrote the following: "Once Luther grasped the teaching of Paul in Romans, he was reborn" (R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 1993 edition, p. 144). He must have written these words in haste because to be consistent with his theology he should have said it this way: "Once Luther was reborn, he grasped the teaching of Paul in Romans."

If regeneration precedes faith, then this would make faith unnecessary since the person would already be saved. If a person is regenerated, then he is born of God and a member of God's family. If you are a member of God's family then you are already saved so what need is there for faith?

Charles Spurgeon, a strong Calvinist himself, recognized the folly of saying that the sinner must be regenerated before he can believe:

> If I am to preach the faith in Christ to a man who is regenerated, then the man, being regenerated, is saved already, and it is an unnecessary and ridiculous thing for me to preach Christ to him, and bid him to believe in order to be saved when he is saved already, being regenerate. Am I only to preach faith to those who have it? Absurd, indeed! Is not this waiting till the man is cured and then bringing him the medicine? This is preaching Christ to the righteous and not to sinners.[4]

Concerning regeneration preceding faith, some Calvinists take this to a ridiculous extreme. Though it seems unthinkable, they actually teach that a person can be regenerated by God and then not come to faith in Christ until years later.

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[3]To "come to Christ" is synonymous with "believing on Him" (see John **6:35**,37,40).

[4]From Spurgeon's sermon entitled, *The Warrant of Faith.*

The Reformation Study Bible (formerly called *The Geneva Study Bible)* claims to be a clear statement of Reformed theology. On page 1664 there is an article on Regeneration. It is a shocking statement relating to infant salvation: "**Infants can be born again**, although the faith that they exercise cannot be as visible as that of adults." I wrote to R.C. Sproul (General Editor) to ask for clarification of this statement. I received a written response from Sproul's assistant, V.A. Voorhis (dated 1/6/2000) in which he made the following statement which is even more shocking:

> When the RSB speaks in the notes of John 3 of "infants being born again," it is speaking of the work of quickening God does in them which inclines their will to Him. In Protestantism, regeneration always precedes faith and if God quickens them, the person will surely come.... Often, regeneration and our subsequent faith happen apparently simultaneously but logically, regeneration must precede faith. **An infant's faith may not come until years after God has worked by His Holy Spirit to regenerate him or her** [emphasis ours]. Two Biblical examples of infants who were born again are seen in Psalm 22:9-10 and Luke 1:15.

According to this teaching a child can be born again or regenerated as an infant and not come to faith in Christ until years later! This may or may not have been the teaching of the Reformers, but it certainly is not the teaching of the Word of God.

For a moment, let's assume that what the extreme Calvinists are saying is true. If regeneration precedes faith, then what must a sinner do to be regenerated? The extreme Calvinists have never satisfactorily answered this. Shedd's answer is typical. Because the sinner cannot believe, he is instructed to perform the following duties: (1) Read and hear the divine Word. (2) Give serious application of the mind to the truth. (3) Pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit for conviction and regeneration.[5]

Roy Aldrich's response to this is penetrating: "A doctrine of total depravity that excludes the possibility of faith must also exclude the possibilities of

[5]W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology,* Vol. II, pages 472, 512, 513.

hearing the Word, giving serious application to divine truth and praying for the Holy Spirit for conviction and regeneration. **The extreme Calvinist deals with a rather lively spiritual corpse after all.**"[6]

The problem with this position is that it perverts the gospel. The sinner is told that the condition of salvation is prayer instead of faith. How contrary to Acts 16:31 where the sinner is **not** told to pray for conviction and regeneration. The sinner is simply told to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

For more information on this subject, see our website article:
http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org/reformed/regenera.htm

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[6]Roy L. Aldrich, "The Gift of God," *Biblio-theca Sacra,* July, 1965, pages 248-253.