

Immediate, Holy Spirit Regeneration

By Zack Guess

A note about the study of doctrine:

We live in a very superficial age, theologically speaking. In my opinion we need much diligent study and preaching on the great doctrines of the faith. However, it is easy to fall into the trap of considering our doctrine from a purely intellectual perspective, while it has no discernible effect on our lives and spirits. This is not the way to study and preach doctrine. We need to realize that when we study doctrine we are not dealing with intellectual abstractions; we are dealing with **glorious, eternal truths!** Doctrinal preaching should have at least two effects on us.

First, it ought to often overwhelm us with praise to the God of all grace. It is striking that in Paul's writings he often breaks out into doxologies. In introducing the glorious doctrine of election, for example, he says in Ephesians 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ..." This is a spiritual song of praise.

Secondly, the great doctrines of grace should inspire us to holy living. It is amazing to me that most of the great Christological passages in the New Testament are in a practical context. For example, the exalted passage in 2 Corinthians 8:9 "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich," is in the context of encouraging the Corinthian saints to give of their financial resources for the benefit of the poor saints in Jerusalem. Many more examples of this could be given. **Great doctrine** should move us to **great worship** and to **great living**. I once read a poem which included this line: "Doctrine without duty is like a tree without fruits; duty without doctrine is like a tree without roots."

In the subject we have under consideration, Immediate, Holy Spirit, Regeneration, let us be careful to study it in the correct way. May this great truth lead us to praise. Let us express our gratitude to the One Who has "called you out of darkness into his **marvellous light**." The Lord Jesus said to some who had been born from above "But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear."(Matthew 13:16).

May this truth also encourage us to righteous living. If we have been given the precious gift of spiritual life, let us show that in our behavior. Let us say with the man in James 2:18 "shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works."

Definition of terms:

Regeneration-By regeneration I mean the initial giving of spiritual life. I agree with Michael Gowens in his book, *BORN AGAIN: The Doctrine of Effectual Calling*. He said, "*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." Regeneration is giving of spiritual life to one who has been dead in trespasses and sins.

Immediate-I am not using the term, immediate, here in the sense of being sudden, even though regeneration is a sudden or instantaneous act. The word, immediate, is used here in the sense of

"having nothing come between; with no intermediary." This means that the Holy Spirit is the **sole agent** in regeneration. Here it will be good to quote Arthur W. Pink in his book, *The Holy Spirit*, pp. 56,57:

In His work of "quickening," by which we mean the impartation of spiritual life to the soul, the Spirit acts immediately from within, and not by applying something from without. Quickening is a *direct* operation of the Spirit without the use of any instrument: the Word is used by Him afterwards to call into exercise the life then communicated... The soul, then, is quickened into newness of life by the **direct** and **supernatural** operation of the Spirit, without any medium or means whatever... No, men are not "quickened" *by* the Word, they must be quickened in order to receive and understand the Word.

Pink says on page forty-nine of the same book:

In regeneration one of God's elect is the subject, and the Spirit of God is the sole agent. The subject of the new birth is **wholly passive**: he does not act but is acted upon. The sovereign work of the Spirit in the soul precedes *all* holy exercises of heart- such as sorrow for sin, faith in Christ, love toward God... This great change is not a gradual and protracted process, but is *instantaneous*: in an instant of time the favored subject of it passes from death unto life.

Note: A number of Sovereign Grace groups agree with what we Primitive Baptists teach on the so-called Five Points, but very few agree with us on the doctrine of Immediate Regeneration. There are some, notably the Protestant Reformed denomination, W. G. T. Shedd, a Congregationalist, A. W. Pink, W. E. Best, and a few others. Some theologians seem to talk out of both sides of their mouths. In some places in their theology books they seem to teach Immediate Regeneration while in other places they plainly teach Gospel Regeneration.

A word of criticism from a friendly critic: I am afraid that in our rightful defense of Immediate Regeneration, some of us Primitive Baptists have not put enough emphasis on the work of the gospel, which is **conversion**. We are afraid that if we call on someone to repent, as Peter did on the day of Pentecost, that we will be accused of teaching Gospel Regeneration. We must beg God to help us restore the **balance of truth**. We must positively teach the truth and not just react against error.

To demonstrate this I am including here a message that Elder David Pyles wrote a brother on e-mail.

SERMON ENDINGS

I would like to address your question concerning reasons why the unregenerate should be addressed in our sermons. Though you have asked specifically about sermon endings, what I have to say would apply to any part of a sermon.

Though the natural man will not receive the gospel into his unregenerate heart (1Cor 2:14, Rom 8:5, Jn 8:43-47, Jn 10:25-27), I believe there are yet two reasons why the gospel should be addressed to him. I feel fairly sure Elder Thompson was motivated by these reasons. The reasons are:

1) The natural man has a memory. Certain of the things preached to him while within unregeneracy will lodge into his natural memory. These things will simply be "head knowledge" unto him in this state, but when God changes his nature in the new birth, those things the preacher formerly taught him will become the joy and rejoicing of his heart (Jer 15:16).

The same principle would apply in training our children. We teach them the way of the Lord while knowing we cannot transform them into spiritual beings, but we sow the seed in hopes that God will quicken it to bring forth fruit. Elder Omar Strickland used to tell of how his father made him study the Bible when he was a boy. His father told him that he could not put the word into his heart, but only into his head, but when God put it into his heart, he would then be thankful that his father had put it into his head.

2) It is our role to warn the wicked so that they will be left without excuse, and so that our negligence will not be the occasion of their condemnation. This principle is expressed in:

Ezek 3:

17 Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me.

18 When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

19 Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.

I think the following paragraph from the Preface to the 1689 London Confession expresses these principles well:

And verily there is one spring and cause of the decay of religion in our day which we cannot but touch upon and earnestly urge a redress of, and that is the neglect of the worship of God in families by those to whom the charge and conduct of them is

committed. May not the gross ignorance and instability of many, with the profaneness of others, be justly charged upon their parents and masters, who have not trained them up in the way wherein they ought to walk when they were young, but have neglected those frequent and solemn commands which the Lord hath laid upon them, so to catechise and instruct them that their tender years might be seasoned with the knowledge of the truth of God as revealed in the Scriptures; and also by their own omission of prayer and other duties of religion of their families, together with the ill example of their loose conversation, having, inured them first to a neglect and the contempt of all piety and religion? We know this will not excuse the blindness and wickedness of any, but certainly it will fall heavy upon those that have been thus the occasion thereof; they indeed die in their sins, but will not their blood be required of those under whose care they were, who yet permitted them to go on without warning - yea, led them into the paths of destruction? And will not the diligence of Christians with respect to the discharge of these duties in ages past rise up in judgment against and condemn many of those who would be esteemed such now?

Finally, I think it is improper to address the unregenerate in any way which would leave improper theological impressions (e.g. urgings to get born again, etc). I believe Elder Thompson was generally careful not to do this.

To what extent should a minister address himself to the unregenerate, and how should it be done? I believe the answer to these questions can be found in the book of Acts. There are several sermons recorded there. We should use these as our pattern. Certainly, the indecent pleas of the Arminians are nowhere to be found in these sermons. At the same time, there will indeed be parts of these sermons serving to warn the wicked.

I hope this helps.

May God bless, David Pyles

A Resurrection

When speaking of the truth of the power of God in bringing salvation to the sinner, the Scriptures use three powerful analogies or comparisons. In all three of these comparisons the recipient of the action is **helpless** and **passive** until a higher power acts upon it. The first of these comparisons is that of resurrection. In John 5:25, Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, 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." This is not talking about the resurrection of the bodies from the grave. That is the subject under consideration in verse 28.

Christ says here, that the "hour is coming and NOW is." The time was right then. Jesus was speaking of a resurrection from being dead in sin, to being alive in Jesus Christ--a spiritual resurrection. Just as it took the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ to raise Lazarus from the tomb (John 11:43), so it takes the voice of the Son of God to give spiritual life to one who does not have it. Jesus said, "It is the spirit that quickeneth (makes alive); the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life"

(John 6:63). This spiritual quickening is what was under consideration in John 5:21 where Jesus said, "For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom He will." The same thing is spoken of in Eph. 2:5 "Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ . . ."

Lazarus was **helpless** and **passive** until Jesus raised him. Jesus called him with irresistible power. Lazarus could not and did not resist the voice of Christ. Likewise, the one who is dead in trespasses and sins is **helpless** and **passive** until Christ by the Holy Spirit calls him from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive. The one who is dead in sin cannot and will not resist the call of Christ. This call comes with irresistible power.

The Ephesian epistle, in very powerful and beautiful language shows emphatically that it takes the same mighty, miracle-working power to make one a believer as it took to raise Christ from the dead: "And what is the exceeding greatness of His power to usward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power, which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places." (Eph. 1:19,20).

A Birth

The bringing of a person from a state of death in sin to a state of being alive in Christ is also called a birth in the Scriptures. Jesus told Nicodemus, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3). Nicodemus didn't understand so Jesus explained to him, "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." (John 3:5).

Being "born of water and of the Spirit" simply means being born of the Spirit. The conjunction "and" is the Greek word KAI which can be translated *and*, *even*, or *also*. Born of water *even* of the Spirit would probably be the best translation here in light of the context of John 3:6,8. Water is used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John as can be seen from John 7:38,39.

Jesus goes on to say in John 3:6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh (the natural birth); and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (the spiritual birth)."

Then Jesus says, "The wind bloweth where it listeth (that is, where it desires, wishes, or pleases), and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8).

Notice that everyone who is born of the Spirit is born the same way. There is only one way of salvation. There is not one plan for the intelligent adult, another for the mentally incompetent, and another for the baby who dies in infancy. All are born the same way with the same irresistible power.

In natural birth, we know that the one who is born does not will to be born--in fact, he has no decision in the matter at all. He doesn't decide the time, place, or circumstances of his birth. He has no power to determine the family into which he will be born. The analogy holds true with regard to the spiritual birth. God determines the time, place and circumstances. The sinner can no more resist this than can an infant resist and refuse to be born naturally. This fact is shown so clearly in John 1:13 where speaking of believers it is said, "Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." This verse kills the doctrine of those who teach that men are saved when they exercise their "free wills" and accept God's "offer" of salvation.

This same truth is taught in I Peter 1:23: "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever." The "word" here is not the preached word nor is it the written word. Rather it is the living truth of God in Jesus Christ which is implanted in the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit.

A Creation

The impartation of saving grace to individuals is also referred to in the Scriptures as a creation. "For God, Who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (II Cor. 4:6). Here, of course, Paul is referring back to the Genesis account of the creation of the heaven and the earth. How was light created? God *commanded* it to shine with irresistible power! "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." (Gen. 1:3). There was no resistance here. God was the active agent. The thing created was passive (indeed non-existent) until God called it into being.

So it is in the spiritual creation, says Paul. How does an individual get to know Jesus Christ with saving knowledge? God commands it as He speaks life into the heart by the Holy Spirit. God is just as sovereign in the creation of spiritual life as He was in the creation of the universe. No one helped Him create the heaven and the earth and no one helps Him give spiritual life to His people. Look at the following Scriptures which teach this wonderful truth: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature (or "creation"--Grk. KTISIS): old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (II Cor. 5:17).

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." (Gal. 6:15).

Look at Ephesians 2:10, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." We are HIS workmanship. An artist forms his work as he wills. The artist does not ask the clay which he forms, "In what form would you desire to be made?" But he fashions the clay according to his own will. So also, we are God's workmanship. The prophet states this too in Isaiah 43:21, "This people have I formed for myself; they shall show forth my praise." That is irresistible grace. This power of God does not wait for those poor

miserable sinners to accept Christ--but it FORMS them to be His people. They therefore show forth His praise.

THOSE UNABLE TO HEAR

The Scriptures make plain that God has regenerated individuals before they were able to think in a reasonable manner. This is very plain in the case of David. He said, "Thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts." (Ps. 22:9). This clause is rendered in Bagster's Interlinery Hebrew And English Psalter, p. 29, "causing me to trust upon the breasts of my mother." The word for "hope" in Ps. 22:9 is BATACH, which, according to Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon To The Old Testament, p. 112 means, "to confide in anyone, to set one's hope and confidence upon any one." So it is obvious that David was regenerated while a suckling. It is just as obvious that this was before the stage of maturity to mentally comprehend either the spoken or written word of God. The conclusion that must be reached is that regeneration takes place on a **level below the consciousness**. Faith and repentance are those exercises which reveal this subconscious change.

Another infant who was regenerated in infancy was John the Baptist. In fact, John was born again while in his mother's womb. "The babe leaped in her womb" (Luke 1:41) "The babe leaped in my womb for joy" (Luke 1:44). According to Galatians 5:22 joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The occasion of the joy was the presence of his Savior who was in the womb of Mary. This was no ordinary leap of a babe in the womb of its mother. Elisabeth was enlightened by the Holy Spirit and she said the babe leaped for joy.

How does this square with a Scripture like John 17:3, where it is said, "And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent."? The answer is simple. One of the basic meanings of *know* is "to be aware or cognizant of." When a little baby is born, it is well aware that something has happened to it even though it can't put into words what has happened. Later on, the babe *knows* its mother long before it has the ability to say, "This is my mother." The same is true of a child of God who is born again in infancy. This little one knows that something has happened. The child feels joy in the presence of its Savior (just as an infant feels pleasure in the presence of its mother). Later as the child matures, it will give more mature indications of what has happened to it. This knowledge of Jesus Christ is imprinted into the hearts of God's people by a direct action of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 8:10-12; I John 2:27). This is a very good reason why infants and very small children should be in the congregation during worship services. If they are born again, they will feel and be benefited by the presence of the Lord.

The Lord Jesus Christ very strongly taught that some infants would be regenerated in infancy when He said, "Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings Thou has perfected praise?" (Matt. 21:16). Another man the Lord very probably touched by His grace while he was in the womb was Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5).

The infant son of David, who died in infancy, evidently was regenerated. David was sure that he went to heaven at death. David was a man after God's own heart and God must have revealed this to him. When the boy died, David said, "But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." (II Sam. 12:23).

FAITH

There is much misunderstanding in the religious world about "faith" or "belief." Many preachers will say that salvation is by grace but that a person must "put his trust in Jesus Christ" or "believe in Jesus Christ as his personal Savior" or "have faith in Jesus Christ" before he can be saved. This act of faith, thus presented, is an act of the sinner's free will.

This conception of faith is not true. If it were true then the sinner would be playing a part in his own salvation. He would be doing something in order to be saved. He would be moving toward God *before* he had spiritual life *in order to obtain* spiritual life. No matter how much a man may talk of "free grace," any act that a man had to perform before salvation, in order to obtain salvation, would render that salvation not free.

Salvation is, however, of grace. It is wholly of God. Even though no one is saved without faith, yet even that faith is a free gift of God. God gives a person faith when He causes him to be born of the Spirit, not before the person is born again. The born-again one cannot exercise faith before he has it. When we see a man exercise faith we can be sure that he is already in a "born-again" condition. To show that salvation is completely of grace, Paul said, "So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy." (Rom. 9:16). Speaking of those that believe on Jesus, John said that they "were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:13). These verses make it plain that "saving faith" is not an act of man's so-called "free will" but is a gift of God.

Definition Of The Terms

The Greek word most commonly translated "believe" in the New Testament is PISTEUO. The meaning is "to believe, be persuaded of, to place confidence in." (W. E. Vine). Thayer gives the meaning as follows: "of the conviction and trust to which a man is impelled by a certain inner and higher prerogative and law of his soul." When the object of believing is Jesus Christ, Thayer says that it is "a conviction, full of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah."

The Greek word most commonly translated "faith" in the New Testament is PISTIS. The meaning is "firm persuasion." (W. E. Vine). Thayer says of this word that "when it relates to God, PISTIS is the conviction that God exists and is the creator and ruler of all things, the provider and bestower of eternal salvation through Christ-Heb. 11:6." He says that, "in reference to Christ, it denotes a strong and welcome conviction or belief that Jesus is the Messiah, through whom we obtain eternal salvation."

It should be obvious that PISTEUO and PISTIS are cognate words. This means that they were derived from a common original form or root. One is a verb; the other is a noun. Simply put it means that "to believe" is "to exercise faith." "Faith" is "the ability to believe." So, if one believes, he is exercising the faith which he already has.

The Scriptural Record

The Scriptures make plain that faith is a gift of God and not an achievement of man's "free-will." "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." (Eph. 2:8,9). These verses tell us that we are saved on the principle of grace (a free unmerited favor); that faith is the instrument used; that salvation is not of works (including a work of faith); and that man cannot take any credit for his salvation. In short these verses say that God gives the individual faith *when* He saves him. Faith, as used here is almost a synonym for spiritual life.

"For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake." (Phil. 1:29). This verse makes it plain that the ability to believe on Christ is a **gift of God**, and not a power exercised by the "free-will" of the sinner.

"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith." (Heb. 12:2). Many people say that "if you will just take the first step and move towards Jesus, He will save you." But this verse teaches that Jesus makes the first step. And, He finishes what He started. Faith is not a work of the creature -- it is a work of the Creator, from beginning to end.

To further show that Jesus finishes what He has begun He said to Peter, "But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not." (Luke 22:32). Christ prays for all His people as their Intercessor. Though they lapse into sin from time to time their faith (practically a synonym for spiritual life) will never fail. The fact that Jesus is both the author and finisher of faith is what is being emphasized in the following verse: "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." (I John 5:4).

Another verse that shows that the ability to believe is entirely of God and is not of man is I Peter 1:21: "Who **by Him** do believe in God, that raised Him up from the dead and gave Him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God." The gift of faith was purchased for the elect on the cross: "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God." (I Peter 3:18). We are brought to God in vital, living union by faith. That faith is entirely by Christ is further pointed out in Acts 3:16: "And His name through faith in His name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea the faith which is by Him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all."

Faith is not the work of man. Man only exercises that which God has already worked in him. "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent." (John 6:29). John Gill says of this verse, "This, as a principle, is purely God's work; as it is an act, or

as it is exercised under the influence of divine grace it is man's act." He is saying what I have said above -- man only exercises what God has already worked in him. The Greek scholar, A. T. Robertson says, "So here Jesus terms belief in Him as the work of God."

It takes the same power to truly believe as it took to raise Christ from the dead. "And what is the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power, which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead ... " (Eph. 1:19,20).

Peter gave his witness in the following words, "Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." (II Peter 1:1). The word translated "obtained" is LAGCHANO, "to obtain by lot." Kittel's Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words has this to say about the word: "The attainment is not by one's own effort or as a result of one's own exertions, but is like ripe fruit falling into one's lap ... In this sentence, the point of LAGCHANO is that faith has come to them from God with no co-operation on their part."

The Lord Jesus sums it up when He says, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray Him. And He said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto Me, except it were given unto him of my Father." (John 6:63-65).

HERMAN HOEKSEMA

One of the few denominations which agrees with Primitive Baptists on Immediate Regeneration is the Protestant Reformed group. Their leading theologian was Herman Hoeksema, who wrote a very good systematic theology book entitled *Reformed Dogmatics*. His remarks on faith are so good that I have included several of them:

"Faith is not another work on the part of man, by performing which he becomes worthy of salvation. All the work that makes us worthy of righteousness and eternal life and glory has been performed and completely finished by Christ Himself. This is true even of faith itself. Christ merited faith for us by His perfect obedience. Nor may we say that faith is a condition upon our fulfillment of which God is willing to give us the salvation merited by Christ for us. There are no conditions whatsoever unto salvation. It is free and sovereign."

"The bond whereby we are united with Christ is faith. This faith we do not possess of ourselves. It is strictly a gift of God, wrought in us by the Spirit of Christ."

"A distinction can be made between the **essence** and the **operation**, or between the **potential** and **activity** of saving faith. Faith is, first of all, a spiritual disposition, a power or aptitude to apprehend and appropriate Christ and all His benefits ... It is the fitness to

believe in distinction from the act itself. We may illustrate this by many natural examples. When a child is born, it has all the faculties and powers and gifts it will ever have, even though they do not as yet actively function ... If later in life the child develops into a great mathematician or skillful musician, this mathematical bent of mind or artistic tendency was not added to the child's talents after it was born; his talents were all given with birth. The same may be said of saving faith. As a spiritual ability, it is given with our spiritual birth, that is, in regeneration, while it develops into the conscious activity of believing through contact with the gospel applied to the heart by the Spirit of Christ. Without this spiritual ability it is impossible for a man to believe in Christ. **If a child is born blind he cannot be taught to see.** If he is born deaf, the activity of hearing will never develop. The same is true spiritually. By nature, the sinner is born blind and deaf and dumb with regard to spiritual things."

"This ability of saving faith is, of course, the fruit of the Holy Ghost. It is true that the power of faith becomes active belief only through the gospel."

"We must also remark here that this ability or potential of faith is wrought in the heart immediately by the Spirit of Christ. The power of faith may be wrought in the heart of the smallest infant as well as in the heart of the adult."

"This potential of faith can never be lost. The activity of saving faith may be very weak at times, may seem to have died out and disappeared, so that we seem to have no hold on Christ and the precious promises of Christ. But the power of faith, the potential of faith, can never be lost -- Once a believer, always a believer."

"Faith cannot be called a condition, a prerequisite, which man must fulfill in order to receive salvation and all the benefits of grace. Faith certainly is not a condition which man must fulfill in order to receive the gifts of grace. On the contrary, faith itself is one of the chief gifts of the grace of God to the sinner. One does not receive grace on condition that he first believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, but on the contrary, he receives the gift of faith in order that he may now live from out of Christ. There are no conditions for salvation, simply because salvation is never dependent on anything in man. By grace ye are saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.--Eph. 2:8."

"The real work of God is that we believe in Jesus Christ Whom God hath sent. (John 6:29) ... Faith is God's own work, the work of His free grace within us, the spiritual means of God, the spiritual dispositions whereby God ingrafts us into Christ through the Holy Spirit, and whereby He causes all the blessings of salvation to flow out of Christ to us-ward. It is the bond to Christ whereby our soul cleaves unto Him, lives out of Him, and receives and appropriates all His benefits."

"Faith reveals itself as spiritual knowledge. Here a new knowledge is meant, which you did not possess as a sinner and of which you received the power in regeneration. The man that has this knowledge discerns spiritual things. The natural man does not see any of this, but the spiritual man that has the gift of faith discerns all things. On the other hand, if one is not born again he cannot even see the kingdom of God."

"The knowledge of saving faith is spiritual. It is experiential. It is not a theoretical knowledge *about* God in Christ, but it is the knowledge of Him. There is a wide difference between knowing that thing or person ... A dietitian may be able to analyze every item on a menu and inform you exactly as to the number and kinds of vitamins each offered dish contains, but if he has cancer of the stomach he cannot taste the food and enjoy it. On the other hand, the man with the hungry stomach may sit at the table with him, know absolutely nothing about the vitamins; but he will order his meal, relish his food, and appropriate it to himself in such a way that he is refreshed and strengthened."

"So a man may be a keen theologian and though he gives a lecture on the Bread of Life, he does not hunger after it and cannot eat it -- if he has not faith. On the other hand, a person may be far inferior to this able theologian in intellectual capacity, but if he possess the knowledge of saving faith he will be like the hungry man that relishes and digests his food. The knowledge of saving faith is the kind of knowledge spoken of in John 17:3: 'And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.'"

SOME PROBLEM TEXTS

At first glance some texts seem to teach Gospel Regeneration. However, Scripture does not contradict itself. After years of honest study I have become increasingly convinced that we Primitive Baptists are correct in our teaching on this subject. I believe that we can give a reasonable explanation for every text which might seem to teach Gospel Regeneration.

Years ago I was challenged in 1 Corinthians 4:15 and did an intense study of this verse. I wrote the following as the result of my studies:

Begotten by the Gospel:

What Does This Mean?

Many well-meaning and honest Christians have the wrong notion of the purpose of the gospel. Many of them think that the gospel is the means that God uses to bring about the new birth in people. But an examination of the Scriptures shows that this is not true. The new birth is exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit. (John 3:8). The purpose of the gospel is to bring life and immortality to light. (2 Timothy 1:10). This means that the gospel simply manifests or reveals spiritual life that had previously been placed in the heart by the Holy Spirit.

Now the gospel is a very wonderful and a very powerful gift of God. The Scriptures attribute great power to the gospel. For this reason many people have mis-interpreted many of the passages of Scripture which deal with the function of the gospel. One of these commonly mis-interpreted Scriptures is 1 Corinthians 4:15, which reads, 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." The Apostle Paul is saying here that in some sense he is the father of these Corinthians, and they are his children. The instrument by which they were born was the gospel. Many people interpret this to mean that Paul was the father of the Corinthians in the sense that he had caused them to be born again when he preached the gospel to them. But that this is exactly not what the text is teaching can be shown by the following considerations.

In the first place it would have been blasphemy for the Corinthians to refer to Paul as a father in the sense that he was the means of bringing eternal life to them. No man can receive this honor because God alone is to receive the credit and glory for the salvation of His people. Christ instructed us, "And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven." (Matthew 23:9). This is one of the gross errors of the Roman Catholic Church by having the priests addressed as "father." So it is certain that Paul was not the father of the Corinthians in the sense that he, by preaching the gospel to them, had had a part in their spiritual birth.

In the second place, this interpretation of the passage betrays an ignorance of how "father," "children," and "begotten" were commonly used in the day in which Paul was writing. Let us study together for a moment and see how these terms were then used. Such study will throw great light on this passage.

The Meaning of Begotten

First, let us see how this word "begotten" was commonly used at the time of the writing of the New Testament. J.H. Thayer, in his **Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament Words**, p. 133, says, "In a Jewish sense, of one who brings others over to his way of life." Commenting on the same word in the same passage, John Gill, in his **Commentary On The New Testament**, quotes the Jerusalem Talmud as follows: "If one teaches the son of his neighbor the Law, the Scripture reckons this the same as if he had begotten him."

Arndt and Gingrich, in their **Greek-English Lexicon**, p. 154, say of the same word, "Figuratively of the influence exerted by one person on another. . . of a teacher on pupils." H. Cremer, in his **Biblical-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek**, p. 146, says of this word, "Peculiar is the use made by Paul in some passages of the word to denote an influence exerted on some one, moulding his life, as in Gal. 4:24; 1Cor. 4:15; Philemon 10."

If we put all this together and sum it up, it becomes immediately apparent that Paul was not even hinting to these Corinthians that he had preached the gospel to them and that they had thereby been born again. Paul is rather saying this, "By my use of the gospel I have brought you over to my way of life; I have taught you the Scriptures; I have exerted an influence on you as a teacher on his pupils; I have helped to mould your life." This, and only this, is what Paul had done to those Corinthians by preaching the gospel to them. And he had this influence only on those who had previously been born again by the **direct** and **immediate** operation of the Holy Spirit and who were thus receptive to his

gospel. This can easily be seen by a study of Acts 18: 1-17, which records the founding of the church at Corinth. That the meaning of the word "begotten" easily and honestly bears this meaning will not be disputed by an honest and open-minded student.

A Look at the Word "Father"

Now let us briefly examine a very common way in which the word "father" was used in New Testament times. Thayer says, p. 495, "Metaphorically. . .one who stands in a father's place, and looks after another in a pastoral way: 1Cor. 4:15." W. E. Vine, in his **Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words**, Vol. 2, p. 82, says ". . .of one who, as a preacher of the Gospel and a teacher, stands in a father's place, caring for his spiritual children, 1 Cor. 4:15."

So, here again, Paul is not saying that he was an instrument in giving spiritual life, but his responsibility was to help the life that had already been implanted by the Holy Spirit to develop. There is not even a hint of the new birth here.

What About "Sons?"

To see the New Testament concept of the beautiful relationship that should exist between a true minister of the gospel and those placed under his care, we quote from Thayer's comments on the word "sons" or "children" used in 1 Cor. 4:14, which passage has a direct bearing on the verse we are studying: "Metaphorically, the name is transferred to that intimate and reciprocal relationship formed between men by the bonds of love, friendship, trust, just as between parents and children. . .just as in Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, Persian, so in the N. T., pupils or disciples are called children of their teachers, because the latter by their instruction nourish the minds of their pupils and mould their characters." p.617.

In line with this, Kittel, in his **Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words**, Vol. 1, pp. 665-667, in an article entitled "Begetting as Image of the Relationship of Master and Disciple" says, "The use of the terms father and son with reference to the master and disciple may be seen already in 2 Kings 2:12. At the time of Jesus it was customary for the rabbi to call his pupil and the ordinary member of the community 'my son.' "

Summation

To sum it all up, what is Paul saying in this passage? He is saying that there were plenty of self-appointed preachers around who did not really have a deep concern for the flock of God (the ten thousand instructors in Christ). But, says Paul, there are only a few men who are truly called of God and who are vitally concerned with the spiritual welfare of God's children (the "not many fathers"). Paul is saying further that he is a father to these Corinthians. By this he means that he preached the gospel to them and turned them from **error** to **truth**. He thus became their spiritual teacher and they became learners or disciples. By his teaching he had great influence on them and helped to mold their lives. In this sense he was their **father** and they were his **children**. But only in this sense. If

they had not previously been born again, his teaching would have had no effect on them in a positive way.

Paul takes no credit for giving them spiritual life. He gives God all the credit for that. Would that men today would do the same!

JAMES 1:18

There are two things that I would like to insert here, one short paragraph that I have written on it, and excerpts from an article in *The Standard Bearer*, a periodical of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America.

Begotten By The Word Of Truth

Speaking of God, James says, "Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." (James 1:18). The word translated "begat" is APOKUEO. It means "to bring forth from the womb, or to give birth to." (Thayer). James is not talking about the initial giving of life, but about life being brought forth to the level of consciousness. In the spiritual realm as well as in the natural the conception of life is an *instantaneous* happening. But the development and birth of this conceived life is a *process*. The conception is done by the Holy Spirit. The birth (conversion or coming to a realization of one's possession of eternal life) is done by the word of truth. James here is not talking about *regeneration*: he is talking about *conversion*. (For an excellent discussion of this and related Scriptures see [The Power of the Word](#) by Jimmy Barber).

Excerpts from An Exposition of the Epistle of James

Chapter 1:18

By Professor Robert Decker

Theological School of the Protestant Churches of America

In the past (not so much today because people generally are ignorant of the Word of God and do not care to know them) a good deal of controversy swirled about this and similar texts of scripture. The controversy had to do with the question as to how regeneration is effected. Some said that the new birth is mediate; that is, it occurs through the means of the preaching of the Word; while others said that regeneration is immediate; that is, it occurs apart from means and is the initial work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the elect. This latter is our position.

That the wonder of regeneration is immediate is evident when we take note of the terms involved in this text and others. The word in the text, "begat he us," means literally "to give birth to." **The point is that life prior to birth is presupposed.** This word is always used in the New Testament to refer to birth from the womb. In other words the term

refers to life coming to consciousness. Now, a different word is used by Jesus in His conversation with Nicodemus as recorded in John 3. Jesus says in verse 3: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The words "born again" refer to the moment of conception, the very beginning of life in the womb. This is precisely how Nicodemus took what Jesus had said. He responds (vs.4), "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus then explains that he speaks of a birth of "water and of the Spirit" (vs. 5). The same word used in John 3:3 is also found in that beautiful passage, 1 Peter 1:23-25. Here the Scriptures speak of "being born again out of incorruptible seed by the living and abiding word." Out of that incorruptible seed life is conceived. That's the work of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, the living and abiding - that is, the eternal Word. **It happens beneath the consciousness of the elect**, [sometimes] in earliest infancy or perhaps even at the moment of conception. That new, heavenly, resurrection life of Christ, which cannot die and apart from which one cannot even see the Kingdom of God, is brought to consciousness by means of the preaching of the Word. "And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you." (1Peter 1:25).

It is in that broad sense that James speaks of regeneration in this verse. The seed of life has already been implanted in our hearts; and having willed it, the Father of lights causes that principle of life to be born (come to conscious expression) by means of the word of truth.

PSALM 119:50

The Word Of God Revives

David wrote: "This is my comfort in my affliction: for Thy word hath quickened me." (Ps. 119:50).

The word translated "quickened" can be translated, "Make alive." But it can also be translated, "revive." It is used in the sense of "revive" here. This seems to be obvious from the way the word is used elsewhere in this psalm. In Verse 25 and in verse 37, David asked the Lord to quicken him. It is evident that he already possessed eternal life when he wrote this psalm. So he did not ask the Lord to give him life; rather he asked the Lord to revive the life which he already had but which had fallen to a low ebb in the exercise of it. It is equivalent to "restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation." (Ps. 51:12). He did not say "restore to me salvation," but "restore the joy of salvation" which had been taken away by sin.

In conclusion, I believe that all the Scriptures which appear to some to teach Gospel Regeneration in fact teach **conversion**.

Life And Immortality Revealed

God's purpose and grace "is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through

the gospel." (II Tim. 1:10). This verse tells us what the gospel is for. The gospel brings "life and immortality to light." What does this mean? The words translated "hath brought to light" are from PHOTIZO. The word means "to bring to light." (W. E. Vine). It means "to render evident." (Thayer). It means "to reveal something." (Arndt and Gingrich). So the purpose of the gospel is to *reveal* life and immortality. It does not *create* nor *impart* life and immortality. When the Holy Spirit regenerates a person, that work is a hidden work, but the gospel reveals that work. When the individual responds to the preaching of the gospel, the work of grace which had been wrought in the heart of that individual is now revealed.

The Lord Saves; The Gospel Looses

When Jesus came to the tomb of the dead Lazarus He said, "Lazarus, come forth." (John 11:43). The same Jesus who spoke physical life into existence by His voice speaks spiritual life into existence by His voice. "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." (John 6:63).

After Lazarus had been given life Jesus said to those round about, "Loose him, and let him go." (John 11:44). The people loosed the living Lazarus from the graveclothes which greatly hindered his exercise of the life which he possessed. This is what the gospel does; it does not give life, but it frees the possessors of life from ignorance, superstition, and error. Only Christ, speaking through the Holy Spirit, can give life.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

I have barely scratched the surface in the study of this marvelous subject. For those of you who wish to dig deeper I will give an admittedly incomplete annotated bibliography:

Best, W. E. Regeneration and Conversion. Houston, TX: South Belt Grace Church, 1975. Best is very sound in distinguishing between regeneration and conversion. He does not have the best writing style, but he is well worth reading. You can get this book for free by writing to the W. E. Best Missionary Trust, P. O. Box 34904, Houston, TX 77234, and requesting it.

Boyce, J. P. Abstract of Systematic Theology. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887. This has been reprinted several times and I believe it is available today, but I don't know from whom. On pages 380-382 of this book, he clearly teaches that regeneration must precede conversion. Boyce was one of the founders of the Southern Baptist Seminary, which is at Louisville, Kentucky.

Crouse, W. H. Regeneration, or the New Birth. I am not sure when this was written. It was written sometime in the early 1900s. Brother Crouse was a very able minister among the Progressive Primitive Baptists. This is a very good book, but I am not sure how a copy could be obtained. I have a Xerox copy which I made from a copy of the book

which was loaned to me by Elder Emerson Proctor, a good brother who is with the Progressives.

Gill, John. A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity. I do not know when this work was originally published. Thankfully it has been republished many times. In my opinion it is the best and soundest systematic theology that I know anything about. Admittedly Gill was not perfect, and I do not agree with him on everything, but I think it is very short-sighted to refuse to read him because of some differences. It is true that Gill taught gospel regeneration in many of his writings. We must remember that this subject was not being controverted much in his day. Toward the end of his life, I believe that he began to see more clearly the issues that were involved. I am going to give the following quote from page 534 of the 1950 Turner Lassetter reprint.

Yet this instrumentality of the word in regeneration seems not so agreeable to the principle of grace implanted in the soul in regeneration, and to be understood with respect to that; since that is done by **immediate infusion**, and is represented as a creation; and now as God made no use of any instrument in the first and old creation, so neither does it seem so agreeable that he should use any in the new creation: wherefore this is rather to be understood of the exertion of the principle of grace, and drawing it forth into act and exercise; which is excited and encouraged by the ministry of the word, by which it **appears** that a man is born again; so the three thousand first converts, and the jailor, were first regenerated, or had the principle of grace wrought in their souls by the Spirit of God, and they were directed and encouraged by the ministry of the apostles to repent and believe in Christ; whereby it became **manifest** that they were born again

Gowens, Michael. Born Again: The Doctrine of Effectual Calling. Lexington: Sovereign Grace Publications, 1996. This is a short but excellent treatment of the subject. It is available from Elder Gowens. I would recommend that a copy be obtained for every member of our churches, and that they be encouraged to read and study it.

Hassell, C. B. and Sylvester. This was originally published in 1886, but has been reprinted by the Old School Hymnal Co. Every Primitive Baptist family ought to have this in their home. Some of the pages in this book which deal with the subject under consideration are 317, 318, 329, 352, 405, 530, and 637.

Hoeksema, Herman. Reformed Dogmatics. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966. The Protestant Reformed denomination is one of the few that essentially agrees with the Primitive Baptists on the doctrine of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). In this excellent book Hoeksema makes the vital distinction between regeneration and conversion crystal clear. Some of the pages where he deals with this subject are 452, 455, 456, 459-463, 479-481, 485, 486, 489. Even though these people are reformed in their church government and even though they sprinkle infants, this book would be a worthwhile addition to the library of any Primitive Baptist preacher. It can be ordered from Reformed Free Publishing Association, 4949 Ivanrest, Ave., S.W., Grandville, MI 49418-9709.

Holder, Joseph R. The New Birth. I don't know when my dear brother wrote this, but it is excellent. It should be in the home of every one of your church members. I am sure you can get a copy from him or from the Baptist Bible Hour.

Kuyper, Abraham. The Work of the Holy Spirit. Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1969. (This is a reprint. This book was originally published in 1900. Kuyper was a famous theologian and statesman from the Netherlands. The pages in his book that are particularly valuable for our study are 293-296, 305, 306, 313, 317-321.

Owen, John. The Holy Spirit. Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1971. This is a reprint. I am not sure when it was first published. Owen was a very famous English Puritan, who was born in 1616. He is widely recognized as one of the leading writers who has ever propagated and defended the doctrines of God's sovereign grace. The pages in this book which are particularly pertaining to our subject are 207-210, 213, 214, 299, 300, 316ff.

Pink, Arthur W. The Holy Spirit. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970. It would be hard to say too much about this book! Pink is as sound as a dollar. I have almost an entire chapter underlined. The pages which I found particularly helpful were 49, 54-59.

Pittman, R. H. and Sylvester Hassell. Questions and Answers. Ellenwood, GA: Primitive Baptist Publications, 1990. This is a reprint of a book which was first published in 1935. The man who reprinted it, Elder H. D. Fulmer is one to whom we all owe a great debt of gratitude. Brother Fulmer is one of our ablest and most dedicated contemporary ministers. He has reprinted several works of bygone days. This little book can probably be obtained from him. If any Primitive Baptist wants to know where our forefathers stood around the turn of the 20th century, he should get this rich little book. The pages in it which particularly pertain to our subject are 71-73.

Shedd, W. G. T. Dogmatic Theology. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971. This is a reprint of a work which was originally published in 1888. Shedd was a Congregational minister and a professor in several theological seminaries. He is very clear on the doctrines under consideration. His most helpful comments are in vol. 2, pages 494, 495, 498, 500-509.

Sproul, R. C. Essential Truths of the Christian Faith. Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1998. Sproul is a very popular and well-known contemporary Presbyterian scholar. In this book he presents "100 Key Doctrines in Plain Language." In his sections on *Effectual Calling* and *Rebirth* he very clearly teaches what I have set forth in this paper.

Warfield, B. B. Biblical and Theological Studies. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1952. This is a reprint. I do not know the date of the original publication. Warfield was a very prominent Presbyterian theologian and professor in Princeton Theological Seminary. He is very helpful on pages 369, 370. A quote from him will show his soundness: "At the root of all lies an act seen by God alone, and mediated by nothing, a direct, creative act of the Spirit, the new birth. This new birth

pushes itself into man's own consciousness through the call of the Word, responded to under the persuasive movements of the Spirit; his **conscious possession** of it thus mediated by the Word."