

'Regeneration an Active State' Ch. 3:9-21

by Charles Alexander

The sermon emphasizes that regeneration is an active, transformative work of the Holy Spirit that enables believers to understand and delight in God's will, contrasting it with the passive nature of the Old Covenant.

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31, John 3:3-18, Acts 2:23, Romans 2:17, 2 Corinthians 5:19, Colossians 1:13, Hebrews 9:14

Topics: "Spiritual Renewal", "Regeneration Doctrine"

Description

Charles Alexander preaches a profound sermon on the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus, highlighting Nicodemus as a representation of the Old Covenant people who were confident in their knowledge and privileges but lacked true understanding. Jesus introduces the doctrine of regeneration to counter the Pharisaic doctrine of dead works, emphasizing the need for spiritual renewal and a new birth to see the Kingdom of God. The sermon delves into the nature of regeneration as a work of enlightenment and persuasion, inscribing God's will in the heart and mind of believers. It stresses the active nature of regeneration, involving repentance, faith, and a pursuit of holiness, and refutes the idea of a time gap between regeneration and the manifestation of faith and repentance.

Transcript

V. 9 "How can these things be?"

Nicodemus represents throughout this dialogue the people of the Old Covenant - vainly confident of their "knowledge" and their national: privileges. "Behold thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God and knowest his will and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness ... thou therefore that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? ... thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God?" (Rom. 2:17-24)

All this was Nicodemus THE ruler of the Jews (Greek) - the representative and sample of the nation, coming in the night to the despised and rejected, because there was no true light in himself; expecting the reward of earthly glory on the sole account that he boasted a natural birth from Abraham and knew not that, "he is not a Jew which is one outwardly neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men but of God" (Rom. 2:28-29).

Thus does Paul, following Christ in the Spirit, utterly demolish and abolish in a few sentences Jewish praise and pretension. In like manner Christ has destroyed the vain confidence of Nicodemus by introducing the doctrine of regeneration to oppose the pharisaic doctrine of dead works and external obligation. "Except a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God".

Let us also in our turn, beware of manipulating the doctrine of regeneration so as to give it an independent existence divorced from the inward realities of the Spirit - repentance, faith, renewal, perseverance.

The true doctrine of regeneration had already, centuries before Nicodemus, been stated by the prophet Jeremiah when announcing the terms of the New Covenant (contrasted with the Old Covenant of Moses):

"Behold the days come that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jeremiah 31: 31-34)

This prophecy clearly shows the nature of regeneration to be a work of ENLIGHTENMENT AND PERSUASION. Paul's quotation of Jeremiah's prophecy in Hebrews 8:8-12, shows this clearly. Regeneration is a writing of the law of God (i.e. the will and the righteousness of God) in the mind and the heart - the mind as it is the seat of the understanding and the heart as it is the seat of the affections. The whole man is comprehended under these two principles, so that what Jeremiah-and Paul are saying is that in His work of regeneration, the Holy Spirit enlightens the mind concerning the divine will and renews the heart so that it delights in the will of God and mediates in that will day and night (Psalm.1).

REGENERATION NOT PASSIVE

Regeneration is not, therefore, a passive state, an inert condition of which the soul might not be aware, but a positive writing of God's will in mind and heart so that the renewed soul not only knows God's will, but delights to perform it.

Anything else is not regeneration, and it is significant that those who hold otherwise make no attempt to define in the language which scripture uses what regeneration in fact is.

This needs to be said, because in post-Reformation centuries a TIME ELEMENT has been introduced into the doctrine of regeneration solely in order to establish an entrenched defensive system against the errors of Arminius. It has been felt in some quarters that the entire edifice of reformed doctrine is undermined if regeneration is, not separated theologically from faith and repentance. The view is taken that only by giving regeneration an isolated and independent position in the scheme of salvation, can the error of human participation in the work be excluded. But the theory is a non sequitur. The consequence which is feared does not necessarily follow, and indeed, does not in fact follow, because the theory springs from a failure to define regeneration in scriptural terms.

Let our friends consider (and many of them we know. to be deeply committed to a real love of the truth and desire for the salvation of sinners) - let them consider the cardinal passage in Jeremiah 31, twice cited by Paul in the epistle to the Hebrews (see Heb. 8:7-12 and 10:16-17), and let them agree that to be "born again" is to receive a new heart and mind upon which the law - the will of God is inscribed.

It was this which the Old Covenant lacked. The Old Covenant presented the will of God engraven in stone; the New Covenant engraves it "upon the fleshy tables of the heart" (2 Cor. 3:3). It is true that under the Old Covenant many were "born Again", but not through the ministration of that Covenant, but through what

that covenant foreshadowed. There were those in ancient Israel (and before Israel, stretching back in antiquity to the beginnings of our race) who by the Holy Spirit's grace and power were enlightened and persuaded in mind and heart: to a true faith and repentance and whose experience clustered around that promise of grace and mercy through a coming Redeemer, which rang in the heart and ears of our first parents in the moment of their banishment from Eden -

"I will put enmity between thee (the serpent) and the woman, and between thy seed and HER SEED. It shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

That promise (for it was a promise to the human race, though spoken in terms of a curse to the Serpent) - that promise is the seed plot of the Bible, the starting point of the entire Biblical development of the doctrine of redemption. It was in the hope of that promise that an elect seed of Adam's race stepped forth upon history, through whom also God preserved light and truth in the world.

It was cherished unto martyrdom by Abel. (the first man to die was the first man into heaven). Through Seth and Enoch, Lamech and Noah (prophets all) it kept faith alive and virile in antediluvian days, overstepped the waters of the Flood and in Shem, Eber and Abraham was perpetuated till it was embodied in a nation to whose custody the Word of God was committed, to be developed in prophecy and history, type and parable, till the Redeemer should be anointed, the Word became flesh and through whom, in His atoning death and glorious resurrection and matchless exaltation to the throne of God, type and shadow would be abolished and the full glory of the KINGDOM OF GOD - the kingdom of redemption, and of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost - established in a mystic nation and people, of every kindred, tongue and clime, who should acclaim Christ Jesus, the Son of God, as Saviour and Redeemer and upon whose hearts would be inscribed "not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God", the holy will of God in which they would delight and upon which they would meditate with increasing light through the Spirit of wisdom and revelation imparted to them (2 Cor. 3:3; Ephesians 1:17-18).

It is in this regard that the people of the New Covenant are distinguished from the people of the Old. The nation of Israel, as a whole, was NOT the people of God because in its successive generations it exhibited the unbelief and hardness of heart for which at the last it was rejected and its place taken by a new people who should bring forth the fruits of the kingdom

"Therefore say I unto you: the kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof".

Matthew 21:43.

That new covenant "nation" is pre-eminently a converted, holy, repentant, believing "nation" upon whose hearts and minds the Holy Spirit has "written" the will of God and the love of God and this is "regeneration".

To allege that regeneration has an "existence" apart from enlightenment and "new obedience", is a doctrine which springs from a philosophy of regeneration and not from scriptural definition. It is essential to a right interpretation of the new covenant of grace, as described in Jeremiah and Hebrews, that there is no time element between regeneration and that light of truth in heart and mind which are the essential facts of its existence.

In other words it is not possible for a regenerate man to go on blindly in his sins, in ignorance of God's will and purpose.

Much has been made from time to time of the analogy of the birth of a child and an attempt has even been made to find correspondence in spiritual terms to the processes of conception, gestation and parturition, as well as the unconsciousness of a newborn babe, as touching its own existence.

This attempt to explain the spiritual by the carnal, rather than to compare spiritual things with spiritual, is to be deplored. Even so, it would be easy to refute some of the notions ;of regeneration so derived and developed, by pointing to a child's immediate hunger for nutriment at birth, and its cry for help, as being matched at least by the immediate hunger of the regenerate soul for the Word of God and its prayerful cry in helplessness for divine aid.

But we need no such adventures in parallelism. It is enough to maintain exclusively scriptural definitions. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit, says Christ and "the spirit" knows, yearns after and seeks incessantly, the food of the soul.

"He that drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst, but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life". John 4:14

"If any man thirst let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth in me as the scripture has said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. This spake he of the spirit" John 7:37

To introduce a time element between the regeneration of the soul and its thirst for Christ is not supported anywhere in Holy Scripture, but is a product of a philosophy of regeneration entirely human in its reasoning. In this all-important matter it behooves us to keep hard by what the Scripture says, lest we substitute our own inventions for the Word of God.

"ISRAEL DOTHT NOT KNOW"

We return to Nicodemus and find him baffled by the Saviour's doctrine of regeneration - as well he might in his hitherto darkened state.

"How can these things be?"

Christ rebukes his ignorance. The Old Testament does likewise.

"The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward". Isaiah 1:3-4

Christ takes up that theme with the baffled and despairing representative of that same wicked nation, and shows him that as he is, so is the nation of which he was "the ruler", or symbol.

"Art thou a (the) master of Israel and knowest not these things?"

John 3:10

The words of the Lord Jesus spring like a fountain of living water from the inspired, prophetic depths of the Old Testament.

Nicodemus! Knowest thou thine own prophet Isaiah? Hast thou not just confessed thine own ignorance of divine things as he, thy Isaiah plainly said? Thou knowest not these things and He who stands before thee now, is showing thee that when Isaiah wrote "Israel doth not know" he was speaking of thee as the sample, of the whole?

Deeper yet must this man be wounded that he might be healed with the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost. The Saviour speaks on:

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, we speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness". (verse 11)

Christ speaks now of "we" as though a plurality of persons stood before the startled man. Who were these of whom Christ speaks "we"?

The Lord is bringing in the whole of the Old Testament, its prophets and righteous men who spoke the Word of God by His (Christ's) own inspiration. And He, the greatest prophet of them all, of whom Moses wrote (Deut. 18:15) - He, the Prophet among the prophets from whom all prophecy proceeds and who in Himself completes all prophecy and seals it up (Daniel 9:24) - He, the Word of God incarnate, associates Himself with all those gone before whom He raised up in ancient times by His Spirit, and declares:

"We speak that we do know and testify that we have seen, and ye receive not our witness".

Calvin beautifully writes on this passage:

"For my part I have no doubt that Christ mentions Himself in connection with all the prophets of God, and speaks generally on the person of all. Philosophers and other vain-glorious teachers frequently bring forward trifles which they have themselves invented; but Christ claims it as peculiar to Himself and all the servants of God, that they deliver no doctrine but what is certain. For God does not send ministers to prattle about things that are unknown or doubtful, but trains them in His school, that what they have learned from Himself, they may afterwards deliver to others".

So then, the Lord addresses the Jewish nation in Nicodemus and remonstrates with them (as He had done through Isaiah) for their unbelief and their refusal of the divine testimony - "And ye receive not our witness".

The word of the Saviour looks back upon history and also embraces the present and the future, when to the "goodly fellowship of the prophets" would be added "the glorious company of the apostles" and "the noble army of martyrs", all agreeing to the testimony of the Lord and by Spirit and by blood witnessing to Jew and gentile all that has been revealed and proclaimed in Christ. So now, each minister of the gospel in his sphere and place, according to the measure of the gift of Christ, proclaims "that which we do know" and testifies "that which we have seen" (though not as the apostles and prophets saw and heard, but having learned from them to whom the Spirit was given in special measure and function).

EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY THINGS

"If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things". (verse12).

The earthly things are the figures and shapes and types, of the Old Covenant. The heavenly things are the realities and powers of the New Covenant. The divine commentary is in Hebrews, notably in chapters 9 and 10. "It was therefore necessary that the pattern of things in the heavens should be purified with these (that is, the blood of beasts) but, the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these" (chap. 9:23).

The Lord is saying to Nicodemus (and to the Jewish nation) that they had not believed even when God spoke to them through Moses and the prophets and through the types, shadows and earthly apparatus of the Old Covenant: how then would they receive the fulness of the revelation of Himself as God manifest in the flesh, reconciling man with God by the sacrifice of Himself upon the tree?

Noteworthy is His departure in this verse from the general term "we". He now speaks in the majesty and authority of His own unique and glorious prerogative as the wisdom and power of God. The eternal Word: "If I have told you earthly things" (for it was He who spoke through Moses and the prophets - they but echoed and transmitted the revelation which came solely from Himself) "how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things". This word foreshadows the full disclosure He was about to make of the new principle of life, the new creation, which was fully revealed, by His atoning death and His glorious resurrection.

Alas, that so many of our preachers and expositors today do not perceive the full extent and significance of this word. Mesmerised by the illusion of an earthly kingdom for the Jews, replete with temple, altar, sacrifices, priests, and an earthly throne at Jerusalem (with a resurrected David sitting upon it), they fail utterly to perceive that these are the very "earthly things" which He came to abolish, that He might establish a heavenly dispensation whose boundaries are not geographical but spiritual and whose realities are the invisible principles of "righteousness, peace and joy".

CHRIST AND PROVERBS

"And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven". (v. 13).

It is the Lord who is still speaking to Nicodemus, declaring now to the trembling and shattered man, His own divinity. Nicodemus is ready at last to receive the witness which Israel rejected (and still, rejects). In terms which this "ruler of the Jews" well understood, the Lord shows that He is God and Saviour and that there is no other.

Christ is quoting from a most remarkable, unusual and mysterious passage in Proverbs where the Spirit of Wisdom that was in Solomon declares:

"Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? Who hath gathered the wind in his fists? Who hath bound the waters in a garment? Who hath established all the ends of the earth? What is his name and what is his son's name if thou canst tell?" Proverbs 30:4

The foreshadowing in this remarkable verse of the revelation of the Son of God, and His association with the Father in the government of creation and the exercise of omnipotence and sovereignty over all, is one of the most moving testimonies to Christ and to the total and absolute divine inspiration of the Scriptures of Old and New Testaments that we know.

To ascend into heaven and descend therefrom is a description of omnipotence in its absolute rule over all things and in its glorious prerogative in occupying the throne of the universe. The meaning is not to be limited to the bodily ascension to heaven 40 days after the Lord's resurrection from the dead, but, is descriptive of an eternal unchanging prerogative of deity. The bodily ascension described in the first chapter of Acts has its place in this verse, as also in the Lord's words to Nicodemus, but it is a mistake to confine it to that one event. The bodily ascension from the Mount of Olives in the presence of the eleven apostles was a visible and historic act which showed finally and conclusively that Christ was the Person referred to in Proverbs 30, and that He was henceforth to be "by the right hand of God exalted", reigning in power and glory at the right hand of the Father till all His enemies are made His footstool.

The historic ascension of Christ in His true human nature and glorified form points to that essential deity of which He was partaker as the Second Person of the glorious trinity. He who was on the earth as SON OF MAN, was also at the same time in heaven.

How can He be on earth and in heaven at the same time? The question is not wise, for it postulates the idea of a geographical heaven. The heavenly dimension is not as the earthly and He who is God does not cease to be God when He becomes Man, nor did He, cease to be in heaven when it pleased Him to become man on the earth.

Heaven is the abode of God in His divine power. His "coming down" from heaven is a frequent Hebrew figure for His activity on earth for the deliverance of His people. We read that "God came down", upon Mount. Sinai: (Exodus 19:11). In Ex. 3:8, He "comes down" to deliver His people from Egypt. In Genesis 5:11 the Lord "comes down" to see the city and tower of Babel which rebellious man builded. Isaiah 31:4 - "So shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion".

Therefore, the "ascending" of John 3:13 and of Proverbs 30:4 signifies something which is impossible to man and is therefore the signature of deity. It rings the death knell of Socinianism and Unitarianism.

"Heaven" is that inaccessible state which denotes the holiness, the authority and the throne of God.

"He that cometh from heaven" says John the Baptist in his magnificent theology, "is above all; he that is of the earth is earthly and speaketh of the earth" (John 3:31). He (John) refers to himself therefore as being "from the earth" as distinct from Christ who is "from above".

Hengstenberg: "By designating Himself as He who has descended from heaven, the Lord attributes to Himself a residence in heaven before His advent in the flesh, in harmony with what, in John 17, verse 5, He says of the glory which He had with the Father before the world was; and in harmony also with John the Baptist who in John 3:31 designates Him as having come from above, and from heaven, and as on this account absolutely exalted above all that is earthly".

THE SON OF JAKEH

The passage in Proverbs 30 is remarkable too for the significant names in the first verse:

"The words of AGUR the son of JAKEH even the prophecy: the man spake unto ITHIEL, even unto ITHIEL and UCAL".

AGUR means "a stranger" and points to the gentile nature of the Kingdom which Christ came to establish.

JAKEH means "gathering" and indicates the calling out of the Church, in accordance with the prophecy of the SHILOH (Genesis 49:10) "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet till SHILOH come and to him shall the gathering of the people be".

It is of the highest significance that only in Genesis 49:10 and Proverbs 30 does the word "JAKEH" occur in the Hebrew Bible. It actually occurs twice in Prov. 30 (in verse 27 where it is said that the locusts go forth "by bands" (margin, "gathered together"). The connections between Prov. 30 and the Shiloh prophecy of Genesis 49 is therefore already established. Shiloh is the first occasion in the Bible when a personal name (the same root as "Solomon" or "the man of peace") is given to the coming Redeemer.

Agur, the deliverer of the gentile strangers, and the son of the man whose name indicates the gathering together of all the people of God scattered throughout time and beyond all national limits, speaks to ITHIEL and UCAL whose combined names yield the meaning, "With me is God and I prevail". This "speaking" is the language of revelation. The heavenly AGUR reveals God and "gathers together in one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:52).

The names in Proverbs of course, are not the names of actual men, but idealistic names chosen to indicate the prophetic nature of the passage. They illustrate the divine nature of Christ and His work. With Him at all times is God and therefore He prevails.

Verses 2 and 3 (Proverbs 30) show the severe limitations of that which is merely human. There is no help in human nature and no strength to prevail. Only One who ascends to heaven and comes down from heaven (verse 4) who holds the four winds of heaven in His omnipotent fists, who binds the mighty oceans with His decree and rules and controls all creation, can be the deliverer and redeemer of His people, He must be God who so prevails. "What is the Name of Him who so rules and prevails? And what is His Son's name, if thou canst tell?" Thus far the inspired Solomon and it is this verse which Christ uses to prevail over Nicodemus and add him to the number of those who are "gathered". Christ puts Himself into the verse when He declares, "even the son of man who is in heaven", and purposely uses the term which designates His human nature ("Son of Man") as He shows that despite His appearance in humiliation and weakness, He is none the less the Almighty, and none other could prevail for the deliverance of His people.

THE LIFTING UP

There remains but to close the interview with Nicodemus by giving the wretched man a preview of that means by which Messiah must prevail -

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life". John 3:14-15

The faith of Nicodemus is at last fixed in the crucified. Israel lies smitten in the wilderness with the sore judgment of God. This is the sorry position into which all her boasted privilege and self-righteousness have led her. Sin has prevailed against her and the fiery serpents are in the camp destroying the people.

The serpent of brass lifted up, is the symbol of sin judged. The Saviour on the Cross is He who was "made sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21). The awful "lifting up" of the Son of Man as a spectacle of the divine wrath and judgment against sin is the only hope of the sinner. Let him look that he might live - 'tis all that he can do: nothing meritorious: just the looking for mercy from One who was made sin for us.

The inspired John is evermore imbued with this term "lifted up" recorded again and again in this Gospel (see John 8:28; 12:32; 12:34).

As when the Hebrew prophet raised

The brazen serpent high;

The wounded looked and straight were cured,

The people ceased to die.

So from the Saviour on the Cross

A healing virtue flows:

Who looks to Him in lively faith

Is saved from endless woes.

True, Nicodemus could not and did not see, in advance the mystery of the Cross but in that moment of his conversion he was prepared for the view and he was in fact there at the Cross to see the awful deed, and with a fellow believer was not ashamed to beg for the sacred body to be entrusted to him. In faith and hope he laid that holy form in the new tomb, perhaps remembering the words of Isaiah, "He made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death", and reverently and lovingly garnished the sepulchre with, spices and perfumes.

Blessed man! Faithful man! Thou hast long since gone to thy place in heaven, thereto gaze and gaze in holy rapture on that face which bears upon it all the Father's glory and from before which, some day, the heaven and earth shall flee away, and no place be found for them any more, No longer the "visage marred" (Isaiah 52:14) but "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

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Some have thought (ourselves amongst them), that the repetition of John 3:15 in the succeeding verse 16, marks the conclusion of the Saviour's words to Nicodemus - that Christ broke off the interview at verse 15 and John the apostle adds his comments from verse 16 onwards. But the question has never been fully determined. Many incline to the view that the Saviour still speaks in these words to the man who came by night; thus: enlarging upon His own words He gives to Nicodemus such an exposition of the gospel, such a warning against unbelief, and such an assurance of justification by faith, as all the commentaries in the world cannot equal.

JOHN 3:16

John 3:16 must have struck a profound note in the soul of any Jew living at that time. The word "whosoever" (although only an English translation of course of the Greek word for "all") used by the Lord in verse 15, required explication. All? All Jews? A wider connotation still? The Lord adds the full meaning in verse 16. "The world", He says - not just the Jewish enclave, the people of the Old Covenant. "God so loved the world" His love and His purpose range far beyond all geographical and ethnic boundaries. Sinful men from every tribe and nation, every clime, tongue and age, must be brought into His Kingdom. Small wonder that Nicodemus was struck dumb - this ruler of the Jews - at the immensity of that love of God now

being unfolded to him.

The restrictions have been lifted. All distinctions and privileges have been leveled. Gentile tribes without the law are on the same footing as the Israel of the Old Covenant. Did Nicodemus think that the promised "Kingdom" was for the glory-and exaltation of the Jew? (Indeed he did, as do many non-Jewish dispensational expositors, as blind as they to this day). Here is the great Revealer, the Word of God, the Fulfiller of all prophecy, declaring that the love of God is for all the world, without distinction of race or degree, Christ makes no qualification. Just as He had previously declared that the Kingdom of God was only for these born again from above, so now He declares that these regenerate souls are not to be gathered from the purlieus of the twelve tribes alone, but without consideration of family, descent, privilege or name, from all the world., The sole equalising factor is need. As wide as the boundaries of sin must the love of God range. Adam's offence was the offence of the entire human race and the Seed of the Woman came to bruise Satan's dominion not merely in relation to one of the smallest of earth's families, but in relation to the entire posterity of Adam. The nature He wore when the Word became flesh was not a Jewish nature, for He had no Jewish father. He was "conceived by the Holy Ghost" and took flesh in the womb of the Virgin that He might be the God of gentile as well as Jew, and obliterate for ever the distinction which for other reasons had been observed in the human race until the time of redemption came.

John has already told us (chap. 1 verse 13) that "the sons of God" are born, not of blood (that is not human descent and genealogy, as the Jew) nor of the will, of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God".

Theologically of course, limitations must be made as to the extent of mankind covered by the term "world", but this is not the primary thought in John 3:16. There is no need for the Calvinist to be afraid of the translated word "whosoever" (the translators were Calvinists anyway) and there is certainly no cause for the Arminian to lay any weight upon it on behalf of an imagined sovereignty of man's will. The key word of the text is "believeth" and the paramountcy of faith (and of course faith's essential companion, repentance) must be recognized. Faith and repentance are not natural products of fallen human nature, and their link in this chapter with regeneration is quite clear and plain. All three are the work of God in the soul of man, and divine love and mercy are the root thereof.

John 3:16 must not be held by any school in such a way as to imperil a sinner's true confidence in the gift and sacrifice of Christ. On the one hand he must not regard "believing" in Christ as something which is independent of that newness of life in Christ Jesus which blooms in a continual repentance towards God, and on the other, he must not place faith so much outside of himself as to lead him to a dormant state of mind which holds the God of all holiness responsible for his continuance in sin and unbelief. The denial of human "responsibility" before God can quickly lead to a state of "irresponsibility" highly congenial to the carnal mind.

He who makes divine sovereignty an excuse for unbelief or for inertia in divine things will find both himself and his theology repudiated --- in the Day of Judgment by a holy God who cannot, does not, and will not, countenance the least sin.

Whatever the mystery of the holy sovereignty of God, it will never be found to have been a valid excuse for doing the thing which God hates and which rent the heart of the Godhead at Calvary.

The evangelical cause is poorly off for valid definitions of many things which are taken for granted. Seldom indeed are these vital words ever seriously defined - REGENERATION, FAITH, REPENTANCE,

SANCTIFICATION.

If regeneration means anything at all it means a highly active and sensitive conscience, a lifelong conflict with sin and a wholesome pursuit of all that is holy, and divine. It needs hardly to be said that the atmosphere of the modern "evangelistic campaign", with its easy decisionism; its fast entertaining music; its theatrical spotlight on platform "idols", popular singers, and fascinating minstrelsy; its snap conversions; its parade of "successes"; its ignoring of the frightful avalanches of "failures" as seen as the outfit has moved out of town it need hardly be said that anything more hostile to true repentance and faith and to that poverty of spirit which is the element of the Kingdom (Matthew 5:3) it would be hard to imagine.

It is the shame both of Calvinism and its opposite philosophy today that either way, we live in the time of the worst, most pitiful, and most incompetent preaching of the Word of God known in the five centuries since the Reformation. Incidentally, there was never so much "Reformed" literature around, for many generations, as there is today, and never so many "colleges" ostensibly dedicated to preparing young men to be ministers of the Word of God. It is high time to call a moratorium on the production of books till we learn to reject the chaff and use the wheat.

"Breadcorn is bruised" says Isaiah (28:28) in describing the wisdom of providence in providing the needs of man. That which is not bruised and sifted may be found in the Day of Judgment to be not wheat. The theory of conversion and regeneration, of faith and repentance, is altogether too facile today, and the fault is not confined to this floor or that, but is a fairly general condition.

John 3:16 teaches that an immense price is paid by God for our redemption. He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to humiliation, shame, indignity and colossal pain, awful sorrow, and mysterious death. Let not the worshipper sing in fascinating rhythms, of a sacrifice like that, or claim a sentimental familiarity in prayer or in song (or in preaching) with a Saviour so great or a love so eternal and holy. Shame upon us all, that like Peter we can in a moment pass from the heights of a sublime dedication to the depths of fleshliness, self-interest, and sin.

No amount of the theological argument and polemical orthodoxy will excuse THAT in the day of judgment.

Having heard and perceived, with Nicodemus; the divine love which embraces our worthlessness and makes us one with Him, let us humbly believe and go on believing, and repenting, and worshipping and, adoring Him whose feet were once anointed with penitential tears as Magdalen cast herself down in utter prostration of love and gratitude and indebtedness.

"Should not perish but have everlasting life".

Tertullian wrote (and John Calvin quotes it with approbation) _ "The soul of the soul is perception". That is the greatest definition of what the soul is, ever heard in this world. If indeed the soul exists in its own self-consciousness, then any interruption of that self-consciousness is inimical to the soul's existence, and its "life" is for ever terminated. This fact shatters for ever any notion of "soul sleep" after death or any extinction of "being" in the next world. Such doctrines are essentially Saduceeistic for they deny the truth of soul and spirit. The death of the soul is not as the death of the body. The one came from the dust of the earth and returns thither; the spirit returns to God who gave it. The death of the soul is its living, conscious agony in a state of separation from God, its highest good.

It is a fair analogy that before regeneration, the soul "dead in trespasses and in sins" is very much conscious and alive in the practice of sin. The "Second Death" of Rev. 20 is the sentence of the judgment seat upon the impenitent soul, that it bear its shame for ever. Consciousness and conscience are as "alive" in this woeful state as ever they can be.

To have everlasting life, is conversely to live in the eternal joy and pleasure of the Divine Presence with the full consciousness and memory of that love which overcame sin, and of that sin which was overcome by love. The song of the redeemed in eternity is "Unto him who hath loved us and washed us from our sins and made us kings and priests unto God and his Father" (Rev. 1:5-6).

Let no-one interfere with the truth herein implied. It has been asserted by some (with what fear of their own possible "recollections", who but themselves can tell?) the memory of what we were on earth; memory of our sins; inconvenient memory of our failures and our shames' will be extinguished in the world to come. But to extinguish memory of our unworthiness is to stifle true appreciation of that grace which overcame it all. In that bright world we shall know all, even as also we are known, and, the knowledge of what we were on earth, will only swell the song of praise and gratitude and adoration to Him who bore it all, and who was not, nor ever will be, ashamed to call us brethren. Magdalen loved much because she had been forgiven much and her former shame became, to her, the ground of such a worship of love that wheresoever the gospel is preached this which she did will be spoken of her.

v.17. "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved".

Christ still speaks and the term "world" must be considered in the sense in which we have stated above. He came not to condemn but to save and redeem. "Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father; there is one that accuseth you, even Moses in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me" (John 5:45-46).

Not to condemn the sons of men

the Son of God appeared;

No weapons in His hand are seen,

no voice of terror heard.

He came to raise our fallen state

and our lost hopes restore;

Faith brings us to the mercy seat

and bids us fear no more.

The mission of Christ from the Father at His first coming was redemptive. It is at His second coming that He will appear in the glory of the Father with all the holy angels with Him, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

v. 18. "He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God".

Could there be any crime more worthy of eternal death than this that one should actually treat with impenitent unbelief the name of the only begotten Son of God? Let Us beware of theological tampering with these solemn words. There is that in man's unbelief which horrifies heaven. Sinful man is held fully and truly accountable before God for his impenitence and unbelief. It is a pitiable policy (in a mistaken "defence of the truth") to tell sinful man that they cannot believe when the Word of God tells them that they must, or bear the eternal consequences thereof. Preachers, as well as hearer will be held accountable at the judgment for every idle word, and it will be rather late in the day for the preacher to awaken to the fact that he has darkened counsel by words without, knowledge.

An immaculate, theoretical theology might well be but, a fig leaf to cover the nakedness of one's own soul. God is incomprehensible, and truth is a paradox. Things which seem to be opposites are reconciled in the hidden depths of the divine wisdom, and all will be made plain some day. Meanwhile we may hold (and for ourselves we do in fact hold) that the election of grace is absolute and unconditional. We also hold that the wicked are condemned for their impenitence and unbelief and that this unbelief will be found in that day to be without excuse. For these are the closing words of the Lord to Nicodemus, when that shattered but now renewed man had been taught in one night all the principles of divine truth: regeneration, the interpretation of scripture, the deity of the Mediator, the efficacy of the atonement and, justification by faith.

"This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

"For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light lest his deeds should be reproved.

"But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest that they are wrought in God".

John 3:19-21

We get very few expositions of these concluding and most weighty words of our Lord's discourse. We wonder why.

* * * * *

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON REGENERATION

The analogy of the natural birth must not be pushed too far in relation to the supernatural birth by the Spirit of God, known as "Regeneration" or being "born again".

The natural birth inaugurates a new personality which never existed before. The supernatural birth, or regeneration, does not create a new personality but effects a fundamental change in the state thereof.

It is the same man who exists after regeneration as existed before, but with a new principle of life which effects a radical change in the nature and behaviour of the person.

Regeneration does not alter the essential features of the personality, but sublimates them. For instance, theologians and philosophers have discerned four temperaments which distinguish between members of the human race - the CHOLERIC, the SANGUINE, the PHLEGMATIC and the MELANCHOLIC. None of these is in itself evil, but may be harnessed or directed for either good or ill. Regeneration does not

changer these characteristics but USES and SANCTIFIES them.

Regeneration does not eradicate the Old Nature. We remain what we always were except for the new principle of life implanted by the Holy Spirit; which "wars" against the old nature; to overcome and subdue it. Likewise the old nature "wars" against the new, seeking to overcome and suppress it. This conflict is graphically described in complete detail by the apostle Paul in Romans 7-8 and Galatians 5:16-26.

This state of conflict exists in the soul of the regenerate till the end of our life, on earth but it will not survive the death of the body (which is the seat of the activity of the old nature). The resurrection by which our mortal bodies shall be raised from the grave in the glory of Christ's risen body (Philippians 3:21) will introduce our final state in which human nature will be the holy instrument of the soul in the eternal glory.

For the realisation of this final state Paul says that the regenerate do "groan within themselves waiting for the adoption, to-wit, the redemption of the body" (Roman8 8:23).

Regeneration being an active not a passive state (as exemplified in the unrelenting conflict which exists in the regenerate between the old and new natures), it may not be considered apart from or unrelated to those principles of truth, righteousness and holiness in which it is created.

(See Ephesians 4:24 - "the new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness (holiness of truth, margin)").

Any idea of a "time element" therefore between the moment of regeneration and the commencement of the manifestation thereof must be rejected. It is impossible, in other words, to conceive of or to consider, a state of regeneration which is not instantly and absolutely a believing state, a repenting state, a praying, aspiring state after holiness and truth.

It is not enough to say "We must be born again before we repent, and believe", because the Bible does not present the doctrine in those terms. These terms arise from a philosophy of regeneration, or an effort of human logic to relationalise the spiritual and divine and reduce it to the level of human understanding. It is better and safer to keep hard by the Scripture when handling these mysteries - and the Scripture knows nothing of a regenerate man who is not at the same time a justified man, a repentant man, and a man in conflict with his own sinful nature.

What! Can a man be born again without his sins being forgiven? And can his sins be forgiven when he is still in an unbelieving, rebellious and impenitent state?

To return to the analogy - or rather the contrast - of the nature of birth of a child and the new birth of the Spirit, it is plain, that the child is a new personality which never before existed. The regenerate man retains the memory, characteristics, experiences and associations of all his past unregenerate life, most notably his sinfulness and unbelief over which he has constant mourning and self condemnation. "I persecuted the church of God", says Paul when declaring that he was the least of all the apostles and not worthy to be called an apostle (1 Cor. 15:9).

There is therefore this continuity in the regenerate from their former state when they were in active hostility to divine light and truth. This former state is described by Paul as a state of death (Eph. 2:1-3). The infant in its natural birth does not emerge from a state of natural death but of non-being. The regenerate, on the contrary, emerge into new life from a sinful state in which every imagination, thought, purpose and intention is contrary to God and truth.

At the basis of unbelief, says Christ (John 3:19-21) is hatred of the light and fear of "discovery" (margin, verse 20). Regeneration is the only remedy for this state but in view of the fact that regeneration is an active, not a passive, condition in which love of the truth and desire for the light is of its very essence, how can it be said that an interval may, or in fact does, elapse between the moment of regeneration and its consequent apprehension of the light?

Is the regenerate man still in the dark, and hating the light? If so, what is regeneration and how is it to be defined and explained?

But if regeneration is the bringing of the soul into the light, or, as Paul defines it, a "translation from the power of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son" (Colossians 1:13) how can the soul remain for any measurable period of time in an unbelieving (darkness) and impenitent state; yet be at the same time in a regenerate state of "translation" from darkness to light?

Let our friends fearlessly and earnestly address themselves to the answers to these questions and let truth prevail and not human philosophies of truth.

* * * * *

THE ATONEMENT AND JOHN 3:16

"God so loved the world that he gave"

The atonement is not an appeasement of God's anger but a pouring out of the divine nature in unutterable love, in an act which at one and the same time indicates the holiness and the truth of God, and provides the ground of the sinner's reconciliation. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

There is nothing here of an angry God being appeased by the intervention of a third party (though this is a common misconception in the preaching and the theology of many). The Son did not, by His own independent initiative, come to redeem. This He could not do for, as the Only Begotten of the Father, He can only will the will of the Father. "I came not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38).

Again, "The Son can do nothing of himself but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise"

(John 5:19).

Those who separate the Son's will from the Father's will in the work of the atonement, destroy not only the atonement, but also destroy the Godhead and destroy creation.

Christ was delivered up to die "by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23).

We have already in our treatise, "The Concert of the Trinity" shown that the so-called "Cry of dereliction" on the Cross cannot be understood in terms of a separation between the Father and the Son. The Son was not, and could never be, "forsaken" by the Father. The Persons of the Godhead always act in concert, and never more plainly so than at the supreme moment of redemption when Father, Son and Holy Spirit engaged, each according to His term in the Everlasting Covenant of Life, to complete the task to which the whole life of the Godhead eternally moves.

The Father's part was to give His Son; the Son's part was to suffer and die in obedience to the Father's will and the Holy Spirit's part was to seal the work and present the sacrifice. Hence we read "Christ, through the eternal Spirit, offered himself without spot to God" (Hebrews 9:14).

The true doctrine of the Atonement is wonderfully enshrined in John 3:16.

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