



Lecture #10, Part 4

Course Information

1. Course Description

A study of the persons of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit and their unified teaching of the doctrines of the Bible.

Survey of the Doctrines of the Bible

The Holy Spirit: The New Genesis

In [Ephesians 2](#) Paul speaks both of “children of wrath” ([v. 3](#)) and “sons of disobedience” ([v. 2](#)). These phrases describe all of us in our natural unregenerate state.

When Paul completes his description of our unregenerate state, he moves abruptly and gloriously into a doxology that praises God for His mercy. The transitional word is the single word upon which our eternal destinies depend. It is perhaps the most glorious word in Scripture, the single word that crystallizes the essence of the Gospel. It is the word ***but***. This tiny conjunction shifts the mood of the entire passage. It is the link between the natural and the supernatural, between degeneration and regeneration:

Ephesians 2:4-10 (NASB)

⁴ **But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,**

⁵ **even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),**

⁶ **and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,**

⁷ **so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.**

⁸ **For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God;**

⁹ **not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.**

¹⁰ **For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.**

THE DIVINE INITIATIVE

Regeneration is the sovereign work of God the Holy Spirit. The initiative is with Him, not with ourselves. We notice that the accent with Paul falls on the work of God, not on the effort of man:

But God, being rich in mercy. . .

We observe that the Apostle does not write:



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But man, out of his goodness, inclines himself to God and raises himself to a new spiritual level.

One of the most dramatic moments in my life for the shaping of my theology took place in a seminary classroom.

One of my professors went to the blackboard and wrote these words in bold letters:

REGENERATION PRECEDES FAITH

These words were a shock to my system. I had entered seminary believing that the key work of man to effect rebirth was faith. I thought that we first had to believe in Christ in order to be born again. I use the words *in order* here for a reason.

I was thinking in terms of steps that must be taken in a certain sequence to arrive at a destination. I had put faith at the beginning of the sequence. The order looked something like this:

Faith—rebirth—justification

In this scheme of things the initiative falls with us. To be sure, God had sent Jesus to die on the cross before I ever heard the gospel. But once God had done these things external to me, I thought the initiative for appropriating salvation was my job.

I hadn't thought the matter through very carefully. Nor had I listened carefully to Jesus' words to Nicodemus. I assumed that even though I was a sinner, a person born of the flesh and living in the flesh, I still had a little island of righteousness, a tiny deposit of spiritual power left within my soul to enable me to respond to the gospel on my own.

Perhaps I had been confused by the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic church. Rome, and many other branches of Christendom, had taught that regeneration is gracious; it cannot happen apart from the help of God. No man has the power to raise himself from spiritual death. Divine assistance is needed and needed absolutely. This grace, according to Rome, comes in the form of what is called ***prevenient grace***. "**Prevenient**" means that which comes before something else.

Rome adds to this prevenient grace the requirement that we must "**cooperate with it and assent to it**" before it can take hold in our hearts.

This concept of cooperation is at best a half-truth. It is true insofar that the faith that we exercise is our faith. God does not do the believing in Christ for us. When I respond to Christ, it is my response, my faith, my trust that is being exercised.

The issue, however, goes much deeper. The question still remains: Do I cooperate with God's grace before I am born again, or does the cooperation occur after I am born again?



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Another way of asking this question is to ask if regeneration is **monergistic** or **synergistic**. Is it **operative** or **cooperative**? Is it **effectual** or **dependent**? Some of these words are theological terms that require further explanation.

MONERGISM AND SYNERGISM

A **monergistic** work is a work produced singly, by one person. The prefix **mono-** means one. The word **erg** refers to a unit of work. Words like **energy** are built upon this root. A **synergistic** work is one that involves cooperation between two or more persons or things. The prefix **syn-** means **“together with.”**

I labor this distinction for a reason. It is fair to say that the whole debate between Rome and Martin Luther hung on this single point. **At issue was this: Is regeneration a monergistic work of God, or is it a synergistic work that requires cooperation between man and God?**

When my professor wrote, **“Regeneration precedes faith”** on the blackboard, he was clearly siding with the **monergistic** answer. To be sure, after a person is regenerated, that person cooperates by exercising faith and trust. But the first step, the step of regeneration by which a person is quickened to spiritual life, is the work of God and of God alone. **The initiative is with God, not with us.**

The reason we do not cooperate with regenerating grace before it acts upon us and in us is because we cannot. We cannot because we are spiritually, dead. We can no more assist the Holy Spirit in the quickening of our souls to spiritual life than Lazarus could help Jesus raise him from the dead.

It is probably true that the majority of professing Christians in the world today believe that the order of our salvation is this: **Faith precedes regeneration.** We are exhorted to **choose** to be born again. But telling a man to choose rebirth is like exhorting a corpse to choose resurrection. The exhortation falls upon deaf ears.

When I began to wrestle with the professor’s argument, I was surprised to learn that his strange-sounding teaching was not a novel innovation to theology. I found the same teaching in **Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield.** I was astonished to find it even in the teaching of the great medieval **Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas.**

That these giants of Christian history reached the same conclusion on this point made a tremendous impact on me. I was aware that they were neither individually nor collectively infallible. Each and all of them could be mistaken. But I was impressed. I was especially impressed by **Thomas Aquinas.**

Thomas Aquinas is regarded as the *Doctor Angelicus* of the **Roman Catholic church.** For centuries his theological teaching was accepted as official dogma by most



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Catholics. So he was the last person I expected to hold such a view of regeneration. Yet Aquinas insisted that regenerating grace is operative grace, not cooperative grace. Aquinas spoke of prevenient grace, but he spoke of a grace that comes before faith, which is the grace of regeneration.

The key phrase in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians on this matter is this: *“even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)”* ([Ephesians 2:5](#)).

Ephesians 2:5 (NASB)

⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

Here Paul locates the time when regeneration occurs. It takes place when we were dead. With one thunderbolt of apostolic revelation all attempts to give the initiative in regeneration to man is smashed utterly and completely. Again, dead men. do not cooperate with grace. The spiritually dead take no initiative. Unless regeneration takes place first, there is no possibility of faith.

This says nothing different from what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Unless a man is born again first, he cannot possibly see or enter the kingdom of God. If we believe that faith precedes regeneration, then we set our thinking and therefore ourselves in direct opposition not only to **Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards,** and others, but we stand opposed to the teaching of **Paul** and of our **Lord Himself**.