

Born From Above - A solution to the mystery of the New Birth

Part 3

Defining our Terms

We now wish to look closer to some of the conditions for regeneration and salvation. We cannot do that without looking at the way the Bible uses the word "salvation". The Bible actually does speak about salvation in past, present, and future sense: *we are saved, we are being saved, we will be saved*.

On the one hand, salvation is seen as something that is happened in the past of a believer. I decided to call that *initial* salvation in these articles. When we talk about someone who has received *initial* salvation, we mean this: someone who has obtained the forgiveness of sins, someone who has eternal life, someone who has become a child of God, someone who has received the Holy Spirit. Someone who is saved in the sense of initial salvation *has peace with God*, which means that, if that person dies, he will go to heaven (or purgatory).

In the broader sense, salvation is seen as the process of becoming holy and just, the process of sanctification (which for Catholics and Orthodox Christians is part of justification), the process whereby we are saved from our sinful behaviours. This is by most serious Christians seen as a process which lasts a lifetime, a process which will be completed somehow during the lifetime of a Christian, or instantly at death, or (for Catholics) in purgatory after death. In that sense, we are all on the path of salvation, and somebody who makes it to heaven will then have obtained what I would call *final* salvation.

Of course, different denominations have different views on the relationship of initial salvation and final salvation. Calvinists for example hold, that anyone who is truly saved cannot lose his salvation, and therefore, there is no need to distinguish between initial salvation and final salvation. This goes way beyond the scope of this article (although it surely is related to the New Birth). We will therefore not go into these arguments.

Having made a distinction between initial and final salvation, I think one can make an argument for, that the following descriptions have traditionally been seen as equivalent to each other:

a regenerate person ⇔ a person who has received the Holy Spirit ⇔ a person who has eternal life ⇔ a person who has received the forgiveness of sins ⇔ a person who has become a child of God ⇔ a person who is (initially) saved.

And let us, for the time being, also hold that the events leading to a person, who has obtained all of these things, also are equivalent to each other:

regeneration ⇔ receiving the Holy Spirit ⇔ receiving eternal life ⇔ receiving the forgiveness of sins ⇔ becoming a child of God ⇔ (initial) salvation.

As we will see, to arrive to the conclusion of my book, it is necessary to make some modifications here, for not to arrive at contradictions. That will be possible without violating anything that the Bible teaches about these events.

Arguments for baptismal regeneration

The strongest argument for baptismal regeneration is to be found in 1 Peter 3:

1 Peter 3, 21: "And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you - not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ..."

This text is one of the main arguments for baptismal regeneration. Here Peter makes a comparison between the story of Noah and his Ark and baptism. That Old Testament story is related to baptism as *type* and *antitype*. The water through which Noah and his family were saved, is the type, which points forward to the water of baptism (the antitype). Therefore, the whole story of Noah's Ark becomes symbolic of baptism.

In many Protestant churches, baptism is seen as only *a symbol* of our salvation. They sometimes point to 1 Peter 3, 21, to make their point. *Noah's Ark is a symbol of baptism, and likewise, baptism is a symbol of our salvation*, they might argue. But note that that is not what Peter is saying here! While Peter says that the story of Noah's ark is a symbol of baptism, he does not say that baptism is a symbol of salvation. Instead, Peter says: *"Baptism now saves you!"* With other words, God saves people through baptism – and thus baptism is part of regeneration.

The middle of the verse reads that baptism is *"an appeal to God for a good conscience"*. This would most straightforwardly mean that in baptism we ask God to forgive our sins. And, therefore, because forgiveness of sins is part of salvation, baptism again would be seen as the saving instrument of God.

Many translations have this part of the verse differently: *"the answer of a good conscience toward God"* (King James 2021 Version). So here we see that word for "appeal" translated as "answer". However, that is not an accurate translation of the Greek word used here (eperotema). The word means *"pledge"* or *"appeal"*, but not *"answer"*. What we see here is a translation which is driven by some kind of Protestant theology, in which baptism is not part of salvation. If you say that baptism is the *answer* of a good conscience to God, then you are saying that the one baptized *already has a good conscience*, and expresses that in baptism. The forgiveness of sins has already been obtained, and baptism is just showing that, according to many branches of Protestant theology.

So we can clearly see here that Protestant presuppositions are the motives behind this translation. Purely looking to the Greek text, an *"appeal"* for a good conscience is the better translation and therefore, this must be considered to the best initial interpretation of the text. If we later would run into a contradiction that requires of us to make a modification here, we could do that, but for the time being we should be careful to stay as close as possible to what the Greek really means.

Now can we find support for the idea, that the forgiveness of sins occurs in baptism, in other texts from scripture? Yes, we can!

When recounting his own story of salvation, Paul (the former Saul) tells his listeners what Ananias said to him:

Acts 22, 16: "And now, why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name."

In baptism, Paul obtained the forgiveness of sins. How should we otherwise understand it? And Paul adds here *"calling on his name"*, which corresponds surely to *"an appeal to God for a good conscience"*. When we are baptized, we ask God in the name of Jesus Christ to forgive our sins.

This also corresponds with one of our main texts in Acts 2:

Acts 2, 38 and 40: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven...(...)...save yourselves from this corrupt generation!"

Baptism, the forgiveness of sin, and salvation, are tied together. It is very difficult to see how one could argue from these few texts that baptism *only comes after* the forgiveness of sins and salvation.

Finally in Mark 16, 16 we find the simple statement:

Mark 16, 16: "The one who believes and is baptized, will be saved, but the one who does not believe, will be condemned."

Faith and baptism are mentioned here as the conditions for salvation, and so also here we see that baptism is included as one of the conditions for salvation. The following table summarizes what we have seen here:

Man's action	The instrument	God's gift
Being baptized	Water	Forgiveness of sins Salvation

As we currently hold that (initial) salvation and regeneration are synonyms, we have some pretty strong arguments that baptism is necessary for regeneration. And thus we can understand why many denominations hold to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

Arguments for regeneration by faith

The main text I wish to focus on here is what Jesus says in John 5, 24:

John 5, 24: "Very surely, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life."

Here we see one of the clearest statement that if anyone hears the word of Jesus, and believes it, *that person has eternal life*. There is no mention of baptism or even repentance, just *hearing* and *believing*. Jesus continues with a similar statement in verse 25:

John 5, 25: "I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."

Later in chapter 5 Jesus refers to the general physical resurrection, when talking about the dead, *coming out of the graves*, when they hear the Son of God. But here Jesus is talking about another resurrection – a spiritual resurrection. What could this be other than the spiritual birth?

In John 3, the discourse about the New Birth, we have those famous words:

John 3, 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

And in John 1, the gospelwriter already told us that there is a people, called the children of God, which are the ones who believe, who are born of God:

John 1, 12: "But all who received him (the "logos", the "word"), who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God."

The eternal life of the Spirit is one of the themes of the gospel of John. Therefore, John 1, 3, and 5 all speak about the New Birth. Now to be fair, the statements in John 1 and in John 3 are not as strong as the one in John 5. In John 1 we read that those who received him, who believed in his name, were given *the power* to become the children of God. It does *not* say, that by believing they *had become* the children of God. So it could be argued that something more is necessary to become the children of God.

Something similar is seen in John 3, 16. The words are:

"Everyone who believes, ... may have eternal life."

And not:

"Everyone who believes, ... has eternal life."

So also here one could argue, that everyone who believes *is on the path* to eternal life, and something more is needed to obtain eternal life. But in John 5 we do see the passing from death to life *occurring for everyone*, who hears and believes God, who sent Jesus. This is therefore a very strong argument for regeneration happening, when someone believes in the words of Jesus Christ.

This gets support from Peter in his first letter:

1 Peter 1, 23 and 25: "You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. (...). That word is the good news that was announced to you."

The *word of God*, which is the good news (the gospel), is the seed that makes someone to be born again. Here having faith or believing is not mentioned, but in light of the different verses of John that mention believing, having faith is also clearly implied here.

The following table summarizes, what we have seen in this chapter:

Man's action	The instrument	God's gift
Hearing and believing	The word of God	Eternal life Regeneration

Clearly from those verses in John 1, 3, and 5 together with Peter's letter regeneration and the gift of eternal life, the life of the Spirit, occurs through someone hearing and believing the word of God. With other words, we have some strong arguments for regeneration by faith.

Some observations

When we join the two tables of the latter two sections, we can obtain the following:

Man's action	The instrument	God's gift
Hearing and believing	The word of God	Eternal life Regeneration
Being baptized	Water	Forgiveness of sins Salvation

In a theology, where salvation and regeneration are equal to each other, we would have to conclude, that both believing and being baptized are necessary for regeneration and salvation. But maybe that is not the case? Maybe regeneration and salvation are not the same thing? Maybe, as the table suggests, on the one hand, regeneration describes what happens when a person believes, and God gives eternal life to the person. And on the other hand salvation describes what happens when a person is being baptized, and God gives the forgiveness of sins to the person. This might seem reasonable.

But that would mean that someone who is regenerated by faith, but not baptized yet, would not yet have obtained the forgiveness of sins nor would he be saved yet. Surely, someone who has eternal life and will not come under judgement, *must be saved in some way*, and how can that be so *without the forgiveness of sins*?

A conclusion that separates what God does in regeneration fully what He does in salvation, both in what is required from man, and what God uses as His instrument, does not solve all problems.

What we will see is, that faith and baptism are part of a *package deal*. You cannot buy the one without the other. They belong together. They are describing different conditions and stages for salvation.

What we also will see is, that regeneration, like salvation, in the New Testament is used in a narrow sense and in a broader sense. In the narrow sense, it refers to the Spirit creating new life when the person believes. This is what we will identify as *spiritual conception*.

In the broader sense, regeneration refers to the *whole process* of being saved, from the initiative of the Holy Spirit bringing the word of God to a person, the person responding in faith which induces repentance, to the act of baptism, after which the gift of the Holy Spirit is received. Only then, one is fully born again, only then one has fully received the New Birth.