

20. THE COVENANT AND REGENERATION

It is especially in connection with infant baptism that questions have been asked about the relationship between the covenant and regeneration. The issue of regeneration was in the forefront of the ecclesiastical struggle of the 1940s and 1950s in The Netherlands and on the American continent. I will begin this chapter with a brief summary of the controversies.

Presumptive regeneration

In the issues of the 1940s the focus was on the immediate relationship between baptism and regeneration. Everyone understood and accepted that baptism and regeneration were somehow linked. In the Form for Baptism the Reformed churches state that “...we cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we are born again. This is what the immersion in or sprinkling with water teaches us” (page 584, *Book of Praise*). We all require rebirth.

The disagreements began when Dr. Abraham Kuyper, Dutch theologian and statesman, introduced a new theory to explain how baptism and regeneration are connected. Noticing that not all baptized children come to faith, Kuyper reasoned that in the case of the unrepentant children baptism didn't work. Since God's work does not fail, and since this work includes the institution of baptism, how could one explain this obvious difficulty? Had God failed after all? Was baptism deficient?

Kuyper could not believe that baptism itself might be ineffective, for God is sovereign and almighty. Real baptism, he reasoned, must lead to regeneration. He concluded that those who did not come to faith received the outward sign, but not the inner power of regeneration. In their case the sign was meaningless. Only those who later showed evidence of rebirth had received the true baptism.

This led to further speculation. Kuyper taught the existence of two covenants, an outer covenant (containing all those who were members of the church) and an

inner covenant (made only with the elect). The elect alone would attain regeneration and be saved. Kuyper wanted to take a positive starting-point for everyone, and said that all children must be presented for baptism and *presumed* to be born again, until the opposite was proven. The basis for baptism was, then, presumed or presumptive regeneration. In short, there were two covenants and two baptisms: one effective, for the elect; the other meaningless, for the non-elect.

This theory is clearly unbiblical. The Word of God teaches that baptism is to be administered not on the basis of a presumption but on the basis of a promise, namely that God makes his covenant with believers and their seed. There is only one covenant and one baptism. (Acts 2:39: the promise is for you and your children; Ephesians 4:5: one Lord, one faith, one baptism....) Kuyper's theory made the ground for infant baptism uncertain. The sacrament which was intended to strengthen faith led instead to much searching and doubting. People began to wonder whether or not they had received the real baptism.

The promise of regeneration

Unfortunately, Kuyper's ideas were made into official church doctrine by the General Synod of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. The result was that many who could not accept Kuyper's views were disciplined and deposed, or left the Reformed Churches to form the Liberated Reformed Churches.

These churches confess that there is indeed a connection between baptism and regeneration, but it is not the one Kuyper taught. It is, rather, that in our baptism we are *promised* regeneration: "When we are baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of the elect in life eternal" (Form for Baptism, *Book of Praise*, page 584).

This promise is real, and as we grow up we may build on it and must respond to it.

The danger of complacency

In our days there are very few people who still teach the doctrine of presumptive regeneration. The problem today may lie on the other side of the spectrum. There is the fear that emphasis on the covenant and its certainty leads people (especially the youth) to be complacent in their faith and conduct. I touched on this point earlier, but it does not hurt to raise the matter again.

We have heard in this connection the term "automatism," which means that people think they are automatically saved by virtue of the covenant relationship, regardless of what they do. Perhaps unwittingly we have again fallen prey to a certain presumption. Has the notion of presumptive regeneration against which we fought in the past come back to haunt us in a more subtle manner? Those who fear

this danger sometimes warn against stressing the covenant, since this may give people the false assurance that they are saved. We ought to urge people instead, they say, to strive for regeneration and to work out their election.

If the complaint is that the Reformed doctrine makes people complacent, we can point out that this complaint is not new and has been answered. In the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 24, Question and Answer 64), it is asked, "Does not this teaching (salvation by grace alone) make people careless and wicked?" The answer is: not at all; the opposite is true. The Reformed doctrine, when properly taught and understood, does not make people careless but renders them obedient and active in the Lord's service. It is not the doctrine that needs to be changed, but people who need to repent.

We do need to ask ourselves, however, whether the fear of complacency and automatism has any grounds. Are the youth being approached in the proper manner? Is there a one-sided emphasis at home and in church on *being* in the covenant and is there not enough emphasis on *living* in the covenant? There is the danger of dead orthodoxy in which the true doctrine is not adorned by a holy life. Are the members of the congregations, also the young people, being properly challenged to examine themselves and to repent from specific sins?

In the covenant of love, regeneration is required. We must become new people. We must not only *hear* the promise of the covenant, but also *work* with this promise from day to day. This was made clear when we were baptized and must be remembered as we live and grow in the covenant.

"A covenant contains two parts"

At our baptism, it was stressed that the covenant is a working relationship. God's promises do not come without important conditions. In the Form for the Baptism of Infants (*Book of Praise*, page 589) we read, "Since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation, we are called and obliged by the Lord to a new obedience...." This is an important statement, the implications of which are sometimes overlooked in heated discussions.

One person may want to stress the promise, believing that the emphasis should lie on what the Lord God truly gives us in his covenant. After all, a covenant is a relationship on which we should be able to build in our lives. Another, having seen much carelessness in the church, feels that the obligation should be emphasized. Otherwise many will be eternally lost while they think they are heaven-bound. Easy-believism must be countered with strong measures.

In fact, both viewpoints are one-sided, and therefore wrong. For the promise and the obligation may not be separated in this way. They belong together and can function only in concert with one another. Take away the promise, and the obligation becomes impossible. Take away the obligation, and the promise is cheapened. Only when we leave both promise and obligation in their proper place we avoid unhealthy and confusing dilemmas.

I must add something important here. The Form indicates that the promise comes first. When the sacrament is administered (and that is when the Form is used), the positive aspect is first stressed. A Christian always begins with the *grace* of God, for without this grace we can do nothing. But where the promise is proclaimed, the obligation must immediately follow. Grace always obligates us to serve God in accordance with his will. We must pray unceasingly for this grace.

We cannot have the one without the other. J. Kamphuis rightly speaks of an “indissoluble connection.” (An Everlasting Covenant, p. 58) Whoever derails here distorts the teaching of Scripture.

Regeneration in the Reformed Confessions

It is true, then, that regeneration is indeed required in our lives. But what, precisely, is meant by this term? Not everyone gives it the same meaning. Some see it as the beginning of a new, spiritual life, while others equate it rather with the ongoing process of daily conversion. The Reformed confessions use the term regeneration in both senses.

In Article 24 of the Belgic Confession, where we confess what God’s Word teaches about sanctification and good works, it is stated that “...true faith, worked in man by the hearing of God’s Word and by the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man.” Faith leads to regeneration (present tense), a process of daily conversion and renewal.

The Heidelberg Catechism mentions regeneration in Lord’s Day 3, question and answer 8, where it is said that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil “unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.” The proof-text here is John 3:3-5, where the Lord speaks to Nicodemus about regeneration. Here the beginning is meant. But later in Lord’s Day 33, dealing with man’s conversion and repentance, the catechism speaks about a process: more and more hating sin and living according to God’s commandments.

In the Canons of Dort (Chapter III/IV, Articles 11 - 13) the words conversion and regeneration appear to be used rather indiscriminately. But in Article 12 we find that regeneration is indeed seen as the beginning of a process: “This conversion is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, the making alive, so highly spoken of in the Scriptures, which God works in us without us.”

Regeneration: the beginning of new life

The term regeneration may be understood as a one-time, single work of God by which we are enabled to begin a new, spiritual life directed to God. Baptism shows the necessity of such a regeneration. The apostle Paul writes in Titus 3:5 about “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” The word “washing” is a reference to baptism. It does not mean that baptism itself brings about regeneration, for that is something which only the Holy Spirit does. Baptism shows us the need for and speaks of the promise of this regeneration.

We confess the divine character of regeneration also in Chapter III/IV of the Canons of Dort, Article 12. It is called “a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvelous, mysterious, and inexpressible work.” It is compared to creation and resurrection, also mighty and incomparable acts of God, and of him alone.

Our baptism, while not administered to seal an already present regeneration, does teach that regeneration must follow and promises that God will give what is required. This is a sure promise upon which we may build in our life. We may ask for its fulfilment, plead on God’s covenant mercy, believe the assurance given us in our baptism, and diligently employ the means which God has given to his church, and which the Holy Spirit uses to work regeneration.

The Canons of Dort, speaking of the “use of the means” (III/IV, Article 17), mention the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. The apostle Peter refers to the regenerating power of the Word when he writes, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet 1:23), and he adds, “And this is the word that was preached to you.” Regeneration is worked by the Spirit through the faithful preaching of the Word.

A covenant child may be sure of God’s promise, but he is at the same time obligated to use God’s means. If he uses them properly and sincerely, he will experience that God gives what he demands.

Regeneration: radical change

The matter of regeneration is mentioned five times in the New Testament. Two different words are used in the original, but both mean essentially the same: being born again means beginning a whole new life. As birth means the beginning of natural life, so rebirth is the beginning of spiritual life. As we are born of the flesh, so we must be reborn of the Spirit. In none of the five cases is the word used in the imperative, as a command; it is always stated as something that has to be a reality in the life of the Christian. Rebirth is something that must happen.

In John 3:3 we read Christ’s words to Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” In John 3:5 we find the expression “born of water and the Spirit.” Unless we receive this rebirth, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. These words show that rebirth is essential for every Christian. Notice the connection between water and the Spirit. Baptism assures us of and directs us to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

In 1 Peter 1:3 we read: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Both John and Peter present regeneration as a work or gift of God, a gift of mercy and love. Rebirth is decisive; it changes our lives completely. Peter also points to the means of regeneration which the Holy Spirit uses: “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (verse 23).

What is the change that rebirth brings about? Paul explains that by this work of God we come to accept the Word of God and learn to understand and apply it: “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us” (1 Cor 2:12).

We no longer think or act as many people around us who do not know the Lord Jesus or have rejected him. We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). We are different, and not ashamed of it either.

The moment of rebirth

The question is sometimes asked whether we can know and pinpoint the exact moment of our rebirth. It is my understanding that Scripture does not focus on this point.

We do not, for example, remember our birth, but we do know that we were born, because we are alive, and we breathe and move. Similarly, we know that we have been born again, not necessarily because we vividly remember the exact moment, but because we believe in Christ. As breath is the evidence of birth, so faith and its fruit are the evidence of rebirth.

The main question which we are asked in Scripture is not: are you born again? It is: but what about you? Who do you say that I [Christ] am? (Matt 16:15). The answer must come deep from the heart, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” If that faith is truly in us, it has not been worked in us by flesh and blood, but by the Holy Spirit. This faith is the result of rebirth, and it will be evident in the bearing of fruit.

This evidence cannot be lacking. Paul writes, “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (Rom 8:6-9).

Once we have received God’s Spirit, we are controlled by him. This is what is stressed also at our baptism and must be evident as we grow up: “We are to cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to trust him, and to love him with our whole heart, soul, and mind, and with all our strength. We must not love the world but put off our old nature and lead a God-fearing life” (*Book of Praise*, page 585). This has been the demand of God’s covenant throughout time. The covenant of love is not based on rebirth, but it certainly requires rebirth.

Daily conversion

As we have seen, the term regeneration can denote a one-time event. There has to be a beginning somewhere of active spiritual life. At the same time, we must be careful to consider that the Bible also speaks of the new life of a Christian as a

matter of *growth*. The regenerate are not free from indwelling sin (Canons of Dort V, Article 1). They are no longer *dominated* by sin, but they are still influenced by it, since they have not yet been set free from “the flesh and the body of sin.”

Therefore the need for daily *conversion* must be stressed. As birth is followed by nurturing and growth, so it is with rebirth. Every day we must repent of our sins, turn away from evil, and train ourselves to be godly (1 Tim 4:7).

The Bible uses two main words for conversion. The one verb, *metanoia*, means that we begin to think differently. We learn to think in a scriptural manner. We begin to look with the eye of love. We come away with a new point of view and a wonderful vision. The second word, *epistrepho*, means to turn away from [evil]. It also implies a turning to God and his commandments. We begin to act differently than we did before, because we have new insights. This is a process which lasts throughout our lives. We think and act like God’s children.

Rebirth is important, but what is reborn must *grow* spiritually. “Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Col 2:6, 7; see also verse 19). I think also of Ephesians 4:15: “...we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

It must be stressed that this is for us not an impossible undertaking. In our baptism we are promised the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who will not only impart to us what we have in Christ, but will also grant us daily renewal (John 14:17). By faith and through prayer and watchfulness we may grow in obedience and the new life.

The apostle Paul in Romans 6 explains that we have died with Christ unto sin. He speaks in this connection also about baptism: “We were therefore buried with him *through baptism* into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (verse 4).

This dying unto sin and rising to a new life, symbolized in baptism, is something that we should not take lightly. It does not happen automatically. God involves us in this process and holds us responsible in his covenant. There must be daily prayer for strength in the battle against sin. In the letter to the Hebrews we are admonished as follows, “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (12:4).

Covenant children must make conscious and concrete decisions time and again to serve the Lord, to obey his commandments, to know the Lord personally and deeply in his love and grace. It is not without reason that our Lord concluded the Sermon on the Mount with a warning: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Christ added, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt 7:19 and 21).

We bring to mind in this respect also Paul’s admonition in the letter to the Philippians, “...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it

is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (2:12, 13). Especially in the new covenant, God’s expectations are high and his wrath is to be feared. The conclusion of the letter to the Hebrews is, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (12:28, 29). This was said already by Moses under the old covenant (Deut 4:24), and it holds true, more than ever, under the new covenant.

Struggle and triumph

The life of a covenant child is one of *struggle and triumph*. The struggle is movingly described by the apostle Paul in Romans 7, not as an excuse for sin, but as a reality of life. It is a reality that needs to be recognized, otherwise we succumb to despair and shattered self-esteem.

Paul writes, “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom 7:14, 15). And note also verse 18: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.”

There has been much discussion on these verses, especially on the question whether Paul in Romans 7 describes his state before or after his regeneration. Can someone who is reborn (which we take Paul to have been when he wrote the letter to the Romans) truly say: I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin? Is not the whole point of rebirth that the slavery to sin is broken? Does Paul not write in Romans 6:18: you have been set *free* from sin, and in Romans 8:2: the law of the Spirit of life set me *free* from the law of sin and death?

Can we be slave and free at the same time? Are we, as Luther said, *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time justified and sinful)? Are we still slaves to sin or are we free from sin? This is an important question for covenant children. We must be clear on this matter.

With Augustine, Calvin and many others, I believe that Paul in Romans 6-8 speaks of himself as a regenerated person. Let’s examine the evidence for this statement. Paul speaks triumphantly in chapter 6 about the new life of the Christian, about his being dead to sin and alive in Christ, and picks up this theme again in chapter 8, when he speaks about being controlled by the Spirit. This is the dominant feature of the Christian life. But at the same time, there is in chapter 7 the down-to-earth word of caution: we are still in this world, in this “body of death,” and there is a constant struggle against our old nature. This is always an element in the Christian life, as long as we are on earth.

The Canons of Dort earnestly warn us that the regenerate are not free from indwelling sin, that they struggle with daily sins and weakness, and even fall sometimes into serious sins. This is not meant at all to excuse sin. On the contrary, the effect of such sins are devastating: they greatly offend God, incur deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, and suspend the exercise of faith. It can even happen that

for a time we lose the sense of God's favour (Canons of Dort V, Article 5). But also then, our hope is in God, who has promised to remain faithful. His promise cannot fail (Canons of Dort, V, Art. 8). The struggle is ours; the triumph comes from Christ, in whom we are indeed "more than conquerors" (Rom 8:37).