



Regeneration and the generations

Regeneration

In his conversation with Nicodemus, the Lord Jesus taught that *“no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again”* (John 3:3). A little further he described this new birth as being *“born of the Spirit”* (v. 8). This new birth is also described by terms like conversion, new creation, raising from the dead, making alive, and regeneration (see CD III/IV 12; HC, LD 3, Q/A 8). The Form for Baptism also refers to it and indicates that this need to be born again is signified in baptism as it *“signifies the impurity of our souls, so that we may detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing and salvation outside of ourselves.”* While in the Scriptures we learn of both the necessity of this new birth as well as how this new birth is the work of the Spirit through the preaching of the gospel, we also learn that the Spirit is pleased to work regeneration within the context of the generations. In other words, God is pleased to work through the families.

This is something that is worth some reflection, for it explains a great deal about our Reformed piety. Reflection should lead to a renewed appreciation of that piety as well as a renewed commitment based not on custom but on understanding. It will also enable us to explain ourselves not merely to the world, but also to others who confess Christ but do so with what is often described as an evangelical mindset. In our reflection we will first consider the scriptural link between regeneration and the generations. We will follow this by considering the various implications.

Generations

The foundational text for seeing how God works through the families is Genesis 17. In this chapter we read how the Lord established his covenant with Abraham. Specifically we read in verse 7,

“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.”

This was underlined by the instruction to give the sign of the covenant, namely, circumcision, to all the boys when they were only eight days old.

How deeply this working of God through the generations was embedded in the hearts of God’s people appears in the Psalms. For example, in Psalm 103, written some one thousand years after the Lord established his covenant with Abraham, we read, *“But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their **children’s children** – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts”* (vv. 17, 18). We find similar thoughts in Psalm 105,

*“He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a **thousand generations**, the covenant he made with Abraham...”*

(Psalm 105:8, 9)

The fact the Lord worked through the generations showed up also in commands pertaining to marriage and raising of children. In Deuteronomy 7 we read the command forbidding inter-marriage with the people of Canaan, *“For they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods...”* (v. 4). This finds an echo in the words of Malachi 2:15. The context is about the priests who broke their marriage vows by divorcing their wives. The Lord was angry with this because He desired *“godly offspring.”* As for raising children, in Deuteronomy 6 we read the

instruction to impress the commandments on the children. This finds an echo in Psalm 78 where parents are told to teach the next generation about the great deeds of the Lord and his laws so that they may know and fear the Lord. In this connection we can also think of the second commandment as it pertains to the manner of worship. The Lord warned parents that if they strayed from his ways, He would visit the sins of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation.

This emphasis on the generations continues in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul speaks about the way children born in a marriage where only one of the parents had become a believer are holy. Later in that same chapter, which is filled with instruction about marriage, he tells single women who desire to marry that they are free to do so but the potential husband *“must belong to the Lord”* (v. 39). As for the raising of children, Paul tells the fathers to *“bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord”* (Ephesians 6:4).

The unmistakable teaching found in the Scriptures is that God works through the generations. In this respect, it is striking that the same type of language continues to be heard in the New Testament setting where the Gentiles were being grafted into Israel. At the same time, it should be realized that working through the generations does not mean that there is automatic regeneration for the children. There are many examples where children turned their back on God. We think of Esau. In Old Testament times, it led to the exile. To mention Psalm 78 once more, we can read there of the importance of the instruction by the parents so that the children may come to know and love the Lord. A lack of instruction will have sad consequences for the next generation. All this does not take away that God works through the families. Families are the basic nurseries of faith as within the context of the families the children learn about the Lord their God and are called to believe in his promises.

Implications

When the relationship between regeneration and the generations is clear, it is not hard to see the implications. We will list the more obvious first, followed by matters that are logically deduced from them.

First, there is the implication for our youth in their search for a spouse. As the family is the nursery of faith, it is important that both father and mother belong to the Lord. How else can they bring forth godly offspring? In an age where appearance is everything, it will be hard to work on the principle that *“faith is first”* when it comes to marriage. When faith is first, then it will be clear that simply membership in the church is not sufficient. There is a need to look for someone who shows a living faith, a true love for the Lord. When faith is first, it can happen at times that one finds someone who is not of the same household of faith yet is drawn to the faith. One cannot forbid this by appealing to the way the Lord forbade the Israelites to marry the Canaanites. Commitment to the Lord, however, must always be first and very evident.

In the second place, we can see the implications for parenting. Regeneration is not passed on genetically. It always remains the work of the Spirit. At the same time, the sovereign Spirit sees to it that children are born in Christian families and He mobilizes the parents to bring up their children in the faith. Christian parenting is a holy and glorious, but also a most serious, calling.

Related to parenting is education. Education has as aim to prepare the children for meaningful life in the world, acquiring the necessary tools to fulfil the creation commission. It is only to be expected that Christian parents want their children to do this in a setting where the Lord and his revelation are honoured. It is the desire that the children learn to see all of life as God’s children. This is the motivation behind spending so much money and energy on Christian education.

Third, there are implications for worship. The second commandment comes to mind. The faithfulness, or lack thereof, on the part of the parents will have tremendous positive or negative consequences for their children. In this respect, church choice comes into the picture.

Related to this is the way a family attends worship as a family and spends the Sunday as a family. Worship is not just a gathering of individuals for worship but of families committed to the Lord. We lose something of this when parents sit by themselves while the youth sit with other youth, with the accompanying temptations and distractions. Further we lose something of this when the family hardly sees each other on Sunday because everyone is socializing everywhere else.

Fourth, there are implications for evangelism. There are numerous programs aimed at the children. How many programs are aimed at parents? Perhaps more specifically, how many are aimed at fathers as heads of the family? Where parents are brought under the influence of the gospel, the children will follow as they end up in a nursery of the Spirit. While there may be hope that what children learn will rub off on the parents that is not really how things work. In this respect, the mission work we read of in the New Testament always seems to have been adult oriented. Further, if one reviews the history of missions, it appears that often a breakthrough was made into a number of families. After the initial breakthrough in a nation or community, the church grows especially from those families.

When we consider all these aspects, it should be clear that saying God works through the generations does not imply we presume the children's regeneration. Regeneration is always the sovereign work of the Spirit. Just the same, the Spirit is clearly pleased to work through the generations to accomplish his work of regeneration. In the end, it is the honour and the responsibility of parents to work through all the implications.

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