

AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE PRIORITY OF REGENERATION IN CONVERSION

by Daniel Kirkpatrick

Introduction

WHILE TRACING ITS HISTORICAL ROOTS to the Pelagian controversy, modern exegetes continue to grapple with the priority of conversion over and against regeneration. While the Councils of Orange and Carthage, respectively, affirmed the priority of prevenient grace over human initiative, neither council issued a definitive statement on the priority of enabled human faith and divine regeneration.¹

The prioritization of faith and regeneration has been a matter of interest in recent years, with many scholars offering modern arguments for the priority of faith over regeneration. Prominent in the discussion are scholars such as David Allen, Steve Lemke, Roger Olson, Norman Geisler, Thomas Oden, Jerry Walls, and Joseph Dongell (to name a few).

Generally speaking, we may find four major reasons why the non-Reformed hold to faith preceding regeneration. First, they claim that it is the clear teaching of Scripture that faith precedes regeneration.² Citing various biblical texts, proponents of faith preceding regeneration state that, in the *ordo salutis*, one must believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in order to become a new creation in Christ. To believe otherwise is to go against the clear teaching of Scripture.

1. Canon 1.3 (and so throughout) of the Council of Orange affirms that human response of faith is effected by grace, yet it did not specify the extent to which such grace is necessary (whether a mere enablement was necessary or whether full regeneration was required) giving rise to continued scholastic debate and modern tensions. It should be noted that paedobaptism was the norm during the 5th and 6th centuries and that (according to the Council of Carthage) baptismal regeneration was required for the remission of sins and the enablement of faith. However, this hardly settled the issue, and Carthage was not universally accepted (giving rise to additional synods like Arles, c. 473). While the priority of divine prevenient grace over human initiative was established, the extent of provenience was not settled by these councils.

2. See Ronnie W. Rogers, "Commentary on Article 5: The Regeneration of the Sinner" in *Anyone Can Be Saved: A Defense of "Traditional" Southern Baptist Soteriology*, ed. David L. Allen, Eric Hankins, and Adam Harwood (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 78; Steve W. Lemke, "A Biblical and Theological Critique of Irresistible Grace" in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, ed. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 117–127.

Second, some say it is a violation of the human will and nature to have regeneration precede faith. Advocates of this position say it would imply that a person was forced to love God and believe in him apart from personal and willing consent. Norman Geisler, criticizing the opposing view, once said, “Forced love is rape, and God is not a divine rapist!”³ This is a most severe accusation against those who would claim regeneration precedes faith. God, in this view, forces his will upon the unwilling. They have no choice but to love him and believe in him. They believe in God, not because they wanted to, but because God wanted them to. This, they claim, is a violation of human integrity and will, and it relates to a third and corresponding concern of the innate goodness of God and his upright moral character.

Third, advocates of faith preceding regeneration claim that to believe otherwise is to believe in a God other than the one mentioned in the Bible. Said another way, they express concerns about what regeneration prior to faith does to the holy nature of God. Is God a divine rapist, as Geisler states when he prevenes upon an individual in such a radical way prior to their consent? Is God truly omnibenevolent when he only regenerates certain individuals and thereby enables them to believe in salvation? Is God cruel in creating some people he knows he will not regenerate, leaving them to stay in their sin and perish in hell? What is to be said about the universal love of God as expressed by John 3:16 when God only enables some to believe in Christ, thereby leaving the rest in their sins? Does not God will for none to perish but all to come to eternal life as 2 Peter 3:9 states? Surely this could not be the case, in their view, if God only enables some to believe (through the act of regeneration) and not all.

A fourth and final argument from this party is that prevenient graces provides individuals the freedom of choice by which the negative effects of the fall may be overcome, allowing individuals the choice whether or not to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It must be clearly stated at the outset that those who are non-Reformed in the way described here are expressly not Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian in any regard. Advocates of faith preceding regeneration, as outlined here, do not believe one may believe in Christ as Savior and Lord through self-driven effort. Even Arminius himself affirmed that God must first work on an individual before he or she can believe in Christ. Arminius once wrote:

In this manner, I ascribe to grace the commencement, the continuance and the consummation of all good—and to such an extent do I carry its influence, that a man, though already regenerate, can neither conceive, will, nor do any good at all, nor resist any evil temptation, without this preventing and exciting, this following and co-operating grace.⁴

3. Norman Geisler, “God Knows All Things,” in *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 69.

4. James Arminius, “A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius on Predestination, Divine Providence, the Freedom of the Will, the Grace of God, the Divinity of the Son of God, and

As such, this fourth concern states that God does overcome the depraving effects of the fall, enabling people to choose whether or not to accept Christ for salvation. In the *ordo salutis*, God prevenes upon the individual, then faith can be freely expressed, and the result will be regeneration. This, they claim, is the proper way of understanding the issue.

While there may be more concerns and defenses that could be made on behalf of the non-Reformed party, these four represent the arguments commonly expressed in favor of faith preceding regeneration, and they will be the four addressed here. In this paper, these concerns will be assessed for their merits. Upon consideration of their claims, it will be argued that the faith preceding regeneration view is built upon questionable exegesis. Additionally, it will be argued that regeneration preceding faith is essential for saving faith to occur. Third, an address to the concerns of the non-Reformed will be made concerning God's holy nature and eternal perdition. Finally, it will be questioned whether the non-Reformed party's notion of prevenient grace really accomplishes what they desire, outlining what are (in this author's opinion) notable deficiencies in their view. It will ultimately conclude that regeneration precedes faith.

1. Analysis of Biblical Support for Faith Preceding Regeneration

It is of great importance for evangelicals to derive doctrine from the biblical text. As such, participants on both sides of this issue must ultimately make their claims based upon evidence from Scripture. While Dale Moody once stated that one of Calvinism's great errors is holding to regeneration preceding faith and repentance, he did not see fit to supply biblical support for his view.⁵ If one were to look at the earlier pioneers of this view, Jacobus Arminius and John Wesley were notably weak on Scriptural proof for faith preceding regeneration.⁶ Such will not do for this party just as it will not do for the opposing party to make their case without biblical support.

Fortunately, there are those of the non-Reformed party who supply Scripture for their rationale in believing faith precedes regeneration. Ronnie Rogers states, "The Scripture affirms that faith precedes and is the prerequisite for regeneration—being born again. (John 1:12–13, 3:3, 15–16, 36, 5:24, 6:40, 7:37–39, 12:36, 16:7–14, 20:31, 1 Pet. 1:23, 1 John 5:1, 4)."⁷ Likewise, Steve Lemke cites many of these verses but notably adds John 3:36, 5:40, 6:51, 53–54, 57, and 11:25.⁸

While many of these verses affirm the glorious truths of God's universal love for humankind, the necessity to believe in him, and the hope of eternal life, the non-

the Justification of Man before God," in *The Writings of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and W.R. Bagnall (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 1:253.

5. Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 322.

6. Daniel Kirkpatrick, *Monergism or Synergism: Is Salvation Cooperative or the Work of God Alone?* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018), 116–128.

7. Rogers, "Commentary on Article 5: The Regeneration of the Sinner," 78. See also Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 264–265.

8. Lemke, "A Biblical and Theological Critique of Irresistible Grace," 136–137.

Reformed party must use texts that specifically address faith as it relates to regeneration for textual support of their view. The question is not whether believing in Jesus is necessary for salvation or eternal life, nor is it whether God loves the world. While important truths, they do not address the subject at hand of the priority of faith over regeneration. Out of this list, only five really concern the ordering of belief and regeneration: John 1:12–13, 5:24, 7:37–39, 20:31, and 1 John 5:1.

Beginning with John 1:12–13, it states: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”⁹ The reasoning goes that those who become children of God and who are born into the heavenly family were those who “received Him” (i.e., put their faith in Jesus for salvation). Such, then, suggests that faith was a necessary condition to them becoming children of God.

In response, one does well to understand the differences in soteriological aspects. In this passage, John refers to the aspect of adoption when he refers to “children of God.” This author knows of no Calvinist who would suggest that faith is unnecessary to become a child of God. Anthony Hoekema, commenting on this passage, states: “It is, of course, true that those who believed in Christ did receive the right to become children of God—but behind their faith was the miraculous deed of God whereby they were spiritually reborn. They were born not of man but of God.”¹⁰

This author personally affirms fully that faith precedes various aspects of salvation. Yet the matter at hand is not whether faith precedes adoption, justification, election, and the like but of *regeneration*. Those who receive Jesus receive the rightful status as children of God according to this verse. Yet such believing, as expressed in these verses, was not because of the will of man but of God. Contrary to the non-Reformed’s claim, these verses actually teach that it was not the will of the person, but of God’s, that they became his adopted sons and daughters. As John notes, it was God’s will for one to become adopted into the heavenly family. This did not come as a result of bloodline, for by our father Adam alone, we could not become children of God. Rather, those who believe in Christ’s name were born into the family of God through the will of God, not man. Thomas Nettles makes this point concerning John 1:12–13. He states: “The emphasis of this passage is not on the order of events (i.e., receiving first, then the giving of authority, and so on) but on the inevitable coexistence of ‘receiving’ and sonship as a gift of God. Notice, the authority to become sons of God was *given* by God.”¹¹ Commenting on this passage, Leon Morris likewise notes: “John sets the way men are born into the heavenly family. The new birth is always sheer miracle. All human initiative is ruled out. Men

9. All Scriptural references, unless otherwise noted, come from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

10. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 96.

11. Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 288. Nettles develops his view by showing how the Holy Spirit creates willingness in the form of repentance and faith. There must be a making alive in the regenerative sense for such belief to occur.

are born ‘of God’. They can be born in no other way.”¹² To be clear, it is not suggested that faith is unnecessary to become a child of God. It is necessary. The question is about priority and initiative. Were we born again because of our will to believe in Jesus or because God *gave us the right to become children of God* not by human will but of the will of God?¹³ The text suggests the latter.

We may now address John 5:24, where it states: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (ESV). The argument is as follows—those who hear Jesus’ word (about himself as Savior and Lord) and believe in Him will receive eternal life and pass from death to life (regeneration). Yet such is not the teaching of this text. The surrounding context concerns the authority given to the Son from the Father. All judgment has been given to the Son (John 5:22). Jesus states an hour is coming (and is even at hand) when the dead will hear his voice, and those who hear will live (v. 25). How can the dead hear? Related to verse 24, how can those hear Jesus’ word and believe in the one who sent him? How can they pass from the death they are in into life? Yes, believing is essential to doing such, but how is it possible given their current spiritual condition?

The clearest explanation is in verse 21. There it states: “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes.” The transfer from death to life is because God “makes alive” (ζωοποιεῖ) those who are dead. This is regeneration. God made those who are dead alive according to verse 21, and then coming to verse 24, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (ESV). Who hears his word and believes him who sent Jesus? The ones who in verse 21 were made alive. Those receive eternal life. Put together, one is regenerated into a new life, then believes in Jesus, and then receives (and even experiences now) eternal life. Far from proving faith precedes regeneration, this text teaches the very opposite. It will only be those who are able to hear and believe (because of regeneration) that receive eternal life.

Another verse used to support faith preceding regeneration is John 20:31: “[B]ut these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The phrase “by believing you may have life in his name” is the text used to support faith preceding regeneration.

Again, no orthodox Calvinist would deny faith is an essential requirement for receiving eternal life. The question at hand is whether John here is speaking of regeneration from death to life or eternal life received after conversion. To assess this, we may examine the Greek word ζῶη, which has many uses. While translated

12. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 101.

13. Hoekema goes on to note that adoption is a benefit of being justified. Faith does precede justification (not as though it were an instrumental cause but as a non-causative action by means through which God pronounces individuals as being in the right). In so doing, one is then a position to be adopted by grace. Such legal adoption, for Hoekema, should be distinguished from the spiritual rebirth in regeneration. See Hoekema, *Saved By Grace*, 185.

“life,” context will determine whether such life refers to one’s mortal life lived in the here and now (Mark 5:23, John 4:50), eternal life which is received upon conversion but awaits the believer in the future (John 3:16, 1 John 2:25, 5:11), or the notion of being born again by the Spirit.

It is difficult to imagine in this context how John is giving a formulaic expression of the *ordo salutis*. The clearer reading of Scripture is that John wrote his Gospel so that people may believe that Jesus is the Christ with the result of receiving eternal life in his name. Context does not support John developing a theology of faith preceding regeneration (or vice versa for that matter). Rather, it seems that in this context, ζῶη is being used to refer to eternal life.

The word for *regeneration* in the New Testament is *παλιγγενεσία*, and it occurs only twice in Scripture (Matt. 19:28 and Titus 3:5). We may also consider its cognates: such as γεννάω ἄνωθεν, ἀναγεννάω, συνεζωοποιέω, and ἀποκυέω. It is worth noting here that John 20:31 does not use any of the words used for regeneration. That is because the majority of lexicons and commentators view this use of ζῶην as a life of grace and holiness experienced now and fully realized in the future.¹⁴ Eternal life did begin at the very moment of regeneration, yet it should be distinguished from the vivifying activity of the Spirit. John here speaks το ζῶην αἰώνιον, which is conditioned upon faith, not regeneration (*παλιγγενεσία*) which appears to be what makes such faith possible.

Finally, we will consider 1 John 5:1. It states, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him.” The argument is that whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ will be born of God, yet is that what this text says? The Greek text reads: Πᾶς πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστός. Notice the tense and voice of the participle and accompanying verb. All who believe (present active participle ὁ πιστεύων ἐστίν) do so because they are already begotten (ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ γεγέννηται). The word γεγέννηται is perfect passive, referring to a past event with present results. Said another way, one is a believer because he has been born again.¹⁵ Rather than supporting faith prior to regeneration, it affirms the opposite.

While more analysis could be given to texts used to support faith preceding regeneration, enough contrary arguments have been made to show that proponents of that view may be on shaky ground. Let us now consider texts used to support regeneration preceding faith.

14. BDAG, s.v. ζῶη. George R. Beasley-Murray observes that “life” here refers to eternal, eschatological life in the world to come and is lived out by faith as one is united to Christ in George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., WBC 36 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 388. Leon Morris views things slightly differently by believing this refers to an abundant (or victorious) life in Morris, *Gospel According to John*, 857. These two are likely not opposed to one another as abundant life in Christ begins upon conversion and endures through all eternity. Nevertheless, this is not a likely reference to regeneration.

15. Gordon H. Clark, *First John* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1980), 149.

2. Analysis of Biblical Support for Regeneration Preceding Faith

Reformed proponents of regeneration preceding faith point to various texts for their support. These include John 3:5: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born (γεννηθῆ) of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Ephesians 2:4–5: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive (συνεζωοποίησεν) together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” Colossians 2:13: “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive (συνεζωοποίησεν) together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.”¹⁶ Additionally, Titus 3:5: “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration (παλιγγενεσία) and renewing (ἀνακαινώσεως) by the Holy Spirit.”

A few general observations may be made upfront. First, these verses utilize the Greek words for regeneration and its corresponding cognates (unlike the non-Reformed counterpoint texts). As such, one can be sure that we are addressing the issue at hand, which concerns regeneration. Other references to believing in Jesus for the reception of eternal life are glorious truths, yet they very well may miss the point of the biblical authors as it concerns regeneration. Further, each of these texts has God as the subject of the verbs. This is of no concern to the non-Reformed as they affirm that God is the regenerator. Yet notice the passivity of the verbs. “When we were dead in our transgressions, (God) *made us* alive together with Christ.” With God as the subject, Paul rightly makes *συνεζωοποίησεν* an aorist active indicative, yet if we were to understand it in the sense of “we were made alive together with Christ,” such would be passive in accordance with the phrase also found in Eph. 2:5 “by grace you have been saved (*σεσωσμένοι*—perfect passive participle). Likewise, “When you were dead in your transgressions . . . He made you alive together with Him.” It is difficult to perceive (even with the non-Reformed’s notions of prevenient grace) how one can exercise faith while being dead in transgressions, yet even still, notice that it was God alone (working monergistically not synergistically) who brings individuals to regeneration. Titus 3:5 likewise states that we are saved not because of what we have done but according to his mercy through regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Granted, none of these verses expressly mention faith. Yet it is here that further biblical support is needed. Because of the depraving effects of sin, an individual must be revived in some kind of way in order to respond to the gospel. All non-Pelagians would agree to this. Scripture teaches that sin leaves us spiritually blind (Matt. 15:14, 23:17–26, Luke 4:18, 7:22, Rom. 2:19, 2 Pet. 1:9, Rev. 3:17), in darkness (Matt. 4:16, 6:23, John 1:19, 12:46, Eph. 5:8, Col. 1:13, 1 Pet. 2:9), and dead (Eph. 2:1, 5, Col. 2:13). Believing in Christ unto salvation is not something we can do by nature. According to both Arminius and Calvin, it must be given (for faith itself is a gift of God’s grace). How then can faith lead to regeneration? The non-

16. These textual references were made by Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 702–703.

Reformed notion is built upon their view of prevenient grace, which will be outlined below, yet here we may say that the Reformed have adequate biblical support in affirming that regeneration is solely from God and enables faith in Christ to occur.

3. Faith, Regeneration, and the Integrity of the Human Will

We now move to the second concern expressed above, namely that to claim regeneration prior to faith's free consent violates the human will. We will again quote Geisler's point on this matter: "Forced love is rape, and God is not a divine rapist!"¹⁷ Geisler is notably extreme on this. Others of a more irenic nature merely affirm that faith preceding regeneration makes one's belief all the more genuine. It was something they chose to do rather than were forced to do.¹⁸ Does regeneration preceding faith violate the human will? Is faith disingenuous when preceded by regeneration? What are the implications for this on God's holy character? We will begin with the first of these considerations.

Does regeneration preceding faith violate the human will? To this, the Reformed gladly respond in the affirmative. The human will, as stated above, is spiritually blind, in darkness, and dead. Scripture also portrays the will as "evil from youth" (Gen. 8:21), unable to do spiritual good (Ps. 14:1-3), unable to seek after God (1 Cor. 2:14), hostile toward God (John 3:19-20, Rom. 8:7), and more. As Reformed and non-Reformed would both agree, on our own we will not seek after God or believe in Christ for salvation. A change in the will is necessary.

All the verses mentioned above concerning regeneration do not now need to be readdressed. What can be affirmed is that the Reformed see this as what makes repentance and faith (i.e., conversion) possible. James Boyce once said, "[A]ll the Scriptures also teach that regeneration is the work of God, changing the heart of man by his sovereign will, while conversion is the act of man turning towards God with the new inclination thus given to his heart."¹⁹ E. Earle Ellis comments on this aspect:

Some suppose that if our will is "free" to accept or reject Christ, many will accept him. But is that true? If our first parents (Gen 1-3), whose wills were truly free, chose against God, do we suppose that any of their children, sullied by sin from earliest experiences, would make a more godly choice than they? Would we, who were at enmity with God, controlled by ego, surrounded by a thousand temptations (Adam and Eve faced one), make a better choice than they? Hardly . . . "Free will" is precisely what God permits to the terminally unrepentant, and it is a one-way ticket to destruction in Hell. If salvation came through our free choice, we would all be lost. No one would be saved except Jesus Christ.²⁰

17. Geisler, "God Knows All Things," 69.

18. Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 36-37.

19. James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, (1887; repr., Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006), 374.

20. E. Earle Ellis, *The Sovereignty of God in Salvation* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), 5.

As such, the Reformed fully affirm that an overcoming grace that changes the human heart and will is necessary in order to believe. What is of interest to this current issue is that they affirm the same. While they will deny that full regeneration is necessary for regeneration to occur, they nevertheless affirm that God must supersede the human heart and exercise overcoming grace to enable the person to believe. This is made evident by their definition of prevenient grace. Roger Olson defines prevenient grace as: “the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible.”²¹

As Olson goes on to note, prevenient grace enables someone to be no longer dead in trespasses and sin. The Word of God proclaimed (corresponding to internal calling) overcome the effects of the fall, enabling one to make a choice.²² Yet is this not also what regeneration does? Does it not overcome the effects of the fall? While a more thorough treatment of prevenient grace is reserved for below, it remains that all non-Pelagians affirm that God must overcome the sinful, rebellious, and dead will in order for one to believe.

Yet does this mean that the belief of a regenerate sinner is disingenuous? Perhaps one could reverse this question for a moment and ask if faith while being unregenerate could be genuine? To be fair, Arminians and those of a non-Reformed understanding would most certainly affirm that such faith is genuine because prevenient grace makes it so. Yet they must at the same time also affirm that one is not merely *able* to believe in Christ; he or she is *enabled* to believe in Christ. Moreover, as this author argues elsewhere, there are legitimate concerns in making faith an instrumental and synergistic cause of regeneration.²³

Nevertheless, one may rightly affirm that having a regenerate will to believe does not make faith any less genuine. Jesus said in John 8:36, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” This does not mean that our human actions do not matter. It means instead, that one becomes free to do actions that do matter. As such, salvation was not so much based upon free will but on God’s grace expressed through *freed* will. The will was now free to do what it otherwise could not. It was a slave to sin, yet it was free to do what it both wants and needs—to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation.

21. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 35. This definition accurately represents the views of most Arminian and non-Reformed individuals who hold to prevenient grace. John Wesley said, “[P]revenient grace” (is) all the drawings of the Father; the desires after God, which, *if we yield to them*, increase more and more;—all that light wherewith the Son of God “enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world;” showing every man “to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God”;—all the convictions which His Spirit, from time to time, works in every child of man—although it is true, the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible, and after a while forget, or at least deny, that they ever had them at all” (John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” in *The Essential Works of John Wesley*, ed. Alice Russie [Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2011], 148).

22. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 36.

23. See Kirkpatrick, *Monergism or Synergism?*, 114–116.

4. God's Holy Character

This article will now move on to the third concern. What about God's holy character? For the sake of focus, we will address the fundamental concern mentioned by Geisler as well as concerns about whether an all-loving God truly desires the salvation of all people if he only regenerates some.²⁴

We have already addressed how God must overcome the sinful human will and rebellion in order for individuals to express faith in Christ. This is agreed to by Reformed and non-Reformed alike. Yet, what does this imply for God's righteous character? Is God unjust to violate his creatures by superimposing his will upon their own? Here we will make some brief considerations: First, Calvinists would affirm with Paul in Romans 9 that the Potter has right over the clay. His sovereignty over all creation affords God the right to exercise his will over the will of humanity. Yet is such an action truly compatible with God's omnibenevolence? While it would be just, would it be gracious?

Here we may affirm that there is nothing gracious about leaving one in a natural state of sin, rebellion, and death. God, in his righteousness, could have left humanity in their depravity. Yet it is an act of grace that he would overcome it. Moreover, as said above, all non-Pelagians must affirm that a gracious, loving God would overcome sinful humanity's nature. As an expression of grace, he allowed humanity to respond freely to Christ for salvation, but such is only possible through a regenerate heart. He is in no way a divine rapist. A rapist seeks to harm and defile a person; regeneration seeks to restore a person. A rapist takes away from a person; God, through regeneration, gives to a person.

Yet is the goodness of God not brought into question when he only regenerates some (i.e., the elect) whereby they are enabled to believe in Christ? The argument goes that if faith in Christ is only possible after God regenerates, and God does not regenerate all, then he does not fairly make salvation available to all (and by implication does not love all). The Gospel, they claim, is thus not available for everyone, and God does not will that none should perish but that all come to eternal life.

These concerns are very legitimate and often at the core of division amongst Christians. How can God truly love all people and want all to be saved if he does not enable all people to believe? Calvinists admit this is a complicated issue, but they also affirm that believing that faith precedes regeneration does not solve the difficult issue.

This point is made most aptly by Greg Welty as he asks a question in return. He states:

[G]iven God's foreknowledge, God creates at least some people whom He knows will never come to faith. Thus, He knows they will end up in hell if they are created. Knowing this, God creates them. Why would He do a

24. For the sake of focus, we will not be able to explore here accusations of God being responsible for evil and other concerns. Calvinists would deny that God is responsible for such.

thing like that? Why create people whom He knows will end up in hell when it was in His power not to create them? . . . I don't know. But does the fact that I don't have an answer mean I should ditch the doctrine of divine omniscience? I don't think so.²⁵

Welty's point is valid. While a Calvinist cannot explain God's hidden will on why he regenerates some and not others, he does not reject the doctrine. Similarly, traditionalists and non-Reformed people who affirm faith preceding regeneration do not escape the similar dilemma on why God knowingly creates some whom he foreknows will never come to him. Even Kenneth Keathley (who holds to faith preceding regeneration) admits this is a difficult issue for Arminians.²⁶ It is perhaps best to affirm that God sovereignly and graciously chooses to overcome the sinful, rebellious will of some while leaving others in their willful state of rejection. The fault still lies with the individual, not God. He does will for all to come to salvation, yet he chooses to leave some in their own willful rebellion while choosing to regenerate some.

5. Preventive Grace

One last consideration must be made in consideration of this debate. The non-Reformed tradition affirms that faith can precede regeneration because of preventive grace. By this, the non-Reformed claim that God overcomes the sinful effects of the fall, enabling one to believe freely in Christ for salvation. Olson states this is what makes repentance and faith possible, for it could not occur naturally. It makes an individual "no longer dead in trespasses and sin" and enables one to freely respond to saving grace.²⁷ Yet, as one would expect, it falls short of full regeneration.

For the Remonstrants, John Wesley, and possibly Arminius (matched with modern theologians like Vernon Grounds and Thomas Oden), they believe God has universally prevented upon the whole world in such a way where all people's original sin has been overcome. This enables all people to respond to the Gospel in their view.²⁸ A universal preventing is not mandated in this view, however. Even still, preventive grace is a grace that goes before the will of an individual, overcomes the effects of the fall, and makes repentance and faith possible.

It is interesting to note that all these transforming effects of preventive grace can be (and are) affirmed by Calvinists. They all affirm that preventive grace is the initial grace extended to a sinner, which overcomes the effects of the fall and makes repentance and faith possible. The only question is—is this not precisely what

25. Greg Welty, "Election and Calling: A Biblical Theological Study," in *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 231. Welty also provides a lengthy exegesis against proof texts that synergists/Arminians often use to support conditional election.

26. Kenneth Keathley, "The Work of God: Salvation," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 566–567.

27. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 36.

28. See Kirkpatrick, *Monergism or Synergism*, 102–103, 137 n.34, 138.

regeneration is? The Arminian Traditionalist position makes prevenient grace exactly that without calling it regeneration.²⁹

The non-Reformed here affirm that sinners are depraved, dead, sick, blind, and more. Yet what overcomes them is an initial act of grace that overcomes these within the human will. We have already observed how this overcoming grace does “violate” in a sense one’s natural will, which many within this tradition find troubling. Yet is it not Scripture that affirms regeneration as that which accomplishes these things?

Scripture attributes to regeneration the ability to accept the things of the Spirit of God in 1 Corinthians 2:12–15. Ephesians 2:1 states that we were dead in our trespasses and sin, but we were made alive (συνεζωοποίησεν) with Christ by grace in verse 5 (cf. Col. 2:13). This concerns regeneration in the full sense. Titus 3:5 states that, through regeneration, we are washed from our depravity. Ezekiel 36:26–27 speaks of the need for the Holy Spirit to give a new heart and new spirit to replace the heart of stone, not the ability to decide to get a new heart. In so doing, will they be able to observe God’s statutes and ordinances? Second Corinthians 5:17 suggests that for the old things to pass away (i.e., depravity and its effects), one must be made a new creation (not just merely brought to a crossroads for a decision). The point to this is that the effects of sin upon human nature were undone through regeneration in the fullest sense. One needs to be made alive from his or her deadness, to be moved from darkness to light, to have their eyes opened from their blindness. Scripture attributes this to regeneration in the fullest sense, not a partial prevenient grace that enables one to do this. The non-Reformed wish to attribute all the effects of regeneration to a partial prevenient while not calling it what it actually is, regeneration.³⁰

We may also question whether there is biblical support for their view of prevenient grace. In this model, God exercises a prevenient and overcoming grace that undoes the effects of the fall and enables the possibility to be regenerate. Notice, though, that people in this position are still unregenerate. They are somewhere in between death in trespasses and sin and alive in Christ. They are in a third state of being. They are in between darkness and light, between blindness and sight in Christ. Where is the Scriptural proof for such a third state? Does not Scripture clearly teach that one is in one or the other?³¹ Other concerns can be made about the synergism

29. Granted, this falls short of the effect of receiving new life, yet as will be shown, this overcoming grace is attributed to regeneration, which itself is a prevenient grace.

30. D. A. Carson rightly addresses this issue with an analogy. He compares it to 10 criminals who are pardoned by a judge. Five choose to accept the pardon while the other five reject it. Carson claims that they would have every right to boast in their own works of accepting their pardon. Though they did not earn or work for their pardon (it was all of grace), they are distinguished from those who rejected it because of their own decision to accept it. Their wisdom sets them apart, and it becomes a legitimate boast. Such is not the biblical model. See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 121–122.

31. This is often the time when proponents of faith preceding regeneration change aspects of salvation. Joseph Dongell and Jerry Walls use the analogy of one who is imprisoned in a terrorist camp. He cannot save himself from this stronghold, but God breaks into this camp, injects a “serum” into the mind of the person to clear them up, takes off the chains, and

entailed here that would further suggest that regeneration must precede faith.³² Nevertheless, we may rightly question whether there is adequate scriptural support for a third state of being between un-regeneration and regeneration.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the arguments made in favor of faith preceding regeneration. It has examined the traditional proof texts used to support their view, and the conclusion was made that biblical evidence is lacking. It further looked at the implications it makes concerning the integrity of the human will and the righteous nature of God with conclusions that a gracious, all-loving God does overcome the rebellion of his creatures in a way agreeable to both sides. Finally, the non-Reformed party was questioned on their grounds of prevenient grace with the conclusion that full regeneration is necessary, not a third state of alternative choice. The overall conclusion is that regeneration precedes faith. Even still, this author's prayer is that we will all agree that neither regeneration nor faith is possible without the faithful proclamation of the gospel and that together we would agree with Charles Spurgeon, who said, "Every generation needs regeneration." May we be faithful in this proclamation until our Lord returns.

enables him to escape (but does not mandate that he does). Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 68–69. Notice this switches the soteriological aspects to redemption rather than regeneration and how there was no free-will consent for God to do this in the first place.

32. See Kirkpatrick, *Monergism or Synergism?*, 116–128. What is namely in mind here is that the faith of an individual works together synergistically with God's work of prevenient grace to cause the effect of regeneration. This makes faith a contributing work.