

– *Reformation Today Series* –



DECISIONAL REGENERATION

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DECISIONAL REGENERATION

“But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

– John 1:13

1. Introduction

a. *What Is Regeneration?*

“Except a man be born again,¹ he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Joh 3:3). Our Lord Jesus Christ taught that the new birth is so important that no one can see heaven without it. Mistakes concerning this doctrine have been very destructive to the Church of Christ. The new birth is a spiritual change wrought in us, not an act performed by us (vv. 5-8). The apostle John states this so beautifully in the first chapter of his Gospel, when he speaks of the children of God as those “which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (v. 13). Regeneration, or the new birth, is God’s work by the Holy Spirit in changing a sinner’s heart and bringing him to faith in Jesus Christ. It is not something that man does or can do, but something that God does.

b. *What Is “Decisional Regeneration”?*

The history of the Christian Church has seen many errors concerning the new birth. These teachings depart from Scripture by attributing to man the ability to regenerate himself. When denominations adopt these false concepts of man and the new birth, they soon become corrupted with false practices. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and many others have all been corrupted at different times and to different degrees by practicing and teaching Baptismal Regeneration.² Baptismal Regeneration teaches that the waters of baptism convey the new birth. Man performs this sacrament³ and it is in his

¹ The word *again* can also be rendered *from above*, which points to the ultimate source of the new birth, the Triune God.

² **Baptismal Regeneration** – the doctrine that water baptism effects the saving work of the Holy Spirit in washing away original sin. Roman Catholicism teaches that baptism (usually of infants) confers grace to the individual, whether or not faith is present. Lutheran theology teaches that baptism must be accompanied by faith, either in the individual or in the parents, to be effective in washing away sin. While Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox, and others hold to varying forms of baptismal regeneration, other Protestants argue that it contradicts the concept of justification by grace through faith alone.

³ **sacrament** – “A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers”—*The West-*

control. Because of this erroneous teaching on regeneration, these denominations have embraced false practices.

In the nineteenth century, few controversies were as heated as that over Baptismal Regeneration. It is interesting to note that C. H. Spurgeon,⁴ the most prolific preacher of that century, printed more copies of his sermon denouncing Baptismal Regeneration than any other in 1864.⁵

However, the twentieth century Church must combat a more subtle falsehood: Decisional Regeneration. Decisional Regeneration differs from Baptismal Regeneration only in the fact that it attaches the certainty of the new birth to a different act. This doctrine, just as Baptismal Regeneration, sees the new birth as the result of a mechanical process that man performs. Decisional Regeneration has in its deceptive way permeated⁶ much of the Christian Church.

c. *Our Purpose*

The methods and theology of those that practice Decisional Regeneration need to be examined—not with a malicious spirit, but with a fervent desire that all of God’s people may be one in doctrine and practice for the glory of God. We love all that are in Christ; but we agree wholeheartedly with Charles Spurgeon:

“The best way to promote union is to promote truth. It will not do for us to be all united together by yielding to one another’s mistakes. We are to love each other in Christ; but we are not to be so united that we are not able to see each other’s faults, and especially not able to see our own. No; purge the house of God, and then shall grand and blessed times dawn on us.”⁷

So then, our purpose is not to question the sincerity of some Christians or to malign them, but to unite Christians in the truth as it is in our Lord. This alone is true Christian unity.

As we earnestly seek to bring unity to the Church of Christ, let us turn from falsehood unto God’s truth. The practice of Decisional Regeneration in the Church must be exposed in order to save men from the damning delusion that because they have “decided” or “signed a card,” they are going to heaven and are no longer under the wrath of God. The purity of the gospel is of extreme importance because it alone is the power of God unto salvation and the true basis of Christian unity.

minster Shorter Catechism, Question 92. Many Protestants today use the word *ordinances* instead of *sacraments* to distinguish from the Roman Catholic Church. The Bible teaches there are two ordinances instituted by Christ in the New Testament: baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both of which are His gifts to the church by which the church is blessed in remembering Christ. The Roman Catholic Church erroneously believes its seven sacraments are meritorious for earning God’s favor.

⁴ **Charles Haddon Spurgeon** (1834-1892) – influential English Baptist minister and history’s most widely read preacher (apart from those found in Scripture). Pastored a congregation of 6,000 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London until his death.

⁵ This sermon is available in print from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

⁶ **permeated** – diffused throughout; pervaded; saturated.

⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit* (London, 1864), Vol. 6, 171.

2. Counseling

Some may still not understand exactly what Decisional Regeneration means. Perhaps some are unfamiliar with the counseling courses that many organizations teach in this country and abroad, or with the numerous “Soul Winning Conferences” that are taking place. In these meetings, counselors are instructed that successful counseling must conclude with absolute assurance of salvation for the one who makes a “decision for Christ.” Counselors are often instructed to assure an individual that his salvation is certain because he has prayed a prescribed prayer and because he has said “yes” to all the right questions.

We have an illustration of Decisional Regeneration when a popular present-day preacher prescribes a counseling procedure. He directs “Mr. Soul Winner” to ask an unconverted “Mr. Blank” a series of questions. If “Mr. Blank” says yes to all the questions, he is asked to pray a prescribed prayer and is then pronounced saved.⁸ For the most part, this counseling results in the individual being “regenerated” through his decision. This is essentially the same counseling method used in large evangelistic crusades across the world. These campaigns are like huge factories turning out as many as ten thousand “decisions” in a week.

Mr. Iain Murray, in his timely book *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, points out that this same type of counseling is used in youth work:

“For example, a booklet that is much circulated in student evangelism at the present time, lays down ‘Three simple steps’ to becoming a Christian: first, personal acknowledgement of sin, and second, personal belief in Christ’s substitutionary work. These two are described as preliminary, but ‘the third so final that to take it will make me a Christian...I must come to Christ and claim my personal share in what He did for everybody.’ This all-decisive third step rests with me; Christ ‘waits patiently until I open the door. Then He will come in...’ Once I have done this, I may immediately regard myself as a Christian. The advice follows: ‘Tell somebody today what *you have done*.’”⁹

There are many variations of this type of counseling, but they all have in common a mechanical element, such as the repeating of a prayer or signing of a card, upon the performance of which the individual is assured of his salvation. Regeneration has thereby been reduced to a procedure that man performs. How differently did Jesus Christ deal with sinners! He did not have any instant salvation process. He did not speak to people with a stereotyped presentation. He dealt with every individual on a personal basis. Never in the New Testament do we find Christ dealing with any two persons in the same manner. It is enlightening to compare how differently He dealt with Nicodemus in John 3 and then with the woman at the well in John 4. Counseling needs to be personal.

There are a number of other problems with a mechanical counseling. Mr. Murray has pointed out the fact that, on the basis of this counseling,

⁸ Jack Hyles, *How to Boost Your Church Attendance* (Grand Rapids, 1958), 32-35.

⁹ Iain H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (London, 1966), 110.

“A man may make a profession¹⁰ without ever having his confidence in his own ability shattered; he has been told absolutely nothing of his need of a change of nature that is not within his own power, and consequently, if he does not experience such a radical change, he is not dismayed. He was never told it was essential, so he sees no reason to doubt whether he is a Christian. Indeed, the teaching he has come under consistently militates against such doubts arising.

“It is frequently said that a man who has made a decision with little evidence of a change of life, 1) may be a ‘carnal’¹¹ Christian who needs instruction in holiness. Or, if the same individual should gradually lose his new-found interests, the fault is frequently attributed to 2) lack of ‘follow-up,’ or prayer, or some other deficiency on the part of the Church. The possibility that these marks of worldliness and falling away are due to the 3) absence of a saving experience at the outset is rarely considered. If this point were faced, then the whole system of appeals, decisions, and counseling would collapse—because it would bring to the fore the fact that change of nature is not in man’s power, and that it takes much longer than a few hours or days to establish whether a professed response to the gospel is genuine. But instead of facing this, it is protested that to doubt whether a man who has ‘accepted Christ’ is a Christian is tantamount¹² to doubting the Word of God, and that to abandon ‘appeals’ and their adjuncts is to give up evangelism altogether.”¹³

Counseling that uses Decisional Regeneration produces statistics that would encourage any Christian—until he follows up the so-called converts. In one heartbreaking experience, forty “converts” of such counseling were contacted and only one person of these forty was found who appeared to be a Christian. One lady may have been converted, but what were the effects of the encounter on the other thirty-nine? Some of them may believe their eternal destinies were determined by their decisions, which is a fatal confidence if no change was wrought in their hearts and lives. Others may conclude that they have experienced all that Christianity has to offer. Failing to feel or see any promised change in themselves, they have become convinced that Christianity is a fake and that those who hold it are either self-deluded fanatics or miserable hypocrites.

Robert Dabney,¹⁴ one of the great theologians of the nineteenth century, made some very penetrating observations concerning the disillusionment of people that have been counseled for a decision. He said:

“Some of these individuals feel that a cruel trick has been played upon their inexperience by the ministers and friends of Christianity in thus thrusting them, in the hour of their confusion, into false positions, whose duties they do not and cannot perform, and into sacred professions which they have been compelled shamefully to repudiate.

¹⁰ **profession** – verbal or written expression of faith in Jesus Christ.

¹¹ **carnal** – fleshly; sensual, as opposed to spiritual.

¹² **tantamount** – equivalent; the same as.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁴ **Robert Lewis Dabney** (1820-1898) – Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth century; author of *Lectures in Systematic Theology* and *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*.

Their self-respect is therefore galled to the quick,¹⁵ and pride is indignant at the humiliating exposure. No wonder that they look on religion and its advocates henceforward with suspicion and anger.

Often their feelings do not stop here. They are conscious that they were thoroughly in earnest in their religious anxieties and resolves at the time, and that they felt strange and profound exercises. Yet bitter and mortifying experience has taught them that their new birth and experimental¹⁶ religion at least were a delusion. How natural to conclude that those of all others are delusions also. They say, ‘the only difference between myself and these earnest Christians is that they have not yet detected the cheat as I have. They are now not a whit¹⁷ more convinced of their sincerity and of the reality of their exercises than I once was of mine. Yet I know there was no change in my soul; I do not believe that there is in theirs.’ Such is the fatal process of thought through which thousands have passed, until the country is sprinkled all over with infidels, who have been made such by their own experience of spurious¹⁸ religious excitements. They may keep their hostility to themselves in the main because Christianity now ‘walks in her silver slippers’;¹⁹ but they are not the less steeled²⁰ against all saving impressions of the truth.”²¹

Dabney penned these words a hundred years ago, long before the days of the “mass evangelism” and highly organized campaigns. If a hundred years ago the country was “sprinkled all over with infidels, who had been made such by their own experience of spurious religious excitements,” what must be the situation today? This is a serious question for every Christian. To have led men, even sincerely, into false hope will be an awful condemnation for a Christian when he stands before Almighty God (2Co 5:10).

3. Altar Calls

One may read thousands of pages of the history of the Christian Church without finding a single reference to the “old-fashioned altar call” before the last century. Most Christians are surprised to learn that history before the time of Charles G. Finney²² knows nothing of this type of “invitation.” The practice of urging men and women to make a physical movement at the conclusion of a meeting [i.e., an “altar call”] was introduced by Mr. Finney in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Dr. Albert B. Dod, a professor

¹⁵ **galled to the quick** – vexed; irritated; chafed.

¹⁶ **experimental** – through personal experience; experiential.

¹⁷ **whit** – the smallest part or bit imaginable.

¹⁸ **spurious** – not genuine; false; counterfeit.

¹⁹ **walks in her silver slippers** – in a stage of favor.

²⁰ **steeled** – to render inflexible, unyielding, determined.

²¹ Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (London, 1967), Vol. 2, 13.

²² **Charles Grandison Finney** (1792-1875) – the Father of modern revivalism; established the modern forms and methods of revivalism between 1824 and 1832; among other things, taught the ability of people to repent and make themselves new hearts and the perfectibility of human nature and society.

of theology at Princeton Seminary at the time of Mr. Finney's ministry,²³ pointed out the newness of the practice and showed that this method was without historical precedent. In his review of Finney's *Lectures on Revival*, Professor Dod stated that one will search the volumes of Church history in vain for a single example of this practice before the 1820s.²⁴ Instead, history tells us that, whenever the gospel was preached, men were invited to Christ—not to decide at the end of a sermon whether or not to perform some physical action.

The apostle Paul, the great evangelist, never heard of an altar call, yet today some consider this practice to be a necessary mark of an evangelical church. In fact, churches that do not give an altar call are often accused of having no concern for the lost. Neither Paul nor Peter ever climaxed their preaching with forcing upon their hearers the decision to walk or not to walk forward in a meeting. The altar call is not only in conflict with Church history then, but with scriptural history as well.

One may ask, "How did preachers of the gospel for the previous eighteen hundred years invite men to Christ without the use of the altar call?" They did so in much the same way as did the apostles and the other witnesses of the early Church. Their messages were filled with calls for all men everywhere to *come to Christ*.²⁵

Surely, all must admit that the *first* sermon of the Christian Church did not climax with an altar call. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter concluded his sermon with these words: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." Peter stopped. Then the divinely inspired record tells us: "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said to Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Act 2:36-37). This response was the result of the work of the Spirit of God, not of clever appeals or psychological pressure. That day the apostles witnessed the conversion of three thousand people.

C. H. Spurgeon called men to come to *Christ*, not to an *altar*. Listen to him invite men to Jesus Christ:

"Before you leave this place, breathe an earnest prayer to God, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner. Lord, I need to be saved. Save me. I call upon Thy name...Lord, I am guilty, I deserve Thy wrath. Lord, I cannot save myself. Lord, I would have a new heart and a right spirit, but what can I do? Lord, I can do nothing, come and work in me to do of Thy good pleasure.

*Thou alone hast power, I know
To save a wretch like me;*

²³ **Albert Baldwin Dod** (1805-1845) – American Presbyterian theologian and professor of mathematics. He was born in Mendham, New Jersey. After a religious awakening while at Princeton, he affiliated with the influential Princeton Theologians and published in the group's *Review*, edited by Charles Hodge.

²⁴ Albert B. Dod, "The Origin of the Call for Decisions," *The Banner of Truth Magazine* (London, Dec., 1963), Vol. 32, 9.

²⁵ See "Come to Me!" by Tom Wells, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

*To whom, or whither should I go
If I should run from Thee?*²⁶

But I now do from my very soul call upon Thy name. Trembling, yet believing, I cast myself wholly upon Thee, O Lord. I trust the blood and righteousness of Thy dear Son...Lord, save me tonight, for Jesus' sake.' Go home alone trusting in Jesus. 'I should like to go into the inquiry-room.' I dare say you would, but we are not willing to pander²⁷ to popular superstition. We fear that in those rooms men are warmed into a fictitious confidence. Very few of the supposed converts of inquiry-rooms turn out well. Go to your God at once, even where you now are. Cast yourself on Christ, at once, ere you stir an inch!"²⁸

Spurgeon directed men to Christ and not to aisles. George Whitefield's²⁹ sermons called sinners to Christ, not to an altar. We may say the same of Jonathan Edwards,³⁰ the Reformers, and others in the past: God blessed them with a harvest of many souls as they used scriptural means to proclaim the gospel and call sinners to repent and believe in Christ.

Today the "altar call" has become the climax and culmination of the entire meeting. As the church sings many stanzas of a hymn, all kinds of appeals are made to sinners to walk the aisle. This gives the impression that their eternal destiny hangs on the movement of their feet.

Charlotte Elliott wrote the precious hymn, "Just as I Am," in 1836. Choirs and congregations frequently sing this hymn for the altar call:

*Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

The phrase "O Lamb of God, I come, I come" has been widely used to encourage people to "come" down the aisle. However, it is significant that Miss Elliott wrote the hymn for the

²⁶ Third stanza of *When Any Turn from Zion's Way* by John Newton (1725-1807), who was born in London, England. He was a rebellious infidel in his youth and early adulthood, leading to total involvement in the slave trade. He was miraculously saved at the age of 23, ordained a pastor in the Church of England, became a fine writer, and penned many hymns, including *Amazing Grace*.

²⁷ **pander** – gratify to or indulge.

²⁸ Murray, *op. cit.*, 107-109.

²⁹ **George Whitefield** (1714-1770) – English evangelist; born in Gloucester, England; worked with the Wesleys during studies at Oxford University. When opposition to his preaching closed church doors to him, he led the way in preaching outdoors. He was mightily used of God in England and the American Colonies during the Great Awakening.

³⁰ **Jonathan Edwards** (1703-1758) – American Congregational preacher. Regarded as America's greatest evangelical theologian and well-known for his preaching in the Great Awakening. Author of *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, and numerous other titles. Born in East Windsor, Connecticut Colony.

infirm, and that it first appeared in a hymnal prepared especially for invalids.³¹ To Miss Elliott, coming to Christ was not walking an aisle.

Although most who use the altar call realize that coming to Christ is not synonymous with coming to the altar, they do give the impression to sinners that the first step in coming to Christ is walking the aisle. I am purposefully being very careful not to misstate the case. I understand the sincerity of those who practice the altar call, it having been a part of every service from my earliest memory until college. In fact, I grew up in Christian circles unaware that evangelical Christianity existed without the altar call. In many services during this time, my mind was centered on the glorious person of Christ and His suffering on the cross, only to find the whole focus of the worship service suddenly changed at the conclusion: from seeing the glories and sufferings of Christ to walking an aisle. Many others have spoken of the same experience—that the altar call and the clever appeals at the conclusion of meetings, the decision to walk or not to walk, and the wondering how many will respond have distracted them from seeking Christ, and from worshipping God in spirit and truth (Joh 4:24).

Do you remember how the crowds physically followed our Lord Christ until He began to preach some unpopular truths? Then the crowds turned back (Joh 6:66). Why? Had they not come to Jesus with their feet? Yes, but this is not the coming to Him that is necessary for salvation. Christ said, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (Joh 6:37). And again He said, “No man can come to me except the Father...draw him” (Joh 6:44). In neither of these instances was Jesus speaking of the physical movement of the feet.

People need to know that coming to Christ is not the same thing as walking an aisle. Coming to Christ means repenting of one’s sins and believing on Him for the pardon of sins. May God cause His Church to return to the Scriptures for its methods of winning men to Christ. We must call sinners to faith in Christ, not to come forward in a meeting.

4. Preaching

The false teaching of Decisional Regeneration has even polluted the structure of the sermon. Jack Hyles, considered by many to be an authority on preaching, gives the following advice to his fellow-ministers:

“Many of us in our preaching will make such statements as, ‘Now, in conclusion’; ‘Finally, may I say’; ‘My last point is...’ These statements are sometimes dangerous. The sinner knows five minutes before you finish; hence he digs in and prepares himself for the invitation so that he does not respond. However, if your closing is abrupt and a lost person does not suspect that you are about finished, you have crept up on him and he will not have time to prepare himself for the invitation. Many people may be reached using this method.”³²

³¹ John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (London, 1907), 609.

³² Hyles, *op. cit.*, 43-44.

Upon first reading this, one might hope that he has misread Mr. Hyles. However, the second, third, and fourth readings confirm that he actually teaches that sinners may be converted to Christ by a minister's clever method in his sermon. This means that one's eternal destiny may be determined by one's impulse in an unguarded moment. The idea that "creeping up on" and surprising a sinner into salvation is in direct conflict with the scriptural doctrine of receiving Jesus Christ. In reality, preaching that tries to creep up on sinners usually results in bringing people to religion, not to Christ. Can there be a more terrible result of preaching a sermon than bringing sinners to something other than our Lord Jesus Christ?

True preaching is not a clever device of man; it is the demonstration of the power of God's Spirit in the proclamation of God's truth. I can never forget hearing Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones'³³ illustration of true preaching. He gave an account of George Whitefield preaching in the church of Jonathan Edwards:

"There was this genius Jonathan Edwards listening to Whitefield, who wasn't in the same field, of course, from the standpoint of genius and ability and so on. But as he was listening to Whitefield, his face, says Whitefield, was shining. Edwards' face was shining and tears were streaming down his face. Edwards was recognizing this authentic, authoritative note—this preaching. Whitefield was in the Spirit, Edwards was in the Spirit, and the two were blended together. The whole congregation and the preacher were one in the hand of God. That is preaching. May God enable us to practice it and experience it."³⁴

The preaching of which Dr. Lloyd-Jones speaks and which the New Testament sets forth is far removed from the trickery used in much modern preaching. Biblical preaching declares that men are not born again by "the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Joh 1:13).

Decisional Regeneration does not bring men to Christ any more than does Baptismal Regeneration. While some may be converted under such preaching, it is in spite of false methods, not because of them. The Bible is clear in its declaration that men are born again only by the Spirit of God. True repentance and saving faith come as the *result* of the new birth, and are never the *cause* of this great change. Repentance and faith are the acts of *regenerated* men, not of men *dead in sins* (Eph 2:1, 5). However, God does not believe for us, and He surely cannot repent for us—He has no sin for which to repent. We must personally, knowingly, and willingly trust in Christ alone for salvation. Moreover, we are not saying that preachers should not urge, yea, plead with men to repent and believe. Any preaching that merely rehearses the facts of the gospel without calling men to repentance and faith in Christ, as a merciful and mighty Saviour of sinners, is not biblical preaching.³⁵

³³ **David Martyn Lloyd-Jones** (1899-1981) – Welsh minister, perhaps the greatest expository preacher of the 20th century; ministered at Westminster Chapel, London, England, 1938-68.

³⁴ Recorded in shorthand from the sermon, "The Responsibility of Evangelism," preached at Grace Baptist Church, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in June 1969.

³⁵ See "What Does It Mean to Preach Christ?"; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

The apostles taught that God saves His elect through the foolishness of preaching. All new methods devised by man can only fall far short of this ordained means of converting the sinner. If modern churches expect God to bless their efforts and multiply their harvest, they must forsake their carnal inventions and once again embrace the teaching of Scripture. Biblical evangelism means to “preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1Co 1:23-24).

5. Theology

Whether we recognize it or not, doctrinal presuppositions³⁶ always underlie evangelistic methods. What presuppositions, then, have motivated the Church to depart from historic, biblical methods and to take up these new devices?

a. *The Work of Salvation*

The first is a faulty view of man’s condition. According to our Lord Jesus Christ, the new birth is the sovereign work of God’s Spirit in the heart of man (Joh 3:8). Yet, in conflict with Christ’s teaching, one of the forefathers of this new evangelism states, “Religion is the work of man.” This is a shocking statement, especially since it appears on the very first page of *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, the most influential of all of Charles G. Finney’s writings.³⁷ The great theological difference between modern evangelism and biblical evangelism hinges on this basic question: whether true religion is the work of God or of man. At best, the doctrine of Decisional Regeneration attributes the new birth partly to man and partly to God.

In his history of the Reformation in England, J. H. Merle d’Aubigne³⁸ states, “To believe in the power of man in the work of regeneration is the great heresy of Rome, and from that error has come the ruin of the Church. Conversion proceeds from the grace of God alone, and the system that ascribes it partly to man and partly to God is worse than Pelagianism.”^{39,, 40}

³⁶ **presupposition** – ideas taken for granted or assumed beforehand.

³⁷ For the clearest statement of Finney’s theory of regeneration, read his sermon, “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts,” in *Sermons on Various Subjects* (New York, 1835). For a detailed examination of Finney’s theology, see “Review of Lectures on Systematic Theology,” *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (Philadelphia, 1847), Vol. 19, 237-277; also Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “The Theology of Charles G. Finney,” *Perfectionism* (Philadelphia, 1967), 166-215.

³⁸ **J. H. Merle D’Aubigne** (1794-1872) – professor of Church history and historical theology at the Ecole de théologie de Genève; best known as the author of *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* and *The Reformation in England*.

³⁹ **Pelagianism** – the doctrine of British monk Pelagius (c. 354-415), who supposedly declared that human effort and merit could bring about salvation without the power of divine grace.

⁴⁰ J. H. Merle d’Aubigne, *The Reformation in England* (London, 1962), Vol. 1, 98; reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust.

One of America's greatest theologians, Charles Hodge,⁴¹ also points out the danger of this teaching:

“No more soul-destroying doctrine could well be devised than the doctrine that sinners can regenerate themselves, and repent and believe just when they please...As it is a truth both of Scripture and of experience that the unrenewed man can do nothing of himself to secure his salvation, it is essential that he should be brought to a practical conviction of that truth. When thus convicted, and not before, he seeks help from the only source whence it can be obtained.”⁴²

In both the above statements stress is put upon man's helplessness to be born anew, and the necessity for God to create life. It is especially in these two areas that the doctrine of Decisional Regeneration deviates from the biblical doctrine of regeneration.

b. Man's Spiritual Condition

This brings us to the foundational issue of Decisional Regeneration: What is the spiritual condition of man?

Can a man be born again by answering “yes” to a certain group of questions? Can a man be born from “above” by walking to the front of a building? Can a man become a true Christian by responding to an invitation as a result of being “crept up on” unawares? Your answers to these questions will be determined by your view of man's spiritual condition. What is man's spiritual state?

The grand old Scottish theologian Thomas Boston⁴³ vividly illustrated man's spiritual condition by comparing the unconverted person to a man in a pit. He can only get out of the pit in one of two ways: he may through much toil and difficulty scale the sides of the pit to the top, which is the way of works; or he may grab hold of the rope of grace let down by Christ and be pulled out of his misery. Yes, he may decide to pull himself up by the rope of the gospel, “But, alas! The unconverted man is dead in the pit and cannot help himself either of these ways.”⁴⁴

Man is spiritually *dead* in trespasses and sins and cannot please God (Eph 2:1; Rom 8:8). Our Savior Himself portrayed man's condition as one of utter helplessness: “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him...no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father” (Joh 6:44, 65).⁴⁵

This state of death and bondage to sin cannot be changed by making a decision or by walking an aisle. A man cannot make himself a Christian. Only the Spirit of God can create a new man in Christ. God in His grace gives men new hearts. Only then can they willingly repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. God Himself has stated this truth by saying: “A

⁴¹ **Charles Hodge** (1797-1878) – the most influential American Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth century; professor of theology at Princeton Seminary.

⁴² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1970), Vol. 2, 277.

⁴³ **Thomas Boston** (1676-1732) – Scottish Presbyterian minister and scholar.

⁴⁴ Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* (London, 1964), 183.

⁴⁵ See “Bondage of the Will” by Martin Luther and “Free Will – A Slave” by Charles Spurgeon; both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Eze 36:26-27). Jesus Christ also clearly said, “For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will” (Joh 5:21).

We cannot see the greatness of God’s power in saving sinners unless we see it against the background of man’s desperate condition. What a glorious doctrine is the new birth to a helpless sinner! May the Church return to biblical doctrine so that it may evangelize again to the glory of God.

*How helpless guilty nature lies,
Unconscious of its load!
The heart, unchanged can never rise,
To happiness and God.*

*The will perverse, the passions blind,
In paths of ruin stray;
Reason, debased, can never find
The safe, the narrow way.*

*Can aught, beneath a power divine,
The stubborn will subdue?
Tis Thine, almighty Saviour, Thine,
To form the heart anew.*

*O change these wretched hearts of ours,
And give them life divine!
Then shall our passions and our powers,
Almighty Lord, be Thine!⁴⁶*

6. What Must We Do?

It is not a time to be silent; it is time to speak out. We have kept quiet too long, somehow feeling that if we opposed these unbiblical practices we might be hindering the good work of evangelism, hoping that among the multitudes of “decisions” there are some genuine conversions. But with every passing week, thousands are being counseled into a false hope! Sinners are directed to walk down aisles and to make decisions, when they should be pointed to Christ alone. The high calling of preaching has degenerated into a series of gimmicks and tricks. These false practices have resulted from the perversion of biblical doctrine.⁴⁷ Therefore, in the midst of this darkness, let us pray that God may be pleased to

⁴⁶ **Anne Steele** (1717-1778) – daughter of a Particular Baptist preacher, she spent her entire life in Broughton, Hampshire, and devoted much of her time to writing. She chose a life of singleness to focus on her craft. She experienced tragic losses and was in poor health for most of her life. Her hymns have been mainstays in Baptist hymnals for over two hundred years.

⁴⁷ See “Ten Indictments against the Modern Church” by Paul Washer, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

revive His Church again. This revival can only come through Christ. Men must turn afresh to Christ's directions for counseling, for the preaching of His gospel, and for calling sinners to repentance and faith. Only then will our labors bring glory to God; and, if God grants, many sinners will be converted for His glory.



Questions for personal reflection and group discussion

The following questions are designed to reinforce understanding and application.

A separate study guide with complete questions covering all aspects of the text also is available, for correspondent, independent, or group study. Contact Mount Zion Bible Institute at the same address or school@mountzion.org.

1. Describe the new birth.
2.
 - a. What is Decisional Regeneration?
 - b. How is it a delusion?
3. What are sinners called to do in the following?
 - a. Acts 16:31
 - b. Romans 10:9
4. What is it to “come to Christ”?
5. What is the meaning of each of the following?
 - a. 1 Corinthians 1:23-24
 - b. Ephesians 2:1
 - c. John 5:21
6. Why is there a sense of urgency in realizing the error of Decisional Regeneration?