

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. More specifically, we are discussing the *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation. In our session last week we were discussing regeneration, or new birth, and we made the points that it is a sovereign, monergistic, irresistible work of God. He causes us to realize that we are sinners in need of salvation and then enables us to respond to the gospel offer with repentance and faith. So, Dr. Spencer, how do you want to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I first want to say a little more about the idea we introduced at the end of our previous session; namely, that the Puritans referred to the Word of God as the instrumental cause of regeneration. We had discussed at length the fact that when Christ told Nicodemus you must be born of water and the Spirit, the water referred to purification, and the Word of God is used by the Spirit to bring purification. It teaches us that we are sinners in need of a Savior.

Marc Roby: And what else do you want to say about that now?

Dr. Spencer: Well, if you think about this for a few minutes you will realize that this view is inconsistent with the definition we have been using for regeneration. I noted before that we don't want to get hung up on terminology, but we have been viewing regeneration, as many modern theologians do, as an instantaneous and immediate work of God in the heart of man, which makes him a new creation. John Murray clearly states how this definition is inconsistent with the Puritan view. He wrote, "If regeneration is an immediate act of creative power it cannot be said to be wrought through the instrumentality of the Word of God in the sense of the gospel."¹ And this is because the Word of God is addressed to our minds, but if regeneration is an immediate work of God, our minds have nothing to do with it. It is something God does to us.

Marc Roby: How then does Murray explain the Scriptures we examined; for example, 1 Peter 1:23, which says, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God."²

Dr. Spencer: The answer is actually quite simple. Murray points out that, "It must be that regeneration is used in two distinct senses in the New Testament: (1) in the restricted sense of recreative action on the part of God in which there is no intrusion in contribution of agency on our part; (2) in a more inclusive sense, that is to say, a sense broad enough to include the saving response and activity of our consciousness, a saving activity which is always through the Word of the truth of the gospel. In this sense it is virtually synonymous with the word *conversion*."³

Marc Roby: And, of course, that term conversion refers to repentance and faith, which is the response of a born-again person to the gospel.

¹ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 196

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³ Murray, op. cit., pg. 197

Dr. Spencer: That's right. I had mentioned in Session 149 that theologians used to think of the effectual call and regeneration as synonymous, or they thought of regeneration as part of the effectual call. When we speak about the Word of God being an instrumental cause, we are, I think speaking about what should more properly be termed the effectual call, rather than regeneration itself.

The important thing to realize here is that when you look at the Biblical data, things are sometimes combined. It is difficult to completely separate out at all times God's calling, regeneration and our response in repentance and faith, or conversion. Nevertheless, it is absolutely essential to recognize the miraculous and gracious work that God must do to give us new hearts and enable us to respond to the gospel call. Without that monergistic, sovereign work of God, our response is guaranteed to be a rejection of God's offer and a suppression of the truth.

Marc Roby: Yes, Paul makes this very clear in Romans Chapters 1 through 3.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he does. The bottom line is that the exact means by which God brings about our new birth is not explained to us and I suspect we wouldn't be able to understand it anyway. It is not a metaphysical change, in other words, it is not a change to the nature of our being. The fall didn't change the essence of man's being, he is still a rational and moral creature made in the image of God.⁴ Rather, sin brought about an ethical change; man became an enemy of God.

Marc Roby: And so, regeneration is also an ethical change, which is why the Bible speaks about God giving us a new heart.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. There is no physical measurement that you could make to determine whether or not someone has been born again. God's ways are often inscrutable. But there is value in recognizing that, whatever terminology we use, God draws us to himself, which almost always involves both particular circumstances in our lives and our hearing the gospel, and then God also regenerates us, which enables us to respond positively to this gospel call in repentance and faith. The details of this process vary from person to person, but in every single case three elements are included: first, the presentation of the gospel message; second, God's sovereign, monergistic work of regeneration; and third, the voluntary response of the person in repentance and faith.

Marc Roby: Very well. What else would you like to say about regeneration?

Dr. Spencer: I want to emphasize what a radical change regeneration brings about. This is especially important today because so many churches have watered down what it means to be a Christian and are leading people on the broad way to hell by telling them that they are saved when they aren't.

Marc Roby: We've read the frightening warning that Jesus Christ gives us in Matthew 7 before. In Verses 21 through 23 he said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say

⁴ E.g., see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed, P&R Publishing, 2008, pg. 289

to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

Dr. Spencer: That is a terrifying warning, and it is meant to be. If you think about the situation from Satan’s perspective for moment ...

Marc Roby: Now wait a minute, that doesn’t sound good. I don’t want to think like Satan does.

Dr. Spencer: True enough, but we need to understand our enemy in order to defeat him. In any event, if you think about this from Satan’s perspective, you realize that the place he would most like to see people is sitting in the pews of a church every Sunday morning, believing in their hearts that they are worshipping God and on their way to heaven, when in fact they are on the broad way that leads straight to hell.

Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point. That would make Satan’s job very easy. Thinking you are already saved is a great inoculation against hearing the gospel call.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. And Paul warned the church in Corinth about false preachers. They had infiltrated the church after Paul established it and in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 he writes about these false ministers. He says, “such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.”

We have to realize that false teaching does not usually come in a form that makes it blatantly obvious. False preachers are very often smooth, they speak well, they smile, they appear to be kind and loving, they quote the Bible and have degrees and, as we read in the passage from Matthew 7, they may even appear to prophecy, to drive out demons and to perform miracles in the name of Jesus.

Marc Roby: And so how are people to recognize these false preachers?

Dr. Spencer: By knowing the Word of God and recognizing that these false teachers are perverting it. You learn how to detect counterfeit money, in part, by becoming intimately familiar with the genuine article and the same is true for false teaching about God. You must know the truth in order to recognize error.

And by far the most common perversion of the gospel in our day and age is a so-called seeker friendly easy believism. It is a different gospel that says you can have Jesus Christ as your Savior without his being your Lord. It tells you that if you just admit you are sinner and pray a prayer you will be saved, and you don’t have to *forsake* your sins. You don’t have to do battle with your old nature. It says that obedience is optional. It says that you simply decide to accept Jesus. This is sometimes called decisional salvation.

But think about that carefully for a moment. If every person is able to simply decide whether or not to accept Jesus, then there is no internal change necessary and without radical internal change, no radical change in behavior is possible. There may be some self-generated moral

reformation, but nothing radical. We will not be new creations. We will not be obedient. We will not be fundamentally any different than the world and we will be rejected by Christ.

Marc Roby: We must admit however, that we do have to make a decision in order to become a Christian.

Dr. Spencer: Well of course we do. But it is a decision which an unbeliever cannot make until and unless God has regenerated him. As Christ said in John 3:3 and 5, you must be born again to see or enter the kingdom of God. In Ephesians 2:1-5 Paul wrote, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”

Now, listen to that politically-incorrect language! We were all by nature objects of wrath, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature. We were dead in our transgressions and sins. But then, praise God, listen to the language of the true gospel message. God, because of his great love for us, made us alive with Christ *even when we were dead!* No dead person ever decides to follow the true and living God, he must be made alive first.

Marc Roby: You were certainly right to call Paul’s language politically incorrect.

Dr. Spencer: It absolutely is, but it is the truth. And we need to see how radical regeneration is. Regenerate people have been given a new heart and a new Spirit as we read in Ezekiel 36:26, they have gone from being dead to being alive as we just saw in Ephesians 2, they have come from darkness to light Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:8, and they have been translated from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God as we can see from Ephesians 2:2 combined with Colossians 1:13, they are new creations Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

New birth is not a result of some decision that we make, it is something done to us by God and is the cause of a radical and pervasive change in our being, which is nothing less than a new creation. And then the first work of obedience done by that new creation is to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-10, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Dr. Spencer: I’m glad you included Verse 10 because many people leave it out. They like to hear that we are saved through faith and not by works because they think that means all they have to do is pray the sinner’s prayer. But Verse 10 makes it clear that that isn’t the case. We are God’s workmanship, in other words he has done a mighty work of transformation in all true Christians, and we are created in Christ Jesus *to do good works!* If we don’t have any good works, we are not God’s workmanship and we have not been born again. Our good works do not in any way

earn our salvation, but if we don't have any, then we have not been born again and any claim we make to being Christians is simply not true. We will be like the people in Matthew 7, saying "Lord, Lord" only to hear Jesus tell us to depart because he never knew us.

Marc Roby: Of course many liberal churches do help with feeding the poor and so on and they would point to those as good works.

Dr. Spencer: And those certainly can be good works. But they can also be done with wrong motives, arrogantly thinking that I am doing something wonderful and earning some reward from God, or simply being focused on being a "good person" and "making this world a better place" rather than living for the glory of God. Good works begin in the heart, by recognizing our need to put our sins to death and recognizing the Creator/creature distinction; we are just creatures, wholly dependent on God. Truly good works must be done for God's glory, whether we are helping feed the poor or just doing our normal jobs.

Good works require complete submission to the will of God. That means living in accordance with his Word. And his Word says that we are to work six days a week, that we are to honor the Sabbath, that we are to be honest and hard working, that we should not be in debt, that sex is reserved for marriage between one man and one woman, that we shouldn't get drunk and so on.

Marc Roby: To some that sounds like a lot of rules.

Dr. Spencer: Well, people often try to dismiss any mention of holy living as mere rule keeping, or even call it being legalistic. But they should read the sermon on the mount. It was Jesus Christ himself who said, in Matthew 5:20, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." And he went on to say, in Verse 22, that "anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." And then, in Verse 28 he said that "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." And in Verse 32 we read that Jesus said, "anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." And he goes on and on.

You can view this as just a set of rules if you like, but Jesus is explaining the true meaning of the Ten Commandments, which are still applicable to Christians. They are a summary of God's unchanging holy law and a transcript of his unchanging character. And we are told many times in the New Testament that if we love God we will obey his commands.

Marc Roby: That's not a popular idea today.

Dr. Spencer: And that's why it is so important for us to bring it up! Jesus said, in Luke 16:15, "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." We must abide by God's standards, not the standards of this world. And God's standards are very, very different than those of the world we live in.

New birth brings us into God's kingdom and gives us an entirely new set of priorities. We are given an eternal perspective so that we are not looking for a reward in this life. In fact, we know that we will have serious troubles in this life.

Marc Roby: Jesus said, as we read in John 16:33, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” And Paul wrote in Philippians 1:29, “it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him”.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, talk about something that is unpopular! The true gospel promises us trouble in this life, but a great reward in the next. The health, wealth and prosperity movement, also called the Word of Faith movement, is a wicked sham. Jesus *does* care for all of his people and he does want what is best for them, but he wants what is truly best for them now and eternally, not what is most pleasurable in this short life. That is why the apostle Paul wrote, in Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” And, in 1 Peter 4:13 he told us to “rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” He also wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:17, that “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

Marc Roby: Now that is not the message that the Word of Faith preachers deliver.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't. They deliver a message of “hope” for pleasure in this life, but it is an empty, false hope even for this life and it is an eternal death sentence. Regenerate people want to know and do God's will for his glory. And when you look to Christ you see the supreme example of what that can mean in this life. As he prayed the night before his crucifixion, we read in Matthew 26:39 that he said, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” And we know what the Father's will was. It was for Jesus to drink the cup of God's wrath to the full on the cross, bearing the penalty that we deserved, so that we might be saved.

And while none of us are called to suffer as Christ did, we do nonetheless have many trials and troubles in this life. We trust, as Jesus did, that there is a good purpose in them, that they will all redound to God's greater glory and that they cannot be compared with the great glory and joy that will be ours throughout eternity if we persevere to the end of this life.

Marc Roby: And all true Christians look forward to that eternal glory. Are we done with the topic of regeneration?

Dr. Spencer: We are for now, but I'd like to close with one more quote from Murray. He wrote, “If it were not the case that in regeneration we are passive, the subjects of an action of which God alone is the agent, there would be no gospel at all. For unless God by sovereign, operative grace had turned our enmity to love and our disbelief to faith we would never yield the response of faith and love.”⁵

Marc Roby: That is a perfect place to end for today. So, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would appreciate hearing from you.

⁵ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 100