Decisional Regeneration

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(Philadelphia, 1847), Vol. 19, pp. 237-Z77; also Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Theology of Charles C. Finney," Perfectionism (Philadelphia, 1967), pp. 166-215.
(13) J. H. Merle d'Aubigne, The Reformation in England (London, 1962), Vol. 1, p. 98.
(14) Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids, 1970), Vol. 2, p. 277.
(15) Thomas Boston, Human Nature in Its Fourfold State (London, 1964), p. 183.

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Introduction
What is Regeneration?

"Except a man be born again (1), he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 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. Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God. It is not a work of man. It is not something that man does but something that God does. The new birth is a change wrought in us, not an act performed by us. This is stated so beautifully by the Apostle John when in the first chapter of his Gospel 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). 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 these false concepts of man and the new birth are adopted, churches soon become corrupted with false practices. The Roman Catholic church, the Anglican church, the Lutheran church and many other churches have all been corrupted at different times and to different degrees with the teaching of Baptismal Regeneration. Because of this erroneous teaching on regeneration, these churches have embraced false practices.

In the nineteenth century few controversies were so heated as the one over Baptismal Regeneration. It is interesting to note that C. H. Spurgeon (1836-1892), the most prolific preacher of that century, had printed in 1864 more copies of his sermon denouncing Baptismal Regeneration than of any other sermon. Baptismal Regeneration teaches that the new birth is conveyed by the waters of baptism. The sacrament is performed by man and is in his control.

But the twentieth century Church has, in "Decisional Regeneration," a more subtle falsehood to combat. "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 can be performed by man. What is here called "Decisional Regeneration" has in its deceptive way permeated much of the Christian Church.

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 that "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," (2). 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.

Decisional Regeneration and Counseling

Some may still not understand exactly what is here meant by this term "Decisional Regeneration." Perhaps some are unfamiliar with the counseling courses that are being taught by many organizations in this country and abroad, and with the numerous "Soul Winning Conferences" that are taking place. In these meetings counselors are instructed that successful

there are some genuine conversions. But with every passing week thousands are being counseled into a false hope! Men are directed to walk aisles 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. In the midst of this darkness let us pray that God may be pleased to revive His Church again. This revival can come only through Christ. Men must turn afresh to His directions for counseling, to His free invitations to sinners and to the preaching of His gospel. Only then will our labors bring glory to God; and if God grants, many sinners will be converted for His glory.

Endnotes:

(1) The word "again" is better rendered "from above." It points to the ultimate source of the new birth, the Triune God.

(2) C. H. Spurgeon, The New Perk Street Pulpit (London, 1964), Vol. 6, p. 171.

(3) Jack Hyles, How To Boost Your Church Attendance (Grand Rapids, 1958), pp. 32-35.

(4) Iain H. Murray, The Forgotten Spurgeon (London, 1966), p. 110.

(5) Ibid, p. 111.

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

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

(8) Murray, op. cit., pp. 107-109.

(9) John Julian, A Dictionary of Hymnology (London, 1907) p. 609.

(10) Hyles, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

(11) Recorded in shorthand from a sermon, "The Responsibility of Evangelism," preached at Grace Baptist Church, Carlisle, Pa., in June, 1969.

(12) For the clearest statement of Finney's theory of regeneration read his sermon, "Sinners Bound To Change their Own Hearts," 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

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..." (Ezek. 36:26, 27). Jesus Christ also clearly said, "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom he wishes" (John 5:21).

The greatness of God's power in saving sinners can only be seen against the background of man's desperate condition. What a glorious doctrine is the new birth to the 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!

Isaac Watts

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, believing that among the multitudes of "decisions"

counseling must conclude with an individual's absolute assurance of salvation. Counselors are often instructed to assure an individual that his salvation is certain because he has prayed the prescribed prayer, and 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, (3). For the most part this counseling results in an individual being "regenerated" through a 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, which is much circulated in student evangelism at the present time, lays down 'Three simple steps' to becoming a Christian first, personal acknowledgment 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,' "(4).

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 which 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 "a man may make a profession without ever having his confidence in his own ability shattered; he has been told absolutely nothing of his need of a change of nature which 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 may be a 'carnal' Christian who needs instruction in holiness, or if the same individual should gradually lose his new-found interests, the fault is frequently attributed to 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 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 tantamount to doubting the Word of God, and that to abandon 'appeals' and their adjuncts is to give up evangelism altogether." (5)

The counseling of "Decisional Regeneration" produces statistics that would encourage any Christian—until he follows

he seeks help from the only source whence it can be obtained." (14)

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. 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 Boston (1676-1732) very 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."(15)

Man is spiritually dead in trespasses and sins and cannot please God (Eph.2:1; Rom.8:8). Our Saviour Himself portrayed man's condition as one of utter helplessness "No man can come to me except the Father who has sent me draw him"; "No man can come to me except it were given to him of my Father" (John 6:44, 65).

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 new

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" (I Cor. 1:23-24).

Decisional Regeneration and Theology

Whether it is openly recognized or not, there are always certain doctrinal presuppositions which underlie the methods used in evangelism. What kind of teaching, then, has allowed the Church to depart from historic Christianity and to take up these new devices?

The new birth according to our Lord Jesus Christ is sovereign work of the Spirit of God in the heart of man (John 3:8). Yet in conflict with Christ's teaching, one of the forefathers of this new evangelism states that "Religion is the work of man." This is a shocking statement, especially since it is found on the very first page of Lectures on Revivals of Religion, the most influential of all of Charles G. Finney's writings, (12). 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.

J. H. Merle d'Aubigne (1794-1872) in his history of the Reformation in England states that "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 which ascribes it partly to man and partly to God is worse than Pelagianism," (13). One of the greatest American theologians, Charles Hodge (1797-1878), 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,

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 reached, 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. The others may have concluded that they had 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, 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. Some of these individuals, he said, "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. Their self respect is therefore galled to the quick, 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 experimental religion at least was 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 whit 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 spurious religious excitements. They may keep their hostility to themselves in the main; because Christianity now 'walks in her silver slippers'; but they are not the less steeled against all saving impressions of the truth." (6)

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.

Decisional Regeneration and 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. Finney (1792-1875) 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 was introduced by Mr. Finney in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Dr. Albert B. Dod, a professor of theology at Princeton Seminary at the time of Mr. Finney's ministry, 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 1820's, (7). 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.

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,"(11). The preaching of which Dr. Lloyd-Jones is speaking of and which the New Testament speaks 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 (John 1:13).

"Decisional Regeneration" does not bring men to Christ any more than does Baptismal Regeneration. It is true that some are converted under such preaching, but this is in spite of the false methods used, not because of them. The Bible is clear in its declaration that only by the Spirit of God can men be born again. True repentance and saving faith come as the result of the new birth and are never the cause of the 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 act for us; He 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 for salvation. Nor are we saying that preachers should not urge, yea, plead with men to repent and believe. Any preaching which 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.

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. The Church must forsake its carnal inventions and once again be guided by the teaching of Scripture if it is to expect God to bless its efforts and multiply its harvest. The Scriptural means of evangelizing is to "preach Christ crucified, unto the

Decisional Regeneration and Preaching

The false teaching of "Decisional Regeneration" has polluted even 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," (10).

At the first reading of such a teaching one might believe, or at least hope, that he misread Mr. Hyles. The second, third and fourth readings, however, confirm that Mr. Hyles actually teaches that men may be converted to Christ as a result of some clever method a minister uses in his sermon, and that one's eternal destiny may be determined by the impulse of an unguarded moment. This idea that a man's salvation may depend upon his being "crept up on" and giving his unwilling consent is in direct conflict with what the Scriptures teach concerning the receiving of Jesus Christ. In reality the kind of Preaching that tries to creep up on sinners results for the most part in bringing people to religion, not to Christ. Can there be any more terrible result of a sermon than the bringing of people to something other than our Lord Jesus Christ?

True preaching is not a clever device of man, but a demonstration of the Spirit of God as the truth of God is proclaimed. I can never forget hearing Dr. David Martyn Lloyd- Jones illustrate what true preaching is with 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

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

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 invitations for all men everywhere to come to Christ.

Surely it will be admitted that the first sermon of the Christian Church was not climaxed by an altar call. Peter on the Day of Pentecost concluded his sermon with these words "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God has made that same Jesus, whom you 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?' " (Acts 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 invited 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;

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

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 enquiry-room.' I dare say you would, but we are not willing to pander to popular superstition. We fear that in those rooms men are warmed into a fictitious confidence. Very few of the supposed converts of enquiry-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!" (8)

Invitations such as Spurgeon gave directing men to Christ and not to aisles are needed today. George Whitefield's sermons were long invitations to men to come to Christ, not to an altar. The same may be said of the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, of the Reformers and of others in the past who were blessed with a harvest of many souls using Scriptural means of inviting men to Christ. Today the altar call has become the climax and culmination of the entire meeting. Many stanzas of a hymn are usually sung, during which time all kinds of appeals are made to the sinner to walk the aisle, and the clear impression is given to the sinner that his eternal destiny hangs on this movement of his feet.

"Just As I Am," the precious hymn perhaps most frequently sung for the altar call, was written in 1836 by Charlotte Elliott

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. But it is significant that Miss Elliott wrote the hymn for the infirm and that it first appeared in a hymnal prepared especially for

invalids, (9). 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.

Do you remember how the crowds physically followed our Lord Christ until He began to preach some unpopular truths? Then the crowds turned back (John 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 gives me shall come to me; and him that comes to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). And again He said, "No man can come to me except the Father draw him" (John 6:44). In neither of these instances was Jesus speaking of the physical movement of the feet. Men today need to be reminded that coming to Christ is not walking an aisle, but is casting oneself on Christ for life or death. May God cause the Church to return to the Scriptures for its methods of winning men to Christ. May sinners be charged not to come forward in a meeting but to come to the Lord Jesus Christ.