

The application of redemption

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Prof J.Douglas Macmillan

[0 : 00] Now, the application of redemption, and in particular these two terms with which we are so familiar, or should be, regeneration and conversion. These are terms that point us directly to the subjective change brought in the sinner by the grace of God.

And they bespeak a change so radical and far-reaching in its effects that it's in fact very variously designated in scripture.

For example, it's called a new birth in that portion which we read. It is spoken of sometimes as a resurrection, sometimes as a new life, sometimes the fruit of it is spoken of as a new creature or a new creation.

Sometimes it is spoken of as a renewing of the mind, or as a dying to sin and a living to righteousness. Sometimes it is spoken of as a new creation, sometimes as a translation from darkness to light, and so one could go on.

The New Testament alone uses a very wide variety of descriptive terms to speak of this renewing work of the Holy Spirit. When we come to theological doctrinal writing and the development of doctrine in history, we see that the systematic development of the application of redemption often uses both these terms, regeneration and conversion.

[1 : 53] And sometimes they have been used interchangeably, and that of course has caused some confusion. They are used also at times for the whole process of renovation or restoration, the renewal of man into the image of God.

And sometimes they are used for a particular stage in that process. For example, John Calvin gives regeneration a very wide meaning.

To quote him, where he has been writing about and talking of repentance, and using repentance not in a particular but a general way as the change that a conversion and regeneration brings. Writing like that, he says, In one word then, by repentance, I understand regeneration. The only aim of which is to form in us anew the image of God which was sullied and all but effaced by the transgression of Adam.

And he goes on, this renewal indeed is not accomplished in a moment. A day or a year, but by uninterrupted, sometimes even by slow progress, God abolishes the remains of carnal corruption in his elect.

[3 : 32] That's book 3, chapter 3 of the institute. Now here, of course, Calvin is not being heretical. And he is not being untheological or careless.

He is simply using the term regeneration to denote not just the action of the spirit in imparting life to the spiritually dead, but also the wider process of conversion and of sanctification which flow from regeneration.

And he is using the one term to cover the whole wide process. Now this wider use of the term regeneration passed from Calvin directly into English theology.

The Puritan writers of the 17th century use it in such a way that they hardly ever make any distinction at all between regeneration and conversion.

And we find such men as Owen and Charnock and others of their contemporaries, we find that they use the two terms synonymously.

[4 : 48] And even James Buchanan, writing last century on the work of the spirit and renewing the heart in his book on the Holy Spirit, he uses the phrase saving conversion to cover the actual implanting of life by the Holy Spirit.

Now interestingly, but not surprisingly in its historical context, the Westminster Confession doesn't use the term regeneration at all.

Instead, it uses that of vocation, the idea or term of vocation or effectual calling. And it's under this heading that the Confession and the Catechisms of Westminster treat the entire work of the Holy Spirit in the application of redemption.

From the first step of conviction of sin right through to the exercise of saving faith in Jesus Christ. But this wide usage of the word gradually came to be recognized as leading ultimately to confusion in our thinking.

regeneration and conversion both denote in their biblical sense and biblical usage I think quite distinctive and separable ideas.

[6 : 15] So there gradually developed a clearer and stricter use of the term regeneration and its usage began to discriminate between regeneration and conversion much more clearly and carefully.

As far as I can trace, it's Francis Turretin who first makes the distinction between the work of God and the action of man that we can trace in conversion.

The one, he says, is a cause, the other is a result. That is in conversion. Turretin on conversion. There's an action of God which is a cause.

There is an action of man which is a result. And then he went on to remark that the first is better denominated regeneration because it refers to the new birth by which man is renewed into the image of his maker.

And the second is better denominated conversion, Turretin says, because it includes the operation and agency of man himself. It is God who regenerates.

[7 : 31] It is man who converts. And can I just say that it's a great pity I think that Turretin is as badly neglected in the foreign theological circles as he is today.

He is the man from whom Dabney and one or two other strong-minded theologians drew their strength in many ways. However, that's a by the way.

I'm always giving by the ways and that's the first one. Now, from the time of Francis Turretin on, the distinction becomes more and more frequently used until, in fact, it became fairly commonplace in the later systematic treatment of our doctrine.

And it's the one that we'll follow in our development of our study of the subject in the time available to us now. Now, when we think of the application of redemption, scripture would have us related not merely to the Trinity, God the Father and God the Son, but the application of redemption specifically is to be related to the agency of the Holy Spirit.

That the work of the Spirit in us is just as necessary for our actual salvation as the work of Christ for us is made clear by many scriptures.

[9 : 06] And I want to repeat that because I think it's a very important distinction and it's one which many people fail to make and it's vital that we do make it. The work of the Spirit in us is just as necessary, just as vital for our actual salvation as the work of Christ for us.

but Hugh Martin would tell us that the second has priority. Everything depends upon the priestly achievement of Jesus Christ and our shorter catechism does say in answer to the question who is the redeemer of God's elect it does say the only redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll finish the question the answer for yourself there.

But we must distinguish in a day when the Holy Spirit is held out almost in the place of the redeemer we must make it quite clear that the Holy Spirit is not the redeemer of God's people he is the sanctifier of God's people he is the quickener of God's people and over against any reaction in us to a wrong emphasis on the doctrine of the spirit in our day we must carefully guard the biblical emphasis that this work of the spirit in us is as necessary for salvation as the work of Christ for us not get the two out of order but the two must be there Paul says 1 Corinthians 6 11 but you are washed you are sanctified you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the spirit of our God and the words of the Lord

Jesus himself that we have read to us except a man be born of the water of water under the spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God these words make it abundantly plain but no man is put into possession of any of the blessings of salvation saving blessings per se until he is renewed by the holy spirit and his words make it plain also that every man every man is made a partaker of all those blessings as soon as by the spirit's agency he is united to Christ and enabled to believe on his name I think I think that a great deal of the confusion about the work of the spirit in the believing soul would have been avoided the kind of confusion confusion which is prevailing in the present age could have been avoided if only men had carefully discriminated in their teaching about

regeneration regeneration unites to christ and to be united to christ is to be made a partaker of all that christ died to purchase for his people to think otherwise is nonsense it's to have a half union and a half way relationship to christ through christ blessing comes now it should be clear that we can't think of the application of redemption as one simple divisible indivisible act in fact it comprises a series of acts and processes or acts and works of god to mention some of these we have calling we have regeneration we have faith justification adoption sanctification and glorification and all these including glorification come into the sphere of the application of redemption now these are all so distinct and clear the one from the other that each has its own meaning and each its own function and purpose in the action of god's grace not one of them can be satisfactorily defined in terms of any one of the others nor should they be confused the one with the other furthermore on closer examination there are

I believe conclusive reasons for thinking that not only must these various actions in the application of redemption be distinguished but we can learn that they take place in a certain order of logical sequence that is why theologians speak of the order salutis now most theologians of the present day would put effectual calling at the very beginning of this sequence effectual calling as that which from god's side initiates the whole process of subjective salvation leading into justification sanctification and all the other things that belong to real christian experience and if the call of god is defined in terms of a divine activity rather than in terms of a human response then this is the correct order

[14 : 32] I believe it's only those who define the call out of or from its effect as a human response who can place it after rather than before regeneration to me it would seem that when the call is effectual it carries with it that plenitude of renewing power which ensures its response that is it comes in and with the quickening power of the holy spirit and in a sense it's very hard to separate you cannot separate in any sense of time at all between effectual calling and regeneration but there is a logical order between them now I want to go on to think now basically of three things first of all just a little on the necessity the bible's teaching on the necessity of regeneration and then a little on the nature of regeneration and then a quick look at the relationship between regeneration and conversion so the necessity of regeneration here at the point we've arrived we must begin to ask the question how can one who is dead in trespasses and sins and whose mind is enmity against God answer a call respond to a call into the friendship and fellowship of Christ and the answer is simple he cannot the response that the call requires is a spiritual moral impossibility on the part of one dead in trespasses and sins redemption doesn't you see find man where creation left him instead it finds him where sin has deposited him destitute not just of holiness of character but separated from God and deprived of the spirit and of all saving divine light totally indisposed to the demands of God's law upon him it's

John Howe who comments on the radical difference between what man once was and what man now is makes this remark it's quoted by James by Smeaton George Smeaton George Smeaton Howe says the stately ruins are visible to every eye that bear in their front yet extant the doleful inscription here God once dwelt that's what we write over man but you see Howe goes on to say here God no longer dwells the gospel finds man deprived of the spirit of God now it's this deprivation of the spirit which the fall of man involves that constitutes I believe man's real spiritual inability scripture teaches us that in regard to the understanding the unconverted man cannot know the things of the spirit of

God 1 corinthians 2 14 and again scripture tells us that as regards the will man is not subject to the law of God and he cannot be Romans 8 and 7 with regard to worship scripture says that man cannot without the spirit of God call Jesus Lord 1 corinthians 12 3 with regard to practice man cannot please God Romans 8 and 8 with regard to fruit he cannot bear fruit apart from the spirit John 15 4 and apart from union to Christ with regard to faith he cannot receive the spirit of truth and so one could go on and on and on I don't need to force the issue natural man's familiarity with sacred truths which he does not and cannot love just leaves him seared in conscience and if I can use the phrase twice dead to overcome all this impotence the regenerating power of the holy spirit is absolutely indispensable there were two great evils in our natural condition says

James the canon writing on justification there were two great evils in our natural condition each of which must be redressed and removed by means appropriate to itself if we were to be thoroughly reconciled to God the first was the guilt of sin the second the dominion of sin so these two things have to be removed the guilt of sin the second the dominion of sin under can and goes on by the

one we were exposed to the wrath of God by the other we were slaves to the carnal mind which is enmity to God and then he says God's displeasure on account of sin must be turned aside and man's enmity must be subdued and he goes on like this the objective work of Christ does one the subjective work of the spirit does the other the work of Christ for us the work of the spirit in us by the former says the canon all the blessings of salvation were procured by the latter all these blessings are effectually applied so we see the work of the spirit is not the cause but the consequence of our redemption by Christ we owe the spirit's work in us which we need we owe it directly to the atonement of Christ now while we can distinguish in this way between the work of Christ and the work of the spirit on the twofold ground of guilt and impotence we must not as I was saying earlier ever sever the two completely we should carry with us the thought that the whole work of the spirit in us rests on the ground of the saviour's finished work he purchased that on the day of pentecost when the spirit was shed forth we read that it was

[21 : 49] Christ who sent him forth and his sending forth is based there in that on the atonement of Christ George Smeaton says the loss of the spirit and the restoration of the spirit the former the result of the fall and the latter the result of the atonement are the two most momentous facts in history and that's the man that William Cunningham called the most astute theological the man he said who had the most astute theological mind in Christendom and Cunningham was a good judge of the the Ruggins.

George Smeaton says the loss of the spirit and the restoration of the spirit the former the result of the fall the latter the result of the tournament are the two most momentous facts in history the fall left the human heart once the temple of God and utter ruin because the great inhabitant who dwelt in it was under the necessity of leaving the polluted spirit with the spirit's return to the human heart on the ground of that everlasting righteousness this is still George Smeaton on the ground of that everlasting righteousness which Christ ushered in a new creation begun to dawn and a new kingdom entered which will be dissolved no more now we're left still with one further thought that we must look at and that is the necessity of regeneration as a work of

God's spirit is taught us by man's moral and spiritual impotence and it means that regeneration cannot come from any work of man's own nor can it come by the power any power of man's own will this impossibility is already implied in the terms Jesus used born again no more can a man be the efficient cause of his own natural birth than he can be the cause of his spiritual rebirth and none of us really have any point hand in our own birth nor do we have in our own spiritual rebirth man cannot renew himself and even if he could he would not he has no desire to renew himself until that desire is implanted by the

Holy Spirit of God man Jesus said loves darkness rather than light because his deeds are evil and loving darkness rather than light he will certainly not make much attempt to come to the light he'll avoid he'll even despise he will hate the light so we should not be surprised at the reaction of men to the gospel when we bring it to them now it's along these lines of scripture teaching we find I think the absolute necessity of a regenerating renewing work of the Holy Spirit John Murray points out that for us very sharply and vividly when he says this the fact is that there is a complete incongruity Murray could use fearful words sometimes but they mean a lot the fact is that there is a complete incongruity between the glory and virtue to which sinners are called on the one hand and the moral and spiritual condition of the called on the other how is this incongruity to be resolved and the impossibility to be overcome not a bad question let me quote another theologian that I hold in high esteem he's still alive he was the professor of systematic theology in the free church college for many years

R.A. Finlayson man's condition says Finlayson is such that a new nature must be given to him God can never be reconciled to the old nature nor can the old nature as such ever be taught to give obedience to God the old nature is such that it cannot be made whole in this sense regeneration is not to be thought of as a renovating of the old nature but rather as the imparting of a new one now let's go back to Murray's question and go on to the second part of our study how is the incongruity to be resolved and the impossibility overcome well that leads us directly to a brief study of the nature of regeneration now it's one of the glories of the gospel that it provides very amply for what [27 : 08] Murray calls this incongruity that is the incompatibility of the demands of God's call and the state of the sinner who is called the gospel is designed to meet man and to meet man exactly where he is lost impotent dark dead and you see that is the one of the glories of the gospel when the call of God is made effectual to man man lives and when the call comes with power it comes in

all the plenitude of special grace saving grace and that grace is the grace of regeneration it is when we take into account God's recreative power says John Murray that the contradiction between the call of God and the condition of the called is resolved there is a solution which takes away this barrier this contradiction it is the work of God's spirit now the language of

Paul in many places undergirds the point that John Murray is making let me quote to you from just one place Paul writes this God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shined in our hearts and not into but in God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and here we have a clear analogy drawn by Paul between the original activity of God who by his spirit the Bible tells us formed the earth and garnished the heavens comparison between that action and the action which through the same spirit by which he brings the sinner from spiritual darkness into the marvelous light of the gospel the language employed indicates that regeneration is something radical all pervasive if any man be in Christ he is a new creation and

Paul can go on to say old things have passed away behold all things have become new and all things are of God Finlayson used to stress that last phrase there all things are of God all the new things are of God time now the words that scripture describes the work of regeneration also indicate the presence and immediate action of the Holy Spirit himself the Greek word for regeneration is found in fact only in two places in scripture in Matthew 19:28 and Titus 3:5 and only in the latter passage, I think, does it refer to the beginning of new life in the individual Christian.

In Matthew, Jesus said this, Verily I say unto you, that ye which have followed me in the regeneration, when the Son of Man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

So Jesus is using the term to speak of the restoration or the renewal of all things, a renewed universe.

[31 : 06] He's teaching that redemption leads on to a regeneration of creation itself, a regeneration which will issue in a new heaven and a new earth.

And Paul, of course, gives us that same idea in Romans 8, and it's picked up in Revelation. In the Titus passage, Paul is quite definitely speaking of the subjective change wrought in man at the point of application of redemption.

Let me quote, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost.

Now the Greek word, palingenesia, palingenesis, is really a compound from palin, the word again, and from genesis, abyrth.

And we should note how closely parallel to the language of Christ in John 3 and 5 this Titus passage really is. Both texts refer to two elements.

[32 : 20] One, the washing and purification of our rebirth. And two, the renewing power of the Spirit who effects that birth and brings it about.

John Murray gives a very full extended exegesis and exposition of the Johannine passage both in volume two of his collected writings and in redemption accomplished and applied.

So I'll refrain from doing that with you today. I just want to suggest on the basis of both these passages that the twofold emphasis of purification and renewal point very strongly to union with Christ and to vivification in Christ, new life in Christ.

It is by union to Christ that his righteousness can be imputed to the sinner and regarded as belonging to the sinner.

And the sinner is made a partaker of Christ's holiness or to put it in another way apart from union to Christ there can be no washing of purification.

[33 : 39] Now equally it seems to me quite impossible that the Spirit should create or renew recreate the soul while it is still separated in any sense from Christ himself.

It is in Christ that the soul is vivified and brought into new life. And for this reason it seems to me that Scripture gives a logical priority to union with Christ over regeneration itself.

Yet we can't separate them time-wise. It's not that you have a non-regenerate soul unified to Christ but in regeneration there must be a union there.

Now although the word regeneration as individual personal renewal is used only in this one place in the New Testament the idea is very broad spread in Scripture.

You get it in the Old Testament again and again and again. Hugh Martin has a very fascinating sermon at least for me I found it a fascinating sermon and three texts from the Old Testament the first one from Ezekiel chapter 18 make you a new heart and a new spirit.

[35 : 05] the second one from Ezekiel 36 I will give you a new heart I will put a new spirit within you and the third one from Psalm 51 create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me.

Hugh Martin takes these three texts all of which deal with regeneration and he points out that the first one brings us God's command it's a precept the second one brings God's promise and the third one is man's prayer and the sermon is concerned to point out that this is a sort of a threefold direction in which the broad principles of Scripture teaching always work and gather together. God lays his demand upon men it's a demand which is impossible to meet. we cannot obey the precept renew your heart renew your spirit but the precept makes us conscious of our need it makes us look to God and as soon as we do there's a promise I will give you and the promise encourages the prayer oh God create in me give me that which you command that's the kind of sermons that Hugh Martin went about preaching they're very informative I'm very illuminative I'm getting tongue tied now like through the New Testament as well the words birth begetting begotten begotten again to bear to bring forth they're all implied in the sense of personal individual renewal by the apostle Paul by John by Peter and the other writers the production of new life is also expressed by the word for create

Ephesians 2.10 or the word a new man Ephesians 4.24 as well as the word to quicken in the Old Testament the same thought is expressed again and again and again a new creation a new heart circumcision of the heart the clean heart and so on somebody was asking me this morning did the apostles preach regeneration he seemed to be divided between what Jesus preached and what the apostles preached no he wasn't he said but it's a good question and of course I believe that the apostles did preach and taught very strongly the necessity of regeneration and that it was all implied in the word repentance toward God faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ the whole teaching of Paul is symptomatic of the fact that man unaided cannot repent and cannot believe now lastly and briefly the relationship between regeneration and conversion the two things of course are closely related like a man and a wife they're closely related but they're very different let me just tabulate now because time is going a regeneration is instantaneous and it's completed in a moment the working out of a new principle may and does professor

Finlinson used to say take a lifetime but it is imparted in a moment so regeneration is an instantaneous act b there is no intermediate state between that of the regenerate and the unregenerate there is no such thing as a half regenerate sinner despite Lloyd Jones and Romans 7 where he sees a man who is neither regenerate nor neither regenerate nor unregenerate the term terminology and what it's positing I think makes theological nonsense there is no such thing as a half regenerate person in the sense that we are using it the imparting of life the soul is either alive or dead and see regeneration takes place in the depths of the soul it is therefore a work of God which takes place under the level of human consciousness no man is aware of its precise moment of occurrence what men feel and therefore what men talk about is the manifestation of the new life which has been implanted and that life coming up into their consciousness the presence of new life secures its own exercise and that means that what men become conscious of is the stirrings of the life that God has wrought in the soul now these stirrings, these feelings are related to regeneration as causes to effect and D, the soul is passive in regeneration man does not because man cannot cooperate in this work this follows from the fact that his relation to the activity of God in his soul is purely that of reception in the instant when the divine and holy life is implanted by the spirit the soul of man contributes no energy or efficiency of any kind a dead man cannot assist in his own resurrection enmity will not cooperate with love the activity involved in regeneration is purely that of God the Holy Spirit and E, I would say, although this may be quarreled with a little bit

[41 : 17] I would say that regeneration is effected without means it is immediate rather than media although some theologians have taught that it is media through the word I believe that regeneration itself is without means and that the word is an instrument which leads into it but it directly is the action of the Holy Spirit faith is not a means of regeneration but a consequent of it it is not the fact that we believe and then are regenerated that is the wrong way around faith is not a means of regeneration but a consequent of it we are not born again by faith or repentance or conversion we repent we believe and we convert because we have been regenerated let's be quite sure of that only the soul that has been quickened out of death into life can exercise faith now all these points

lead to the position that conversion is the result the fruit of regeneration regeneration is the act of God conversion is the action of man conversion conversion is the natural expression of the new life given by God but even here

God is not absent his spirit it is that nurtures and sustains the life he has given and enables it to come into exercise here God causes the regenerate in their conscious life to turn to himself in faith and repentance and that turning is what scripture speaks of as conversion that turning is undertaken in actual personal experience that turning takes place in the sphere of experimental religious exercise of the human soul now conversion affects the condition of men the condition rather than the state it's not a legal act but a moral spiritual change and it's the emergence into the conscious life of a person of that grace which has its roots in regeneration and so in the subconscious life

I want to finish with a quotation from George Smeaton the scripture he says emphatically describes the divine action of the spirit as working in us to will and to do Philippians 2 and 15 he's quoting there but whether he works in us to will or subsequently works with us when we are enabled to will the entire glory of regeneration and of conversion belongs to the spirit of God and James Macan says this by the agency of the Holy Spirit who works faith in us enabling and persuading us to receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation we are united to Christ and by our union with him we are made partakers of all the blessings which he died to purchase and is exalted to be stole the two elements

I think are important they should not be confused in our thinking they should not be confused in our preaching they are in a sense inseparable they may well be simultaneous although some have taught that regeneration can by a long way precede conversion I wouldn't be too sure of that but the two are there and we should distinguish them and when we distinguish them then I think we can be clearer in our preaching of the necessity of the new birth and that necessity must be preached we should be clearer in our demands upon all our hearers for a converted life no matter who these hearers are covenant children there is only one thing which will satisfy us that they are in Christ by regeneration and that is the marks of a converted life and you and I as preachers of the gospel not only have the right we have the duty to demand insistently and urgently again and again sabbath by sabbath and weekday that we see the fruits of a converted life in our membership in our churches the fruits of a converted life are the only guarantee that you have that I have as preachers of the gospel or that these people themselves can have that they are truly regenerate men and women and we don't want anything less than truly regenerate men and women in the visible church of God so preach for conversion or let me say preach for regeneration and then preach with all your might for the fruits of a converted life let's insist a truth that the apostles propounded again and again let's insist upon it without holiness no man shall see

God and the truth of Jesus except a man be born again even if he's been born into a covenant family except a man be born again he cannot and will not enter the kingdom of God come here for your patient listening this recording is brought to you by the christian library dot org dot au