

Does regeneration necessarily precede conversion?

By **Tom Schreiner**

The answer to the question is “yes,” but before explaining why this is so, the terms “regeneration” and “conversion” should be explained briefly.

Regeneration means that one has been born again or born from above (John 3:3, 5, 7, 8). The new birth is the work of God, so that all those who are born again are “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8 ESV here and henceforth). Or, as 1 Pet 1:3 says, it is God who “caused us to be born again to a living hope” (1 Pet 1:3). The means God uses to grant such new life is the gospel, for believers “have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet 1:23; cf. Jas 1:18). Regeneration or being born again is a supernatural birth. Just as we cannot do anything to be born physically—it just happens to us!—so too we cannot do anything to cause our spiritual rebirth.

Conversion occurs when sinners turn to God in repentance and faith for salvation. Paul describes the conversion of the Thessalonians in 1 Thess 1:9, “For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” Sinners are converted when they repent of their sins and turn in faith to Jesus Christ, trusting in him for the forgiveness of their sins on the Day of Judgment.

Paul argues that unbelievers “are dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1; cf. 2:5). They are under the dominion of the world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph 2:2-3). Every one is born into the world as a son or daughter of Adam (Rom 5:12-19). Therefore, all people enter into this world as slaves of sin (Rom 6:6, 17, 20). Their wills are in bondage to evil, and hence they have no inclination or desire to do what is right or to turn to Jesus Christ. God, however, because of his amazing grace has “made us alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:5). This is Paul’s way of saying that God has regenerated his people (cf. Tit 3:5). He has breathed life into us where there was none previously, and the result of this new life is faith, for faith too is “the gift of God” (Eph 2:8).

Several texts from 1 John demonstrate that regeneration precedes faith. The texts are as follows: “If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him” (1 John 2:29). “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God” (1 John 3:9). “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whomever has been born of him” (1 John 5:1).

We can make two observations from these texts. First, in every instance the verb “born” (*gennaō*) is in the perfect tense, denoting an action that precedes the human actions of practicing righteousness, avoiding sin, loving, or believing.

Second, no evangelical would say that before we are born again we must practice righteousness, for such a view would teach works-righteousness. Nor would we say that first we avoid sinning, and then are born of God, for such a view would suggest that human works cause us to be born of God. Nor would we say that first we show great love for God, and then he causes us to be born again. No, it is clear that practicing righteousness, avoiding sin, and loving are all the consequences or results of the new birth. But if this is the case, then we must interpret 1 John 5:1 in the same way, for the structure of the verse is the same as we find in the texts about practicing righteousness (1 John 2:29), avoiding sin (1 John 3:9), and loving God (1 John 4:7). It follows, then, that 1 John 5:1 teaches that first God grants us new life and then we believe Jesus is the Christ.

We see the same truth in Acts 16:14. First God opens Lydia’s heart and the consequence is that she pays heed to and believes in the message proclaimed by Paul. Similarly, no one can come to Jesus in faith unless God has worked in his heart to draw him to faith in Christ (John 6:44). But all those whom the Father has drawn or given to the Son will most certainly put their faith in Jesus (John 6:37).

God regenerates us and then we believe, and hence regeneration precedes our conversion. Therefore, we give all the glory to God for our conversion, for our turning to him is entirely a work of his grace.