# THE DOCTRINE OF REGENERATION IN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY
## THE REFORMATION TO 1800

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With increasing regularity, an argument is now being made in conservative Protestant theology that runs thus: the related doctrines of regeneration and conversion took on an enlarged and even exaggerated role in the eighteenth century (the age of the Great Awakening) compared to anything given to them previously. As a consequence (so goes this argument) the now-conventional evangelical Protestant emphasis on the need for regeneration, not being an emphasis very fully anticipated in the theology of the Protestant Reformation[1] is something now best "pared back." Children raised in Christian families can be nurtured towards faith in Christ without it; those "in the world" can be told of their need to be united with Christ without the conventional emphasis on regeneration.

This paper takes issue with this representation and consequently will survey the doctrine of regeneration as taught from the age of the Reformation to 1800 (a convenient terminus date for the first era of Awakening) and seek to analyze such developments to the doctrine as may have occurred. It is only to be expected that we will observe *some* developments – inasmuch as formulations of many doctrines may develop incrementally over time. But I hope to be able

[1]Lewis B. Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (1940, Yale University Press; reprint, Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 8ff., is the first writer to have made this argument in modern times. He has been enthusiastically followed by pastor-theologian Tom Trouwborst in two essays, "A Response to 'The Reformed Doctrine of Regeneration'" in E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros and Cons* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Seminary Press, 2004), 187-205, and "From Covenant to Chaos: The Reformers and their Heirs on Covenant Succession," in Benjamin Wikner, ed. *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2005), 59-103. Schenck, followed by Trouwborst, approach the question of regeneration with the question of the children of Christian parents at the forefront of their thinking. D. G. Hart relays what is essentially the Schenck view of the negative drift taken by development in the doctrine of regeneration in the age of the Great Awakening in his *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), ch. 14. In this paper, I deliberately do not engage the discussion about regeneration and children but concentrate simply on the development of the doctrine itself.

to demonstrate that such developments to the doctrine of regeneration did not wait for the eighteenth century but arose much closer to the Reformation – and in response to the pastoral difficulties faced in a nominally-Christian Europe which still awaited full evangelization.

## I. Our Current Usage of the Term "Regeneration" Does Not Strictly Conform to Early Protestant Usage

Today, it is not sufficiently appreciated that a significant part of the "gain" in the Reformation era was in the realm of the application of redemption. Given that Jesus Christ, by his incarnation, his perfect life, his death for our sins, and his resurrection had *accomplished* redemption, how was any given individual able to participate in this redemption? To answer the question only by saying that the individual participates in Christ's redemption by the exercise of faith is true, yet it is an answer that raises still-additional questions. Whence comes this faith? Whence comes the awareness of and contrition for sin, without which no proper faith in Christ is exercised? Why does the response to the offer of the gospel come in a certain week or month or season of life and not at some other time? The Reformation era was indeed concerned with such questions and concerned to a degree that made the sixteenth century an epoch that expanded the boundaries of our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of redemption.[2]

In the sixteenth century itself, the Reformation emphasis was initially upon the paramount need for entry into forgiveness of sin by justifying faith in Christ. The question of how justifying faith relates to the reception of spiritual regeneration was not explored closely in earliest Reformation times. Huldrych Zwingli took small steps in this direction in his *An Exposition of the Faith* (1531)[3] when he indicated the following:

> It is not by good works that the son merits his position as heir to the estate, nor does he toil and labor to become the heir; but the moment he was born he was heir to his father's property not by merit but by right of birth. . . . Similarly, the children of God who stand in

[2]James Orr's *The Progress of Dogma* (1902, reprint, London: James Clarke, 1960) lecture viii, a lecture surveying the sixteenth century, was entitled "The Doctrine of the Application of Redemption." Also of note are three volumes touching on the related doctrines of regeneration and conversion in the post-Reformation context: Bernard Citron, *New Birth: A Study of the Evangelical Doctrine of Conversion in the Protestant Fathers* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1951); Helmut Burkhardt, *The Biblical Doctrine of Regeneration* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978); and David F. Wells, *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

[3]Geoffrey Bromiley, ed. *Zwingli and Bullinger*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. XXIV (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 240-41, indicates that the *Exposition*, though prepared by Zwingli in 1531 for the perusal of King Francis of France (with whom a military alliance was then contemplated) was only published subsequently in 1536 by Bullinger, the successor of Zwingli.

> faith know that by their divine birth, that is the birth of the Spirit, and on the basis of free election, they are the sons of God and not servants.[4]

Here we have the most basic recognition that the standing of the Christian believer has commenced with a spiritual birth. But Zwingli apparently felt no urgency to expand on this idea in 1531.

The initial *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) of John Calvin (1509-1564) did not advance beyond an elementary explanation of justifying faith.[5] However, the conception expressed in Calvin's *Geneva Confession* (1536) and his expanded *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) show that "regeneration" was reckoned to mean "renovation and renewal," a process of modification of the character of the believer that would occupy the whole balance of his or her life.[6] Regeneration, when understood in this way, is not very different than what has come subsequently to be called "progressive sanctification" or the mortification of sin. We are, with Calvin, admittedly some distance from the now-common conception that regeneration involves the inception of spiritual life in a fallen creature. Very much has been made of this fact, of late.[7] Yet, Calvin's contemporary at Zurich, the successor to Zwingli – Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), has what seems to be a clearer conception of regeneration as inception than the reformer of Geneva. Discussing the significance of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, Bullinger writes:

> The second birth (i.e. the one urged on Nicodemus by Christ) is wrought by means of the Holy Spirit, which being from heaven poured into our hearts, doth bring us to the knowledge of ourselves so that we may easily perceive, assuredly know and sensibly feel, that in our flesh there is no life, no integrity, or righteousness at all; and so consequently, that no man is saved by his own strength or merits. What then? The Spirit forsooth doth inwardly teach us that which the sound of the gospel doth outwardly tell us, that we are saved by the merit of the Son of God.[8]

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[4]Ibid., 272.

[5]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536 ed., reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 34-35.

[6]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics, vols. XX, XXI (1559 ed. reprint, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.iii.9; there Calvin equates ongoing repentance with regeneration. See this emphasis as originally present also in the Geneva Confession of 1536 , head 8 in Charles C. Cochrane, ed. *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 122. Calvin was also quite capable, however, of occasionally speaking of regeneration as inception; see for instance *Institutes* (1559) II.iii.6 where he says that 'regeneration….is the beginning of the spiritual life'. A most balanced treatment of these two emphases in Calvin is that of Pete Wilcox, "Conversion in the Thought and Experience of John Calvin," *Anvil* 14.2 (1997): 113-28.

[7]So Schenck, Trouwborst as indicated in footnote 1.

[8]Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, 4 vols. (London: Parker Society, 1839-52), IV.I., 37.

Here, already in mid-sixteenth century, we have a description of regeneration-as-inception, which the non-appearance of the precise terminology notwithstanding, quite fully anticipates later developments. One can detect the influence of Bullinger on this matter in the document of 1549, *Mutual Consent of the Churches of Zurich and Geneva As to the Sacraments,* a document produced under the threatening activity of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles. Taking up the difficult question of the relationship between a child's reception of baptism and the all-important activity of the Spirit of God (without which the ceremony would be empty) the position is taken that "those who were baptized when mere infants, God regenerates in childhood, or adolescence, occasionally even in old age."[9] By implication, this is a regeneration which, because punctilliar, provides entry into the new life.

On the other hand, as in Calvin, there is no really developed doctrine of regeneration in Calvin's younger contemporary, Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583). Ursinus, co-author of and commentator upon the Heidelberg Catechism (1562), can state that the effects of this all-important justifying faith are "conversion, regeneration, and universal obedience" and yet go on to explain that by regeneration he means something "which is begun in this life, and will be perfected in the life to come."[10] There is really no movement here beyond what we find in Calvin's *Institutes* of 1559.

Yet when we have taken note of the recurring appearance of this sixteenth-century conception of "regeneration- as-process," it is not as though early Reformed Protestantism spoke of regeneration *solely* in that sense and not at all in the now more common sense of the inception of spiritual life. Consistent with what we have seen, in tendency, in Bullinger, regeneration in this more defined sense as distinct from sanctification is referred to in the Confession of the English (Refugee) Congregation at Geneva (1556), the French Confession (1559), and the Scots Confession (1560).[11] Particularly of note is that in the latter case, spiritual regeneration is described thus:

> For by nature we are so dead, blind and perverse . . . unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus quicken that which is dead, remove the darkness from our minds and bow our stubborn hearts to the obedience of His blessed will. As we confess that God the Father created us when we were not, as His Son our Lord redeemed us when we were enemies to Him, so also we confess that the Holy Ghost does sanctify and regenerate us, without any respect to any merit proceeding from us, be it before or be it after our regeneration.

This plainly is regeneration conceived of as punctiliar.

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[9]*Mutual Consent of the Churches of Zurich and Geneva As to the Sacraments,* Art. 20 in Henry Beveridge, ed. *Tracts and Treatises of John Calvin*, 3 volumes, (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), II. p. 218.

[10]Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (1591), trans. G. W. Williard (1851, reprint, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), Lord's Day 7, Q. 21, 113.

[11]"Confession of the English Congregation at Geneva," head III, "French Confession of 1559," Art. XXII, and the "Scots Confession of 1560," chap. XII in Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions*, 133, 151, 171.

Similarly, the Belgic Confession of 1561 speaks of the way in which "the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Ghost doth regenerate and make him a new man,"[12] while the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 uses the term "regenerate" repeatedly to describe the individual who is now in a state of salvation: "Scripture requires regeneration of whoever among us wishes to be saved."[13] Thus, while fully allowing that the conception of regeneration in Calvin and Ursinus was an extended conception, embracing not only the onset of new life in Christ but also its progress, we are not under any obligation to suppose that this opinion was utterly dominant. There is ample evidence that regeneration understood (as we now understand it) as the inception of spiritual life, encountered in connection with the hearing of the Word of God in the gospel, was an always-more-widespread conception as the sixteenth century advanced. But this is hardly the only consideration when we examine the doctrine of regeneration within the sixteenth century.

## II. The Emergence of the Doctrine of Regeneration As Distinct from a Wider Conception of Special or Effectual Calling.

As one examines the writings of the sixteenth-century Reformed Protestants, it emerges that whatever may have been their conception of regeneration, narrowly considered as the inception of the new life within one who is to be saved, they had very clear conceptions of the secret workings of the Holy Spirit, associated with regeneration, which have the effect of drawing a person to faith in Christ. Thus, we find that John Calvin, who understood regeneration was lifelong, himself, was clear on the calling aspect. He speaks of the work of the Spirit in calling sinners to salvation in Christ "consisting not only in the preaching of the Word, but of the illumination of the Spirit." He emphasizes that as to the timing of this call, "the elect are gathered into Christ's flock by a call not immediately at birth, and not all at the same time, but according as it please God to dispense his grace to them."[14] Thus, even in the age of Reformation, there was an inching forward in understanding the mutual relationship of calling and regeneration and a growing understanding of how they are actualized in time. And this emerging change, perhaps only implicit in the late sixteenth century, becomes more evident in the seventeenth. Reflecting the pastoral reality in which an extensively Protestantized Europe was still largely nominal in its Christian profession a full century after Luther's initial protest, various Reformed Protestant theologians begin to insist on the distinctiveness and necessity of regeneration, considered as this initial imparting of

[12]"Belgic Confession of Faith" Art. XXIV, in Cochrane, 205.

[13]"Second Helvetic Confession," in Cochrane, 238.

[14]Calvin, *Institutes* (1559), vol., XX, XXI, III.xxiv, 2, 10.

divine life into a sinner's darkened heart.[15] I stress that this is *not* the insistence of enthusiasts and sectarians. And if anything, this emphasis is more pronounced, initially, on the Continent than in England and Scotland.

Thus, regeneration as the initial impartation of divine life by a direct action of the Holy Spirit is already clearly in evidence in the Canons of the Synod of Dordt (1619). The advance in clarity of statement is marked:

> But when God accomplishes his good pleasure in the elect, or works in them true conversion, he not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, and powerfully illuminates their minds by his Holy Spirit . . . but by the agency of the same regenerating Spirit he pervades the inmost recesses of the man; he opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised. . . . And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation; a resurrection from the dead; a making alive which God works in us without our aid.[16]

This is especially impressive when it is recalled that the Canons expressed the theological consensus of the Reformed churches of the United Netherlands, Rhineland, Switzerland, what is today Belgium and Great Britain – a group characterized by some theological diversity of its own.

Acknowledging this prominence given to regeneration in the Synod of Dordt, it is not surprising to find the same doctrine clearly enunciated in 1624 by Amandus Polanus of Hanover, author of *Syntagma Theologiae Christianae*:

> Regeneration is God's *beneficium* (favor) by which our corrupt nature is begotten and renewed a second time in God's image through the Holy Spirit by the incorrupt seed of God's Word.[17]

Again, we find the Reformed theologian of Basel, Johannes Wollebius (1586-1629), writing in his *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* (1626) giving extended treatment to the subject of "Special Calling." It is plain that Wollebius, who proceeds to show that this "special calling" is called in Scripture "the new creation, rebirth, drawing, divine teaching, and

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[15]William B. Evans hypothesizes in *Imputation and Impartation:"Union with Christ" in American Reformed Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), ch. 2, that over and above these pastoral realities, Reformed theology in the early seventeenth century was proceeding to make more and more of the "order of salvation." See hints of this also in Orr, 272-74.

[16]*The Canons of the Synod of Dordt*, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (1877, reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), III, 590. (Third & Fourth Heads of Doctrine, arts. xi and xii).

[17]Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma Theologiae Christianae* VI, 37, as quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out from the Sources,* trans. G. T. Thomson (1950, reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 519.

resurrection," is in fact discussing within that rubric what we now recognize as regeneration, i.e. the initial imparting of new life which constitutes an individual a Christian. It is also noteworthy that Wollebius, a paedobaptist, is careful to distinguish this "special calling" from the act of baptism: "The time of calling is not necessarily that of baptism; God calls some before baptism, some in baptism, and some after baptism."[18]

The English Puritan writer, Reformed theologian, William Ames (1576-1633) who became professor of theology in the University of Franeker, the Netherlands, from 1622, took a similar stance in his *Marrow of Theology* (1629). His discussion of divine calling enfolds into it a consideration of regeneration, which he explicitly names:

> . . . calling is termed conversion, Acts 26:20. All who obey the call of God are completely turned from sin to grace and from the world to follow God in Christ. It is also called regeneration or the very beginning of a new life, a new creation, a new creature – and it is often so called in the Scriptures.[19]

Yet the emphasis of seventeenth-century Reformed theology could also be more muted on this subject. The still-famous Irish archbishop of Armagh and Reformed theologian, James Ussher (1581-1656) reflected this in his *A Bodie of Divinitie* (1648). Ussher, so widely reputed to be a seminal theological influence among the Westminster Assembly of Divines (1643-1649), would only state on the subject of calling and regeneration:

> God does not only offer grace to us, but causeth us effectually to receive it: and therefore is said not only to draw us, but also to create a new heart in us, whereby we follow him.[20]

And that is the sum of it! Here, as in the preceding century, we see the substance of the eventual doctrine of regeneration enunciated without any clear utilization of the terminology itself.

The Westminster Assembly of Divines, to whose number Ussher declined to be added, also followed this somewhat circumspect approach by devoting a chapter (ch. X) of the Westminster Confession of Faith to the broad topic of "Effectual Calling" and employing the verb "regenerate" but once within it. The verb appears again, twinned with "effectual calling," in the Confession's

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[18]Wollebius, "Compendium Theologiae Christianae," in John W. Beardslee, ed., *Reformed Dogmatics:Seventeenth-Century Reformed Theology through the Writings of Wollebius, Voetius, and Turretin*. (1965, reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 157-58.

[19]William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (1629, reprint, Boston, MA: Pilgrim, 1968), ch. XXVI, head 19.

[20]James Ussher, *A Bodie of Divinitie* (1648, reprint, Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 2007), Sixteenth head, 170. The same muted emphasis can be noted in Thomas Watson's *A Body of Divinity* (1692, reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 221. Watson's treatment of "inward call" includes "renewal of heart" and "drawing of the will."

chapter on Sanctification (ch. XIII).[21] But it should be plain to us that a description of "Effectual Calling" which entails "calling out of the state of sin and death in which they are by nature . . . enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly . . . taking away their heart of stone and giving unto them a heart of flesh and quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit"[22] is plainly a discussion of regeneration *as well* as calling. And these are motions of the Holy Spirit towards the fallen *in time* rather than in eternity.[23] The Savoy Confession of Faith, a slight modification of the Westminster Confession by Congregational Independents in 1658 went only marginally further; in a new chapter "Of the Gospel" it expanded upon the idea of effectual calling by saying that

> men who are dead in trespasses may be born again, quickened, or regenerated (by) an effectual, irresistible work of the Holy Ghost upon the whole soul for the producing in them (of) a new spiritual life'.[24]

The treatment of this subject by the celebrated seventeenth-century Baptist writer, John Bunyan (1628-1688), is of a piece with what we have seen earlier in the seventeenth century. In his treatise, *A Confession of My Faith*,[25] Bunyan had affirmed:

> I believe that to effectual calling, the Holy Ghost must accompany the word of the Gospel and that with mighty power; I mean that calling which of God is made to be the fruit of electing love. . . . Otherwise men will not, cannot hear and turn. Samuel was called four times before he knew the voice of him that spake from heaven.[26]

## III. The Age of Later Puritans and Reformed Orthodoxy

Now with the consideration of the viewpoint of the Westminster Divines, the Congregational Independents, and Bunyan, we have come to the age of the later Puritans and of Reformed

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[21]Carl Robbins has gathered a fuller list of allusions to regeneration in the Westminster Standards. See also Robbins, "The Reformed Doctrine of Regeneration," in Beisner, ed., *The Federal Vision*, ch. 13.

[22]*Westminster Confession of Faith* X, i-ii .The primary use of the verb "regenerate" comes in X, iii where the difficult cases of those dying in infancy and others incapable of being outwardly called by the Word are considered.

[23]The references to time in the Westminster Confession's treatment of the application of redemption are worthy of much greater attention than they are receiving in current discussions. Note the references to time at X, i, iii; XI, iv.

[24]See Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III. 718-19.

[25]The date of first publication is not known. Richard Greaves, *John Bunyan* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 171, indicates that the treatise was only added to the collection of Bunyan's writings in 1736-37 and was not included in the 1692 edition.

[26]John Bunyan, "The Confession of My Faith" in *The Complete Works of John Bunyan* (Marshallton, DE: NFCE, 1968), I, 421

orthodoxy. These, we find not to be the originators, but only the elucidators of a doctrine of regeneration as the inception of new life which is now capable of being discussed as an operation of the Holy Spirit distinguishable from special or effectual calling. The doctrine of regeneration as inception into spiritual life which had already appeared in Europe in the opening decades of the seventeenth century in the writings of Wollebius, of Polanus, and in the Canons of Dordt, was now taken up by writers such as Gisbertus Voetius (1588-1676), Franciscus Burmannus ( 1628-79), Herman Witsius (1636-1708), and Johannes Henricus Heideggerus (1633-1698).[27] Among the later Puritan writers John Owen (1616-1683), Stephen Charnock (1628-1680), John Flavel (1627 -1691), and John Howe (1630-1705) there are generated extended systematic investigations of the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration and His means of granting it.

These Puritan developments, which are echoed in European Pietism, do have a pastoral context. As one reads the later Puritans closely, one finds them emphasizing the distinctiveness of regeneration as an operation of the Spirit active in the sinner's lifetime, and using the language of "new birth" to describe the distinguishing feature of the truly Christian man or woman. They do this in the face of a then-contemporary Christian moralism, which was working to reduce the Christian message to a question of right behavior and which – in light of the spiritual tumults of the period, just passed – now decries all "enthusiasm" and heart religion.[28] In the face of such a challenge, evangelical writers such as Owen are at pains to emphasize that right behavior and right action (which moralists "preach up") must be rooted in new life imparted by God.[29] Without the new life, the fruits of obedience and virtue cannot appear. Thus, regeneration must be a frequent theme for godly preachers:

> The work of the Spirit of God in regenerating the souls of men is diligently to be inquired into by the preachers of the gospel, and all to whom the word is dispensed. For the former sort, there is a peculiar reason for their attendance unto this duty; for they are used and employed in the work itself by the Spirit of God and are by him made instrumental for the effecting of this birth and life. So the apostle Paul styles himself the father of them who were converted to God or regenerated through the word of his ministry.[30]

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[27]See Heppe XX, supra for illustrations of this from Voetius (1648), Witsius (1694), Heidegger (1696) and Burmann (1699)

[28]This period, known also as the "interregnum" because there was no monarch in England between 1649 and 1660, was characterized by unbridled activity of various sectarian expressions of Christianity. See C. Fitzsimmons Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (New York: Seabury, 1966).

[29]Owen, in his "Discourse on the Work of the Holy Spirit" (1674), in *The Works of John Owen* (London: Banner of Truth, 1966), III, 121ff., has regularly refuted such insinuations by Samuel Parker, author of "Defence and Continuation of the Ecclesiastical Polity" (1671).

[30]Ibid., 226.

This context is reflected equally in Stephen Charnock, who preached on *The Necessity of Regeneration* in the difficult times which followed both the restoration of monarchy and the ejection of Puritan ministers from the Church of England:

> If regeneration be so necessary, then how much to be lamented is the ignorance of this doctrine in the world? And strange and sad it is that it should be so little considered. The common talk is of serving God and reforming the life, but who of a thousand speaks of the necessity of a new nature? It is a sad case that, when a doctrine is so clear, men should be so stupid and deludingly damn themselves; that they should be so sottishly ignorant of this who have Bibles in their hands and houses, yet not understand this, which is the great purpose for which God even sent the Scripture among the sons of men.[31]

Charnock's own approach was to urge his hearers to seek this all-necessary regeneration:

> If it be necessary to be had, it is necessary to be sought. We are all at this present before God in an old or new nature; and if we die in the nature we have received from old Adam, without another from the new, it is as certain that every one of us shall be excluded out of the kingdom of God as it is certain we live and breathe in the places where we stand or sit. We are born of the earth, we must be born from heaven; we must have a spiritual as well as an animal life.[32]

Another of the later Puritans, John Flavel (1627- 1691), devoted extensive attention to the theme of regeneration in his treatise, *The Method of Grace*. He stressed the decisiveness of this saving change:

> This infusion of spiritual life is done *instantaneously*, as all creation work is; hence it is resembled to that plastic power which, in a moment, made the light to shine out of darkness; just so God shines into our hearts, 2 Cor. iv. 6. [33]

John Howe (1630-1705), not to be outdone by his late-Puritan predecessors for attentiveness to the doctrine of regeneration in that time of religious confusion, preached thirteen sermons on the single text (1 John 5.1), "Whoever believes in Jesus Christ, is born of God." The emphasis was rather like of that of Charnock, who found religiosity rampant, but Christian faith scarce:

> It may indeed seem a great thing to be a son of God, one born of God; but the name of believing is become so cheap amongst us, and carries so little and so diminished a sound with it, that we are

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[31]Stephen Charnock, "The Necessity of Regeneration" in *The Works of Stephen Charnock* (1688, reprint, 1865, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 58.

[32]Ibid., 69.

[33]John Flavel, "The Method of Grace," in *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 vols (reprint, 1820, London: Banner of Truth, 1968), II. 93.

> too generally tempted to look upon it as a slight, and small and trivial matter.[34]

All this unfolds in a confusing state of affairs in European Protestantized Christendom in which real and nominal Christianity are found intertwined. The same emphases we can note in these late Puritan writers are observable also in then-contemporary orthodox Reformed writers in Europe. Francis Turretin (1623-1687) regularly highlighted the importance of regeneration as the inception of Christian life. We find that like writers earlier in the seventeenth century, Turretin treats regeneration-as-inception as an aspect of effectual or special calling. Distinctive in Turretin is the evidence that he is laboring to uphold the orthodox Protestant position on this matter against the polemical assaults of Catholic counter-Reformation theologians such as Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621). Bellarmine had found the Reformed conception of divine calling as effectual to be highly objectionable, inasmuch as it enshrined the divine initiative at the expense of a human will that he deemed to be largely unaffected by sin. On such a view, divine calling must not go beyond persuasion, lest it interfere with human liberty. Against this point of view, Turretin insists that

> the action of God in the conversion of man . . . consists not in a simple and bare moral suasion (which is merely objective), but in an omnipotent and irresistible power. It is nothing less than the very creation and resurrection of man, which therefore operates not only objectively, but also effectively with man. . . . Now who can believe that to regenerate and resuscitate man, to take away his heart of stone and to give him a heart of flesh is nothing else than to morally persuade to conversion? . . . But far different is the language of Augustine when he says, "Not by the law and doctrine sounding without, but by an internal and secret, a wonderful and ineffable power, God works in the hearts of men not only true revelations, but also good wills."[35]

The reference here to "omnipotent and irresistible power" might, by itself suggest, that Turretin supposed that this grace was only an exercise of divine might; but as he went on to make clear, his conception was that in regeneration, the omnipotent grace of God engages the sinner at multiple levels of need:

> God regenerates the minds of the elect by a certain intimate and wonderful operation and creates them as it were anew by infusing his vivifying Spirit, who gliding into the inmost recesses of the soul, reforms the mind itself, healing its depraved inclinations and prejudices, (and) endues it with strength.[36]

Fascinatingly, Turretin combats a then-contemporary criticism of the Reformed understanding of regeneration, which charged that the divine initiative understood in this way meant that

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[34]John Howe, *The Works of John Howe* (New York: John Haven, 1835), Sermon XXXVIII, 882.

[35]Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* 3 vols. ed. James T. Dennison (1696, reprint, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), II, 519.

[36]Ibid., II, 523.

the human subjects of regenerating grace are as good as oblivious to what is transpiring, so disengaged are they. But Turretin responds:

> Man is not like a log and a trunk in his regeneration as our opponents falsely charge upon us. The will is the receptive subject of grace; this cannot be said of a trunk. The Spirit does not force the will and carry it on unwilling to conversion, but glides most sweetly into the soul (although in a wonderful and ineffable manner, still most suitably to the will) and operates by an infusion of supernatural habits by which it is freed little by little from its innate depravity, so as to become willing from unwilling and living from dead. The will so renewed and acted upon immediately acts, converting itself to God and believing.[37]

Benedict Pictet (1655-1724), theological successor to Turretin, similarly dealt with regeneration within the larger category of effectual or, as he terms it, "inward" calling.

> It is termed "calling according to the divine purpose," (Rom. viii.28), also regeneration, sanctification, and conversion…It is termed regeneration to denote the entire inability of man to what is good; to denote the great change which takes place in him, so great that he seems to be born anew; and also to intimate the almighty power of divine grace. . . . Calling and regeneration denote the mere acts of God, and not our own; sanctification and conversion denote the acts of God, and our own also, as stirred up within us by the grace of God. These terms, however, are frequently distinguished in this manner; effectual calling is the giving of faith and repentance, and thus it precedes both; regeneration sometimes includes effectual calling, and the renovation of the corrupt nature; at other times it is strictly taken for the latter only; sanctification is the continuance or carrying on of regeneration; conversion sometimes means the same as regeneration, sometimes as repentance.[38]

## IV. The Eighteenth Century, the Century of Awakening, is the Period in which the "Floodgate" is Alleged to have Opened and the Emphasis on Regeneration Becomes Obsessive. Do We Note Substantive Changes?

Most worthy of note, early in this century, is the now-famous work of the Scottish minister, Thomas Boston (1676-1732), *Human Nature in Its Fourfold Estate* (1720). In a way highly reminiscent of late Puritan writers, Owen, Charnock, and Flavel, Boston gives real prominence to this doctrine; it is the first theme dealt with in the opening of the "third estate," the state of grace. One readily grasps Boston's pastoral motivation in pressing this doctrine:

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[37]Ibid., II, 524.

[38]Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology*, trans. Frederick Reyroux (1696, reprint, London: Seeley, 1834), 339.

> Many call the church their mother, whom God will not own to be his children . . . All that are baptized are not born again. Simon Magus was baptized, yet still "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity." Where Christianity is the religion of the country, many will be called by the name of Christ, who have no more of him but the name; and no wonder, seeing the devil has his goats among Christ's sheep. . . . Good education is not regeneration. Education may chain up men's lusts, but cannot change their hearts. A wolf is still a ravenous beast though it be in chains.

Boston, very much like the late Puritans, is contending with nominal Christianity in a country where the Reformation has been in place for a century or more.

In these same years, the young Jonathan Edwards—even as a recent Yale graduate serving a short pastorate in New York City—was giving thought to the doctrine of regeneration. In a short piece of theological "Miscellany" penned in 1722, he compared the new birth of the sinner to the joining of the soul to the fetus in a mother's womb.

> In the new birth there is certainly a very great change made in the soul: so in the first birth there is a very great change when the rational soul is first infused, for the fetus immediately upon it becomes a living creature and a man, that before had no life; yet the sensible change is very gradual.[39]

While he treated regeneration as a distinct reality in this early short meditation, it was his general tendency to treat regeneration as an aspect of effectual calling, a divine calling decisive in bringing sinners from darkness to light.[40]

Philip Doddridge of Northampton (1702-1751) delivered a course of sermons (later published) on the theme of regeneration in 1741. The year is important. For this was just the time when both from various corners of Britain and from the then thirteen American colonies came reports of large-scale evangelical awakening. Doddridge stood theologically in the tradition of late Puritanism and was also abreast of current European Reformed theology. What did he, active as both pastor and theological tutor contribute to the theme we are exploring?

Here the doctrine of regeneration is stated with *simplicity*. The course of seven sermons begins from only four New Testament texts: Eph. 2:1, 2 (you he has quickened) John 3:3 (Jesus' instruction to Nicodemus), 2 Cor. 5:17 (the Christian is a new creation) and Titus 3:5 (washing and renewal); it is also remarkably free of the fine theological distinctions one finds on every page of a Turretin (above). And yet, having said this, we dare not imply a theological regress. There is a complexity, a multi-faceted approach embodied in a definition of regeneration which is stated thus:

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[39]Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellany 241: Regeneration," in John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 42.

[40]So, for instance, "Miscellaneous Observations on Theological Subjects," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (1834, reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), II, 550.

> A prevailing disposition of the soul to universal holiness, produced and cherished by the influences of God's Spirit on our hearts, operating in a manner suitable to the constitution of our nature, as rational and accountable creatures.[41]

While there is observable here the familiar emphasis on the ultimate necessity of God's taking the initiative in regeneration, there is also, a less familiar concern, (present also in Turretin, above) to fathom how the sovereign initiatives of grace *engage*, rather than merely conquer fallen creatures. Though it is somewhat anachronistic to speak this way, we might call this a psychological interest.[42] Doddridge wants to understand what *manner* of a divine working in a fallen human is required to produce a change of "prevailing disposition." But for all this, we are only seeing here themes about the secret dealings of the Holy Spirit with a sinner, in conjunction with the ministry of the Word, which we have observed across the preceding two hundred years. Here is no unbridled enthusiasm, no rantings of the unlettered.

The theme of regeneration also was of importance to the eighteenth-century Baptist theologian of distinction, John Gill (1697-1771), as shown in his *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (1767). Though Gill was no doubt familiar at the time of writing with the treatises of the late Puritans, Doddridge, and European theologians on this theme, his treatment is truly his own. As with Doddridge, this is a less technical, less ornate approach than that shown in Turretin. Conversion, according to Gill is

> excited and encouraged by the ministry of the word, by which it appears that a man is born again; so then the three thousand first converts, and the jailor were first regenerated, or had the principle of grace wrought in their souls by the Spirit of God, and then were directed and encouraged by the ministry of the apostles to repent and believe in Christ, whereby it became manifest that they were born again.[43]

John Brown (1722-1787) the Scottish Secession Presbyterian divine was, in regard to the doctrine of regeneration, more like the Genevan theologians Turretin and Pictet than like the late Puritans in that he returned to treating regeneration as a subsidiary aspect of effectual calling. The particular stress of the treatment of regeneration in his *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1782) is that it is the means by which the sinner is brought into union with

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[41]Philip Doddridge, *Miscellaneous Works*, 2 vols. (1839, reprint, Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker, 2003), II, 726.

[42]This "psychological" interest can also be detected in Jonathan Edward's treatise, "Narrative of Surprising Conversions" (1737), in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), I, 352, where he remarks on how, of late, the process of conversion seems accelerated compared to former times.

[43]John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 2 vols. (1767, reprint, London, 1839, reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 115.

Christ.[44] Regeneration is effected in the sinner not by an act of bare divine omnipotence, but (in his striking phrase) "in the time of love."[45]

## V. Drawing the Threads Together

This paper began with an acknowledgement of a disturbing current tendency to suggest that the doctrine of regeneration as inception into new life, because not prominent in the first age of Reformation, should be "pared back" now, in our time. We took note of the hypothesis, advanced by this viewpoint, that regeneration never achieved its more prominent role until preachers and evangelists of the Great Awakening era harped on it too often. It is an interesting hypothesis. To be fair, it should be allowed that this contention *might yet* be shown to be true if one took the time to study sermons which have survived from that time, compared to those of an earlier era. But the difficulty is that those who have advanced the theory have *not* attempted to demonstrate that eighteenth-century preaching about regeneration was distinctive or excessive. They have been content to merely *assert* that it was so.[46] Thus the suggestion that there was an obsession with regeneration in the eighteenth century has been much easier to advance than to substantiate. This paper has turned to hard evidence of a different kind and reached a very different conclusion.

This paper has shown that in spite of ambiguities associated with the view of Calvin and Ursinus on regeneration, the teaching that regeneration was the Holy Spirit's inceptive work of awakening and infusing the sinner with new life was beginning to be clarified by 1560. Such teaching was explicitly evident by the time of the Synod of Dordt and was the common theme of British Puritans and Continental Reformed theologians through the balance of the seventeenth century. It was in *that* century, rather than in the century to follow, that the doctrine of regeneration as inception began to be considered in a free-standing way, distinct from special or effectual calling. And as for the eighteenth century, far from there being strong evidence that this doctrine was harped on too often, there is a different kind of evidence suggesting that if anything, the presentation of the doctrine was somewhat simplified and was explained in a less-technical form.

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[44]John Brown, *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1782, reprint, as *The Systematic Theology of John Brown*, Grand Rapids: Christian Heritage, 2002), 336-37.

[45]Ibid., 355.

[46]See footnote 1. Trouwborst, in his essay, "From Covenant to Chaos: The Reformers and their Heirs on Covenant Succession," in Benjamin Wikner, ed., *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2005), 59-103, has revised his 2004 opinion (in which he followed Schenck and faulted the era of the Great Awakening). He now believes that an increased emphasis upon regeneration in the seventeenth century entailed a defection from the doctrine of the covenant earlier championed by the Magisterial Reformers.

The increase in attention to the doctrine of regeneration from the sixteenth century forward is evidently *not* best explained by making reference to the emphasis on revival in the eighteenth century, but by the sober realization of the inadequate evangelization of Reformation Europe, which dawned on thoughtful preachers and theologians. There is clear evidence that the heightened emphasis on regeneration, far from being "made in America," was of European importance before it was taken seriously elsewhere. Transatlantic preachers such as Whitefield and Freylinghausen preached new birth on the far side of the Atlantic before proclaiming it here. Such are the fruits of our survey up to 1800.

That the doctrine of regeneration has declined in importance for us in the early twenty-first century is therefore *not* necessarily a sign of some recovered equilibrium. Conservative Protestantism is now marginalized in our culture to a degree hardly imaginable a half-century ago; we are too inclined to let the former searching (and sometimes nettlesome) emphasis upon the absolute need for regeneration give way to less confrontational themes. As well, strands of conservative Protestantism which, reflected in the literature surveyed in this paper, have done most to assail the former emphasis on regeneration, are those which in this unsettling context of Christian marginalization, are most likely to focus inward upon those who already comprise the visible church – to the potential neglect of those who need to hear, repent, and believe the gospel.[47]

A judicious appropriation of the Reformed theological heritage will not insist that we slavishly stand by earlier, perhaps less coherent, formulations of the doctrine of regeneration traceable to early writers such as Calvin and Ursinus – especially when there is evidence that it was good theology and good pastoral practice which required the refinement of and additional elaboration upon themes such as regeneration, in the description of which they were, after all, but pioneers.

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[47]Note the salutary caution on this front to those who lay heightened stress on the doctrine of the covenant and on the visible church, issued by Gerald Bray in his *Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 208.