

Berkhof, WGT Shedd & Regeneration – does the revealed Word usually initiate conception in the New Birth?

Berkhof poses the question, 'Whether God, in implanting or generating, the new life employs the word of Scripture or the word of preaching as a means in the work of regeneration?'¹

His answer is negative and for his support he cites Shedd's voluminous dogmatic theology. He gives three grounds for this position: first regeneration creates new life, where it was not present before, but preaching to be effective requires the prior possession of this new life for it to be grasped; second, regeneration is a subconscious work, whilst preaching is directed to the conscious mind; third, the work of the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Word and this work is essential for the Word to be received. In the third ground alone, he cites scripture.

He then proceeds to address three passages that seem to refute his position: James 1.18, 1 Peter 1.23 and the parable of the Sower.

Shedd argues, 'The Holy Spirit employs means in conviction, in conversion, and in sanctification but not in regeneration. The appointed means of grace are the Word, the sacraments, and prayer. None of these means are used in the instant of regeneration, first because regeneration is instantaneous, and therefore there is not time to use them, secondly because regeneration is a direct operation of the Holy Spirit upon the human spirit.'²

This position is conducive to hypercalvinistic passivism with respect to evangelistic preaching, a tendency to mysticism in the work of the Holy Spirit and in Berkhof's case yields concessions to Freud. Whilst his motivation seems to be to conserve the absolute Sovereignty of God in salvation, retain the glory for the work solely to Him and to comfort the parents of infants dying young, none of these assertions are necessary to these ends.

Our only preoccupation is to test these assertions scripturally.

Both authors are at pains to refine the focus of the question on conception, the initiation of regeneration. As Berkhof implicitly acknowledges this goes beyond the scriptural use of the terms³, born again or regeneration in the passages where these terms are used in John 3, the first epistle of John, and Titus 3.5, all of which encompass conversion, or the culmination of the New Birth and its fruits as well.⁴ Indeed often to make a point regeneration, as he more narrowly defines it, Berkhof cites passages that plainly refer to the later stages of conversion, for example in passage on the positive characteristics of regeneration in impacting the whole man⁵, he cites 11 texts, only one of which Matt.5.4 might be referred to a pre-conversion state of conviction.

His contention is that regeneration must be considered as encompassing conception (or implantation in his terms) and later birth, but his assertions on regeneration are largely restricted to the former not the latter. It is his thesis that this conception is usually effected without means that we challenge here and consider its implications. For clarity we will use the word conception, when Berkhof intends it, whilst he usually uses the broader term regeneration.

Berkhof distinguishes conception from the effectual call by three criteria. First, the effectual call is externally manifest by preaching, witness or some other exposure to the persuasions of God's voice. Conception is

¹ Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (ST) p.525 <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/berkhof/systematictheology>

² WGT Shedd Dogmatic Theology Vol.2 p.506

https://archive.org/details/dogmatictheology0002shed_f9s2/page/506/mode/1up

³ ST p.515 <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/berkhof/systematictheology>

⁴ Berkhof also acknowledges he is going beyond the church fathers, the reformers, and the major confessions (ST p.516-7). The 1689 Baptist Confession (ch.10) follows the Presbyterian and makes no distinct contribution on regeneration separate from the effectual call of God's Word by His Holy Spirit. The 1644 on the other hand refutes Berkhof's position, as we shall see.

⁵ ST p.519

however the result of a creating command⁶. He writes as he distinguishes the internal call from conception, 'The question arises, whether in this calling (as distinguished from regeneration) the Word of God works in a creative way, or by moral suasion. Now there is no doubt about it that the Word of God is sometimes said to work in a creative manner, Gen.1.3, Ps.33.6,9, 147.15, Rom.4.17... But these passages refer to the Word of God's power, to His authoritative command, not to the word of preaching with which we are concerned here. The Spirit of God operates through the preaching of the Word only in a morally persuasive way, making its persuasion effective, so that man listens to the voice of his God'⁷

The key issue is does scripture maintain this important distinction between persuasion and creation in the operation of God's Word in salvation? It is freely granted that we are naturally irrevocably hostile to God's approach, (Col.1.21, Jn.5.40, Rom.8.7) and crippled by this disobedience (John.8.34, Prov.5.22).

The scriptures assert repeatedly that the Word itself is instrumental in generating the New Birth, not only in conversion, but even in producing an abortive response to the Truth, as also in the true conviction and awakening that proceed genuine conversion.

In Matthew 13, the seed of the Word gives birth to four responses, one of which is genuine, the other three are spurious, though initially convincing in two cases to those who experience them. To this Berkhof raises two objections⁸. First that the Holy Spirit is not bound up in the operation of the Word, but acts distinctly and separably. Who doubts this? Yet it is the Lord's own teaching that the Word brings life, by the Holy Spirit's power, not in every hearer, but in some. Nor is there any ground in the analogy for Berkhof's 'Lutheran' objection that His Word will fail in any elect heart, because it is obstructed in the reprobate, on the contrary it will accomplish His purpose, no more, no less (Isa.55.11). Second, the seed analogy does not require the Word to generate spiritual life, but it evidently does, within the Lord's own picture, without the seed there is no plant! When Satan snatches away the seed, he snatches away any opportunity for life. I am not asserting here that the Lord can never produce regeneration without His revealed Word, but that assertion could not be based on this parable. Berkhof is deeply mistaken to suggest that the seed simply prepares the soil, like a hoe and trowel prepare hard ground, the seed is the plant, in embryo, given the right conditions and power to germinate, at least within the bounds of the Lord's picture.

In James 1.18, the word used for begetting, is indeed *apokueo*, also used in v.15 for bringing forth death. The source of the begetting is not human will but Divine Will, revealing the true wellspring of all salvation, hinting at conception. The reference to 'firstfruits of His creatures' indicates a creating Word is in mind. We will not quibble further over this text, but it supports the *whole* of regeneration, *including* conception, being effected *both* by the Word and the Spirit.

In 1 Peter 1, the Apostle twice describes the new birth, first by resurrection from the death of sin and despair (v.3) and second by the incorruptible Word (v.23). Berkhof concedes that it is the preached Gospel (v.25) that it is in mind, but then incongruously claims this incorruptible seed is not to be identified with the Word, despite the Saviour's explicit words (Lk.8.11). If this seed is not the Word, what does Berkhof have in mind? The Holy Spirit contrasts the regenerating Seed with grass and flower seed (v.24), then immediately proceeds to describe the preached Word, 'which endures forever'.

In Berkhof's three objections to the Word being immediately involved in regeneration by the Holy Spirit⁹, we listed, his second is that the work of regeneration is in the subconscious. Where is this proven in scripture? The concept of a subconscious mind is a psychoanalytic construct. It was much employed by Freud and his disciples,

⁶ ST 520

⁷ ST p.520

⁸ ST p.526-7

⁹ ST p.526

but appears to have been conceived by the psychologist Pierre Janet a little earlier¹⁰. If Berkhof is loosely describing an unconscious experience, like physical conception, for which we have no conscious memory, perhaps he could have been clearer both in his definition and his substantiation.

His third objection is the importance and centrality of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. That the Holy Spirit initiates and effects regeneration in all cases is not in doubt, the Messiah explicitly asserts this in John 3.5,6,8 so do the Apostles Tit.3.5, Peter strongly suggesting it in 1 Pet.1.2-3 and 22-23. In this, we understand regeneration to comprise the whole work, especially including conception too. Berkhof writes, 'the Bible distinguishes the influence of the Holy Spirit from that of the Word of God, and indicates that such influence is necessary for the reception of the truth'. No doubt this is true. The texts he cites in John 6.64-5 (v.63), Acts 16.14 (v.13-4), 1 Cor.2.12-15 (v.1-5), Eph.1.17-20¹¹ (v.13), however all prove the importance of prior preaching and hearing of the Word, as the Holy Spirit acts (contextual verses in parentheses). We are born again by the Spirit and water. What is water? The Lord Jesus provides the interpretation in the next chapter, by speaking gently of sin, repentance and faith, when he asked to supply water by the Samaritan divorcee (Jn.4.10,15). Paul speaks of the washing of regeneration in the context of instruction in the Word, and of the declaration of justification without works (Tit.2.15,12,3.8-10).

It is the first objection we wish to focus on. Here again we return to Berkhof's distinction between effectual call and regeneration, which was rooted in a distinction between the creating and preached Word. He writes, 'regeneration is a creative act, by which the spiritually dead sinner is restored to life. But the truth of the Gospel can only work in a moral and persuasive way. Such an instrument has no effect on the dead. To assert its use would seem to imply a denial of the spiritual death of man; which, of course, is not intended by those who take this position' [sic]. This is a serious charge, is it substantiable? Rationally, his argument seems plausible. Persuasion requires comprehension and a response of which the physically dead are utterly incapable.

However, the unregenerate are described as dead euphemistically, for actually their death is much more than passivity, viler than unresponsiveness, more vicious than insensitivity. It is an active, pervasive and ceaseless hostility to the Truth. We are not just passive; we vigorously oppose the Holy Spirit. We are actually deader than death itself (Jn.12.10), darker than darkness (Jn.3.20), we actively despise God's will (Amos 2.4, Jer.23.17), and vigorously spin new deceits to evade and suppress God's truth (Isa.59.5, 2 Thess.2.10-12). We set our reason, will and affections against God (1 Cor.1.21, Jn.5.40, 1 Sam.2.30). It is in the tooth of opposition and to the hostile that the Gospel of peace is proclaimed (Acts 7.51,4). It is here the Holy Spirit prevails.

Moreover, God's creating command is often used to describe the preaching of the Gospel. Ezekiel is unembarrassed by the paradox of commanding stones to live, 'Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?' Ezk.18.31. The Saviour's word commands, 'ye (pl.) **must** be born again' Jn.3.7, a word we gladly echo to the wholly unregenerate.

The 1644 London Confession also uses the sense of conception. 'That [saving] faith is ordinarily **begot** by the preaching of the Gospel, or the Word of Christ, without respect to any power or capacity in the creature, but it is wholly passive, being dead in trespasses and sins, and is converted by no less power, than that which raised Christ from the dead.'

Paul describes the reception of light, 'In whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, Who is the image of God, should shine unto them.'

¹⁰ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201912/subconscious-vs-unconscious-how-tell-the-difference>

¹¹ This text has more to do with ongoing illumination, than with the conception of regeneration.

For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.

For 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.' 2 Cor.4.4-6

When the prophet is called to [regenerate the dead nation](#), he is called to preach to them and then invoke the Holy Spirit, also by the Divine Word (Ezek.37.4-7,9-10). The similarity with Genesis 2.7 is pronounced.

When Lazarus is raised from the dead, he was passive, not resistant as sinners are, but the voice that raised him summons him irresistibly, as it will the dead to life now, just as much as in the Day of Resurrection (Jn.11.43; 5.25,28-9).

The conclusion is inescapable, the preached, regenerating Word *is* the creating Word, indeed it is a greater work not only than creation, but even than physical resurrection, precisely because it is performed in the face of intense hostility and requires the greatest power (Jn.5.20,14.12, Eph.1.19-21). Berkhof and Shedd have separated that which should have been left joined. What heavenly treasures are commended to such clay vessels!

What then of Berkhof's proper concern to preserve all Divine glory and initiative in the work of salvation, and to exclude all human agency at its foundation? Does granting that God's Word, when preached and acted upon by the Spirit conceives new life, detract an iota from this? Does the command of the Lord Jesus to Jairus' daughter to rise, the widow of Nain's son to sit, or the Lazarus to come out in the least detract from His unique glory in raising the dead, by his own holiness and power? Not at all, it commends, clarifies and preserves it! Can Lazarus, or the others claim any contribution because they were quickened at His Divine summons, heard and obeyed? Certainly not. If you believe, you will see the glory of God, not of Lazarus.

It might be objected that if a preacher, not God or His Son directly, command, then is there not some glory attributable to the sinful preacher? This plausible reservation does not hinder Paul's appeal to the Corinthians and his plea to Philemon that he was himself most directly involved as the human agent in their spiritual conception.

'For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.' 1Cor.4.15

'I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds' Phil.10

What then of Berkhof and Shedd's concern to comfort parents whose infants die before reception of the Word? This is a deeply mysterious matter, but that the usual means for those of understanding is to be regenerated by the Word, does not detract from the power of the Holy Spirit to fill John the Baptist from the womb or assure David he would see his son again (Lk.1.15,41; 2 Sam.12.23). Here it seems is regeneration without hearing the preached or written Word, perhaps God speaks directly to the unborn and the suckling to ordain His praise, but this should not be used to undermine His plain declarations about the ordinary means of regeneration in those that have come to years.

If conception must always only be by the Holy Spirit, without the Word, does this not discourage evangelistic persuasion? Does it not suggest we should wait till we see signs of life first? Does it not cool our appeals to the dead hearts and spirits of the lost? This would be a serious and an unscriptural mistake since the commands to come, to believe, to repent are universal and unexcepting (Mk.16.15, Acts 17.30, 2 Thess.1.8).

The use of Freudian terminology is unhelpful and suggests the penetration of erroneous psychoanalytic concepts in the scriptural study of man, a phenomenon we should avoid with vigilance and care.

There is also the concern that bypassing the Word and the mind as means to the human spirit feeds mystical views of illumination, undermines the sufficiency and efficacy of Divine revelation and may injure our notions of the Holy Spirit's operation.

Conception in particular, and regeneration as a whole, is brought into effect by the Holy Spirit usually acting upon the hearing of the preached Word or the reading of the written Word. It is the greatest Divine miracle, parallel only to the Resurrection of the Saviour, upon which it is based. This consideration should compel us also to cry, 'it is my intense grief, if I preach not the Gospel'!