

Regeneration or not... the discernment of the Holy Spirit
A Series on Regeneration: Part 3

Regeneration is more than simply an act of God. It is the spiritual blessing through faith in Jesus Christ, “the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb 9:15), and partial fulfillment of God’s New Covenant. Yet as God is faithful to His promises, does regeneration occur to all who simply profess faith in Jesus Christ? Jeremiah offers a perspective that may be helpful in considering this question:

The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?
I, the LORD, search the heart,
I test the mind,
Even to give to each man according to his ways,
According to the results of his deeds. (Jer 17:9-10)

The New Testament has several examples where the Holy Spirit indwells a Believer and this review may shed some light on details that may help one gain a deeper understanding of faith.

Perhaps one of the most significant conversions of the Bible is the testimony of how Saul became the apostle Paul. Recounted on three occasions (Acts 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18), each account reveals new details of the event. Paul experiences a very personal trial; he is first confronted by Jesus (Acts 9:3-7; 22:6-10; 26:13-19) and then stricken with blindness in both eyes (Acts 9:8; 22:11).

The Jews understood blindness as a punishment for sin whether personal or inherited from parents (Gen 19:11; 2 Kings 6:18; John 1:1-2). Thus, to be afflicted, Saul, teacher of the Law, perceives his blindness with a piercing significance; he is confronted by a voice no one else hears and then receives a punishment.

Unable to earn a living, blind people usually become beggars (Mark 10:46), and it is interesting to note that the apostle Paul would later exercise this form of this punishment (Acts 13:11).

In recognition of his sin and denial of Jesus as the Messiah, Saul genuinely repents and humbles himself through a 3 day fast (Acts 9:9). Shortly after, his sight is restored, and he is regenerated with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17-18; 22:13-14).

In contrast to Paul’s conversion as an orthodox Jew becoming a Believer, the Bible presents the conversion of two people who were of a special class of Gentile followers of Judaism unaware of Jesus Christ: Cornelius the Italian centurion (Acts 10:1-23) and Lydia the seller of purple fabrics (Acts 16:13-15).

Cornelius is portrayed as a genuine Believer in God, because a) he was “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually” (Acts 10:2), b) was recognized for his faith by an angel (Acts 10:3-4) and c) was the person that the Holy Spirit directs Peter to receive (Acts 10:19-23).

Lydia is portrayed as a genuine Believer in God, because she worshipped God. Understanding the background to this is helpful to understanding the significance of Lydia’s worship. According to Jewish law, a quorum of ten men was required to establish a synagogue. Failing this, a place of prayer on the Sabbath would be outside and near a body of water. Because Philippi lacked a synagogue, Paul searched for a place of prayer along the river (Acts 16:13). The fact that they found only a group of women assembled testified to their devotion to God.

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Many commentators have perceived Cornelius and Lydia as non-Believers who were regenerated prior to having a genuine faith; the claim is that regeneration enabled non-Believers to come to a saving faith. But does the biblical text support this hypothesis?

As seen above, the biblical evidence indicates that both Cornelius and Lydia were genuine Believers of the one true God. Whether a Jew or Gentile, the Mosaic Law was the tutor to lead all Believers to Jesus Christ (Gal 3:24-29). The God of the Jews was also the God of the Gentiles (Rom 3:28-29).

Figuratively, as genuine Believers of God, Cornelius and Lydia were of God's own possession as His own people (Ex 19:5). This idea of being of divine possession is carried through with the earthly onset of Jesus, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:37-38). The concept of divine possession is repeated after Jesus' crucifixion and death (Gal 3:29; 5:24; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 3:23).

Understanding this hand off of genuine Believers from God the Father to God the Son is necessary in understanding the process of regeneration in Cornelius and Lydia.

While on earth, Jesus specifically refers to this passing of possession of genuine Old Testament Believers (Believers of God) which enables one to recognize and come to Jesus (John 6:65; Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22). Because they knew and were obedient to God's word (Old Testament), Simeon listened to the Holy Spirit and recognized the infant Jesus as the Lord's Christ (Luke 2:25-32) and Peter, observing Jesus as fulfilling Messianic prophecies, recognized Jesus as the Son of God (Matt 16:13-20).

Likewise Cornelius, who knew and was obedient to God's word, listened to the angel and was divinely guided to hear the gospel (Acts 10:22), and he explicitly receives the Holy Spirit after hearing it (Acts 10:44-45). Besides bringing Cornelius under the New Testament, God intended this event to tell Peter that the gospel is for everyone (Acts 10:34-35). Lydia's knowledge and obedience to God's word enabled to hear the gospel (Acts 16:14).

Cornelius and Lydia had a genuine faith in God before Jesus, and they had a genuine faith in God after Jesus; the difference was that their covenantal relationship was no longer the Mosaic Covenant but the New Covenant (Luke 22:20).

While the above examples were of conversion experiences, it is instructive to examine people who thought they were Believers but were not.

Ananias and Sapphira perceived themselves as Believers and shared in the congregation's objective of providing for the needy (Acts 4:34-35). However, they were not of one heart and soul with the Believers (Acts 4:32), because they held back a portion of the proceeds of their land sale (Acts 5:1-2). They never received the Holy Spirit, and Peter confronts Ananias for his deceitful heart (Acts 5:3-4).

Simon the magician is noted in the Bible as one who "believed" and was "baptized" (Acts 8:13). However, Simon never receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, because, as Peter notes, "... your heart is not right before God..." (Acts 8:20-23).

It is clear that a person is reborn when they express a genuine faith in the work of God through Jesus' atonement. Whether a person truly believes and trusts that Jesus is the Son of God and the gospel is a faith issue which only the Holy Spirit can discern.