

# Purposeful Liberty

## *The Bounds and Duties of Regeneration*

William H. Gross [www.onthewing.org](http://www.onthewing.org) Nov 30, 2023

### Regeneration is an act of God

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup> he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by ***the washing of regeneration*** and renewal of the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Tit 3:4-7 <sup>ESV</sup>)

The word used for regeneration is *palig-genesia*. It's found only twice in the NT. Here in Titus, and in Matthew 19.28, where it is sometimes translated *new world*, or *renewed world*.

"Assuredly I say to you, that ***in the regeneration***, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Mat 19:28 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

The Greek word means new birth, recreation, or renewal. The *washing* of regeneration seems to imply sanctification. But this isn't just consecration or purification. It's the making of a whole new creature. Yet as we see throughout the NT, and in our experience as Christians, it's not as pervasive or total as we'd like. *Something* is made anew; some *part* of us is reborn — but we remain a frustrating mixture of righteous aspirations and sinful inclinations.

### Premise

My premise in this paper is that, although depravity is pervasive, regeneration is not. God does not regenerate our beliefs, nor our will, nor our actions. And yet, regeneration is necessary to salvation. What specifically, then, is *regenerated*, *freed*, or *renewed*, if believers may still believe sinful things, make sinful choices, and act sinfully?

All believers receive the gift of the Spirit at conversion (Gal 3.14). He causes our new birth, and comes to us in it (Joh 3.3). His presence in us enables us to combat our "sinful nature," our old man. This old nature remains in believers, despite our new nature (Eph 2.3). Thus we must choose to put off the old and put on the new, *after* conversion (Col 3.8-9). The Spirit enables us to do that. He enables us to see the things of God, believe the gospel truth, and live a godly life. *He* teaches us — but *we* must learn (Joh 14.26). We inevitably come to Christ, and yet we come most freely. We *choose* to follow Christ (Luk 9.23), and yet He chose us to follow Him (Joh 15.16). This paradox, or mystery, is what I want to explore here.

### Pervasive Depravity

Our inherent moral depravity is so *pervasive*, that we are unable to come to Christ without it. John Piper writes, "Total depravity means that there is no human faculty left untouched by sin." OK. But what's a *faculty*? The dictionary says that it's one of the inherent cognitive or perceptual powers of the **mind**. R.C. Sproul wrote,

"The **will**, according to the New Testament, is now in bondage. *We are enslaved to the evil impulses and desires of our hearts*. The body, the mind, the will, the spirit—indeed, *the whole person*—have been infected by the power of sin."

This view of pervasive infection or depravity comes from Luther's ***Bondage of the Will***. Yet in Jonathan Edwards' ***Freedom of the Will***, he distinguishes the will from our other faculties:

In every act of Will, there is an act of *choice*; in every volition there is a preference, or a prevailing inclination of the soul... The Determiner of the Will is that motive which is the strongest as it stands in view of the mind... By motive, I mean the whole of whatever moves, excites, or invites the mind to volition (to make a choice)... *Nothing can induce or invite the mind to will or act anything, any further than it is **perceived***, or is in some way or other in the mind's view.

So Edwards sees the will being governed by something outside the will. It's whatever moves or excites the mind to make a choice. It is founded upon what the mind perceives to be true or desirable. The ensuing choice that we make is an *act of will*. In *Thoughts on Revival*, Part I.2.(1) he then ties the will to the affections:

I humbly conceive that the affections of the soul are improperly distinguished from the will, as though they were two separate faculties in the soul. All acts of the *affections* of the soul are in some sense acts of the *will*, and all acts of the *will* are acts of the *affections*. All exercises of the will are in some degree or other, exercises of the soul's appetite or aversion; or (which is the same thing) of its love or hatred. The soul wills one thing rather than another, or chooses one thing rather than another, no differently than it loves one thing more than another. But love and hatred are affections of the soul. And therefore, all acts of the will are truly acts of the affections; though the exercises of the will are not termed *passions*, unless the will, either in its aversion or opposition, is exercised to a high degree, or in a vigorous and lively manner.

All will concede that true *virtue* or *holiness* has its seat chiefly in the **heart**, rather than in the **head**. It therefore follows from what has been said already, that it consists chiefly in *holy affections*. The things of religion take place in men's hearts, no further than they are *affected* by them. The informing of the understanding is all vain, any further than it *affects* the heart; or which is the same thing, it influences the *affections*.

Edwards isn't equating the will to the affections. He's saying that the will is inextricably tied to the affections, to our desires. It is driven by our affections, which must be aligned with the truth of God's word if they are to be virtuous, holy, and *godly* affections. So, although the affections are chiefly in the heart rather than in the head (or mind), the head must rule the heart, so that we learn to desire what is pleasing to God, and act in accordance with His will.

"I delight to do Your will, O my God. And Your law is within my heart" (Psa 40:8)

In his book, *Indwelling Sin*, John Owen makes this observation about the heart:

The heart in the Scripture is variously used: sometimes for the mind and understanding, sometimes for the will, sometimes for the affections, sometimes for the conscience, sometimes for the whole soul. Generally it denotes the whole soul of man, and all its faculties — not absolutely, but as they are all one principle of moral operations — as they all concur in our doing good or evil. The **mind**, as it inquires, discerns, and judges what is to be done, and what is to be refused; the **will**, as it chooses, or as it refuses and avoids; the **affections**, as they like or dislike, cling to or have an aversion to what is proposed to them; the **conscience**, as it warns and determines — all these together, are called the heart.

## Two wills?

To explain the difference between the will of believers, and that of unbelievers, some theologians distinguish man's *preferential will* from his *dispositional will*. Believers and unbelievers alike have a volitional will. They can make natural choices. But unbelievers cannot believe in Christ unless they are regenerated. That's because their dispositional will is their "state of being," and they say *that* is what God regenerates. In refuting Arminianism, Jonathan Edwards distinguished this *natural* ability to choose various things, from our *moral* ability to choose Christ. The first is common to all men; the second is imparted by God. Arminians make no such distinction. They argue that the natural man, even without regeneration, is fully capable of hearing and believing the gospel, or not.

Calvinists, by contrast, believe that the new man is so radically different from the old, that his *state of being* has changed. This change goes far beyond mere faculties, so that God's grace is made irresistible to him. They see this as part of God's *decretive* (sovereign) will. In the Arminian view, the faculties are *not* radically changed; so that man can resist God's will regarding salvation. He can even reject Christ *after* conversion. Thus Arminians see the "call of God" as being within His *preceptive* (permissive) will, which we may obey, or disobey.

*Do we in fact have these two wills?* One of preference, and one of being? One that is always free, and one that is bound prior to conversion and freed afterward? Is that a clear teaching of Scripture? I don't believe it is. A theologian might answer that these are not separate wills, but only two distinct qualities of the same will. OK; but still, *is that Scriptural?*

— *Scriptural Evidence:* In the OT, the word translated "will," when it doesn't refer to desires or passions, is *reuwth* (Ezr 7.18). In the NT, the word is *thelema* (Eph 6.6). Both words convey the idea of making a DETERMINATION about what is to be done. In the NT we also see the word *boule* used (Act 13.36), meaning to *purpose* something — to have a reason or intent for our determination. Nothing suggests that we have two wills, or two qualities of the same will. That may be an inference or an explanation by Edwards and others, but it isn't a clear teaching of Scripture. We may be of two *minds* about something (Psa 119.113; Jas 1.8). We may even have two laws at work in our inner being (Rom 7.23). But our *will* is not divided. I believe it is the product of the mind and heart, as Edwards described it, and as I'll try to explain below.

## A New Will?

Some might say that instead of two wills, or two qualities of the same will, our "rebirth" provides us with a *new* will to replace the *old* one. It's still guided by the mind and heart, but it has a new ability to choose Christ. Again, is that what Scripture says? It says we're born with a *sinful* nature (Psa 51.5). When we are reborn, we have a new *nature* (Eph 4.24) — but not a new *will*. We need to put off the old man and put on the new, which is an act of will. This need indicates vestiges of the old man remain after regeneration. We are to be renewed in *knowledge* according to the image of God (Col 3.9-10). We are to be renewed in the *spirit of our mind* (Eph 4.22-24), but not of our will. Yes, this new man is spiritual, having received the Spirit at conversion (Act 8.15-17) — but the Spirit wars against the flesh (Gr. *sarx*):

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Gal 5:17<sup>ESV</sup>)

What then changes as a result? Unbelievers can imitate Christian behavior. They can willfully choose to obey many of God's commands, tares among the wheat (Mat 13.25f). But without *faith*, it's displeasing to God (Heb 11.6). And faith comes only by regeneration (Eph 2.8), not by the will of man (Joh 1.13). So apparently our will, both before and after regeneration, is *affected* by the sinful nature, but it isn't *bound* by it. We always have an active will, or else we wouldn't be accountable for our actions. I'm convinced that the **will** is bound only in the sense that it is driven by our **beliefs**; and our beliefs are determined by both our **desires** (the heart), and our **understanding** (the mind). A believer's heart and mind are still *influenced* by the sinful nature; but an unbeliever's are *bound* by it. Why do I say that?

Those who are "in the flesh" cannot please God. (Rom 8:8) It's the *mind* that Satan blinds (2Cor 4.4). God's grace must renew our heart and mind before we see the kingdom (Joh 3.3), believe the gospel (Eph 1.19), and freely obey Christ (Rom 6.16). Because we're responsible for our beliefs and choices, we're grateful for the grace that *allows* us to believe the gospel, but it doesn't *bind* us to believe it. So the will must be free. *Grace* is irresistible, not *belief*.

As Jesus says, "No one can come to me *unless* the Father who sent me draws him." (Joh 6.44) And "all that the Father gives me *will* come to me." (Joh 6.37) Something frees us, and something draws us. But what is that something which God's grace touches and renews? That's what I'm exploring here.

God never promised to give us a new will. He promised to give us a new **heart**, and a new **spirit** (Eze 36.26). We are to love God with all our **heart**, soul, and **mind**. (Mat 22.37) Paul prays with his **mind**, not just his **spirit** (1Cor 14.15). Paul summons us to be transformed by the renewing of our **minds** (Rom 12.2). He's not summoning us to renew our minds. Rather, our minds have already been renewed by God's grace. We are to let that renewal *transform our understanding* so that we may believe, choose, and act rightly, according to God's will. Why then do we continue to make sinful choices, and act in an ungodly manner?

### **Freedom of Choice is a gift of God**

We weren't freed from sin. We were freed from our inability to hear, understand, and believe the gospel. We were freed to obey *or* disobey, believe *or* disbelieve; we were freed to *choose*.

The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is **not able** to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1Cor 2:14)

For those who live according to the flesh **set their minds on** [*direct them to choose*] the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit **set their minds on** the things of the Spirit... For all who are led [*not bound*] by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (Rom 8:5, 14)

Regeneration, then, does not limit us to doing only good; it frees us from doing only evil. We're freed to follow **or** to turn aside from following Christ. What then influences us to do one or the other?

### **Feeding our renewed Heart and Mind**

It seems clear that our spiritual diet influences what we think, believe, and do. In John Owen's Preface to *Spiritual Mindedness* (1681), he observes the following:

I would observe the present importunity of the world to impose itself on the minds of men, and the various ways of insinuation by which it possesses and fills them. If it attains this — if it can fill the minds, thoughts, and affections of men with itself — then in some, it will fortify the soul against faith and obedience, and in others it will weaken all grace, and endanger them to eternal ruin. For “if we love the world, the love of the Father is not in us;” and when the world fills our *thoughts*, it will entangle our *affections*.

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (Joh 6:53)

To the extent that we don't “feed” our renewed hearts and minds with the truth of God, our desires and thoughts will feed on fleshly and worldly things. That will hinder us from being increasingly transformed into the image of Christ — even though we're *capable* of it.

On the other hand, to the extent that we feed on Christ, the inward man is renewed day by day, even as the outward man is decaying (2Cor 4.16). This is how the believer is able to put off the *old man* with his **deeds**, and put on the new *man* who is renewed in **knowledge** according to the image of Him who created him. (Col 3:9-10) “Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful **desires**,<sup>23</sup> and be renewed in the spirit of your **minds**.” (Eph 4:22-23<sup>ESV</sup>).

Grace enables us; but we must willingly believe, choose, and act according to the will of God. The will of God is revealed in His word. And yet, reading, knowing, and even understanding God's word is not enough. We must *choose to do it*. How else can we account for Peter's denial, or Judas' betrayal of Christ? They **knew** but did not **do** the words of Christ.

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and **does** them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock...<sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does **not do** them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. (Mat 7:24-26)

We don't escape the world by withdrawing into Christian ghettos to avoid its contamination. Rather, we're inescapably *in* the world, engaging it thoughtfully. We know that we're not *of* the world (Joh 15.19). We're sojourners here (1Pet 2.11), citizens of heaven (Phi 3.20). We're members of the household of God (Eph 2.19), and joint heirs with Christ (Rom 8.17; Jas 2.5).

What God's word does, what God's law does, is to reveal our sin to us. It identifies sin, and convicts us of it. But it won't keep us from it. It exposes sin so that we may *choose* not to sin — imperfectly perhaps, but it's still a real choice. This knowledge of good and evil, this ever-present choice that's set before us, causes a struggle within us. Believers aren't obedient in order to be saved. We're saved in order to be obedient. We're ever-dependent on Christ as our Redeemer, ever-dependent on God's grace, ever-driven into the arms of Christ to preserve us. We never get over our sin, and thus we never get over our need of Christ. That truth must grab and hold our attention, and drive our obedience, so that we never substitute godliness for grace. And yet we always strive to be godly. We strive to live in freedom, not in bondage.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life... <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order

that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.  
<sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin. (Rom 6:1-7 <sup>ESV</sup>)

## A Conflict of Conscience

In Romans 7, Paul describes an inner conflict between his will and his understanding, and between his actions and his mind. This *depravity* remaining in his nature, this “other law” at work in his members, prevents him from doing what he knows is right. If he is to be delivered from such bondage, it must be by God’s grace through Jesus Christ. Here is his lament:

<sup>5</sup> For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful **passions**, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. <sup>6</sup> But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

<sup>7</sup> What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." <sup>8</sup> But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of **covetousness**. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.

<sup>9</sup> I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. <sup>10</sup> The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. <sup>11</sup> For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

<sup>12</sup> So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. <sup>13</sup> Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was **sin** [the collective aggregate of sin, our proneness and liability to sin], producing death in me through what is good [God’s law], in order that sin might be *shown* to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

<sup>14</sup> For we know that the law is **spiritual**, but I am of the **flesh** [Gr. *sarx*, the sinful nature], sold under sin [i.e., sold into bondage to sin, to serve and satisfy those sinful desires]. <sup>15</sup> For I do not understand my own **actions**. For I do not do what I want [Gr. *thelo*, to *will*], but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want [i.e., if I don’t do what I *will* to do], I agree with the law, that it is good.

<sup>17</sup> So now it is no longer I who do it [Gr. *ego*], but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the **desire** to do what is right, but not the **ability** to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want [what I *will* to do], but the evil I do not want [i.e., do not *will*] is what I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now, if I do what I do not want [i.e., what I do not *will* to do], it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being [lit., my *inward man*], <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members [or, in my physicality] another law waging war against the law of my **mind** and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my **members**.

<sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve [Gr., *douleuw*] the law of God with my **mind**, but with my **flesh** [Gr., *sarx*] I serve the law of sin. (Rom 7:5-25 <sup>ESV</sup>)

Some say that what Paul is describing here was his life *before* Christ; and chapter 8 describes his life *after* Christ. But every Christian knows that Paul’s struggle in chapter 7 is theirs too.

## The Seared Conscience

At what point in this struggle is the **conscience** either offended or affirmed? We describe it as having *scruples*, which are moral principles that govern our actions. They are recognized by the mind, and desired by the heart. This places the conscience between our *beliefs* and our *actions*. When such a principle is contradicted — when we act against what we know and believe to be true — the conscience is triggered. It sounds an alarm, inducing guilt and shame in us, warning us against sin. If that alarm no longer sounds, it means we've seared our conscience. We've repeatedly and willfully *chosen* not to heed its warnings. The conscience is now unresponsive. It's no longer governed by the moral law that God prescribed to sustain and nourish it. And without a restraining conscience, there are no boundaries, no limits to our conduct (Rom 3.12-18). We become like brute beasts, fit only for destruction (2Pet 2.12). Paul was *alarmed* that his flesh could act against his conscience, as if he had no will.

## Personal Responsibility

How are we to make sense of all this? Do we have free will, or not? Notice all the boldfaced words in Romans 7 above. How do we distinguish the mind, passions, flesh, will, and actions? What exactly do we have control over? What are we responsible for? Paul isn't making excuses for himself. He isn't saying that all of this is beyond his control. He's saying that his actions are driven by his will, but that his will is not always driven by what he knows and believes to be true. His knowledge of sin is given by the law of God. But there is another law at work in him, another motive driving him. And there's a *conflict* between the two.

Here's the truth: *we've been renewed by God's Spirit*. In what way is this renewal hindered? How is hindrance even possible? I'm asking, what has God actually *given* us or *done* in us, that renews our mind, but doesn't overcome our will? Again, why may we still *choose* sin?

<sup>16</sup> Don't you know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? <sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God, that you who were once **slaves of sin** have become **obedient from the heart** to the standard (imprint) of teaching to which you were committed, <sup>18</sup> and, having been set free from sin, have become **slaves of righteousness**. (Rom 6:16-18)

*Without* Christ, we were in bondage to sin, and yet our will was still active. *With* Christ, we are no longer in bondage to sin, and yet our will does not irresistibly do what is right. Again, this indicates that we remain in constant need of God's grace, and Christ's redeeming blood, and the imprint of God's word. What then is *irresistibly* changed when we're regenerated by the Spirit of God? Obviously, our beliefs, will, and actions are not regenerated in the sense of being impervious to sin and bound to godliness. Otherwise Paul wouldn't have lamented his constant struggle with sin. He wouldn't have confessed his constant need for God's grace in Christ. As Edwards pointed out, our motives *invite the mind to make a choice*. Regeneration *enables* the mind to believe the gospel and to choose godliness. But our motives vary.

Self-preservation and self-interest are powerful motivators. So Christ exhorts us, "be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Rev 2:10) That crown is one possible motive for the *choice* we make to be faithful, but it's not the only one. Others still contend for our affections, despite regeneration, and despite having the Spirit.

## Making a Choice

There are various elements involved in taking any action: our understanding and desires, what we believe to be true, and the will to make choices and to *act*. In fact, Jonathan Edwards defined the will as “the mind choosing.” Obviously, we can believe what we don’t understand, but we cannot believe what we don’t know. Thus choice must *follow* belief, and belief follows knowledge. We *choose* according to what we believe, and we *act* on our choice. As the old adage goes, if you want to know what someone truly *believes*, look at what they actually *do*.

Curiously, we also choose whatever we *want* to believe. Other beliefs will then flow from that initial choice; as will other choices. Our **WORLDVIEW** is a primary belief; secondary beliefs are dependent on that primary belief. Belief in Christ, belief in the truth of God, govern or *determine* our other beliefs, choices, and actions. When that core belief is tainted with doubt, we become half-hearted, or double-minded (Ps 119.113; Jas 1.6-8, 4.8). Each secondary belief, choice, and action will be tainted by that doubt or unbelief. I’ll return to this later.

There are also times when what we *desire* outweighs what we know to be true. We want something so badly that we set aside all reason to get it. We make an irrational choice based on an overwhelming desire, having convinced ourselves that we desperately need whatever it is. I think that’s what Paul lamented in Romans 7. His behavior seemed to him to be irrational at times, in light of what he knew to be the truth of God.

Keep in mind that regeneration is not an event, like conversion. Thomas Chalmers called it “an advancing process of regeneration.” It is both an initiating and a progressively enabling act of God. It both precedes (Calvinist) and follows (Arminian) our conversion; which makes the *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation) less explicit than many theologians would have it. It is the “*washing of regeneration*” (Tit 3:4-7). It enables the sanctification of the people of God, by the Spirit of God, to the glory of God. *As He who called you is holy, so you also be holy in all your conduct* (1Pet 1.15). That is a command which we willingly obey, as God enables us.

Now, because it’s a process, there is a necessary sequence leading us to act, whether sinfully or righteously. The sequence appears to be this: the heart and mind govern our beliefs; our beliefs govern our will or choices; and then our *actions* follow those choices, good or bad.

Is it possible to diagram what may be going on in this process? To repeat my initial question, what exactly is regenerated, renewed, and born again by God’s grace? How can an “irresistible” grace enable us to believe the gospel freely and willingly, so that we *choose* to take up our cross and follow Christ? (Luk 9.23) That is, how does God “draw” us to Christ?

And how can this same grace permit us to sin? What does it mean to be freed from sin’s grip, and yet not be bound to God’s righteousness? If we’re renewed, how can our prayers to God be asked with “wrong motives”? (Jas 4.3) It may involve that mix of spiritual food mentioned earlier, which hinders our transformation. But it’s not that alone.

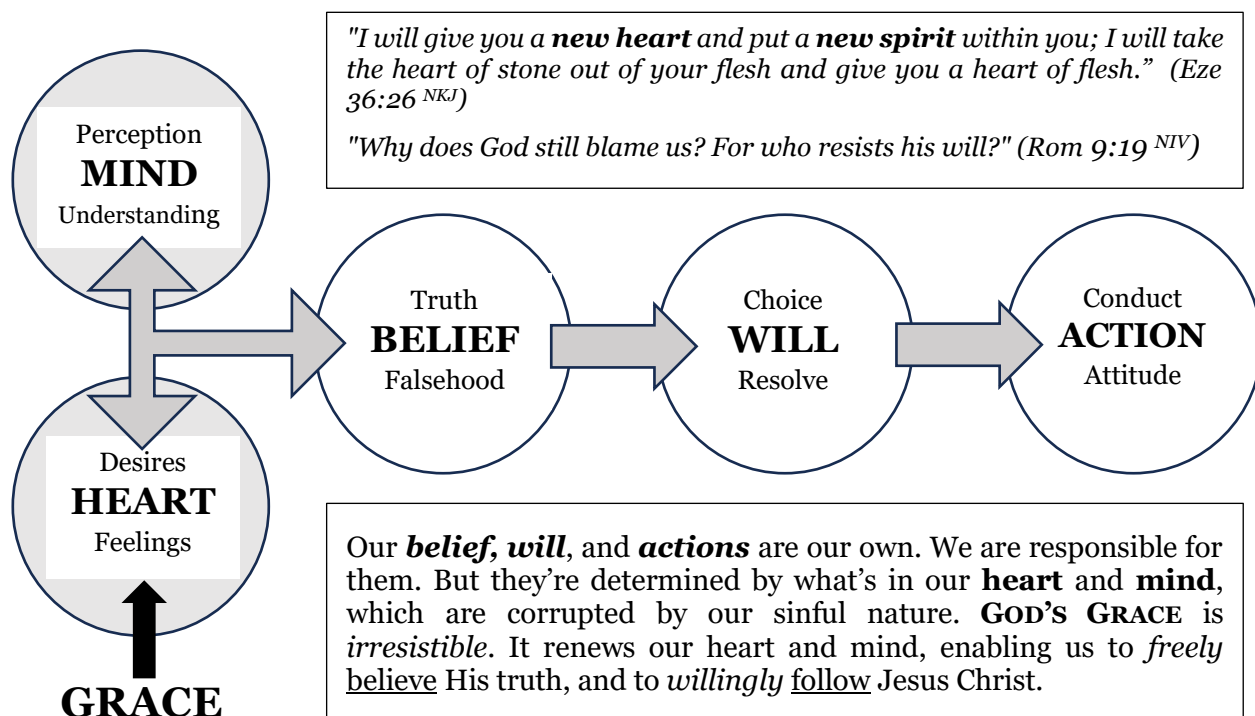
What follows below is my attempt to diagram such a gracious and liberating regeneration. I distinguish what God’s grace inexorably does in us, from our duty to voluntarily respond in faith. Acting in faith — that is, acting on what we believe to be true — is making an *informed choice*. For “whatever is not from **faith** is sin” (Rom 14:23). Thus our *unwillingness* to act according to the truth of God is an indication of the extent of our unbelief. That’s why we’re



held accountable by God, and why we're in constant need of His grace in Christ. We have an ongoing and inescapable dependence on God, which is to His glory.

**Rom 9:16** So then, it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

## A DIAGRAM OF REGENERATION



### The Necessity of Regeneration

Depravity is pervasive because it impacts how we think, what we understand, how we feel about our circumstances, and what we desire. This pervasiveness touches on a number of central doctrines of the faith. It proves the *necessity* of regeneration by God's grace in order to overcome our depravity. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Asahel Nettleton put it this way:

"[Regeneration] is a doctrine supported by the great light of the Reformation and by the pillars of the evangelical churches ever since — that regeneration is a *physical* work. And by this they mean there is an actual new creation, as absolutely so as when the world was created; that a new spiritual taste, or discernment and principle, is implanted by a sovereign creative operation, and *not simply a new direction given to the old faculties*.

"Such a work being proved, the whole system of evangelical truth, the doctrines of grace — of divine sovereignty; of election; of redemption only by Christ; of human depravity, and others connected with them — all flow from it. There is one grand, harmonious, and perfect system; and God is the sum, the substance and the glory of all."

The model I've proposed is one way to illustrate such dependencies, to prove the necessity of a new heart and mind, and to explain our continuing responsibility for what we believe, what we choose, and what we do. The sinful nature is not removed; but the Spirit is gained.

How can we tell if such a model is in fact accurate and biblical in describing the struggle within us? Does this diagram adequately explain Paul's inner conflict? Does it adequately account for two children growing up in the same household, with the same father, receiving the same instruction, and yet coming to very different ends?

Take, for example, Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, or Absalom and Solomon. Does it account for sovereign election, irresistible grace, the regeneration of our faculties, *and yet our ongoing sin?*

Does it still glorify God? Does it still humble us, portraying our weakness without excusing it? Does it exalt Christ as our Redeemer, Mediator, Teacher, and Lord? Does it maintain the covenant of grace and not promote a doctrine of works, while encouraging godliness?

Well, let's test it against Scripture, as I've tried to do throughout this paper.

### Testing the Model

Let's take a passage from Philippians as a test, and apply the process laid out in the diagram.

**Phi 4:4-9** (ESV) <sup>4</sup> *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*

<sup>5</sup> Let your reasonableness [gentleness or equitableness] be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup> do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, *will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these things.*

<sup>9</sup> What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me--*practice these things*, and the God of peace will be with you.

In verse 4, we're commanded to rejoice in the Lord. We choose whether to obey that command or not. Why would we choose to obey it? The diagram suggests there must be some prior belief upon which to make such a choice. And that belief is going to be motivated either by a desire to satisfy our fleshly desires, or a desire to abide by what we *know* to be true.

We **choose** to rejoice "in the Lord" because He is in himself the reason for our rejoicing. He satisfies the **desire** of our heart to be loved, known, and accepted as we are. We are the redeemed of the Lord. We choose to rejoice because we **believe** that he is our Lord, our very reason for being. We know this to be true from the Scriptures, as revealed to us by the Spirit of God. Now come the harder questions raised by verses 5 and 6.

**Do we believe** what God has written? Are we *reasonable* and *suitable* to God's word? It all begins and ends there. That's why God put a new heart and mind, and a new spirit within us — so that we **can** believe what He has written, and live by it. We're not *coerced* into believing and acting. Rather, the Spirit of God *persuades us*. It's our *choice* in every way, just as Adam had a choice whether to believe or disbelieve what God said about the tree of knowledge, and to act on it. It was a choice to obey or disobey according to his belief.

**Do we believe** that "the Lord is at hand" [nearby] and that He's our "ever-present help in trouble"? (Psa 46.1). If we do, then we may *choose* not to be anxious about anything, and to

subdue our emotions and physical desires accordingly (1Cor 9.27). Having made that choice, we can act on our belief that God is near, by making our requests known to Him with thanksgiving — *knowing* who He is and what He has done for us, and that He will listen.

What's the result? Philippians 4.7 says that when we complete the process of knowing, believing, choosing, and then acting upon the truth, *the peace of God* is the result. It's not peace FROM God, but the peace OF God — the peace available and inherent *in* God. It's *His* peace that we experience. We don't need to seek it out; we HAVE it, just as Jesus promised.

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you.... Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. (Joh 14:27)

That's a command. Don't *allow* your heart to be troubled; don't *permit* it to be afraid! This too is a choice. It's an act of obedience, born of a belief that's founded on God's truth. *His peace* is what will guard our hearts and minds *in* Christ Jesus. His peace is not found in our flesh, nor is it merely in our minds, as if we could generate it from within. Instead, our hearts and minds are to be *clothed in Christ*. Scripture says that through faith, we have already "put on Christ" (Gal 3.26-27). John Gill's *Commentary* expounds on this truth:

[Believers] put Him on as the Lord their righteousness. His righteousness is compared to a garment. It is called the best robe, the wedding garment, fine linen, clean and white, the robe of righteousness, a garment down to the feet. This is imputed to the elect of God by the Father, through a gracious act of His. And what they are clothed and covered with by the Son, is put upon them and applied to them *by the Spirit*. Faith receiving this robe, puts off its own rags of righteousness, and makes use of Christ's robe as its proper dress to appear in before the most High. Through divine grace, they are *enabled* to put off the old man and to put on the new — that is, to walk in their outward lives and conduct, not according to the dictates of corrupt nature, but according to the principles of grace.

The *new man* is formed in the soul [as in a womb] for righteousness and holiness, and in imitation of Christ — having him for an example, and *desiring* to walk as he walked. This is another sense of "putting on Christ" — namely, following him in the exercise of grace and in the discharge of duty. [Believers] make a public profession of him, by deeds as well as words, thus declaring him to be their Lord and King.

Putting on Christ in this way is, again, a *choice*, based on what we believe to be true about who Christ is, and what He has done for us. Paul says to the Romans: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and *make no provision for the flesh*, [to gratify] its desires (Rom 13.14). He says to the Galatians, "Walk in the Spirit, and you won't gratify the lust of the flesh." (Gal 5:16) To the Romans, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (Rom 8:14) To the Galatians, "For the desires of the *flesh* are against the Spirit, and the *desires* of the *Spirit* are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." (Gal 5:17)

### **Our liberty has bounds and duties**

We must cooperate with the Spirit. Our liberty in Christ has *bounds*, and it has *duties*. It was granted to us by God for a *purpose*. That's why we remain responsible to obey His will. We may assume that — to the extent our hearts and minds are clothed in something *other than Christ* — the peace of God will be withdrawn and hidden from us. His peace, though available,

will not be active to guard, insulate, inoculate, or barricade us from the things of this world. By clothing ourselves in something other than Christ, we leave ourselves open to attack, and to be persuaded of another truth or another gospel. And we'll take another path.

Therefore, returning to Philippians 4, verse 8, we must once again *choose* what to think about, so that what we believe about God's truth is buttressed and not undermined. The word *think* means to intentionally consider, weigh, or meditate on. But even that's not enough. Verse 9, "What you have learned and received ... **practice** these things." If we do, then the God of peace (and not just the peace of God) will be with us. He will then be "at hand." So there's something we can actively do to find God at hand. As James says, if we "draw near to God, He will draw near to us." (Jas 4.8) This makes drawing near to Him *our* responsibility and duty.

OK. How do we draw near? James tells us: "Cleanse *your* hands, *you* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *you* double-minded. (Jam 4:8) God has given us a new heart, but it's our responsibility to purify it. He made it *possible*, but we must do it. We are to "put to death the deeds of the body, by the Spirit" (Rom 8.13). The Spirit enables and empowers us to do it; but we must choose to act. Our sinful nature remains, and therefore the presence or habit of sin remains. But we've been given the Spirit to enable us to make this purifying choice. The Spirit doesn't make our choice easy for us; He only makes it possible. Why is the choice to do the will of God so difficult? What is it that we must overcome? *Consider that sin is more than a bad habit.*

### **Our Addiction to Sin**

We say that when we come to Christ, "the *power* of sin is broken, but the *presence* of sin remains." Or we may say, "the power of sin is broken, but the *habit* of sin remains." Our sinful habits must be replaced with new godly habits. But it seems clear that sin is more than just a bad habit. It's an *addiction*, and it has a physiological component to it. It's a *compulsion*. Sin can produce *dopamine*, stimulating the pleasure center of the brain. It can also produce *adrenaline*, triggering a fight or flight response, as when we're angry or terrified. These two chemicals aren't mentioned in Scripture; but pleasure, anger, and fear are everywhere.

**Jas 4:3** You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures.

**Eph 4:26** Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.

**Lam 3:57** You came near when I called on you; you said, 'Do not fear!'

When we strive to put on the new man, the physical addiction of the old man still longs to be satisfied. We feel like we need a "fix." That's where a distinction between habit and addiction may be helpful. We were *slaves* to sin; i.e., we were *addicted* to it. But now we are slaves to righteousness, and so we must become addicted to godliness. Let that physical need which remains in our flesh be satisfied by new, godly habits.

If such habits are merely chores ("I've gotta") instead of pleasures ("I get to"), then our old habits will remain more satisfying to us than the new ones. They will become more entrenched instead of being displaced. We need to see godliness as not only expected of us, or good, but as desirable, delightful, and *pleasurable*. We must become addicted to godliness.

**Psa 119:92** If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.

The word translated as *addicted* shows up only once in the New Testament:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Titus 2:3** “Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or **addicted** to much wine, but to teach what is good.”

*Addicted* is the Greek word *douloo* — the word for *slave*. Don’t be *enslaved* to wine. THERE is the challenge. Our mind can know that sin is bad for us; we can even believe it’s bad for us; and yet we choose to remain in bondage to whatever it is that has hold of us. It’s our “besetting sin.” I suspect it’s because our desire for sinful and base pleasure overrules our mind, and we won’t listen to our better angels. Such lust will so blind us, and twist what we believe, that it compels us to continually make the choice to satisfy it. And so we act accordingly, followed by all the guilt, shame, and remorse of having been so foolish and gullible. But that’s how addiction works, isn’t it? We sell ourselves into slavery again, like a dog returning to its vomit (2Pet 2.22), or the Israelites’ desiring to return to Egypt (Num 14.3).

We’ve been set free, but we return to our familiar prison cell, with its door flung wide open. We sit down in that pigsty of our own making. The prodigal son finally came to his senses, and returned to his father’s house, offering to be his father’s slave instead of a slave to his own flesh (Luk 15.17-19). What was the turning point for him? When was his addiction broken? The text indicates that his rational mind finally overcame his irrational desires, and he departed from the pigs. OK. But how did that happen? The text is unclear: “He came to himself.” He literally lost his mind when he squandered his inheritance on momentary pleasures. Then, having come to the end of his pleasures, he regained his senses and found himself again. Sin is fleeting and unsatisfying in the end. It is voluntary, *willful* enslavement.

Chris Tomlin’s lyric to *Amazing Grace* says, “My chains are gone; I’ve been set free.” And yet we must *choose* to live free.

“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.” (1Pet 2:16)

Most addicts outgrow their addiction at about age 35. Their adolescence ends, and they finally grow up, like the prodigal son. Jacob outgrew his addiction to his mother’s approval, and overcame his frustration at his father’s rejection, at about age 40. He was a late bloomer. So then, does growing mature in our faith lead to overcoming our addictions? Maybe. Is that why we’re encouraged to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? Maybe. Do we have to live with our persistent addictions until then, desperately relying on God’s grace without abusing it? Maybe.

None of that contradicts the process of our desire or knowledge leading to belief, choice, and action. It only explains where the breakdown is between God’s grace renewing our hearts and minds, which gives us a new understanding, and occasionally choosing to continue in sin. Our addiction to sin inhibits and restrains an immediate, unadulterated, godly response. We can cling to the law, like a child clinging to its mother’s apron strings. We can also rebel from the law, like a child throwing a tantrum, demanding to have its own way. Or — we can learn to increasingly exercise self-control, as we increasingly find pleasure in obedience.

Now, *is finding such pleasure also a choice?*

<sup>NAU</sup> **Jas 1:2-3** “Consider it [*count it, suppose it, choose to see it as*] all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, etc.”

<sup>ESV</sup> **Psa 111:2** Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight (Heb. *chefets*, take pleasure) in them.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Psa 119:16** I will delight (Heb. *sha’a’*, be immersed) in your statutes.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Isa 58:13-14** "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Addictions aren't passive. Desires and delights aren't passive either. We choose our poisons, and our elixirs. Thus, God *commands* us to delight in Him. So YES, it's a choice. But every choice is driven by what we believe. And what we believe is itself a choice, dependent on where we seek our pleasures and spend our energies. Will we seek God's truth, or satisfy our fleshly desires? Hmmm. What will we choose to believe today? What will we allow to hold our attention, and satisfy us, and direct our actions? That's the dopamine or pleasure side of it.

What about the adrenaline side of it? If you didn't know, anger and rage can be as addictive as pleasure. Risk and danger can be addictive too. *They can provide a sense of pleasure*, even though they're provoked by **fear**. The resulting adrenaline rush counteracts the fear, and it can generate a false sense of security, or of control. It's volatile and consuming. And then the rush dissipates, like a hit of cocaine that demands repeated doses. It will never again satisfy like that first experience of it, but we keep trying. We call such addicts "adrenaline junkies." They're always looking for the next big rush.

So addiction can take two paths: dopamine or adrenaline, escape or exhilaration. Each is a form of pleasure or self-gratification – and each is perverted when pursued for evil ends.

### **Redefining Pleasure for Ourselves**

Pleasure is an effect of our choices, not the cause of them. Again, we choose for ourselves what we find pleasurable. As James says, we must *consider* it all pure joy. Meditation on the Word of God can stimulate in us a sense of peace and contentment, just like an addictive drug. The proclamation and defense of the gospel can also produce in us a sense of conquest and victory, just like adrenaline. But any action we take, any pleasure we seek, even if good in itself, must be intended to give glory to God. It must not merely satisfy a desire for self-gratification and accolades. That's the struggle within, to conquer our pride. "Humble yourselves, therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time." (1Pet 5.6)

We need to examine our motives, as James exhorted us. That's the reason for this examination of regeneration. What choices have we made, and why? More importantly, *to what end?* Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1Cor 8.1). Is our motive to love others as Christ loved us? Is it to die to self that He might live in us? (Gal 2.20) If we don't *think* so and *believe* so, then such unbelief is what accounts for our sinful choices and actions. What then?

“Bitterness and gall” are the *effects* of self-seeking, self-gratification, and self-satisfaction — because only Christ can truly satisfy our soul. Any other path will only frustrate us, and profane our labors. That was said of Simon the Magician. May it not be said of us. Pastors and teachers are given to the church to equip the saints for the work of ministry. They teach Christ by argument and personal example. *But they cannot instill a hunger for Christ.* They can only whet our appetite, and try to persuade us of God’s truth. The responsibility rests with believers to *learn*, and to *let* themselves be persuaded (Heb 13.17). Paul describes this responsibility to the Ephesians, as he contrasts unbelievers with believers. This passage was mentioned earlier:

<sup>19</sup> **They** have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. <sup>20</sup> But that is not the way **you** learned Christ! — <sup>21</sup> assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, <sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:19-24 <sup>ESV</sup>)

That’s what must happen; that’s what we must do with our freedom. That’s the *purpose* of it. If maturing in Christ is a way to gain the upper hand over sin, then we have to ask ourselves, at what point will we no longer be children “blown about by every wind of teaching, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes?” (Eph 4.14). When will we be ready to put away our childish things?

### **Christ must be formed in us.**

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, *I gave up childish ways.*” (1Cor 13:11)

“*My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!*” (Gal 4:19)

*There it is.* Until that happens, we cause anguish in those who are accountable to God for our soul (Heb 13.17). John Gill’s *Commentary* explains the formation of Christ in us like this:

This is the same as being created in Christ, to being made new creatures, or new men in Him — in other words, to have the principle of grace wrought in the soul. Christ is formed in the heart. *It is from him; he is the author of it,* and it bears a resemblance to him. It is that by which Christ lives, dwells, and reigns in the souls of his people... It is also the same as being conformed to the image of Christ, which in **regeneration** is stamped upon the saints, and gradually increased, and will be perfected in heaven — that this might more manifestly appear. A veil was drawn over it by their departure in any degree from the truths of the Gospel...

Once more, it is the same as having the form of Christ. That is, ... to be cast into the form of doctrine, and mold of the Gospel, and to receive a Gospel impression and spirit from it. *This means to have a spirit of liberty,* in opposition to legal bondage; *to live by faith in Christ,* and not in the works of the law; *to derive comfort from Him alone,* and not from any services and duties whatever; to have repentance, and the whole course of obedience, influenced by the grace of God, and love of Christ; and to be zealous of good works, and yet to have no dependence on them for justification and salvation.

## How Then Shall We Live?

If my diagram correctly reflects all this, then it may be a useful tool to grasp why our regenerated soul may be so disquieted within us. If we're filled with conflicting knowledge and desires, and we're confused as to what we truly believe, if we act against our interests in Christ (still being addicted to our sin), then it's perfectly understandable why that father cried out to Christ, "Lord, I believe! Help my *unbelief!*" (Mar 9.24) We must change our appetites, our affections, and the sources of our joy and pleasure. We must learn to love the things of God more than the things of this world. *We must learn Christ.*

**1Joh 2:15** Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

Our love of God must drive our studies, thoughts, beliefs, choices, and actions. We must choose to love the things of God as we love Christ, knowing how He loves us, until we *feel* such love in our own heart. We must pray to delight in them, and allow ourselves to be transformed by them into Christ's image. Surely we can instill in ourselves a hunger, an *addiction* for the things of God, imperfect and short-lived, perhaps, but a countervailing addiction nonetheless. We are no longer slaves to sin. We are now bondservants, *willing* slaves of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must believe that, and then choose to act accordingly.

*There but for the grace of God is me:  
Christ my only hope and plea.  
I once was blind, but now I see.  
I once was bound, but now I'm free.*