

The Idea of the Organic in Scripture (5)

When the fall came, God began to work His eternal and highest purpose by making His own incarnate Son head over all. He gave many indications of His plan and purpose. He promised to Adam the “seed” who would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). The Old Testament is the story of Christ and Satan in their bitter warfare that would culminate in the cross (Rev. 12:1-5). God kept reminding His people of His purpose by His miracles, laws and prophecies, as well as through the visits of angels and the words of outstanding men who spoke of the Messiah’s coming.

When the baby Jesus was conceived and born of the virgin Mary, God came in our flesh in the greatest miracle that took place in all of history. Christ came to die for His people and so unite both creations in the praise of the Triune God.

His resurrection from the dead shattered the barrier that had existed in the old dispensation. Christ startled, so to speak, heaven and earth. He arose from Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb—an event that is part of the history of this world. But He went through a door that He created and that opened in heaven. His resurrection was visible only in heaven and was seen there. There He became head over all!

This new organism will finally be perfected at our Lord’s bodily return, when this earth is destroyed by fire, the elect are saved and all things, including heavenly things, are made new. Christ will be universally acknowledged as Lord (Phil. 2:9-11). He will be the head of all. The old world will be burned with fire, regenerated humans will be delivered from sin and death, the elect angels will enjoy blessed fellowship with redeemed humanity, and the whole creation will be united as one great organism to the eternal glory of the living and true God.

This is Scripture’s teaching on the great works of our covenant God. We cannot celebrate His greatness without seeing how He has revealed Himself in His mighty deeds in His beloved Son: Christ, head over all; the elect, Christ’s own body; the holy angels, their “ministering spirits” (Heb. 1:14); and the whole new creation, heaven and earth, their everlasting possession of Christ and His church. The old organism will serve its purpose and be swept away in order to make room for this glorious organism.

How easy it is to lose sight of God’s glory in our preoccupation with earthly problems and things. How great is the majesty of our God revealed in Christ and His cosmic work. How beautifully biblical revelation portrays all Jehovah’s works united to bring praise eternally to Him who has done it all. Let us lift up our eyes on high and worship Him whose ways are past finding out!

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For more on the organic idea of the covenant and kingdom of God, read *Sin and Grace* by Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof, available from the CPRC Bookstore for £19.80 (including P&P).

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Adam was the head of all God’s work in the physical universe—not only of mankind but also of the creation. He fell, plunging the entire human race into the darkness and hopelessness of total depravity. The curse of God came also on the creation itself. Jehovah’s curse was inflicted on the ground because Adam sinned (Gen. 3:17), but in Romans 8:19-22 Paul tells us that the whole creation groans and travails under the curse, waiting for the salvation of the children of God.

This is important because it means, as the passage in Romans 8 makes clear, that the creation that is under the curse shall be delivered with the sons of God, that is, in the redemption of the elect accomplished by Christ. We often forget that. The Lord Jesus bore our curse but He also bore the curse of God on the creation. The result is that Christ’s headship over His elect people, who were “chosen . . . in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), extends over the whole universe so that He is head of all.

But there is more. Colossians 1:20 insists that Christ is the head of all things “in heaven,” as well as all things on earth. It is almost as if the apostle thinks that we might doubt his statement that our Saviour is also the head of heavenly things and the heavenly creation. But it is true. Scripture teaches that Christ is Lord of all, including the new heavens and the new earth in the future.

God created the angels, possibly on the sixth day when He created man—although Scripture does not tell us specifically. When the devil rebelled against God, a large number of angels also sinned personally and so fell into the same total depravity as Satan.

Scripture refers to the “elect angels” (I Tim. 5:21). God’s eternal and unchangeable election and reprobation embraces both angels and men, and so applies to the occupants of heaven as well as those on earth. In heaven, election and reprobation manifested themselves immediately at the fall of some angels and the continuance of others in obedience.

Satan was permitted to have access to heaven until Christ’s ascension, when He threw him out. In the old dispensation, Satan could still enter heaven, as during his tirades against Job (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; cf. Jude 9; Rev. 12:7-12). The last passage also teaches that the ascended Christ is the head of the elect angels, for Michael the archangel does His bidding. It is clear that, through His humiliation and exaltation, our Lord Jesus became the head of both the earthly and the heavenly creations.

When originally God created the heavens and the earth, He created them as two separate creations. They were different in that the earth was physical and material, while the heavenly creation was spiritual. They were so different that the two could have no contact with each other, nor could angels come to earth and men go to heaven.

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Begotten by God's Own Will

Holy Scripture speaks of regeneration as a new or spiritual birth. It is being born (or begotten) again or born from above or born of the Spirit or born of God. Thus James 1:18 states, “Of his own will *begat* he us with the word of truth.”

What is regeneration? Regeneration is God's granting new, spiritual and heavenly life—the resurrection life of Jesus Christ—to an elect but totally depraved sinner, so that his inner transformation is truly a new, spiritual and heavenly birth or begetting.

Who would have expected regeneration to have been mentioned in James 1:18 in the midst of James' very practical first chapter? Very few, yet it fits the context really well. The previous verse begins, “Every good gift [including regeneration] and every perfect gift [including regeneration] is from above” (17). Moreover, the new birth is especially “from above” for all true Christians are “born again” or, as it may also be translated, “born from above” (John 3:3, 7). James 1:17 continues, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the *Father*.” How does God become our Father? By His begetting or regenerating us!

The previous verse commands, “Do not err, my beloved *brethren*” (16). How do we become brothers and sisters of each other? By regeneration, for we are begotten by the same spiritual and heavenly Father!

Regeneration is a “good” and “perfect” *spiritual* “gift,” and we also receive “good” and “perfect” earthly and temporal gifts (17). Regeneration is the *first* spiritual gift in the life of God's elect because our fellowship with our heavenly Father begins with our being born again. It is only through our regeneration that we *know* the truth of James 1:17, that “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights.”

So what is the first thing that James teaches us about regeneration? That it originates solely in the sovereign good pleasure of Almighty God: “Of his own will begat he us” (18)! The emphasis of the original Greek is captured in the word order of our English translation: “*Of his own will* begat he us.”

James 1:18 is not the only New Testament text on God's sovereign will as the source of our new birth. John 1:13 declares that the regenerate “were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” This is the first reference to regeneration in the Gospel According to John and in the New Testament canon as arranged in our Bibles. It even occurs in John's celebrated prologue (John 1:1-18).

Notice how emphatically antithetical John 1:13 is. It states that the origin of our regeneration is not any of these three things, for we “were born, [1] not of blood, [2] nor of the will of the flesh, [3] nor of the will of man.” Instead, we “were born ... of God.” Our regeneration is of God, not man; of God's will, not man's will; of God's will *alone*!

Two chapters later, we read, “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Here Christ uses the wind as an image to convey

the sovereignty of God in regeneration. Jesus speaks of the wind blowing wherever it wants, so that we do not know where it came from or where it is going next.

The lesson that the Lord is teaching us is that the Holy Spirit in regeneration is like the sovereign wind. The Spirit regenerates whom He wills or wishes or wants or desires. We do not know where He was last when He regenerated someone or where He is going next to regenerate another.

Christ was not afraid to instruct people in the absolute sovereignty of God the Spirit in regenerating whom He wants (and also not regenerating according to His own free and sovereign will). Here in John 3, Jesus is explaining the truth to an unbeliever, an unbeliever who was a leader in the institute church: Nicodemus the Pharisee.

Clearly, our Saviour did not think that this truth was too hard or sharp, or that it would blunt the seriousness of the call to repent and believe, or kill evangelism. After teaching Nicodemus about regeneration (1-13), Christ speaks about God's love demonstrated in the cross bringing everlasting life to all who believe (14-17), and warns of God's condemnation of all who love darkness and so do not trust the Son (18-21).

Now let us put two parts of James 1 together: “Do not err, my beloved brethren” (16) and “Of his own will begat he us” (18). How do people “err” (16) in opposition to the truth of God's sovereign regeneration (18)?

First, many teach and believe *baptismal* regeneration that people are born again through the water that is applied by the church in the sacrament of baptism. Everyone who is dunked in, or sprinkled with, water by an ecclesiastical official in the name of the Triune God is born again so that new spiritual life is given to him or her. This is the position of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Lutheranism, high church Anglicanism and many others.

Second, many teach and believe *decisional* regeneration that people are born again through the exercise of their own free will. Whereas baptismal regeneration locates the power to effect the new birth in the church (with its sacrament), decisional regeneration places this might in the sinner himself (and his own supposed free will). According to the latter heresy, though God assists him, the final say always lies with man and his free will: man decides to believe and then (in response) God regenerates him. This is preached and believed in Arminianism and Methodism, and in most of fundamentalism and evangelicalism.

“Do not err, my beloved brethren” (16), not only regarding our practice, especially as concerns our temptations (2-15), but also regarding our doctrine. There is a massive theological error that most in Christendom actually embrace. Instead of the Bible's doctrine of sovereign regeneration, they teach and trust in baptismal regeneration and/or decisional regeneration. I say, “and/or” because some, like John Wesley, believed or believe both of these heresies!

But what does James 1 say? “*Of his own will* begat he us” (18), so “Do not err, my beloved brethren” (16). As those who are “of the truth,” let us hear the “voice” of Him who bears “witness unto the truth” in the Bible (John 18:37)!
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