

Regeneration and a Changed Life

The Bible mentions regeneration, or spiritual new birth, in several passages. Jesus talked about being “born again,” or literally, *born from above* (John 3:3, 7). In Titus 3:5, the apostle Paul uses a different word meaning *born again* usually translated “regeneration.” The new birth is also mentioned or implied in other passages (John 1:13; 1 Peter 1:3, 23; James 1:18; 1 John 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). The new birth that comes through faith in Jesus Christ is the implantation of divine life in a sin-dead soul. Some questions often posed about the new birth are: Does regeneration inevitably produce a changed life? Does a changed life therefore prove regeneration? Does a changed life give assurance of regeneration?

Does regeneration inevitably produce a changed life?

We would have to conclude, *Yes*. There are many reasons to believe it does. Consider these:

- A believer in Christ as Savior is certainly inclined to trust Him in other areas of life.
- A believer has the instruction of God’s Word which exhorts a changed life.
- A believer has Christ’s life in him which will be manifested through him in some way.
- A believer has the Holy Spirit indwelling him to influence and transform him.
- A believer who understands God’s grace is motivated to live gratefully and godly.
- A believer can experience God’s discipline for disobedience.

Though our answer is *yes*, it is a cautious *yes*, because we have to admit it comes from inference based on the facts listed above. There is no statement in biblical texts on regeneration guaranteeing a changed life.

Some might argue that 2 Corinthians 5:17 guarantees a changed life: “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*” But what is this verse teaching in context? Certainly “old things” couldn’t refer to sin, because all Christians will sin, and likewise, “all things” that “become new” can’t refer to one’s conduct, because again, all Christians retain their personality, aptitudes, some habits, and even sins. The context is not speaking about changed conduct. The apostle Paul is telling the Corinthian church that he no longer views people “according to the flesh,” or according to their human circumstances (such as whether they are Jew or Gentile) because his new relationship to Jesus Christ has radically changed his perspective (5:16). Paul reflects how he had previously dismissed Jesus as the Messiah because of His human circumstances (for example, His lowly birth, vulnerability, humiliating death), but now he has a new perspective on Him. Likewise, he wants the Corinthians to realize this new perspective that comes from their new reality of being reconciled to God and declared righteous in Christ (5:18-21). So the change spoken of is a change in the believer’s standing before God and the resulting change of perspective toward the world and others.

Others will cite passages like James 2:14-26, Matthew 7:15-23, John 15:6, or some in 1 John, but these passages are not about proving one’s salvation or regeneration. (For studies on these and other passages, see GraceNotes nos. 2, 13, 53, 54, 57, 59, 60, 61, 62.)

Does a changed life prove regeneration?

Now this is a very different question, one that must be answered, *No*. Here is why:

- A changed life can result from reasons other than actual regeneration.
- A person's outward change does not guarantee inward conformity.
- There is no objective standard for either the believer or the observer that specifies how much change is necessary to prove regeneration.
- Life change is relative varying in degree and in rate for each person.
- A changed life can revert to looking unchanged.
- A believer may show no visible fruit or may persist in sin.
- To judge whether a life has truly changed would take nothing less than omniscience and constant surveillance of that person.

With all these conditions, it is impossible to prove anyone is regenerate based on outward conduct or change.

Does a changed life give assurance of salvation?

We can easily answer, *No*. Because of the reasons listed above, it is impossible to have assurance from an outwardly changed life or from one's behavior. Grace-based assurance does not come from works; it comes from faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:4; 11:6; Eph. 2:8-9). The best we can say is that a changed life may (or may not) be evidence of regeneration, but we cannot draw a certain conclusion. The only "proof" of salvation is one's faith in Jesus Christ (His person, provision, and promise). Of course, one's faith is only known with certainty by that person and by God. We are not assured of salvation by judging our works or conduct, but by trusting in Jesus Christ as our sufficiency for acceptance with God.

Conclusion

God gives divine life to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, which changes one's spiritual life and standing with God. We can conclude that it changes the believer's conduct as well, though there is no biblical text that explicitly says so. That conclusion has to be inferred from the totality of scriptural teaching. What is clearer is that outward conduct, or a "changed" life, cannot prove regeneration or give assurance of salvation. A changed life is not automatic, that is why we have the numerous exhortations in the New Testament. But a changed life is God's intention for us (Eph. 2:10) and understanding His grace teaches us to live godly lives (Titus 2:11-12). Regeneration demands, intends, initiates, and provides for a changed life, but it does not guarantee a change visible to the believer or others and therefore is inadequate as a final proof of salvation. God's grace is our sufficient guarantee.