

**“GRACE RESTORES NATURE”:  
CREATION AND PROVIDENCE, NATURE AND REGENERATION —  
A WAY THROUGH THE IMPASSE**

By Rich Lusk

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In recent years, debate in the Reformed world has swirled around several key categories, primarily “nature” and “regeneration.” The debate began with the publication of [James Jordan’s exploratory essay, “Thoughts on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration,”](#) but has led to the likes of [Peter Leithart](#) and [Douglas Wilson](#) squaring off over the issues. These debates touch on almost everything – our doctrine of creation, anthropology, soteriology, sacramental theology, sexual ethics, and more, are at stake. This short paper is not an attempt to resolve the debate altogether. But it is an attempt to frame the debate, put it into proper perspective, and suggest a way forward that can close the gap between the two sides. I have benefitted from the work of all of the key players in the discussion, though admittedly my view might not be identical to any of them.

### **NATURE DEFINED**

Nature has been a key term in this debate. While Jordan and Leithart have been suspicious of the way “nature” is used in these discussions (wondering if it is a way of smuggling in unbiblical assumptions), Wilson is an advocate of it. “Nature” is certainly a biblical term and so I believe we should be fully comfortable with using the term in ways consistent with Scriptural usage. Of course, therein lies the problem. What does “nature” mean in Scripture? It certainly does not mean the same thing in Scripture it means in, say, ancient Greek philosophy. As best I can tell, “nature” is used in at least six distinct but related ways in the Bible. In each case, nature describes some kind of order, whether established by creation, covenant, or custom:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A helpful discussion of “nature” in the NT is found in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, volume 2, p. 656-662. This article takes up the meaning of *physis* and the related adjective *physikos*.

- **To describe the basic properties of something that makes it what it is, whether God (2 Pet. 1:4), man,<sup>2</sup> or beast (James 3:7; cf. “kinds” in Genesis 1).** This should not be confused with the use of the term “nature” in certain philosophical contexts (e.g., Aristotle), though it may overlap at points.
- **To describe God’s creational design, a kind of blueprint for life in the world he made (Romans 1:18ff and 1 Cor. 11:2-16, where “nature” has normative, ethical force).**<sup>3</sup> In this sense, to violate nature is go against the grain of creation (with resultant splinters). To live in accord with nature to live wisely. Appeals to “in the beginning” (that is, to the original creation; cf. Mark 10:6) are appeals to nature in this sense. This use of “nature” may be regarded as support for a kind of “natural law,” though that language has baggage of its own.

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<sup>2</sup>Granted, there is no biblical text that uses the phrase “human nature.” But since Scripture does speak of the “divine nature,” and ascribes various “natures” to different kinds of animals, it is hard to imagine the biblical writers would object to the language of “human nature.” The early church certainly believed this, which is why they developed Christology (and anthropology) the way that they did. Consider the incarnational theology of the early church. The early church confessed that the eternal divine Son assumed to himself a human nature, and thus became the God-man, two natures without confusion, change, separation, or division, in one theanthropic person. This is called the hypostatic union; each nature maintains its properties in the unity of the one person. The Formula of Chalcedon defines human nature as “consisting of a reasonable soul and body;” in other words, it is the sum total of those features and characteristics that make a human human.

<sup>3</sup>Some have suggested that “nature” means custom or tradition in passages like Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 11. But there is no reason why God would pour out wrath on people for violating Greco-Roman customs (Rom. 1:18ff). Those cultural customs were not sacred and certainly never had the force of divine law (and besides that, it highly debatable whether or not homosexuality, pedophilia, etc. were really contrary to Greco-Roman customs anyway). Likewise, it is hard to see how violating localized cultural customs about male/female relations would be offensive to the angels (1 Cor. 11:10-14); the fact that an appeal to nature (1 Cor. 11:14) is situated within a text that also appeals to the creation account (1 Cor. 11:8-9) suggests that Paul is using “nature” as a shorthand way of pointing to God’s creational design. Creation established a natural order which men and women should honor; this order is embedded in the way God made the world and designed men and women to relate to one another. For more on the difficult passage of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, see my [sermon](#) and [notes](#).

- **To describe what creation has become, twisted and warped by human sin and the curse of death (1 Cor. 2:1-14, where “natural man” is fallen man).**<sup>4</sup> Man now does by nature what is unnatural. Nature is no longer what God created it to be. By nature — that is, because of God’s just order and decree — we have become objects of wrath (Eph. 2:3), in union with Adam, our natural covenant head.
- **To describe someone’s identity by birth, ethnicity, and culture (Rom. 2:1-28 and Gal. 2:15, where “nature” is used to describe one’s relationship to the covenant God made with the nation of Israel, e.g., people are “by nature” Jews and therefore possessors of Torah, or they are not).**<sup>5</sup> In this sense, nature is not tied to God’s creational design in the beginning but to his providential orchestration of events in history. Jews have a different “nature” than Gentiles (in a certain sense) because God has given them a unique covenantal system to live by. They were a people set apart.
- **To describe man’s cultivation of nature, transforming the raw materials of creation into civilization for his own use (cf. Rom. 11:17ff).** It is perfectly legitimate to use nature in ways “contrary to nature” in certain contexts,

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<sup>4</sup> In other words, post-fall nature must be distinguished from pre-fall nature. The events that transpire in Genesis 3 deform the nature of man and the world in a fundamental way. Nature has been corrupted by the curse. Man is now totally depraved, as we Calvinists like to put it, meaning not that he is as evil as he could be, but that every aspect of his being is warped and marred by sin so that he is Spiritually dead and unable to do anything to please God. God’s creation is still good in itself, but is now twisted in that creational goods can be used in evil ways. Creation will no longer fulfill the original purpose for which God made it. When sin enters the world, nature is corrupted and subjected to the curse of death. Salvation, then, may be understood as God’s work of reclaiming and restoring (and perfecting and glorifying) his now fallen world. Think of the fall as a train going off its track and wrecking. Redemption is God’s commitment to fix the wreckage and put the train back on track so it can reach the destination he planned for it from the beginning. In this sense, we can rightly speak of “grace restoring nature.” See below for more on this theme.

<sup>5</sup>One of the reasons I do not like “natural law” language is I think it confuses the exegesis of Romans 2:1-14, especially verses 14-15. N. T. Wright provides the proper exegesis of this text. Paul is not talking about Gentiles who fulfill a natural law, known apart from Scripture or tradition; rather, the Gentiles in view are God-fearers/believers who do not possess the law (the Torah) by nature, that is, by birth/ethnicity/culture, but fulfill the *true intention* of the law by faith (cf. Rom. 8:1-4). “Nature” in Romans 2 cannot trace back to creation because it is part of the Jew/Gentile distinction, which came in later. From Genesis 12 until 70 A.D., the Jew/Gentile divide was one the basic features God built into his world, but it was neither protological nor eschatological; rather, it was a temporary administration (cf. Gal. 3-4).

provided nature is being developed, glorified, and perfected, in accord with its original trajectory.<sup>6</sup>

- **To describe the pre-eschatological state of creation (1 Cor. 15:44-46), which was good but immature and not yet glorified.** In this sense, nature gives way to supernature, creation gives way to new creation, flesh gives way to Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>In Romans 11 Paul uses the metaphor of the olive tree to describe the people of God. Paul says the Jews are “natural” branches who are in danger of being pruned, while the Gentiles are “wild” branches who are being grafted in by faith, “contrary to nature.” The use of nature here is closely related to the use of “nature” in Romans 2, but the context is not culture, but rather horticulture. If grafting wild branches into a tree is “unnatural” but lawful, how does that bear on Paul’s use of “unnatural” in Romans 1? The short answer is that we must distinguish ways in which we sinfully disfigure nature from ways in which we properly cultivate nature. Sin deforms nature, righteousness transforms nature. To know the difference, we must look at how particular practices relate to creational norms and the cultural mandate (and certainly Scripture helps us in this task). We can go to the ant to learn a work ethic, but we cannot go to the penguin (or the dog, etc.) to get our sex ethic; learning from nature is never that simple. Likewise, some ways of using and manipulating nature are lawful and some are not. For example: Homosexual practice and transgender operations disfigure and insult nature; they are a misuse of our sexual powers and parts, and an abuse of technology. Wearing clothes, brushing one’s teeth, trimming one’s nails, training a dog, turning a tree into a table, developing a hybrid azalea, pulling weeds out of a garden, fertilizing crops, etc., are all examples of actions that are certainly “contrary” to nature in a certain sense. But in a deeper, more profound sense, they are examples of exactly what man is supposed to do with nature. They are good uses of labor and technology. Nature was made to tended and cultivated. Man was created to be nature’s caretaker, to transform nature into culture, to turn the Garden of Eden into the New Jerusalem. Man in his sin often abuses nature, whether through wrecking the environment with pollutants, or damaging his body through sinful sex practices. But the cultural mandate gives man permission and motivation to glorify the world, to make it better, to bring it to maturity. The cultural mandate is the basis of science and technology, art and architecture, etc., all of which transform the creation.

<sup>7</sup>In 1 Cor. 15:44, 46, the “natural body” is the original, pre-eschatological human body, which will give way eschatologically in the resurrection to the “Spiritual body” (that is, a body perfected and fully animated by the Holy Spirit). Of course, the Spirit created the natural body, and the Spiritual body still has a created nature, but the use of terms here is still telling. In 1 Corinthians 15, the term “nature” describes man in his unfallen but pre-eschatological state; thus, this is a use of “nature” is very close to the creational use of the term already identified, only now the dynamic, developmental aspect of man’s original nature is brought to the fore. God did not intend nature to be static; he intended for every created nature to grow, develop, and mature in accord with its essence. Nature as created gives way to nature as glorified and resurrected. The “natural” state in this sense is man as originally created, but still immature. This first phase of human existence will give way to an even better state when man is raised from the dead, never to die again. In this context, the natural/Spiritual distinction is not merely physical or metaphysical, as such, but eschatological. This progression would have happened even if man had not fallen into sin, but now happens in Christ as the Second and Last Adam. Note that the progression for man is not from the physical to the non-physical, but one kind of physicality to a better kind of physicality. The resurrected body will every bit as physical as the original creation body, but will be vastly superior to it, even as the glory of the sun exceeds that of the moon.

We could identify these several uses as “essential nature,” “creational nature,” “fallen nature,” “covenantal nature,” “cultivated nature,” and “protological nature.” Some of these categories overlap, as already noted, but there are distinctions that must be made.

In the case of God, obviously “nature” cannot develop or change. God is absolutely perfect and infinitely dynamic. God is pure act and his being is identical with his attributes. God defines himself to Moses: “I am who I am.” God exists as a Trinity, simple and immutable in his being. The divine nature can neither become better nor be corrupted. In his transcendence, God is unaffected by his creation, but exists in unperturbed bliss. In his immanence, God can change in his relations to his creatures, and thus can be “emotionally” responsive to his creatures, but these changes in relations are not changes in nature; rather, as God relates to his creation in various ways, he always does so *freely* in accord with his *unchangeable* attributes.<sup>8</sup>

But unlike the divine nature, created natures are malleable, at least within a certain God-ordained range. This is a decretal ontology. Every created thing is what it is because of God’s decree; it either remains what it is or changes, in accord with God’s decree. Created natures can admit of development or of decay, as God ordains. Created natures have no self-sustaining power on their own. God makes them (creation), and preserves them (providence); everything that exists only does so because of the word and power of God. Whatever fixity or flexibility things have is due to his creation and providence. Ordinarily, God preserves created natures in certain ordered and patterned ways (and when he deviates from these ordinary patterns we call it a *miracle*).<sup>9</sup> Whatever changes created natures undergo are according to God’s eternal decree. Creation does not stand on its own; there is no such thing as autonomous nature in the created realm. In this sense, grace is always already there in the creation. Existence itself is a gift of God. Creation is a gift of God. Sustenance is a gift of God. Nature is a gift of God. Identity through time is a gift of God. The power of secondary, creaturely causation is the gift of God. Nature is always graced, even before the fall. Every cause within the creation can be traced back to God as the Ultimate Cause, which means he is also the Ultimate

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<sup>8</sup> This all-too-abbreviated discussion follows John Frame’s work and insights. See especially his superb *No Other God*.

<sup>9</sup> The way in which we account for miracles is a good test case of how we understand nature. In a miracle, God can either restore the nature of a thing (e.g., healing a deaf-mute to human wholeness) or God can change the nature of a thing completely (e.g., turning water into wine). Miracles are *not* divine interventions in the creation, since God is always already active in his creation. Rather, they are actions of God outside his ordinary patterns of activity. To put it another way, miracles are not violations of natural law, since what we call natural law is nothing other than God’s habitual, usual way of acting within his creation. A miracle happens when God chooses to do something unusual, *but God is just as active in ordinary providences as he is in the miraculous*.

Giver.<sup>10</sup> God is sovereign over his creation, filling it, empowering its “secondary causes,” and holding it together. He is creation’s Lord precisely because he is creation’s Servant. The creation is utterly and always dependent on God.

### “GRACE RESTORES NATURE”

While much more could be said about nature, we want to focus one question in particular, a soteriological question. In this discussion, we want to ask about the effect of God’s *saving* grace on *fallen* nature. Here we move beyond the grace given to creation when God brought it into existence and began sustaining it. Here we are taking up the question of how God’s redemptive grace in Christ effects his creation.

What do we mean by the common theological claim and soteriological slogan, “Grace redeems nature” or “Grace restores creation”? These are Reformed commonplaces, but what do they communicate about God and the state of his world? Why does Scripture describe salvation as a re-genesis, or a re-creation? In Scripture, salvation clearly is presented as a reclamation project. What does this tell us about the fallen-nature/grace relationship? What does it tell us about the creation/fall/redemption narrative?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism follows the Apostle Paul in presenting salvation as a restoration of man in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (cf. WSC 10, which refers to man’s original state but cites Eph. 4:24 and Col. 3:10 as prooftexts, thus using our redemption in Christ to illuminate our original unfallen condition). The Christian is not a human who has added a religious dimension to an otherwise secular life, he is not a natural man who has become religious. Instead, he is completely new and different kind of human. He is still human, as before, but he now has a different way of being human. He has become, in principle, what a human is supposed to be. He has become *truly* human in Christ. The gospel gives us the only true humanism there is. It is humanism found in union with Christ and indwelt by the Spirit. This is what it ultimately means to bear the image of God.

God restores (and eschatologically perfects) human nature in Christ. God’s image in man was defaced by sin, but is restored and perfected in Christ. This is why Scripture describes salvation in terms of being renewed in God’s image, being made a new creation, etc. In short, salvation is a re-genesis, or a re-creation, that undoes the effects of the fall and brings creation to its originally intended glory. “Grace restores nature” [a] in the sense that through Christ God has repealed the curse on creation and replaced it with blessing so that we recover what we were made to be in the beginning, and [b] in the sense that God will finally bring creation, including humanity, to its originally

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<sup>10</sup>In traditional Reformed theology, God gives his creatures their natures in the act of creation, building into each them a “law” of development. God then causes and oversees the development (or degradation) of those natures, sustaining, transforming, etc., them in his providence (noting, of course, that providence includes “secondary causes”). Problems arise if we link nature only to the doctrine of creation (thus overemphasizing the fixity of nature, making nature as changeless as God) or only to the doctrine of providence (thus overemphasizing change/dynamism within nature, essentially denying any created thing has a set of fixed properties that make it what it is and give it stable identity through time).

intended perfection in maturity and glory through Christ. Christ restores us to what we were in the beginning and makes us what we were supposed to become. He recovers what sin has spoiled and brings it to greater glory.

This means salvation (like human identity in general) is deeply and fundamentally *relational*;<sup>11</sup> it is impossible to define what happens in salvation apart from describing the change brought about in our relationships. Salvation has to do with our movement from the family of Adam (with Satan as our father) to the family of Christ (with God as our Father). Adam was originally the son of God. Because of sin he was orphaned and taken into the Satanic household. In Christ, man is adopted and reborn into God's family again.<sup>12</sup> Relationships determine identity; human nature is inherently relational because we are made in the image of a relational, Trinitarian God; salvation restores human nature as it restores human relations to what they were designed to be.<sup>13</sup>

If the Christian has a new family, does he have a new nature as well? In a certain sense, perhaps. Relationships determine identity, and identity is tied to nature, so a new set of relationships implies a new nature. It is clear that nature and relationship co-inhere; the nature of a thing is constituted by its relationships. New relationships = new nature, right? Wilson would favor this reading. This especially fits with certain senses of the term "nature" given above, particularly the covenantal use of "nature." For Wilson,

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<sup>11</sup>This is to say, we do not get to our personal identity by peeling away external relations as if they were layers of an onion, leaving some solitary "I." Rather, I discover who I am precisely through my relations. I am who I am in view of my various relationships, to God, to my parents, to my siblings, to my spouse, to my children, to my boss, even to a particular place, etc. Postmodernism tells us we have to create an identity for ourselves by looking within. But this is a blasphemous attempt at self-creation. In reality, we are who God has made us to be in his creation and providence. Identity is a gift given from the outside-in, not something I create for myself by turning inward. The reason for so much postmodern angst is that we were not made to bear the burden of identity-creation and we end up crushing ourselves under the weight of our own autonomous project.

<sup>12</sup>See especially Romans 5-6. One can see how the rite of baptism plays into this discussion (cf. Rom. 6:1-14). In baptism, God gives me the gift of a new self/identity and a new family. Baptism is an outward gift that remakes who I am inwardly, and thus it is the solution to the postmodern quest for an answer to the question, "Who am I?" Baptism answers: "You are a child of God, bought by the blood of Christ and united to him. Now live like it!"

<sup>13</sup>The model for the connection between relationship and ontology is found ultimately within the Trinity. What distinguishes each of the three persons of the Trinity from the others is their relations to the other two members of the Trinity, e.g., the Son is constituted as Son by being eternally begotten of the Father by the Spirit, and the Father is constituted as Father by eternally begetting the Son through the Spirit.

regeneration is defined as a change in nature, and Christians and non-Christians do not share a common nature because one is alive in Christ while the other is dead in sins.<sup>14</sup>

But in general, I am not convinced this is the best way to describe what happens in salvation because it obscures certain fundamental truths. The Christian and non-Christian each have a relationship with God, one relating to him as a covenant keeper, the other as a covenant breaker. They are each created and sustained by God *as humans*. What happens in salvation is not so much that the Christian is given a new nature as it is that the nature he had before is restored and transformed. Salvation is not a change *of* nature, but a change *in* nature. The non-Christian does not have his human nature replaced with something else; that suggests the wrong idea of what Scripture means by “new creation.” Instead, he finds his nature has been reclaimed by and for God. A non-Christian is not subhuman, he is a misdirected human. The Christian is not super-human, he has become a Spirit-filled human, a true human, as God intended all along.

Thus, I would want to ask Wilson: Does the non-Christian have a human nature before conversion? Does he still have a human nature after conversion? If yes (as I imagine Wilson would answer — what else could he say?), then why insist on describing becoming a Christian as “getting a new nature.” Doesn’t this confuse the issue? The issue is not a *new* or *different* nature, but the *restoration* of nature. Redemption does not replace one nature with another, it restores the nature that was fallen.<sup>15</sup>

Soteriologically, the implications of this should be clear. Again, salvation makes us what we were in the very beginning, when Adam’s was God’s son, only now in a more glorious way than before, since the Last Adam is greater than the First Adam. Salvation is relational; thus, we are restored to a right relationship with God, with others, and with

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<sup>14</sup> Despite the logic Wilson uses here, there is still something odd about his insistence that becoming a Christian entails a change of nature. One of the concerns Wilson has expressed with the Jordan/Leithart denial of nature is that it entails “anything can become anything” (ala Darwinism). If there are no fixed natures, for example, how can we object to transgenderism? Wilson sees this as the weakness of the Jordan/Leithart position. I think Jordan and Leithart would push back against transgenderism by appealing to God’s creational design (which amounts to the same thing as “nature” in Wilson’s sense); indeed Leithart has confirmed this with me in private conversation. But Wilson’s argument is reversible and can turn back on itself. If conversion brings about a change in nature, then human nature is not fixed after all. And if human nature is malleable, who is to say that a change in gender is not also possible? Wilson could certainly mount arguments against this line of reasoning, but it shows that his appeal to fixed nature on the one hand (which he uses to refute the possibility of transgenderism) is not obviously consistent with his appeal to regeneration as a change of nature (since this would imply natures are not as fixed as he has claimed).

<sup>15</sup> One can think of other problems with the Wilson version of regeneration as a change in nature. For example, which kind of nature did Christ take to himself in the incarnation? Was it unregenerate or regenerate nature? The fact that the church has historically not asked this kind of question (but has simply insisted that Christ took to himself the only kind of human nature, or flesh, that existed after the fall), is further proof Wilson is not on the right track and is insisting on an idiosyncratic formulation.

creation, by virtue of our relationship with Christ. These new relationships give us a new identity and a new orientation. Nature has been restored. Grace perfects nature.

## REGENERATION AND NATURE

Now we turn from a discussion of nature to the related topic of regeneration. We have already hinted at the way forward, but now we will spell it out more fully. Let's retrace our steps and then forge a path forward. As noted previously, in recent years, there has been a great deal of debate in certain Reformed circles over whether or not regeneration, or the new birth, should be understood as a *change of nature* or a *relational change* (or perhaps some combination of both, using a relational ontology). [Doug Wilson](#) has argued that regeneration is a change of nature; in other words, God's effectual call brings about a metaphysical or ontological change in us. There has to be some *thing* that can be related, saved, etc. and that thing is changed at conversion. [James Jordan](#) has argued that humans do not have a fixed nature, but are instead constituted by their relationships (most essentially their relationship to God, upon whom they are absolutely dependent). Thus, "regeneration" is not a change of nature (a "transubstantiated heart") but a change in relation, or a change in spiritual orientation and direction.

This is a complicated theological issue that deserves a full length paper, if not a book, of its own, but I want to briefly suggest the best way to move the discussion forward, in a way that does justice to concerns on both sides. As is often the case in such matters, I think there has been a lot of talking past one another and a lot of terminological confusion, which ends up obscuring wide areas of agreement.

What Wilson means when he affirms regeneration is a change of "nature" is not the same thing Jordan means by "nature" when he denies it and focuses on relationships rather than substance; in other words, there is quite a bit of equivocation going on in these debates. Jordan needs to reckon with the fact that "nature" is biblical language and embrace it in its proper sense(s), but Wilson needs to carefully spell out how he is using the term since it is susceptible to a wide range of meanings (see above).

As already demonstrated, it is highly questionable whether or not the change that takes place when someone becomes a Christian can best be described as a change of nature; in other words, one can affirm there is such a category as nature (contra Jordan), but deny that regeneration is best defined as a change in nature (contra Wilson). Again, as we already saw, both the non-Christian and the Christian are human and therefore share a common human nature, even though that nature has been reoriented in conversion and so now the Christian relates to both God and Satan differently. I would argue (closer to Jordan than to Wilson, but perhaps not identical to either one) that regeneration does not cause a change of nature, but is a *restoration*, *reorientation*, and *perfection* of the same nature a person has had all along. There are metaphors in Scripture that might suggest a change in nature happening at baptism/conversion (e.g., unbelievers are described as serpents, believers as sheep), but those are only metaphors to describe our change in orientation, direction, and relation. Certainly, one could argue that a regenerate person has a new nature precisely because he has a new set of relationships (granting that

relationships determine nature), but in this case, the use of “nature” would have to be very carefully circumscribed.

One problem is that, just as “nature” has multiple meanings, so does “regeneration.” [The term “regeneration” does not exactly have a fixed meaning in the history of Reformed theology, and so discussions of what regeneration entails can also become tricky business.](#) The only two places “regeneration” shows up in Scripture are Titus 3:5, where it is sacramental, and Matthew 19:28, where it is cosmic. Within the Reformed tradition, Calvin and the early continental Reformers used the language of regeneration in a sacramental and covenantal way, to describe the new life we receive in the context of the church. Thus, Calvin spoke this way in various contexts:

For as God, regenerating us in baptism, ingrafts us into the fellowship of his Church, and makes us his by adoption, so we have said that he performs the office of a provident parent, in continually supplying the food by which he may sustain and preserve us in the life to which he has begotten us by his word...

That this may be more clear, let my readers call to mind that there is a two-fold grace in baptism, for therein both remission of sins and regeneration are offered to us. We teach that full remission is made, but that regeneration is only begun, and goes on making progress during the whole of life...

I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God . . . we are restored by this regeneration through the benefit of Christ into the righteousness of God . . . And indeed this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples, renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will only end at death...

Later Reformed scholastics, bearing the marks of the Arminian debates and armed with philosophical tools Calvin did not typically employ, narrowed the meaning of the “regeneration” into a technical term for the change of heart that takes place when God effectually calls an elect person into a permanent faith-union with Christ. In this context, regeneration tends to lose its relational dimension, as well as the connection it had with the sacraments and the church in Calvin’s theology. Instead, it became a principle of new life imparted to the soul by the immediate work of the Holy Spirit (and thus the connection of this internal change to the external means of grace was rendered ambiguous at best).

Given the variety of ways the term “regeneration” has been used in Reformed history, making one particular definition the test of Reformed orthodoxy is sectarian and arcane, bound to create unnecessary confusion and division. Any Reformed coalition should be appropriately flexible on this matter. Should Calvin really be excluded from modern Reformed denominations because he used the term “regeneration” differently than most

do today? And what of the apostles, who also clearly used the term differently? It would be much better to acknowledge that Reformed Christians are probably not going to have total agreement on the best way to use this term. And we should be okay with that, since diversity here is part of our heritage.

But even allowing for those kinds of differences, there is still a way forward. Jordan prefers to use regeneration in a relational way, to describe the new life in the covenant that all the baptized receive (even those who will not persevere). His use of the term is quite close to Calvin. Wilson prefers to use the term in an ontological sense, the way the later Reformed scholastics did, to describe a new heart and new nature, given only to the elect, that produces faith and leads to perseverance. How can these uses and positions be brought closer together?

One way to cut through the mess is to point out the fundamental agreement between Wilson and Jordan. Both sides are fully Calvinistic and predestinarian; thus, both sides confess that faith is a Spirit-wrought gift and that salvation is ultimately a monergistic work of God from beginning to end (because all our efforts are undergirded by God, who works all our works in us). This does not mean the whole discussion resolves into mere semantics, but it does help pinpoint the precise areas of disagreement. I actually do not think the sides are as far apart as public rhetoric would suggest. Here is the nub of the matter:

**Jordan affirms that those who apostatize and those who persevere have a qualitatively different kind of relationship with God; indeed, he asserts that each of us has a personally unique relationship to God. To be sure, sometimes Jordan obscures this point, but it is his position. This means that the difference between those who persevere in the faith and those who not is not ONLY the duration of their faith. Thus, this should satisfy Wilson's desire to distinguish whatever the elect covenant member receives at baptism/conversion from what the non-elect covenant member receives. Wilson may want to describe that difference in more robust terms, whereas Jordan wants to emphasize what is covenantally shared by those who will persevere and those who won't, but Jordan does acknowledge a difference.**

**On the other side, in conversation several years ago, Wilson agreed with me that if a "regenerate" person in his sense of the term (a person with an ontologically changed heart) were to have the Holy Spirit taken away from him (however counterfactual Wilson believes that to possibility to be — but see Psalm 51:11 and the case of Saul), he would not persevere. So even for Wilson perseverance is ultimately guaranteed by the ongoing work of the Spirit, not a past ontological change, which was Jordan's main point all along. We persevere not because we had an internal and irrevocable "heart change" in the past, but because the Spirit continues his work of renovation in us and preserves us in the new creation. It is not a one time change of nature, but the ongoing work of the Spirit, struggling with us and continually transforming us, that brings a believer to final glory.**

Thus, the two sides are not as far apart as might appear on the surface. If they can agree on the preceding two paragraphs, much of the issue is resolved.

But there is still one outstanding question to deal with, though I will only touch on it briefly.

### **COVENANT MEMBERS WHO APOSTATIZE: THE CURIOUS CASE OF SAUL**

I have addressed apostasy extensively in several [essays](#) and [articles](#), and I would point the curious reader to those works. But we must briefly deal with apostasy here in order to round out our discussion.

A discussion of apostasy requires us to explore resistible and irresistible grace. If some persevere and others do not, if some keep covenant and other break covenant, is that due to some difference in what they were given at conversion, or is it due to some difference in their own actions? Or is there another way to explain this? Take the case of Saul from 1 Samuel. He was given “another heart” (1 Sam. 10:9). This is as close as one will come to the language of an “ontological change” and “new nature” as we will find in Scripture. Saul should be the perfect test case for Wilson’s view of regeneration. But the problem is that later Saul falls away. The Spirit he had been given was taken from him. How do we grapple with this? It seems that the grace God gave to Saul initially was irresistible. But later on, God allowed Saul to resist grace, even to the point that the Spirit departed from him. We know all of this happened in accord with God’s decree. Saul never ever autonomously, even if he did exercise creaturely agency (and is therefore held responsible). But it seems clear that in Saul’s case, God decreed for him to receive irresistible grace at one point, and resistible grace at another. We cannot understand Saul’s story if we think of “grace” in a timeless way. Grace is relational and dynamic, not a static, atemporal once-and-for-all, indefectible gift. The case of Saul only makes sense only if we include the factor of time. If you could cut into Saul’s heart, spiritually speaking, in 1 Samuel 10:9, you would find a “new heart.” Scripture says so. But that new heart was not enough, by itself, to guarantee Saul’s perseverance. Cut into Saul’s heart at the end of 1 Samuel 15, and you find heart of stone cold unbelief and rebellion. For Saul to make it to the finish line in faith, he would have had to continue walking with God — and God would have had to continue working in him. In Saul’s case, God sovereignly chose to let him go. God gave him back over to his sin and willful rebellion. His new heart was not enough to save him. Of course, Saul could not blame God — any more than the pot can say to the Potter, “Why have you made me thus?” (Rom. 9). Saul is responsible for his own choices, which led to his final apostasy (see his threefold fall in 1 Sam. 13-15).

### **JORDAN AND WILSON ON APOSTASY**

Jordan and Wilson explain apostasy differently. Or do they? On the one hand, Jordan would say that if a person is baptized, they have entered the regeneration in Christ. They have a new family and new life because they have a new relationship with God. But some of the baptized fall away. They kill the new life they’ve been given. The book

of Hebrews warns about this, the parable of the soils shows us what it looks like, and concrete cases from Scripture (e.g., Saul, Judas) demonstrate the sad reality of it. How does Jordan explain what happens when a baptized person fails to persevere? From the human perspective, the apostate is totally to blame. He has refused to continue in the grace he was given. He is to blame for receiving the grace of God in vain. He has willfully broken covenant with God. The Bible speaks this way again and again, blaming apostates for their apostasy. There was no defect in the grace received at baptism. The apostate has chosen to reject what he was given. From a divine perspective, what has happened? The apostate has fallen away from the faith because God has decreed to wrestle with this non-elect covenant member for only so long, before giving him over to his willful rebellion. In principle, this is not more problematic or offensive than the doctrine of election itself. If God can choose to leave some in their sins, justly reprobating them to damnation, why can't he give temporary grace to some, before giving them up to their sins and (and an even greater) eternal damnation? Indeed, such cases remind the rest of us that perseverance is not to be taken for granted; it is not automatic and we are not entitled to it. Our preservation in the faith is just as much a gift as the inception of faith at the beginning of the Christian life. Those who persevere do so only because God *continues* the good work he began in them, while apostates are given what they have chosen. Jordan is happy to leave apostasy as a largely mysterious reality, standing at the intersection of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. But nothing in his discussion of apostasy compromises his fundamental commitment to Calvinism.

Wilson explains apostasy by arguing that the non-elect covenant member did not receive regenerating grace. He can't lose what he never had – and he never had what he needed for salvation. Wilson may still use the language of covenant breaking, but for him, the covenant is a thin relationship. Wilson may say that the unregenerate baptized person is a member of the church, but church membership/ecclesiology and soteriology are kept completely distinct. The non-elect covenant member does not really fall from grace, so much as he manifests that he never received grace. He only falls away in a phenomenological sense. We may have thought he was a Christian before he apostatized, but he was faking it all along and there was never any grace actually operative in his heart. This explanation of apostasy is certainly simpler than Jordan's, but it runs into problems of its own, particularly dealing with certain texts of Scripture (see my essays cited above).

Here's the rub: Both Jordan and Wilson attribute perseverance of the elect of the grace of God. They do differ in how they would explain the benefits received by the non-elect, non-persevering covenant member. But even this is an issue within the Reformed tradition where a great deal of latitude has been allowed. In the *Institutes*, Calvin gives a complex, meandering discussion of the matter that, at times, sounds much like Jordan. The Westminster Confession of Faith, 10.6, describes "common operations of the Spirit" that persons not elected for final salvation may receive for a season. These are "operations" of the Spirit common to the elect and non-elect within the life of the church. Depending on one's choice of terminology, "regeneration" may or may not be one of these "common operations." But this is not an issue that should divide Reformed Christians from one another. There are certainly differences in the way these respective

theologies will be worked out pastorally (and here, I think, Jordan's view is vastly superior because he connects election to the administration of the covenant in a much deeper, more integrated way), but certainly both Jordan and Wilson are within the Calvinistic fold. Given more time, it would be worthwhile to connect this whole conversation with the Canons of Dort, but that will have to await another occasion.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A few key points to summarize the discussion:

- Creation exists as a gift of the Triune God. Nature is not autonomous, but dependent on God's works of creation and providence. Grace is always already there, even before the fall. There is no autonomy in the created order. In the post-fall situation, God adds salvific grace to the creational grace that was there in the beginning.
- In salvation, God's grace restores and perfects fallen created nature, including human nature. Thus, salvation is not an altogether new creation from scratch, but a recreation of a humanity that already exists. Salvation is not a change *of* nature (from one kind of thing to another kind of thing) but a change *in* nature (from a fallen human nature to a redeemed human nature, from covenant breaking human nature to covenant keeping human nature). "Grace restores nature," meaning that the work of Christ and the Spirit bring to glorious fruition the original created potential of humanity.
- Human nature has been twisted by the fall, and man is now alienated from God, from others, and from creation. By nature, we are now children of wrath. By nature, we live contrary to our created nature, that is, contrary to God's design. By nature, we do what is unnatural.
- In Christ, human nature is restored, perfected and glorified. All of this takes shape relationally, as we are reconciled to God, others, and creation. The fall transferred Adam and his progeny from God's family to Satan's family; redemption reverses that, as we are adopted and reborn into God's family by grace.
- Regeneration is best understood as the inception of the Christian life, as God brings us to faith and gives us new life in Christ. Normally, this is linked with baptism (Titus 3:5), though not absolutely. The life given in regeneration is no more self-sustaining than the original created order. Thus, a one-time gift of regeneration would never be enough to ensure perseverance. God has to keep working to sustain and grow the new life he has given, or it will die (as sometimes happens, in those cases in which God brings an ultimately reprobated person into the covenant and church for a season). Of course, covenant breaking in the new covenant is a mystery, just as Adam's original act of covenant breaking remains a mystery.
- Regeneration is not a change of nature as such (we are human both before and after), but is rather the reconstituting of our human nature in union with the glorified God-man, Jesus Christ. The regenerate life is the life of faith, in union with Christ, the Regenerate One. Christ shares his new, glorified, resurrection life

with us. He is the man Born From Above, and we come to share in his heavenly origin. Whereas as the fall left men completely self-absorbed and directed towards selfish ends, the regenerate man has his life redirected and reoriented around God and his kingdom.

- This regeneration (considered as a past event) does not by itself guarantee our perseverance in the faith. Our perseverance is guaranteed as God who began a good work in us carries it to completion (Phil. 1:6). If God were to withdraw his Spirit from us, we would surely apostatize (and he does seem to do this with some). The fact that some apostatize does not negate the promises of perseverance, but it does show us such promises have to be claimed by faith and not presumed upon. Assurance is not deduced from certain propositions concerning the divine decree but stems from faith in the revealed promises of Scripture.
- Salvation is a work of God's grace from beginning to end, through his Son and by his Spirit. The elect can take no credit for their conversion or their perseverance. The reprobate are completely to blame for their damnation.
- Those elected for final salvation will indeed persevere to the end not because of a past change in nature as such, but because God continues working in them to will and to do his good pleasure (Phil 2:12-13). We do not rest our faith in a past ontological change but in the mercies of God that are new every morning (indeed, new every millisecond).
- Covenant members who apostatize have no one to blame but themselves. They received sufficient grace in the covenant, but turned away from God. The elect who will and do persevere to the end in faith have no one to thank but God who continued working in them by his efficacious grace to bring them to glory. We could debate exactly how to describe what elect and non-elect covenant members have in common in the covenant (and what they do *not* have in common) but in each and every case, we must affirm divine sovereignty (so God gets all the glory for the salvation of the elect) and human responsibility (so apostates have no one to blame but themselves for their damnation).