

A SHORT NOTE ON THE WILSON/JORDAN REGENERATION CONTROVERSY

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I wrote this elsewhere as a footnote in another essay (<http://trinity-pres.net/essays/obergefellandamericaswarongod.pdf>), but since it is likely to get overlooked, I have pulled it out and turned it into its own short paper for those who might be interested. The debate between Doug Wilson and Jim Jordan over regeneration pits two men whom I respect and from whom I have learned much. I hope this note can bring them closer together on this issue.

In salvation, “grace redeems nature.” God restores (and eschatologically perfects) human nature in Christ. Scripture describes salvation in terms of being renewed in God’s image, being made a new creation, etc. This newness is deeply and fundamentally relational; it 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). Relationships determine identity; human nature is inherently relational because we are made in the image of a relational, Trinitarian God. But we need to be careful how we understand this.

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. 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), and so “regeneration” is not a change of nature (a “transubstantiated heart”) but a change in Spiritual orientation and direction.

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. I think what Wilson means when he affirms regeneration as 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, but Wilson needs to carefully spell out how he is using the term since it is susceptible to a wide range of meanings.

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). After all, 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 instead that regeneration does not cause a change of nature, but is rather a restoration and perfection of the same nature a person has had all along.

But “nature” is not the only difficult term to pin down in this discussion. 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. Calvin’s use of the term “regeneration” was certainly different from the later

Reformed scholastics and Puritans. There is no way a particular meaning of the term can serve as a test of orthodoxy. A large part of this discussion is about how to best recover biblical language and categories for pastoral purposes, but that's hard to do when stipulated definitions that are not grounded in Scripture and do not account for diversity in church history are insisted upon. 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 (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 and put them in proper perspective. I actually do not think the sides are as far apart as public rhetoric would suggest. For example, 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. In other words (though Jordan may sometimes give this impression), it will not do to say that the ONLY difference between those who persevere in the faith and those who do not is the *duration* of their faith. And Wilson has agreed with me in conversation over these matters 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 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.

There are differences in other areas, such as how baptism and the covenant are related to regeneration, how apostasy is explained, how the promises of Scripture are applied to Christians individually and corporately, how assurance is derived, and so forth. But those differences can also be minimized in the same way I have closed the gap on the issue of regeneration and nature. Yes, differences remain but they ought to be kept in perspective. This is one of those cases where the parties at odds have a lot more in common than might be apparent at first glance, and it is certainly not an issue that should cause a break in fellowship.