

Reformed Congregational Fellowship

March 25-27, 2014 - Dr. Jeffrey F. Evans
 Christ Community Bible Church, Perkasi PA
 (www.ChristCommunityBibleChurch.org)

"How God Uses Subjective Human Experiences in Bringing the Elect to Salvation"

Savoy Declaration Chapter 20

Of the Gospel, and of the Extent of the Grace Thereof

1. *The covenant of works being broken by sin, and made unprofitable unto life, God was pleased to give unto the elect the promise of Christ, the seed of the woman, as the means of calling them, and begetting in them faith and repentance: in this promise the gospel, as to the substance of it, was revealed, and was therein effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners...*

4. *Although the gospel be the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace, and is as such abundantly sufficient thereunto; yet that men who are dead in trespasses, may be born again, quickened or regenerated, there is moreover necessary an effectual, irresistible work of the Holy Ghost upon the whole soul, for the producing in them a new spiritual life, without which no other means are sufficient for their conversion unto God.*

I. The Gospel we are Called to Proclaim.

As a way of setting the stage for my paper, I would simply like to offer (as a concise summary of the Gospel) the words of Calvin in a letter to his friend Cardinal Sadoletto.

"We show that the only haven of safety is in the mercy of God, as manifested in Christ, in whom every part of our salvation is complete. As all mankind are, in the sight of God, lost sinners, we hold that Christ is their only righteousness, since, by his obedience, he has wiped off our transgressions; by his sacrifice, appeased the divine anger; by his blood, washed away our stains; by his cross, borne our

curse; and by his death, made satisfaction for us. We maintain that in this way man is reconciled in Christ to God the Father, by no merit of his own, by no value of works, but by gratuitous mercy. When we embrace Christ by faith, and come, as it were, into communion with him, this we term, after the manner of Scripture, the righteousness of faith."

II. The Gospel and the Work of the Holy Spirit in Bringing the Elect to Salvation.

My paper will focus, as can be seen from its title, on the fourth and last section of Chapter 20 which deals with the indispensable need for *"an effectual, irresistible work of the Holy Ghost upon the whole soul."* Commonly known as the effectual call or irresistible summons, this work of God's grace precedes faith, is the cause of any faith that follows, and makes repentance and conversion possible. As the Savoy declares, it, *"produc[es] in them a new spiritual life, without which no other means are sufficient for their conversion unto God."*

This gracious internal work of God in the soul is not His response to our repentance and faith, but rather precedes and produces our repentance and faith. This is the truth that makes the Reformed view of soteriology so unique. Nearly every group of Christians will acknowledge the fact that a divine work of grace needs to occur in the soul. But the chronological placement of that work as both preceding faith and making our response to Christ possible is what makes the Reformed position unique. For unlike our Arminian brothers we contend that it is not one's *"decision for Jesus"* or their *"volitional faith response"* to the external call of the Gospel that brings about the miracle of the new birth. Rather, it is God, at the precise moment determined in eternity past, carrying out the decision He made to *"give unto the elect the promise of Christ, the seed of the woman, as the means of calling them, and begetting in them faith and repentance."*

As John Calvin rightly pointed out, *"Faith does not proceed from ourselves, but is the fruit of spiritual regeneration."* Without this inward, divine, and supernatural work of the Holy Spirit enlightening the mind and enlivening the soul of the lost sinner, every last person -- *even those continually exposed to the instruction and glorious promises of the Gospel* -- would remain what they are by nature: *"objects of wrath,"* and, *"dead in their trespasses and sins"* (Eph. 2:1, 3 and 5).

Robert L. Reymond describes what this *"work of the Holy Ghost upon the whole soul"* might look like in the life of any given saint.

"...the Bible makes it clear that the race of mankind to whom God issues his general summons [the external call of the Gospel] by and through his church, is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1) and "corrupt" (Ps. 14:1-3), and that its collective mind "does not submit to God's law [this is depravity], nor can it do so [this is inability]" (Rom. 8:7). Accordingly, it is quite understandable that such people would conclude, when they sit under the proclamation of the gospel, that they are listening only to the voice of an irrelevant preacher.

But quite often, as the sinner listens to the voice of the preacher, something happens. Mysteriously, imperceptively, he no longer hears simply the voice of the preacher; instead, what he now hears is also the voice of God summoning him into fellowship with his Son, and he responds to Christ in faith. What happened? The Scriptures would say God had "effectually called" an elect sinner to himself. It is true the word "effectual" never occurs in Scripture as an adjective before the noun "call," or as an adverb before the verb. But when Romans 8:29 states that all those whom God calls he also justifies, it is evident that the call envisioned is not simply the general call that people can resist and reject. His summons is irresistible, because all those whom he calls he also justifies, which fact implies that all those he calls in the sense intended in Romans 8:29 respond to his summons in faith."¹

Apart from this divine, internal, and invisible work of God in the soul, the sin-bound transgressor is not able to respond to the general summons of the Gospel given *"by and through his church."*

Charles Spurgeon, the greatly gifted gospel preacher of the mid-1800's took this truth so to heart that it is said that as he slowly climbed the stairs leading to his high pulpit in the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London each Lord's Day, he would repeat to himself over and over again: *"I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost."*²

This was because he was absolutely convinced by Scripture and personal experience that although the Gospel is, *"the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace,"* the natural human activity of sharing the Gospel will never be effectual in the conversion of souls *unless* it is simultaneously attended by the inward, gracious and supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit moving upon

¹ Robert L. Reymond, *"A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith,"* Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1998, pg. 714.

² John R. W. Stott, *"The Preacher's Portrait,"* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1961, pg. 118.

the souls of its lifeless or unregenerate listeners. Spurgeon goes into greater detail when he says:

"The gospel is preached in the ears of all; it only comes with power to some. The power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher; otherwise men would be converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preacher's learning; otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were a mysterious power going with it -- the Holy Ghost changing the will of man. Oh Sirs! We might as well preach to stone walls as preach to humanity unless the Holy Ghost be with the Word to give it power to convert the soul." ³

This scripturally grounded exhortation is one we need to be reminded of in an age where many preachers rely upon the use of psychological insights, marketing savvy, mood-creating multimedia devices, or well-honed rhetorical skills to sway the emotions of the listeners and thus "get a response."

We would do well to continually remind ourselves of what the Puritans were so painfully conscious of -- that for people to be truly born of the Spirit, or brought to repentance and faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit must do His indispensable inward, gracious, and miraculous work in the "*whole soul*" of the powerless, volitionally-bound, sin-enslaved, spiritually-dead transgressor of God's law.

Jesus alludes to the need for this inward work of the Spirit when he states on two occasions in John chapter 6: "*No man can come unto me unless the Father who sent me draws [enables] him*" (John 6:44 and 65). It stands to remind every preacher of the gospel that left to himself -- *to his own knowledge, skills, rhetoric, and technological aides* -- he is utterly powerless to bring about the conversion of even one soul. We are continually and desperately dependent upon the presence, power, and the work of the Holy Spirit if we are ever to see even one person saved under the entire tenure of our lengthy ministries.

God must do a mighty, miraculous, effectual, and irresistible work of grace in a person's soul to raise them from their mortified state of death in trespasses and sins, and make them alive in Christ, or they will not -- *indeed they cannot* -- come to Christ. Scripture assures us that conversion does not find its instrumental cause in any supposed human goodness, yearning, desire, or willingness to believe, but only in the sheer unmerited grace and love of God (Acts 13:48 and Acts 16:14). This is the confirmed testimony of all who truly understand the nature of man in sin and the redemptive process unto salvation.

³ Charles Spurgeon, as quoted by John R. W. Stott, "The Preacher's Portrait," pg. 118.

It was St. Augustine who said: *"To will is of nature, but to will aright is of grace."* And again, *"The nature of the Divine goodness is not only to open to those who knock, but also to cause them to knock and ask."*⁴ This means that every faint yearning, desire, or degree of willingness on the sinner's part owes its existence to the ever-previous work of the Spirit of God in the souls of His elect. As Abraham Kuyper notes:

"Since in the world of spiritual things deaf ears and blind eyes do not avail for anything, the church of Christ confesses that every operation of saving grace must be preceded by a quickening of the sinner, by an opening of blind eyes, an unstopping of deaf ears -- in short, by the implanting of the faculty of faith."⁵

Spurgeon chimes in on this particular point repeatedly:

"A man hates God, the Holy Spirit makes him love God. A man is opposed to Christ, hates his gospel, does not understand it and will not receive it, the Holy Spirit comes, puts light into his darkened understanding, takes the chain from his bondaged will, gives liberty to his conscience, gives life to his dead soul so that the voice of conscience is heard, and the man becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus. And all this is done, mark you, by the instantaneous supernatural influence of God the Holy Spirit working as he wills among the sons of men."⁶

"A man is not saved against his will, but he is made willing by the operation of the Holy Ghost. A mighty grace which he does not wish to resist enters into a man, disarms him, makes a new creature of him, and he is saved."⁷

"I must confess I never would have been saved if I could have helped it. As long as I could, I rebelled and revolted and struggled against God. When he would have me pray, I would not pray. When he would have me listen to the sound of the ministry, I would not. And when I

⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *"The Work of the Holy Spirit,"* Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1977, pg. 305.

⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *ibid.*, pg. 309. As I also point out in my doctoral dissertation on the redemptive nature of Puritan preaching: *"The understanding that regeneration comes before faith rather than being the consequence of it, is what keeps faith from coming to be seen as a spiritual "work" that saves us. This is why Reformed theologians are so adamant on the point that regeneration precedes faith. Aside from the fact that the scriptural evidence supports a regenerative priority, it is also nearly impossible to reverse the order [make faith first] without attributing to faith the status of a spiritual work infused with some degree of saving merit."* Pg. 47.

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, *"The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit,"* New Park Street Pulpit, preached June 20, 1858, sermon #201.

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, *"The Power of the Holy Ghost,"* New Park Street Pulpit, preached June 17, 1855, sermon #30.

heard, and the tear rolled down my cheek, I wiped it away and defied him to melt my heart. Then he gave me the effectual blow of his grace, and there was no resisting that irresistible effort. It conquered my depraved will and made me bow myself before the sceptre of his grace. And so it is in every case. Man revolts against his savior, but where God determines to save, save he will. God never was thwarted yet in any one of his purposes. Man does resist with all his might, but all the might of man, tremendous though it be for sin, is not equal to the majestic might of the most high." ⁸

In fact, Spurgeon could not be any more adamant when exhorting his listeners.

"Never let us hear you say again, "So many persons were converted by So-and so." They were not! If converted they were not converted by man... Do not think Christians are made by education; they are made by creation... The vital spark must come from above! Regeneration is not of the will of man, nor of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but by the power and energy of the Spirit of God, and the Spirit of God alone!" ⁹

God's people speak, but God alone saves. His ministers preach, but His Spirit alone gives life. The Word goes forth, but unless the Holy Ghost moves to unplug sin-sealed ears, open eyes made blind to keep them from seeing the truth, and raise the dead to life, the message will not find even one receptive listener.

In this sense the nature of man as dead in sin makes the evangelistic task seem more than foolish -- *a man called to preach to an audience of corpses!* Not only is the message of a crucified Messiah foolishness (I Cor. 1:18), the task of proclaiming it to lifeless sinners is equally foolish -- unless God moves in grace (at His appointed time in the lives of particular sinners) to raise them from the dead and make them alive in Christ (Eph. 2:5). "*Thou must save and Thou alone,*" ¹⁰ should be the assured conviction of every biblically informed heart.

This is one the reasons that Jonathan Edwards (and others) have referred to the "new birth" as the greatest of all miracles. And it is! The nature of man in sin assures us beyond any doubt that even if no other miracles ever occurred in the context of the Christian faith or ministry -- *ever* -- man's native condition as dead in sin, coupled with the fact that many are now alive in Christ, is more than sufficient proof of the miraculous nature of the Christian faith.

⁸ Charles Spurgeon, "The New Heart," New Park Street Pulpit, preached September 5, 1858, sermon #202.

⁹ Charles Spurgeon, "Light, Natural and Spiritual," Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, preached November 12, 1865, sermon #660.

¹⁰ Augustus Toplady, "Rock of Ages," verse 2.

Sad is the perspective which sees "conversion" as involving little more than the natural, volitional choice of a person exercising their "free will" and making a "decision" for Jesus.

II. Regeneration, the Effectual Call and Conversion.

All Reformed theologians which I have ever read (and I confess to sticking to those in the theologically conservative camp) would agree that for *"men who are dead in trespasses, [to] be born again, quickened or regenerated, there is moreover necessary an effectual, irresistible work of the Holy Ghost upon the whole soul, for the producing in them a new spiritual life, without which no other means are sufficient for their conversion unto God."* On this point there is little of no disagreement.

Yet the moment we move on from that place of nearly universal agreement, things begin to splinter into various competing opinions. The source of these varying opinions stems from the difficulty that comes when seeking to determine exactly what the Scriptures teach regarding:

- 1.) Whether regeneration is dependent upon the preaching of the Word.
- 2.) The exact relationship between regeneration and the effectual call.
- 3.) The sequential order in which these divine acts of grace occur.

Let's take them in order.

1st) Is regeneration is dependent upon the preaching of the Word.

Abraham Kuyper asks whether the regenerating act, *"precedes, accompanies or follows the hearing of the Word"*? And he takes it upon himself to supply us with this answer: *"The Holy Spirit may perform this work in the sinner's heart before, during, or after the preaching of the Word."*¹¹ And since God is sovereign and can therefore do whatever pleases Him and suits His redemptive purposes -- we can thereby concur that Kuyper is surely right.

It is anything but the norm, but we do see in Scripture that John the Baptist was (as far as we can tell) born again in the womb. Luke 1:15 tells us as much when it states he was *"filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth."*¹²

¹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *"The Work of the Holy Spirit,"* Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979, pg. 317.

¹² Kuyper notes of John the Baptist: *"It is evident that in the case of an infant which, like John, is still unborn, there can be nothing but passivity--i.e., the child underwent something, but himself did nothing; something was done to him, and in him, but not by him, and every idea of cooperation is absolutely excluded. Hence, in regeneration man is neither worker nor coworker; he is merely wrought [worked] upon; and the only Worker in this matter is God."* Abraham Kuyper, *ibid.*, pg. 306.

Kuyper goes to great lengths to stress the fact that since regeneration "*is not dependent upon the preaching of the Word*"¹³ it can therefore precede it. He does this (it appears) for the sake of giving hope and comfort to Christian parents who have lost infants to death. Not only that, since God's regenerating work in the soul often occurs when a person is very young or, in the case of those raised in godly homes, apart from any kind of dramatic life-change, it's occurrence often goes completely unnoticed. Kuyper says this is because, "*regeneration designates that which was wrought in us unconsciously.*"¹⁴

Christopher Love acknowledges this same truth and the dangers encountered when one overlooks it.

"A man may have a grounded assurance that he is effectually called, and yet neither know the time when, nor the manner how, nor the instrument by whom he was called... There are some that press conversion so high that if a man cannot tell the time when or the manner how, or the sermon by which he was called, they say that he is not yet converted. This is too rigid a doctrine... So John 9:12-20. It is spoken there of the man who was healed by Jesus Christ, the blind son who had his eyes opened by Jesus Christ. What did his parents say? 'We know this is our son, and that he was born blind; but by what means he now seeth, we know not, nor who opened his eyes.' Beloved, so I may say of a poor sinner... We know we are born blind, neither knowing God nor ourselves. We know if we are converted we now see, but how this was done, or by whom this was done, we cannot so exactly determine."¹⁵

If a man had been a "*profane liver*" or fallen into "*scandalous sin*" he says, he is more likely to be able to "*know the time when he was called.*"

"But for others who from their childhood have been brought up in a godly family, and from their childhood to their dying day never broke out in scandalous sin, these men cannot give an account either when or by whom [what preacher] they were called, and yet their calling may be effectual... God has different ways and degrees of working, though not all are obvious to the eye."¹⁶

¹³ Abraham Kuyper, *ibid.*, pg. 318.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 318.

¹⁵ Christopher Love, "*A Treatise of Effectual Calling and Election*," Soli Deo Gloria Publishing, Morgan, PA, 1998, pp. 75-76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 76. This was one of the considerations that was instrumental in leading New England Congregationalists to adopt the "Half-Way Covenant" in 1662. As Williston Walker (*The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*) points out, in the earliest days of colonial Congregationalism, "*Applicants for church membership had to submit to a searching private examination by the elders of the church both in regard to their*

2.) The exact relationship between regeneration and the effectual call or irresistible summons. Some (like Kuyper and Berkhof) make regeneration and the effectual call **two** very distinct and separate acts of God (or stages of regeneration) often separated by years. Yet Love (along with his modern day counterpart G. I. Williamson, who uses the terms interchangeably) and Spurgeon seem (as far as I can tell) to count them as one and the same act, using both the terms and the effects they have on the soul, synonymously -- which was not unusual for English and American Puritans.

The Westminster Confession devotes Chapter XII to "Effectual Calling," and in the last section speaks of being "*quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit.*" Yet it is difficult to see if we are speaking of one work of grace or two very distinct works of grace. Even this fourth section of Chapter 20 in the Savoy leaves us wondering the same thing. Are we talking about two distinct works of grace separated in time (regeneration followed by the effectual call), or one work of grace (sometimes referred to as regeneration and other times referred to as the effectual call) which contains in itself both the renewing and summoning power whereby God enlivens and irresistibly calls the sinner? I dare suggest the Puritans were not always 100% clear on this point.

In the end it probably doesn't matter as much as some would seem to suggest. Yet it does have a distinct impact on the practical and sequential application of these terms, the way in which one carries out evangelism, and the way one views (and expresses) God's work in their own personal life-experience.

For instance, Kuyper says: "*...since quickening [ie: regeneration] is an unaided act of God in us, independent of the Word, and frequently separated from the second stage, conversion [ie: the effectual call which brings about one's conversion], by an interval of many days, there is nothing to prevent God from performing His work even in the babe.*"¹⁷ And lest there be any question as to what he means by the words "*many days*" he tells us they can carry with them the idea of many years.¹⁸

For Kuyper an infant may be regenerated (born again?) many years before being effectually summoned or converted when the Spirit would do its work in direct conjunction with the preached Word (or the Word read, or contemplated,

knowledge of the principles of religion [Christian theology and practice] and in regard to their experience in the ways of grace and of their godly conversation among men." This included their ability to point to the time of their effectual summons and/or conversion. Since many could not do so, and thus could not become members in full standing, or have their children baptized, it was determined under the Half-Way Covenant to relax this stringent requirement. Most churches abandoned it in the 18th century when Jonathan Edwards and other leaders of the Great Awakening taught that church membership could be given only to *convinced* believers.

¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Ibid.*, pg. 320.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 308. The concern I have with Kuyper separating by many years regeneration in the infant and a later in life effectual call is that it's a mere half-step away from embracing Anglican/Episcopalian or Catholic baptismal regeneration.

as was the case with St. Augustine). For him it is this "second stage of regeneration" ¹⁹ (the effectual summons which brings about one's conversion) which does indeed, "employ means, viz., the preaching of the word." ²⁰

"In each [stage] God is the Worker; only with this difference, that in the **quicken**ing He works alone, finding and leaving man inactive; (and) that in **conversion** [or the effectual call] He finds us inactive, but makes us active, and in **sanctification** He works in us in such a manner that we work ourselves through Him." ²¹

Berkhof gives us a similar picture, though he prefers to see the preaching of the Word as preceding or coinciding with the operation of the Holy Spirit, making an exception only for children.

"(1) Logically, the **external call** in the preaching of the Word (except in the case of children) generally precedes or coincides with the operation of the Holy Spirit, by which new life is produced in the soul of man.

(2) Then by a creative word God generates the new life, changing the inner disposition of the soul, illuminating the mind, rousing the feelings, and renewing the will. In this act of God the ear is implanted that enables man to hear the call of God to the salvation of his soul. This is **regeneration** in the most restricted sense of the word. In it man is entirely passive.

(3) Having received the spiritual ear, the call of God in the gospel is now heard by the sinner, and is brought home effectively to the heart. The desire to resist has been changed to a desire to obey, and the sinner yields to the persuasive influence of the Word through the operation of the Holy Spirit. This is the **effectual calling** through the instrumentality of the word of preaching, effectively applied by the Spirit of God.

(4) This effectual calling, finally, secures, through the truth as a means, the first holy exercises of the new disposition that is born in the soul. The new life begins to manifest itself; the implanted life issues in the new birth. This is the completion of the work of regeneration in the broader sense of the word, and the point at which it turns into **conversion**." ²²

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 318.

²⁰ Ibid., pg. 319.

²¹ Ibid., pg. 318.

²² Louis Berkhof, "Systematic Theology," Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1977, pg. 471.

Unlike Kuyper and Berkhof who emphasize a very distinct difference between regeneration and the effectual call, the Puritans sought to keep them tied as closely together as possible -- both to the preached Word and each other. In fact, some tended to see the outward call of the Gospel (when spoken in the imperative tense as a command to believe) as the point at which God would (in the life of certain elect sinners) regenerate and/or issue the inward Spirit-given effectual call in that person's life.

This is how the story of Jesus calling Lazarus from the dead was often times interpreted. Just as Jesus commanded dead Lazarus, by name, to come out of the tomb -- *and with that spoken command went the power to raise Lazarus from the dead* -- so also it was believed that when the pastor issued the command to "*Repent and Believe!*" the power of the Spirit would *sometimes* (at that sovereignly determined point in the life of particular dead sinners) go with that command to raise that person to life. Love and Whitfield undoubtedly shared this opinion and they were not alone.

The hope of Puritan preachers was that when they offered the *outward call* of the Gospel during a sermon the Spirit would issue His *inward irresistible call* at that same time -- using their Spirit empowered words as the means for extending that call. As Christopher Love states: "*The internal call is when the Spirit of God accompanies the outward administration of the Word to call a man from ignorance to knowledge, and from a state of nature to a state of grace.*"²³ This call, he says,

"is the fruit of God's election, whereby God, of His free grace, works a wonderful change in the heart of an elect person by the inward operation of the Spirit accompanying the ministry of the Word; by virtue of which the soul is brought from under the dominion of sin and Satan, into a state of grace, and so made meet for the enjoyment of God in glory."²⁴

As can be seen from this quote, Love speaks of the effectual call in such a way that it's hard to tell what makes it different from regeneration. In fact, in his fourth sermon on effectual calling Love describes it in terms that sound identical to those Kuyper uses in reference to *regeneration* where he said it was "*that which was wrought in us unconsciously.*" "*So the man may have the seed of grace sown in his heart, which is effectual calling, and yet it grows he knows not how, nor when he was called.*"²⁵

²³ Christopher Love, "A Treatise of Effectual Calling and Election," Soli Deo Gloria Publishing, Morgan, PA, 1998, pp. 4-5.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 28.

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 76.

Of course, being sovereign God can issue that irresistible summons at any time He chooses -- *before, coinciding with, or after the preaching of the Word* -- even apart from it altogether, as was the case with John the Baptist. In this sense the Puritans didn't see preaching as the *only* time God issued that inward call, but the most reasonable or most common occasion. Their view is in keeping with Paul's words in Romans 10:17 where he says, "*faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard by the Word of [about] Christ.*"

3.) The sequential order in which these divine acts of grace occur.

Since regeneration precedes faith, the longstanding debate in Reformed circles has had to do with how much time can lapse between regeneration, the effectual call, and faith (or conversion). Is it days, months, years, decades or a lifetime?

If, as Kuyper suggests, "*there is nothing to prevent God from performing His work even in the babe,*" is it possible that any particular "*babe*" could go years, or even decades, as one regenerated by the Holy Spirit and yet not believe? If they receive the first stage of regeneration as a babe (or in the earlier years of their life) does God then allow that person to go many years before extending the effectual summons and bringing them to faith and repentance?

Is it possible for a person who comes to faith at 25 or 40 or 60 years old to suggest that they were born again or regenerated as a babe but simply did not receive the effectual call until that later moment in their life? Likewise, how much time (if any) passes between the effectual call and the exercise of faith? Is faith the immediate fruit of the inward call or is there a period of time between it and faith also?

I must confess that given my background, it seems odd (at least for me) to even suggest that one could be "born again" for many years -- or possibly even decades -- without believing. And if they do, it's an assertion they can make only if they divide "regeneration" into at least two very distinct stages separated by lengthy periods of time.

III. The Use of Subjective Experiences in Bringing the Elect to Faith.

At the very least it would appear (from what has been presented) that we are safe to suggest that there is a sense in which "conversion" is a process involving at least two or three acts of divine grace (or stages of regeneration) that could cover a span of many years. Like Spurgeon, and those of more baptistic leanings (including Puritans like Love), I have always considered regeneration and the effectual call to be essentially the same thing. I saw them like two sides

of the same coin. In and through regeneration God both enlivens the dead sinner **and** calls him by name to repentance and faith.

In reference to my own conversion, I have always pinpointed the moment I was regenerated and called (resulting in my conversion) to Monday, January 7, 1980. On that day I was sitting in a classroom in Washington, D.C. listening to a man expound on John 1:1-14 in connection with Watchman Nee's "The Normal Christian Life."

During that class a light went on in my mind (an experience I actually *felt* happen) and suddenly I found myself believing in Jesus. When I walked into that classroom I did not believe Jesus was Lord, divine, or God the Son, but midway through the class I did. Since then I have merely assumed that at that moment God had both regenerated and called me. He gave me life, enlightened my mind, changed my heart, brought me to repentance and imparted to me the gift of faith.

Yet, in light of what we've seen from Kuyper and Berkhof, maybe I've been wrong in lumping them together. Maybe what happened in that classroom was simply the effectual call. Maybe I'd been regenerated months, years, or a decade or more earlier, since I can point to times earlier in my life that would seem to suggest some type of "spiritual life." Let me give you a few examples.

1.) Twelve years beforehand (when I was eleven) I had an extremely vivid and moving dream. I was standing on a ridge looking across a little gully at a hill silhouetted by a beautiful sunset. The sky was a glowing, iridescent, shimmering orange, and on the hill were three crosses with a person hanging on each one. The cross in the middle stood higher than the two on each side, and I recall thinking the person hanging on the middle cross must be Jesus.

In the dream I stood there gazing upon this serene scene for quite a lengthy period of time. In fact, I did not want it to end, since my whole being was filled with an uncanny sense of inner peace as I stood gazing upon it. It was so powerful for me that to this day I can still see it in my mind's eye and have drawn it many times.

Thus I have always wondered: Was it due to life in me? Was it evidence I had already by that time been the undeserving recipient of the "first stage of regeneration," or was it merely a God-given and gracious hint? Worse yet, was it, as my mother told me, the result of eating "*too much pizza*"?

2.) Within a year I was sitting at a campfire at a VBS hosted by the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Norfolk, MA. Pastor Tyler Flynn was giving the closing address, concluding with a call to "receive" Jesus as our "Lord and Savior." To my great surprise, my twin sister stood and went forward. I also sensed an inner pull to do so, but resisted, because an overwhelming sense came over me at that very instant that God wanted me to be a pastor -- and I had

no desire to be one! Therefore it spawned a noticeable resistance to the gospel within me, though to this day I refer to that as the moment I received my call to the pastorate.

3.) In the year that followed I would attend that church and hear Gospel messages almost every week concluding with an invitation. When it was given I always sensed a strong inner prompting to take Christ as my Savior. Yet because I equated the call to come to Christ with the call to the pastorate, I would literally grab on to the seat of my chair and keep myself from going forward week after week. I did this so many times that I was able to sit through the most stirring message and feel no yearning for Christ in my soul at all. I had successfully numbed my heart to the Spirit's appeals through the Word.

From there it was all downhill. For the next ten years I would run headlong into nearly every imaginable sin, often belittling the faith and shaking my fist in victorious defiance at God, thinking to myself that I had won. By 16 I stopped going to church altogether (except the occasional Christmas and Easter service), looking at Christians as a bit naive and out of touch with reality. I had tasted the pleasures of sin and it was hard to keep from wanting to taste more and more.

4.) Then three years later (while nineteen and attending college at Wentworth Institute of Technology) I chose to take a course on "The Philosophy of Religion." The professor was adamantly anti-Christian. He had little good to say about those who believed the Bible. Yet his harsh critique of Christians didn't fit with what I knew of my twin sister, my mother, my brother and some of his friends. Thus, for my class project I chose to write a paper opposing the theory of evolution and defending Christianity! It was such a change in attitude for me that even I didn't know what was going on! All I knew is that little glimpses of joy came to me as I started reading the Bible my believing mother had given me when started college, hoping I would actually open it and read it.

As I read Job and Proverbs I began to see the wisdom of the Bible and it intrigued me. I told God I was sorry and vowed to change. The very next day a classmate approached me at the beginning of class and asked, "*Jeff, can you give me some of what you're on?*" He somehow assumed I was high on drugs (which may have been true just weeks earlier). Though I still did not believe Jesus was Lord, divine, or God in the flesh, he had somehow noticed something different in me.

The question is: Had I somehow been regenerated without knowing it? Was I one of those regenerate persons Kuyper speaks of who had simply been awakened but not yet effectually summoned? Or was I still "*dead in trespasses and sins*" and simply finding some type of hope and joy through reading the Bible and my attempts at moral reformation? Was I experiencing the joy of having the

Spirit work in me, or the ego-centered kind of joy one experiences when they make progress toward some goal?

Over the next three years my life was like an emotional roller coaster ride. I was up and down emotionally, back and forth between partying and trying to reform, and questioning the faith completely while at the same time attending Christian concerts (2nd Chapter of Acts, etc.). At the prompting of one of the band members I even *"raised my hand"* at one concert, and *"squeezed the hand of the person next to me"* at another -- thinking that somehow that physical act would spark the new birth in me. Yet each time I would wake up the next day (after the music had faded and reality had set back in) to find myself as disillusioned, unbelieving and depressed as ever.

5.) I also discovered an interesting phenomena taking place inside me. I found that every time I thought about Jesus my heart would feel just a twinge of that inner peace I felt in that dream 10+ years previously. When I sinned (morally) I would feel miserable, but when I thought about Jesus (whom I didn't yet believe in!) I would feel peace. I felt like one of Pavlov's dogs with God training my conscience!

I began attending a Christian coffee house in Rhode Island where musician John Polce played. Though I still did not believe in Jesus I would drive home from that coffee house listening to secular love songs play on my car radio and find myself singing them to God/Christ in the place of the woman -- not because I believed, but because every time I did I would feel that sense of peace again.

One night, in fact, when that sense of peace was particularly strong, I came home from that coffee house, sat on my bed (in the dark), and tried to make sense out what was happening inside me. As I did, a cloud -- about four feet in diameter -- suddenly appeared in the room. On it (as if watching a movie) there were the heads of three white stallions galloping at full speed, sweat dripping from their heads, and breathing heavily through their nostrils. I stared in frightened awe, even pinching myself to make sure I was awake, for as one who had just graduated from college as a mechanical engineer, I did not believe such things were possible. I held to the scientific view of a "closed" universe. Yet the result of seeing that vision was two-fold:

- 1st)** It opened my mind to the possibility that the supernatural could indeed break in upon the natural (meaning the miraculous accounts in the Gospels might actually be true).
- 2nd)** The three heads somehow spoke to me of the Trinity (possibly because that was my greatest struggle right up until the time of my conversion. The Trinity was the issue that filled me with doubts and kept me from embracing Christ).

6.) That roller-coaster ride between doubt and hope, despair and peace, continued as I quit my job and headed overseas for a three-and-a-half month backpacking tour of Europe. There, as I hiked across the English and continental countryside, I read nearly every day the Gideon New Testament which a friend had given to me. I saw God answer some of my prayers in a very marked way, and when I was alone I even found myself singing "Amazing Grace," "This is My Father's World," and "Rock of Ages." I even bought a silver cross with the words "*He Lives*" at the bottom, hoping that someday if I displayed it and affirmed it enough I might actually believe it. (To this day I refer to that trip as the outward expression of my inward search for God.)

7.) Only three months after returning from Europe -- on Monday, January 7, 1980 -- I found myself in that previously mentioned class session astounded to discover that apart from my even "trying" to believe, years of doubt, struggle and unbelief was instantaneously replaced by faith.

I *felt* it happen, since with it came a flood of inner relief in my mind. I walked into that class an unbeliever, and I walked out with a full assurance of the deity and Lordship of Jesus.

Upon leaving that class my immediate desire was to get to a bathroom as fast as I could, where I could lock myself in, get down on my knees (face to the floor), repent for my sins, rebellion, and unbelief, ask God to forgive me, and break what had become some firmly ingrained sinful addictions. Only at this point did I begin to see any real consistent life-change. To use the words of Christopher Love:

"We have often withstood His call. We have often strangled the motions of His Spirit in our hearts. We have often carried gainsaying hearts to the woings of the ministers of Christ, [showing us] it is nothing in us, but merely His own grace that conquers our unwillingness, and overcomes that stoutness of heart that is in us." ²⁶

IV. What, then, is my conclusion?

I am still of the opinion that except in rare and unusual cases regeneration and the effectual summons should be held in as close a sequential order as possible chronologically. As mentioned before I believe that in and through regeneration God both enlivens and enlightens the dead sinner *and* calls him by name to repentance and faith.

²⁶ Christopher Love, "A Treatise of Effectual Calling and Election," Soli Deo Gloria Publishing, Morgan, PA, 1998, pg. 59.

Yet, if Kuyper is right and they *were* separated by many years, what may have caused my confusion is a faulty understanding of faith which saw doubt as completely incompatible with it. If so, Calvin's words may have helped me where he says, "*Even right faith is surrounded by error and unbelief...*"²⁷ Or once again, "*Unbelief is, in all men, always mixed with faith.*"²⁸ Maybe I did believe, but saw my doubts as unbelief, instead of "*right faith...surrounded by error and unbelief.*" Richard Sibbes points out a similar thing:

"We must acknowledge that in the covenant of grace God requires the truth of grace, not any certain measure; and a spark of fire is fire, as well as the whole element. Therefore, we must look to grace in the spark as well as the flame... A weak hand may receive a rich jewel. A few grapes will show that the plant is a vine, and not a thorn. It is one thing to be deficient in grace, and another thing to lack grace altogether."²⁹

Yet regardless of which view of my experience is right, or which one fits more closely with the testimony of Scripture (I still favor seeing them like Spurgeon and Love as co-joined), one thing remains incontestably true:

"God... works in his elect in two ways; **within**, through his Spirit; **without**, through his Word... By his **Spirit** illuminating their minds and forming their hearts to the love and cultivation of righteousness, he makes them a new creation. By his **Word**, he arouses them to desire, to seek after, and to attain that same renewal. In both he reveals the working of his hand..."³⁰

²⁷ John Calvin, "The Institutes of the Christian Religion," Vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1960, pg. 546.

²⁸ Ibid., pg. 547.

²⁹ Richard Sibbes, "The Bruised Reed," Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1998, pg. 36.

³⁰ John Calvin, "The Institutes of the Christian Religion," Vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1960, pg. 322.