

Can an Unregenerate Person Believe the Gospel?

Many would answer this question, “Of course. How else could a person be eternally saved?” But there are some who would disagree, because they think that a person must be regenerated (born again) before he or she can believe the gospel. That perspective is demanded by their view of man’s sinfulness, which they call total depravity. But what does the Bible say?

The issue of total depravity

Total depravity is a theological term used by some to describe the sinfulness of man. The term itself is not in the Bible. After Adam’s fall in Genesis 3, man is considered “dead in trespasses and sins” as described in Ephesians 2:1 (see also Rom. 3:10-18; 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22). How one understands this spiritual death determines how one relates faith to regeneration.

Those who insist that God must regenerate a person before that person can believe define total depravity as man’s total inability to respond positively to God. They believe that an unregenerate person cannot even understand and believe the gospel. This view is held by Reformed theology and strong versions of Calvinism.

It would be more biblical to take “dead in trespasses and sins” as a description of man’s condition before God. Because of Adam’s sin and man’s relationship to Adam, man is totally separated from God and lacks anything that can commend him to God. Though sin’s corruption extends to every man and all of his being, man retains the capacity to respond to God’s initiative. Even after Adam sinned and died spiritually, he was able to talk with God immediately (Gen. 2:17; 3:1-19).

The biblical evidence that regeneration does not precede faith

Many biblical arguments show that man’s sinfulness does not require regeneration before faith.

Man remains in God’s image. Man was made in God’s image, which includes a measure of self-determination. The image of God was not destroyed by man’s fall, but marred or corrupted, with the result that man, when left to himself, is inclined toward evil and rejection of God. Self-determination, even if used to reject God, is essential to humanness and personhood. Without self-determination man would be nothing more than a robot with every decision and action determined and controlled by God.

Man is responsible. Because human beings can make self-determining choices, unbelievers are held accountable by God for rejecting the gospel (John 3:18, 36; 5:40-47; Acts 17:30; 2 Thess. 1:6-10). God would not be just or fair if He condemned people who could not believe because He did not regenerate them. That would actually make God the author of evil.

The invitation to believe is legitimate. God’s invitation to be saved through the gospel is a sincere and legitimate offer only if any and every person can believe it. If God must regenerate people before they can believe the gospel, then the invitation is not really to all people, but only to those already born again. But this is contrary to biblical statements that the gospel is for all (John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:19-20; 1 Tim. 2:3-6; 1 John 2:2). Just as Paul preached everywhere with the assumption that anyone could

respond to the gospel (Acts 20:21), we also should share the gospel with everyone (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8) because it is a genuine offer to everyone. God regenerates anyone who believes the gospel.

God draws men to Himself. Because in his sinful state man does not seek God. The Bible teaches that before anyone believes, God draws that person to Himself (John 6:44; 12:32). God convinces or persuades the unbeliever of truth, righteousness, and judgment concerning Jesus Christ (John 16:8-11). The Holy Spirit works mysteriously in a person's heart to bring her to the point of faith (John 3:8).

Faith is the means not the result. Nowhere does the Bible say that faith is created by regeneration. John 3:16 is a very familiar verse which, according to the preceding context of 3:1-15, explains how God gives eternal life as a result of faith, not a requirement for faith. Likewise, Ephesians 2:8 explains how it is through faith God made alive those who were dead in sins (Eph. 2:1-7). Regeneration is the result of receiving God's eternal life, and that life is only available through faith (John 5:24; 20:31).

Faith is simply a personal response. Man can believe either truth or falsehood that is presented to him. An unregenerate person can believe the truth of the law of gravity, or he can believe the error of a flat earth. Likewise, an unregenerate person can believe the truth of Christ's gospel or she can believe the error of a false religion. Since faith is only the instrument, the response of faith in the gospel is not a special kind of faith. Faith is simply faith. It is the *object* of faith, the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is special and brings salvation.

Faith is not a good work. Those who define total depravity as total inability claim that if man were able to believe, then that faith would be a meritorious good work for salvation. But that cannot be true, because the Bible declares that faith is *necessarily contrary* to works (Rom. 3:27; 4:4-6; 11:6; Eph. 2:8-9). Faith is not the cause of our salvation; God is the cause. Faith is God's designated means by which the unregenerate can receive His grace for salvation. Faith is passive because it means that one is convinced that something is true or trustworthy. It is not a work in the sense of actively doing something, thus it is non-meritorious.

Conclusion

The view that regeneration must precede faith is a theological construct, not a biblical one. To say that a person goes from being spiritually dead to eternally alive before he believes in Jesus Christ is both absurd and contrary to biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that man is so corrupted by sin that left to himself, he would not seek God or believe the gospel. Therefore, God must draw a person to the point of faith. Nevertheless, it is the person who believes. Faith is not man's contribution or good work. It is the means through which man receives God's grace in salvation. The unregenerate person believes in Jesus Christ as Savior precisely because he can contribute nothing to God's work of salvation. Faith makes the new birth accessible to anyone, but that birth is God's work.