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The Doctrine of Regeneration in the Second Century

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Having been raised within the evangelical community since birth, and having ‘gone forward’ at a Billy Graham crusade at the age of nine, there has never been any question in my mind as to what it means to be ‘born again’. However, since having begun to dabble in historical theology, the question has often occurred to me: ‘I wonder if Ignatius or Justin or Irenaeus understood [John 3:7](#) as I understand it, and if not, why not?’.

The purpose of this paper is not to critique twentieth-century evangelicalism’s doctrine of regeneration but to ponder this issue: if the idea of the ‘new birth’ is as foundational to the Christian faith, and the experience of the ‘new birth’ as central to the Christian life, as we evangelicals believe them to be; and if our (evangelical) view of regeneration is correct, as I presume most of us are convinced that it is; then why is it not more evident in the traditions of the sub-apostolic and early patristic Church?

There are two reasons that I have chosen to examine the second century in particular. First, the person of Irenaeus provides us with an appropriate and convenient focal point. He lived and wrote at the close of the period and was the pre-eminent systematic theologian of the century and arguably the first in the history of the Church. Furthermore, his greatest contribution was in the area of soteriology. Second, the chronological proximity of our primary sources to the age of the apostles should provide us with as faithful a representation of apostolic tradition as possible. For example, since he was a disciple of Polycarp who was a disciple of John,¹ Irenaeus stands third in an uninterrupted line of succession of apostolic influence and tradition (written and oral).

However, since no theology is formulated in a vacuum, we must first step back and consider several of the significant factors that would have influenced the formation of a second-century doctrine of [p. 100](#) regeneration. These include (1) Scripture, (2) mythology, (3) pagan religion and (4) the Church.²

¹ Irenaeus makes reference to this relationship in *Against Heresies (AH)*, III.3.4; as does Eusebius in *Ecclesiastical History (EH)*, V.20.4–7.

² Due to the constraints of time and space, we shall not at this time discuss Judaism or Hellenistic philosophy, two additional factors that had an impact on the formulation of patristic theology.

FACTORS IN THE SECOND-CENTURY DOCTRINAL FORMULATION³

Scripture

The specific term which is translated 'regeneration' (*palingenesia*) occurs only twice in the New Testament: once in [Matthew 19:28](#), with reference to the cosmic renewal which is to take place at the end of the age; and once in [Titus 3:5](#), referring to spiritual regeneration, or rebirth, as an aspect of personal salvation. However, the idea of regeneration can be found throughout the New Testament ([John 1:12-13](#); [3:1-10](#); [Galatians 4:23, 29](#); [James 1:15-18](#); [1 Peter 1:3, 23](#); [1 John 2:29](#), for example).

The concept of spiritual regeneration was a familiar theme in the second-century Church and perhaps the single most significant factor in its influence was the multiple reference to it in the writings of the Apostle John. We shall limit our discussion to a general review of several key Johannine texts.⁴

(a) [John 1:12-13](#) According to this verse, the fact of 'receiving' Christ as Messiah and 'believing' in him as the Son of God served as entitlement to the status of 'children of God'. The word for 'children' (*tekna*) is derived from the verb *tiktein* (to beget), and thus conveys the idea of being begotten by God himself. In verse [13](#), John further emphasizes that being born of God has nothing to do with natural human reproduction but is a supernatural expression of the power of God. It is worth noting that the imagery of birth employed in these passages is certainly such as would be universally understood! Although there is certainly a great deal of mystery regarding the miracle of birth, there is little question as to the end result. It is clear [p. 101](#) that Jesus and the Gospel-writer were attempting to communicate a wonderful truth that would be easily understood by all.

(b) [John 3:1-8](#) In this passage, Jesus articulates the theme in his dialogue with Nicodemus. The passive form of the verb in vv. [3, 7](#) can be translated either 'to be born' or 'begotten', which refer to the role of the mother or father respectively. The adjective *anōthen* can be variously translated as 'again', 'anew' or 'from above'. In this case, it may be purposely ambiguous in order to convey both senses.⁵

The query of Nicodemus in v. [4](#) clearly suggests that he understood Jesus to be speaking in terms of being 'born again'. In an intensely debated response in v. [5](#), Jesus appears to disregard the question and proceed to re-emphasize the necessity of spiritual rebirth⁶ as a prerequisite to entering the Kingdom of God, or inheriting eternal life.

In John's First Epistle, the idea of spiritual rebirth is related to a rich variety of other moral themes. (1) [1 John 2:29](#) points out that the one who bears a resemblance to the

³ This approach is largely due to the Influence of Gene A. Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), which suggests that an accurate perception of the contemporary Church can only be realized by viewing it through the three lenses of Scripture, history and culture. Certainly the same could be said of the historical Church, as well.

⁴ A more exhaustive exegesis of these and other texts may be found in Peter Toon, *Born Again: A Biblical and Theological Study of Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), pp. 24-36.

⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 76.

⁶ The second century fathers are essentially unanimous in their understanding of this verse as referring to water baptism and spiritual regeneration.

nature of God (in terms of righteousness) does so as a result of having been born of God. (2) [1 John 3:9-10](#) explains something of the nature of spiritual regeneration: that the seed of the Divine nature resides within the one 'born again', rendering that person incapable of again living comfortably or constantly in sin. (3) [1 John 4:7](#) identifies love as a primary evidence of one's regeneration and manifestation of the Divine nature imparted to the one born of God. (4) [1 John 5:1](#) establishes the necessity of personal faith as the human essential for spiritual regeneration to take place.

What, or how much, of our retrospective insight into these representative texts regarding the meaning of spiritual regeneration registered with those who followed Christ in the second century? That must be considered later; for there were other factors that influenced their thinking.

Mythology

Perhaps more so than in our day, there existed widely-regarded myths, many of ancient and uncertain origin, that were preserved through literature and oral tradition and were used to illustrate certain [p. 102](#) fundamental beliefs. The richness of the ancient mythology that relates to spiritual regeneration bears witness to the fact that the early Christians were not the first (or only) people to consider it. It is likely that when a second-century Gentile first heard the words 'Ye must be born again' memories of a host of regenerative myths bombarded his mind and influenced his initial understanding of what those words meant. Among the most widespread of these myths were:⁷

The Phoenix Perhaps the most universal symbol of rebirth, this mythical bird is preserved in Persian, Greek, Jewish and Oriental literature. With minor variations, the phoenix is described as a large bird of great beauty, of which only one exists at a time. It lives for 500–1000 years, feeds on the air and never sets foot on earth from the time of its birth until the hour of its death.

At the end of its life, this magnificent bird, laden with spices from the East, flies into Egypt, through the entrance to the temple at Heliopolis, alights upon the altar and builds its own funeral pyre nest. The heat of the sun interacting with the aroma of the spices produces the flames that reduce the phoenix to ashes. On the next day a new phoenix, already feathered, emerges from the ashes, salutes the priest and flies away.

Historically, this myth has been understood as illustrative of the flight of the human spirit and its dissolution followed by its reemergence with fresh vigour.⁸

The Wheel of Rebirth The religious potency of this mystical tradition is evident in Greek literature beginning from the 5th-4th century BC. The wheel represents the imperishable self with a motionless centre, while the turning of the wheel is symbolic of the cycles of existence (life and death, light and darkness). As the wheel turns, life is perpetually renewed out of the opposite state (death), giving expression to the Eastern notion of metempsychosis.

Psyche and the Butterfly The Greek goddess, Psyche, the name also given to the soul, was often illustrated as a butterfly in Greek art because of the change that takes place from the caterpillar to the butterfly stage. The sleep of death in the tomb-like chrysalis followed [p.](#)

⁷ These examples have been gleaned from a number of 'mythologies'.

⁸ This myth is also related in the early Christian literature; Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, XXV, (ANF, V. I, p. 12) and Lactantius, *The Phoenix*, (ANF, V. VII, pp. 324–326), for example.

103 by the miraculous change in form, function and behaviour illustrates the mystery of metamorphosis, the eternal transformation of old forms into new through the process of rebirth.

The Serpent The snake has since ancient times been a symbol of death and rebirth due to its annual hibernation, shedding of its skin and reappearance as a new creature. As it freed itself from the constricting, seamless, outgrown encasement, the snake was thought to be undergoing the throes of death before rebirth. It is these regenerative characteristics of the snake that are reflected in the *caduceus*, the serpent staff of Hermes and Mercury, the emblem of the healing profession. The serpent's eggs also were symbolic of rebirth and regeneration for the Greeks, Indians and Chinese.

The Ever-Resurrecting Sun Greek and Roman mythology is full of allusions to the sun as a symbol of universal rebirth, due to its daily setting and rising and its annual resurrection at the vernal equinox. Numerous legends of semi-divine heroes (Orpheus, for example) who flourished before being killed and reborn are related in the context of the ever-resurrecting Sun.

Other Religions

Gnosticism The term Gnosticism designates a widespread syncretistic theosophical and philosophical religious movement current in the early centuries of the Christian era, which was characterized by the notion that salvation is achieved through knowledge (*gnosis*). Beyond that very general definition, it is difficult to speak specifically, because of the extreme complexity and diversity within and among the Gnostic schools.

What is most relevant to our present discussion, however, is that according to Gnostic anthropology there are three classes of people: (1) Hylics, dominated by the physical body, concerned only with the cares of life on earth, and incapable of salvation; (2) Psychics, dominated by the soul and therefore also subject to the lower powers, but with the potentiality for being saved; and (3) Pneumatics, those in whom the divine spark has been rekindled, and who are therefore destined to be liberated from the powers of this present world in order to rejoin the divine world from which they have fallen. This is the level of existence to which all Gnostics aspire; and such liberation takes place only through the mystical experience of illumination or reception of Knowledge. It would not be surprising for an unsuspecting p. 104 young Christian to equate such an event with the 'born again experience'. However, Gnosticism's emphasis on esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*) as the means of salvation was in sharp contrast to orthodox Christianity's emphasis on faith (*pistis*).

This religious movement sought to infiltrate the Christian community from the time of Simon Magus ([Acts 8:9–23](#)) and was most successful in the person of Valentinus, who was almost declared Bishop of Rome in AD 140.

Mystery Cults Among the most popular religious forms in the Graeco-Roman world during the first and second centuries were the mystery religions. Some of these had been imported from Egypt and the East, while others were indigenous to Greece. Those of which we know most include the Eleusinian mysteries, the cult of Dionysius and the cult of Mithras. These religious systems promised salvation and immortality to those who through the rites of initiation would enter into a 'secret experience'.

The power of these cults lay in the secrecy with which they guarded the 'mystery'. Through mystical re-enactments of every conceivable human and natural activity (death, marriage, sacrifice, sexual acts, battle, the harvest), the initiate was supposed to come by degrees to participate in the divine life and ultimately achieve immortality.

As with Gnosticism, many features of Christianity were adopted into the mystery cults, and it is likely that 'mystery-thinking' also had an influence on the early Christians.

The Church

The influence that the institutional Church had on the formulation of the doctrine of regeneration is of a different order from those already mentioned. Certainly a primary function of the Church at the end of the apostolic age was faithfully to preserve and proclaim the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. However, partly because of the infiltration of non-Christian influences with their false prophets and teachers, it became necessary for the Church to regulate itself more closely.

This was accomplished in great measure by establishing more rigid requirements for initiation into the Church than a simple confession of faith. This practical need posed a problem for the Church whose own apostolic writings asserted that the only requirements for becoming a child of God (regeneration) were individually to receive Jesus Christ as Messiah (Saviour) sent from God and to believe in him as the Son of God, or Lord ([John 1:12](#)). p. 105

Thus it is possible that by the second century the Church recognized the need to devise requirements of initiation that did not appear in the teachings of Christ or the Apostles, in order to safeguard the integrity of the Church. And since at that time being a Christian was always identified with church membership, these secondary requirements might easily have been perceived as requirements for salvation or prerequisites of regeneration.⁹

Therefore, it is possible that the institutional Church, young though it still was, exerted a structural influence on the formulation of doctrines that were not necessarily conceived in a humanly-structured environment.¹⁰

Although there were admittedly other social, political and intellectual factors that influenced the thinking of early Christians, those considered above should enable us to listen to what they have to say with a moderate appreciation for the milieu out of which they speak.

EARLY SECOND-CENTURY ALLUSIONS TO REGENERATION

Clement of Rome

For the purposes of this discussion, we shall assume that *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* was written by Clement, the early Bishop of Rome, who is likely to have been a friend of St. Paul ([Phil. 4:3](#)). It must have been written following the persecution of the Church under Domitian, between the years of AD 97–102. Therefore, it represents for us a highly regarded¹¹ document from the beginning of the second century.

The passage that first captures our interest is found at the conclusion of Chapter 9:

⁹ This pattern of thinking was not clearly stated until Cyprian (*Epistle* 74, 14, for example) declared that the Catholic Church as the spouse of Christ was alone able to bear sons of God.

¹⁰ Although this ecclesiastical influence certainly evolved over the years, it is first formally evident in the 'Apostolic Tradition' of Hippolytus in the first quarter of the third century. See Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), pp. 13–24.

¹¹ 'Almost canonical', *ANF*, I, p. 2.

Noah, being found faithful, preached regeneration to the world through his ministry; and the Lord saved by him the animals which, with one accord, entered into the ark.

The usefulness of this text lies in the fact that it relates the precise [p. 106](#) (but rarely used) biblical and theological term to a familiar historical account: the life and ministry of Noah. The phrase 'preached regeneration' may be considered parallel to 'Noah preached repentance' (Ch. 7) and 'Noah, a preacher of righteousness' ([2 Peter 2:5](#)). The gospel of salvation, even as preached in Noah's day, was understood by Clement as embodying a multi-faceted redemptive theme, including a call to repentance, a call to faith and obedience and an offer of spiritual rebirth.

It is also suggestive of this passage that the message of regeneration preached by Noah was symbolized in the ark. Inasmuch as the wicked to whom Noah preached were offered new life in the face of certain doom, if only they would relinquish life as they had known it, so the gospel of regeneration imparts new spiritual life to those who would turn their backs on the old life in the face of spiritual death ([Romans 6:23](#)). And as 'the Lord saved by him the animals which entered into the ark', so he saves (regenerates) those who enter into fellowship with him through repentance and faith.

In another context, Clement introduces another aspect of spiritual regeneration that we shall see further developed in Irenaeus: the gift of immortality. It was generally believed by the early fathers that man in his natural state was neither mortal nor immortal, but bore the capacity for either. Immortality was considered solely as a characteristic of divinity.

Thus, it is significant that in Chapter 35 Clement exults: 'How blessed and wonderful, beloved, are the gifts of God! Life in immortality, splendour in righteousness, truth in perfect confidence ...' Listed first of the gifts of God bestowed in salvation is 'life in immortality'! In the following chapter (36), he further affirms that 'the Lord has willed that we should taste of the knowledge of immortality'. It seems that the Tree of Life from which Adam and Eve were excluded following their fall has been restored through Christ to all who have passed through 'the gate of righteousness, which is set open for the attainment of life' (Ch. 48).

We sense already that the idea of regeneration was perceived as representing, not so much an initial moment of spiritual conversion, as a new and higher order of life and way of living.¹² In spite of the fact that Clement's Epistle is a letter of exhortation to believers to celebrate the gifts of their salvation, it is also evident that he places the highest [p. 107](#) priority on the proclamation of the regenerating power of the gospel of Christ. In fact, in Chapter 46, he gently chides his hearers for being 'fond of contention and full of zeal about things which do not pertain to salvation'.

Ignatius

As Clement is believed to have been a disciple of St. Paul, Ignatius is recognized by tradition as a disciple of St. John along with Polycarp of Smyrna. He was, therefore, an approximate contemporary of Clement, though representing a different line of apostolic tradition.

For Ignatius, the contrast between life in Christ and death outside of Christ is an almost all-consuming theme throughout his writings to the point where he begs his friends not

¹² *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* provides as eloquent a description as we have of how this new and higher order of life manifested itself in the lives of the early Christians (ANF, I, pp. 26–27).

to hinder his martyrdom and describes his life as ‘a state of death’ and martyrdom as ‘living’ (*Epistle to the Romans*, VI).

In one beautifully instructive passage he illustrates the relationship of faith to new life in Christ in contrast to the spiritual death of the unbeliever in the world:

These two things are simultaneously set before us—death and life ... For as there are two kinds of coins, the one of God, the other of the world, and each of these has its special character stamped upon it, [so is it also here]. The unbelieving are of this world; but the believing have, in love, the character of God, the Father by Jesus Christ, by whom, if we are ready to die into his passion, his life resides within us. (*Epistle to the Magnesians*, V)

In the longer version of this text, he makes clear that whether one bears the stamp of God’s character or the devil’s is a matter not of nature but of personal choice. For Ignatius it appears that regeneration represents not merely a distinction between a higher and a lower order of life but a radical distinction as between life and death.

This rather cryptic illustration appears to be a veiled reference to [Matthew 22:19–21](#), in which Jesus was asked a question regarding taxation. He took a coin, asked whose image was on it, then uttered the familiar line ‘Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God that which is God’s’, suggesting that once one has chosen to receive the imprint of God’s character on one’s life, one receives the irreversible stamp of God’s ownership, and the animating power of Christ’s life continues to pulsate within one’s being.

Justin

Justin, a student of philosophy, was persuaded to become a Christian **p. 108** by the boldness of Christian martyrs and his study of the Old Testament. By the middle of the second century, he had become perhaps the most compelling Christian apologist of the post-apostolic period. He sets out evangelical minds at ease by recounting in detail the circumstances of his conversion,¹³ although perhaps not in terms quite as ‘regenerational’ as some of us might like!

Justin’s contributions to the development of the doctrine of regeneration lie primarily in three areas. He advanced the idea of divinization, or *theosis*, as being the completion of the new birth; he articulated more clearly than had been done before the idea of baptismal regeneration; and he established the notion that regeneration affects not only the soul of man, but the flesh as well.

First, with reference to divinization, Justin in his first *Apology* responds to those who consider the Christian faith to be foolishness, by pointing out that there are many heathen analogies to Christian doctrine. For example, the divinization of the followers of Christ is no more preposterous a thought than the deification of the Emperor!¹⁴

He argues the point further with Trypho by asserting that Christians are the sons of God.

Let the interpretation of the Psalm [\[82:6\]](#) be held just as you wish, yet thereby it is demonstrated that all men are deemed worthy of becoming ‘gods’, and of having power to become sons of the Highest.¹⁵

¹³ *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, VIII (ANF, V. 1, pp. 198–199).

¹⁴ *The First Apology*, XXI (ANF, I, p. 170).

¹⁵ *Dialogue with Trypho*, CXXIV (ANF, I, p. 262).

From this point on, the divinization of the believer is frequently alluded to in terms of immortality and incorruptibility and always as the destination of the pilgrimage of regeneration begun at the point of conversion.

Secondly, Justin engraved the doctrine of baptismal regeneration upon the history of the Church by pressing the analogy of Noah another step beyond Clement of Rome. This occurs in a number of passages, including the following:

For righteous Noah, along with the other mortals at the deluge ... being eight in number, were a symbol of the eighth day, wherein Christ appeared when He rose from the dead ... For Christ, being the first-born of every creature, became again the chief of another race regenerated by Himself through water, and faith and wood, containing the mystery of the cross, even as Noah was saved by wood when he rode over the waters ...¹⁶ p. 109

However, in a more extended discussion of Christian baptism, he suggests that although the miracle of regeneration takes place concurrently with baptism, it occurs as a result of personal choice, repentance, belief and a commitment to a life of obedience (*First Apology*, 61). On the basis of this text, it appears that the apostolic tradition advocated the baptism of 'him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his sins'. Hence it is worth noting that the notion of baptismal regeneration gained its initial foothold within this specific context.

Thirdly, in his fragments on the resurrection, Justin boldly affirms, in contradiction of Pythagorean and Platonic principles, that the gift of regeneration brings salvation not only to the soul, but to the flesh as well.

It is not impossible that the flesh be regenerated; and seeing that ... the Saviour in the whole Gospel shows that there is salvation for the flesh, why do we any longer endure those unbelieving and dangerous arguments?¹⁷

It is certainly refreshing to see the Church at such an early date firmly establishing the uniqueness of its doctrine in the face of Hellenistic philosophical influence, to which many have suspected the Church of capitulating. Having gained a sense of the development of the doctrine of regeneration through the early years of the second century, we now turn to the most exhaustive and systematic treatment of soteriology of the period: formulated at the close of the century by Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon.

REGENERATION IN ST. IRENAEUS

The doctrine of regeneration in Irenaeus must be sifted out of his much broader treatment of soteriology. However, this search should not be in vain, for most scholars agree that Irenaeus made his greatest contribution as a theologian in the area of soteriology.

His soteriological formulation has become known as the doctrine of recapitulation. The term *recapitulatio* (in Latin) or *anakephataiōsis* (in Greek) appears in [Ephesians 1:10](#), 'the *summing up* of all things in Christ', a passage to which Irenaeus repeatedly makes reference. The word itself is rich and multi-faceted, reflective of Irenaeus' doctrine, but can generally be defined in terms of 'restoration, renovation and renewal'. To oversimplify, Irenaeus is speaking of taking something once done wrong (creation) and 'doing it over right' (redemption). That p. 110 'something' encompasses all of human history and includes both cosmic and personal renewal.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 138 (*ANF*, I, p. 268).

¹⁷ *On the Resurrection*, X (*ANF*, I, pp. 298–299).

The backbone of Irenaeus' system is his parallelism between Adam (and through him, all mankind) who failed in every respect and Christ (and through him, all believers) who recapitulated the experience of Adam in every respect with a resoundingly victorious outcome. In order to develop this doctrine, Irenaeus becomes the first of the fathers to deal at any length with the nature of the Fall. However, he does not regard Adam's sin as a radical infraction of the Law of God for which the only equitable punishment is death, but rather as a moral mistake attributable to the spiritual and intellectual immaturity of Adam and Eve. Yet it was an act of disobedience that derailed the glorious purposes of God for mankind.¹⁸

Therefore, it became necessary for Christ to come in the Incarnation and retrace all of Adam's steps, replacing our natural spirit of disobedience with his spirit of obedience, thus setting in motion the 'summing up of all things in Christ'. In the final analysis, Irenaeus' message of hope is that mankind 'has been given the opportunity of making a new start in Christ ... through incorporation in his mystical body. The original Adam, by his disobedience, introduced the principle of sin and death, but Christ by his obedience has reintroduced the principle of life and immortality'.¹⁹

Although one could reasonably argue that Irenaeus' 'recapitulation' is primarily a doctrine of regeneration, the key to deriving out of it a more clearly focused definition may be found in his explanation of the need for Christ's recapitulation: 'God recapitulated in himself the ancient formation of man, that he might (1) kill sin, (2) deprive death of its power and (3) vivify man.'²⁰

Gustaf Aulén has treated the first two objectives extensively in *Christus Victor* (pp. 16–35), but it is the third that addresses the doctrine of regeneration. There is no question that for Irenaeus, salvation is equated with life and sin (disobedience) is death. So, as he compares the effects of Adam and Christ, he explains that 'as by the former generation we inherited death, so by this new generation [regeneration] we might inherit life'.²¹

The conditions for becoming partakers in this regeneration are [p. 111](#) consistent with those described in [John 1:12](#), for he states that God 'rendered himself visible ... that he might vivify those who receive and behold him through faith'.²²

Irenaeus does not emphasize the relationship of baptism and regeneration other than to concur with the earlier tradition of interpretation of [John 3:5](#), as referring to outward baptism and inward (spiritual) regeneration.

What are the benefits of this spiritual regeneration or vivification in Irenaeus? First of all, Christ has gained for us the victory over our enemy (sin), whereas in Adam we were vanquished (*AH*, V.21.1). Secondly, we were reconciled to God (brought to 'friendship and concord'—*AH*, III.18.7). And thirdly, we see the flowering of the notion of divinization. In the anthropology of Irenaeus, man was created in the image of God with no essential difference from God except for the infinite distance between the two. But because in the Fall that image was marred, a major objective of the Incarnation and Atonement was to restore man to this intrinsic sameness with God.

¹⁸ *Against Heresies*, V.16.3 (*ANF*, I, p. 544).

¹⁹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 173.

²⁰ *AH*, III.18.7 (*ANF*, I, p. 448).

²¹ *AH*, V. 1.3 (*ANF*, p. 527).

²² *AH*, IV.20.5 (*ANF*, p. 489); also III.16.8 (*ANF*, p. 443).

This is accomplished in the life of the believer in terms of immortality (he never dies), incorruptibility (he never decays) and *theosis* (he becomes as Christ is). These passages capture the essence of this the apogee of second-century soteriology:

He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption might become the son of God.

(AH, III.19.1)

Our Lord Jesus Christ ... did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself.

(AH, V.Preface)²³

CONCLUSIONS

Let us conclude our study with several observations based on the material we have considered.

(1) The perception that one finds in the second century is that regeneration is a process of growth that encompasses one's life from the moment of initiation into Christ to the moment of glorification beyond the grave, with the responsibility to remain faithful and obedient throughout all the stages in between. This seems to lend a cohesion to the Christian life that is not always appreciated today by [p. 112](#) those who view regeneration in terms of a one-time experience that often has little long-term impact on the quality of one's life.

(2) Baptismal regeneration as articulated in the second century does not appear to be incompatible with evangelical theology today. Nowhere was it stated that the act of water baptism produced regeneration, but only that water baptism constituted the sacramental means by which God illustrated to man the spiritual birth which takes place on the basis of repentance and faith. Even this position is stated only with reference to individuals who have already repented, believed and made a choice to be 'born again'. Therefore one finds no basis at all in the second century for any doctrine of baptismal regeneration relative to infant baptism.

(3) The analogy of Noah's day (salvation taking place only by one's inclusion in the ark), suggesting that spiritual rebirth can take place only within the community of the Church, presents a notion worthy of our consideration. Although the idea was to be taken too far a century later, perhaps we overstate the personal and individual aspect of conversion to the point that many apparent converts are never effectively integrated into the corporate life of the Church.

(4) However one is inclined to react to the idea of *theosis*, it appears to have enough basis in Scripture ([Psalm 82:6](#); [2 Peter 1:4](#); [1 John 3:2](#); etc.) that it deserves our contemplation. Regardless of how we conceive of it, it seems greatly to enhance the 'blessed hope' as a powerful incentive for godly living.

(5) Finally, we as evangelicals should be gratified to find our emphasis on personal scripture regeneration on the basis of repentance and faith so well represented in the post-apostolic Church. The Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches have effectively claimed the patristic period as their own by tracing their particular traditions through its centuries, leaving evangelicals with seemingly little heritage to claim between AD 90 and 1517.

Not only would we gain credibility in our dialogue with other branches of the Church, but we would also enrich our own tradition and broaden our appeal, if we were to claim

²³ See also III.10.2; III.19.1; IV.33.4; IV.38.4; and IV.39.2.

and demonstrate the presence of our theological and spiritual heritage in every age of the Church's history.

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New Testament Christology and the Jesus of Islam

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In the history of post-Enlightenment NT study we may speak in broad terms of two trajectories of research. One approach, which we might (in many cases anachronistically) call evangelical, attempts to capitalize on new insights from and innovations in the progress of human knowledge in the various recognized academic disciplines and to utilize these in coming to a contemporary understanding of the Bible. Yet it does this while retaining fundamental allegiance to historic orthodox Christianity, in particular its doctrine of Christ, or Christology. Modern learning is harnessed in the service of the cause of Christ—Christ understood, from this point of view, in terms which would meet basic agreement from an executive panel comprising, say, the Apostle Paul, Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and Barth.¹ Christ understood in historic orthodox terms, as attested to in canonical Scripture, sets limits to the claims of modern learning in important respects. At the same time, modern learning is not categorically repudiated as a promising source and necessary context for a better understanding of NT Christology.

The second approach is no less concerned with orthodoxy, but its orthodoxy rests on a much different conception of Christ (which, one might say, means that what it calls orthodoxy has since Nicea usually [p. 114](#) been called heresy). I have in mind here the

¹ Barth's orthodoxy (and that of neo-orthodoxy generally) is doubted by some evangelicals; see e.g. the recent programmatic comments by M. G. Kline, review of J. I. Durham's *Exodus*, *JETS* 32 (1989) 380–382. Certainly Barth's epistemological assumptions and resulting hermeneutic raise disturbing questions. And the chapter on Barth and Bultmann in Peter Carnley's *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) demonstrates that both go to 'a false extreme by disqualifying the contribution of historians in understanding and interpreting what the original Easter witnesses claimed to have experienced' (Gerald O'Collins, 'Resurrection Belief: A Note on a Recent Book', *Gregorianum* 70/2 [1989] 341–344 [341]). in the past two hundred years, however, it is hard to think of a more incisive, original, and prolific theologian who has attempted so exhaustively to articulate a Christology comporting, *mutatis mutandis*, with earlier christological formulations. For present purposes I will, therefore, leave it to the executive committee named above to pass their own judgment on their modern colleague.