

# DOES REGENERATION PRECEDE FAITH IN 1 JOHN?

by Matthew Barrett

## 1. Introduction

FOR CENTURIES CALVINISTS and Arminians have been divided over the proper causal ordering between regeneration and conversion in the *ordo salutis*.<sup>1</sup> Is it true, as the Calvinist believes it is, that God's act of regeneration precedes faith (monergism) or should we believe, as the Arminian does, that regeneration is conditioned upon man's faith and therefore precedes regeneration (synergism)?<sup>2</sup> While the debate oscillates around numerous texts, the letter of 1 John plays a major role in determining the debate. For example, 1 John 5:1 states, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whomever has been born of him." This paper will argue that texts like 1 John 5:1 as well as others (cf. 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18) teach that regeneration does indeed precede faith.<sup>3</sup> In demonstrating this thesis it will become evident that the Arminian *ordo* is inadequate while the Calvinist *ordo* is most faithful to the biblical witness.

## 2. 1 John 5:1

We begin by considering 1 John 5:1, which Piper calls "the clearest text in the New Testament on the relationship between faith and the new birth."<sup>4</sup> The Greek reads, Πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν

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1. This essay is a brief treatment of the topic. For a full defense of monergism as well as a full critique of synergism see my forthcoming book on the subject with P&R (some content in this chapter is taken from the forthcoming book published by P&R Publishing Co., P O Box 817, Phillipsburg, N.J. 08865 [www.prpbooks.com](http://www.prpbooks.com)). Also, see Matthew Barrett, "Reclaiming Monergism: The Case for Sovereign Grace in Effectual Calling and Regeneration," (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011).

2. When I speak of the proper order in the *ordo salutis* I am assuming a logical order not a chronological one.

3. Space does not permit us to examine texts in John's gospel as well. However, it should be noted that texts such as John 3:5-8 and 6:35-65 are consistent with those in 1 John where regeneration precedes faith.

4. Piper, *Finally Alive* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 118; also see 138-39. It could be objected from the outset that the logical priority of regeneration to faith in 1 John is unfounded because John never had this debate over the *ordo salutis* in his

ὁ Χριστὸς ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ γεγέννηται, καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν γεννήσαντα ἀγαπᾷ [καὶ] τὸν γεγεννημένον ἐξ αὐτοῦ. Notice, “believes” (πιστεύων) in the phrase “Everyone who believes” (or “Everyone believing”) is a present active participle in the nominative case, indicating ongoing faith.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, when John says all those believing “*have been* born of him,” “have been born” (θεοῦ γεγέννηται) is a perfect passive indicative, meaning that it is an action that has already taken place in the past (it is completed) and has ongoing effects in the present. As Daniel Wallace explains, the perfect speaks “of an event accomplished in the past (in the indicative mood, that is) with results existing afterwards—the perfect speaking of results existing in the present.”<sup>6</sup> In 1 John 5:1, the action in the perfect passive indicative (regeneration) precedes and causes the action in the present active participle (faith). The result is clear: God’s act of regeneration precedes belief.<sup>7</sup> As John Stott explains,

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mind. As Burdick writes, “This verse is not written to prove either the Calvinistic or the Arminian *ordo salutis*.” Donald W. Burdick, *Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 358. However, as Snoeberger comments, “Admittedly, the present argument was probably not filling John’s mind as he penned these words; however, it does not follow that he is indifferent toward the issue. Two factors, namely, the syntax and the purpose for writing, militate against such a conclusion.” Snoeberger, “The Logical Priority of Regeneration to Saving Faith,” 82.

5. On the use of the participle, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 613ff.

6. “The force of the perfect tense is simply that it describes an event that, completed in the past (we are speaking of the perfect indicative here), has results existing in the present time (i.e., in relation to the time of the speaker.” Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 572-73. Or as Zerwick states, the perfect tense is used for “indicating not the past action as such but the present ‘state of affairs’ resulting from the past action.” M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (Rome: Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 96. Likewise Mounce states, “The Greek perfect describes an action that was brought to completion and whose effects are felt in the present. Because it describes a completed action, by implication the action described by the perfect verb normally occurred in the past.” William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek: Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 225. Moreover, it is not the case that John is using the perfect tense randomly or without intention. As Moulton observes, the perfect tense is “the most important, exegetically, of all the Greek Tenses” and as Wallace observes, “when it is used, there is usually a deliberate choice on the part of the writer.” J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 1:140.

7. “Here, as in the other verses just considered, ‘has been born’ is perfect, passive, indicative; and the same logic applies. One expression of being born of God, says John, is that the person born again believes that Jesus is the Messiah. Presumably the opposite, then, is true. If one is not born again, he cannot believe that Jesus is the Messiah, just as if he is not born again, he cannot do what is right and he cannot love. Being born again, then, gives rise to doing right, to loving others; and it gives rise to believing that Christ truly is the Messiah. Faith in Christ, then, flows out of the life of the one who has been regenerated.” Bruce A. Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, ed. Chad Owen Brand (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 20.

The combination of the present tense (believes) and perfect tense [has been born] is important. It shows clearly that believing is the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth. Our present, continuing activity of believing is the result, and therefore, the evidence, of our past experience of new birth by which we became and remain God's children.<sup>8</sup>

The implication, therefore, is that it is God's act of regeneration that creates the faith man needs to believe. Peterson and Williams similarly conclude,

The perfect-tense verb in 1 John 5:1, "has been born," indicates that the new birth is the cause of faith in Christ, even as the new birth is the cause of godliness and love in the passages cited above [1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:18]. As a result of God's grace in regeneration, all those who have been born of God believe savingly in the Son of God.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, Robert Yarbrough states,

In Johannine theology, spiritual rebirth seems to precede and ultimately create faith: those who believe do so not so much as the result of human volition as of prior divine intention (cf. John 1:12-13; Akin 2001: 189 misses this by citing 1:12 but not 1:13; more aptly, see Peterson and Williams 2004: 188-189).<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that in regards to 1 John 5:1, the New International Version (NIV) should not be followed. The English Standard Version (ESV) correctly translates the perfect verb as a perfect, but the NIV translates the perfect as if it were a present tense verb.<sup>11</sup> "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ *is born* of God," could be taken to mean that one's faith produces or results in regeneration. Strangely, the NIV translates the same perfect in 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; and 5:4 as a perfect tense verb ("*has been born*").<sup>12</sup> Why the NIV is inconsistent when it comes to 1 John 5:1 is

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8. John Stott, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 175. Also see White on this issue in Dave Hunt and James White, *Debating Calvinism* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 198-201.

9. Peterson and Williams, *Why I Am Not An Arminian*, 189. Also see Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 100-01.

10. Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, BECNT (2008), 270.

11. Peterson and Williams also makes this observation. *Why I Am Not An Arminian*, 188.

12. Unfortunately, the New American Standard Bible (NASB) makes the same mistake as the NIV in 1 John 5:1. However, unlike the NIV the NASB continues to

unclear, but it gives the impression that faith precedes regeneration when that is not the case.

### 3. 1 John 2:29

As seen above, the use of the perfect in 1 John 5:1 can also be found in 1 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, and 5:4. In 1 John 2:29 the Greek reads, *ἐὰν εἰδῆτε ὅτι δίκαιός ἐστιν, γινώσκετε ὅτι καὶ πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην ἐξ αὐτοῦ γεγέννηται*. Those who are doing righteousness *have been born of God* (γεγέννηται). The grammar here is parallel to 1 John 5:1. The phrase “*have been born of him*” is a perfect passive indicative (from γεννάω, to beget or bring forth), while the phrase “*everyone who practices righteousness*” (πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην) is a present active participle. Again, the perfect here refers to the new birth, an act that has been completed in the past and has continuing results in the present. Practicing righteousness (present tense) is what results from the new birth. Or as Stott says, “A person’s righteousness is thus the evidence of his new birth, not the cause or condition of it.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly Murray states, “In 2:29, we must infer, that the reason why the person in view does righteousness is that he is begotten of God.”<sup>14</sup> To interpret 2:29 as if regeneration came after faith would mean that one’s own righteousness would precede regeneration. This interpretation would evidently teach works-righteousness. Ware explains,

The perfect tense normally indicates past action that continues into the present. So John is saying that the person who has been and is born again is like this: he does what is right. That is, being born again accounts for doing right. This surely means that the new birth precedes a righteous life; otherwise John would be teaching works-righteousness (i.e., doing ‘what is right’ accounting for being born again)! No, rather, regeneration accounts for the “right” sort of actions and behavior of which John speaks.<sup>15</sup>

It must be observed that Arminians find themselves in a number of contradictions at this point. For example, concerning 1 John 2:29

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make this mistake not only with 5:1 but with 2:29; 3:9; 4:7 and 5:4 as well. Again, the ESV is far superior at this point.

13. John R. W. Stott, *Letters of John*, TNTC, 19 (1998), 122. Likewise Burge, “But it does not work the other way around. Doing righteousness is not a precondition for being born of him, nor is it the means to divine birth.” Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John*, NIVAC (1996), 145.

14. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 102. Similarly Frame, “Everyone who practices righteousness must have been born again, because you cannot do righteousness without being born again.” Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, 186.

15. Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” 19.

I. Howard Marshall agrees that practicing righteousness is the result of the new birth not the other way around. "What John is trying to stress is that doing what is right is the consequence of spiritual birth; hence if a person does what is right, this is a sign of spiritual birth." And again, "True righteousness (the kind shown by Jesus) is possible only on the basis of spiritual birth."<sup>16</sup> When Marshall comes to 1 John 5:1 he begins as he did in 2:29 by saying, "Faith is thus a sign of the new birth, just as love (4:7) and doing what is right (2:29; 3:9) are also indications that a person has been born of God."<sup>17</sup> Marshall sounds like a Calvinist. It is obvious even to Marshall that in 2:29, 3:9, and 4:7 doing righteousness, avoiding sin, and loving are all the result of the new birth. One would then expect Marshall to say the same about 1 John 5:1. After all, 5:1 has the same grammatical structure as 2:29, 3:9, and 4:7. Moreover, Marshall begins his commentary on 5:1 in this direction when he says "Faith is thus a sign of the new birth," just like love and doing righteousness. However, Marshall immediately qualifies such a statement by saying,

At the same time, however, faith is a condition of the new birth: "to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn. 1:12). Here, however, John is not trying to show how a person experiences the new birth; his aim is rather to indicate the evidence which shows that a person stands in the continuing relationship of a child to God his Father: that evidence is that he holds to the true faith about Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

Marshall's logic seems to contradict itself. He begins by saying that faith is a sign of the new birth but then he says faith is a condition of the new birth. It is clear that for Marshall, saying faith is a sign of the new birth is not the same as saying that faith is caused by the new birth and only the result of the new birth. For Marshall, regeneration cannot occur without man having faith first. Consequent to regeneration, faith continues and so Marshall can simultaneously say faith is the condition of the new birth and yet faith is the sign of the new birth as shown in 1 John 5:1.<sup>19</sup> Two responses are in order. First, Marshall would never apply his exegesis of 5:1 to 2:29 ("everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him"). Why not? Because it would imply works righteousness! If

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16. I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 169.

17. *Ibid.*, 226.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Smalley makes the same move that Marshall does. See Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC, 51 (1984), 266-67.

Marshall was to be consistent he would have to apply the same hermeneutic to 2:29 that he does in 5:1 and it would sound like this:

Righteousness is thus a sign of the new birth, just as love (4:7) and doing what is right (3:9f) are also indications that a person has been born of God. At the same time, however, righteousness is a condition of the new birth...

Notice how closely this parallels his comment on 5:1,

Faith is thus a sign of the new birth, just as love (4:7) and doing what is right (2:29; 3:9f) are also indications that a person has been born of God. At the same time, however, faith is a condition of the new birth...<sup>20</sup>

It is astonishing that it can be so obvious to Marshall that in 2:29 righteousness could never be the condition of regeneration, but in 5:1, a verse with the same grammatical structure, faith can be the condition of regeneration. In the end, Marshall refuses to apply his same method of exegesis in 2:29, 3:9, and 4:7 to 5:1. Why? Evidently, to do so would mean that faith precedes regeneration and is caused by regeneration, a conclusion unacceptable to an Arminian like Marshall. Therefore, instead, Marshall has allowed his Arminian presuppositions to alter the plain meaning of the text.

Second, Marshall not only is inconsistent in his exegesis but he completely ignores the grammar of the text in 5:1. Marshall's statements in 2:29, 3:9, and 4:7 seem to demonstrate (though he never says it explicitly) that he has knowledge of the fact that a perfect passive is being used in the phrase "have been born of God." However, when Marshall comes to 5:1 he ignores the grammar altogether and actually interprets 5:1 as faith being the condition of regeneration, which is the exact opposite of what the text says grammatically, namely, that regeneration (perfect passive indicative) results in faith (present active participle). This negligence of the grammatical structure is poor exegesis on Marshall's part.

#### 4. John 1:12-13

Marshall, however, not only misconstrues the meaning of 1 John 5:1, but he does so by jumping over the plain meaning of 5:1 in order to appeal to John 1:12. John 1:12-13 reads, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." It must be observed that

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<sup>20</sup> Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 226.

such a move gives the reader the impression that Marshall does not want to deal with what 5:1 actually says on its own terms but rather he wants to allow *his* interpretation of John 1:12 to be the key factor in providing an alternative interpretation to 5:1.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Marshall's appeal to John 1:12 is unfounded precisely because John 1:12-13 actually proves the opposite of what Marshall wants it to say. Marshall believes that John 1:12 proves that faith is the condition of regeneration for the text says that all who received Jesus, who believed in him (faith), God gave the right to become children of God.<sup>22</sup> There are several problems with Marshall's interpretation here. First, Marshall assumes that the phrase "become children of God" is synonymous with "new birth."<sup>23</sup> However, Marshall never shows evidence that this is the case. Why should the reader assume that the phrase "become children of God" is synonymous with the new birth? Why not interpret becoming a child of God as the result of the new birth? Why not interpret such a phrase as referring to adoption, which is produced by the new birth? Indeed, for several reasons I would argue that the phrase "become children of God" is referring to adoption, not regeneration. (1) The phrase "children of God" in John 1:12 is also used by Paul in Romans 8:15-16 to refer to adoption, not regeneration. Paul writes, "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:15-16; cf. Eph 1:5). Paul's language of adoption is again reiterated when he says in Galatians 3:26, "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith" (cf. Gal 4:5). As a consequence to believing (John 1:12) or having faith (Gal 3:26), one is adopted into God's family as a son.<sup>24</sup> (2) Adoption, as

21. To clarify, I am not saying that it is unjustified to appeal to other texts (especially by the same author in this case) in order to interpret properly. This would be to deny the analogy of Scripture, which I do not. However, in Marshall's case, it seems as if his appeal to John 1:12 is so that he does not have to interpret 5:1 as he already did interpret 2:29, 3:9, and 4:7. Moreover, as will be seen, even in Marshall's appeals to John 1:12 his bias becomes evident when he only quotes verse 12 and ignores verse 13, which has much to say concerning his interpretation. On appealing to the gospel of John to interpret 1 John, see Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, PNTC (2000), 157.

22. Also Barrett, "This birth is conditional upon receiving Christ and believing on his name." C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 137. Contra H. J. Holtzmann, *Lehrbuch der neutestamentlichen Theologie* (Tübingen: n.p., 1911), 2:534; Morris, *John*, 101; Barnabas Lindars, "The Fourth Gospel an Act of Contemplation," in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. L. Cross (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1957), 27.

23. Likewise Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 124.

24. It is also important to keep in mind that while those who believe are adopted by God here and now, adoption is also a future hope and reality, something which cannot also be said of regeneration, which is a one-time event at initiation. Paul states in

Snoeberger observes, is emptied of meaning “if regeneration has already placed the believer into the family of God and given him all the privileges of heirs.”<sup>25</sup> (3) Many scholars agree that the phrase “become children of God” in John 1:12 is a reference to adoption, not regeneration.<sup>26</sup>

Second, in order to argue that the phrase “become children of God” is referring to the new birth or regeneration,<sup>27</sup> one must take a leap that is not warranted by the text and assume the text reads that one becomes a child of God because he believes. However, the text does not make such a causal correlation in 1:12. As Ware explains,

Notice that John does not say, ‘He gave them the right to be children of God because they believed in His name.’ Rather, he merely notes that these two things both happen: they are given the right to be children of God, and they believe in his name. What he does not say in verse 12 is that becoming children of God results from their faith.<sup>28</sup>

Michaels makes a similar observation between “believing” in verse 12 and being born again in verse 13.

It is important to notice here what is *not* said. The text defines no temporal or causal relationship between “believing” and being “born of God,” either to the effect that individuals are born of God *because* they believe [contra Bultmann], or that

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Romans 8:23 that we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as “we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Schreiner and Caneday comment, “Here adoption is said to become ours when our bodies are redeemed, that is, on the last day. We conclude, then, that there is an already-but-not-yet dimension to adoption as well. As Christians we are adopted into God’s family, yet we will not experience the consummation of our adoption until the day of the resurrection.” Surely the same cannot be said of regeneration. Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 68. On adoption in Pauline literature see Trevor J. Burke, *Adopted into God’s Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

25. Snoeberger, “Regeneration,” 77-78.

26. Snoeberger, “Regeneration,” 78. Also see Carson, *John*, 126; Ridderbos, *John*, 45; John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:17; Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 81, 87, 132-34; Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 96, 185-87; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 738; Raymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 759.

27. “In John being a child is always rooted in a new birth ‘of God,’ ‘of the Spirit,’ or ‘from above’ (cf. vs. 13; 3:3f).” Ridderbos, *John*, 45-46.

28. Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” 20. Also notice the insight of Michaels, “It clearly does *not* mean that ‘those who received him’ have a choice of either becoming ‘children of God’ or not!” J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (2010), 69.



they believe because they are *already* born of God.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, causal language does not come into view until verse 13 which actually prohibits the new birth being conditioned on man's free will, bringing us to the third problem.

Third, we cannot ignore verse 13, which reads, "who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." Why does Marshall not quote verse 13? Could it be that verse 13 actually would prohibit his interpretation of verse 12? Anthony Hoekema exposes such a textual bias,

Arminian theologians often quote verse 12 to prove that faith must precede regeneration: 'To those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God.' But we must not separate verse 12 from verse 13. The latter verse tells us that being children of God is not the result of natural descent or human decision, but of divine activity alone. It is, of course, true that those who believed in Christ did receive the right to become children of God – but behind their faith was the miraculous deed of God whereby they were spiritually reborn. They were born not of man but of God.<sup>30</sup>

Verse 13 actually clarifies and qualifies verse 12 stating, "who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." In other words, being born is in no way due to the "will of man."<sup>31</sup> Since the will of man is involved in faith, there is no way that faith could precede being born again.<sup>32</sup>

To conclude verse 13, John makes it clear that the new birth is *not* conditioned upon man's will, but is completely and only the act of God. Ware is right when he states, "What accounts for them having the right to be God's children, and what accounts for their believing in Christ's name, is that they had been born of God."<sup>33</sup> Robert Reymond also comments on John 1:13,

By this particular reference to God's "begetting" activity John refers to regeneration, and clearly suggests by his statement that, while faith is the instrumental precondition to

29. Michaels, *John*, 71.

30. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 96.

31. "Will" here can also mean "desire." Michaels notes that will "refers simply to choice or initiative." Michaels, *John*, 72.

32. Snoeberger, "Regeneration," 80, expresses this point in the following syllogism:

A: No act of the human will can inaugurate regeneration.

B: Faith is an act of human will.

C: Therefore, Faith cannot inaugurate regeneration.

33. Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," 20. Also see Snoeberger, "Regeneration," 80.

justification and adoption, regeneration is the necessary precondition and efficient cause of faith in Jesus Christ. In short, regeneration causally precedes faith.<sup>34</sup>

Herman Ridderbos is just as adamant,

However, against this [the interpretation of John 1:12-13 which views faith as preceding regeneration] it has to be asserted that the concluding statement in vs. 13 traces the entire gift of being a child of God, including the manner in which it is effected, to its deepest ground: "procreation" by God. The idea that faith as a human choice should precede that birth and therefore that in some sense a person should have this rebirth of God at his or her disposal not only seems absurd but is also at variance with statements like this in 1 Jn. 5:1: "Everyone who believes . . . is born of God." By saying this one does not in any way detract from the call and invitation to believe so emphatically issued in John's Gospel, a call addressed to all without distinction.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, when Marshall concludes from verse 12 that regeneration is conditioned upon man's faith he does so in direct conflict with the rest of the sentence in verse 13 where John is clear that the new birth is in no way conditioned upon man.<sup>36</sup>

## 5. 1 John 3:9

The same grammar and logic in 2:29 applies to 1 John 3:9, "No one born of God [Πῦς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ; perfect passive participle] makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning [οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν; present active infinitive] because he *has been* born of God [θεοῦ γεγέννηται; perfect passive indicative]."<sup>37</sup> 1 John 3:9 is very similar to 1 John 5:18, "We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him." In 3:9 and 5:18 the sinner would be expected to

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34. Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 708.

35. Ridderbos, *John*, 47.

36. Such an interpretation is also in tension with what we have already seen is true in 1 John 5:1. Carson, interpreting John 1:12, states, "The tenses and the context of 1 John 5:1 strongly argue that faith, like love (1 John 4:8) is the *evidence* of the new birth, not its cause." Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 182.

37. Kruse rightly states that "we may say that to be born of God here means being brought to new spiritual life by the will of God and through the agency of his Spirit." Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 124. For the OT background to spiritual rebirth see Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 234-35. Also see page 172 where Smalley mentions the perfect tense.

not make a practice of sinning so that he may be born again, if the Arminian view is affirmed. The text, however, never warrants this. Instead, the believer is not to make a practice of sinning because he has been born of God and consequently “God’s seed abides in him.” Once again, like 5:1 and 2:29 we see the same grammatical structure. The perfect verb (has been born of God) is what grounds and results in the present active infinitive (makes a practice of sinning). The point then is that it is *because* one has been born again that he does not make a practice of sinning. As John Murray concludes, “He does not sin because God’s seed abides in him. Now this abiding seed alludes clearly to the divine impartation which took place in the divine begetting. It is this divine begetting with its abiding consequence that is the *cause* of not doing sin. Hence regeneration is logically and causally prior to the not doing sin.”<sup>38</sup>

## 6. 1 John 4:7

In 1 John 4:7 we also see the priority of the new birth, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves *has been* born of God and knows God” (Ἀγαπητοί, ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν, καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀγαπῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται καὶ γινώσκει τὸν θεόν.). Loving (ὁ ἀγαπῶν; present active participle) is the result of having been born of God (θεοῦ γεγέννηται; perfect passive indicative).<sup>39</sup> Love is from God and until God regenerates the dead heart, the sinner cannot love God or neighbor. Therefore, “Whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (4:7). As John states in 4:19, “We love because he first loved us.” John does not say, “He loves us because we first loved him.” Rather, it is God’s love that precedes the sinner’s and it is God’s love which enables and produces the sinner’s faith, evidenced in love for God and neighbor.<sup>40</sup> This same truth is affirmed in 5:1 where John states that not only is belief in Jesus the result of being born of God but so also is love for

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38. “And again, John tells us that ‘he cannot sin because he is begotten of God,’ an express statement to the effect that regeneration is the cause why this person cannot sin. So the reason why a person cannot sin is that that person is regenerated – the order cannot be reversed. In this verse, therefore, we are informed that regeneration is the source and explanation of the breach with sin which is characteristic of every regenerate person.” Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 101.

39. “The first verb is a perfect tense, suggesting that divine rebirth is past, yet bearing fruit in the present. A person once converted now demonstrates the fruit of that conversion. The second verb is a present tense, implying that love is connected to an ongoing awareness of who God is.” Burge, *The Letters of John*, 186. Smalley also sees love as the effect of the new birth from God rather than the cause. See Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 238.

40. “Again, ‘has been born’ is perfect, passive, indicative, and so the idea is clear: being born of God and knowing God are the basis by which one is able to love.” Ware, “Divine Election to Salvation,” 19.

the Father who has sent his only Son. Again, love for the Father and the Son is caused by the new birth. But notice, 1 John 4:7 not only says that regeneration precedes love but it also precedes saving knowledge of God. John states that “whoever loves has been born of God and *knows God*.” “Knows” is not referring to pure cognitive, factual data of God’s existence and acts in the world. Rather, “knows,” like love, is tied to saving faith. To have saving faith in God is to know God personally. To know God is to have saving faith in God. Again, it must be concluded that saving knowledge of God is the result of God regenerating the believer, not the other way around.

### 7. 1 John 5:4, 18

Finally, 1 John 5:4 is another text that supports the Reformed view. John states, “For everyone who has been born of God [γεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ; perfect passive participle] overcomes the world [νικᾷ τὸν κόσμον; present active indicative]. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” What is John referring to when he says that we overcome the world? John is clear in the very next sentence: “And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith.” So it is faith that overcomes the world and John goes on to say that such faith that overcomes is faith that “believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” Again, saving faith is the result of being born of God. Just as righteousness, rejecting sin, and loving God are the result of being born of God so also is having faith which overcomes the world. To reverse this order, as Arminians so often do, is to teach works-righteousness. How unorthodox it would be to say that being righteous (2:29), resisting sin (3:9), loving God and neighbor (4:7), having saving knowledge of God (4:7 and 5:1), possessing a faith that overcomes the world (5:4), and abstaining from sin (5:18) all result in regeneration. Though Arminians would never say such a thing, their reading of the text (that faith precedes regeneration) inevitably ends up in such a direction. In contrast, it is the Calvinist who is exegeting the text according to its proper grammatical structure. All of these benefits, faith included, come from the fountain of regeneration, not the other way around.<sup>41</sup> The same principle is evident in 1 John 5:18, “We know that everyone who has been born of God [γεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ; perfect passive participle] does not keep on sinning [οὐκ ἁμαρτάνει; present active indicative], but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.” The reason one does not keep on sinning

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41. “We have therefore a whole catalogue of virtues – belief that Jesus is the Christ, overcoming the world, abstinence from sin, self-control, incapacity to sin, freedom from the touch of the evil one, doing righteousness, love to God and one’s neighbour. And they are all the fruit of regeneration.” Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 102.

(which is surely a faith involved deed) is because one has already been born again. Reymond states, “Though he does not say so in so many words, it is surely appropriate, because of his earlier pattern of speech in 1 John 3:9, to understand him to mean that the cause behind one’s not sinning is God’s regenerating activity.” Therefore, John’s “established pattern of speech would suggest that he intended to say that God’s regenerating activity is the *cause* of one’s believing that Jesus is the Christ, and conversely that such faith is the effect of that regenerating work.”<sup>42</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, these passages teach that regeneration precedes and brings about the believer’s faith. Schreiner makes two observations which have been seen,

First, in every instance the verb “born” (*gennaō*) is in the perfect tense, denoting an action that precedes the human actions of practicing righteousness, avoiding sin, loving, or believing. Second, no evangelical would say that before we are born again we must practice righteousness, for such a view would teach works-righteousness. Nor would we say that first we avoid sinning, and then are born of God, for such a view would suggest that human works cause us to be born of God. Nor would we say that first we show great love for God, and then he causes us to be born again. No, it is clear that practicing righteousness, avoiding sin, and loving are all the consequences or results of the new birth. But if this is the case, then we must interpret 1 John 5:1 in the same way, for the structure of the verse is the same as we find in the texts about practicing righteousness (1 John 2:29), avoiding sin (1 John 3:9), and loving God (1 John 4:7). It follows, then, that 1 John 5:1 teaches that first God grants us new life and then we believe Jesus is the Christ.<sup>43</sup>

Concerning these passages in 1 John, John Murray also concludes,

It should be specially noted that even faith that Jesus is the Christ is the effect of regeneration. This is, of course, a clear implication of John 3: 3-8. But John the apostle here takes pains to make that plain. Regeneration is the beginning of all

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42. Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 709.

43. Thomas R. Schreiner, “Does Regeneration Necessarily Precede Conversion?” available from <http://www.9marks.org/ejournal/does-regeneration-necessarily-precede-conversion>; accessed 6 July 2008; internet.

saving grace *in us*, and all saving grace in exercise on our part proceeds from the fountain of regeneration. We are not born again by faith or repentance or conversion; we repent and believe because we have been regenerated. No one can say in truth that Jesus is the Christ except by regeneration of the Spirit and that is one of the ways by which the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ. The embrace of Christ in faith is the first evidence of regeneration and only thus may we know that we have been regenerated.<sup>44</sup>

Schreiner and Murray are exactly right and consequently these texts not only support the Calvinists position regarding the *ordo salutis* but equally exclude the Arminian position.

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44. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 103.