

ARTICLE 12 / RE 7,8,9

Regeneration is the work of God alone

John 3:3 2 Corinthians 4:6 5:17 Ephesians 5:14	This conversion is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, the making alive, so highly spoken of in the Scriptures, which God works in us without us. But this regeneration is by no means brought about only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a mode of operation that, after God has done His part, it remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not regenerated, converted or not converted. It is, however, clearly a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvellous, mysterious, and inexpressible work.
John 5:25 Romans 4:17 Philippians 2:13	According to Scripture inspired by the Author of this work, regeneration is not inferior in power to creation or the raising of the dead. Hence all those in whose hearts God works in this amazing way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe. And then the will so renewed is not only acted upon and moved by God but, acted upon by God, the will itself also acts. Therefore man himself is rightly said to believe and repent through the grace he has received.

In the previous Article we have learned how God brings about the conversion of man, namely, by infusing into man new qualities — qualities like those with which he was first created but which he lost through his fall into sin. Without the infusion of these new qualities man remains dead in sin.

It is important to stress again the fact that by nature we are dead in sin. Unless we acknowledge this fact we cannot acknowledge the fact that our conversion is the work of God alone; which is the specific intent of this Article. If we entertain notions that fallen man retains some ability to do good, we will view our conversion either as our own act, or at least an act which we instigate and in which we cooperate.

The terms or phrases that Scripture uses to describe the conversion of man make it clear that conversion is entirely a work of God. Conversion is called *regeneration* (cf. Titus 3:5), which literally means *rebirth*. Just as our birth is rightly described in Scripture as the mysterious and marvellous work of God (cf. Psalm 139:13-16), so our rebirth is the work of God. Just as a man cannot decide to be born and just as he cannot participate in his conception and birth, so a man cannot decide to be reborn or participate in the conception of new life.

Only those who acknowledge that they are dead in sin will acknowledge that conversion is the work of God alone.

Scripture also speaks of man's conversion as *a new creation* (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15.) Just as God creates new physical life where no life existed before, so God creates new spiritual life in fallen man who is dead in sin. Just as man played no role in his creation, so man plays no role in his recreation.

Conversion is also referred to in Scripture as *the raising from the dead and the making alive* (cf. Romans 6:4, 13; 8:11). A dead man cannot request or cooperate in his physical resurrection. In like manner, one who is spiritually dead can neither request nor cooperate in his spiritual resurrection.

These terms for man's conversion teach us that the work of conversion is a work of God alone. It is a work that God accomplishes *in us* and *without us*. We are completely passive in this divine work of creating new spiritual life.

Man plays no role in his birth or creation. In like manner, man plays no role in his rebirth or recreation.

Having said this, we should explain that the word conversion can be used in different ways. At times the word *conversion* is used to describe the initial and definitive act of God whereby He gives life to those who are by nature dead, which occurs once and at once, never to be repeated. For the seed of regeneration or conversion is an imperishable seed (cf. 1 Peter 1:23). This is how the word *conversion* is used in this Article of the *Canons*. At other times this word is used to describe the progressive act of spiritual renewal, which is accomplished throughout the life of the saints. This is the way this word is used earlier in the *Canons of Dort* (cf. I,16) and in the *Heidelberg Catechism* (Q&A 88).

We may, therefore, distinguish between the conception of this new life, and the growth of this new life. A child is suddenly born into this world, but he is not born mature. He will grow physically and intellectually. In a similar way the elect are at some moment given spiritual life where no spiritual life existed before. This is their initial conversion to God. But having been reborn, they are not yet mature. At first they are fed the milk of the gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:2). Through continued

In conversion, we may distinguish between the conception and the growth of new life.

spiritual nourishment they mature to Christian manhood (cf. Ephesians 4:13). This describes their on-going conversion to God.

When we say that conversion is entirely a work of God *within us* and *without us* we refer to our initial conversion. A person is incapable of initiating or participating

Initial conversion is a work of God within us and without us.

in his spiritual conception and rebirth. But the ongoing conversion of man is a work in which man participates. It is a work of God *within us* and *with us*. As a young Christian matures, he takes an increasingly active role in his spiritual growth. He begins to study the Scripture, and he prays for the illumination of the Holy Spirit. He begins to uncover new truths in the Scripture, and begins to apply them to his faith and conduct. Having been worked upon by God, he himself begins to work.

In this sense, the man who is passive in His initial conversion to God becomes active in his on-going conversion. This is the thought the fathers of Dort express in this Article when they write, *“And then the will so renewed is not only acted upon and moved by God but, acted upon by God, the will itself also acts. Therefore man himself is rightly said to believe and repent through the grace he has received.”*

Ongoing conversion is a work of God within us and with us.

Arminians believe that initial conversion is a work of man.

This does not mean that man’s on-going conversion can be considered man’s own work, for it always remains the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet the converted man becomes an active participant in his on-going conversion.

The Arminians differ from us greatly regarding man’s role in his initial conversion to God. They believe that man decides whether he will be converted to God or not. This is completely in line with what we have learned so far of them. They deny that God elects to save anyone, but maintain that man himself elects to be saved. In like manner, it is not God who chooses to convert some, and not to convert others. To the contrary, it is man who decides whether or not he will be converted to God.

We read of their position in **REJECTION OF ERRORS, III/IV, 9:**

Error:

Grace and free will are partial causes which together work the beginning of conversion. In the order of these causes grace does not precede the working of the will. God does not effectually help the will of man to come to conversion until the will of man moves itself and determines to do this.

Refutation:

The early church long ago condemned this doctrine of the Pelagians according to the words of the Apostle, *So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy*, Romans 9:16. Also, *For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?* 1 Corinthians 4:7. And: *for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure*. Philippians 2:13

The Arminians believe that God is willing to help man in his struggle against sin and in his pursuit of holiness. He will assist them in their conversion. But He will not assist anyone unless that person first wills to be converted. A man must first choose to accept Christ in his heart before Christ will enter his heart and help him.

A very clear statement of the Arminian position is found in a novel wherein a mature Christian woman explains to a young girl why God does not dwell in everyone's heart.

*“God is such a gentleman that He will never come into a place unless He's invited. So He only lives in the hearts of the men and women who open the door to that little place down inside them. ... God wants to make His home with us. But He waits patiently and never beats down doors. You see, there's only one key to the door of every heart, and we're the only ones who possess it. God may be all powerful, but on the other hand, that's one thing God can't do —force open our doors. ...God wants to live in everybody's heart, and I hope some day He will, I don't know. But for now He only lives where the doors have been opened from the inside.”*⁹⁸

The Arminians make God's will subject to man's will. Man must act *first*, and *then* God can act. God's will is not sovereign, but is dependent upon the will of man. The initiative in man's conversion lies with man, not God.

The fathers have quoted a number of texts in their refutation which show that God is the one who initiates our conversion. God says, *“I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion. So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.”* (Romans 9:15,16). God does not have compassion upon men because man wills, but because God wills. God's will is sovereign, not man's.

Man must take the initiative in conversion, say the Arminians.

Paul also said, *“For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had*

⁹⁸ Michael Phillips and Judith Pella, *Daughter of Grace (The Journals of Corrie Belle Holister, Book 2)*, Bethany House Publications, 1990, p. 177-178.

not received it?” (1 Corinthians 4:7). In the context, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for becoming proud, as though they had accomplished something that others did not. He informs them that they were what they were because of the grace of God, and not

“For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”

because of anything in themselves. Do they have faith, while others do not? That is not their doing. It is a gift of God (cf. Ephesians 2:8). Are they faithful in their walk of life, bearing much good fruit? That is not their own doing, but the work of Christ in them (cf. John 15:5,6). By nature they are no different than any others who are dead in sins. That they are different is to be ascribed to God, who causes them to differ through the grace of regeneration.

Paul wrote elsewhere, “*for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*” (Philippians 2:13). We ourselves possess neither the will or desire, nor the ability to do what pleases God. Both must be worked in us by God.

Scripture also shows that the Arminians are incorrect when they present man as the initiator of God’s grace and favour towards him. Paul wrote to the Philippians that he was “*confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.*” (Philippians 1:6). Paul attributes the beginning of their spiritual life to God, not to the Philippians themselves.

Christ said, “*You did not choose Me, but I chose you...*” (John 15:16). Any choices we make are subsequent to God’s choice in Christ.

“You did not choose Me, but I chose you....”

James wrote: “*Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.*” (1:18). James says that it was God who chose to give us birth. He refers, not to physical birth, but to the spiritual rebirth that is accomplished through the preaching of the Word. Our rebirth, our regeneration, our conversion is the result of *God’s own will*, not the result of our will.

All those whom God has elected will certainly, unfailingly, and effectually be converted.

The conversion of man, say the fathers, is a “*most supernatural, most powerful work.... According to Scripture inspired by the Author of this work, regeneration is not inferior in power to creation or the raising of the dead. Hence all those in whose hearts God works in this amazing way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe.*” We have seen now that man’s conversion is the result of God’s will which He established before the foundation of the world. He wills to convert those whom He has elected. Now man is not

able to conquer God’s gracious will. All those whom God has elected will certainly, unfailingly, and effectually be converted. There are no if’s, but’s or maybe’s about their conversion. For God will powerfully yet pleasantly bend their will so that they are converted.

The Arminians deny this sovereign power of God in conversion. We read of this denial in the **REJECTION OF ERRORS, III/IV, 7 and 8:**

<p>Error:</p>	<p>The grace whereby we are converted to God is only a gentle advising. This manner of working which consists in advising is the most noble manner in the conversion of man and is most in harmony with man's nature. There is no reason why this advising grace alone should not be sufficient to make the natural man spiritual. Indeed, God does not bring about the consent of the will except through this moral persuasion. The power of the divine working surpasses the working of Satan, in that God promises eternal while Satan promises only temporal goods.</p>
<p>Refutation:</p>	<p>This is entirely Pelagian and contrary to the whole Scripture, which teaches beyond this moral persuasion yet another, far more powerful and divine manner of the working of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of man: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." Ezekiel 36:26.</p>
<p>Error:</p>	<p>In regenerating man God does not use the powers of His omnipotence so as to forcefully and unfailingly bend man's will to faith and conversion. Even if all the works of grace have been accomplished which God employs to convert man and even if God intends His regeneration and wills to regenerate him, man may yet so resist God and the Holy Spirit, and indeed often does so resist, that he entirely prevents his regeneration. It therefore remains in man's power to be regenerated or not.</p>
<p>Refutation:</p>	<p>This is nothing less than the denial of all the efficacy of God's grace in our conversion, and the subjecting of the working of Almighty God to the will of man. It is contrary to the apostles, who teach that we <i>believe, according to the working of His mighty power</i>, Ephesians 1:19, pray that our God would fulfil all the good pleasure of His goodness and the</p>

Refutation:
(continued)

work of faith with power, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, and declare that His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, 2 Peter 1:3.

According to the Arminians, God's role in the conversion of man can be likened to the power a parent has to correct a disobedient teenager, or the power an elder or minister in the church has to lead back one of the flock who has withdrawn from the church. Parents can only explain to a teenager why it is wrong for him to act as he does. But they cannot change his thoughts or desires. In a similar way, elders can only expound the will of God from Scripture to one who has gone astray, showing the fearful outcome of rejecting the grace of God. But they cannot work repentance in the heart.

The only power God exercises in conversion is the power of persuasion, say the Arminians.

God's role in the conversion of man, say the Arminians, is of the same nature as Satan's role in the rebellion of man. The only power that God and Satan exercise over man is the power of persuasion. The Arminians acknowledge that God's power of persuasion is greater, but only because He has something better to offer man. God is able to grant eternal good, while Satan can only grant temporal good. Satan can give things like earthly riches and power, but these are short lived. God, however, can give heavenly riches and glory that endure forever and ever. This is God's only advantage over Satan.

No amount of persuasion can bring a spiritually dead man to life.

It was the Arminian's optimistic view of man's abilities that laid the foundation of this idea. For they felt that it would be ignoble, degrading, and dishonourable to man if God used anything more powerful than persuasion in his conversion. If someone uses force to compel a man to do something that he would be quite willing to do, that man might indignantly reply, "*You don't have to force me; you only need to ask! I'd be happy to do it!*" Similarly, a child who is capable of tying his own shoelaces might decline Mum's or Dad's offer to tie his shoes for him saying, "*No! I can tie my own shoes!*" He resents his parent's offer of help. It insults his abilities! In like manner, the Arminians believe that the Reformed insult the nature of man when they teach that God powerfully converts man. Man is fully capable of converting himself. They therefore believe that their doctrine of conversion "*is the most noble manner in the conversion of man and is most in harmony with man's nature.*"

God works conversion by renewing the dark mind and giving a new heart.

No amount of persuasion, however, can bring a spiritually dead man to life. The presentation of the truth is not sufficient to enable man to accept it. Paul clearly states that the natural man cannot accept spiritual truths. "*The natural man does not receive*

the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Only those in whose hearts the Spirit works are able to accept what Scripture says. The Spirit restores the mind of man and makes him capable of understanding the truth that he would otherwise not understand or accept.

Scripture also teaches that understanding and accepting the truth is only possible when God renews the heart of man. Moses said to Israel of old, *“Yet the LORD has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear; to this very day.”* (Deuteronomy 29:4). But having said this, he immediately proclaimed the promise that God would grant this ability to know and to love God. *“The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”* (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Scripture teaches that men are converted, not through their own power, but through the mighty power of God.

This same promise was repeated to the people of Israel whose wilful rebellion against God had led to their exile into Babylon. God promised that the day would come when He would renew their heart so that His people would walk in faithfulness, which they were not capable of doing without God’s powerful work within them. God said, *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”* (Ezekiel 36:26-27). Elsewhere He said, *“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”* (Jeremiah 31:33). That the LORD would write the law in their minds and on their hearts implies more than just giving advice. He will make them understand what He requires, and He will make them want to do it.

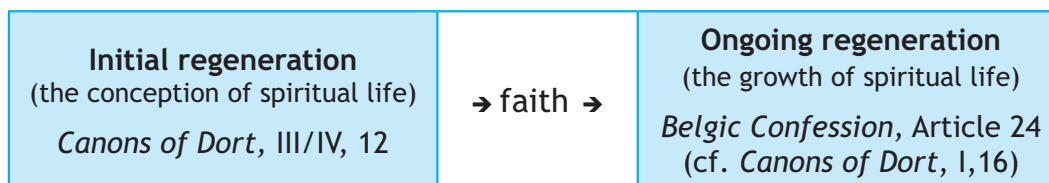
Does regeneration lead to faith, or does faith lead to regeneration?

The fathers have alluded to other texts as well—texts that speak of the mighty power God uses to work faith in our hearts, by which we come to know and accept the truth of God’s Word. Paul said that we *“believe, according to the working of His mighty power.”* (Ephesians 1:19). Faith, which is an integral part of our conversion to God, is worked in us by God’s power. It does not arise from any ability in us. Further, Paul prayed for the Thessalonians that God *“would fulfil all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power.”* (2 Thessalonians 1:11). Again, faith is depicted as the work of God that He fulfils through His power. Lastly, the fathers quote Peter, who declared that God’s *“divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.”* (2 Peter 1:3). The reference to *“all things that pertain to life and godliness”* must certainly include also the very conception of that new life, as well as its growth. This conception of new life is accomplished by God’s divine power. Regeneration is the work of God alone.

There is one other matter we would like to discuss in this Article. The fathers of Dort wrote, “Hence all those in whose hearts God works in this amazing way are certainly, unfaillingly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe.” Regeneration is presented here as the cause of faith. Or if you like, faith is here presented as the fruit of regeneration. In *Belgic Confession* Article 24 Guido de Brès wrote, “We believe that this true faith, worked in man by the hearing of God’s Word and by the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man.” In this place, faith is presented as the cause of regeneration. Or if you like, regeneration is the fruit of faith. Is this a contradiction? Which is correct?

There is no contradiction between the *Canons of Dort* and the *Belgic Confession*. Both are true. Earlier in this Article we mentioned that the word ‘conversion’ could be used in two different ways. This is also true of ‘regeneration’, a synonym of conversion. We can speak about the *starting point* of regeneration (the conception of new spiritual life) and we can speak about the *process* of regeneration (the growth of this new spiritual life). We can even speak about the *completion* of regeneration (the perfection of spiritual life—cf. Matthew 19:28).

There is a moment in a person’s life when new spiritual life is conceived. But that life is not immediately full grown. In this Article of the *Canons of Dort*, the fathers have in mind the conception of new life. Only those in whom new life has been conceived can come to faith. Article 24 of the *Belgic Confession*, however, is dealing with the growth of this new spiritual life, in which faith plays an important role. We can put this into a diagram:



QUESTIONS:

1. Which doctrine underlies the belief that conversion is the work of God alone?
2. What terms or phrases does Scripture use to highlight the fact that conversion is God’s work alone?
3. In what two ways can the word ‘conversion’ be used? Give evidence of these two ways from the Confessions.
4. In light of the distinction in the previous answer, describe what role man plays in his conversion. Does this mean, then, that conversion can in some way be attributed to man?
5. What do the Arminians believe concerning man’s role in his initial conversion? What do they believe concerning God’s role in ongoing conversion?
6. What effect does the Arminian doctrine of conversion have upon God’s sovereignty?

7. Refute from the Scripture the idea that man must take the initial step in his conversion.
8. Is there any uncertainty concerning the conversion of the elect? Why?
9. According to the Arminians, to what can God's role in the initial conversion of man be likened?
10. According to the Arminians:
 - a. what similarity is there between God's power over man and Satan's?
 - b. how can God's power over man be described?
 - c. in what way is God's power greater than Satan's?
11. Explain what the Arminians mean when they say that God's gentle advising "*is the most noble manner in the conversion of man and is most in harmony with man's nature.*"
12. Why is the presentation of the truth not sufficient to bring man to conversion? What two things must happen?
13. Prove from Scripture that God does exercise His power when working faith in man's heart.
14. Explain what might appear to be a contradiction concerning the order of faith and regeneration in the *Belgic Confession* and the *Canons of Dort*.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

15. In Ephesians 5:14 Paul says "*Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.*" If God must raise those who are spiritually dead, why are men commanded to "*arise from the dead*"?
16. Do texts such as John 5:25 and Romans 4:17 refer to conversion or to the resurrection? Explain why.