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**Paternoster:**  
*thinking faith*

# Does regeneration precede faith? The use of 1 John 5:1 as a proof text

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## Introduction

Calvinists disagree with Arminians and most other non-Calvinist evangelicals about the order of faith and regeneration, arguing that regeneration precedes faith (at least logically). A number of Calvinists have appealed to the Greek grammar of 1 John 5:1 as strong support for their view. Indeed, John Piper, who uses this grammatical argument, goes so far as to assert that, ‘This is the clearest text in the New Testament on the relationship between faith and the new birth.’<sup>1</sup> But the grammatical argument is completely invalid. This is of special concern because appeal to grammar tends to imply a more objective, and therefore weighty, argument that practically settles the issue of dispute. The purposes of this article are (1) to draw attention to the falsity of the argument and to explain why it is unsound, and (2) to counter a related non-grammatical argument that might be thought to rescue the underlying concern of the grammatical one, the claim that 1 John 5:1 implies that regeneration precedes faith. But before proceeding, it will be helpful to set the relevant part of the Greek text (1 John 5:1a) before us: Πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ χριστός, ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται (‘Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten of God’).<sup>2</sup>

## The grammatical argument for regeneration preceding faith in 1 John 5:1

The grammatical argument has to do with verb tense as it is used in 1 John 5:1a, and tends to come in two basic forms. Form 1 maintains that the combination of tenses establishes regeneration as preceding faith.<sup>3</sup> John Stott makes the argu-

1 John Piper, *Finally Alive: What Happens When We Are Born Again* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 118.

2 Translations of Scripture in this article are mine.

3 Representatives of this form of the argument include: John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John* (TNTC 19; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, rev. edn, 1988), 175; Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 3rd edn, 1979), 270 (3rd

ment in his commentary on 1 John: ‘The combination of present tense (ὁ πιστεύων ‘believes’) and perfect [γεγέννηται, ‘has been begotten’] 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>4</sup> Form 2 does not specifically mention the contrast of verb tenses (present tense vs. perfect tense), but without explicit mention of the present tense of the verse’s participle, invokes the indicative perfect tense verb of 1 John 5:1a (γεγέννηται) as establishing its action (regeneration) as prior to faith (which is after all the action indicated by the present participle of the verse).<sup>5</sup> Robert Peterson and Michael Williams state this form of the argument succinctly: ‘The perfect-tense verb in 1 John 5:1, “has been born,” indicates that the new birth is the cause of faith in Christ.’<sup>6</sup>

However, there are fatal problems with this argument in any form that render it invalid. First, some Greek grammarians now contend that Greek tense forms do not express time (except for perhaps the future tense), but only aspect.<sup>7</sup> If they are correct, it would negate the grammatical argument for faith preceding

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edn originally published in 1914 by T & T Clark); Piper, *Alive*, 118-19; idem, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, rev. and exp., 2003), 66-67; James R. White, *The Potter’s Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal of Norman Geisler’s Chosen But Free* (Amityville: Calvary Press, 2000), 287-88; Glen W. Barker, ‘1 John’, in Frank E. Gaebelin (ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 12: Hebrews-Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 293-358 (348); Mark A. Snoeberger, ‘The Logical Priority of Regeneration to Saving Faith in a Theological *Ordo Salutis*’, *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 7 (Fall 2002) 49-93 (81-83); A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1932-33, 1960), on 1 John 5:1 (accessed at <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/robertsons-word-pictures/>), who does not specifically mention the grammatical details of the argument but quotes Law’s conclusion, which assumes them. It should be noted that not all adherents to either form of the grammatical argument are necessarily Calvinists, but most are.

4 Stott, *ibid.*

5 Representatives of this form of the argument include: Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 188-89; Robert W. Yarborough, *1-3 John* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 269-70; Bruce A. Ware, ‘Divine Election to Salvation: Unconditional, Individual, and Infralapsarian’, in Chad Owen Brand (ed.), *Perspectives on Election: Five Views* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 1-58 (19-20); Thomas Schreiner, ‘Does Regeneration Necessarily Precede Conversion?’, [http://www.alliancenet.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526\\_CHID626244\\_CIID1731702,00.html](http://www.alliancenet.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526_CHID626244_CIID1731702,00.html); Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 5th edn, 1996), on 1 John 5:1.

6 Peterson and Williams, *Not Arminian*, 189.

7 See Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989, [2nd edn, 1993]); idem, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (London: Continuum, 2nd edn, 1999); K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach* (New York:

regeneration in 1 John 5:1. But this view of a timeless Greek verb system remains in the minority among scholars,<sup>8</sup> and I am inclined to agree with a more traditional approach, which is the perspective from which this article is written.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the present participle πιστεύων is a substantival participle, which functions as a noun.<sup>10</sup> The element of time tends to be diminished in substantival participles and can be lost altogether.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, present substantival par-

Peter Lang, 1994); Stanley E. Porter, Jeffrey T. Reed, and Matthew Brook O'Donnell, *Fundamentals of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Constantine R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

8 Campbell, *Aspect*, 29.

9 One critical but sometimes overlooked point in the debate about time in the Greek tenses is that 'both ancient and modern Greeks have unanimously affirmed that temporal significance is normally communicated by Greek verbs' (Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* [Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Nottingham: Apollos, 2010], 44; note their references to ancient Greek authors who commented on time in Greek verbs). If ancient authors writing in Greek considered themselves to normally be communicating time through their use of tense, then the fact that authorial intention determines meaning (a point that is itself disputed, but rightly is still probably the standard assumption of exegetes) demands that we regard Greek verbs as normally communicating time.

10 Martin M. Culy, *1, 2, 3 John: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor University, 2004), 56 (cf. 120), claims that it could equally be that πῶς is substantival and the participle is attributive in this type of construction, but he seems to have misconstrued the sources he cites for substantiation (F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1961], § 413.2; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* [Nashville: Broadman, 1934], 772-73). Closer inspection shows that they both support the participle as substantival. Nonetheless, in this article my comments about substantival participles with respect to time would largely apply to attributive participles as well (see the citation of Mounce in note 11 below). Indeed, both are a type of adjectival participle.

11 Grammarians who think that substantival participles have no time significance include Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 3rd edn, 1900), § 123; Porter, Reed, O'Donnell, *Fundamentals*, 110; cf. Porter, *Idioms*, 187-88. Less absolutely, James L. Boyer, 'The Classification of Participles: A Statistical Study', *Grace Theological Journal* 5.2 (1984) 163-179 (165-66), implies that present substantival participles specifically do not typically indicate temporal significance. On the other hand, while A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 3rd edn, 1919), notes that the articular participle 'sometimes loses much of its verbal force' (892) and regards the articular participle as clearly timeless, citing Mark 6:14's reference to ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτίζων (1111), and the present articular participle as especially so (1115), he illustrates the fact that participles can relate time relative to the main verb with a substantival present participle (1111). Similarly, Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 614 n. 1, specifies that the time element of participles applies principally to adverbial/circumstantial participles,

ticiples ‘identify by some characteristic or customary action or condition, and frequently are equivalent to a name or title.’<sup>12</sup> Thus, ὁ πιστεύων in 1 John 5:1a is probably roughly equivalent to ‘the believer’, characterizing its referent as a believer without any indication of when belief began. This could be devoid of any time significance whatsoever,<sup>13</sup> which would of course invalidate the grammatical argument we are criticizing. However, ὁ πιστεύων’s characterization of its referent by ongoing action and the conditional function of πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων<sup>14</sup> probably do imply some sort of time relationship to the main verb γηγένηται. But if so, then the grammatical argument for regeneration preceding faith is invalidated just as much if not more strongly.

If ὁ πιστεύων and γηγένηται are to be related temporally in some way, as seems likely, then the grammar actually suggests that believing and being begotten of God are portrayed as contemporaneous (or perhaps that believing precedes being begotten of God; see below). It is well recognized by most Greek

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implying that relative temporal significance *can* obtain in other types of participles, such as substantival ones. Later Wallace indicates explicitly that articular participles can bear a temporal significance relative to the main verb (625-26), as does B. M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 409. Even more positively, Campbell, *Aspect*, 122, states that the present substantival participle ‘is normally contemporaneous in time frame’ (with the main verb of the sentence). And according to William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 3rd edn, 2009), § 29.13, ‘The present and aorist participles have a relative time significance regardless of whether they are adverbial or adjectival.’ In my judgment, it seems that substantival participles do typically suggest time relative to the main verb to some extent because they identify on the basis of action, which usually will have some sort of natural temporal relationship to the action of the main verb. Nevertheless, there may be many exceptions, such as substantival participles that function as a mere name or title, and as with time even in the indicative, other factors from the context besides tense form help to determine time with respect to any participle; cf. Wallace, 514-16.

12 Boyer, *ibid.* Cf. Wallace, *Greek*, 629.

13 Indeed, Wallace, *Greek*, 523, points out that the present participle in the formulaic expression πᾶς + ὁ + present participle is routinely gnomic/atemporal. Keeping Wallace’s discussion of the gnomic present in mind (which follows Fanning, *Aspect*, 208-17), its occurrence in πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων is of the sort that is part of a statement that is true any time that the condition implied by πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων obtains (rather than speaking of an action that always obtains). But there is no reason to think that when the condition is true, then the action indicated by the participle necessarily bears no time relative to the main verb. Indeed, in the two other texts that use πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων (Acts 13:39; Rom 10:11) with the indicative, there is clearly a temporal relation. Interestingly, in both cases believing seems to be prior in some sense to the main verb.

14 On the use of substantival participles to convey conditionality, see Wallace, *Greek*, 688; Burton, *Tenses*, § 428. While Wallace notes that the future indicative is often used with the substantival participle for this, it seems clear that other indicative tenses can be used as well.

grammarians that Greek indicative verbs normally indicate so-called ‘absolute time’ or ‘independent time’, that is, time relative to the author’s/speaker’s own time frame, the time of writing or utterance, while participles normally indicate time relative to the time of the main verb.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, the perfect indicative ‘describes an event that, completed in the past... has results existing in the present time (i.e., in relation to the time of the speaker),’<sup>16</sup> while the present tense participle normally suggests the action of the participle as contemporaneous

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15 See e.g., Wallace, *Greek*, 497-98, 614; James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winberry, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1979), 76, 132 (though their comments about the temporal significance of participles concern adverbial participles specifically); H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955), §§ 168, 202; Burton, *Tenses*, §§ 6-7, 118-154, passim; Fanning, *Aspect*, 406-08; Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, *Greek*, §§ 318, 339; Robertson, *Greek*, 1111; Albert Rijksbaron, *The Syntax and the Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 3rd edn, 2002), §§ 3, 36; Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar for Colleges* (New York: American Book Company, 1920), §§ 1850-51, 1872; Jeremy Duff, *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 3rd edn, 2005), §§ 14.3, 18.5; Mounce, *Greek*, §§ 25.18, 28.17. It should be noted that many of these authorities might have adverbial participles especially in mind. But the impression one gets from the grammars is that when substantival participles convey time at all, then they normally convey time relative to the main verb, for the relative temporal significance of participles is often addressed in general comments about participles, some grammars state that participles never express absolute time (Robertson, 1101b; Dana and Mantey, § 202), some grammars use substantival participles to illustrate the relative temporal nuance of participles, and some grammars explicitly state that substantival participles can convey relative time while others make statements that indicate or entail that they normally do; cf. note 11 above. Among the authorities mentioned above, Burton, Smyth, and Dana and Mantey are careful to state that they regard Greek participles as completely timeless, with any time significance implied by context rather than tense form. Nonetheless, they recognize that the action of Greek participles is most often relative in time to the main verb. Indeed, Smyth asserts that the present participle rarely is used for action that is not coincident with the leading verb (§ 1872a). Robertson, 1101b, 1111, is perhaps most accurate in saying that while participles are timeless, the tense of the participle *suggests* (presumably, rather than denotes or demands) relative time. On the other hand, Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (trans. Joseph Smith; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1963), §§ 261-68, 371-72, contends that aorist and present participles do not express any type of time. Interestingly, even Campbell, *Aspect*, recognizes that participles typically carry a temporal nuance relative to their leading verb (72, 94), and specifically that present substantival participles normally have a nuance of contemporaneous time relative to their leading verb (122).

16 Wallace, *Greek*, 573, giving a typical description of the force of the perfect tense in the indicative. He further notes that, ‘There is basic agreement among grammarians about the force of the perfect (viz., that two elements are involved, completed action and resultant state)’ (n. 1). But he must be excluding those who deny that the Greek tenses grammaticalize time.

with the action of the main verb.<sup>17</sup> Thus, unless it actually portrays believing as preceding regeneration (again, see below), the grammar of 1 John 5:1a most naturally portrays the action of the verse's substantival participle (believing) as contemporaneous with the action of the perfect indicative verb (regeneration and its resultant state).

Even if one were to posit that substantival participles normally convey absolute time, or that they do so occasionally and 1 John 5:1a contains an instance of such a phenomenon,<sup>18</sup> it would not imply that the time of the participle and main verb would be related through the author's viewpoint in such a way that

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17 See note 15 above. It is important to understand that Greek tenses subjectively communicate the action of the verb according to the author's choice of how he wants to portray the action as opposed to necessarily presenting the objective nature of the action; see e.g., *ibid.*, 498, 502-04; Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, § 241. On occasion, the present participle can be used with time subsequent to the main verb, but this is clearly indicated by context and not suggested by tense form, and apparently involves the participle standing after the main verb (see Burton, *Tenses*, §§ 119, 130; Robertson, *Greek*, 892i, 1115-16γ; cf. Wallace, *Greek*, 626). It also appears that most of these express purpose, and are not truly of subsequent time (see esp. Robertson and Wallace). Wallace gives the impression that this usage only occurs with purpose. All of this practically disqualifies the present participle of 1 John 5:1a from indicating time subsequent to the perfect indicative verb of the verse. And even in the exceedingly unlikely event that it could be considered a present participle of subsequent action, the grammatical argument for regeneration preceding faith would still be undercut, because any such conclusion would be indicated by context and by no means tense form. I.e., it would still be illegitimate to say things like 'the tense(s) here indicate(s) that regeneration causes faith'.

18 The question of whether substantival participles, when conveying time at all, normally convey relative or absolute time is a difficult one. Usage of substantival participles with absolute time is rarely contemplated by the grammars and might be largely limited to occasional occurrence with the aorist articular participle. Robertson, *Greek*, 1114, notes this phenomenon as occasional in the aorist articular participle but does not mention it in the present; cf. Boyer, 'Participles', 166, who simply notes a seeming instance of this with an aorist substantival participle. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, §§ 266-67, also notes the phenomenon in the aorist articular participle, and is in fact more optimistic about its frequency. But this seems tied into his questionable view that participles have no typical time significance relative to their leading verbs (cf. note 15 above) and his observation that such participles are not (grammatically) subordinated to the verb. However, this observation, though true, does not undo the leading verb's typical role of setting the time frame of the sentence (on this role, see Rijksbaron, *Syntax*, § 3). Zerwick's own citation of an anarthrous aorist participle in Acts 1:8 that is not grammatically subordinated to the leading verb undermines his point, for it is clear that its time is relatively antecedent to the main verb in the future tense rather than merely future from the absolute point of view. Zerwick seems to indicate that the present participle can be used of the absolute future apart from relative time, but he gives no example or documentation for this idiosyncratic view; cf. note 17 above. In my view, substantival participles with temporal significance normally suggest relative time (see note 15 above), but an ancient author could readily take the viewpoint of absolute time with them if and when it suited his purpose, a phenomenon that must be determined from context.

a present participle, located in the author's present, would necessarily be preceded in time by a perfect indicative, located in the speaker's past and present. For the present tense related to the time of the author/speaker does not limit the present tense action to the author's/speaker's present, but portrays the action as taking place in the present without any indication of when the action started or if or when it might end. Consequently, whether the time of the present participle is relative to the perfect indicative in 1 John 5:1a or conveys absolute time, the grammar of the text leaves the order of faith and regeneration unaddressed (unless it suggests that faith precedes regeneration; once again, see below), nullifying the grammatical argument for regeneration preceding faith.

However, this does not mean that the grammar would preclude faith or regeneration preceding the other. For as Daniel Wallace has observed, the contemporaneity signaled by the present participle 'is often quite broadly conceived', and in any case, allows for logical priority even when the actions in view are chronologically simultaneous.<sup>19</sup> But this does mean that the grammar itself would not suggest any priority, and that if any indication of priority is present in the text, it must be derived from context rather than grammar.

On the other hand, it may be that the grammar actually suggests that believing precedes regeneration. Ernest De Witt Burton observes that with the present participle, 'The action of the verb and that of the participle may be of the same extent (Mark 16:20), but are not necessarily so. Oftener the action of the verb falls within the period covered by the participle (Acts 10:44).'<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Wallace observes that the present participle 'can be broadly antecedent to the time of the main verb, especially if it is articular (and thus adjectival; cf. Mark 6:14; Eph. 2:13).'<sup>21</sup> And an articular present participle is exactly what we have in 1 John 5:1a.

Moreover, I have already noted that the construction of 1 John 5:1a containing the participle ('whoever believes'; πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων) has a conditional function. The conditional sense it yields for the sentence carries a generic idea that conveys that if anyone, whoever it might be, believes, then that person has been begotten of God.<sup>22</sup> Now since conditional ideas most often indicate a cause-

19 Wallace, *Greek*, 614-15.

20 Burton, *Tenses*, § 119, though recall that he would deny temporal reference in the substantival participle.

21 Wallace, *Greek*, 625-26. Present participles can also sometimes express action that is more strictly antecedent to the main verb even if this is not their normal temporal significance; see e.g., Burton, *Tenses*, §§ 127, 131; Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, *Greek*, § 339; Robertson, *Greek*, 892, 1115; Smyth, *Greek*, § 1872a.1.

22 The participle with the definite article can alone communicate a generic, conditional sense; see together, Wallace, *Greek*, 523, 688; Burton, *Tenses*, § 428; W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3rd edn, 2000), s.v. ὁ, 2.c.β. The addition of the adjective πᾶς ('every, all'), which modifies the substantival participle, strengthens the generic conditional. This is why, with a number of translations, I have translated πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων as 'whoever believes' rather than more literally as 'everyone who believes', though the latter is also a fine translation.



effect relationship between the protasis (cause; in this case, believing) and the apodosis (effect; in this case, regeneration), the conditional sense of 1 John 5:1a further strengthens the case that the verse's grammar suggests that faith precedes regeneration.<sup>23</sup>

But this is not definitive. Wallace makes the important point that the protasis and apodosis of a conditional sentence can relate in ways other than cause and effect.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, they can relate as evidence and inference (i.e., the protasis serves as evidence of the apodosis) or as semantically equivalent parts of the sentence. The evidence-inference relationship is the alternative that is relevant here. For it is conceivable that faith evidences that one has been begotten of God. Yet even if 1 John 5:1a were an evidence-inference conditional, this would not resolve the question of the order of faith and regeneration, for faith could serve as the evidence of regeneration either because faith causes regeneration<sup>25</sup> or because regeneration causes faith.

Now one of the main themes of 1 John is the assurance of salvation, and therefore, evidences of salvation, of eternal life, of belonging to God (salvific sonship/begotten-of-God status), etc.<sup>26</sup> Apparently, certain members of the Christian community John addressed in the epistle had come to hold heretical views, leave the community, and challenge its members' confidence in apostolic doctrine and their standing as genuine children of God (see e.g., 1 John 2:18 – 3:3; 5:13). So John identifies various grounds for assurance by which his audience can know that they, who continue in John's teaching, are genuine children of God, who therefore have the divine approval and the eternal life it bestows. The various 'begotten of God' statements in the epistle serve this purpose of giv-

23 Cf. Wallace, *Greek*, 682, who observes that the cause-effect relationship is often tacitly assumed by interpreters. I would add that this is because it is the most common type of conditional, and the one that an author would tend to expect his readers to assume absent contextual indications to the contrary; cf. Rijksbaron, *Syntax*, § 24.1.

24 See Wallace, *Greek*, 682-84, for his valuable discussion.

25 It should be noted that the language of faith 'causing' regeneration is imprecise language comparable to speaking of faith saving or justifying or causing justification. E.g., to speak of faith justifying us is really to speak of God justifying us in response to our faith. Faith does not technically justify us, but because God justifies us in response to our faith, we can loosely speak of faith justifying us. Similarly, when we speak of faith causing regeneration, this is imprecise language for God regenerating us in response to our faith. Thus, we can speak of justification by faith and regeneration by faith. It is God alone who justifies, regenerates, and saves. But that does not mean that he does not do these things in response to human faith.

26 On this theme in 1 John, which is regarded as concerning the epistle's primary purpose, see e.g., I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 14-15, 54-55; Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 2-3, 15-16, 27, 33-34. Indeed, this has spawned an entire book on the theme in the epistle, which also regards it as 'the predominant theme of the entire letter' (1): Christopher C. Bass, *That You May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John* (New American Commentary Studies in Bible and Theology 5; Nashville: B & H, 2008). Cf. the theme of Law's (*Tests*) influential study of 1 John.

ing assurance to John's audience, including 1 John 5:1 (see also 2:29, 3:9; 4:7, 5:4, 5:18). Hence, the verse's implicit conditional sense likely bears an evidence-inference import.

However, this does not rule out it also bearing a cause-effect sense. As Wallace observes, the semantic categories of conditions can overlap.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it is practically self-evident that the observable presence of a cause automatically gives evidence of the effect. In other words, if one knows that A causes B, then observing A would provide evidence of the existence of B. If faith yields regeneration, then one can be assured that those who believe have been regenerated. On balance, it seems that both cause-effect and evidence-inference relationships are in play here, and thus, that, all things being equal, the grammar of the verse actually hints faintly that faith precedes regeneration. That is to say, 1 John 5:1a's grammar itself gives some slight support for taking the verse to *reflect* the view that faith precedes regeneration. But this is far from saying that the grammar demands faith as prior to regeneration or that it was intended to affirm this specifically or even that it precludes the opposite order. Yet, one thing is certain: the grammar gives no positive support to the claim that the verse teaches that regeneration precedes faith.

We can demonstrate both the falsity of the view that the tenses of the verbs in 1 John 5:1a necessarily indicate that regeneration precedes faith and the fact that present participles can be at least logically antecedent to their main verbs by looking just nine verses later, in 1 John 5:10b, where the same basic combination of tenses is used: 'Whoever does not believe [present substantival participle] God has made [perfect indicative] him a liar, because he has not believed [perfect indicative] in the testimony which he has testified [perfect indicative] concerning his son' (ὁ μὴ πιστεύων τῷ θεῷ ψεύστην πεποίηκεν αὐτόν, ὅτι οὐκ ἐπίστευκεν εἰς τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν μεμαρτύρηκεν ὁ θεὸς περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ). Here the negated present substantival participle, 'whoever does not believe', logically precedes the perfect indicative, 'has made' (God a liar). In time, they are probably roughly coincident. But it is clear that one makes God a liar (i.e., makes him out to be a liar, implies that he is a liar) by not believing. The disbelief begins the action of making God out to be a liar and remains concurrent with it throughout its occurrence. The disbeliever makes God a liar as a result of not believing him. The next clause states this logical connection explicitly: '*because* he has not believed...' (emphasis mine). John 3:18 furnishes another clear example: 'but whoever does not believe [present substantival participle] has been condemned [perfect indicative] already because he has not believed [perfect indicative] in the name of the one and only son of God' (ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται, ὅτι μὴ ἐπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ). Again the text tells us explicitly that the action of the present participle (disbelieving) is the cause of the action of the perfect indicative (condemning). Further examples could be produced,<sup>28</sup> but

27 Wallace, *Greek*, 684.

28 See e.g., Exod. 3:14; Num. 14:14; 24:9; 1 Sam. 14:22; Prov 28:18; Isa. 14:14, 22:3; Ezek. 7:4; Tob 12:2; 1 Macc 5:13, 10:39; Mark 14:42; Rom. 13:2; Heb. 7:6.

these should be sufficient to prove the point that the tenses of 1 John 5:1a do not necessarily indicate that regeneration precedes faith, and indeed, that the construction used in the verse can be used when the action of the present participle precedes the action of the perfect indicative in some sense.

As mentioned earlier, one form (# 2) of the argument we are criticizing does not explicitly appeal to the relationship between the present tense participle and the perfect indicative in 1 John 5:1a, but only to the perfect tense verb 'has been begotten' (γενένηται). It is hard to know for sure if there is an implicit appeal here to the combination of the tenses in 1 John 5:1a. One would think so, since the point of the argument is to state a particular relationship between faith (expressed in the present participle) and regeneration (expressed in the perfect indicative verb). If so, then form 2 of the argument is invalidated by the observations we have already made.

But if not, then basic grammatical considerations still render form 2 of the argument invalid. For as mentioned earlier, if Greek verbs indicate time at all (and I agree with the many scholars who think that they typically do in the indicative), indicative verbs indicate time relative to the author's/speaker's time of writing/speaking, not time that is relative to other elements of the sentence. Moreover, examples such as 1 John 5:10b (discussed above) apply just as much to form 2 of the argument, showing that it is just as untenable as form 1. There may be other arguments that can be employed to support 1 John 5:1 as a proof text for regeneration preceding or causing faith, but an appeal to grammar in the matter is not a reasonable one. It is completely baseless to claim that the perfect tense of 1 John 5:1a indicates that regeneration precedes or causes faith.

### **The argument from epistolary context for regeneration preceding faith in 1 John 5:1**

Despite the fallaciousness of the grammatical argument we have been countering, one might try to argue that its underlying point is rescued by the presence of other passages in 1 John indicating the results of regeneration (2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:4, 5:18).<sup>29</sup> Two of these use the same construction as 5:1a, viz. πᾶς + present substantival participle + perfect passive indicative (2:29, 4:7), with the present substantival participle identifying a result of regeneration in some sense. But this is not compelling in favor of 1 John 5:1a indicating faith as a result of regeneration for several reasons.

(1) It does not follow that because 1 John identifies other phenomena as the result of regeneration that every phenomenon it connects with regeneration is its result. It could equally be that another phenomenon associated with regeneration is actually the cause of the latter or without any causal relationship to it.

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this is often combined with the grammatical argument. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 101-04, is noteworthy for employing a form of this argument without appealing to the grammatical argument.

(2) The argument in question is one based on context, yet there is a specific, key contextual factor involved in each of the other passages that suggests some sort of causative role for regeneration but is not present in 1 John 5:1a, namely, that God has a certain quality (whatever it is in each specific case), and that therefore, the one who is begotten of him, his child, will be like his father. It is the issue of family resemblance so to speak (cf. the old saying, 'like father, like son'). Central to each of the passages indicating regeneration as the cause of some quality in the believer is the notion of causal similarity between father and child.<sup>30</sup> This is not the case in 5:1a. The issue there is not the believer being like God the Father in believing in Jesus. The Father does not believe in Christ in a saving way as humans do.

(3) As already noted, John's overriding concern in the epistle with respect to regeneration was to provide assurance to his readers who were faithful to his teaching that they were in fact begotten of God, and thus were children of God in possession of eternal life. Therefore, the emphasis of the 'begotten of God' statements is on giving evidence of regeneration, not particularly on the causative nature of regeneration. The effects of regeneration are indicated as such because whatever regeneration causes serves automatically as sure evidence of regeneration, giving assurance of sonship and eternal life to the one possessing the qualities produced by regeneration. But as noted earlier, the cause of regeneration would serve the same function. This point is underscored by the perfect tense used of regeneration in the 'begotten of God' statements, since the perfect tense here almost certainly emphasizes the present regenerate state of the believer (an intensive or resultative perfect),<sup>31</sup> as is acknowledged even by some advocates of 1 John 5:1 as a proof text for regeneration preceding faith.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the perfect tense in 1 John 5:1a underscores John's interest in addressing the present state of believers rather than the causal relationship between faith and regeneration.

(4) Faith is relatively unique among the other phenomena related to regeneration in the epistle, for it also is depicted as causing these other qualities not to mention additional ones. John depicts faith as yielding righteousness, obedience, saving knowledge of God, love, victory over the world, and spiritual life.<sup>33</sup> Most critically, John presents faith as the means by which believers receive spiritual life (1 John 5:10-13; cf. 2:23-25; 5:20),<sup>34</sup> the inception of which is regeneration. This is a prevalent theme in Johannine theology (John 3:15-16, 36; 4:14; 5:24, 40; 6:47, 51-54; 20:31), not to mention the New Testament generally. But if spiritual life is received by faith, then that places faith at least logically prior to

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30 On the notion of father/son resemblance in these passages, see Marshall's treatment of them in his commentary (*Epistles of John*), especially on 2:29.

31 On the intensive/resultative perfect, see Wallace, *Greek*, 574-76.

32 See e.g., Yarborough, *1-3 John*, 269-70; Snoeberger, 'Regeneration', 82-83.

33 See Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 54-55, 241-42; Yarborough, *1-3 John*, 72-75, 289-91.

34 On 1 John 5:10-13, see Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 241-42; Yarborough, *1-3 John*, 289-91; on 1 John 2:23-25 and 5:20, see Marshall, 159-61, 253-55, respectively.

the bestowal of spiritual life, and thus, logically prior to regeneration, which is the initial bestowal of spiritual life.<sup>35</sup> In my opinion, John would have expected readers familiar with his teaching that spiritual life comes by faith to know that regeneration is granted by faith, and to understand 1 John 5:1a accordingly, though his intention was not to specifically make this point, but again, to give assurance of sonship and eternal life to his audience of believers.

(5) John 1:12-13 is determinative in establishing faith as prior to regeneration in John's theology.<sup>36</sup> John 1:12 indicates that people become children of God by faith. That is, upon believing, God gives them the right to become something that they were not prior to believing – children of God. John 1:13 then clarifies that they become children of God not from human ancestry (that is the significance of 'not of blood, nor of the desire of the flesh [which equates to sexual desire that might lead to procreation], nor of the will of a husband [who was thought to be in charge of sexual/procreative activity]'), but from God, describing their becoming children of God as being begotten of God. 'Becoming children of God' and 'being begotten of God' are parallel expressions referring to the same phenomenon. Indeed, the same type of paralleling of being begotten of God and being children of God occurs in 1 John 2:29 – 3:2 and 3:9-10, while 5:1 (of all verses!) uses 'the one who has been begotten of him [God]' (τὸν γεγεννημένον ἐξ αὐτοῦ) as a virtual synonym for 'child of God', leading several translations to render τὸν γεγεννημένον ἐξ αὐτοῦ as 'the child born of him' or something similar.<sup>37</sup> Since 'becoming children of God' and 'being begotten of God' are parallel expressions referring to the same phenomenon, and the former is clearly presented as contingent on faith, the text presents God's act of regenerating believers, making them his own children, as a response to their faith.

It would be special pleading, and a desperate expedient at that, to argue that becoming God's child and being begotten of him are distinct in the Johannine context or that the text would allow that a person could be begotten of God and yet not be his child. Some scholars have suggested that the text assumes a distinction between adoption and regeneration, speaking of the former in 1:12 and the latter in 1:13.<sup>38</sup> But the Johannine literature makes no distinction whatsoever

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35 Snoeberger's ('Regeneration', 62-66) attempt to escape the force of this point by pointing out that 'life' does not always specifically refer to regeneration is not successful. For the question is not whether 'life' always refers to regeneration, but whether it includes regeneration in some texts that speak of 'faith unto life'. And this it surely does, such as in cases that deal with or entail initial saving faith that brings the believer from spiritual death/lack of spiritual life into *present* possession of eternal life (see, e.g., the references from John above).

36 An in-depth treatment of John 1:12-13 vis-à-vis the order of faith and regeneration is beyond the scope of this article. The following discussion of this text has been slightly adapted from my monograph, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9.10-18: An Intertextual and Theological Exegesis* (Library of New Testament Studies 317; London: T & T Clark, 2011), 191 n. 153, and substantially expanded.

37 See NASB, NIV, NET, NLT, and NJB.

38 See e.g., Snoeberger, 'Regeneration', 77-78; Murray, *Redemption*, 132-33.

between adoption and regeneration.<sup>39</sup> It would be exegetically and hermeneutically illegitimate to insist that there is such a distinction in Paul, and therefore, that John must have had Paul's distinction in mind.

First, it is questionable whether Paul's epistles contain any such sharp distinction between adoption and regeneration. It is more likely that adoption and regeneration on the individual level are simply two sides of the same coin in Paul's thought, with adoption focusing on the formal granting of elect status and heirship, while regeneration focuses on the element of the same reality that is the granting of the divine nature/Holy Spirit, which concretely conveys elect status and heirship. In other words, Paul seems to see the initial phase of adoption as being practically effected by regeneration, the granting of the Spirit of adoption and heirship (cf. Rom. 8:9-11, 14-17). Of course, in both Paul's and John's thought the giving of the Spirit takes place by faith and is accordingly preceded by it logically (e.g., John 4:14, 7:38-39; Gal. 3:1-6, 14). Interestingly, the only instance of the use of the word 'regeneration' (παλιγγενεσία) in the traditional Pauline corpus is in Titus 3:5, where it does seem to be roughly equivalent to the giving of the Spirit or something that is accomplished upon the giving of the Spirit.

If Paul distinguished between adoption and regeneration enough for there to be any logical order between them, then he regarded adoption – and therefore the faith that precedes it – as preceding regeneration according to Gal. 4:6 – 'Because you are sons, God poured out the Spirit of his son into our hearts, who cries, "Abba! Father!"' It would seem that in Paul's thought adoption and regeneration can generally be regarded as the same reality, though more precisely, they can be distinguished in a complementary way by saying that the status of sonship is formally conferred upon the believer by faith-union with Christ, simultaneously leading to the nature of sonship being communicated to the believer by regeneration.<sup>40</sup> That is, adoption makes believers sons by decree and regeneration makes believers sons by nature. Indeed, adoption comes to its inaugurated completion in regeneration, and so the two can naturally be viewed as one. As the concept of aspect in Greek grammar teaches us, the same event can be viewed legitimately and complementarily in more than one way.

Second, even if there were a sharp distinction between adoption and regeneration in Paul, it does not follow that there is one in John. There is no hint of such a distinction in John, and it is entirely conceivable that what Paul thought of as adoption, John thought of as regeneration. Or if John held to some sort of distinction between them, he still could have conceived of them together as one event. At any rate, it is exegetically unsound in this case to read Paul into the text

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39 Still less does it (or any other NT text for that matter) so much as hint at a distinction made by some Calvinists between regeneration as the Spirit's secret, unobservable implantation of new life in the soul, and new birth, following regeneration as its first, conscious, observable manifestation. For this type of view, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 4th rev. and enl. edn), 465, 474-76.

40 Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 198.

of John so as to make the understanding of John's text rely on a distinction that John never mentions. Furthermore, the sheer logic of John's text stands against any such move, since it would contradict the obvious idea that the very act of being begotten of a father makes one a child of that father. One cannot be begotten of a father and yet need something else to make one that father's child, even if that additional element is simultaneous with the begetting. One cannot be begotten of God and yet not be his child.

Even if one were to deny, against most commentators, that reference to *θελήματος σαρκός* or *θελήματος ἀνδρός* is to human ancestry specifically and insist that it refers to human willing in general, it would not make the divine action of regeneration any less a response to human faith and hence any less conditional on it. Nor would this be inconsistent with John 1:13's attribution of the act of regeneration to God. The text indicates that God is the one who grants the right to become children of God and the one who regenerates. His doing so in response to faith is a matter of his discretion and would not somehow make the human choice to believe the source of regeneration instead of God any more than it makes it the source of justification, which undeniably is by faith. Interestingly, in his excellent commentary on the Gospel of John, the eminent Calvinist scholar D. A. Carson is at pains to try and fend off the obvious implication of John 1:12-13 that believers become born again/from above by faith.<sup>41</sup> But in an unguarded moment later in the commentary, Carson's exegetical sense gets the better of his theology, leading him to the frank admission while commenting on John 3:3 that, 'Readers who have followed the Gospel to this point will instantly think (as Nicodemus couldn't) of John 1:12-13: "to be born again" or "to be born from above" must mean the same thing as "to become children of God", "to be born of God", by believing in the name of the incarnate Word.'<sup>42</sup> That is exactly right.

## Conclusion

The claim that the tenses of 1 John 5:1 indicate that regeneration precedes faith is untenable because: (1) it is questionable whether any chronological relationship between them is suggested, given that some grammarians deny that Greek tenses grammaticalize time, and more importantly, one of the tenses in the verse occurs in a substantival participle, which can be devoid of time significance even on a more traditional view of Greek tenses; and (2) if the tenses are to be related temporally, as seems most probable, then the grammar suggests either that believing and being begotten of God are portrayed as contemporaneous, or perhaps more likely, that believing logically precedes being begotten of God. By no means does the grammar itself lend credence to viewing the perfect indicative verb ('has been begotten') as necessarily prior to the present participle ('who-

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41 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Leicester: IVP; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 125-26.

42 *Ibid.*, 189.

ever believes'). It is surprising that some scholars have made such a basic error regarding Greek grammar in this argument for regeneration preceding faith in 1 John 5:1.<sup>43</sup> It gives the impression that, in the rush to find a proof text to support their own theological conviction, they have been less than cautious in handling the text. But it is time for greater care to be taken with 1 John 5:1 and for this fallacious argument to be put to rest. The argument from the epistolary context invoking a pattern in 1 John of indicating the results of regeneration, sometimes with the same grammatical construction as 1 John 5:1a, is stronger, but it fails to rescue 1 John 5:1 as a proof text for regeneration preceding faith for a number of reasons delineated in this article, including the distinctive and crucial role of faith in the epistle and Johannine theology. Advocates of regeneration preceding faith would do better to look elsewhere for scriptural support. But Piper's assertion, quoted at the beginning of this article, about 1 John 5:1 being 'the clearest text in the New Testament on the relationship between faith and the new birth'<sup>44</sup> is telling in this regard, offering little hope of finding any solid scriptural support for the doctrine of regeneration preceding faith.<sup>45</sup>

### Abstract

A number of scholars have appealed to the Greek tenses of 1 John 5:1 as definitive proof that the verse teaches that regeneration precedes faith. But this argument is untenable. The purposes of the present article are (1) to draw attention to the falsity of the argument and to explain why it is invalid, and (2) to counter the contention that the underlying concern of the grammatical argument (i.e., that 1 John 5:1 implies that regeneration precedes faith) can be rescued by appeal to a pattern in 1 John of indicating the results of regeneration. It is questionable whether the tenses in 1 John 5:1 suggest any chronological or causal relationship between faith and regeneration since some grammarians deny that Greek tenses grammaticalize time, and more importantly, one of the tenses in the passage occurs in a substantival participle, which can be devoid of time significance. If the tenses are temporally related, as seems most probable, then Greek grammar suggests either that believing and being begotten of God are

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43 It is especially surprising that the distinguished Greek grammarians A. T. Robertson and Max Zerwick have voiced the argument (see notes 3 and 5 above), particularly since their grammars would roundly contradict it. In Robertson's case, he merely quotes the classic work by Robert Law (*Tests*) on 1 John without actually mentioning the grammatical argument, and perhaps can be partially excused on this score. Interestingly, his comments on John 1:12 go in the other direction and seem to imply that faith precedes regeneration (Robertson, *Pictures*).

44 Piper, *Alive*, 118.

45 I would like to thank Paul Ellingworth, Bill Klein, Ron Fay, Roy Ciampa, and Howard Marshall for commenting on a previous draft of this article and offering helpful comments, though they bear no responsibility for any deficiencies this final version might contain.



portrayed as contemporaneous, or perhaps more likely, that believing logically precedes being begotten of God. Invocation of statements elsewhere in 1 John indicating the results of regeneration does not rescue 1 John 5:1 as a proof text for regeneration preceding faith because of, *inter alia*, the distinctive and crucial role of faith in the epistle and Johannine theology.

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