

Regeneration: Psalm 51

How does the way God regenerates us resemble and differ from the way we regenerate ourselves?

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

The one who voices Psalm 51 is on the floor before God, utterly ashamed and as dust before glory: "My sin is ever before me." The symptoms of sin are gradually displaced by the greater reality of God: "Against you, you alone, have I sinned." The speaker does not look outside for an oppressor to blame, but inside, to the "inward being," for a heart to be renewed. The speaker gradually receives the commission of the penitent: "I will teach transgressors your ways." There is a deep awareness of the consequences of wrongdoing ("deliver me from bloodshed") and of the rewards of reconciliation ("the joy of your salvation"). And finally there is hope, in a shared plan of regeneration: "Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem." The psalm ends with the community gathered in worship. The welfare of the people is assured by their peace with God.

The British government has been doing a new thing in some of its deprived inner cities and outer urban estates. It has chosen 17 neighborhoods, of around 4,000 dwellings, to be part of a social experiment. They have each been offered as much as £50 million if they can form a vision, involve all sections of their community, develop a planning and decision-making structure, and write a plan for implementation. The residents identify what is wrong in their neighborhood with regard to health, education, employment and community safety, and they themselves set about putting it right. Regeneration is growing out of the experience of the poor rather than the wisdom of the rich.

I live in one of these 17 neighborhoods. It has been my privilege to be part of this remarkable process. I have sought to offer patience, energy, humor, reason and encouragement. I have tried to communicate that God cares about what the community cares about. Neighborhood regeneration is a great setting for the church. People are coming out of a kind of slavery. They are talking about putting a new heart and spirit into their community. They are sharing their dreams. Few, even

in a deprived community, think money is the answer. But the promise of money has started a remarkable debate about what is good in the locality and what is bad; what should grow and what should wither.

Setting Psalm 51 alongside this kind of community program begs an important question. In what respects does the way God regenerates us resemble and differ from the way we regenerate ourselves?

Let's start with the resemblances. There are plenty. Both neighborhood regeneration and Psalm 51 begin with people in desperate straits ("crushed bones"). Both acknowledge the depth of human misery ("broken heart"). Both make progress by identifying the relationship that holds the key to regeneration. Both require the reestablishment of trust and truth, and a real belief that change, though slow, is possible. Both speak of the need for a new, willing spirit, restored joy, a clear break with the past, the teaching of a different approach to life, and the singing of praise for what has been achieved.

Perhaps the key similarity lies in the central words of the psalm: "Create in me a clean heart, and put a new and right spirit within me." The most significant product of the program so far has been the formation of a highly motivated, increasingly confident group of perhaps 25 local people. These people are now able to articulate the needs, fears, aspirations and expectations of their community. They have set about establishing the processes, building the trust, encouraging their friends and setting out the plans to make regeneration possible. These people have become the "new heart" of the community. They—or perhaps I should say we, since I am one of them—are in some ways like a church: there is a commitment to meeting regularly, repeated resolution of differences, a strong desire to spread the good news and a determination to point the community in the direction of genuine hope. The way to regenerate a community seems to be to put this kind of new heart within it.

Two simple questions expose the differences between neighborhood regeneration and God's renewal: What is the problem and what is the solution? Psalm 51 does not offer popular answers: The problem is sin, the solution is repentance. In the absence of a debate about sin and God, a regeneration program tends to offer answers about blame and power. During the program's early stages, it seemed that power was in the wrong hands, and blame was frequently attributed to the local authority. As control was transferred, however, it became clear that power could be misused no matter whose hands it was in.

This has opened up a space in which the language of renewal can be heard. People have begun to talk of a “right spirit” in which power should be used. It is a spirit that seeks out the poorest and most needy people in the community, and assesses projects by the degree to which each will benefit them. This “right spirit” has come to be seen as more significant than the hands that hold it. It is not far from the gospel.

But it is not yet the gospel. It has not yet encompassed the depth of sin, nor the joy of repentance. It is hard to call people to repentance when they are at least as much sinned against as sinning. When one has no control over one’s own destiny it is easy to see all one’s problems as of others’ making. Only when one has the freedom to make one’s own mistakes does one realize that there are fewer and fewer people to blame.

Discovering one’s ability to sin is a necessary prelude to liberation. One needs a little power before one can recognize one’s true identity: a sinner who can be forgiven, rather than a victim who can protest. If the regeneration program has led people to this, it has, like Psalm 51, directed them toward true freedom.