

WCF 14 & 15

Conversion

Note Prior Discussion on Effectual Calling.

CHAPTER 14

Of Saving Faith

1. The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.
2. By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.
3. This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory: growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

CHAPTER 15

Of Repentance unto Life

1. Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.
2. By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.
3. Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.
4. As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.
5. Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins, particularly.
6. As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof; upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy; so, he that scandalizeth his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession, and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended, who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.

1. Read Acts 2:37-47

- What do we learn about “conversion” from this passage?
- What was the context? What was required? How was faith born? What was the result?
- Concerning conversion in the early church, one theologian describes the journey to faith this way:
Pagan converts to the [Christian] mainstream did not, for the most part, first understand the faith and then decide to become Christians; rather, the process was reversed: they first decided and then they understood. More precisely, they were first attracted by the Christian community and form of life... they submitted themselves to prolonged catechetical instruction in which they practiced new modes of behavior and learned the stories of Israel and their fulfillment in Christ. Only after they had acquired proficiency in the alien Christian language and form of life were they deemed able intelligently and responsibly to profess the faith, to be baptized.

George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 132.

Observation:

There was a time not so long ago, and even still with us to varying degrees, when people believed that in order to know something we must take the posture of the “unencumbered self” and seek after universal truths independent of any particular communal narrative or influence. True “belief,” it was asserted, is something we must attain to by ourselves, and is based on a blind optimism about the power of individualism and human reason to bring us to absolute certainty in knowledge. Religious faith, as such, was abstracted from the “text” of communal life, rituals and teaching—the very context wherein faith was ordinarily born throughout human history!

Another epistemology will emphasize the “communal self” in search of truth based on a method of participation and human experience. The knowledge of God is a communal kind of knowledge that we must discover by means of participation with God vs. merely thinking about God. As we will see, this is not to “check our brain” at the door of faith. Rather, it is to recognize that while faith in God is reasonable, it can’t be attained by reason alone! And given the modernist context, isn’t it an intriguing reversal of the way we tend to think—that the way to belief in God and the Christian faith in the NT was to *first* decide to believe and to participate in the life of God in, with and through God’s presence in the midst of his special community wherein that belief was more and more understood such as to eventually justify believing! But if there is a God, and if He has made himself known, in so far as God is personal, wouldn’t it make sense that He would expose himself not by some impersonal media, but within the warm and personal context of communal life?

In conversion for instance, wherein the covenant word aspect of Christian spirituality will emphasis declaration and assent such as to “receive” by faith the word of life, the temple bodily presence aspect of Christology applied suggests an experiential I epistemology not often recognized. Alister McGrath, describing Blaise Pascal (and C.S. Lewis):

“For Pascal, there was little point in trying to persuade anyone of the truth of religious belief. The important thing, he argued, was to make people wish that it was true, having caught sight of the rich and satisfying vision of reality it offered. Once such a desire was implanted within the human heart, the human mind would eventually catch up with its deeper intuitions.”

And so the question has been raised, “how can I believe in God?” Our answer is by “faith seeking understanding.” By “faith” I mean that kind of knowledge that is gained by participating in it such as to then seek after the moral and intellectual justification in order to “believe” it (seeking understanding). Faith, like all communal knowledge, is a product of our will as much as our mind. We “will” to know God by participating with Him, even as the knowledge of God is found more and more reasonable on the basis of our experience and the reality of life as we know it with God.

c.f. Addendum #1: Faith Seeking Reason, Example #3

Chapter 15: Saving Faith

2. Is it possible NOT to have “faith”? Saving Faith? Notice then the title of Chapter 14. What are we talking about? What aren’t we talking about?

3. Notice WCF 14:1 What are the three ordinary means by which God works saving faith in people?

4. According to Chapter 14:2, What is Saving Faith? Notice also WLC #72, and discern three characteristics of saving (or justifying) Faith.

Question 72

Q *What is justifying faith?*

A Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.

5. Notice especially “assent” to the truth? What does this imply about the pre-requisite to saving faith?

Conversion is not uniquely Christian, but Christian conversion is unique and uniquely true... Conversion has come to be understood in purely subjectivistic terms as changed behavior. The objective realities of conversion, its divine origin supernatural change and eternal results-- have been downplayed and rejected. If the truth of the gospel is tied to a testimony of transformation and change, then non-Christians can point to similar stories of transformation and change in non-Christian religions, sects, cults and even among users of certain drugs...

David Wells, *Turning To God*

What “truth” must we assent to in order to be saved? (c.f., What is a Christian, Preston Graham Jr)

- a. (Acts 17:24-25, Gen.3:16-17)
- b. (1 John 1:8-9, Rom.2:23)
- c. (1 John 1:7, 2:1b-2,)
- d. (Eph. 2:8ff, Rom.5:1)

5. Notice also that “assent” to the truth is not itself faith. What must be added to assent, and what isn’t added? (Note then, the three components of saving faith—the intellectual component, the will/affection component, and the joining/communal component.)

6. How then do we strengthen faith? How don’t we?

c.f. Addendum #2-- Letter to R. L. Dabney

Chapter 15: Repentance Unto Life

1. Notice how the WCF refers to repentance as an “evangelical grace.” What do you think this means? (note the Acts 2 Commentary, in the context of Pentecost, it is said, “and the Lord added to their number day by day” vs. 47)

2. Some have mistaken “repentance” with “good works”—what is two separate chapters in the WCF as related to two separate ends theologically is conflated. It is important therefore to understand this description of “repentance unto Life” in a way that doesn’t refute WCF 11 and then 14.

Note for instance the important qualification in WCF 11:

1: *not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone... they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith: which faith they have not of themselves it is the gift of God.*

2: *Faith... is the alone instrument of justification, yet is not alone.. but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but walketh by love.*

Note again the important language of WCF 14: 2

The principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone for...

Given the above qualifications concerning saving faith, how should we understand “repentance” as per the meaning of “as to turning from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.” Notice 15:3

3. What does paragraph 4 mean? Again, notice that the context is not civil codes or even church discipline, but in the greater scheme within our human covenant with God—we are saved either by our own keeping of the terms of the covenant at creation, or by Christ’s keeping the terms on behalf of us. This is the point of James 2:10-11 (e.g. on the context of the overarching law “love your neighbor as yourself” vs. 8) C.f. WLC # 150

Q Are all transgressions of the law of God equally heinous in themselves, and in the sight of God?

A All transgressions of the law of God are not equally heinous; but some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.

Observation: Isn’t it interesting that one of the sure signs that people have NOT repented unto life is that they justify themselves by distinguishing their sins from the really “heinous” sins of others... thus not understanding their own culpability in failing the whole of the law in their failure to love wholly!

4. We know of course that there is the possibility of “false conversions” (Mt.7:21, 19:11, 1Cor.8”7) What might some types of false conversions?
5. How does the question of conversion engage the transition from non-communicant (baptized) covenant children membership and then full- communicant (adult) membership (c.f. “Covenant Child Membership)

Addendum 1: Faith Seeking Reason Applied to Assurance

Reason Seeking Faith vs. Faith Seeking Reason *Three Examples*

Introduction:

1Cor. 1:18

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,

“I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE,
AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.”

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the **called**, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 26 For consider your **calling**, brethren,

WCF X: Effectual Calling

I. All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.

II. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.

Example #3: Christian Assurance

How can a person be assured that he/she is accepted by God? What is “evangelical grace” as related to an understanding of “repentance” and “faith”

Mark 1:15 “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Acts 20:21

solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Heb. 6:1

Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,

A. Reason Seeking Faith: Experience/Works to Assurance

Some will say, “examine yourself (your experience of faith, and the quantity/quality of your works. E.g. The example of the black vs. white marbles—and when you have more white than black—you can have assurance

Repentance and Faith = Good Works and Strength of conviction

B. Faith Seeking Reason: Assurance to Experience/Works

The gospel will say, examine the person and work of Christ and his promises for you in the gospel, by God’s grace working in you, you will want Christ as your savior and Lord and will more and more humbly rest in them as the basis of how you relate to God

Repentance and Faith = Confession of Sin(s) and Spiritual Rest leading to good works

Hebrews 10:

14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified...

He then says,

17 “AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS
I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE.”

18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer *any* offering for sin. **19** Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, **20** by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, **21** and since *we have* a great priest over the house of God, **22** let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. **23** Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; **24** and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, **25** not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near...

Heb. 11:1

Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. **2** For by it the men of old gained approval.

WCF XIV: Saving Faith

- I. The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts...
- II. ...the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.
- III. This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory: growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

WCF XV: Repentance Unto Life

- I. Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the Gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.
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- III. Although repentance is not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ, yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.

WCF XVIII: Assurance of Grace and Salvation

- I. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption

Therefore, the temple flesh is at its best when it is most local and culture specific. It is a celebration of the salvation of flesh in its rich and created diversity of gender, race and culture. It is significant that the many nations/cultures in heaven are not neutered or even "blended" in heaven, but gloriously distinguished, if also never separate, as united in one faith and spirit and one liturgical vocation of worship.

As applied to salvation, God's temple body expresses the experiential transaction of our salvation by divine participation even as this infers an epistemology of participation vis-à-vis ecclesial conversion. Wherein justification, adoption and assurance is by faith alone such as to have the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers, conversion unto faith (efficacious calling), sanctification and perseverance is the gift of God by uniting himself in Christ to believers in the mystery of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. (c.f. Eph 1:15-22, 2:11ff)

Addendum #2: Letter to a doubting Christian

Dear R.L. Dabney:

Yours of the 28th, just received, relieved a tension of feeling which has held me painfully ever since Mrs. Dabney's last. I dreaded to hear, and then to hear you are in any degree better was an inexpressible comfort. It melted me to hear of your prayers for faith and dying grace. The stress of such constant and severe bodily pain is enough of itself to try you; and the tempter is sure to use it to affect your hope. Pray on, dear old soldier, of course; but listen to me awhile. I want to give you a morsel of honey out of one of my dead lions, though, in fact, there is a large herd of them still living, and they roar on me often till I am sick with fears.

You want more faith. Do you remember, in the stress of your trial, how faith comes? Let me remind you, although you know it. You know we are sanctified through the truth. Sanctification is just the growth of the particular graces of the spirit, of which faith is one. Just here is where Christians make a great mistake. When they want more faith, or want to know whether the faith they have is the right sort of faith, instead of looking at the things to be believed, they turn their eyes inward and scrutinize their faith. They want to see something in their faith to trust in, something that will certify their faith. Of course, self-examination is all right, but not when it practically substitutes faith for our Lord, grace and righteousness. Even a great theological thinker is as apt to make that mistake when he has come into the practical stress of this awful world as a common Christian.

Now, suppose a traveler comes to a bridge, and he is in doubt about trusting himself to it. What does he do to breed confidence in the bridge? He looks at the bridge; he gets down and examines it. He doesn't stand at the bridge-head and turn his thoughts curiously in on his own mind to see if he has confidence in the bridge. If his

examination of the bridge gives him a certain amount of confidence, and yet he wants more, how does he make his faith grow ? Why, in the same way; he still continues to examine the bridge.

Now, my dear old man, let your faith take care of itself for awhile, and you just think of what you are allowed to trust in. Think of the Master's power, think of his love; think how he is interested in the soul that searches for him, and will not be comforted until he finds him. Think of what he has done, his work. That blood of his is mightier than all the sins of all the sinners that ever lived. Don't you think it will master yours? Think of his great righteousness: will it not avail for all you hope to gain? That great work is enough; it needs not to be supplemented; it meets every demand. It warrants you to come into the King's very presence, assured of welcome, because you can come in the name of the King's Son. ...Think of the Master when you want your faith to grow.

Now, dear old friend, I have done to you just what I would want you to do to me if I were lying in your place. The great theologian, after all, is just like any other one of God's children, and the simple gospel talked simply to him is just as essential to his comfort as it is to a milk-maid or to a plow-boy. May God give you grace, not to lay too much stress on your faith, but to grasp the great ground of confidence, Christ, and all his work and all his personal fitness to be a sinner's refuge. Faith is only an eye to see him. I have been praying that God would quiet your pains as you advance, and enable you to see the gladness of the gospel at every step. Good-bye. God be with you as he will. Think of the bridge!

Your brother,

C. R. Vaughan