

God Glorified in Conversion

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You may be surprised to find that the word "conversion" does not appear in the Westminster Confession or Catechisms. But the verb "convert" does appear in the chapter on free will (9.4) in the phrase; "When God converts a sinner" The words "convert" and "conversion" are equally rare in the bible. In the King James Version "conversion" is found only in Acts 15:3. The verb "convert" appears 14 times, and the noun "conversion" is used three times. In other versions the figures are lower yet.

Even though this word is rare in the scriptures, the concept of conversion is present in a variety of Hebrew and Greek words. This is apparent in the beginning of the article Conversion in ISBE. Conversion is an act of God that causes a repenting sinner, brought to life in regeneration, to turn away from sin and toward God and living faith in Jesus Christ.

Saving faith and repentance are really two names for one radical turn by which one's original course is reversed away from sin and toward God.

The Confession treats each of these two components in separate chapters; saving faith in chapter 14, repentance in chapter 15. They are introduced together in both the Shorter and Larger Catechisms. The Shorter Catechism has one question each for faith and repentance (questions 86 and 87), and the Larger Catechism devotes two questions to justifying faith (72 and 73) and one to repentance (76).

The Catechisms and Confession order these subjects in widely different ways. The Confession deals with faith and repentance after effectual calling, justification, adoption and sanctification, and before good works, perseverance and assurance. Glorification appears in the last two chapters. In this way the order of the golden chain of salvation (Rom 8:29-30) is followed, with the addition of two links, adoption and sanctification, that certainly belong to the phases of the plan of salvation. Glorification comes at the end, a natural place, since it is part of the consummation. It is noteworthy that G. I. Williamson, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* has actually reordered the Confession's chapters to keep faith and repentance near effectual calling, since they are the immediate and necessary fruits of regeneration.

Here is the order in the Larger Catechism: justification, justifying faith, adoption and sanctification; then comes repentance unto life, followed by questions on the difference between justification and sanctification, the reason for the imperfection of sanctification in the believers, perseverance, assurance and nine questions on glorification and eternal destiny. The duty of repentance and faith is treated in question 153, after the lengthy exposition of the law of God.

In the Shorter Catechism the order is different still. The questions concerning effectual calling, justification, adoption and sanctification are followed by three questions dealing with the benefits of salvation in this life, at death and at the resurrection. Then come 46 questions related to the law of God (questions 3984) followed by three questions dealing with faith and repentance (8587). After that a study of the means of grace, the word, the sacraments and prayer, concludes the catechism.

These different orders show that there are different ways of organizing the order of worship. In his Institutes, Calvin dealt with faith and repentance immediately after saying that it is the Holy Spirit who applies to individuals the benefits of the mediating work of Christ. Francis Turretin has no separate place for repentance or conversion, but he deals with faith before his treatment of justification. More recent theologians treat conversion and repentance immediately after regeneration. Turretin finishes up with a chapter on faith, then justification, sanctification and perseverance.

Let's take a look at the contents of the chapters on saving faith and repentance in the Westminster Confession.

I. Saving Faith

The Origin of Faith 14.1

It is clear that faith does not arise by the initiative of sinful human beings. This glorious flower does not grow on the dunghill of human depravity and rebellion. The Confession states this truth in five ways: (a) Faith is called a grace; (b) the elect are the ones who exercise saving faith; (c) they are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls; (d) it is the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart; and (e) three passages of Scripture are listed: 1 Corinthians 12:5, Ephesians 2:8, Hebrews 12:2.

It's also clear that this blessing that originates in God's plan is connected with the ministry of the Word and the administration of the means of grace. God is the formal cause and these are often instrumental causes.

In light of this, it is important to recognize that the new Christian is not passive in the act of faith but actively exercises the new powers established by accepting

the truth. Faith involves the whole person (body and soul; mind, heart and will). It is not God who believes through us, but in faith we respond; the first act of a freed slave. (Jn 8:32-36)

That a believer is personally active in faith is clear from the fact that the verb "believe" occurs in the imperative (e.g. Mk 5:36; Jn 10:38; 14:2; Acts 16:31) God commands us to do something that requires our participation, at least to some extent. God never says "Be born" or "Be born again," for these acts are clearly outside our reach. But "repent," "believe," and "obey" include our activity even though we are helpless to do this if God does not enable us by his spirit.

The object of faith 14.2a

"By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein," We can summarize this in three propositions: The whole Bible is true, the whole Bible is the Word of God, and the Christian is bound to accept the whole Bible as such. To fail to do that is a signal of failure of faith.

Since the Bible contains different types of messages, the Confession articulates the right attitude toward three important forms of revelation: commands we must obey, threats that make us fear and tremble, and joyful promises.

Christ as the object of faith 14.2b

Saving faith is indispensably connected with the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Three words show how faith and redemption are linked: (a) accepting, that is, recognizing that what the Scripture says about the Savior is true; (b) receiving, that is, having the saving blessing that Christ secured; (c) resting upon Christ alone, that is, rejecting any hope or expectation of salvation or any other ground than the work of Christ.

Note that our faith is not the basis of justification, otherwise faith would function as a work. The ground of justification is Christ's work and that alone. Faith functions as an electric switch that adds nothing to the current but directs it where it is needed.

The benefits embraced by faith 14.2c

The Confession lists three benefits: (a) Justification, that is, the forgiveness of all our sins and the investiture of the merits of Jesus Christ; (b) sanctification, that is, the progressive elimination of all sinful drives and tendencies of our inner being, and renewal of our nature into conformity to the demands of a holy God; and (c) eternal life, that is, the blessing of fellowship with God our Creator in the present life (John 5:24) and for all ages to come (Jn 14:3; Rom 8:38-39; 1 Jn 3:2). These are all benefits included in the covenant of grace.

The degrees of faith 14.3

Like so many human activities, faith shows some variation when one compares one Christian to another, and also in the same person at different moments of life. In this sense faith may be assailed and weakened or again refreshed and strengthened.

One characteristic of a strong faith is the assurance of salvation through Christ, "the author and perfecter of our faith." (Heb 12:2) Assurance is undermined by disobedience; it is strengthened by the use of the means of grace that reinforce our sense of fellowship with Christ, and consequently of our union with Him.

The joy of salvation is a blessing that God bestows on His obedient children. When willful and conscious sin intervenes the sense of fellowship is damaged, even as a cloud may for a time hide the face of the sun. (Ps 51:12)

II. Repentance unto life

The relevance of repentance 15.1

The Westminster Confession calls repentance an evangelical grace, meaning that it is only through the grace of God that any sinner is awakened to repentance. This is stated in Acts 11:18. "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." Every minister must preach the necessity of repentance as well as of faith. (Acts 20:21) As with faith, repentance, too, is not purely passive but must act in response to God's command.

The origin of repentance 15.1b

There are three awarenesses that are at the root of true repentance: (a) a sense and sight of the dangers incurred because of sin; (b) a perception of the heinousness of sin as contrary to God's nature and law; and (c) a realization that God is merciful to those who are truly penitent.

The nature of repentance 15.2b

Repentance is a sincere revulsion against the filthiness and odiousness of sin, and a turn toward God and his merciful pardon. It is a deep desire and commitment to abandon the paths of sin and to live unto God in a new obedience to His commandments. This definition appears in almost identical terms in the two catechisms.

The necessity of repentance 15.3

Repentance is not necessary as the ground for forgiveness, since the work of Jesus Christ is sufficient for pardon and acceptance, but it is so indispensable that no one may entertain the hope of salvation without it.

The variety in gravity of sin 15.4

All sins are not equally grievous. There is none so small that it does not deserve damnation and none so horrendous that it exceeds God's power to forgive those who repent. The sin against the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:32; Heb 6:46; 1 Jn 5:16) is not one that exceeds God's power to forgive, but one that manifests such hardening of the heart in response to full enlightenment that no repentance may be expected from those who have hardened themselves to such a degree.

Repentance and Confession 15.5, 15.6

We should not be satisfied to make a general confession to God. However, it is important to review in prayer any acts of disobedience that we have committed. This will help us to remain penitent and to flee the paths of sin. In addition to our private confession to God we should be willing and prepared to acknowledge our faults to those we have offended and to make a public confession when our sins have been of public nature. Christians must forgive those who repent and confess their sins should be forgiven by Christians even as they are forgiven by God.

Chapters fourteen and fifteen of the Confession glorify God, who is the author of every good and perfect gift. (Jas 1:17) These are intensely practical chapters that should strongly influence our daily walk. Our profession of faith and conduct will glorify God if we live by the principles contained in them. (Mt 5:16)

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