

Conversion

“ And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.” (Acts 15:3 AV)

Conversion can be seen as the turning of a sinner to God as seen in Acts 15:3 above. Men are said to have converted when by divine grace their whole life is changed (converted). All things become new as the old passes away.¹ Soteriology is the doctrine of Salvation as revealed in the Bible. In conversion many things take place. Some are of a forensic nature and other of an organic nature. The parts of conversion while distinct are also so closely interwoven they defy separation. Thus all elements may be seen as identifiable events in the life of a person they are not able to stand-alone. This appears to cause a problem with the foundation of the Protestant Reformation where the great solas were posited as points of faith. One of these being “Faith Alone,” whereby it is declared we are justified by faith alone. Many argue that Paul and James are showing different aspects of the same “justification” lest they be guilty of causing the Bible to contradict itself. Some however continue then to try and prove that the deeds of a person (good works) are also part of justification. In this attempt to affirm the traditional understanding of the church, but to broaden the meaning or application they cause more confusion than not and end with a works based or merit of man salvation.

An order of salvation is an attempt to show in what logical sequence these different aspects of conversion take place. Such ordering of events can be beneficial as we study God’s work within creation and the salvation of some for His won glory. A typical list might go like this: Regeneration; Faith; Justification; Sanctification; Glorification. It is not argued by any that all is not of God and all is of grace.² The argument is from the necessity of works being inseparably connected to faith in such a way that faith cannot exist without works. This is a divine truth and is not argued among the traditional Reformed understanding of Scripture. However the Reformed tradition does separate the appearance of these two in time placing works under sanctification, which follows faith and justification. The Westminster Assembly was clear on the point that justification is by faith alone but that faith never is imparted in isolation.³

¹ “ To open their eyes, *and* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.” (Acts 26:18 AV)

² “8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:8-10 AV)

³ WCF XI.ii Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification:[1] yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.[2]

1. John 3:18, 36; Rom. 3:28; 5:1

2. James 2:17, 22, 26; Gal. 5:6

The Westminster Assembly is also clear that God does not infuse righteousness into man, but God “imputes” to man the righteousness of Christ. This means there is no righteousness of man whatsoever involved in the “conversion” of man. Conversion will include the whole list in the order of salvation but faith alone stands as the sole entry into this grace.⁴

Every effort must be made to understand that justification then is a result of the gift of faith from God to man after the Holy Spirit regenerates the heart of a person to provide a proper receptacle for the gift bestowed. Justification is once and forever declaration of God that a person is fully justified by the works and merit of Jesus Christ alone. Yet the person must receive this gift thus regeneration stands first in an order of salvation with the understanding it is all of grace alone. (see footnote 2) Thus faith can be properly said to be the instrument of justification but the ground of justification rests with God in the eternal election brought to fruit in Jesus Christ and His “completed” work.⁵ Justification is then a one time event and in no sense is it a continuing of this declaration of God of the position of the justified in Christ. God has spoken and so it is for all of eternity.⁶ Justification is then a one time forensic declaration by God of the position a person has in Christ alone for their salvation.

Sanctification is the process whereby in obedience to God and conforming to the will of God the justified person becomes more like Jesus Christ and emulates the perfect obedience of Christ in his life. Thus in conversion the new person and changed life style are made manifest.⁷ Effectual calling can be seen as regeneration or the beginning point

⁴ “1 ¶ Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: 2 By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” (Romans 5:1-2 AV)

⁵ WCF XI.iii. Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf.[1] Yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them;[2] and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead;[3] and both, freely, not for anything in them; their justification is only of free grace;[4] that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.[5]

1. Mark 10:45; Rom. 5:8-10, 18-19; Gal. 3:13; I Tim. 2:5-6; Heb. 1:3; 10:10, 14; Dan. 9:24, 26; see Isa. 52:13-53:12

2. Rom. 8:32; John 3:16

3. II Cor. 5:21; Eph. 5:2; Phil. 2:6-9; Isa. 53:10-11

4. Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7

5. Rom. 3:26; Eph. 2:7; Zech. 9:9; Isa. 45:21

⁶ WCF XI.iv. God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect,[1] and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification:[2] nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.[3]

1. Rom. 8:29, 30; Gal. 3:8; I Peter 1:2, 19-20

2. Gal. 4:4; I Tim. 2:6; Rom. 4:25

3. Eph. 2:3; Titus 3:3-7; Gal. 2:16; cf. Col. 1:21-22

⁷ I. They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection,[1] by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them:[2] the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed,[3] and the

of conversion. (See footnote 7) The Westminster Assembly uses careful wording here to indicate the growth possible in all other saving graces, but not of justification. (See footnote 7) The justified will then attempt to only do (works) those things, which are in the will of God. It is a growth process and the ease with which a person overcomes their own sinful nature and does the work of God increases as a person makes use of the means of grace provided by God. These means of grace are normally only found within the body of Christ, the church of God. The means whereby all saving graces grow are these: Hearing the word of God (Preaching); Proper observation of the sacraments of Christ; and the practice of godly discipline. Sanctification is a life-long process whereby man cannot attain perfect sanctification because of the will of the created that remains in the flesh.⁸

Glorification is also all of grace and the judgment of God whereby the faith of the justified is vindicated at the final judgment. Some confusion enters the picture here because almost all of the passages in the Bible that speak of judgment speak of man being judged by his works. When we understand that we are called (regenerated) by God who at this point gives the gift of faith that we might be sanctified in obedience to God's revealed will we can begin to grasp what is happening here. The justified will live by faith.⁹ The works (deeds) of the person then is a manifestation of God's working within the justified. For the justified it is of God for the justified to both to will and to do.¹⁰ Likewise then at that final judgment the works of each person are judged, but not to the

several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified;[4] and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces,[5] to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.[6]

1. I Thess. 5:23-24; II Thess. 2:13-14; Ezek. 36:22-28; Titus 3:5; Acts 20:32; Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:5-6
2. John 17:17, 19; Eph. 5:26; Rom. 8:13-14; II Thess. 2:13
3. Rom. 6:6, 14
4. Gal. 5:24; Rom. 8:13
5. Col. 1:10-11; Eph. 3:16-19
6. II Cor. 7:1; Col. 1:28, 4:12; Heb. 12:14

⁸ “19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. 20 Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. 21 I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. 22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” (Romans 7:19-23 AV)

⁹ Romans 1:17 For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.

Galatians 3:11 But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.

Hebrews 10:38 Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.

¹⁰ Php. 2:13

condemnation of the justified.¹¹ Works have nothing to do with justification. Works have everything to do with the reward the justified lay up for himself or herself in heaven or the loss of this reward. In a sense then the deeds of the person can be seen as either adding to or removing from the heavenly bank account that awaits all of the justified in the final judgment. In this sense alone does their works judge the justified. The just enter into the eternal life in the very presence of God (glorified) by the eternal decree of God alone.

Since Scripture says that we shall know the just by their fruit, we can in the flesh judge the works of our fellow saints and reprove or commend each other. The works are never of justification in the sense of judgment of the position of a person in Christ, which is the declaration of God by eternal election. Scripture also says that we can improve our personal assurance of faith by doing the works God prepared for the justified to walk in from the foundation of the earth.¹²

A better application of these divine truths then might be found in using the term conversion to refer to the justified with less attention to detail and sequence of the events that are included in conversion. While there may be some value to understanding the fullness of Scripture in the systematic method of division, such a systematic division can cause confusing and that more abundant in those without a theological education. Pastoral or practical theology then can best be served by seeing those around us as converted or in need of evangelization. Not that we can judge, but that we can inspect the fruit in their lives. Part of the problem in understanding this great truth is in the presence of time in all that man does as opposed to the timeless nature of God's economy. With God all things are always present His having declared the end from the beginning. It is with no certainty then outside of the logic of man alone we assign a sequence to the conversion of the soul. In fact it is a divine truth that all of these things happen simultaneously in the eternal decree of election. However they are made manifest in history (time) at God's will alone and can thus be perceived by man to be of individual elements happening in a time sequence. With God the end is sure, and there is no sequence. Can we measure the time then between regeneration and the gift of faith and the sanctification of the called? Do we indeed need a sequence in the doctrine of

¹¹ “¹² Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; ¹³ Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.” (1 Corinthians 3:12-15 AV)

¹² “⁸ For if these things be in you, and abound, they make *you that ye shall* neither *be* barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. ¹⁰ Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall:” (2 Peter 1:8-10 AV)

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10 AV)

salvation? Is not an understanding of conversion being the whole is of God's grace alone and that by faith enough?

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