

## LESSON 6:

# What Was Involved in Our Coming to Christ?

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## I. Introduction and Review

The previous lesson examined God's actions in eternity that laid the groundwork for how He worked out salvation in history. The lesson focused in particular on the *pactum salutis*, the agreement between the three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to bring about the salvation of God's people. This agreement necessarily consists of God's foreknowledge and predestination to election in Christ. God's predestination of a people to be elected in Christ does not depend on anything that they did, but solely upon His free grace alone. Because of God's foreknowledge and predestination, we have assurance that our salvation rests in His promises alone, not in our decisions. We also have assurance that all those elected by God will come to salvation; none will be lost. This should be a comfort to believers. This backdrop, however, raises the question as to what this means for how we should view our coming to Christ. That is what we will explore in this lesson, looking particularly at what is meant by regeneration, calling, and faith.

## II. The New Birth, Regeneration and Effective Calling

### A. Understanding Experientially How We Came to Christ

With regard to God's predestination, if God chose us from all eternity, then are we really making a free decision for Christ? It certainly felt like a free decision when we made it. Also, if predestination is true, is the free offer of the Gospel really free? The concern many have is whether predestination makes the free offer of the Gospel a convenient fiction. This brings into focus the question of how we are to experientially understand how we came to Christ. **The short answer is that God's election of a people for Himself is true, our decision for Christ was freely made, and the free offer of the Gospel is genuine and not a fiction.** But to understand how this is all the case requires some explanation.

**First of all, we have to keep in mind that in God's sovereignty, He (a) brings about the circumstances of our lives and (b) works through secondary causes.** So, for this reason, He does not have to coerce us into coming to Him, and the decision is in one respect wholly ours. That said, He worked to bring us to that point. If we think about our own personal testimonies, we can easily point to people and circumstances that influenced our coming to faith in Christ.

### Preparation

1. In John 3:1-19, Christ talks about being "born again." Think about the process of a baby being born. What happens before the actual birth? How is coming to Christ like that?

**One thing that is often misunderstood is what we mean by “free will.” It is important to clarify what we mean by this.** The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF 9) is helpful in giving a nuanced description of man’s will in what theologians call the “fourfold estate”: that is, man in innocency prior to the Fall, in his fallen condition after the Fall, in redemption and ultimately in glory.

- In *innocency*, man was not enslaved to anything and therefore not predisposed toward evil. Man’s will was perfectly free will and unencumbered. That estate only last until the fall. (WCF 9.2)
- Man in his *fallen state* cannot not sin. That is, he is predisposed to sin at any given moment (WCF 9.3). In the Confession’s language, “as a natural man, being altogether averse from the good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.” Thus, as a result of sin, our will is not really free at all.
- In the *state of grace*, man is able to will and do that which is spiritually good, albeit imperfectly given the remnants of sin within us (WCF 9.4). That is, man’s will is partially free and restored, but man still struggles with enslavement to sin.
- Finally, the Confession (WCF 9.5) says that it is only in the *state of glory* that our wills are perfect and unchangeably free to do good. In other words, only in glory will we not be able to sin.

## Observation

2. Read WCF 9, WLC 58-59, and WSC 29-30.

Does man have free will? How does this understanding compare with contemporary notions of free will?

So, biblically speaking, man’s will was only “free” in the Garden before the Fall. Since the Fall, it has been either completely or partially enslaved to sin. It will only be completely free from any trace sin in glory. **The modern notion that somehow man’s will is not truly free unless God self-limits Himself has no biblical warrant.** If taken to its logical conclusion, it would make God out to be completely passive, and indeed, completely marginalize Him by make Him only and totally reactive to our wills. He would become a force for our manipulation rather than an independent actor in His own right. One can see this notion in the so-called “Prosperity Gospel” or the “Word of Faith” preachers today. Throughout the history of the Christian Church, however, such a view would have been considered rank heresy and rightly condemned. **Moreover, the modern notion of “free will” is practically inconsistent.** On the one hand, people will assert that our wills cannot be free unless God restrains His will, while on the other hand, we do not consider our wills to be unfree when we have to interact with other human beings who can influence or exert power over us. **Putting a more**

restrictive standard on God really is a sign of sinful man trying to assert his autonomy from God than a realistic or biblical position.

## B. Regeneration and New Birth

So how is it then that we can go from a state of fallenness to a state of redemption if we are dead in our sins and our will is completely enslaved to sin? Here we need to revisit an analogy which the Lord Himself used, namely what it means to be “born again.” The phrase, “born again” has become a cliché in the last fifty years. When Jesus talks about it in John 3:1-19, He used it synonymously with being born of the Spirit (John 3:6 & 8). Pastor Steve Smallman has a helpful insight on this analogy that useful in understanding what is going on and . We need to take the analogy of being born again further than we typically do. When a person is born physically, they do not have any choice in terms of who they would be born to, when they would be born, or the circumstances under which they would be born. Moreover, when they are actually born is not when their life actually began. They have been in the womb gestating for nine months. Their life actually began at conception, not the day they came out of their mother’s womb. By analogy, there is a point in our lives when God began the process of regenerating us.

Geerhardus Vos describes regeneration as “an immediate re-creation of the sinful nature by God the Holy Spirit and an implanting into the body of Christ.” **Think of it as a seed or spark which God plants within us. In point of truth, it is the beginning of when the Holy Spirit starts to work within us.** Again, if we think about our own personal narratives, we usually can identify events that happened and people who came into our lives who began leading us in the direction of taking an interest in Christ before we made a genuine profession of faith. This would be period of gestation. The point of conversion, then, is analogous to the baby’s birth.

**The Confessional standards do not use this language exactly, but one can see the concepts there.** WLC 58-59 and WSC 29-30 indicate that we are made partakers of the redemption purchased for us by Christ through the effectual application of it to us by the Holy Spirit. WLC 60, goes one step further and notes that this is the only way people can be saved. If they do not hear the gospel, know Christ, nor believe in Him, they cannot be saved. This ties back to the fact that those who will be saved are a predestined by God. None are lost.

## C. Effectual Calling and Coming to Christ

Regeneration is the beginning of application of salvation that subsequent aspects will build upon. **The next of these aspects is effectual calling, and the term means that this calling brings an individual to Christ without fail.** Indeed, Christ Himself says this:

### Observation

3. Read WCF 10, WLC 67-68, and WSC 31-32. Who calls us? To what? Why do you think that such a calling is termed “effectual”?

*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore, everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. (John 6:44-45)*

The Westminster Standards describe what effectual calling actually accomplishes in the life of an individual. The Confession of Faith (WCF 10.1) put it this way:

All those whom God has predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted 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 a 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.

The Shorter Catechism Q. 31 puts it more succinctly and clearly:

Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.

The Westminster Standards use the terms regeneration and effectual calling interchangeably and subsume both under the latter. Conceptually, however, it is worth making some differentiation between the two. Geerhardus Vos points out that where regeneration operates on a subconscious level and internal to an individual, effectual calling works on a conscious level and the call is external to the individual. **Regeneration begins the process of making one a new creation in Christ. Effectual calling directs one toward the end of drawing a person to Christ consciously and specifically.** Regeneration and effectual calling work together and are part of God's irresistible grace.

### III. Conversion and Faith

#### A. What Changes For Us in Conversion?

Going back to the "born again" analogy, when a person is effectually called then there is the point at which the "baby comes out." This is what happens in conversion. Effectual calling results in our response and that response is our conversion. **Conversion results in a change in our consciousness, wills, and emotions. It not only entails accepting the truth of God's word, but also setting ourselves against our former life, and thus repentance is involved as well.** We are turning around. Vos notes that historically the terms associated with conversion are **having remorse** (*poenitentia*), **turning around** (*conversio*), and **regaining wisdom** (*resipiscere*). Thus, regardless of whether one had a dramatic conversion experience at a particular point in time or cannot remember a time

when he or she has not been walking with the Lord, these three aspects are key to determining whether conversion has actually happened. It is not merely “making a decision for Christ.” To put it another way, **if one does not have remorse over sin, is not changing the vector of one’s life and is not growing in the knowledge and love of Christ, then a legitimate question can be raised as to whether conversion has indeed happened.**

## B. What is Faith?

**Regeneration, effectual calling, and conversion are accompanied by faith, which is a gift of God to the believer** (Eph. 2:8). The common definition of faith is given in Hebrews 11:1: “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*” Moderns often try to characterize faith as a blind, willful acceptance of something unjustified by reason or evidence, but Geerhardus Vos describes **faith as “acceptance as true [that] by which we do not rest in ourselves but in the testimony of another.”** Understood this way, we exercise faith all the time—faith that things which have preceded us actually happened, faith in things we have not seen or experienced, faith in abstract concepts, and so on. The certainty of our faith in a given object is not derived from our intensity in believing but in the reliability of the testimony upon which we are relying. For Reformed Christians, **our faith is grounded in the Word of God.**

Faith, according to Question 73 of the Westminster Larger Catechism, is “**an instrument by which he [the believer] receives and applies Christ and His righteousness.**” The Confession of Faith (14.2) describes faith in robust terms:

By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; 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.

This description contains three aspects commonly associated with faith: **knowledge** (*notitia*), **assent** (*assensus*) and **trust** (*fiducia*).

**Regarding knowledge, there is a real truth content to faith;** we have an object to our faith. This is important to note because there are tendencies to ignore such truth content. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, one merely needs to assent to whatever the Church teaches, regardless of the content for such teaching. Prosperity Gospel preachers also divorce faith from true knowledge by treating faith as a force in itself for realizing one’s own desires. In contrast, we are

### Observation

4. Read WCF 14, WLC 72-73, and WSC 86.

What is saving faith? Does the Confession say that we need to have a strong saving faith to come to Christ?

actually believing in particular truths from Scripture. Theologians have debated how much one has to know of the Christian faith in order to receive salvation, and while that cannot be determined precisely the paragraph above from the Confession sets a minimal bar: one has to believe in Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life.

This is not a mere intellectual affirmation but **involves conviction or assent**. Vos points out that one can believe that certain things have happened historically, but that does not necessarily move one to action. There may be a temporary faith, such as what the Lord spoke about in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23) regarding the seed that fell along the stony place: the seed represents those who receive the Word of God initially with joy, but they wither with persecution. One can have a faith in the supernatural, for example, in miracles, but a faith that is fundamentally self-centered. The Lord chides those who were simply looking for miracles or blessings (see, e.g., John 6:26ff). True saving faith is a gift of God wherein we lay hold of God's Word as true.

**Such faith necessarily includes trust that leads to action.** Look back at WCF 14.3. The Confession speaks about (1) *acting* upon truths revealed in God's Word; (2) *yielding* obedience to commands; (3) *trembling* at the threatenings; (4) *embracing* the promises of God for this life and the life to come; and (5) *accepting, receiving, and resting* upon Christ alone. All of these things are actions that are taken on the basis of the knowledge of God's Word, held with conviction. It is knowledge and assent that leads to trust upon Christ and taking steps to act upon and in response to those truths.

**While knowledge, assent, and trust are all a part of saving faith, it can be intimidating to think that one needs to have a full measure of all these things from the outset of the Christian life.** Many Christians struggle with weak faith and this often can lead them to doubt their salvation. The Confession recognizes this in WCF 14.3.

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.

Faith thus can vary from person to person and from time to time. No one needs to have a fully developed faith from the beginning of one's walk with Christ. True saving faith will be strengthened over time. As WCF 14.1 puts it, "[it] 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." Faith is a gift of God and God will strengthen the faith of His people over time. In addition, the means

## Reflection

5. In regeneration, calling, conversion and faith, God does it all. How should we respond to that? Why would that be encouraging?

by which God strengthens a believer's faith are ordinary — Word, sacraments, and prayer — rather than extraordinary. This should be an encouragement to believers as well, since too many Christians today inappropriately seek extraordinary means to confirm their faith, such as charismatic gifts. When these are not manifest, then they doubt their salvation. This need not be the case.

