

## SESSION 12: Changed Forever

### Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 47-49

WCF	WLC	WSC
10	57-60, 67-68	29-32

### Introduction

Up to this point, we have been dealing with what theologians call the *historia salutis* – the history of salvation. But beginning with this section in our standards, we will deal with what theologians refer to as the *ordo salutis* – the order of salvation. The distinction is embedded in the title of John Murray’s book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Redemption is accomplished in history (*historia salutis*). But it is then applied to us personally (*ordo salutis*).

How important is it for us to understand redemption applied? John Calvin writes, “As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”<sup>142</sup> *Historia* without *ordo* is of no benefit to us:

Electricity lines may go past a house, but to benefit from the electricity supply, the house must be connected to the lines.... To be united to Christ, we need to be connected to Christ by the Holy Spirit through faith. There are two linked realities here. Without the electricity surging through the grid, the house could have no benefit, even if the wires were connected.<sup>143</sup>

Therefore the basic question we will be investigating from this point forward is this: *how does God take his saving acts in history and apply them to us personally?* How are we changed forever?

### Aspects of Conversion

The title of this chapter in our confession is “Of Effectual Calling.” This uncommon phrase is defined in WSC 31, WLC 67, and WCF 10.1. J.I. Packer helpfully unpacks the latter:

What is being spoken here is the many-sided reality of Christian conversion, involving illumination, regeneration, faith, and repentance. It is being analyzed as a sovereign work of God, “effectually” (i.e., effectively) performed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The concept corresponds to Paul’s use of the verb *call* (meaning “bring to faith”) and *called* (meaning “converted”)... and contrasts with the idea of a merely external and ineffective invitation, as found in Matthew 22.14.<sup>144</sup>

Thus our standards use the phrase “effectual calling” as an umbrella term to refer to the various aspects of conversion.

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<sup>142</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

<sup>143</sup> Letham, *Union with Christ*, 42.

<sup>144</sup> Packer, *Concise Theology*, 152-153. As examples of Scriptures speaking of effectual calling, Packer cites Rom 1.6, 8.28,30, 9.24; 1Cor 1.24,26, 7.18,21; Gal 1.15; Eph 4.1,4; 2Th 2.14.

## The Partakers of Redemption

“Who are made partakers of redemption through Christ?” asks WLC 59. The answer given is “all those for whom Christ hath purchased it.” WCF 10.1 is more specific: “All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call.” The proof text cited is Romans 8.30: “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

The Scriptures thus distinguish between *general* and *effectual calling*: “For many are called, but few are chosen,” (Mt 22.14). God sincerely offers Christ to all who will come: “let the one who desires take the water of life without price,” (Rev 22.17). At the same time, Christ himself tells us, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him,” (Jn 6.44). It is the elect only “who are in time by the Holy Ghost enabled to believe in Christ according to the gospel,” (WLC 59).

Having laid out this general principle, our standards go on to speak of more specifically difficult cases. What of infants who die in infancy? What of the mentally handicapped? What of those who dwell in lands to which the gospel has never come?

WCF 10.3 addresses the case of infants and the mentally handicapped in two ways. Firstly, it affirms is that in such cases, as in all others, salvation is only through the accomplished work of Christ personally applied by the Holy Spirit, “who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth.” The gospel is exclusive, and there are no exceptions. Secondly, it pushes the question back onto the only sure hope there is for anybody: the electing love of God. If a person is chosen by God for eternal life, then that person will be saved by Christ through the Spirit. *How* it happens may be a mystery to us; but *that* it happens is not.

Yet all this leaves unanswered one very burning question: how many infants and handicapped are included among the elect? On this question significant figures in the Reformed tradition differ. A.A. Hodge is optimistic that all infants who die in infancy are elect:

The phrase “elect infants” is precise and fit for its purpose. It is not intended to suggest that there are any infants not elect, but simply to point out the facts – (1.) That all infants are born under righteous condemnation; and (2.) That no infant has any claim in itself to salvation; and hence (3.) The salvation of each infant, precisely as the salvation of every adult, must have its absolute ground in the *sovereign election of God*. This would be just as true if all adults were elected, as it is now that only some adults are elected. It is, therefore, just as true, although we have good reason to believe that *all* infants are elected.<sup>145</sup>

Others in the Reformed tradition believe that Hodge’s optimism goes beyond what Scripture states. Scripture does offer us three significant comforts. First, it tells us that our God deals with families; he is a God of covenant. He makes claims on, and extends promises to, both believers and their children (Gen 17.7-10, Acts 2.38-39). Second, Scripture infers in at least two places that such “covenant children” who died – or were murdered – belonged to him (2Sam 12.23, Ezk 16.20-21). Third, it tells us that Jesus welcomed children (Mk 10.14).

Yet at the same time, Scripture also shows us that many children were included among those swept away in God’s mighty acts of judgment – both in the Flood (Gen 7.21) and in the conquest of Canaan (Josh 6.21). Even within the covenant community, judgment for rebellion fell on both parents and children (Num 16.25-35).

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<sup>145</sup> Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 174-175.

From this data, the present author believes we may safely affirm two things. First, that the infants or handicapped offspring of *professing Christians* are included among the elect. Second, that those who lose infants or handicapped offspring prior to becoming Christians may also believe that their children who predeceased them are included among the elect – since God elects in eternity past. But to those who persist in rejecting the free offer of the gospel, can we really extend any comfort? It is *possible* that God may elect their infants and invalids? It is. But it is *promised* in Scripture?

WCF 10.4 addresses two other cases of special import. The first is of those who apostatize. Here the confession affirms that people may well be “called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ.” The proof texts cited include the “rocky ground” hearer in the parable of the sower, as well as the difficult Hebrews 6.4-5.

The second case handled in WCF 10.4 (and WLC 60) is that of people who have never heard the gospel – the oft-mentioned “native in the jungle.” Here our standards are clear: the honest pagan is still a pagan and so *cannot be saved through paganism*, regardless of whether they are “diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, or the laws of that religion which they profess.” In situations where age or disability is not a factor, *God always brings his elect into personal contact with saving revelation.*

*How* he does this may be mysterious and surprising – examples from Scripture include Ruth (Ruth 1.16), Naaman (2 Kings 5), and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). *Where, when, and to whom* he has done this may include places, times, and persons of which history will remain ignorant until the resurrection. But *that* this is how God saves is irrefutable: “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved,” (Acts 4.11-12).

### **The Work of the Holy Spirit**

Having discussed *who* are made partakers of redemption, it is well that we turn to consider *how* redemption is applied. WSC 29-30 and WLC 58 tell us the application of redemption is “the work especially of the Holy Ghost,” who does it “by working faith in us.” WCF 10.1 explains that this work involves “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.” What is in view here is what Packer referred to as *illumination* and *regeneration*.

Illumination “is not a giving of new revelation, but a work within us that enables us to grasp and to love the revelation that is there before us in the biblical text.” Though a lifelong experience, it “starts before conversion with a growing grasp of the truth about Jesus and a growing sense of being measured and exposed by it.”<sup>146</sup> One thinks of Acts 16.14: “One who heard us was a woman named Lydia... The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”

Regeneration is the concept “of God renovating the heart, the core of a person’s being, by implanting a new principle of desire, purpose, and action, a dispositional dynamic that finds expression in positive response to the gospel and its Christ.”<sup>147</sup> The primary texts here are Ezekiel 36.25-27 and John 3.1-15.

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<sup>146</sup> Packer, *Concise Theology*, 155.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

Can there be regeneration without conversion? Packer cites several verses in support of the conclusion that this is impossible. 1 John 3.9 is especially worth consideration: “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” This verse makes an identification between those “born of God” and those in whom “God’s seed abides.” But God’s seed does not abide in the unconverted. Therefore, whatever other considerations might posit the possibility of regeneration without conversion, this verse offers compelling substantiation to Packer’s conclusion: “It thus appears that as there is no conversion without new birth, so there is no new birth without conversion.”<sup>148</sup>

### **Changed Forever – Union with Christ**

Conversion brings us into personal, permanent, spiritual union with Christ. One of the key metaphors used in Scripture to explain this change is that of a vine and branches: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing,” (Jn 15.5). The ‘vine’ was an Old Testament image for the people of Israel (Ps 80.8-9) – a symbol of their experience and identity. By taking up this symbol and referring to himself as “the true vine,” Jesus tells his disciples that a living connection to him changes us forever.

Union with Christ changes our experience by bringing us into a new relationship. Like any healthy relationship, our relationship with Jesus has five aspects. First, we enjoy his *presence* through the indwelling of his Spirit (Jn 14.23-25). Second, we *trust* him – through believing his words we are made clean (Jn 15.3). Third, we *communicate* with him – he speaks to us in Scripture, and we speak to him in prayer (Jn 15.7). Fourth, we receive the *affection* of both Father and Son (Jn 14.23, 15.9). Finally, we *serve* him because he first served us (Jn 14.15, 15.10).

But union with Christ does not simply change our experience. It also changes our identity. We will conclude this session by reflecting upon this new identity...

### **Gospel Identity<sup>149</sup>**

Identity controls destiny. Whether we realize it or not, each of us spends our life acting like a novelist: selecting courses of action (our plot) for our main character (ourselves) based on who we think that character is. It is here, at this central narrative of our existence, that the gospel meets us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is *an identity, defined by a destiny, that overflows into activity*.

#### *The Gospel is an Identity*

“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive,” (1Cor 15.11). The key word in both parts of this sentence is ‘in.’ It is shorthand for “in union with.” All humanity starts out in union with Adam. We are *identified* with Adam, and we face the consequences of his rebellion against God.

But the gospel offers us something better than the old identity in union with Adam. It offers us union with Christ. Union with Christ is a central concept in the New Testament. Theologian John Murray wrote, “Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ.... Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”<sup>150</sup> Is this an exaggeration? We are to consider: how often does the Apostle Paul speak of being “in Christ Jesus”, “in him,” etc.?

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>149</sup> This section has been published as a separate article available at: <http://resurrectionopc.org/discipleship/>.

<sup>150</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 161.

Union with Christ connects us to the work of Christ. Supernaturally conceived and born of a virgin, Jesus Christ is the only son of Adam who is also the Son of God. As such, he alone did not inherit Adam's guilt or corruption. On the contrary, he was perfect: in his birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection. As such, Jesus was uniquely qualified to rescue rebels *and restart the human line*. How so? Because Jesus is God, his work is of infinite value. And because he is also a perfect man, his life and death provide something unique: a substitute record that can count for others.

How can the work of Jesus, now over two millennia past, count for people today? The answer is that God, in eternity past, elected *in advance* those whom Jesus would represent (WLC 31). And just as a team captain scores goals *for his team*, so Christ's life and death accomplished salvation for God's elect.<sup>151</sup> Yet this decretal union does not become an existential union<sup>152</sup> – redemption accomplished does not become redemption applied – until we are *actually united* to Christ.

Actual union begins when God the Spirit regenerates and brings a person to trust in Jesus Christ. This is called 'conversion' or "effectually calling," (WSC 30). When this happens, the new Christian is "spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband," (WLC 66). And it is in this united-to-Christ state that Christians "partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them," (WSC 32).

Union with Christ thus gives the Christian a new identity. Instead of being identified with Adam in his rebellion, we are identified with Jesus Christ in his obedience – and in his destiny.

Do you have this new identity? Do you desire it? All you have to do is entrust yourself to Jesus. Are you unsure? There is an easy way to discard your uncertainties: stop wallowing in doubt and surrender to Jesus right now. Simply believe, and he will put his name on you (Acts 15.17, Rev 14.1). There is no need to be unclear about your identity – or your destiny.

#### *An Identity Defined by a Destiny*

"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his," (Rom 6.5). For the Christian, resurrection life is not just a future promise. It is also a present reality (cf. Jn 5.24, Col 3.1-4).

To say that resurrection life is a present reality is to speak of *sanctification*. The rule here is very simple: as for Christ, so for the Christian, the cross must precede the crown (Mk 8.34-38). From the moment we believe, the death and resurrection of Jesus becomes the master page in the providential copier machine – and we become sheets of paper sent through the machine over and over again. Through this process of heat and pressure, God applies to us the death and resurrection of Christ. In turn, we come more and more to resemble Jesus: dead to sin, alive to righteousness, (WLC 75, WSC 35). Bearing the excruciating cross becomes the means whereby we are made to reflect Jesus. And in coming to reflect him who is true humanity himself, we ourselves become more truly human. Through suffering we learn to love God not simply for his *gifts*, but for *himself*. This is man's chief end. Its rejection was and is man's great sin. Its accomplishment was Christ's great win. Its application is our sanctification.

The gospel is thus an identity defined by destiny. The cross precedes the crown. Yet so far begetting despair, this reality creates hope – *because the excruciation leads to the consummation*. If the cross must precede the crown, then the crown must follow the cross.

Do you struggle with this? Remember that this life, despite its luster, is a bauble compared to resurrection life (2Cor 4.16-18). Every day, a better world draws near (Rom 13.11; cf. Rev 21-22).

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<sup>151</sup> Letham, *Union with Christ*, 58.

<sup>152</sup> The present author is indebted to Rev. Jody Morris for the terms "decretal" and "existential" union.

*An Identity that Overflows into Activity*

The active agent of resurrection life is God the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ indwells those united to Christ (Rom 8.9). Like soup in a bread bowl, the Holy Spirit *saturates* and *permeates* believers<sup>153</sup> – transforming our affections (1Jn 2.15-17), giving us the mind of Christ (Rom 12.1-2, 1Cor 2.16).

The Christian life consists in *living consistently with our new identity*. Every day we rehearse for the role of our life – life everlasting! Every day we must draw our identity not from the surrounding noise, but from our eternal destiny. When tempted to sin, we tell ourselves, “This isn’t me. Sin is no longer who I am. In Jesus I am a saint, and saints live differently.” This doesn’t mean we’re perfect. “A saint does sin. But a Christian is one who has *saint* as their constant identity and *sinner* as their occasional activity. For the Christian, there is a vital difference between *having* sin and *being* sin.”<sup>154</sup>

In Christ, we remember that there is a proper sense in which we are too good for the world. The world is no longer worthy of our affections (Heb 11.38). We put off sin because grave clothes don’t belong on the living (Jn 11.44). We seek no place in Atlantis, for we belong to a city with foundations (Heb 11.10). We have been invited to a great feast (Is 25.6, Rev 19.9), and there is no need to go dumpster-diving along the way. In Christ we are accepted: God’s verdict is in, the court is closed, and now we spend our lives doing things not to *look good*, but because they *are good*.<sup>155</sup> “The imperatives of the Bible (what you should do) flow out of the indicatives (who you are).”<sup>156</sup>

The essence of all this is simple. Just as we activate faith by *remembering who Christ is* (cf. Mk 4.40), so we activate resurrection life by *rejoicing in and remembering who we are in Christ*. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,” (Gal 2.20).

Christian, do you believe these things? How much of your life could change today, simply by *crediting the reality* that in Christ you are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus,” (Rom 6.11)? This is the *actual present reality* for every Christian. This is gospel identity. Do you believe?

**Important Questions**

1. Reformed theology is often perceived as having little use and leaving little space for the work of the Holy Spirit. Is this accurate?
2. To what extent does consciousness of being united to Christ inform your Christian life?

**Additional Resources**

Letham, Robert. *Union with Christ: in Scripture, History, and Theology*.

**For Next Session**

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 50-53, 56-57, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
11-12, 14	70-74, 153	33-34, 85-86

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<sup>153</sup> Letham, *Union with Christ*, 50.

<sup>154</sup> Mark Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 35.

<sup>155</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (Chorley, UK: 10Publishing, 2012), 43-44.

<sup>156</sup> Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, 39.