

**Theology for Life**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church**  
Lesson 8: Free Will and Conversion

**Opening Discussion:**

- There is an assumption that predestination means the absence of free will. Why is lacking freedom of will such a disturbing concept to many people?

**Ordo Salutis (Order of Salvation)**

Christ's saving work is accomplished in history (including all of what God did to save). All the many benefits of this salvation are applied to believers individually. Westminster Confession spends the next several sections (ch. 10-18) describing these benefits.

*Ordo Salutis* refers to the order or sequence in which the benefits of salvation occur in a Christian's life.

Here are all the different parts of salvation applied to believers: Calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, glorification: all of these describe and flow from Union with Christ

Does the order of how salvation gets applied to people matter?

How does someone become a Christian? Does faith produce conversion? Does it begin with our choice?

**Our Starting Point: The Unencumbered Self?**

There has been a common belief that to truly know something you must learn it without any influences or biases. The assumption is that your beliefs aren't valid because you were predisposed by your culture or upbringing to believe such things. The 'unencumbered self,' free from these influences, is the only proper starting point.

You may hear this expressed like this: "You're only a Christian because you grew up in America," or "...in the Bible Belt," or "...in a Christian home." Statements like these are meant to discount your faith or question its authenticity. It may be posed like this: "If you grew up in China you would be Buddhist, in India you would be Hindu."

The assumption is that to have true knowledge you must throw off your biases and approach a subject independently. There is a naïve optimism that thinks we can stand in a neutral position and reason our way to truth.

Under this perspective, conversion happens when we present the claims of Christianity and they are accepted or rejected. The choice was made from our own free will.

Revivalism in America approached conversion from this perspective. 19<sup>th</sup> Century revival preacher Charles Finney described the conversion process as he understood it.

Finney:

*“The Spirit pours the expostulation home with such power that the sinner turns... the Spirit turned him, just as you would say of a man who had persuaded another to change his mind on the subject of politics, that he had converted him and brought him over... He does not act by direct physical contact upon the mind, but he uses the truth as his sword to pierce the sinner; and the motives presented in the gospel are the instruments he uses to change the sinner's heart... Did not the serpent change Adam's heart by motives? and cannot the Spirit of God with infinitely higher motives exert as great power over mind as he can?... The power which God exerts in the conversion of a soul is moral power; it is that kind of power by which a statesman sways the mind of a senate; or by which an advocate moves and bows the heart of a jury.”*

The power of persuasion implied that humanity was in a neutral position. Revivals unashamedly, therefore, attempted to sway the mind, emotions, fear, desires, feelings of guilt, etc. of listeners.

### **Our Will**

WCF 9.1 *“God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil.”*

The key question regarding our ability to “choose” God from a free will begins by asking How far did sin affect humanity? Just our behaviors? Did it affect our mind and our emotions? Did it affect our will?

Finney strongly asserted that sin did not come from a sinful nature.

*“All sin consists in voluntary acts, no innate, inherent or derived corruption in human nature...”*

*“All depravity is voluntary-- consisting in voluntary transgression... O! the darkness of that view of depravity which exhibits it, as something lying back, and the cause of all actual transgression.”*

What does scripture teach about the extent of sin?

- **Romans 8:7–8** *“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. [8] Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”*
- **John 6:44** *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.”*
- **Romans 3:12** *“All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”*
- **1 Corinthians 2:14** *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”*
- **Titus 3:3–5** *“For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. [4] But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, [5] he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,”*

Westminster affirms:

WCF 6.4 *“From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.”*

WCF 9.3 *“Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”*

On our own, how would we respond to a presentation of the claims of Christianity?

What needs to happen in order to respond positively?

### **External and Internal Call**

A. External Call (summons)—the call (audible/written) to receive the gospel through God’s word:

1. This does not come to everyone
2. This is not accepted by everyone to whom it comes Matt. 22:14 “many are called, but few are chosen”

B. Internal Call—the Spirit’s call on the heart/will

1. This does not come to everyone, but it does come to everyone who is a believer
2. This is always accepted by everyone to whom it comes
3. In almost every instance in the Bible this is the meaning of call (effectual, predestination).
  - **Romans 8:30** *“And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”*
  - **1 Corinthians 1:9** *“God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful”*
  - **Galatians 1:15** *“But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace...”*

### **The Change: God’s inward call produces a necessary change in our heart**

A. It is the work of the Trinity (Father is the Author, work of redemption done by Son, application done by the Spirit.

1. Done by the Word Romans 10:14-15

*[14] How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” [16] But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” [17] So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

2. “The sole agent of it is the Holy Ghost, who uses the revealed truth of the gospel as his instrument” A.A. Hodge

B. What does the Holy Spirit do to us?

1. To the mind? (enlightening spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God)-new lenses
2. To the heart? (taking away heart of stone, and giving a heart of flesh)
3. To the will? (renewing, determining them to that which is good, not against our wills, freely and made willing)

WCF 10.1. *All those whom God hath 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.*

WCF 10.2. *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.*

*"The Holy Spirit, in the act of effectual calling, causes the soul to become regenerate by implanting a new governing principle or habit of spiritual affection and action. The soul itself, in conversion, immediately acts under the guidance of this new principle in turning from sin unto God through Christ." A.A. Hodge*

This is what Christians mean by "born again" or "regeneration." We were dead, and God gave us new life.

C. Ordo Salutis: let's figure out the order

1. Faith must come after regeneration

2. Effectual Call must come first (Romans 8:28-30)

*[28] And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. [29] For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. [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.*

3. Order: Calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, glorification

### **Augustine's Fourfold State of Human Nature:**

1. Man's original capacities included both the power not to sin and the power to sin (***posse non peccare et posse peccare***).

WCF 9.2 "Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it."

2. In Adam's original sin, not able not to sin (***non posse non peccare***);

WCF 9.3 "Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto."

3. After Conversion, Man is able not to sin (***posse non peccare***)

WCF 9.4 4 *When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by his grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.*

4. In Heaven, man will have the ability to sin taken away and receive the highest of all, the power not to be able to sin (*non posse peccare*) .

WCF 9.5 *The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone, in the state of glory only.*

### **Exceptions to God's Ordinary Way of Conversion?**

*"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"*

If we are saved by faith in Christ...

What about the person living in a distant country who has never heard the gospel?

What about the person who seems to be living a good moral life, but doesn't believe what Christians believe?

What about the person who sincerely believes in a different religion?

What about the person who believes, but then falls away?

What about infants who die before they even have a chance to believe?

What about those who do not have the ability to understand the gospel?

### **A. Those who cannot understand or have not heard the call**

Regeneration takes place in connection with the means of grace which God himself has appointed.

Primary way: Salvation only takes place in connection with the **means of grace**

WCF X.1 "he is pleased...to call by his Word and Spirit..."

Romans 10.14 "...how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard."

1. Those who cannot hear: Infants and those incapable of understanding

- Age of accountability (problems?) Different plans of God: Is there such a thing as an age of accountability?
- If we all stand guilty of sin and accepting Christ is the only way to salvation, what does that mean for babies and infants that are not old enough to make that decision?
- Many Christians say that children under the age of 13 are automatically saved (some are not so dogmatic about the particular age).

2. Any Evidence: WCF X.3

*"Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth..."*

3. Scripture

*"But Jesus called the children to him and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'" Luke 18:16*

4. Good and necessary: Scant evidence, but good and necessary inferences which may be drawn from Scripture: WCF wording "elect infants dying in infancy" could be few, could be all-Scripture doesn't say, so we shouldn't speculate.

*"We may legitimately hope, but we may not demand."* G.I. Williamson

5. Incapable: similar conclusion

WCF X.3 "...so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word."

### **B. Have not heard**

1. Question of God's justice: men are condemned for their sin, not for rejecting the gospel.
2. External call goes to those whom God wants it to: Act 16:6  
*"Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia."*
3. Yet God does desire all men to repent and have eternal life  
*Ezekiel 33:11 "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live."*

### **C. Those who hear and never believe or believe and fall away**

WCF 10.4 *"Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved:"*

1. Some are used by the Spirit and have appearance of faith
  - a. Parable of the seed
  - b. Truly saved will never fall away, but no one can know the mind of God "make your calling and election sure" 2 Peter
2. Some never believe, but live according to a moral standard
  - a. Their chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever; first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God
  - b. What is the danger of believing that some can be saved apart from Christ?  
WCF calls it "pernicious"

WCF 10.4 "... much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature and the laws of that religion they do profess. And, to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious, and to be detested."

## **Discovering God**

We have seen how we cannot escape our biases and predispositions. There is no "unencumbered self" who can reason their way to faith.

Consider the criticism mentioned above: "You are only a Christian because you grew up in a Christian home." Does this statement undermine your faith?

How might you respond to a skeptic that asks you that question? One response is to point out that their reasoning would also imply that they are only a skeptic because they grew up in a cynical, anti-Christian 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

Is truth learned in the context of belief less valid? Do we have to figure it out by ourselves?

Consider Acts 2:37-49. What do we learn about conversion from these two episodes?

*[37] Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" [38] And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. [39] For the promise is for you and for your children and for*

*all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” [40] And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” [41] So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

*[42] And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. [43] And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. [44] And all who believed were together and had all things in common. [45] And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. [46] And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

In both instances knowledge of God (conversion) comes through participation in community. Baptism implies an intentional raising of your children in community as the best way to discover God.

Our understanding of sin exposes that we cannot simply come to faith by reason alone in isolation. This doesn’t “check our brain” at the door; Faith is reasonable. It does, though, suggest that we rethink how we learn about God.

Instead of the modern assumption that we must first decide to believe and then we can participate in the life of the community. We see the NT imply that a major way to know God comes through participating in the covenant community: Participation that leads to faith.

We become a Christian not so much from reasoning our way to faith as by “faith seeking understanding.” We learn the faith in the context of a believing community all the while seeking intellectual understanding of what we believe.

This is how the early church grew:

*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.

What are the implications of this for baptism?

How might this change our approach to evangelism?