

First Conviction of Sin: Preparation for or Part of Conversion

A view of Dutch Divines in comparison to English Puritans on the knowledge of sin before the knowledge of Christ.

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Introduction

In 2012, Rev. A. Kort, minister in the Old Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands, wrote *Wedergeboorte of Schijngeboorte* (Regeneration or Pretense-Birth). He argued that many conservative Dutch Reformed congregations have moved away from the Biblical theology concerning regeneration, “There are currently churches which have embraced the so called ‘embryo theology.’ With this, these churches are fundamentally deviated from the doctrine of the Reformation.”¹ Rather than a regeneration that begins with the knowledge of Christ, most conservative Dutch Reformed churches argue that regeneration starts with knowledge of sin. Kort, however, argues that one needs to have knowledge of Christ before regeneration takes place.² Furthermore, He says that one needs to be sure of his salvation in Christ and of his justification.³ Not without reason, caused this book much commotion in the conservative denominations in the Netherlands.⁴ Two conservative theologians, Rev. J.M.D. de Heer and Rev. J. Roos, wrote various articles to defend that regeneration begins with the knowledge of sin rather than that of Christ. The question is, which view is Biblical or if both concepts can be defended from Scripture. This paper will argue for a middle way between these two views. There is certain knowledge of sin, though worked savingly by the Holy Spirit, which one has before the actual regeneration. The moment of regeneration happens when one flees to Christ as the only Savior, and that knowing to have faith and justification belongs to the assurance of faith.

¹. A. Kort, *Wedergeboorte of Schijngeboorte*, 3rd ed. (Meteren: Textservice Vermeulen, 2013), 12.

². Kort, *Wedergeboorte of Schijngeboorte*, 51, “Laat iemand mij zeggen dat hij het gevonden heeft buiten Hem, Die ons vindt. Zullen we door Hem gevonden zijn en Hem niet kennen? Dat is onmogelijk. We weten in Wie we geloofd hebben. Een geloof zonder de bewuste kennis is geen geloof...Laat varen dat misleidende geloof, dat mensen laat geloven dat ze gelovigen zijn zonder te weten dat ze geloven in Christus.”

³. Kort, *Wedergeboorte of Schijngeboorte*, 142, “Die verlossing geschiedt dus bewust en niet onbewust; door een bewuste rechtvaardigmaking en een bewuste wedergeboorte (let ook op de volgorde).”

⁴. Kerkredactie, “Publicatie ds. Kort roept veel reactie op,” *Reformatisch Dagblad*, December 21, 2012.

Definitions

It is necessary to define various terms to prevent confusion. The first term is “first conviction of sin,” and the second is “Preparation for Grace” or “Preparation for Christ.”

First Conviction of Sin

The “first conviction of sin” is the work of the law by which a sinner is convicted of his sinful nature, but has not yet any sight on the grace or mercy of God for salvation. During this time, the soul of the convicted person has many fears and sorrows. He undergoes the pain of getting to know his sins, is humbled and receives a tender heart.⁵ Flavel writes, “They see [during this conviction] the law broken by sin, wrath hanging over them in the threatenings, the bitterness thereof they have in their consciences; they have dealt with fears and horrors a long time.”⁶ Note that this conviction or sorrow differs strongly from the sorrow after the knowledge of Christ. The former is called a “legal sorrow” while the latter is called an “evangelical sorrow.”

Preparation for Grace or Christ

The “preparation for grace,” or also called “preparation for Christ,” is the work of the Holy Spirit by which an elect person through knowledge of his sin is prepared to receive or come to Christ. Though there is a general work of the Spirit that looks similar in the reprobate as in the elect, there are in general some differences between a saving preparation in the elect and a general conviction in the reprobate. One example is that the elect during the first conviction of sin have love towards God and fear for sin itself. However, a convicted reprobate only fears a just God, and though he has some knowledge of sin, he fears for the consequences of sin rather than for sin itself. It should be made clear that this conviction in the reprobate cannot be called “preparation for grace.” Besides this, it has to be mentioned that the preparation in the elect is not a work from man’s side but takes place by the workings of the Holy Spirit.

Dutch Reformed View

The Dutch Reformed view is one of the two main categories concerning the “first conviction of sin.” These divines argue that at the same moment of regeneration and faith, the person receives his first conviction of sin. In this case, there is no knowledge of Jesus Christ.

English Puritan View

The English Puritan view is the second category of “first conviction of sin.” These divines argue that the person who is savingly convicted of his sins is *not* yet regenerated, but this work is “preparatory grace.” Before the moment of regeneration, the person receives some knowledge of Jesus Christ and a merciful God. At the moment of regeneration, one flees to Christ alone for salvation. Only few English Puritans argue that the person will receive assurance of faith at the moment of regeneration.

⁵. John Flavel, *Christ Knocking at the Door* (New York: American Tract Society, 1689), 288.

⁶. Flavel, *Christ Knocking at the Door*, 288.

Dutch Reformed View – First Conviction of Sin part of Conversion

Preparations for Regeneration Rejected

The mainstream of Dutch Reformed theologians argue that a person is regenerated, made alive, and receives faith at the moment of his first conviction of sin. This means that they believe that there are *no preparations* before regeneration, because the sinner is dead in his sins and an enemy of God and His Word. Witsius says, “There are *no preparations* antecedent to the first beginning of regeneration; because, previous to that, nothing but mere death in the highest degree is to be found in the person to be regenerated.”⁷ The word “regeneration” has two different senses, namely “regeneration in the narrow sense,” and “regeneration in a broad sense.” Witsius argues that the first is the translation from spiritual death to spiritual life,⁸ also called the quickening of a dead soul.⁹ In similar manner, Comrie argues that regeneration in the narrow sense excludes any preparatory work as cause, “Our pious divines taught that, in the narrow sense, all preparatory work as cause [for regeneration] needs to be excluded, and that regeneration in this respect has to be placed before faith, as the root and principle, out of which true faith arises.”¹⁰ This means that every preparation from man’s side should be excluded.¹¹ In similar manner, Rev. G.H. Kersten, founder of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, writes, “As the absolute work of God, regeneration has no preparations from man’s side. No one can add anything to his natural birth; thus, it is even more impossible that man can add [anything] to his regeneration.”¹² Though he acknowledges that a number of divines argue for some preparations from God’s side, he prefers with Comrie not call them preparations.¹³ In like manner, theologians in the Gereformeerde Gemeenten (in Nederland) argue that there is no preparatory work before regeneration. Rev. Roos (GGiN) writes in *De Wachter Sions*, “We teach that when the Lord regenerates a person and makes him alive, he uses the law to savingly convince him.”¹⁴ Similarly, Rev. J.M.D. De Heer (GG) writes in the *Saambinder*, “When does spiritual life begin? Does that begin with a conscious uniting with Christ by faith? Yes, writes Rev. Kort. Is there only spiritual life at the benefit of justification before God? Yes, is the conviction of Rev. Kort.

⁷. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans by. William Crokshank, vol. 1,2 (London: T. Tegg and Son, Cheapside, 1837), 242. Emphasis added.

⁸. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1,2:245.

⁹. Herman Witsius, *Conciliatory or Irenical Animadversions*, trans by. Thomas Bell (Glasgow: W. Lang, 1807), 256.

¹⁰. Alexander Comrie, *Verhandeling van Enige Eigenschappen des Zaligmakenden Geloofs*, vol. 1 (Leiden: D. Donner, 1744), 88.

¹¹. Alexander Comrie, *Stellige en Praktikale Verklaring van den Heidelbergse Catechismus - Zondag Zeven* (Middelburg: Stichting De Gihonbron, 2008), 18.

¹². G.H. Kersten, *De Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 2 (Utrecht: De Banier, 1966), 89.

¹³. Kersten, *De Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2:90–91.

¹⁴. J. Roos, “Is de Leer van Comrie Onbijbels (2),” *De Wachter Sions*, December 6, 2012.

At this point our ways separate...Does it mean that sorrow after God, weeping over sin and hungering after deliverance is no spiritual life? Is it just the general work of the Holy Spirit? No.”¹⁵ In other words, these divines argue that the first conviction of sin without knowledge of Christ, takes place after regeneration, and not before this moment.

There are several reasons for Dutch theologians to defend that there are no preparations, not even from God’s side, before regeneration. In the first place, man by nature is dead in his sins and trespasses. Comrie reasons that man cannot do anything spiritually because he is spiritually dead.¹⁶ Witsius, in like manner says, “Since our nature is become...like an evil tree, it can produce no fruit [that is] truly good and acceptable to God, and can do nothing by which he can prepare himself for the grace of regeneration, unless a person can be thought to prepare himself for grace by sin.”¹⁷ Second, the effects of the first conviction of sin, like weeping over sin and a thirsting after righteousness, are in Scripture described as fruits of spiritual life (Matt. 5). Witsius writes, “That which follows assent is the love of the truth, known and acknowledged; and this is the third act of faith, of which the apostle speaks, 2 Thess. 2:10...Hence arises a fourth act of faith, a hunger and thirst after Christ. For the believing soul knowing, acknowledging, and loving the truths of salvation, cannot but wish that all those things, which are true in Christ, may also be true to him...This is that hunger and thirst after righteousness, mentioned [in] Matt. 5:6.”¹⁸ Still, a number of Dutch theologians are aware that some orthodox divines would argue for a preparation from God’s side. Nevertheless, Witsius says,

But we really think they argue more accurately, who make these and the like things in the elect, to be preparations to the further and more perfect operations of a more noble and plentiful spirit, and so not preparations for regeneration, but the fruits and effects of the first regeneration: for as these things suppose some life of the soul, which spiritually attends to spiritual things, and are operations of the Spirit of God when going about to sanctify the elect, we cannot but refer them to the Spirit of grace and regeneration.¹⁹

Dutch theologians acknowledge that there can be common convictions of sin but say that this is only a common and not a saving work of the Holy Spirit. De Heer says, “There is a substantial difference between a *general* conviction of sin and a *saving* conviction. In the general conviction, there is slavish fear, [and] a regret over the sin, because God’s judgment is connected to it.”²⁰ Also, Witsius argues that no conviction of sin should be called preparation. He writes, “But as these things do not, of their own nature, dispose man for regeneration, though, by the

¹⁵. J.M.D. De Heer, “Comrie onder Vuur (2),” *De Saambinder*, November 29, 2012.

¹⁶. Comrie, *Verhandeling van Enige Eigenschappen des Zaligmakenden Geloofs*, 1:10.

¹⁷. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1,2:243.

¹⁸. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1,2:256.

¹⁹. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1,2:244.

²⁰. J.M.D. De Heer, “Comrie onder Vuur,” *De Saambinder*, January 3, 2013. Emphasis added.

appointment of God, they are so disposed, as that regeneration is certainly to follow, they cannot but very remotely be called preparations, and they will be such more from the intention of God, than from the virtue of the thing.”²¹ However, when it comes to saving convictions, Dutch theologians would argue that this differs from general conviction, and therefore part of one’s conversion rather than any preparatory work.

Theological Issues

In the view that the first conviction of sins is fruit of regeneration gives a number of theological issues.

In the first place, faith is defined in various ways. On the one hand it is part the first conviction of sins, on the other hand there is only an essence of faith at the fleeing to Christ. For instance, Witsius defends that the first knowledge of sin is the moment of regeneration and faith. However, at the same time, he says concerning faith, “Other acts belong to the very *form or essence* of faith, as assent, hunger and thirst after righteousness, the receiving Christ as Lord and Saviour, and the *soul's flying* to him for refuge.”²² Related to this, he says, “The word trust signifies two things. The very act of *resting upon*, and *cleaving unto Christ*, whereby we embrace him as with both arms, and by that act, endeavour to obtain from God the Father, pardon, grace, and glory.”²³ The question that arises is how true saving faith is “leaning upon” or “fleeing to Christ” while a convicted sinner, under the law, has yet no knowledge of Christ. Also, the Scripture says, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Matt. 11:28-29). This seems to make a difference between those laboring and heavy laden with their sins, a convicted one, and those that come to Christ, one with fleeing faith, as coming to Christ is equated with believing in Him.

Second, regeneration and faith occurs at the moment of the first conviction of sin but there is yet no knowledge of Christ. The question is how one can have true saving faith without the knowledge of Christ. The Scripture argues that eternal life is to know Him, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, *and Jesus Christ*, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).²⁴ Also, Paul writes, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21), and “I *know* whom I have believed” (2 Tim. 1:12).²⁵ John even says, “Everyone that loveth is born of God and *knoweth* God.” (1 John 4:7).²⁶ These verses would argue that faith in God and Jesus Christ assumes a knowledge of them, which differs from saying that one with the conviction of

²¹. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1,2:246.

²². Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1,2:259. Emphasis added.

²³. Witsius, *Conciliatory or Irenical Animadversions*, 106. Emphasis added.

²⁴. Emphasis added.

²⁵. Emphasis added.

sin has no knowledge of Christ.

Moreover, the Scriptures say that those who are regenerated love Jesus Christ (John 8:42) but those that are not born again do not love Him and are cursed (John 8:42, 1 Cor. 16:22). The question arises how those under the first conviction of sin, who do not have knowledge of Christ can love Him. For the Scriptures says that those who love Christ do know Him (1 John 4:7-8).

In the third place, it is argued that those who are regenerated obtain knowledge of their lost condition before God. The question is how one can be justified and at peace with God and at the same time see and feel himself only as condemned. For in Romans is said, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1,11). It seems that in Romans one experiences peace after justification. However, Comrie writes, “In the preparatory work of the Spirit for conviction. O then, when one sees his lost condition, the soul begins to make that garment, which is, to all duties, to change of life and deeds.”²⁷ At the same time, he argues that at the moment of faith, one is justified. The question can be asked how one is justified, has peace with and joy in God while he only sees his sin and guilt.

Fourth, this view seem to separate regeneration from faith or justification by faith. Faith is called a coming to Christ (Matt. 11:28-29). However, some theologians argue that this is a later stage in the life of a “believer.” At the same time, the Scripture affirms that regeneration and faith take place at the same moment (John 1:12-13; 1 John 5:1).

Finally, this view gives a serious theological concern concerning the question what happens to a person that dies with only conviction of sin, whether the person is in heaven or hell. On the one hand, these theologians should answer the question with “heaven,” because those who are regenerated are free from sin in God’s sight and will enter into the kingdom of God (John 3:5-6; 1 John 3:9; 1 John 5:4,18). At the other hand, they should answer this question with “hell,” because for such people Christ is not the foundation by faith (1 Cor. 3:11; Acts 4:12) and only those who believe in Christ shall be saved (John 3:16).

Scriptural Basis

Nonetheless, there are several texts that seem to support this view of the first knowledge of sin as part of conversion.

In the first place, man by nature is completely dead in sins and trespasses, and not half

²⁶. Emphasis added.

²⁷. Alexander Comrie, *ABC des Geloofs* (Leiden: Johannes Hasebroek, 1743), 18.

dead, weak or sick (Eph. 2:5, 1 Cor. 15:22, Col. 2:13). Witsius refers to one of these texts when he says, “Nothing but mere death in the highest degree is to be found in the person to be regenerated.”²⁸ In like manner, Comrie writes, man is “not half dead, but fully [and with] all what he is, [he] is dead in sins.”²⁹ This means if there seems to be fruits of life, for instance a seeking to do God’s will, one can argue that there must be spiritual life. In response can be said that not all what seem to be fruits of life, is truly spiritual life. Man can show outwardly certain fruits that do not come from a renewed heart. The general workings of the Spirit are not saving, and are difficult to distinguish from the true saving work of the Spirit.

Second, man as in his natural state has no true sense and knowledge of his sins (Eph. 4:19). However, those that mourn over their sins are called blessed (Matt. 5:4). At the same time, Scripture demonstrates that there are two types of knowledge of sin, namely a sorrow after God that works repentance and a sorrow after the world that works death (2 Cor. 7:10). Witsius writes, “They [the unregenerated] are spiritually insensible of all spiritual things, destitute of all true feeling: they do not rightly consider the load of their sins, because they are in them as in their element: nor have a right knowledge of their misery, ‘being past feeling.’”³⁰ Along the same lines, Comrie argues, “The sorrow to have God angered, so that the sinner is more oppressed by the wrath of God than out of a fear for punishment. This is a sorrow after God... [this is a] humiliation or abasement, which is not feigned, or from a short duration.”³¹ Also, man in his natural state is wholly blind (Eph. 8:8, 1 Cor. 2:14).³² This would mean that when man receives some sense and knowledge of his sins and his eyes are opened, it would argue that one’s conviction of sin (after God) only takes place after regeneration. In response can be said that the Bible demonstrates that people can have true knowledge of sins which is not saving, for instance with Cain (Gen. 4:13) and Judas (Matt. 27:4). Both did know how great their sins were, but it did ultimately not bring them to ask for mercy and grace. Also, the text in Corinthians says that the sorrow after God *works* repentance, but not that it *is* repentance.

In the third place, man after receiving his first conviction begins to ask for grace and thirst after righteousness (Matt. 5:6). Thirsting may rightly be called initial faith.³³ This means that when one has hunger and thirst after the righteousness of God and Christ, he must be regenerated. In response can be said that this beatitude of hungering and thirsting cannot be received separated from the other beatitudes. This means that those who mourn should also be

²⁸. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1,2:242.

²⁹. Comrie, *Stellige en Praktikale Verklaring van den Heidelbergse Catechismus - Zondag Zeven*, 20.

³⁰. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1,2:240.

³¹. Comrie, *Stellige en Praktikale Verklaring van den Heidelbergse Catechismus - Zondag Zeven*, 20.

³². Comrie, *Stellige en Praktikale Verklaring van den Heidelbergse Catechismus - Zondag Zeven*, 20.

³³. Comrie, *Stellige en Praktikale Verklaring van den Heidelbergse Catechismus - Zondag Zeven*, 20.

meek (v. 5), merciful (v. 8), pure in heart (v. 8), and peacemakers (v. 9). Moreover, the Bible says that only those are blessed whose transgressions are forgiven and sins covered (Ps. 32:1). Besides, it can be argued that hungering and thirsting after the righteousness points to the righteousness of Christ, or Christ Himself. Thus, there is some knowledge of Jesus Christ and a fleeing faith.

Dutch Theologians with Different view

There are few Dutch theologians who have a different view than the mainstream. They argue that there is a time of conviction over sin, which is not part of spiritual life. Brakel, for instance, writes,

If he were to begin with the first serious conviction, in all probability he did not have faith [and regeneration] as yet. If he were to begin with the moment when, for the first time, he exercised faith consciously and in a most heartfelt manner, he would reckon too late, for in all probability he already had faith. I thus maintain that one cannot or rarely can know the precise moment when faith begins and when regeneration occurs.³⁴

Another theologian, Van der Groe, argues that regeneration takes place at the moment that one consciously embraces Jesus Christ, which means after conviction of sin. He says, “There can be much mourning, remorse and sorrow over the sins in one’s soul, while he is still under the preparatory convictions. But then, as the soul comes to Christ, and kisses His bloody wounds with the mouth of faith, o then is the mourning and sorrow over the sins at first sincerely from the heart.”³⁵ He also argues that the believer is always boldly and confidently assured of his part of grace.³⁶ In other words, De Groe defends that the moment of *assurance of faith* is the time of regeneration and all the knowledge of sins before this moment is preparatory grace. In similar manner, Rev. Kort, having written his doctoral dissertation on John Own, argues that the moment of regeneration is after the preparatory conviction of the Spirit and happens at the moment that one is assured of faith in Jesus Christ. He writes, “We can say that these [knowledge of lost state] are preparations of God the Holy Spirit, but then is the soul not spiritual alive, because she is under the law. It is still a lost case.”³⁷ He further writes, “Justified unconsciously, that is not what God’s Word teaches,”³⁸ and again, “The grace of Christ cannot be received, without bringing an undoubted surety with her. In this steadfastness the believer stands, for he is fully aware that God

³⁴. Wilhelmus À Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, edited by. Joel R. Beeke, trans by. Bartel Elshout, vol. 2 ([S.l.]: Reformation Heritage Book, 2012), 245.

³⁵. Theodorus van der Groe, *De Bekering tot God en het Geloof in Jezus Christus* (Middelburg: Stichting De Gihonbron, 2005), 59.

³⁶. Theodorus van der Groe, *Beschrijving van het Oprecht en Zielzaligend Geloof* (Middelburg: Stichting de Gihonbron, 2004), 3.

³⁷. A. Kort, *Het Rechtvaardigend Geloof* (Meteren: Textservice Vermeulen, 2015), 129–130.

³⁸. Kort, *Het Rechtvaardigend Geloof*, 160.

is his God. That is the full assurance of faith.”³⁹ This demonstrates that few Dutch theologians argue that the moment of regeneration is either fleeing to Jesus Christ or the assurance of faith.

³⁹. Kort, *Het Rechtvaardigend Geloof*, 171.

English Puritan View – First Conviction of Sin is Preparation

Preparation for Regeneration Defended

Most English Puritans argue that the first conviction of sin is preparation of God in a sinner to prepare him for Christ, His grace, and benefits. In this paper, only two of them, Flavel and Owen, will be referred to in order to show that English Puritans defend preparatory grace before regeneration.

In the first place, John Flavel defends that there is preparation before regeneration. This preparation exists of illumination, conviction, and compunction. He says, “Illumination, conviction, compunction *prepare the way to* Christ; and *then faith unites* the soul to him: without humiliation there can be no faith.”⁴⁰ Though Flavel does not directly speak in this quotation of regeneration, he makes clear that there is first preparation and then faith. Almost similar in another writing, he says, “But here conviction and humiliation come *first, these prepare the way* for Christ; and with Him come rest and peace. Their sorrow is turned into joy. John 16:20.”⁴¹ In other words, one who is convicted is prepared to receive Jesus Christ. He further writes, “By worthiness [of following Christ], we are not to understand the meritoriousness of these acts, but the necessary qualification of the will, and the *due preparation* of one coming to Christ.”⁴² Flavel argues in other places that coming to Christ is the first act of faith, and thus the moment of regeneration.⁴³ He further shows that the law itself and its conviction of man does not justify man before God but rather condemns him, “[The law] cannot make us righteous, but it can convince us that we are unrighteous; it *cannot heal, but it can discover* the wounds that sin has given us.”⁴⁴ This means that the convicting work of the law is not saving in itself but preparing one in his need of Christ. Moreover, Flavel argues the necessity of this preparation. He says, “Unregenerate persons are generally full of groundless confidence and cheerfulness, though their condition be sad and miserable.”⁴⁵ In other words, someone who is unconverted thinks too much of himself. Therefore, it is necessary that the sinner will be humbled before God, which is needed in order to receive Christ. This demonstrates that Flavel argues that the Holy Spirit works preparatory in conviction before giving faith in Jesus Christ. This preparation is not a method to heal the sinner but to wound him.

In similar manner, John Owen argues for the preparatory work before conversion. In a

⁴⁰. John Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 2nd ed. (New York: American Tract Society, 1820), 80. Emphasis added.

⁴¹. Flavel, *Christ Knocking at the Door*, 293. Emphasis added.

⁴². Flavel, *Christ Knocking at the Door*, 183. Emphasis added.

⁴³. Flavel, *Christ Knocking at the Door*, 176,266; Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 87.

⁴⁴. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 343. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 344.

chapter on the activity of the Holy Spirit, he says, “In reference unto the work of regeneration itself...ordinarily there are certain previous preparatory works...that are antecedent and dispositive unto it. But yet *regeneration doth not* consist in them, nor can it be educated out of them.”⁴⁶ In another place, he writes, “What is *preparatory* for regeneration is the conviction of sin.”⁴⁷ He further clarifies what this preparation exists of, namely: “1. Illumination. 2. Conviction [of sin]. 3. Reformation [of life, change in affections].”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, he argues that this is not anything from man’s side but the work of the Holy Spirit, “All the things mentioned, as wrought instrumentally by the word, are effects of the power of the Spirit of God.”⁴⁹ Owen points out why this preparatory work is necessary, namely, man has by nature “corrupt prejudices and stubbornness in sinning.”⁵⁰ This keeps man from using the means of grace in the right manner, wherefore, from human perspective, his regeneration is prevented. In other words, preparation is needed to make the soul a right subject for regeneration.

In summary, both Flavel and Owen argue that the Holy Spirit first works in a sinner by preparatory grace before He regenerates him unto new life.

Means of Preparation

Moreover, the Puritans argue for certain means which the Holy Spirit uses to prepare a sinner before coming to Christ. Though God can use various means, the main one argued for is the law of God. Flavel shows that the law and its dread is used as preparatory means. He says, “The terrors of the law may be *preparatory*, but only the grace of the gospel is that which effectually opens the sinner's heart.”⁵¹ He further writes concerning the law that it is necessary tool to slay the sinner, “There is a mighty efficacy in the *law of God* to kill vain confidence and quench carnal mirth in the hearts of men, when God sets it home upon their consciences.”⁵² In another writing he writes concerning the law, “[The law] is...exceedingly useful to convince and humble us; it cannot relieve nor ease us, but it can and does awaken and rouse us. It is a mirror to show us the face of sin, and till we have seen that, we cannot see the face of Jesus Christ.”⁵³ Flavel further describes what the law does in one’s life, “The law discovers the evil there is in sin and the misery that follows it; and the Spirit of God, working in fellowship with the word,

⁴⁶. John Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, edited by. William H. Gross, vol. 3, 2016th ed. (London, 167AD), 205.

⁴⁷. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:269. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:207.

⁴⁹. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:211.

⁵⁰. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:287.

⁵¹. Flavel, *Christ Knocking at the Door*, 116–117. Emphasis added.

⁵². Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 344. Emphasis added.

⁵³. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 211.

effectually turns the heart from sin.”⁵⁴ He continues, “It [the law] has an awakening efficacy upon secure and slumbering sinners...The law of God has an enlightening efficacy upon the minds of men...When the word comes in power, all things appear with another face: the sins that were hid from our eyes...now lie clear and open before us.”⁵⁵ At the same time, he warns that the law itself is not the way of salvation, “[An] error is laboring to heal the wounds that the law has made upon your conscience by a stricter obedience to it for the future in the neglect of Christ and his righteousness.”⁵⁶ In other words, one can by the law be convicted of his sins and try to keep it to receive salvation but when it does not lead to Christ, the work of the law is useless. These things demonstrate that the main method for Flavel by which the Holy Spirit prepares a sinner to come to Christ is the law of God.

Also, John Owen argues that the law is the method that God uses in the preparation of a sinner. He says, “The written law requires all duties of original obedience from us; and God uses these things variously to prepare our souls for a right receiving of the gospel.”⁵⁷ In one instance, he says that one feels his guilt when he is under the law, “[One feels] a disquieting sense of the guilt of sin with respect to the law of God, with his threatenings and future judgment.”⁵⁸ This shows that the law is a means in showing someone his sins. At the same time, Owen warns that the law itself, without the Holy Spirit, will never convict a person of his sins,

Neither the light of a natural conscience nor the law will convince anyone of the guilt of unbelief with respect to Jesus Christ, nor instruct them in the nature of faith in him... Therefore, this belongs to the work of the Spirit as a Spirit of supplication. Let men tear and tire themselves night and day with a multitude of prayers, if a work of the Spirit of God in teaching the nature and guilt of unbelief, and the nature, efficacy, and use of faith in Christ Jesus, do not go with it, all will be lost and perish.⁵⁹

In conclusion, both Flavel and Owen write that the main tool to prepare a sinner to come unto Christ is the law. This law will convince him of his sin and humble him before God. However, this preparatory work needs to be wrought by the Holy Spirit, otherwise the winner will never truly be convinced and prepared.

Moment and Means of Regeneration

The Puritans argue that the moment of regeneration takes place when a sinner comes to

⁵⁴. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 355.

⁵⁵. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 354.

⁵⁶. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 199.

⁵⁷. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:448.

⁵⁸. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:209.

⁵⁹. John Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books VI - IX)*, edited by. William H. Gross, vol. 3, 2016th ed. (London, 1677), 245.

Christ by faith. Flavel connects the reception of Christ strongly with regeneration. He says, “The Lord that has made it [the gospel] a key by regeneration to open the door of salvation to your souls: ‘And as ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him.’ (Col. 2:6).”⁶⁰ In other words, those who consciously receive Christ Jesus are regenerated in that moment. In another place he explains, “Those who have opened the door to Christ *by regeneration*, even they do often shut it against him in the hours and seasons of communion with him.”⁶¹ This clarifies that regeneration does not happen at the first conviction of sin, but at the moment of receiving Christ alone for salvation. Flavel calls this exercise the “act of faith” and a “coming to Christ.” He writes, “Let us also take into consideration the act of faith, as it is here described by the soul’s coming to Jesus Christ.”⁶² In other words, the moment of regeneration is connected to the act of faith and coming to Jesus Christ as the only Savior.

In like manner, Owen argues the same when he says, “The work itself wrought is our regeneration. I have proved before that this consists in a new, spiritual, supernatural, vital principle or habit of grace, infused into the soul, the mind, will, and affections, by the power of the Holy Spirit, disposing and enabling them in whom it is unto spiritual, supernatural, *vital acts of faith* and obedience.”⁶³ This act of faith is also called “actual believing or the exercise of faith,”⁶⁴ and is “through the promise of the gospel.”⁶⁵ Owen describes it in a different way when he says that “by the exercise of faith...we continually derive virtue from Christ.”⁶⁶ This demonstrates that the exercise or fact of faith is closely related to leaning on Jesus Christ. In another passage, he says that faith is the same as coming to Christ, “No man of himself can believe, none can come to Christ, unless faith itself is ‘given to him’ — that is, unless it is worked in him by the grace of the Father, Phil. 1.29.”⁶⁷ In other words, the time of regeneration is the moment when the first act or exercise of faith takes place, which happens when a person comes to Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

Moreover, it must be presumed that one has knowledge of Jesus Christ in order to be able to come unto him with his sin and misery. This is what Flavel argues for in his works. He says, All saving faith is founded in light and knowledge, and therefore it is called knowledge, Isa. 53:11...Men must hear and learn of the Father before they can come to Christ. John

⁶⁰. Flavel, *Christ Knocking at the Door*, 348.

⁶¹. Flavel, *Christ Knocking at the Door*, 101. Emphasis added.

⁶². Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 87.

⁶³. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:293.

⁶⁴. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:362.

⁶⁵. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:325.

⁶⁶. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:409.

⁶⁷. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:288.

6:45. The receiving *act of faith is directed and guided by knowledge*. I will not presume to state the degree of knowledge which is absolutely necessary to the reception of Christ; I know the first actings of faith are, in most Christians, accompanied with much darkness and confusion of understanding: but yet we must say in the general, that wherever faith is, there is so much light as is sufficient to discover to the soul its own sins, dangers and wants, and the all-sufficiency, suitableness and necessity of Christ for the supply and remedy of all; and *without this Christ cannot be received*. “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” Matt. 11:28.⁶⁸

In other words, the sinner receives during the time of conviction not only knowledge of his sins, but there comes also knowledge of Christ. At the moment of regeneration, he acts on the knowledge of Christ to flee to Him for salvation.

Furthermore, the means for regeneration must therefore be the preaching of the gospel. Flavel argues, “No faith is ordinarily wrought without the preaching of the Gospel by Christ’s ambassadors; and their preaching has no saving efficacy without God’s drawing.”⁶⁹ On the other hand, Owen says both law and gospel are used for the work of regeneration, “We grant that in the work of regeneration towards adults, the Holy Spirit makes use of the word, *both the law and the gospel*, and also the ministry of the church in the dispensation of the word, as the ordinary means of regeneration.”⁷⁰ At the same time, however, he argues that in order to exercise faith in Christ, the preaching of the gospel is necessary,

This work of conversion to God is completed, as to its outward means, is the ingenerating and acting of faith in God by Jesus Christ...1. This is the proper and unique work of the gospel, and it has been so from the first giving of the promise...2. To this purpose it is necessary that the gospel — that is, its doctrine concerning redemption, righteousness, and salvation by Jesus Christ — be declared and made known to convinced sinners.⁷¹

Though Owen say that on the one hand both law and gospel are necessary for the work of regeneration, at the same time, he argues that this regenerating work is not complete without the preaching of the gospel.

In summary, both Flavel and Owen argue that the first act of faith is related to the moment of regeneration, and is visible in a fleeing to Jesus Christ. This means that the convicted sinner needs to have knowledge of Christ and salvation, which is set before him in the proclamation of the gospel.

⁶⁸. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 120.

⁶⁹. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 76.

⁷⁰. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:282.

⁷¹. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:322–323.

Theological Issues

The view of preparatory raises another number of theological issues compared to the view of the Dutch divines.

In the first place, the question arises how saving conviction of the Holy Spirit is not fruit of the regeneration when the Bible seems to see certain marks related to conviction as fruits of repentance and regeneration. The Scriptures demonstrate that the fruits of regeneration are a mourning over sin, a godly sorrow, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, a broken and contrite heart. The Bible calls them blessed (Matt. 5:4,6), says that this kind of sorrow works repentance (2 Cor. 7:10), and that such a heart will not be despised by God (Ps. 51:17). Also, the LORD shall not break a bruised reed or quench a smoking flax (little faith) (Matt. 12:20). However, unregenerated persons are dead in their sins and trespasses (Eph. 2:1). In response, it has to be acknowledged that these elements do exist in the regenerate. However, the texts that are referred to, must not only be applied to those that have only conviction of sin but also to them that know Jesus Christ and have fled to Him for salvation. An example is Psalm 51, where David speaks of a broken spirit and contrite heart. This happened to him after he tasted the joy of salvation and knew that God was merciful (Ps. 51:1,12). Also, these texts may not be separated of Scriptures further testimony concerning regeneration. For instance, the beatitudes state that those who mourn are also meek, merciful, and pure in heart (Matt. 5:5,7,8). Also, a regenerate person has no longer the Spirit of bondage again to fear but of adoption (Rom. 8:15). The latter cannot be applied to those who are under the conviction of the law. Furthermore, life eternal cannot be separated from knowing Christ (John 17:3).

In the second place, this view of preparatory grace makes a distinction between the awakening of a sinner, and his making alive or regeneration. The time between awakening and regeneration could be interpreted as a “middle-state.” In this state, God works in the sinner so that he is convicted and drawn, but he is not regenerated and without God and Christ.⁷² The first question that arises is, when the love of the Father has drawn him (Jer. 31:3) and the person dies, how could this person than be lost? In response, it can be argued that not every “drawing” is by the eternal love from the Father. This is certainly not true for those who have not been elected from all eternity. It is also possible that the sinner has certain emotions and even some love in relation to the preaching, which is not saving in nature (Mark 6:20, Heb. 6:5). Besides this, the text in Jeremiah speaks of the nation of Israel and not in the first place of a sinner that is personally drawn by the LORD. A second question is how there can be three states, while the Bible demonstrates that there are only two, namely a state of life and that of death (Matt. 7:13-14, John 3:36). In response can be said that the doctrine of preparation does not argue for three states. This preparation takes place while the sinner remains in his state of death, though there are certain changes that look like fruits of regeneration. A third question is whether it is Biblical to separate the awakening of a sinner from his regeneration or union with Christ. In Ephesians is

⁷². J. Roos, “Is de Leer van Comrie Onbijbels (3),” *De Wachter Sions*, December 13, 2012.

stated that awakening is related to the raising from the dead and the enlightening of Christ (Eph. 5:14). In response can be said that this text does speak in relation to both believers and unbelievers. The epistle itself was written to the congregation in Ephesus, which were called saints (Eph 1:1). This means that this text is not only addressed to unbelievers in their state of death but also saints who are backsliding. The annotations on Statenvertaling explain,

[This] exhortation partly concerns the believers, who sometimes also sleep in some common sins; and partly the unbelievers, who are dead in the same sins. The first he exhorts to be awakened by the power of the Spirit of God, whereof they are already partakers; the others to arise from the dead, that by such exhortations, being made sensible of the quickening power of Christ, they would likewise become obedient to the same, as Lazarus arose from physical death by the word and power of Christ, John 11:43, 44.⁷³

In other words, the call to be awakened does not always refer to the sleep of death of the unregenerate person. Moreover, it is possible that the two commands of “awake” and “arise from the dead” are not meant to take place on the same time or to the same person. It might be possible to take both commands to unbelievers in different conditions, for instance the call to awake to a sleeping unbeliever, and a call to arise from the dead to an awakened sinner.

In the third place, when is spoken of a sinner preparing for coming unto Christ, it seems that God seeks certain qualifications in man before He regenerates him. This would mean that God depends on man to be able to regenerate him. In response can be said that these are no qualifications from man’s side. It is only God who both prepares and regenerates him. Therefore, God is not dependent on any qualifications from man’s side to regenerate him.

Scriptural Basis

Both Flavel and Owen use various texts to ground the doctrine of preparation on Scripture. Flavel, in the first place, defends that one needs first to be slain by the law from the letter to the Romans, “For I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died” (Rom. 7:9). He argues that the death mentioned in the text is the opposite of spiritual life.⁷⁴ Second, Flavel shows that the unregenerate person is without God and hope in the world (Eph. 2:12), but the regenerated person does have a lively hope that comes from the union with Christ (1 Pet. 1:3, Col. 1:27).⁷⁵ Moreover, he says that the unregenerate man has a low esteem of Jesus Christ, while the regenerate person sees excellency in Him (Phil. 3:8).⁷⁶ Also, Flavel argues that the gospel is hidden for and has little success upon the unbeliever, and

⁷³. *Statenvertaling*, 1657th ed. (Leerdam: Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting, n.d.), Eph. 5:14, note 20.

⁷⁴. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 343–344.

⁷⁵. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 345.

⁷⁶. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 348.

that they do not believe the gospel report (2 Cor. 4:3-4, Isa. 53:1).⁷⁷ It can be said that those under the conviction of the law have not yet seen the gloriousness in the gospel. If one would have believed it, he would have fled to Jesus Christ for salvation.

Moreover, Owen uses several other Scriptural references to defend the doctrine of preparatory grace. In the first place, he refers to the creation of Adam. His body was first formed, and then the LORD breathed a soul in him so that he became a living being (Gen. 2:7). This shows that God prepares man before He gives him life. Second, he refers to the vision of Ezekiel. The prophet had first to prophesy to the dead bones, and then those bones came together and were covered with flesh. Only after this moment, Ezekiel prophesied a second time and then the bones were brought to life (Ezek. 37:7-10).⁷⁸ Third, he shows from the letter to the Corinthians that conviction takes place in an unbeliever, “If all prophesy, and an *unbeliever* comes in, he is *convicted* by all: and thus the secrets of his heart are made manifest; and so falling down on his face, he will worship God” (1 Cor. 14:24-25).⁷⁹ Fourth, Owen demonstrates that certain sorrow is of the world (2 Cor. 7:10), called legal sorrow, which “brings men into bondage under fear, Rom 8.15.” Even when this results in the outward acts of humiliation, like prayer or fasting, it is a legal humiliation (1 Kings 21:29).⁸⁰ Moreover, he refers to the parable of the four different soils. The soils that do not lead to fruits (regeneration) are not rightly prepared, but only the soil that leads to fruit was well prepared.⁸¹ Besides, there can be much outward godly appearance, without the power of it (2 Tim. 3:5).⁸²

Furthermore, there are other texts in Scripture that can function as argument for preparatory grace and a regeneration during the moment of fleeing to Christ. In the first place, life eternal is to know God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3). This would support the fact that there cannot be spiritual life without any knowledge of Christ as is true for one that has only conviction of sin. Second, the coming of Christ is the same as believing in Him. He calls specially those who are laboring and heavy laden, which points to their conviction of sin (Matt. 11:28). This would demonstrate that those who only know their sins, have not yet faith. Besides, there is said that those who come (believe) to Christ will find rest. This cannot be said of those under the convicting work of the Spirit. Lastly, Paul writes to the Romans that Christ is the end (aim) of the law, for those who believe (Rom. 10:4). This would defend that those who are still

⁷⁷. Flavel, *Method of Grace*, 348–349.

⁷⁸. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:205.

⁷⁹. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:208. Emphasis added.

⁸⁰. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:209.

⁸¹. Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:212.

⁸². Owen, *Pneumatologia (Books I - V)*, 3:215.

under the law are not yet in Christ nor do believe.

Conclusion

The work of the Holy Spirit in convicting a sinner from his sin has a different place in regard to the moment of regeneration for the mainstream Dutch divines and the English Puritans. Dutch theologians argue that this saving convicting work takes place after the moment of regeneration. Therefore, they will reject any preparatory work in the sinner before the time of regeneration or faith. Their first main argument is that man by nature is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1), therefore there can no be true sorrow over sin. Second, in the first conviction of sin, there are certain visible elements like weeping over sin, and hungering and thirsting after righteousness. The Scriptures sees them as fruits of regeneration (Matt. 5:6). However, the main issue for this view is that there is no knowledge of Jesus Christ, whom to know is eternal life (John 17:3). A practical issue arises when one dies under the first conviction of sin. If is argued that the person is regenerated, he will be in heaven. When is believed that the person lacks the knowledge of Jesus Christ and Him as the only hope for salvation, the person can only be in hell.

On the other hand, the English Puritans argue that the first conviction of sin, though a work of the Holy Spirit, is not part of one's regeneration but preparatory for it. Their first argument is that the law cannot make someone righteous (justify before God) but only discover sin. It does not make a person alive, but it kills him. This would mean that there cannot be spiritual life (Rom 7:9). Second, only the gospel opens the heart of a sinner to receive Jesus Christ. Also, true faith is the same as a coming to Christ (Matt. 11:28). This assumes that the person has knowledge of Him. Both elements are not true when one is under the convicting work of the law. However, the main issue of this view is that people usually show forth certain elements that seem to be fruit of regeneration, like sorrow over sin, and hungering and thirsting after righteousness (Matt. 5:4,6). At the same time, it can be argued that a true regenerate man does no longer have the Spirit of bondage to fear but of adoption of God (Rom. 8:15). The former is true during the conviction of sin.

Taking both views into consideration based on the Scriptures, it can be argued that the moment of regeneration and true saving faith takes place after a preparation of conviction of sin, which is worked by the Holy Spirit, and happens at the moment that a person flees to Jesus Christ as the only hope for His salvation, as He is proclaimed to him in the gospel.

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