

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SERIES: JER 31:31-34 | SERMON: THE NATURE & CONSEQUENCE OF CONVERSION

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Conversion is not less, but more than mere assent to propositions

Calvinism is a system which lays heavy emphasis on the sovereignty and supernatural nature of salvation. As a result, it is Calvinism which has often been at the forefront of the push to emphasize the need for divine action if conversion is to be genuine. This concern has been opposed to the view of salvation which almost removes the divine element in an effort to make salvation/conversion more easily attainable by man; the reason for doing this is to stress the responsibility of man in conversion. Many have been persuaded by the dictum which says that if God commands it, then men must be able to do it.

Calvinism disagrees. It says God commands repentance and faith but man is unable to do either; God must grant these conversion elements as a free gift. This grant occurs in conjunction with effectual calling, new birth, and the outpouring of the Spirit upon a sinner. This is just to repeat that divine action is needed if conversion is to be genuine.

And we have more than enough evidence to show there is a "conversion" which doesn't deserve the name. Countless men, under the influence of preachers such as Finney and Billy Graham, have believed themselves converted because they performed some action recommended by the preacher. Perhaps they made a decision to follow Christ, or asked Jesus into their heart, or came to the front of the church thinking their action was identical with coming to Christ. Subsequent years showed that such "converts" performed the recommended action apart from any accompanying divine action. The men attempted to convert, but because God had not converted them the conversion was spurious. Again, divine action is necessary if conversion is to be genuine.

Now one branch of this sub-par thinking on salvation recommends, not making a decision or walking to the front of the church, but believing certain propositions. I am told the fundamentalists were guilty of this when they insisted men must believe a handful of fundamentals in order to be saved, such as inspiration of Scripture, virgin birth, miracles of Christ, atoning death, and resurrection. One famous sermon describes well-meaning

fundamentalists requiring assent to these propositions and affirming the salvation of men who assented to them.

Now I have no problem with requiring that men believe these propositions. I believe them all. The problem is in teaching that assent to these (or any) propositions alone, however true, is all that is needed for genuine conversion. We have a ready-made refutation of this idea from James: The devils assent to all of these propositions but remain devils. If that were not enough, experience produces far too much evidence of men who assent to all of these things, and more, but whose lives show no sign of biblical conversion. Why? Because divine action is necessary to conversion and in the case of such men there has been no divine action.

There is another sub-group of those who equate conversion with assent to propositions, or rather, one proposition. These men are basically hyper-calvinists. Perhaps in many cases they require assent to the 5 points, and no more, for conversion. The more relevant group requires assent to Limited Atonement, and perhaps nothing more, for conversion.

The same tests we used above can be applied to this sub-par view of salvation: Does the devil believe LA? Yes, we assume he would since we expect him to have an accurate view of salvation. Does he yet remain a devil? Yes. Further, are there men who believe limited atonement but whose lives do not show evidence of Christian conversion? Certainly.

And so the first purpose of this teaching is just to show the Bible requires more than mere assent to propositions (and thus more than mere assent to limited atonement) for genuine conversion. Specifically, the argument is that divine action is required for conversion. Following are texts showing this fact.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 ³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

This text describes the work of God within the sinner resulting in conversion. Jesus quotes this text in John 6 while explaining the difference between those who believe savingly in him and those who don't. Take note: All those addressed by Jesus in John 6 have some level of belief in him. Most of them, however, Jesus describes as people unable to come to Jesus due to God not working within them for conversion. By the end of this chapter the majority, all of whom claimed some kind of belief, are offended by Jesus and desert him for good. Why? Because divine action is necessary for conversion and the majority did not experience it.

Ezekiel 36:22-31 ²² "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³ And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴ I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. ³⁰ I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. ³¹ Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.

John 3:1-8 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus¹ by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again¹ he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.¹ ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you,

'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind¹ blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Ezekiel describes the work of God within the sinner for conversion. Jesus probably alludes to this text in John 3 when he talks to Nicodemus about being born again. In that case Nicodemus expresses belief in Jesus as a man sent from God. Jesus rebuffs Nicodemus by implying he has not experienced new birth and thus knows nothing yet as he ought to know. As with chapter 6, Jesus points to God's work within the sinner as the difference between the man who can see and enter the kingdom and the man who cannot; take note that again, as with chapter 6, Nicodemus is a man who considers himself a believer in Jesus to some extent. He is not, however, converted, since conversion requires more than human belief; it requires divine action.

John 3 could be the most important text on the necessity of divine action for conversion. Jesus repeatedly speaks about human inability to see and enter the kingdom. Notice Jesus never tells Nicodemus how to be born again? That's because men have no magic button, no special action to perform which can cause new birth. All the best actions men can perform are never better than flesh actions, and flesh can never give birth to spirit; only the Spirit can do that. Jesus points to the Wind, that is, the Spirit, as the agent of new birth. Is it a matter of human free will? Not at all. On the contrary, the will Jesus mentions is the will of the Spirit. New birth, and thus conversion, is the result not of human free will, but of divine free will.

But the point here is that conversion cannot take place apart from divine action. Assent to propositions is not enough. The Wind must also blow.

Acts 16:13-15 ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. ¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

We know Paul considered Lydia to be converted because he baptized her. Her conversion included both the preaching of the Word and divine action inasmuch as the Lord opened her heart to believe the Word preached.

Colossians 2:11-13 ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,

Paul is describing the conversion of the Colossian Christians. He does so in terms of spiritual circumcision; their circumcision was done "without hands," that is, not by man but by God; this is another reference to God's work within the sinner, on the heart, such as we saw in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Paul also describes their conversion as God making them alive who formerly were dead. Christian conversion includes and requires divine action.

Now earlier I applied two tests to the position which says assent to limited atonement is sufficient to produce Christian conversion. First, I pointed out the devil likely believes this truth and yet remains a devil. Second, I noted the fact of men who believe LA yet live unchanged lives proves mere assent to LA is insufficient for conversion. At this stage we need to point out the relevant group denies that righteous living is an evidence of conversion; this is to say that they deny the relevance of my second test of their position. So, it is the second purpose of this teaching to show from Scripture that righteous living is indeed evidence of conversion

Righteous living is evidence of conversion

The basic move of hyper-calvinism is to remove the human role from salvation. They believe that in doing this they are giving honor to God by demeaning man. Some of them also enjoy the antinomian benefits gained from such a move, since if human action is irrelevant to salvation, and if conversion consists merely of assent to propositions (such as LA), then a sinner can be saved while continuing to practice his sin.

We see then there is an unflattering motive in seeking to make conversion no more than assent to limited atonement. If indeed, as I showed above, Scripture paints conversion as requiring divine action, and if a man is not saved by mere assent to propositions, then those who assent to LA must fear lest they have no more than mere assent to LA, and thus are not converted. This fear they seek to remove (and they would condemn any suggestion of this sort as being legalistic) by maintaining conversion is no more than assent to LA.

Further, they refuse the teaching which makes righteous living indicative of conversion, for then they could have no assurance of salvation while they continued comfortably practicing sin. I have already shown conversion consists partly of divine action; now it is time to show evidence that righteous living is evidence of conversion.

Matthew 7:15-20 ¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

The man is known by his fruit. The converted bear converted fruit, and vice versa.

Romans 6:4-5 ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ 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.

Everyone who is baptized into Christ in conversion will certainly be raised with Christ to a new life. New life follows conversion certainly.

Galatians 5:19-22 ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

"Flesh" and "Spirit" are terms speaking respectively of the conditions of the lost man and the saved man. What things are produced by flesh and Spirit? Evil and works and good works. Conversion produces good works.

1 John 1:6 ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

Walking in darkness falsifies a claim to conversion.

1 John 2:3 ³ And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.

We know we are converted because we keep his commandments. The hypers like to say John only means the commandment to believe, which is part of what he says in chapter 3. This interpretation doesn't work, however, because in the same place his commandment is described as loving each other, which is a moral command summing up all the moral laws of God.

1 John 2:9 ⁹ Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.

Conversion produces love to others.

1 John 2:29 ²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

Conversion makes men practice righteousness.

John has even more of these comments but those listed more than suffice. The point is that the Bible overwhelmingly and plainly states that righteous living is evidence of conversion.

But if that is true, then our point is maintained which says that the phenomenon of the man who assents to LA but lives wrongly proves that mere assent to LA is insufficient for conversion. Such a man believes one point of true doctrine, but the Wind has not blown on him and he is not born again; consequently, he has neither seen nor entered the kingdom.

As a closing point, take note of the irony of the results of the hyper-calvinist position. Hyper-calvinism sets out to be the true Calvinism and to defend Calvinism from the dilution of lesser Calvinists, whom they claim are just Arminians in Calvinist clothing. But the results of their anti-biblical moves is to adopt a position which is far more characteristic of Arminianism than Calvinism!

It is Arminianism, not Calvinism, which has done so much to remove the divine element from conversion; but hypers, with their idea of conversion consisting of mere assent to doctrines, have returned to Arminian waters by making salvation less divine and supernatural than biblical and historical Calvinism has made it. And, it is Arminianism whose system often results in a low view of the holiness of the Christian life given their lack of emphasis on the divine work of God in conversion; if conversion is so simple as walking an aisle then it's easy to see how a man would not be much changed by it.

But if salvation is a miracle from heaven, as biblical and historical Calvinism maintains, then how could we possibly envision a man being saved without his life subsequently changing? It is the hypers who are Arminians in Calvinist clothing if anyone is, with two exceptions: The hypers are generally so confused as to not really know what theological tradition they are actually in, and the better Arminians are far more biblical and Christian than the hypers.