

**Conversion to Jesus Christ:
(6) The New Birth and the *Ordo Salutis*, or, the Order of Salvation**

In our study of true conversion to Jesus Christ, we have shown that many have a wrong view of conversion and many are mistaken as to the evidences that conversion has taken place. Belief in a set doctrines or a creed is in itself not an evidence of conversion. Joining a church, accepting its teachings, becoming involved in the activities and the life of the church, are not sure evidences of conversion. Religious experience is not necessarily conversion. Great enthusiasm for Jesus Christ is not a sign of true conversion. The suddenness of a remarkable religious experience is not a sign of true conversion. All of these are not reliable evidences of conversion. There is much error regarding the teaching of God's Word respecting true conversion to Jesus Christ.

Two weeks ago we gave consideration to our Lord's dealings with a young rich Jewish man, whom we depicted as perhaps the *most* likely man to be converted unto God, according to human standards. But he went away from Jesus sorrowful. Last week we considered the account of Zacchaeus, whom everyone in the community regarded as the *least* likely man to be converted to Jesus Christ. Everyone knew that Zacchaeus deserved the wrath of God. But in order for God to give hope to great sinners, while bringing to Himself sole glory for bestowing salvation, the Lord Jesus came into Jericho on that occasion to save this man from his sin and enable him to participate fully in the eternal blessing of the people of God. This work of God through Jesus Christ is in accordance with the teaching of all of Holy Scripture. Fallen man is incapable of saving himself. If a man or woman is to be saved from sin and brought into an eternal blessed relationship with God, it must be due to the sovereign grace of God alone. This is the teaching of the Holy Scriptures and it is the teaching of historic Protestantism, that is, reformed theology. The teaching that salvation is wholly and solely a work of the Lord for guilty sinners has historically been known as *sola gratia*--salvation is by God's grace alone.

What is the evidence of true conversion to Jesus Christ? Simply stated, we know that *conversion has occurred when there has been a transformation of both the inner man and his outward behavior with respect to his faith and obedience to the Lord Jesus, and that change remains throughout his life.*

This change in the inner man is *a work of God the Holy Spirit*. A person cannot be truly changed outwardly apart from *an inward work of grace* transforming the very nature of the sinner into one who loves, believes, and obeys God. The work of God that produces this change in a sinner is called *regeneration*. The expression that is more commonly used to describe this work of transforming grace is the *new birth*, or being *born again*. A man cannot be converted, unless he is first born again by God the Holy Spirit. This work of regeneration is God giving a new heart to His people whom He has purposed to save from their sins. Let us turn to **John 3** to see what God says regarding this subject.

Our Lord Jesus taught that salvation was by grace alone to Nicodemus, a teacher of the Jewish people. Our Lord declared to him that in order for a man to become saved from his sin, here, expressed by the idea of entering the kingdom of God, God must first cause him to be born again, that is, to be born anew by the Holy Spirit. Let us read our Lord's words in **John 3:1-17**.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus 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."

³Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

⁴Nicodemus 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?"

⁵Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and

you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?

¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:1-17)

We read of Nicodemus coming to meet Jesus. ***“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night...”*** We see that Nicodemus appeared to all to be a devout and committed man (3:1). Here was a man who was very devout in his efforts to serve God. He was a Pharisee, one who had devoted his life to live according to the law of God and teach others to do the same. Later in the passage we read that Nicodemus was no ordinary Pharisee. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees; he was perhaps the foremost teacher of the law in Israel (v. 10). As such he knew the Holy Scriptures, having studied them thoroughly. He had memorized much of the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible of the time. He would debate the teaching of the Scriptures, defending them against heretics. He would teach the Word of God to the people. But Nicodemus was more than just a Pharisee and teacher. He was a “ruler of the Jews.” He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Jewish men who led the people of Israel. Here was a devout, committed Jewish man who believed the Bible to be the Word of God and sought to live according to its commandments. Nevertheless, Jesus told Nicodemus of his need for the new birth (3:2, 3).

Nicodemus was curious of Jesus. He knew that He was from God and that God was with Him. He confessed to Jesus that he knew Jesus was no ordinary man. He said to Jesus, ***“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”*** (v. 2). This suggests that Nicodemus suspected that Jesus was the Messiah.

How did Jesus respond to him? Jesus answered and said to him, ***“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*** Although Nicodemus was a religious man, who knew the Bible, who knew that Jesus was the Messiah, nevertheless, Jesus told him very clearly and forcefully that the new birth was necessary for a man--any man, even a religious and devout man--in order to enable him “to see” the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus was like many today--religious but lost. They assume that they are right with God. They make effort to live for God, perhaps they make *great* effort, outstripping others in zeal. They have a far greater understanding of the Bible than most, but they are still in their sins. They have not been born again. They need God to transform them into a new person, who truly knows God and walks with God. Merely moral or religious involvement or commitment will not do. A man must become a new man if he will see the kingdom of heaven; that is, if he will become a citizen of the kingdom of God serving Jesus Christ as His Savior-King.

Jesus told His disciples one day,

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:20)

The only way this can occur is if God does a work of grace in the heart, bringing about through the new birth conversion of the whole person, whereby a man is changed in his *attitude, behavior and outlook toward himself and how he relates to God through Jesus Christ, as he puts forth great effort to fight against sin and strive to follow Jesus the Lord in faith and obedience.*

Nicodemus asked Jesus to explain to him the nature of the new birth (3:4-7).

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?”

Nicodemus did not understand the need for the new birth or the manner in which a man might be born a new. How can he become a new person? Jesus answered him first, by telling him, that the new birth is work of the Holy Spirit. ***“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*** It may be that the Lord used the emblem of water here to speak of God’s *grace*. Unless a man receives grace from God in that he is born anew of the Holy Spirit, he cannot be saved.

Our Lord Jesus then compared and contrasted the nature of a man as he is born into this world in contrast to the nature of one who is born again of the Holy Spirit. ***“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”*** The natural man, who has not experienced regeneration, is “flesh.” That is all he can be. He cannot change his nature. He lives chiefly for himself. He cannot live for God or before God. His nature is not inclined for that end. But in contrast to him, the one born of the Spirit is spiritual. That is, the one born a new has a desire to live before God, because He loves God, desires to please God, therefore He obeys Him from the heart.

Jesus then told Nicodemus that the new birth is a work of God’s sovereign grace apart from man’s working or man’s will. ***“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*** (3:8). This is confirmed elsewhere in Scripture. In **John 1** we read of those who are saved through receiving Christ. We read in verses 12 and 13,

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, ***who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.***

Notice that being born of God was antecedent, that is, was before believing on His name. Faith cannot come forth from a sinner until he is first born again by the Holy Spirit. The new birth cannot be brought about by our own effort. It is a sovereign work of God; that is, God chooses when and in whom He will create new life. No man can cause himself to be born again. He can change much about his observance of religion, but he cannot change his heart. He cannot bring life from the dead. Only God can infuse life into the soul of a sinner. Just as we cannot control the wind or explain fully its properties, we can only see its effects, so it is with the new birth. God is sovereign in causing people to be born again. Only God can create spiritual life where there is none. Only God can create a new heart, making a new man, who loves God, seeks to know God, who strives to obey God in all aspects of life.

Many Christians misunderstand greatly the sovereign nature of the new birth. They wrongly believe that it is in the power of a sinner to be born again. Books are written with title, “How to be Born Again.” This is foolishness. It is not Scriptural. The Bible nowhere tells a person how he can be born again through steps that he takes. Our Lord told Nicodemus that he must be born again, that he would not, could not, enter the kingdom of God without being born again. But our Lord never gave Nicodemus instruction on how to be born again, nor does any other place in the Holy Scriptures give such instruction. Our Lord declared to Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit is sovereign in causing a sinner to be born again, or regenerated.

Most evangelicals are not reformed in their theology. They hold to the teaching espoused by **Jacobus Arminius**. These Arminians teach a doctrine that is sometimes referred to as ***“decisional regeneration.”*** They believe that regeneration, or the new birth, is the result of saving faith, occurring after a sinner believes the gospel. They say that belief in the gospel results in being born again. They have it wrong. No, being born again of the Spirit results in saving faith.

The Arminian understanding of ***the order of salvation***, which has been known by the Latin phrase, ***ordo salutis***, is that first the sinner manifests saving faith in Jesus Christ, which then results in him being born again, which is then followed by all of the blessings of salvation. Here is the Arminian’s more full ***ordo salutis***:

- 1) the outward call of the gospel
- 2) faith/election (God’s election of the sinner is based on foreseeing his faith in the gospel)
- 3) repentance (turning from sin unto faith and obedience to God)
- 4) regeneration (the new birth)
- 5) justification (forgiveness of sin and granted the gift of righteousness)

- 6) perseverance (continuing in faith and obedience)
- 7) glorification (at death and the resurrection the believer is delivered from the presence of sin entirely and confirmed in holiness)

But we who are reformed understand the Bible's teaching on the order of salvation this way:

- 1) election/predestination (in Christ)
- 2) atonement
- 3) gospel (general) call
- 4) inward (effectual) call
- 5) regeneration
- 6) conversion (faith & repentance)
- 7) justification
- 8) sanctification
- 9) glorification.

The Arminian teaches that sinners are saved by their own *free will*, which is a response to God's offer of grace. They teach that a sinner has the ability, albeit with God's help, to believe the gospel before he is born again, for regeneration occurs as a result of believing, rather than regeneration enabling the sinner to believe the gospel. The result of the Arminian's teaching is to give glory to fallen man for saving himself.

Charles Spurgeon sought to show the folly and error of this kind of thinking by reciting an Arminian "prayer." He said that although the Arminian exalts man's free will in coming to salvation, he never does so when he prays. Here are Spurgeon's words:

You have heard a great many Arminian sermons, I dare say; but you never heard an Arminian prayer—for the saints in prayer appear as one in word, and deed and mind. An Arminian on his knees would pray desperately like a Calvinist. He cannot pray about free-will: there is no room for it. Fancy him praying,

"Lord, I thank thee I am not like those poor presumptuous Calvinists. Lord, I was born with a glorious free-will; I was born with power by which I can turn to thee of myself; I have improved my grace. If everybody had done the same with their grace that I have, they might all have been saved. Lord, I know thou dost not make us willing if we are not willing ourselves. Thou givest grace to everybody; some do not improve it, but I do. There are many that will go to hell as much bought with the blood of Christ as I was; they had as much of the Holy Ghost given to them; they had as good a chance, and were as much blessed as I am. It was not thy grace that made us to differ; I know it did a great deal, still I turned the point; I made use of what was given me, and others did not—that is the difference between me and them."

That is a prayer for the devil, for nobody else would offer such a prayer as that. Ah! When they are preaching and talking very slowly, there may be wrong doctrine; but when they come to pray, the true thing slips out; they cannot help it.¹

Regeneration, or the new birth, is the initial work of God that He performs *in* the sinner in order to bring him salvation. And God is sovereign in this matter. A man can no more create a new heart than he can create a new world. The Holy Spirit creates life in them whom the Father has chosen and the Son has purposed to redeem. The Holy Spirit comes to them when they are sinners, whether in our outside the church. He puts in them new life—spiritual life—that comes from Jesus Christ. The result of that new life is the sometimes sudden,

¹ From a sermon delivered on Sabbath Morning, December 2, 1855, by the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon at New Park Street Chapel, Southwark titled, "*Free Will -- A Slave.*"

sometimes gradual, but always certain transformation of a sinner into a trusting and obedient child of God. The new birth always results in conversion.

Nicodemus himself did not understand this teaching of our Lord Jesus. We read in **John 3:9**, ***“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’”*** ***Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?”*** In one sense Nicodemus, who knew the Old Testament, should have known about the matter of the need for the new birth. But due to his sinful condition, he did not know the truth of this matter. Jesus said,

Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

Jesus taught the inability of man to save himself, but that he might be saved through His death on the cross (3:13ff). Our Lord then reinforced to Nicodemus the truthfulness of this matter, challenging Nicodemus to consider carefully what he was being taught. He told Nicodemus that a man cannot be saved through his own effort. He cannot ascend into heaven through his own works. He is a sinner. He is damned. He is condemned. He is helpless and hopeless. God must come to Him in the person of Jesus Christ if he is to be saved. Jesus told Nicodemus in **verse 13**, ***“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.”***

Eternal life can only come to those through Jesus Christ, Who was sent from and by the Father in order to die for sinners on the cross and be raised to new life. Only through faith in Jesus Christ will a person ascend into heaven. The eternal Son of God had to come down, assuming our human nature, and then be lifted up on the cross, so that all those who receive life through Him may be taken up to heaven.

Jesus then cited an account found in the Old Testament, which illustrated to Nicodemus the truth of what He was telling him. The occasion was when God had judged His people Israel for having rebelled against Him. Poisonous snakes came through the camp biting everyone. They lay dying due to their sin. But a way to escape judgment was made. Moses was commanded to fashion a bronze snake and wrap it upon a pole and walk through the camp. All who looked to the bronze snake in faith as God’s provision for their sin, were healed of their fatal condition. So in the same way, Jesus said that He would be lifted up, which is a reference to Him being nailed upon the cross, that those who saw Him and His death as the way of salvation from their guilt and condemnation, would receive the promise of everlasting life. We read in **3:14ff**,

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Jesus concluded this teaching session by affirming once again that the faith people exercise in Him is due to the work of God in regeneration (3:19ff). Jesus stated to Nicodemus that sinners will not look to Christ in true faith unless they see themselves as condemned sinners, who have been shown their condition and whose response toward Jesus have been wrought by God.

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.

Unless a man has been born again, he will not believe. Unless a man is born again, he will continue to love “darkness”, that is, his sin, his wrong beliefs and practice. Everyone “practicing evil”, and that is everyone not born again, hates the truth of what has been expressed in this passage of John 3. They hate the fact that they are told that they are guilty, helpless sinners who are in a state of condemnation before God. They hate to hear

that there is nothing good about them that will commend them to God. They hate to hear that all of their religiosity is worthless and counts for nothing, that it even aggravates their condemnation. They hate to hear that unless God takes the initiative to set them free, and that He is under no obligation to do so, that they will perish in their sins. They hate to hear that there is only one way of salvation and that is through the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit creating life in them. They hate the cross as the only basis of hope for them. On the other hand, the one who “does the truth”, because he has been born from above, embraces readily and even rejoices in all that is set before us in this chapter. He sees clearly that his works are due to the grace of God.

And so, the Bible teaches God’s salvation of sinners is due to His sovereign grace alone. God has purposed to save His people by grace through the means of faith. But fallen man will not believe God’s way of salvation--by grace through faith alone--he wrongly thinks that he may be saved through his own works, or at least through a combination of his works coupled with faith that he wrongly thinks comes forth from his unregenerate heart. But fallen man will not believe the gospel, nor can he believe it, “because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). God commands sinners to repent of sin and to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. But man fails to do so, indeed, he refuses to do so, for it is impossible for him to do so. Job stated the matter in a question, “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one” (Job 14:4).

The depravity of man was demonstrated through God’s dealings with Israel in the Old Testament. We read in 2 Kings 17 these words,

¹³Yet the LORD testified against Israel and against Judah, by all of His prophets, every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My servants the prophets.” ¹⁴Nevertheless *they would not hear*, but stiffened their necks, like the necks of their fathers, *who did not believe in the LORD* their God. ¹⁵And *they rejected His statutes and His covenant* that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; they followed idols, became idolaters, and went after the nations who were all around them, concerning whom the LORD had charged them that they should not do like them.

Perhaps this is a matter of man’s inability to save himself needs proclaimed above all others. But it is not. Man’s condition is not commonly described as hopelessly lost, but rather he is only damaged a bit. He does not need redemption, but rather understanding and some assistance. It is no wonder that Christianity is so powerless in our land when the pastor of the largest evangelical church (i.e. Joel Osteen), so called, refuses to mention the word “sin.” In contrast to his approach, listen to the words of **Charles Spurgeon**:

The withholding of the doctrine of the total depravity of man has wrought serious mischief to many who have listened to a certain kind of preaching. These people do not get a true healing because they do not know the disease under which they are suffering; they are never truly clothed because nothing is done towards stripping them. In many ministries, there is not enough of probing the heart and arousing the conscience by the revelation of man’s alienation from God, and by the declaration of the selfishness and the wickedness of such a state. Men need to be told that, except divine grace shall bring them out of their enmity to God, they must eternally perish; and they must be reminded of the sovereignty of God, that He is not obliged to bring them out of this state, that He would be right and just if He left them in such a condition, that they have no merit to plead before Him, and no claims upon Him, but that if they are to be saved, it must be by grace, and by grace alone. The preacher’s work is to throw sinners down in utter helplessness, that they may be compelled to look up to Him who alone can help them.²

In order for a sinner to believe the gospel to be saved, God must impart a new heart to him to enable him to believe. Without this new heart, a sinful man never could, never would, believe the gospel. The reason that the rich young ruler refused and failed to believe on Jesus was because he was an unregenerate sinner, unwilling and unable to believe on the Lord Jesus. The reason that Zacchaeus did believe on the Lord Jesus and thereby

² Charles Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner* (Eerdmans, 1963), p. 24.

salvation “came to his house”, was because God had caused him to be born again, and therefore he believed Jesus and repented of his sin.

Now, although the new birth is the first act of God by which He begins to do a work of grace in the sinner in order to transform him into a repentant, believing, obedient disciple of Jesus Christ, we should not think that this is the first act of God in bringing that sinner to salvation. Yes, regeneration transforms the sinner, but God does a prior work in order to bring the sinner to the place and time that he experiences regeneration. In other words, as we stated last week, part of the reason that Zacchaeus had responded in faith to Jesus Christ was because God had been at work in the soul of Zacchaeus prior to meeting Jesus that day in Jericho. God had prepared Zacchaeus for work of grace. The Lord Jesus on one occasion said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Luke 5:31). Before one will come to the Great Physician to deal with their problem of sin, he needs to understand that he is desperately “sick”, sick with a sin problem that Jesus Christ alone can remedy. God prepares people by His grace for the grace of regeneration.

We sing about the soul’s preparation for grace in the hymn, “*Amazing Grace*”, written by the puritan **John Newton**. We read,

’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;

The “grace my fears relieved” was the grace of justification, which occurred due to faith wrought by the regenerating grace of God.³ But the grace that preceded the grace that relieved fears, was the grace that taught his heart to fear; in other words, the grace of preparation for the grace of regeneration.

Now as we concluded last Lord’s Day, we stated that this is how the 17th and early 18th century Puritans, both in old and New England, sought to deal with true and false conversion in their churches. This is how they sought to address the problem of nominal Christianity--Christians in name only. They wrote and taught in great detail how God normally brings salvation to sinners, so that their people could reasonably and biblically conclude that they were either in a state of saving grace or that they could be awakened to the fact that they were without Christ and in need of being saved by Him. Salvation is wholly due to the sovereign grace of God, but how does God normally apply the benefit of Christ’s life and death in order to bring sinners to true conversion? How does God prepare a sinner for that great act of saving grace, his new birth, his regeneration?

Last winter I read an excellent book that addressed this subject. **Joel Beeke**⁴ and **Paul M. Smalley** titled their book, “*Prepared By Grace, For Grace.*”⁵ In this book the authors sought to put forth what the Puritans wrote and taught regarding God’s preparatory work in the soul prior to regeneration. In doing so they attempted to address the question, “How does God ordinarily bring sinners to the point of trusting Christ alone for salvation.” The authors demonstrated that the Puritans consistently taught that God does an advance work of preparation in the soul prior to and with view toward regeneration. This preparation is not to be understood as meritorious or qualifying the soul for regeneration, as is taught by Roman Catholicism and Arminians. In attempting to maintain distance from that errant teaching, the authors used the term “preparation” rather than “preparationism.” The Puritans “consistently opposed any notion of preparation based upon the exercise of human free will or any supposed merit in the action of sinful men.”⁶

The Puritans were not completely uniform, however, in their understanding of God’s preparation of the soul unto salvation. Different Puritan writers varied in their understanding and had different emphases in their teaching and preaching. But the authors showed that there was more agreement among them about the details of this doctrine than some scholars have acknowledged, but there were some differences expressed in their writings.

The authors argue that the Puritans developed a very detailed and thorough doctrine of preparation in order to address and correct a pervasive problem in the churches: the presence nominal Christians in the churches. The Puritans believed that many who claimed to be Christians were actually unregenerate and in need

³ Romans 5:1f.

⁴ Joel Beeke will be one of our Bolton Conference speakers in October, Lord willing.

⁵ Joel Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Prepared By Grace, For Grace* (Grand Rapids, Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 297 pp.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 4.

of conversion. The Puritan preaching the doctrine of preparation was designed to show nominal Christians the manner in which God ordinarily brings sinners to experience true conversion.

The Puritans' view of God's preparation of the soul unto his conversion involved the role of the Law of God preached and applied in his hearing. But even as the Puritan preachers proclaimed the normal manner in which God converts sinners, they were always careful not to teach that the experience of the steps of preparation were necessary to come to Christ. *They always sought to hold forth Christ as willing to receive sinners and that sinners had a duty to respond immediately to the gospel in faith and repentance.* This is important. They also avoided presenting the preparatory events or experiences in the unconverted as sequential steps that must be "checked off" a list before coming to Christ. Preparation was not, therefore, "qualifying" sinners to come to Christ. Rather, God's preparation of the sinner was to make him see his guilt and hopeless condition, his need of salvation, and that his only and certain hope is in Jesus Christ offered to sinners. Preparation, therefore, was not saving grace, but God's work prior to God's work of grace in regeneration.

Different Puritan writers proposed different steps in the process of preparation. **William Perkins** (1558-1602) taught that God in saving a man ordinarily followed 10 steps in two stages. The first stage included the following:

- (1) God gives a sinner the outward means of grace, especially preaching, plus some inward or outward affliction to subdue his stubbornness.
- (2) God makes him attentive to the law to see what is good and what is evil.
- (3) God causes him to "see and know his own peculiar and proper sins, whereby he offends God."
- (4) God "smites the heart with a legal fear...makes the sinner fear punishment of hell, and despair of salvation, in regard of anything in himself." These were regarded as steps prior to grace. One could experience the first four steps and yet be unregenerate.

And then the following 6 steps were the result of grace, in what was understood as stage two.

- (5) God stirs the person's mind seriously to consider the gospel.
- (6) God kindles in the heart sparks of faith consisting of a persistent desire to trust Christ. This is the beginning of justifying faith.
- (7) God sustains this faith to combat doubt, despair, and distrust.
- (8) God quiets the conscience so that the soul rests on the promise of salvation.
- (9) God stimulates the heart to "evangelical sorrow for sin, because it is sin, and because God is offended." This is evangelical repentance.
- (10) God gives grace to the saved sinner to labor to obey God's commandments.

John Preston (1587-1628) set forth steps of preparation that the sinner was to employ. He (and others) made clear that this work of preparation was not performed to gain a warrant for trusting Christ. These steps of preparation were to foster the motivation for trusting Christ. The instructions to the sinner included the following:

- (1) Get a right mental view of sin as God's enemy, our greatest evil in separating us from God and his holiness, the cause of all bitter effects, and the cost it required to be healed: Christ crucified.
- (2) Labor "to make your hearts fit to be humble" by gaining an inward sense of holiness by the Spirit so that sin becomes a burden and by considering the inescapable and awful judgment of God.
- (3) Apply to yourself how much you owe God for all his mercies to you and how little you have given Him by way of thankful obedience, especially in your great sins.
- (4) Look upon your past sins as if they were all present with you, and upon God's future judgment as if it were presently coming upon you.
- (5) Remove your excuses for sin that shelter your conscience, such as, trusting in outward religious duties, pretending to have a good heart despite sinful actions, and saying that it's just your nature to do a particular sin.
- (6) Pray earnestly for the work of the Holy Spirit, "for this makes the law effectual." "The law and the letter of the law will not work grace in you no more than the flesh will, except the Spirit go with it: it is the Spirit that

always enlighteneth the mind and works a change in the whole man.” Make use of Christ’s promise that God will give the Spirit to those who ask Him (Luke 11:13).

(7) Strive to gain knowledge of the Word, for it is the instrument of the Spirit. Know the Bible, receive it as God’s Word, and apply it to your conscience.

John Norton (1606-1663) was a congregational minister in New England, who was a friend of John Cotton. Norton set forth a detailed explanation of preparation through the law and the gospel. He said that *the Spirit of God uses the law* to work the following:

- (1) conviction of the holiness of the law as the will of God;
- (2) conviction of sin as a transgression of the law, including Adam’s sin imputed to us all, our original sin and corruption inherited in Adam, and our actual sins of omission and commission;
- (3) conviction of guilt or the binding of the sinner to punishment;
- (4) imprisonment of the sinner under a sense of the power and guilt of sin;
- (5) conviction of the righteousness of God in punishing us for our sin; and
- (6) destruction of the sinner’s excuses and self-defences so that he is silenced before the Judge.

But in addition, *the Holy Spirit uses the gospel* to give men these benefits:

- (1) revelation of the historical facts of the gospel of Christ for the salvation of sinners,
- (2) preparatory repentance (as distinct from evangelical repentance) resulting in an external conformity to the principles of Scripture,
- (3) further sense of one’s lost estate because one lacks the righteousness of Christ and lacks the ability to turn to Christ,
- (4) acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty in showing grace or not showing grace as He pleases,
- (5) understanding the command of the gospel to believe in Christ and the power of the gospel to create faith,
- (6) waiting on the Lord by actively receiving the Word in hearing, reading, meditating, discussing, and praying.

Thomas Hooker (1586-1647) lived and ministered in England before immigrating to New England. After having conflict with the established ministry, he and those who followed him settled and founded Hartford. He is commonly viewed as the founder of Connecticut. Among Christians Hooker is most noted for his work, *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ*. But in addition he was the Puritan who had set forth the fullest treatment of the doctrine of the soul’s preparation for coming to Christ. He wrote several extensive works on the subject, most noted being *The Application of Redemption*. The full title was *The Soul’s Preparation for Christ, Being a Treatise of Contrition. Wherein is discovered How God breaks the Heart, and wounds the Soul, in the Conversion of a Sinner to Himself*. It was said of Hooker that “Perhaps no Puritan is as famous on the subject of preparation as Hooker.” Here is a description of his ministry”

From the outset of his ministry in England, Hooker had to deal with nominal Christianity in the churches. Some bishops even sneered at the idea of an experiential knowledge of Christ. In response, Hooker preached like a lion to expose superficial faith and to call people to true faith. He said, “If you desire any evidence to your souls or testimony to your hearts that God hath wrought grace in you, then show it in your lives.... Be holy in buying, selling, trading....” Ironically, Hooker’s passionate preaching to the lost is what has provoked the most fiery criticism from modern historians. (p. 73)

Many “scholars,” claiming wrongly that he had departed from historic reformed theology, have attacked Thomas Hooker. **Ian Murray**⁷ wrote, “Hooker, a modern school of critics unite to say, was a legalist who directed men more to duties and their own abilities than to Christ.” Perry Miller charged Hooker with corrupting Reformed theology. Of Hooker he wrote,

⁷ Ian Murray will be our second speaker at this fall’s Bolton Conference, Lord willing.

“In many passages describing the extent to which an unregenerate man may go in the work of preparation, some of these writers passed beyond any limits that could be reconciled with Calvinism. In New England clearly the most extreme was Thomas Hooker, who with great eloquence magnified the possibilities of a man’s producing in himself a receptive frame of mind.” (p. 73.)

Beeke and Smalley throughout the book bring the reader back to this matter to refute the assertions of modern scholarship regarding the doctrine and practice of the Puritans. The Puritans are held forth as having left valuable teaching and exemplary practice in the work of evangelism. They wrote of the Puritans:

We can learn much from the Puritans, if we read their writings with one eye on the Bible. Their method of soul care calls the church to return to preaching the law to convict and humble the unconverted. In today’s context, James 4:9 is virtually incomprehensible when it exhorts sinners and even nominal church members to “be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.” But sinners must be convicted of the wrath of God, and see the righteousness of it before they understand the need to repent and by faith to embrace the gospel promise. They must examine themselves and mourn over their sins. This message may not attract large crowds today apart from an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit. But it will create a context in which the gospel makes sense and is good news indeed. It will also honor the Spirit who inspired both law and gospel and He will be pleased to honor our preaching. A comfort gained upon grieving over sin is solid and lasting comfort. (p. 261)

And so, if we can discern from the Scriptures what kind of attitudes and understandings that are necessary for true conversion and that God normally produces in bringing His people to salvation, we may, by the grace of God, learn how to better direct people in the course they should follow in which they can reasonably expect to receive the grace of God in salvation. It was upon these themes that the Puritans, including Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield during the Great Awakening, taught and preached to the people. And God greatly blessed their efforts.

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 5:10f)