

Lord's Day 33

88 Q. *What is
the true repentance or conversion of man?*

A. *It is the dying of the old nature
and the coming to life of the new.¹*

¹ *Rom. 6:1-11; I Cor. 5:7; II Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:5-10.*

89. Q. *What is the dying of the old nature?*

A. *It is to grieve with heartfelt sorrow
that we have offended God by our sin,
and more and more to hate it
and flee from it.¹*

¹ *Ps. 51:3, 4, 17; Joel 2:12, 13; Rom. 8:12, 13; II Cor. 7:10.*

90. Q. *What is the coming to life
of the new nature?*

A. *It is a heartfelt joy
in God through Christ,¹
and a love and delight
to live according to the will of God
in all good works.²*

¹ *Ps. 51:8, 12; Is. 57:15; Rom. 5:1; 14:17.*

² *Rom. 6:10, 11; Gal. 2:20.*

91. Q. *But what are good works?*

A. *Only those which are done
out of true faith,¹
in accordance with the law of God,²
and to His glory,³
and not those based
on our own opinion
or on precepts of men.⁴*

¹ *John 15:5; Rom. 14:23; Heb. 11:6.*

² *Lev. 18:4; I Sam. 15:22; Eph. 2:10.*

³ *I Cor. 10:31.*

⁴ *Deut. 12:32; Is. 29:13; Ezek. 20:18, 19; Matt. 15:7-9.*

LORD'S DAY 33

THE TRUE CONVERSION OF MAN

Text: Lord's Day 33
Reading: Psalm 51 : 1-12
II Corinthians 7 : 1-12

Psalm 32 : 3
Hymn 6
Psalm 38 : 1, 8
Psalm 119 : 5, 6
Psalm 51 : 4, 5

Introduction: Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

We saw in Lord's Day 32 that the Christian life is one of active obedience, gratitude in action, as it were, which focuses on the doing of "good works", works acceptable to God and pleasing to him.

We must work because Christ works in us! We saw that faith is not a dead and ineffective substance but a renewing and regenerating power in the lives of God's children. The Belgic Confession says in Article 24 that this true faith "regenerates man and makes him a *new man*". Regeneration, therefore, is a mighty process of great importance.

The Canons of Dort (III/IV, Article 12) speak as follows: "This conversion is that regeneration, new creation, resurrection from the dead, making alive so highly spoken of in the Scriptures . . . a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvellous, mysterious, and inexpressible work . . . not inferior in power to creation or the resurrection of the dead".

It is then understandable that the Catechism, after speaking about our new life in Christ, deals with the *conversion* of man.

If we are to properly serve God, there must be regeneration and conversion. Regeneration is an essential process, one already mentioned at our Baptism, when it was said that we cannot enter the kingdom of

God unless we are *born again*—that is, regenerated or converted. So we are dealing now with a very essential and decisive matter.

I always like to point out at this point that there is an abundance of terms here (rebirth, recreation, regeneration, repentance, conversion) which seems to cause confusion sometimes. All these terms have their own flavour, but all deal with the same basic matter. They point to the fact that a mighty *change* takes place within us. Spiritually dead people come to life in Christ! It is not without reason that this process is compared to the resurrection. The dead must indeed come to life! That is what we are talking about in this Lord's Day.

Now when we speak about conversion, we are dealing with a very difficult process which the Catechism calls "the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new nature". And we notice that the Catechism speaks in this connection about "grief" and "joy". Conversion, then, is a process which has to do with grief and joy in the believers. I summarize this Lord's Day as follows:

The confession that true conversion leads to new life in Christ. This means:

- 1. godly grief over sin**
- 2. godly joy in righteousness.**

1. When the Catechism here explains conversion as a dying of the old nature and a coming to life of the new, it distinguishes but does not separate these two ele-

ments. It is not so that *first* the old nature dies off and that then the new nature comes to life. Instead we must see that these two take place *at the same time*. Our old nature is only fully and truly “dead” when we ourselves die and leave this life. Until then there is this constant struggle between the old and the new nature. Until then, also, there is this remaining ambivalence of godly grief and godly joy.

Dying and death are associated with grief. Coming to life is associated with joy. These are therefore the two elements which play a great role in our conversion or repentance. Grief and joy are very strong emotions and deep feelings which give evidence of the true power of conversion.

We begin, then, with that element of *grief*. The Catechism asks, “What is the dying of the old nature?” And the answer is: “It is to grieve with a heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin . . .” Repentance is therefore first and foremost a grieving from the heart. There is no repentance without real grief. Grief means to experience real anguish and sorrow over the sins committed, to be devastated by the evil character and awful consequences of your sinful deeds. If that grief is not present, is there then a real repentance, as understood by the Scriptures?

Notice also that the Catechism says that this grief directs itself first of all towards *God*. We have offended *God* by our sin! What was it that David confessed in Psalm 51? He did not say, “against Uriah and Bathsheba, against Israel I have sinned”, but, “against *Thee*, Thee only, have I sinned!” Indeed, our sins are offensive to the people around us, but they are first of all *an offense against God*, a transgression of His Law, an insult to His holiness, a despising of His grace!

I want to bring this out a little more by directing you to what we read in II Corinthians 7. There the apostle Paul distinguishes between a *godly* grief and a *worldly* grief.

We should note this important matter in connection with conversion.

In II Corinthians 7:10 Paul writes: “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death”. Worldly

grief is grief that rests only on human or worldly considerations. Unbelievers also grieve over their sins, but they are not concerned about the offensive nature of their sins before God. They are worried about the earthly consequences, for example, about loss of freedom or loss of benefit. A thief or murderer will mourn the loss of freedom when he is put in prison. He will in a sense be “sorry” for his deed because he loses certain benefits. Someone may know a certain feeling of shame because his deeds have become known and are condemned by other people.

But this worldly grief is not true repentance. It is not a grief before God! It does not include any understanding of the real nature of sin! Therefore there is no broken and contrite heart, no humbling of oneself before God, but rather a hardening of oneself, an inward or secret defiance of God!

I think here of the example of Esau, who also wept and cried when he saw that the blessing had been given to Jacob. Esau felt duped and cheated, and he experienced grief, but it was a worldly grief over loss of possible benefit. He did not at all see that this trouble had come over him because he refused to serve the LORD according to His Word! We read in the letter to the Hebrews that Esau was immoral or *irreligious*, and found “no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears” (Hebrews 12:17).

The world also cries, but tears are not enough. It must be a *godly* grief over sin, godly in the sense that it is worked by God, by His Word and Spirit, that it is a grief which comes out of an *inward change*, a heartfelt sorrow caused by the Spirit of God, by which someone truly humbles himself before the LORD. Yes, against Thee, Thee only have I sinned and done what is evil in Thy sight!

Worldly grief leads to *death*, because there is no change of heart. But godly grief, says Paul, produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret. It is not a false front which does not benefit, but an effective and saving work of God!

And the apostle uses a number of key words to show what godly grief produces in the believers (verse 11): what earnestness (understanding of the serious-

ness of sin), what eagerness to clear yourselves (a true desire to have reconciliation, to have the blame and shame removed as soon as possible), what indignation (anger at yourself), alarm (being shocked at yourself), what longing (a desire for innocence and righteousness), what zeal (doing everything to rectify the situation), what punishment (really disciplining yourself)! This is what godly grief is all about! With this kind of grief there is no light-hearted approach to sin, as if it is nothing; this is not a worldly approach to sin—because of the damage it does to your name and wealth—but a deeply serious, truly sorrowful approach, a broken heart before the Lord!

The Catechism picks up this notion when it adds, “more and more to hate [sin] and flee from it”. The unbeliever *says* that he is sorry, but actually he is not. He is sorry that he got caught, but not sorrowful for the sin itself. If he could get away with it, he’d do it again! There is no *hating* of the sin itself, and no fleeing from the sin. There is still a personal pleasure in sin and a secret savouring of the sin itself. Well, that kind of grief leads to death—to eternal judgment—for there is no new life present at all!

If we look at David’s reaction to the admonition by Nathan the prophet, we discover that David is appalled at himself, shattered and broken, and that he bends deeply before the Lord. What indignation at himself, what alarm, what zeal before the Lord! Here indeed is godly grief, the coming to life of the new nature! What an intense struggle of self-incrimination and self-accusation. David accuses no one except himself; he excuses everyone except himself. It was his sin, between him and his God!

This is something very important also for us today. Do we have this godly grief? Do our sins really bother us deeply, as an offense to God, or are we worried mostly about the worldly consequences? Are our tears truly from the heart or do they mask our inward indifference? Do we, when we repent, then also hate the sin itself, and do we flee from it, that is, do everything not to fall into that sin again? We are severely warned in Scripture and in our confession about *false* conversion. It is the *true* repentance or conversion of man

which is required! We must be very careful that much repentance and conversion in our lives is not an imitation, something that perhaps looks like repentance but is not the real thing!

Godly grief over sin, the real thing, is the fruit of the Spirit, the result of the Word. Those who do not open their life to the Word cannot truly repent. Did David not remain unconverted until God broke open his heart by the Word of the prophet? True conversion is therefore the powerful effect of the Word of God in our lives, so that we come to hate sin and flee from it! Here the Holy Spirit of God must break down walls of wilfulness and ramparts of resistance. It is indeed not without reason that conversion is likened in its power and significance to creation and resurrection, for conversion means that God creates in us again a new life, causing us to rise to a new life in Christ Jesus, His Son!

There must be godly grief, even more so today than in David’s time, for we see more clearer than David the effect of the terrible wrath of God over our sins. Are we not as Christian Church directed to Golgotha where the curse of God over sin became evident on the cross? We read part of a psalm of David, but we know also of the ultimate trial of the great Son of David, Who can say: I know what it is to bear sorrow and grief over sin, over *your sin*! Therefore, through Him and for His sake, we shall hate sin all the more, and flee from it, and experience and show godly joy in all righteousness. We come to the second point.

2. For we should not get a one-sided and false impression here that conversion is only a matter of grief and tears. Conversion or repentance indeed brings with it a deep sorrow that we have offended God—and that is something which must and shall deeply bother us—but the very *same* process of conversion also includes *heartfelt joy* in God through Christ! That is the power, the coming to life of the new nature! Here we are again called to live in the joy of faith!

Conversion means also experiencing an inexplicable *joy*. We do not just cringe and crawl before the Lord, but we may leap and skip before the Lord! Con-

version is not a matter of walking around with a sad face all the time because of the burden of sins; on the contrary, it means walking with a smile on your face and a song in your heart because the burden has been lifted in Christ!

Heartfelt joy. It strikes me time and again whenever I read the so-called “psalms of confession” (like Psalm 32 and Psalm 51) that there is besides the godly grief also the godly joy! Psalm 32: “Songs of deliverance everywhere resound, Thou me with *great rejoicing* dost surround!” And Psalm 51: “. . . let [the] *joy* of Thy salvation with me stay”. Did you notice how the theme of joy is prevalent in these psalms of confession?

Yes, there is on the one hand a trembling before the Lord, a sense of shame and disgust at yourself. But on the other hand, there is a sense of great relief and a feeling of elation that you no longer have to walk around with the immense burden of sin! Repentance is like a cool breeze in the stifling heat, for it is the experience of the pressure being lifted and the burden being removed!

That is what David expresses in Psalm 32: Blest is the man whose trespass is forgiven! Can you picture David before Nathan the prophet came to him? David was playing games of hide and seek with the LORD God. The distance between Him and His heavenly Father was getting greater all the time. David was sinking ever deeper into a spiritual depression. Then comes the conversion: the joy begins to flow again, and the heart surges out to the LORD again! This is the beauty of our conversion and the lustre of our new life!

Oh, the Catechism has it tuned so finely here. It says that there must be a heartfelt joy *in God through Christ*. This joy is in God, and not in myself or in what I have done. Conversion is not a rejoicing in the spiritual level which you (may) have finally achieved after much personal struggle and sacrifice, but is simply a rejoicing in God and in His boundless grace, in His work of deliverance. For this joy is in God *through Christ*. The joy of the Christian is inseparably connected

to the atoning death of Christ on the cross. It is a rejoicing in the fruits of His suffering alone!

Our Lord Himself warned us strongly on this point about the tendency to justify ourselves. There is the danger that we seek our joy in our own works, that we try to stand before God in our own merit. Then we would be like the Pharisee who indeed stood in the temple, rejoicing immensely, but not in God through Christ! He was rejoicing in himself and through himself.

This must be very clearly said. There is always the question whether the preaching in the Reformed Churches is sufficiently *experiential*. Do we sufficiently stress the experiencing of the power of the Holy Spirit? Is there not too much emphasis with us on “knowing” and not enough on “feeling”? That is sometimes the complaint which is raised against us.

Well, always take well-meant criticism of others seriously, for that is a key to learning and growth. Yes, conversion is also indeed a matter that we must experience! But the danger is that when we emphasize *our* experiences, we start to seek the reason for our joy in ourselves and not in *Christ* alone! And this we may never do and never preach, for our joy must always be a joy in God through Christ. This joy is a matter of the faith based on the Word and the promises of God, and not based on our feelings or experiences!

A person who experiences conversion, experiences a tremendous relief and joy. However, also here we must add something. This joy does not stand on its own or by itself. It is combined with “love and delight to live according to the will of God in good works”. With that relief comes the desire to serve again!

I already pointed to the words of Paul in II Corinthians 7 where he speaks about the eagerness to clear yourself, to show to God again that you do love Him and want to serve Him! Conversion is always a matter of longing and zeal, of striving again to do good works! David also speaks of this when he says: “then I will teach transgressors Thy ways”! David wants to be completely restored in the service of the LORD so that

he may again lead God's people in good works, by example! There is only one over-riding desire and that is to do it right, to walk in righteousness.

True conversion leads to godly joy in righteousness and to a happiness which is evident in the doing again of God's will. So we see that the salvation which is by grace alone directs itself to the Law of God. This is what we also find in Psalm 119:6: "In Thy commandments I take *great delight*". Now we begin again to live by faith, according to God's law, to God's glory. We no longer walk as we see fit, but we walk as God desires.

The ungodly don't know what I am talking about here. They have no delight in the Law. They only enjoy themselves when they are doing evil. But the godly experience true delight only when they do the will of God. They are glad when the new nature, the life in the Spirit, prevails!

As I indicated, these two elements of grief and joy are not separate. Both are with us all the time. Sometimes the one is stronger than the other. The life of faith is not always on an even keel. We are subject to

all kinds of emotions. But grief and joy do not conflict. They belong together. They are like the two sides of the one coin.

Indeed, there comes a day when we will no longer experience grief over sin. A day when we will sin no more. Then our joy will be complete and full. We will serve God in perfect righteousness all the time. Our daily conversion in this life directs us to the great resurrection, the re-creation of heaven and earth and of all creatures.

This recreation begins here, and continues throughout our entire life. Already at our Baptism it is said that we cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless we are born again. Without conversion we cannot see God. But already at the beginning of our life we receive the promise of this conversion. In the whole course of our lives we receive the fulfilment of this promise. We obtain it by faith, through prayer in Christ. And one day this painful process of conversion, with its grief and its joy, will be completed and we will enter the new life on the new earth to serve God forever in perfection. Then I will do good works, to God's glory, in all eternity. AMEN.