

# Calvin on Conversion

Yang Ho Lee

## I. Introduction

R. T. Kendall presents a new interpretation about Calvin's doctrine of conversion in his book *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*. He argues that, according to Calvin, in conversion God created a new will in man. Kendall says.

Conversion therefore is supernatural; it is above nature. God does not cooperate with nature; He supplants nature with a new will and does this by effacing nature. God does not aid the will already in nature; He gives man a new will outside nature. It is not nature, or flesh, or the will, that is merely 'strengthened'; conversion means a new will altogether. Our natural will is abolished - 'effaced'.<sup>1)</sup>

On the contrary, Paul Helm insists that in Calvin conversion is the change of man's will, not the creation of new will. He says.

In other words, Calvin's view is that in conversion the will of a person undergoes an ethical and spiritual change of direction, but his old will is not literally replaced by a new will. Rather the will is re-modelled and re-directed. Kendall is quite unwarranted in concluding that, according to Calvin, "God does not aid the will already in nature; He gives man a new

---

1) R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 21.

will outside nature.” Rather, what God does in conversion is to give a person’s will a new direction, a direction wholly determined by divine grace.<sup>2)</sup>

Here we are about to deal with Calvin’s doctrine of conversion as follows. Firstly, is conversion, in Calvin, God’s act or man’s act? Secondly, is it sudden or progressive? Thirdly, is it, in Calvin, the creation of new will or the change of will? Fourthly, what is relation between justification and conversion or regeneration in Calvin?

## II. God’s Act or Man’s Act?

Kendall insists that conversion, in Calvin, is God’s act. He says, “Fundamental to Calvin’s doctrine of conversion then is that (1) the natural will is extinguished and (2) God substitutes for it a good one from Himself. Calvin himself claims to have experienced a ‘sudden conversion’.”<sup>3)</sup> According to Kendall, T. H. L. Parker interprets *subita conversio* as ‘unexpected conversion’, further amplifying the given and passive nature of conversion to Calvin.<sup>4)</sup> Kendall quotes from the *Institutes* 2.32.6 for the basis of his insistence as follows.

If, therefore, a stone is transformed into flesh when God converts us to zeal for the right, whatever is of our own will is effaced. What takes its place is wholly from God. I say the will effaced (*voluntatem dico aboleri*).<sup>5)</sup>

However, against this insistence of Kendall, Helm quotes

---

2) Paul Helm, *Calvin and Calvinists* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 55.

3) Kendall, 21.

4) Kendall, 21, n. 3.

5) Quoted in Kendall, 21.

subsequent passages from the *Institutes* and criticizes him.

What takes place is wholly from God. I say that the will is effaced; not in so far as it is will, for in man's conversion what belongs to his primal nature remains entire. I also say that it is created anew; not meaning that the will now begins to exist, but that it is changed from evil to a good will.<sup>6)</sup>

After quoting the above mentioned passages from the *Institutes*, Helm says, "Could anything be clearer? It is almost as if Calvin had anticipated the very misinterpretation Kendall puts forward, and answered it: 'what belongs to his primal nature remains entire'."<sup>7)</sup>

Before dealing with the problem whether conversion, in Calvin, is God's act or man's act, we must deal with what conversion is in Calvin. Calvin, in his *Institutes*, defines conversion as follows.

Indeed, I am aware of the fact that the whole of conversion to God is understood under the term "repentance," and faith is not the least part of conversion; but in what sense this is so will very readily appear when its force and nature are explained. The Hebrew word for "repentance" is derived from conversion or return; the Greek word, from change of mind or of intention. And the thing itself corresponds closely to the etymology of both words. The meaning is that, departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind, we put on a new. On this account, in my judgment, repentance can thus be well defined: it is the true turning of our life to God, a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him; and it consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.<sup>8)</sup>

In this definition of conversion, first of all, conversion is the true turning of our life to God. This requires "a transformation, not only in outward works, but in the soul itself."<sup>9)</sup> Only when the soul puts off its

---

6) Quoted in Helm, 55.

7) Helm, 55.

8) *Inst.* 3.3.5.

old nature does it bring forth the fruits of works in harmony with its renewal. Secondly, “repentance proceeds from an earnest fear of God.”<sup>10)</sup> Before the mind of the sinner inclines to repentance, it must be aroused by thinking upon divine judgment. Thirdly, repentance consists in “mortification of the flesh and vivification of the spirit.”<sup>11)</sup> When the prophets recall man from evil, they demand the destruction of the whole flesh, which is full of evil and of perversity. And vivification “means the desire to live in a holy and devoted manner,”<sup>12)</sup> above the consolation that arises out of faith

In the above-mentioned explanation of conversion, human desire to repent and to live in a holy manner is emphasized. However, Calvin, in his commentary on Jeremiah, says, “We hence, then, conclude that repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>13)</sup> In this regard, he criticizes Papists, “We hence learn how blind the Papists are, who, speaking of repentance, hold that man, through his own free-will, returns to God; and on this point is our greatest contest with them at this day.”<sup>14)</sup> Calvin, in his commentary on Jeremiah 3:19, “after thou hast turned me, I repented,” says, “The meaning is, that men never entertain a real hatred towards sin, unless God illuminates their minds and changes their hearts; for what is the turning or conversion of which the prophet speaks? It is the renewal of the mind and heart.” He also says, in his commentary on Jeremiah 3:18, “This the prophet testifies when he says, ‘Turn me, and I shall be turned,’ as though he had said, that men indeed turn when God reminds them of their sins, but that they do this not by their own power, for it is the peculiar work

---

9) *Inst.* 3.3.6.

10) *Inst.* 3.3.7.

11) *Inst.* 3.3.8.

12) *Inst.* 3.3.3.

13) *Comm. Je.* 31:18.

14) *Comm. Je.* 31:19.

of God.”

Is conversion, in Calvin, divine act or human act? Considering the texts of Calvin, to Calvin conversion is both divine act and human act. However, it is not synergism between equals. To Calvin divine act is central, human act is peripheral.

### III. Sudden or Gradual?

The second problem is whether conversion is sudden or gradual in Calvin. According to Kendall, in Calvin, conversion is divine act and it is sudden. On the contrary, in accordance with William J. Bouwsma, in Calvin, conversion is gradual rather than sudden. Bouwsma says, “Calvin always emphasized the gradualness rather than the suddenness of conversion and the difficulty of making progress in the Christian life. ‘We are converted,’ he said, ‘little by little to God, and by stages.’”<sup>15</sup> Also according to Bouwsma, Calvin does not attach significance to conversion. Bouwsma says, “What is probably more to the point is that Calvin attached little or no significance to ‘conversion’ as precise event in his many discussions of the Christian life and the way of salvation. Indeed, he was inclined to minimize the importance even of the conversion of Paul.”<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, Bouwsma says in regard to ‘sudden conversion’ in Calvin’s preface to his commentary on the Psalms, “The evidence for a ‘conversion’ corresponding to this model in Calvin’s life is negligible. It consists almost entirely of a single passage in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, written in 1557, nearly thirty years after the supposed event, to which, during this long interval, he had never before directly referred.”<sup>17</sup>

---

15) William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11.

16) Bouwsma, 11.

As Bouwsma maintains, Calvin insists on the gradualness of conversion and the life-long repentance in several places. Calvin, in his commentary on Jeremiah, says, “We turn, as I have already said, by little and little to God, and by various steps; for repentance has its progress.”<sup>18)</sup> In this regard, Calvin criticizes the Anabaptists and the Jesuits, “I am speaking of very many of the Anabaptists, especially those who marvelously exult in being considered spiritual; and of their companions, the Jesuits, and like dregs. Obviously, that giddy spirit brings forth such fruits that it limits to a paltry few days a repentance that for the Christian man ought to extend throughout his life.”<sup>19)</sup>

Although Calvin insists on the gradualness of conversion and the life-long repentance as mentioned above, he also insists on ‘sudden conversion’ in the autobiographical fragment in the preface to the *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. Calvin says his sudden conversion as follows.

When I was as yet a very little boy, my father had destined me for the study of theology. But afterwards, when he considered that the legal profession commonly raised those who followed it to wealth, this prospect induced him suddenly to change his purpose. Thus it came to pass, that I was withdrawn from the study of philosophy, and was put to the study of law. . . ; but God, by the secret guidance of his providence, at length gave a direction to my course. And first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life.<sup>20)</sup>

Calvin’s own conversion in this autobiographical fragment seems to

---

17) Bouwsma, 10.

18) *Comm. Je.* 31:18, *CO* 38:671. “*Convertimur, quemadmodum iam dixi, paulatim ad Deum, et per certos gradus: quia poenitentia suos progressus habet.*”

19) *Inst.* 3.3.2.

20) John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B.

be a divine act and a sudden conversion. Therefore, if we judge justly the texts of Calvin, conversion, in Calvin, is both sudden and gradual. As it will be treated below, Calvin does not distinguish between repentance, regeneration and sanctification, to him conversion is both sudden and gradual.

#### IV. Creation of New Will or Change of Will?

In this chapter, we will treat a problem whether conversion, in Calvin, is the creation of will or the change of will. In this regard, as mentioned above, according to Kendall conversion, in Calvin, is the abolishment of old will and the creation of new will. On the contrary, in accordance with Helm, conversion, in Calvin, is change of will, that is, change of an evil will into a good will.

First of all, Calvin mentions the creation of new will in many places. Calvin says, "If, therefore, a stone is transformed into flesh when God converts us to zeal for the right, whatever is of our own will is effaced. What takes its place is wholly from God. I say that the will is effaced."<sup>21</sup> Here Calvin says that whatever is of our own will is effaced. Also Calvin says, "(1) the Lord corrects our evil will, or rather extinguishes it; (2) he substitutes for it a good one from himself."<sup>22</sup> Here Calvin says that our evil will is extinguished rather than corrected. Also Calvin says, "Here he clearly commends the new creation, which sweeps away everything of our common nature."<sup>23</sup> Here Calvin uses "new creation." Calvin asks, "Who shall say that the infirmity of the human will is strengthened by his help in order that it

---

Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), xl.

21) *Inst.* 2.3.6.

22) *Inst.* 2.3.7.

23) *Inst.* 2.3.6.

may aspire effectively to the choice of good, when it must rather be wholly transformed and renewed?"<sup>24)</sup> Human will is wholly transformed rather than strengthened.

On the contrary, Calvin uses expressions of the change of will in many places. Calvin says, "I say that the will is effaced; not in so far as it is will, for in man's conversion what belongs to his primal nature remains entire. I also say that it is created anew; not meaning that the will now begins to exist, but that it is changed from an evil to a good will."<sup>25)</sup> In this passage, Calvin says that the will remains but is changed from an evil will to a good will. Also Calvin says, quoting Augustine's words, "Elsewhere he says that will is not taken away by grace, but is changed from evil into good, and helped when it is good."<sup>26)</sup>

In the Meantime, Calvin mentions in one passage both the correction of the will and the creation of the will. Calvin says, "Meanwhile, we do not deny that what Augustine teaches is very true: 'Grace does not destroy the will but rather restores it.' The two ideas are in substantial agreement: the will of man is said to be restored when, with its corruption and depravity corrected, it is directed to the true rule of righteousness. At the same time a new will is said to be created in man, because the natural will has become so vitiated and corrupted that he considers it necessary to put a new nature within."<sup>27)</sup>

Is conversion, in Calvin, the correction of the will or the creation of

---

24) *Inst.* 2.3.6.

25) *Inst.* 2.3.6.

26) *Inst.* 2.3.14.

27) *Inst.* 2.5.15, *OS* 3:315, 14-21. "*Interim non negamus verissimum esse quod Augustinus docet, non destrui gratia voluntatem, sed magis reparari: quia utrunque optime constat: ut instaurari dicatur hominis voluntas, dum correcta vitiositate et perversitate ad verum institutae regulam dirigitur: et simul nova in homine voluntas dicatur creari, quia sic vitiosa corruptaque est, ut novum penitus ingenium induere necesse habeat.*"

the new will? We are about to consider Calvin's concept of the will in order to solve this problem. Calvin says of the will as follows.

. . . the human soul consists of two faculties, understanding and will. Let the office, moreover, of understanding be to distinguish between objects, as each seems worthy of approval or disapproval; while that of the will, to choose and follow what the understanding pronounces good, but to reject and flee what it disapproves.<sup>28)</sup>

As we can see here, the will, in Calvin, is not a substance but a faculty. The human soul is a substance and the human will is a faculty of the human soul. In this regard, the debate seems to be meaningless whether conversion is the creation of the new will or the change of the will. Because the will is not a substance but a faculty, the change of the will is not different from the creation of the new will.

## V. Justification, Conversion and Regeneration

In this part, we will deal with the relationship between justification and conversion in Calvin. This is the relationship between justification and sanctification, because conversion is regeneration and regeneration is sanctification to Calvin.<sup>29)</sup>

Firstly, Calvin identifies repentance with regeneration. "Therefore,

---

28) *Inst.* 1.15.7, *OS* 3:184, 29 - 185, 6. ". . . *subesse duas humanae animae partes. . . intellectum et voluntatem. Sit autem officium intellectus, inter obiecta discernere, prout unumquodque probandum aut improbandum visum fuerit: voluntatis autem, eligere et sequi quod bonum intellectus dictaverit: aspernari ac fugere quod ille improbarit.*"

29) According to Wilhelm Niesel, Calvin calls regeneration "rebirth or penitence or else renewal, sanctification, conversion." Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 127.

in a word, I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam's transgression"<sup>30)</sup> Also Calvin identifies regeneration with sanctification. "Accordingly, we are restored by this regeneration through the benefit of Christ into the righteousness of God. . . . And indeed, this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruption of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death."<sup>31)</sup>

In this point Calvin's opinion is different from John Wesley's opinion. While Calvin identifies regeneration with sanctification, Wesley distinguishes between regeneration and sanctification. Wesley says, in one sermon, as follows.

. . . the new birth is not the same with sanctification. This is indeed taken for granted by many; particularly by an eminent writer in his late treatise on 'the nature and grounds of Christian regeneration'. To waive several other weighty objections which might be made to that tract, this is a palpable one: it all along speaks of regeneration as a progressive work carried on in the soul by slow degrees from the time of our first turning to God. This is undeniably true of sanctification; but of regeneration, the new birth, it is not true. This is a part of sanctification, not the whole; it is the gate of it, the entrance into it. When we are born again, then our sanctification, our inward and outward holiness, begins. And thenceforward we are gradually to 'grow up in him who is our head'. This expression of the Apostle admirably illustrates the difference between one and the other, and farther points out the exact analogy there is between natural and spiritual things. A child is born of a woman in a moment, or at least in a very short time. Afterward he

---

30) *Inst.* 3.3.9.

31) *Inst.* 3.3.9.

gradually and slowly grows till he attains the stature of a man. In like manner a child is born of God in a short time, if not in a moment. But it is by slow degrees that he afterward grows up to the measure of the full stature of Christ. The same relation therefore which there is between our natural birth and our growth there is also between our new birth and our sanctification.<sup>32)</sup>

Calvin says that justification and regeneration are neither confused nor separated. First of all, Calvin criticizes Osiander who identifies justification with regeneration, because Calvin distinguishes between justification and regeneration. Calvin says, “Osiander mixes that gift of regeneration with this free acceptance and contends that they are one and the same.”<sup>33)</sup> Calvin insists that justification and regeneration is distinguished, though they are not separated. Calvin says, “the grace of justification is not separated from regeneration, although they are things distinct. But because it is very well known by experience that the traces of sin always remain in the righteous, their justification must be very different from reformation into newness of life [cf. Rom. 6:4]. For God so begins this second point in his elect, and progresses in it gradually, and sometimes slowly, throughout life, that they are always liable to the judgment of death before his tribunal.”<sup>34)</sup>

Calvin maintains that justification is not the impartation of righteousness but the imputation of righteousness. Calvin says, “through which [faith] alone we obtain free righteousness by the mercy of God,”<sup>35)</sup> and he also says, “we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”<sup>36)</sup> Calvin criticizes Osiander,

---

32) John Wesley, *Sermon 45: The New Birth, The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:198.

33) *Inst.* 3.11.6.

34) *Inst.* 3. 11.11.

35) *Inst.* 3.11.1.

because “Osiander explains ‘justify’ as ‘to make righteous’.<sup>37)</sup> Also he criticizes Osiander, because Osiander insists on “essential righteousness” and “pretends that we are substantially righteous in God by the infusion both of his essence and of his quality.”<sup>38)</sup> Osiander insists that “to be justified is not only to be reconciled to God through free pardon but also to be made righteous, and righteousness is not a free imputation but the holiness and uprightness that the essence of God, dwelling in us, inspires.”<sup>39)</sup> According to Calvin, this kind of Osiander’s insistence is to force “a gross mingling of Christ with believers.”<sup>40)</sup>

Though distinguishing between justification and regeneration against Osiander, Calvin does not separate justification from regeneration. Calvin says, “actual holiness of life . . . is not separated from free imputation of righteousness.”<sup>41)</sup> Calvin also says, “he ‘is given unto us for righteousness, wisdom, sanctification, and redemption’ [1 Cor. 1:30]. Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify. These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems; those whom he redeems, he justifies; those whom he justifies, he sanctifies.”<sup>42)</sup> Calvin says thus, “as Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable - namely, righteousness and sanctification.”<sup>43)</sup> Calvin summarizes relationship between regeneration and sanctification as follows, “we are justified not

---

36) *Inst.* 3.11.2.

37) *Inst.* 3.11.6.

38) *Inst.* 3.11.5.

39) *Inst.* 3.11.6.

40) *Inst.* 3.11.10.

41) *Inst.* 3.3.1.

42) *Inst.* 3.16.1.

43) *Inst.* 3.11.6.

without works yet not through works, since in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness.”<sup>44)</sup>

Although Calvin opposes “a gross mingling of Christ with believers” against Osiander, he insists on a union of Christ with believers. Calvin says as follows, “Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts - in short, that mystical union - are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body - in short, because he deigns to make us one with him.”<sup>45)</sup> Just as in Chalcedonian creed the human and divine nature of Christ are not in confusion but in union, so in Calvin Christ and believers are not in confusion but in union.

---

44) *Inst.* 3.16.1. *OS* 4:249, 19-22. “. . . nos non sine operibus, neque tamen per opera instificari: quoniam in Christi participatione, qua instificamur, non minus sanctificatio continetur quam institia.”

45) *Inst.* 3.11.10. Calvin uses an expression “*mystica . . . unio*” in 1559 Latin *Institutes*, but uses an expression “*l’union sacree*” in 1560 French *Institutes*. In this regard, François Wendel says, “Although Calvin calls it so, it is not, in the technical sense of the term, a mystical union.” (François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet, Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1950, 237.) Meanwhile, Niesel says, “That union of the faithful with Christ which Calvin teaches has nothing whatever to do with the absorption of the pious mystic into the sphere of the divine being.” (Niesel, 126.)

## VI. Conclusion

In this thesis the first problem is whether conversion, in Calvin, is divine act or human act. Considering the texts of Calvin, to Calvin conversion is both divine act and human act, but God has initiative in it. The second problem is whether conversion, in Calvin, sudden or gradual. Though Calvin says “sudden conversion” in his own experience, he maintains the gradualness of conversion in many places. Because Calvin includes conversion, repentance, new birth and sanctification in regeneration, to Calvin conversion is both sudden and gradual. The third problem is whether conversion is the creation of new will or the change of will to Calvin. In the texts of Calvin both the creation of new will and the change of will are mentioned. Because to Calvin will is not a substance but a faculty, the creation of new will and the change of will are same one. The last problem is what the relationship between justification and regeneration is in Calvin. On the one hand, Calvin distinguishes between justification and regeneration against Osiander who identifies justification with regeneration, on the other hand, he insists that justification and regeneration “are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond.” According to Calvin, “those whom he justifies, he sanctifies.”