
Samuel Rutherford's Experience and Doctrine of Conversion

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Although very little definite information is known concerning the conversion of Samuel Rutherford, a consensus regarding the date and circumstances of that event has been established amongst most biographers. This brief study attempts to draw together relevant information in order to challenge that consensus as well as to connect these issues with parts of Rutherford's writings that relate to the doctrine of conversion.

I. RUTHERFORD'S CONVERSION

1. The consensus regarding the date of Rutherford's conversion

There are some significant figures within Church history such as John Calvin of whom very little is recorded in relation to their conversion. The exact time of Samuel Rutherford's conversion is certainly unknown, but it has been widely presumed by most writers and biographers that it was in 1625 or 1626. This time frame has usually been identified in connection with the controversy concerning his marriage which arose from an allegation of fornication. We do not have space in what follows to consider the evidence as to whether or not this allegation can be substantiated. Despite the consensus that has been built around this matter also, it is a vexed question and merits a fuller discussion on a future occasion (D.V.).

The view which dates the conversion to 1625 or 1626 has been advanced rather firmly by some more scholarly studies and biographical treatments of Rutherford and his life that have been published in the last fifteen years or so and appears likely to become the default view amongst historians and biographers. This view has been most fully expressed by Guy Richard, the author of a landmark study of Rutherford's theology, *The Supremacy of God in the Theology of Samuel Rutherford*.¹

As a result of what was clearly a profoundly difficult time in Rutherford's life, one in which he was confronted like never before with the corruption of his own heart, Rutherford appears to have experienced Christian conversion. On this there is little disagreement among his biographers. Even some of those who deny the charges of fornication still trace his conversion to this point in time. If they are right that this event did precipitate Rutherford's conversion, then it would help to explain why he might have been shown leniency and been appointed as minister in Anwoth only a little over a year after committing what certainly would have been a serious sin in the eyes of the church.²

Richard is quite correct that while some biographers defend Rutherford against the allegation of fornication, they are nevertheless in agreement conversion must have taken place during this period of his life. Thomas Murray defends Rutherford but avoids reference to dating the conversion.³ Later biographers, however, such as Andrew Thomson, introduce the suggestion of conversion in the midst of their treatment of the incident relating to his marriage.

There must, however, have been bitter hours associated with this passage in Rutherford's life; and it is far from unlikely that these may have led him into trains of thought and self-reflection which ended in his coming under the supreme power of the religion of Christ. There had, no doubt, been many seasons of conviction and partial and temporary impressions of religion before this time; but, from repeated statements in his letters at a later period, we are led

¹ G. M. Richard, *The Supremacy of God in the Theology of Samuel Rutherford* (Milton Keynes, 2008).

² G. M. Richard, "Samuel Rutherford for the 21st Century", *Reformation* 21, <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/samuel-rutherford-for-the-21st-century.php#sthash.InWAg0oL.dpuf> – accessed 05/12/14.

³ T. Murray, *The Life of Samuel Rutherford* (Edinburgh, 1828), pp. 18-23.

to suppose that it could scarcely have been earlier than this that he passed into the "Valley of Decision". We find him, more than once, when exhorting young men to consecrate to God the morning of their days, lamenting that he had delayed this momentous step until it was "high noon". "Like a fool," says he, "as I was, I suffered my sun to be high in the heaven and near afternoon, before ever I took the gate by the end." And there are other passages in which he writes in even more sorrowful and self-accusing terms.⁴

Robert Gilmour equally seeks to "inquire as to the possibility of a crisis at this time in the inner life of one who was destined so powerfully to influence the inner life of others".⁵ More recently, Kingsley G. Rendell has sought in his new biography, developed out of a M.Th. Thesis, to dismiss the allegation against Rutherford and to assert that he had simply transgressed college rules in failing to gain the correct approval for his marriage. Nevertheless, he identifies this incident as a likely catalyst for Rutherford's conversion.

His indiscretion could possibly have preyed upon his mind, bringing about a state of conviction. Frequently in his letters he referred to the inner conflict of soul and perils of youth. To William Rigg of Athernie he wrote, "Old challenges now and then revive, and cast all down, I go halting and sighing, fearing there be an unseen process yet coming out, and that heavier than I can answer". He confessed to Bethsaida Aird, while an exile in Aberdeen, that his head was "fraughted with challenges", and that he feared he was an outcast, "a withered tree in the vineyard, and but held the sun off good plants" with his shadow. Most explicit of all are his words to Earlston the Younger, written in Aberdeen. "There is not such a glassy, icy and slippery piece of way betwixt you and heaven, as Youth," he wrote. In this particular letter he referred to "The old ashes of the sins of my youth" – "the hot, fiery lusts and passions of youth". Was Rutherford reflecting upon his own bitter experience? It is quite possible that he was. It could well have been that at this time, like the prodigal son, "he came to himself" experiencing conversion. There is no evidence that before

⁴ A. Thomson, *Samuel Rutherford* (London, 1884), p. 6.

⁵ R. Gilmour, *Samuel Rutherford: A Study Biographical and somewhat Critical, in the History of the Scottish Covenant* (Edinburgh, 1904), pp. 29-30.

this period in his life he had any such experience, in fact he regretted that his conversion was so long delayed.⁶

Others that have assumed the truth of the allegation against Rutherford have connected it very definitely to his conversion. It is an assumption that runs through Alexander Whyte's lectures on Rutherford's letters without anywhere being made very explicit.⁷ John Coffey's scholarly biography of Rutherford may not be explicit concerning the period during which conversion is likely to have taken place, but allusions are made in the midst of a robust discussion that strongly asserts the authenticity of the allegation of fornication.⁸ Recently Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson in their definitive collection of puritan biographies, *Meet the Puritans*, have written that "he was forced to resign after behaving inappropriately with a young woman named Euphame Hamilton, whom he subsequently married. God apparently used this incident to initiate or further his conversion".⁹ Robert McCollum draws similar conclusions concerning the incident as a catalyst in Rutherford's spiritual experience:

. . . the weight of the evidence presented by John Coffey in his recent research would indicate that Rutherford was in fact guilty. It also appears that the Lord used this turbulent period in Rutherford's life to lead to his conversion. Although few details of his conversion are known, yet in one of his letters he speaks of "loitering on the road too long" and in another he refers to "the wasted years before he discovered the loveliness of Christ". And thereafter we find Rutherford pleading with people to come to Christ early in life.¹⁰

As may have already become evident, the case for dating Rutherford's conversion around 1625-26 rests entirely upon reading this event into certain expressions in the letters. In a letter to Robert Stuart

⁶ K. G. Rendell, *Samuel Rutherford: A new biography of the man and his ministry* (Fearn, 2003), pp. 22-23.

⁷ A. Whyte, *Samuel Rutherford and some of his Correspondents* (Edinburgh, 1894), cf. pp. 7, 15, 16, 70, 73, 75, 98, 142.

⁸ J. Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The mind of Samuel Rutherford* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 37-38.

⁹ J. R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson (eds.), *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids, 2006), p. 721.

¹⁰ R. L. W. McCollum, "Samuel Rutherford – Covenanter Extraordinary, Preacher, Pastor and Political Theorist, *Reformed Theological Journal*, Vol. 16 (2000), pp. 5-17 (p. 6).

on 17th June 1637, for instance, Rutherford wrote: "Ye have gotten a great advantage in the way of heaven, that ye have started to the gate in the morning. Like a fool, as I was, I suffered my sun to be high in the heaven, and near afternoon, before ever I took the gate by the end."¹¹ The implication drawn is that Rutherford was not converted until the latest possible time of youth and when he was into manhood. Rutherford also writes: "I had stood sure if I had in my youth borrowed Christ to be my bottom: but he that beareth his own weight to heaven shall not fail to slip and sink."¹² Another expression elsewhere in the letters is taken as an indication that intense conviction of sin was a significant part of his experience of salvation. "I knew a man," he wrote, "who wondered to see any in this life laugh or sport."¹³ Guy Richard adds some further reflections to these assumptions.

One of the most convincing reasons for tracing Rutherford's conversion to the time of the fornication scandal is that this event sets the paradigm for the remainder of Rutherford's Christian life. From this point on, Rutherford's Christianity becomes deeply experiential, which one would expect to find following conversion, especially a conversion brought on by a public humiliation of the order that Rutherford endured. Beginning at this decisive moment and continuing throughout the remainder of his days, Rutherford's life becomes marked by a profound sensitivity to the sinfulness of his own sin. And this, in turn, ensured that his life would also be marked by a profound gratitude and an overwhelming appreciation for what Christ accomplished on the cross on his behalf. These two aspects of Rutherford's life – a profound awareness of his sin and a profound gratitude for Christ's finished work on the cross – will uniquely qualify and equip him to speak so powerfully to the souls of others.¹⁴

2. Concrete evidence for dating Rutherford's conversion

This view is certainly widely held but it rests upon interpretation rather than solid facts. Some writers have therefore been deliberately vague in referring to the period of Rutherford's life in which conversion may have

¹¹ A. A. Bonar (ed.), *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* (Edinburgh, 1891), Letter 186, p. 337.

¹² Letter 240, p. 449.

¹³ Letter 223, p. 408.

¹⁴ Richard, "Samuel Rutherford for the 21st Century".

taken place.¹⁵ Few indeed have given weight to the more concrete indications of time provided by Rutherford himself. The popular writer Faith Cook diverges from the consensus and, drawing upon one of Rutherford's letters, she strongly suggests 1624 as the year of his conversion. Writing from Aberdeen in 1638 to Robert Gordon of Knockbrex, he says: "Christ hath been keeping something these fourteen years for me, that I have now gotten in my heavy days that I am in for His name's sake, even an opened coffer of perfumed comforts, and fresh joys, coming new, and green, and powerful, from the fairest face of Christ my Lord."¹⁶ This date is significant, but there are additional hints that would suggest an even earlier date.

Two writers have pinpointed references in the *Letters* that provide very much more concrete evidence for the date of Rutherford's conversion. James Clark, in his booklet *The Life and Works of Samuel Rutherford*, states: "The time of Rutherford's conversion is not known precisely, but was probably in 1620, judging from his letter (no. 61) to Lady Kenmure in July 1636." There Rutherford speaks of his banishment as "that honour that I have prayed for these sixteen years".¹⁷ Ian Hamilton comes to a similar conclusion based upon this statement. "It would be reasonable to assume, then," he says, "that Rutherford was around twenty years of age when he was brought to saving faith." He goes on to remark: "It is perhaps no bad thing that we know so little about the particulars of Rutherford's conversion. At the least, we are being reminded that the vital thing about conversion is not when it happens, or how it happens, but the fact that it happens and shows itself in a transformed, Christ-centred, gladly obedient life!"¹⁸

The spirit of true prayer was an authentic token that conversion had taken place. Rutherford himself writes in *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself* that "an unconverted man cannot pray, no more then the birth can pray it selfe out of the mothers womb".¹⁹ In Rutherford's brief reference we have various evident marks of grace: he was praying, he was praying earnestly and steadfastly, and he was,

¹⁵ M. Vogan, "The King in His Beauty": *The Piety of Samuel Rutherford* (Grand Rapids, 2011), p. 3.

¹⁶ Letter 285, p. 528.

¹⁷ J. Clark, *The Life and Works of Samuel Rutherford* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 1.

¹⁸ I. Hamilton, "Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661)", *Cambridge Presbyterian Church*. <http://www.cambridgepres.org.uk/res/rutherford.html> – accessed 16/12/14.

¹⁹ *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself* (London, 1647), p. 124.

moreover, praying that he might be counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ.

Thus far we have been able to confirm that Rutherford's conversion took place not too long before the age of twenty. When we consider the nature of the prayer that he identifies it may be unlikely that it was exactly in the year 1620. It was probably when he was a student of eighteen or nineteen in Edinburgh. Given that various contemporaries could identify a saving change in childhood and that some such as John Livingstone could be admitted to the Lord's Table for the first time in his early teens whilst at school in Stirling, we can understand why Rutherford felt his conversion to be late.²⁰ Perhaps he reflected upon the faithful ministry of David Calderwood and the guilt of not having made the best use of this privilege by closing in with Christ. Perhaps, as we shall see, he was to have another unexpected opportunity to profit savingly from the ministry of Calderwood and that this underlined his squandering of the previous privilege.

3. The historical context of Rutherford's conversion

Rutherford went to university in Edinburgh in 1617, presumably in the autumn following King James' visit to Scotland. This was an important event that resulted in considerable prestige for the Town College as it was then called, thereafter to be known as the King's College. It was also a significant year in the events surrounding David Calderwood, who was the minister of the parish of Crailing in which Rutherford had grown up. He had added his signature to a protestation against the decree of the Lords of Articles giving power to the king, with the archbishops, bishops, and such ministers as he might choose, to direct the external policy of the Kirk. After a frank discussion with the king in 1617, Calderwood was summoned before the High Commission, deprived of his living, and banished from the realm, though only leaving for Holland in 1619.

According to Alan R. Macdonald, Calderwood's years in Edinburgh, particularly in the 1590s, had been the "ideal training ground for ministers who wished to involve themselves in ecclesiastical politics".²¹ It was to be the same for Rutherford himself. Calderwood was in Edinburgh on occasions during the period 1617-19 and was engaged

²⁰ W. K. Tweedie (ed.), *Select Biographies* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1845-6), Vol. 1, p. 131.

²¹ A. R. Macdonald, "David Calderwood: the not so hidden years, 1590-1604", *Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. 74 (1995), pp. 69-74 (p. 73).

in conducting private meetings. Could it be that Rutherford attended some of these and that these may have been instrumental in his conversion? Certainly, Rutherford was later to be a staunch defender of private meetings and resisted any suggestion that the Spirit's power was tied to public worship alone.

We can be reasonably clear that the godly friends in Edinburgh, which Rutherford retained as later correspondents, had a lasting influence upon him. It is altogether likely that Calderwood introduced them to Rutherford since they were later the most prominent leaders of private meetings in Edinburgh during this period. There had been virtually no eminent examples of zealous godliness in Rutherford's home parish as he grew up and we can be sure that witnessing the reality of godliness in the lives of others had a powerful impact upon the young man.²² There was often a "sensible effusion of the Spirit" at such meetings; the character of them was witnessed to by James Wood, the foremost apologist for Episcopacy in the 1630s, who attended a meeting for prayer and conference at the invitation of Alexander Henderson. He was so much affected by it that after reading more concerning these issues he became a convinced Presbyterian.²³ David Stevenson notes the many private gatherings of the godly for prayer as a vital contribution to the events which led to the signing of the National Covenant in 1638.²⁴

Edinburgh was to be the national centre of opposition to the Articles of Perth (1618), including an initial protest by the ministers of the city before a later recantation. Amongst these was Andrew Ramsay, who was later to be Rutherford's tutor in theology at the University. Ramsay also preached publicly against the innovations.²⁵ Communion became dramatic occasions, as Calderwood records, where the posture of communicants was closely observed to see whether or not they would submit to the royal requirement of kneeling, which was considered to be an idolatrous action. Laura A. M. Stewart points to evidence that thousands of people in the capital were refusing to attend churches where communion was administered kneeling. They were prepared

²² He describes his home parish and district as a place where "Christ was scarce named, as touching any reality or power of godliness", Letter 344, p. 654.

²³ R. T. Martin (ed.), *Sermons, Prayers and Pulpit addresses by Alexander Henderson* (Edinburgh, 1867), p. xxxi.

²⁴ David Stevenson, "Conventicles in the Kirk, 1619-1637: The Emergence of a Radical Party", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 18 (1972-1974), pp. 99-114.

²⁵ D. Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland* (8 vols., Edinburgh, 1842-9), Vol. 7, p. 286.

instead to walk to other congregations around the town.²⁶ Calderwood certainly records concerning 28th March 1619, "Easter day", that "the inhabitants of the toun went out at the ports in hundreths and thousands, to the nixt adjacent kirks".²⁷ Calderwood records that few indeed were kneeling to receive communion:

There were fewer communicants in the Colledge Kirk, yit the most part kneeled not. The Communion was celebrate this same day in the Abbay Kirk, the West Kirk, and in the kirk on the north side of the bridge of Leith, efter the old forme, wherunto the inhabitants of Edinburgh resorted in great numbers. Yit was there great confusion and disorder in manie kirks, by reason of the late innovation. In some kirks, the people went out, and left the minister alone: in some, when the minister wold have them to kneele, the ignorant and simple sort cryed out, "The danger, if anie be, light upon your owne soule, and not upon ours". Some, when they could not gett the Sacrament sitting, departed, and besought God to be judge betweene them and the minister.²⁸

If we date Rutherford's conversion to 1619, it may be that he made public profession of faith at a time when partaking of the Lord's Supper required an additional witness on the side of Christ and truth by refusing to bow the knee and perhaps also by forsaking the metropolitan congregations where the tutors also served as ministers. Such public and controversial demonstrations of conviction were of no small moment.

On 10th February 1619 some of the merchants and burgesses of the city were summoned before the High Commission to answer charges of not attending Church on Christmas Day and of keeping their shops open. These included the bookseller John Mein, a friend of Rutherford's, and James Cathkin, also a bookseller.²⁹ In March the High Commission also summoned Richard Dickson (Mein's brother-in-law), the minister of the West Church for administering communion to communicants seated rather than kneeling.³⁰ This was followed by controversies in the Kirk

²⁶ L. A. M. Stewart, "The Political Repercussions of the Five Articles of Perth: A Reassessment of James VI and I's Religious Policies in Scotland", *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 38 (2007), pp. 1013-1036.

²⁷ Calderwood, Vol. 7, pp. 359-360.

²⁸ Calderwood, Vol. 7, p. 360.

²⁹ Calderwood, Vol. 7, p. 348.

³⁰ Calderwood, Vol. 7, pp. 352-355.

Session of Edinburgh on 23rd and 25th March in relation to kneeling to receive communion, in which John Mein was the main opponent of the conformist ministers.³¹ The Town Council records only tersely notes, on 23rd March, a letter from the king “derect to the provest, baillies and Counsall of this burgh anent the ressaite of the sacrament . . . quhilk was red”.³²

The Town College was not free from unrest at this time. In 1619 “misordor of the Colledge” was reported.³³ The Burgh Records are not explicit about the nature of the “misorder” but it was noted on 14th May 1619, around the same time as controversies in the Kirk Session, 26th May 1619.³⁴ It is possible that there was some degree of agitation amongst the students and the College staff in relation to the matters concerning the Kirk. One minor aspect of the unrest was the need for the Town Council to enforce the wearing of gowns by “the Rector and Regentis of the Colledge in all tyme cuming” “upon the hie streitis and within the colledge”.³⁵ Controversies raged through the month of June with a public proclamation that all without exception were “to give obedience to the Five Articles, and were discharged to wryte, scatter abroad, or reid anie libells, pamphlets, or books, sett out against the Assemblie of Perth, or against ministers obedient to the acts of the said Assemblie”.³⁶ This was followed up by the searching of houses for

³¹ Calderwood, Vol. 7, pp. 358-359.

³² M. Wood (ed.), *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1604 to 1626* (Edinburgh, 1931), p. 186.

³³ Wood, p. 189.

³⁴ See Calderwood, Vol. 7, pp. 361-4.

³⁵ Wood, p. 187. A similar rule had been in place since 1583 and it was usually thought to be necessary as a deterrent to illicit behaviour but perhaps at this time might have been thought useful in singling out behaviour in church too. King James expressed an evident concern for academic dress on numerous occasions, which was later to be continued by Charles I, see J. C. Cooper, “The Scarlet Gown: History and Development of Scottish Undergraduate Dress”, *Transactions of the Burgh Society*, Vol. 10 (2010), pp. 8-42 (pp. 13-14). Perhaps due to the Laudian insistence upon them, John Owen was later to regard academic gowns as “totally superstitious”, see B. Worden, *God’s Instruments: Political Conduct in the England of Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford, 2012), p. 134.

³⁶ Calderwood, Vol. 7, pp. 386-9. We must also remember that in 1619 royal policy in Scottish ecclesiastical matters was developing apace in other areas such as the Anglicising revision of the *Book of Common Order*, which had been in progress since 1615 and had reached its final draft, see A. R. Macdonald, “James VI and I, the Church of Scotland, and British Ecclesiastical Convergence”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 48 (2005), pp. 885-903 (p. 897). James also ordered Archbishop Spottiswoode to depose all ministers who refused to comply with kneeling at communion according to the Articles of Perth, B. Botfield (ed.), *Original letters relating to the ecclesiastical affairs of Scotland* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1851), Vol. 2, p. 620.

books published by Calderwood against the Perth Assembly, particularly the anonymous publication, *Perth Assemblée*, which was now circulating.³⁷ James Cathkin was arrested once more, this time in London, and tried with close interrogation by the king regarding his associations with Calderwood.³⁸

In June 1619 the king wrote to the Town Council in Edinburgh in relation to the Edinburgh burgesses that were opposing his ecclesiastical policies and instructed the Council to enforce the Articles of Perth and related issues.³⁹ In July 1619 it appears that the Clerk of the Town Council, John Hay, had been dispatched to London to present certain articles to the King for “freithing of the guid toun from the aspersionis quhairwith thay war burdeynit be his Majestie upon thair pastouris information”. Evidently some Edinburgh ministers (presumably conformist) had complained to the king that the Council was not supporting them where they were experiencing opposition from their congregations.⁴⁰

As we have already hinted, such events cannot but have called upon Rutherford to be clear as to where he stood and commit himself to the cause of Christ no matter what the consequences might be. We know that by the year 1620 he was not only willing to endure such consequences but earnestly desiring the privilege of suffering for the name of Christ. It is unmistakably clear that this must be connected with the key events in the political and ecclesiastical life of Edinburgh that took place during that year. This was when four burgesses who were protesting against the Articles of Perth were put in ward and threatened with banishment to the north by the Privy Council. The four men, including John Mein and William Rig, were all active in private religious meetings in Edinburgh and indeed were friends of Rutherford's. Intercession by the Town Council later delayed the sentence. Although Rig was ordered again to be banished to Caithness in July, this sentence was not followed through.⁴¹ It was in the same year that “the ministers of

³⁷ Other publications by Calderwood included: *A solution of Doctor Resolutus, his resolutions for kneeling* (1619); *The speech of the Kirk of Scotland to her beloved children* (1620); *Parasynagma Perthense et iuramentum Ecclesiae Scoticae et A.M. Antitamicamicategoria* (1620); *A defence of our arguments against kneeling in the act of receiving the sacramentall elements of bread and wine impugned by Mr. Michelson* (1620).

³⁸ *The Bannatyne Miscellany: containing original papers and tracts, chiefly relating to the history and literature of Scotland* (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1827-55), Vol. 1, p. 204.

³⁹ Wood, p. 191.

⁴⁰ Wood, pp. 191-92.

⁴¹ Calderwood, Vol. 7, pp. 477-78.

Edinburgh inveighed bitterlie against the private meetings of some good Christians in Edinburgh, who convened to deplore the iniquitie of the time”.⁴²

Rutherford could not avoid these events; he was at the epicentre of the unfolding drama relating to the protests against the Articles of Perth; and when his friends were being threatened and sentenced with banishment he tells us that he was praying to receive the same honour.

II. RUTHERFORD'S DOCTRINE OF CONVERSION

Guy Richard argues that Rutherford lays particular emphasis on the *usus pedagogus* which was the second of the three uses of the law proposed by Melancthon and Calvin. The *usus pedagogus* is a particular application of the law in order to bring about conviction of sin and so to lead the sinner to Christ. According to Richard:

Part of the reason for this is to be found in Rutherford's own conversion experience. If we follow John Coffey in seeing his conversion as the result of his being charged with fornication and removed from office as regent in Edinburgh's town college – which certainly appears to be the case – then there can be no doubt but that Rutherford would have had profound experiences of humiliation and law-consciousness and that this would have heavily influenced his own understanding of divine grace and conversion. Perhaps it is because Rutherford's conversion is of a more dramatic nature – more like Luther's than Calvin's – that Rutherford's emphasis seems to gravitate towards the former and the *usus pedagogus* more than is true for the Genevan reformer.⁴³

Richard also finds in Rutherford's writings an “overwhelming emphasis” upon the doctrine of the mortification of sin which he believes derived from this event.⁴⁴ We have seen, however, that it is untenable to posit a date for Rutherford's conversion that would follow hard upon the Euphame Hamilton incident. Setting aside this mistaken assumption, we

⁴² Calderwood, Vol. 7, pp. 440, 447.

⁴³ Richard, *The Supremacy of God*, p. 182.

⁴⁴ Richard, *The Supremacy of God*, pp. 200-201.

would like in what follows to assess whether or not Rutherford gave a particular prominence to preparations and convictions in his treatment of conversion.

1. Rutherford and preparations before conversion

Richard notes that “Rutherford and British theologians in general at this time, place great emphasis on the doctrine of preparation”.⁴⁵ “Puritan preparation is the doctrine that God prepares sinners for faith by overcoming obstacles in their minds and consciences to the claims of the gospel.”⁴⁶ Comparison with a recent study, *Prepared by Grace, for Grace: The Puritans on God’s Way of Leading Sinners to Christ*, suggests that Rutherford was in step with post-Reformation and puritan theologians in emphasising preparations for conversion.

Rutherford asserts very clearly that preparations are necessary but that they are not meritorious, efficacious, or something that the sinner can do in his own strength.⁴⁷ M. Charles Bell has argued that Rutherford’s emphasis on preparation as a necessary precursor to effectual calling is legalistic by “subordinating grace and gospel to law”.⁴⁸ In particular, he highlights the answer in Rutherford’s Catechism to the question, “Then ther goeth no preparatione befor Godis effectuall calling?”. “Yes. God casteth us downe with the terrours of the law, making us see our miserable estait. – Acts ix. 6; ii. 37.”⁴⁹ This can be connected with even stronger statements such as: “To beleeve and not be humbled, and despaire of salvation in your selfe, is to presume.”⁵⁰ There are indeed various such expressions in *Christ Dying* that might indicate the absolute necessity of preparations if they are taken apart from other clear statements that emphasise the contrary.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Richard, *The Supremacy of God*, p. 183.

⁴⁶ J. R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Prepared by Grace, for Grace: The Puritans on God’s Way of Leading Sinners to Christ* (Grand Rapids, 2013, Kindle Edition), Kindle locations 414-415.

⁴⁷ Rutherford emphasised that “no whole-hearted sinners meet with Christ; none come at first laughing to Christ, all that come to Jesus for helpe, come with the teare in their eye. . . . To come dry and withered to the waters, Esai 55.1. is the required preparation,” *Christ Dying*, p. 251. This is also emphasised in his Letters, No. 203, p. 373.

⁴⁸ M. C. Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 77, quoted by Richard, *The Supremacy of God*, p. 178.

⁴⁹ “Ane Catechisme Containing the Soume of Christian Religion,” in A. F. Mitchell (ed.), *Catechisms of the Second Reformation* (London, 1886), p. 201.

⁵⁰ *Christ Dying*, p. 249.

⁵¹ cf. “it must be impossible, that any can beleeve, but some preparation fore-going there must be; and because *all sinners as sinners* have not such preparation, *all sinners as sinners* are

Bell's claims are in line with a mistaken trend of twentieth-century historiography and historical theology that seeks to separate Calvin from the Calvinists. Bell misunderstands entirely the role of preparation in post-Reformation theology, an error most famously elaborated by Norman Pettit in his influential work, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (New Haven, 1966). It is interesting that Rutherford defends himself against a contemporary critic that seems to anticipate such later mishandling of his thought. "If Master *Cornewell* dreame, that we thus heighten preparations before conversion, as he seemes in his Arguments, against *gratious conditions in the soule, before faith*; he knowes not our mind."⁵² He rejects the idea that any Reformed theologian could elevate natural strength to such a degree.

No man but *Pelagians, Arminians*, and such do teach, if any shall improve their naturall habilities to the uttermost, and stirre up themselves in good earnest to seeke the grace of conversion, and *Christ* the wisdome of *God*, they shall certainly, and without miscarrying, find what they seeke.⁵³

He asserts strongly that no orthodox divine taught thus. "Not any Protestant Divines, I know, make true repentance a worke of the Law, going before faith in Christ."⁵⁴ Rutherford denies that there are "preparations in the converted, to which conversion is promised as a free reward of grace, which may be called moral preparations – there is no such promise in the word as this: 'Whosoever are wearied and lost in their own eyes, they shall be converted.' Yea . . . It is hard to affirm, that

not at the first clap, to beleee in the soule Physitian *Christ*, but onely such as in *Christs* order are plowed, ere *Christ* sow on them, and selfe-condemned ere they beleee in *Christ*". This must be taken in its context, however, of contending against an Antinomian rejection of law-work in favour of "the immediate revealing of *Christ* to an unconverted sinner, never humbled, nor despairing of himselfe" which is not "*Christs* owne way and order", pp. 102-3. Rutherford strongly rejects "the *Antinomian* way of conversion" which "is, that every soule-troubled for sinne, Elect, or Reprobate, is immediatly, without any foregoing preparations, or humiliation, or worke of the law" to beleee *that God loved him with an everlasting love*. A manifest lie, for so Reprobats are to beleee a ly, as the first *Gospel-truth*," p. 250.

⁵² *Christ Dying*, p. 110.

⁵³ *Christ Dying*, pp. 239-40. cf. also "This is the absolute and loose faith that Papists and Arminians slander our doctrine withal, because we reject all foregoing merits, good works, congruous dispositions, preparations moving God to convert this man, because he hath such preparations, and to reject and to leave another man to his own hardness of heart, because he hath no such payment in hand, by which he may redeem and buy conversion", p. 295.

⁵⁴ *Christ Dying*, p. 244.

all who are prepared with these preparations of order, are infallibly converted: it is likely Judas and Cain reputed themselves sinners, and had some law-work in their heart, and yet were never converted. But God's ordinary way, is to bring men unto Christ, being first self-lost and self-condemned, and that, upon these grounds that proveth God's way of working to be successive."

Rutherford grants that "in regard of time, sinners cannot come too soon to Christ, nor too early to Wisdom; but in regard of order, many come too soon, and unprepared. *Simon Magus* too soon believed."⁵⁵ He explains clearly why law-work may be considered to be an ordinary (though not absolutely indispensable) part of the process of conversion.

1. Because conversion is a rational work, and the gospel is a moral instrument of conversion, therefore Christ here openeth a vein, ere he give physic; he first cutteth, and then cureth; for though in the moment of formal conversion, men be patients, and can neither prevent Christ, nor co-operate with Christ, yet the whole work about conversion is not done in a moment; for men are not converted as the lilies grow, which do not labour nor spin. There be some pangs in the new birth. . . .
2. Christ's saving and calling the lost, is a new generation as well as a creation. A child is not born in one day; saving grace is not physic that worketh the cure, while the sick man is sleeping: Christ casteth the metal in the fire, ere he form the vessel of mercy; he must cast down the old work, ere he lay the new foundation.
3. Conversion is a gospel blessing, and so, must be wrought in a way suitable to the scope of the gospel. Now, the special intent of the gospel is to bring men to put a high and rich price upon Christ, and this is one gospel-offer: What thinkest thou of so excellent a one as Christ? What wouldst thou part with? What wouldst thou do or suffer for Christ? Now, men cannot prize Christ, who have not found the terrors of the law: so Paul, finding himself the chief of sinners, and in that case saved, (1 Tim. 1:15,) must hug and embrace Christ, and burst out in a Psalm (v. 17), "Now, to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever, Amen".

⁵⁵ *Christ Dying*, p. 258.

A sight of the gallows, of the axe, raiseth in the condemned man's heart, high thoughts of the grace of a pardoning prince: to be a tenant of free grace, is so sweet a free-holding, that it must put a high rate on free grace.

4. The clay organs, and faculties of the soul working by them, cannot bear the too great violence of legal terrors; for, in reviving the spirit, "If he should let out all his wrath, the souls should fail that he has made," (Is. 57:16). Nor can they bear that God let out all his strength of love in one moment. Rough or violent dealing would break crystal glasses.⁵⁶

Preparations for conversion as part of the common operations of the Holy Spirit (cp. *Westminster Confession of Faith*) can be outward (using outward means such as attending upon the preaching of the gospel and reading the Scriptures) or inward (convictions and law-work). Contemporaries such as David Dickson give greatest emphasis to outward preparations in his *Therapeutica Sacra*. Inward dispositions are equally, however, means used towards an end rather than causes that bring about infallibly their effect. "Preparations are penall, to subdue; not morall, to deserve or merit; nor conditionall, to engage Christ to convert, or to facilitate conversion."⁵⁷ They only prepare the soul to receive grace rather than inexorably secure it.⁵⁸

All preparations even wrought in us, by the common and generall restraining grace of God, can have no effective influence to produce our conversion, from the Scriptures alledged; for then should we be *called, saved, and quickned, when we are dead in sinne, foolish, disobedient, and enemies to God* [otherwise indeed]. Men might prevene Grace, and forestall *Christ* and his merits, which overturns the foundation of the *Gospell*, and cries down *Christ* and free Grace.⁵⁹

Preparations are not grace nor strictly speaking a part of conversion at all: "humiliation, sorrow for sin, displeasure with our selves, that goe before conversion, can be no formall parts of conversion, nor any essentiall limbs, members or degrees of the new creature; nor so

⁵⁶ Samuel Rutherford, *Trial and Triumph of Faith* (Edinburgh, 1845), pp. 148-51.

⁵⁷ *Christ Dying*, p. 257.

⁵⁸ *Christ Dying*, p. 239.

⁵⁹ *Christ Dying*, p. 240.

much as a stone or pin of the new building.” Richard shows how this is consonant with the emphasis of theologians such as William Perkins and William Ames; it is likely that these are prominent amongst the divines that Rutherford refers to in what follows.⁶⁰ Richard helpfully translates and elucidates the Latin terms used by Rutherford and these have been made use of in what follows.⁶¹

Divines call them, *gradus ad rem* [step towards conversion] *initium materiale conversionis* [the material beginning of conversion]; *non gradus in re, nec initium formale* [not a step within conversion or its formal beginning]: For parts of the building remaine in the building; when the house is come to some perfect frame, all those bastard pieces, coming not from the new principle the new heart, Christ formed in the soule, are cast out as unprofitable.⁶²

The closest that we have to a systematic theology from Rutherford's pen was the published divinity lectures *Examen Arminianismi*. In this volume he emphasises similarly that conversion is ordinarily a process. Generally speaking the Lord does not “convert people in an instant, the way water is changed into wine; and [he does not typically convert them] without [any] knowledge” of Himself and His gospel but “he converts people who are prepared, humbled and downcast and broken by an awareness [*conscientia*] of sin and the terrors of the Law”.⁶³ “Preparations remove not one dram, or twentieth part of an ounce of guiltinesse, or sin. Christ, in practice of Free-grace, not by Law, yea not by promise, gives grace to the thus prepared, and often hee denyes it also.”

Rutherford distinguishes “the preparatory good affections of desire, hunger, sorrow, humiliation, going before conversion” from “the renewed affections which follow after; the former being acts of grace, but

⁶⁰ In *Christ Dying* (p. 243), Rutherford also appears to allude to Ames' frequently re-used example regarding the fashioned body of Adam having been prepared to receive life or having a disposition to life. This example was also used by David Dickson, cf. Beeke and Smalley, *Prepared by Grace, for Grace* (Kindle locations 1550 and 1642).

⁶¹ Richard, *The Supremacy of God*, p. 182.

⁶² *Christ Dying*, p. 241. cf. *Trial and Triumph of Faith*: “when Felix and Agrippa were both upon the wheels, I cannot say that conversion formally was begun; yet materially it was. The one trembled, and so was afraid, and fled, and did put Paul away till another time; then he saw the danger of grace: (Acts 24:25, 26): the other saith, he was half a Christian, (but it was the poorest half), and ‘he arose and went aside’, (Acts 26:28, 30, 31),” p. 297.

⁶³ Richard, *The Supremacy of God*, p. 182 (Richard's own translation).

not of saving grace, which goeth along with the decree of the election of grace, and of like latitude with it; the latter being the native and connatural fruits of the Spirit, of which the apostle speaketh, (Gal. 5:22, 23).⁶⁴ A distinction is even to be made between true and false preparations; the latter are purely temporary and outward and do not issue in conversion.⁶⁵

Following Augustine, true preparations can be thought of as “*Gratia praeparans*, or preparing grace, which communicates a sense of one’s inability and a desire to come to Christ. This is preparation for conversion by the law.” It is not the grace that regenerates and is also distinct from “*gratia praeveniens*, or preventient grace, which precedes repentance”.⁶⁶ Richard Muller outlines that the “Protestant scholastics distinguish five *actus gratiae*, or actualizations of grace”. These are identical to those defined by Augustine. Muller says that *Gratia praeparans* “is the preparing grace, according to which the Spirit instills in the repentant sinner a full knowledge of his inability and also his desire to accept the promises of the gospel. This is the stage of the life of the sinners that can be termed the *praeparatio ad conversionem* (q.v.) and that the Lutheran orthodox characterize as a time of *terrores conscientiae* (q.v.). Both this preparation for conversion and the terrors of conscience draw directly upon the second use of the law, *the usus paedagogicus* (see *usus legis*).⁶⁷ Viewed from this perspective, preparations are a constellation of undeserved favours and grace, though it would be “the common and generall restraining grace of *God*” rather than saving grace.⁶⁸

Ezek. 16. Thy time was a time of loves. As a constellation is not one single starre, but many; so the converted soule observeth a confluence, a bundle, an army of free loves, all in one cluster, meeting and growing upon one stalk: As to be borne where the voyce of the Turtle is heard in the land, its free love; to heare such a Sermon, free love; that the man spake such an excellent word,

⁶⁴ *Trial and Triumph of Faith*, p. 173.

⁶⁵ *Christ Dying*, p. 269. A similar distinction is found in William Guthrie’s *The Christian’s Great Interest*, chapter 2, section 3, “The difference between that preparatory work of the law which leads to salvation and the temporary convictions of those who relapse”.

⁶⁶ P. Schaff, quoted J. R. Beeke and P. M. Smalley, *Prepared by Grace, for Grace* (Kindle locations 560-566).

⁶⁷ R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastics Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1985), pp. 129-30.

⁶⁸ *Christ Dying*, p. 240.

free love; that I was not sleeping when it was spoken, free love; that the Holy Ghost drove that word into the soule, as a *nayle fastened by the Master of the assembly*, it was free mercy: so that there's a meeting of shining favours of God, in obtaining mercy; and this would be observed.⁶⁹

2. Variety of experience in conversion

Rutherford emphasises that this is ordinarily the orderly pattern followed by Christ in converting the soul. "*Christs worke of conversion is orderly; as first to plow, and pluck up, so then to sow and plant; and first, to take the soule off old lovers.*"⁷⁰ William Guthrie was a student of Rutherford at St. Andrews and appears to have profited from his ministry to the conversion of his soul. Guthrie published *The Christian's Great Interest*, the well-known abiding classic treatise on conversion and assurance from the Second Reformation period. In this Guthrie speaks of "a preparatory work of the Law, whereof the Lord doth ordinarily make use, to prepare his own" but emphasising that it is not "a negative mark" of grace "as if none might lay claim to Gods favour, who hath not had this preparatory work in the several steps of it, as we are to speak of it; for, as we shall hear, the Lord doth not always keep that path with men".⁷¹ Christ is not, however, tied to this order.

God ordinarily prepares men by the Law, and some previous dispositions, before they be drawne to Christ. I dare not peremptorily say, that God useth no prerogative Royall, or no priviledges of Sovereignty, in the conversion of some who find mercy between the water and the bridge; yea, I thinke that *Christ comes to some like a Roe, or a young Hart, skipping and leaping over hills and mountaines*, and passeth over his owne set line, and snatcheth them out of hell, without these preparations; at least, hee works them suddenly.⁷²

James Durham imparts a useful definition in making brief reference to legal repentance in an essay in his commentary on Revelation. He says that repentance "maybe considered as somewhat

⁶⁹ *Christ Dying*, p. 277.

⁷⁰ *Christ Dying*, p. 246.

⁷¹ W. Guthrie, *The Christian's Great Interest* (London, 1681), p. 12.

⁷² *Christ Dying*, p. 244.

previous in time to the exercise of faith and pardon of sin. This is properly legal sorrow, and is a common work of the spirit, which may be in one whose sins will never be pardoned. It is therefore not of itself gracious, although the Lord may sometimes make use thereof, for a sinner's humbling and wakening before his conversion."⁷³ The word "sometimes" is ambiguous here, it may mean that it is not always necessary before conversion but could also signify that legal sorrow sometimes issues in conversion but does not always do so.

Rutherford spends considerable time emphasising the various ways in which sinners are converted. This is a passage that anticipates William Guthrie's well-known treatment in *The Christian's Great Interest* (chapter 2, section 1). It is interesting to speculate upon the influence of Rutherford's teaching and preaching on this treatise.

The particular exact knowledge of the Lords manner of drawing of sinners, may be unknowne to many that are drawn. . . . There be many sundry locks, and many various turnings and throwings of the same key, and but one key. 1. Some Christ drawes by the heart, as *Lydia, Matthew: Love* sweetly and softly bloweth up the doore, and the King is within doores in the floore of the house before they be aware. Others Christ trailes and draggeth by violence, rather by the haire of the head, then by the heart, as the *Jayler, Act. 16.* and *Saul, Act. 9.* who are plunged over eares in hell, and pulled above water by the haire of the head: sure thousands doe weare a crowne of glory before the throne, who were never at making of themselves away by killing themselves, as the *Jayler* was. A third sort know they are drawne, but how, or when, or the Mathematicall point of time, they know not: some are *full of the Holy Ghost from the womb*, as *John Baptist*. Yee must not cast off all, nor must Saints say they are none of Christs, because they cannot tell you histories and wonders of themselves, and of their owne conversion: some are drawne by miracles, some without miracles; the word of God is the Road-way.⁷⁴

3. Law and Gospel in conversion

Whatever the exact timing or the nature of the events that were used sovereignly to bring Rutherford to newness of life, it was a powerful

⁷³ *A Commentary on Revelation* (Willows Street, PA, 2000), p. 314. Originally published 1658.

⁷⁴ *Christ Dying*, pp 275-77.

experience. Although it has been suggested that it may have been an extended period of acute conviction of sin, from the following expression it sounds as though it was not in fact a protracted experience. "O but Christ hath a saving eye! Salvation is in His eyelids! When He first looked on me, I was saved; it cost Him but a look to make hell quit of me!" Rutherford also wrote that: "At the Lord's first meeting with a sinner, the Lord opens his heart by grace to let Him in, and there they sup together. There is a feast of love between them." He makes it very clear that, "No man can love Christ till He love him first, because our love of Christ is nothing else but an effect of this love to us. . . . So we may learn to sing for ever a song of free grace shown in our conversion." It is hard not to see an autobiographical aspect in the explanation given in another sermon: "When sinners have been going on into a course of rebellion, running away from God, *after their humiliation* ordinarily He fills them with a feast of the sense of His love, all their days they cannot forget." God begins His work of grace by shattering the "towers of pride, of worldly-mindedness, of filthiness", but then overwhelms the sinner with His presence and His beauty.⁷⁵

Rutherford also compares the sinner in conversion to a fish hooked by the angler. The affections are moved, and faith works by these affections. Perhaps there was much of his first experience of grace in this description:

As when a fish is taken there are two actions, the bait alluring and beguiling the fish with hope of meat. This is like the working of the word which is Christ's bait; but when He wins us to dry land, then, when the fish is hooked, there is a real action of the fisher, drawing and hauling the fish to land; it leapeth and flighter and wrestling while it bleeds with the hook. And this answereth to the Holy Spirit's powerful hauling and drawing of the soul in all the affections, that the soul feeleth joy, comfort, delight, desire, longing, believing, nibbling and biting Christ's bait.⁷⁶

It is true, however, that Rutherford is most often counselling his correspondents to make sure work of their conversion and not be casual about it, particularly emphasising the need for strong conviction of sin.

⁷⁵ A. A. Bonar (ed.), *Quaint Sermons of Samuel Rutherford* (Morgan, PA, 1999 edn.), p. 253.

⁷⁶ *Quaint Sermons*, p. 92.

Make no sport nor bairn's play of Christ; but labour for a sound and lively sight of sin, that ye may judge yourself an undone man, a damned slave of hell and of sin, one dying in your own blood, except Christ come and rue upon you, and take you up. And therefore, make sure and fast work of conversion. Cast the earth deep; and down, down with the old work, the building of confusion, that was there before; and let Christ lay new work, and make a new creation within you. Look if Christ's rain goeth down to the root of your withered plants, and if His love wound your heart whill it bleed with sorrow for sin, and if ye can pant and fall aswoon, and be like to die for that lovely one, Jesus. I know that Christ will not be hid where He is; grace will ever speak for itself, and be fruitful in well-doing.⁷⁷

We believe that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Rutherford's experience involved both sorrow for sin and the awakening of affectionate desires. On many occasions it is the latter that is given greater emphasis albeit that there is recognition given to the need for law-consciousness. Rutherford asserts that "convictions under the Gospel, are stronger and more solide, for they have more of sanctified reason: 2. Will. 3. Inclination of heart and affection" in comparison with law convictions. Indeed "many tormented with the Law, have believed such a case to be the pain of the second birth, when it was but a meer Law-feaver, and have returned to their vomit and become more loose and profane. . . . Because the Law as the Law can convert none."⁷⁸

Rutherford stressed the primacy of the affections in conversion. In "natural" ineffectual conviction the "conscience of the natural man may convict him of sin, but for his will and his affections they are mere patients and join not at all in the work".⁷⁹ "The conscience is slow, the heart is quick and swift. The affections are like dry timber, any spark of fire casten in upon them makes them soon to burn; the conscience is like green wood that burns not soon, yet keeps the fire durable."⁸⁰

Rutherford qualified this emphasis on the affections by warning that affections such as sorrow and visible signs of conviction such as

⁷⁷ Letter 186, pp. 337-38.

⁷⁸ *The Covenant of Life Opened or, a treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (Edinburgh, 1655), p. 69.

⁷⁹ *Quaint Sermons*, p. 49.

⁸⁰ A. A. Bonar (ed.), *Fourteen Communion Sermons by the Rev. Samuel Rutherford* (Glasgow, 1877), p. 316.

weeping should not be depended upon. While “in true repentance there is meikle [much] sorrow”, there is also a false sorrow “without love toward the Him whom you have offended”. “Do not think to buy God’s kindness with tears, as if sorrow were a fat feast to God.” “When many tears go out, a windy conceit comes in: ‘I am sure God cannot but be pleased now. He is in my debt now’”.⁸¹ He also made it clear that the “*desire to beleve*” is not itself faith. Mere desires in themselves are insufficient: “raw desires, and wishes after conversion, and Christ, are to us no more conversion, and the soules being drawn to Christ, then *Esau’s* weeping for the blessing, was the blessing.”⁸²

Guy Richard argues that “the strongly ‘affectionate’ nature of his conversion to Christ and the impact that this had upon his Christian experience” explains why Rutherford adopted the “intimate language of the Song of Songs” in his sermons and letters to such a great extent. This “affectionate experience” “was a product of his ‘Damascus Road’ conversion” and “converges with his theology of union with Christ, his theology of the affections, and his understanding of the Song of Songs”. While we disagree with Richard that Rutherford’s conversion had any connection with the controversy surrounding Rutherford’s marriage, it is clear that the conversion experience was, as Richard describes, “affectionate”.⁸³

In one of his sermons on the Forlorn (or Prodigal) Son, Rutherford emphasises loving overtures and engagement in the first meeting of the Saviour and sinner, not referring to the beginning of preparations for conversion but the beginning of conversion:

A word, now, of the Lord’s behaviour towards His forlorn son. His kissing him and falling upon his neck tell us this far: when a sinner comes to the Lord truly humbled for sin, there is nothing then but free love and kindness and expressions of love upon the Lord’s part: Rev. iii. 20: To him who knocks, the Lord says that He will open to him, and will come in, and they shall sup together. At the Lord’s first meeting with a sinner, the Lord opens his heart by grace to let Him in, and there they sup together. There is a feast of

⁸¹ *Quaint Sermons*, pp. 94-97.

⁸² *Christ Dying*, p. 242.

⁸³ G. Richard, “The Two Shall become One Flesh: Samuel Rutherford’s ‘Affectionate’ Theology of Union with Christ in the Song of Songs”, in Matthew Vogan (ed.), *Samuel Rutherford: an introduction to his theology* (Edinburgh, 2012), pp. 77-111 (pp. 105-107).

love between them. And it sets our Lord well to do so at the first conversion of a sinner.⁸⁴

Rutherford is quick, however, to assert that sorrow for sin, conviction and preparations are equally part of the experience leading to conversion. Intriguingly, however, he seems to suggest that this may be either more in the preparatory stage or else subsequent to the first meeting. Indeed he says elsewhere, “Therefore is the sense of sin required as a condition in all that come to Christ, whether it be before conversion, or after conversion, when acts of faith are renewed”.⁸⁵ Rutherford in no way minimised the preaching of the law, however, and there can be no doubt that he maintained it in its proper place. He comments for instance on the practice of Peter in Acts 2:

Now Peter, Act. 2. poured vinger and wine at first on the wounds of his hearers, when hee said, Yee *murthered* the Lord of glory; and they were *pricked in their heart*. This is the Law’s work, Rom. 3. to condemne and *stop the sinners mouth*. And you cannot say that Peter failed in curing too suddenly; because hee preached first the Law, to wound and prick them, for that they *crucified the Lord of glory*, before hee preached the Gospel of *beleefe* and *Baptisme*.⁸⁶

Rutherford is very clear, however, that while law-work is necessary and ordinarily to be expected, it is not to be over-emphasised since it is not effectual in conversion.

I mean not that the sinner has no sorrow before Christ and he meet. Ay! he has meikle grief and sadness. But at the first meeting, I say, it sets our Lord to give the humbled sinner joy and consolation, and a feast of His presence . . . for our Lord has promised that such shall be comforted, and the reason is clear thus: there are none who are converted but those who are once humbled, for our Lord has good news unto none but them that mourn; Isa. lxi. 1: He is sent to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; and to them who are not humbled and mourn not, He has a day of vengeance to preach unto them. So

⁸⁴ *Quaint Sermons*, p. 252.

⁸⁵ *Trial and Triumph of Faith*, p. 173.

⁸⁶ *Christ Dying*, p. 256.

those who are humbled and mourn, and meet with the Lord, must be comforted. . . . It is also agreeable to the Lord's love that humbled sinners, at their first meeting with Christ, should get such arles [tokens] as they may never forget again all their days. Now I mean not by this that all the children of God can tell the very first mathematical point of the time of their conversion, for there be some with whom the Lord has dealt from their youth, and, with some, the Lord deals more smoothly in their conversion than He does with others. But for the most part I say this is His dealing, that when sinners have been going on into a course of rebellion, running away from Him, after their humiliation ordinarily He fills them with a feast of the sense of His love, that all their days they cannot forget it. . . . When the Lord gets a new scholar to His school, the first seat He sets them in He puts them into His bosom, that so they may be forced to say. He is a Lord worthy to be served, and that they may be made to condemn themselves for biding so long away from such a Lord, who is love and kindness itself.⁸⁷

There are many similar statements in other sermons which suggest that this was a point that Rutherford was at pains to emphasise.

Then Christ filleth to comers, at the first meeting, a cheerful heart. And (Matt. 11:28) ease and rest to their souls is promised. (Rev. 3:20), "If any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and sup with him, and he with Me." There a feast of joy (Prov. 9:5), Christ saith to a parcel of fools: "Come, eat of My bread, and drink of My wine." There is a home-coming soul set to a full covered table.

I deny not but there be down-casting terrors, and ploughing of the conscience before; but that is before Christ come. Sorrow ushers the gate to Jesus. The reasons are these, i. The conscience is as a dainty small spun thread at conversion, either begun or renewed. There is a double knot upon it, law terrors, and the threatenings are a sharp knife to cut the thread; but not to loose the knot: and loosed it must be. For well is the soul that Christ wooeth with its own consent. Therefore love's sweet graces and felt promises have a rank smell of the soul's delight and comfort of Christ's presence:

⁸⁷ *Quaint Sermons*, pp. 252-55.

and they are the small soft singers of Christ, whereby, with the strong, soft, and subtle art of love, Christ looseth the knot. The soul is, until then, a locked door. The law is the wrong key, it would break the lock ere it opened the heart. When Christ comes, the law and our affections are like ill ravelled yarn; force would ravel them worse.⁸⁸

There is evidence of a definite balance here and it seems rather unlikely therefore that Guy Richard is correct in suggesting that law-work was the initial emphasis of Rutherford's preaching in Anwoth.⁸⁹

Richard points to a sermon on the Song of Solomon where Rutherford indicates some tokens of spiritual winter in the parish. Specifically Rutherford mentions such things as the lack of desire to repair the leaking roof of the church building. This does not, however, indicate a prevailing emphasis upon the law in his preaching. Spiritual winter could easily be understood as a coldness or lukewarmness of affection in true believers. It seems almost more likely that Rutherford would see an antidote to spiritual winter in the "voice of the turtle" in the gospel being heard.

The reality is that we are very well placed to assess the prevailing emphases within Rutherford's preaching, since we have more of Rutherford's sermons available to us than of any of his contemporaries in Scotland. There is a very evident homely and affective strain in Rutherford's sermons.⁹⁰ The emphasis upon the affections in conversion is certainly so pronounced that it is very easy to discern an autobiographical note behind his expressions.

But in Christ's coming first to win in upon our hearts, we are like old vessels made new; it is best to try old vessels with water ere ye put wine in them. Love is like water in the soul; it is not so sore looking in the soul as wine. It is best at our first starting of the race to see the gold. Christ puts not new wine into old vessels. . . . To draw home Ephraim's heart to God, He plats the rope double, that it break not. See our Lord's word to him (Jer. 31:20), "Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child?" etc. And a new garment, feasting, and kissing, is for the forlorn child.

⁸⁸ *Communion Sermons*, p. 212.

⁸⁹ Richard, *The Supremacy of God*, p. 184.

⁹⁰ cf. M. Vogan, "Samuel Rutherford and the theology and practice of preaching", in Vogan, *Samuel Rutherford: an introduction to his theology*, pp. 49-76 (pp. 72-74).

The first love-token is a copy and sampler to all the rest: therefore it must be given with a hearty impression from Christ's own mouth in His word. The bairns' copy should be written with fair and large letters, that it may make them learn with the better will. Our Lord knows we will have to do with experience; and therefore, ordinarily at our first meeting we get as much feeling as we shall never cast off all our life-time again. I will not affirm this to be universal; for Christ steals in upon some souls from the womb, so that they can say, Here He is; but how He came in I cannot tell.⁹¹

III. CONCLUSION

The mistaken assumptions concerning the date and circumstances of Rutherford's conversion ought to be instructive in relation to the extent to which historical studies establish events based upon loose interpretation of ambiguous language. While we must be tentative about some of the likely events surrounding the probable time of Rutherford's conversion, the context of protests made against the Articles of Perth does give us a perspective upon the commencement of his lifelong faithful witness against defections from the covenanted work of reformation.

Rutherford and contemporary Reformed divines did not have a formulaic "Romans road" approach to conversion but they did observe regularity of pattern and order whilst allowing for the sovereign freedom of God in the exercise of His grace. Together with the other Westminster Divines, Rutherford taught that God "doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel" by "convincing us of our sin and misery" (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 31). It is interesting that he even connected this method of divine dealings with national deliverance. Many times the Lord "delivereth his people when then they are humbled" but he "keeps not alwayes this method; nor is it like hee will observe it with Scotland and England, first to humble, and then deliver; but contrarily hee first delivers, and then humbles".⁹²

There are also useful lessons to be drawn from Rutherford's doctrine and preaching of conversion. The law must be preached

⁹¹ *Communion Sermons*, p. 212.

⁹² *Christ Dying*, pp. 269-70.

together with the gospel and there must be a thorough experience of being humbled for sin but the law in itself cannot save, and convictions are not conversion. Both law and gospel must be emphasised. This type of preparation is not Roman Catholic or Arminian, Neonomian, or Hyper-Calvinist, and it is not opposed to the free offer of the gospel, but is a biblical dimension of the preacher's message. In his forthcoming book on James Durham and the Gospel Offer, Donald John Maclean comes to the same conclusion. He asserts that Rutherford's emphasis upon "preparations" does not undermine or undercut his conviction in the freeness of the gospel offer and the right of all without exception to the promises; it simply indicates that he understood preparations to form part of the usual way in which these gospel offers were embraced.⁹³

This is an essential point, since an over-emphasis upon the law in preaching the gospel is detrimental because of its inability to save. Rutherford gave an important place to the law but he makes it clear that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. He says "that the Law purely and unmixed, without all Gospel, is not to be used as a dyet-potion, onely to purge, never to let the unconverted heare *one Gospel-promise*".⁹⁴

Lastly, we can understand some of the central emphases of Rutherford's experience, preaching, and writing in relation to affective piety in gaining a closer understanding of his own conversion, together with his teaching concerning the beginnings of saving grace in the soul. He believed that there were preparations of absence for Christ's presence in the ordinary experience of believers and this is very much the rhythm of his own spiritual life.⁹⁵ There must be humbling, desire, and a sense of Christ's presence before he comes. "The ground moving Christ to renew his love in drawing a fallen Saint out of the pit, is the same that from heaven shined on him at the beginning. . . . Some love-sickness goes before his returne."⁹⁶ Rutherford's widely valued *Letters* therefore provide ample evidence of the life-long impact of Rutherford's first experience of grace.

⁹³ D. J. MacLean, *James Durham (1622-1658) and the Gospel Offer in its Seventeenth Century Context* (Göttingen, forthcoming 2015).

⁹⁴ *Christ Dying*, p. 257.

⁹⁵ cf. M. Vogan, "Samuel Rutherford's Polemic Against Antinomianism in *Christ Dying, and Drawing Sinners to Himself*", in Vogan, *Samuel Rutherford: an introduction to his theology*, pp. 111-128 (pp. 112-123).

⁹⁶ *Christ Dying*, p. 260.