

What is Conversion?

But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Romans 6:17

INTRODUCTION

A young apprentice was converted in a New England church and later indicated he felt called to the ministry. As was the custom of that day, the pastor decided to check with others to determine the genuineness of the young man's conversion. He went to the boy's employer first to talk with him about it. The employer pointed to a chain hanging on the wall and asked, "Do you see that chain? That chain was forged for him. I was obliged to chain him to the bench to keep him at work. He was the worst boy I had in the establishment. I could not trust him out of my sight, but now, he is completely changed. He is one of my best apprentices. I would trust him with untold gold."

The religious experience the Bible describes as conversion results in a change in the life-style of the convert. As a young woman was attempting to join Spurgeon's church in London one day, she was asked, "What makes you think you have become a Christian?" Not understanding the related Bible doctrines of conversion and regeneration, she simply responded, "Because now I sweep under the doormat!" During the Welsh Revival among the coal miners of that land, the change in the lives of the men was so dramatic, the animals in the mines refused to obey them. The miners had formerly cursed them and abused them to make them work; the animals were not trained to respond to kind language. As the caterpillar emerges from a cocoon a beautiful butterfly, so the person who experiences conversion emerges a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Two biblical terms are used to describe this experience, depending upon the perspective of the context. When viewed in terms of man's role in salvation, the term used is "conversion." When considered from God's perspective, the Bible describes it as "regeneration." These two terms are discussed in this chapter. When we understand them and all they represent, we will better appreciate our salvation. Then as we seek to reach others for Christ, we can anticipate a similar change in their lives.

DEFINITION OF REGENERATION

Regeneration is the work of God through the Holy Spirit of placing in one who has been given the gift of faith a new nature which is capable of doing the will of God. The regenerated person is capable of doing the "righteous things" required by God. Regeneration results in more than eternal life, it makes possible our sanctification. Regeneration is the result of that experience which is called being born again. "Therefore, if any man be in Christ he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Regeneration is an act of God. Only God can save a soul. Jonah recognized that "salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). Salvation is called the "gift of God" (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8). No one is able to forgive sin and save a soul but God (Mark 2:7).

But it is not enough to think of salvation as only a legal act whereby God erases our sins from the legal record. Salvation results in a living, dynamic experience. One of the greatest promises given by God is, "Whosoever believeth on him ... [has] everlasting life" (John 3:16). The new life of a Christian is more than endless duration. A Christian receives a new quality of life the moment he receives Christ (John 3:36; 4:14; 7:37-39).

Regeneration produces spiritual life. Every person has a living body and soul, and at regeneration the spirit is made alive. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul said, "And you hath he quickened [made alive] who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and ... have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Much has been said in recent years about being born again. This expression was used by Jesus to explain regeneration to Nicodemus. The term *anōthen*, translated "born again," can also be rendered: "born from above." A person needs a spiritual rebirth because he is spiritually dead. When Adam was created, he was a living soul (Gen. 2:7), which meant he was living both spiritually and physically. God warned, "For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Adam disobeyed God and ate the fruit, but lived 930 years (Gen. 5:5). Adam died spiritually the day he ate the fruit, even though he lived over 900 years physically. As a result everyone is born into the world spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1) because of trespasses and sins. But when a person receives Jesus Christ he receives spiritual life—this is eternal life (John 5:24).

When a person is born again (John 1:12, 13), the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ comes into his life. Christ is the spiritual life of the new believer. But regeneration is more than the presence of Christ. Christ promised the Father would also indwell the believer. "We will come unto him and make our abode with him" (John 14:23). Finally, the Holy Spirit also indwells the Christian, and his presence is the guarantee of new life, "by his Spirit that dwelleth in you" (Rom. 8:11). Hence, when a person is regenerated he receives the life of God because he is indwelt with the presence of God. One of the great devotional classics of sixteenth-century England discusses this very theme, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*.

When Jesus told his disciples, "I am the vine, ye are the branches" (John 15:5), he was illustrating the unique relationship into which every believer enters at the moment of conversion. He becomes one with Christ. Paul often wrote of being "in Christ" and "Christ in you." Both statements are the result of an act that occurred at the moment of salvation. Many people are saved and pray, "Come into my heart, Lord, Jesus." Every saved individual has become one with Christ in a unique manner. This is a part of the work of God in regeneration.

New nature. When a person receives Jesus Christ he becomes a new creation, but this does not mean the sin nature is eliminated or is upgraded. Paul recognized the continuance of the sin nature when he stated the Ephesians had put off "concerning the former conversation the old man" (Eph. 4:22). He wanted them to recognize that the act of crucifying the old nature took place at Calvary (Rom. 6:6). The sinful nature was not eliminated, only condemned. Paul also recognized the struggle he had with the continuing sin nature. He wrote, "The evil which I would not, that I do" (Rom. 7:19). He also recognized his continuing inability to perform righteousness, "for the good I would that I do not" (Rom. 7:19). While on earth a Christian will struggle with the desires of his old

nature. But in regeneration he receives a new nature with new power and new attitudes. Now it is the duty of a Christian to allow his new nature to direct his life. To do this the Christian must “control” his old nature (Rom. 13:14), and allow the power of the new nature to overcome the old life.

New creation—transformation. Paul used this expression when he told the Corinthians, “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away, behold all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). God works in the life of an individual not just to improve him but to totally transform him. Paul also described the results of regeneration as a “new man.” He notes, “that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24).

The usual testimony of regeneration is the changed lives of those who have been delivered from the power of sin. The Bible teaches that no person is beyond hope. Paul reminded the Corinthians of their past lives: “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners shall inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9, 10). The very next verse explains their transformation, “and such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 6:11). What Paul was saying was that the church of Corinth had members who had formerly been unfaithful, idol worshipers, homosexuals, thieves, drunks, terrorists, and extortioners, but their lives had been changed by God. The power for that transformation is regeneration.

Before Zacchaeus met Jesus, his unethical financial practice was a way of life. When he met the Savior, he immediately wanted to restore what was taken unethically.

Levi (or Matthew, as he was also known) was, like Zacchaeus, a self-centered tax collector interested primarily in his own prosperity at the expense of others. When he met Jesus, he sponsored a gathering of his colleagues to introduce them to the Messiah.

Two boys were preparing their wagon for the Easter parade at Sunday school when their pastor walked by. They had spent many hours making a beautiful cross complete with ribbons and bows. “Boys,” the pastor explained, “you’ve got it all wrong. The cross upon which Jesus died was ugly and despised but yours is beautiful.”

One of the boys looked to his pastor and said, “I thought you said Jesus never touched anything and left it the same.” When Jesus meets a life, a change takes place that only God can perform. Sometimes the change is very dramatic. A man who has been an alcoholic for years may lose his desire for drink the moment he is saved. For another, the change in his life may be slow and gradual, almost unnoticeable without careful observation.

DEFINITION OF CONVERSION

The human side of regeneration is conversion. Many people have different ideas about conversion. Fortunately, we are not bound to the ideas and opinions of others. The Bible describes the doctrine of conversion by written explanations of what we can expect and a detailed example of how people come to know God in the Scriptures.

The apostle Paul described the conversion experience of the Romans when he wrote, “Ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you”

(Rom. 6:17). Conversion does not involve learning a catechism or knowing the doctrine of Christ. It embraces the total person, which means conversion is related to all three powers of man: the intellect, the emotions, and the will. A person must know certain things to experience conversion, but a knowledge of these facts alone will not save him. Conversion also involves the emotions, but it is far more than an emotional experience. Conversion is not complete until an act of the will has taken place, but even an act of our will is not enough to save if it is done in ignorance or without a heart desire.

The intellect. The conversion of a man to Christ is different from a conversion to another religion or commercial product. Though many have tried, conversion cannot be passed off as a mere psychological phenomenon.

To be saved, a person must know the gospel. There is only one gospel (Gal. 1:9) but it contains two sides of the same truth. Just as a door has two sides, so the gospel is propositional and personal truth. The gospel is propositional truth which means it is a formula that is accurate. The gospel is the account of the death of Christ for our sins, his burial and resurrection from the dead on the third day (1 Cor. 15:1-4). Only Jesus could provide for us salvation. "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

A second aspect of this gospel is personal truth. When Paul came to Corinth to preach his gospel he "determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). The gospel is not complete in its presentation until it focuses attention on the Person of Christ. Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14, 15). If a person does not trust in Christ, that person is not saved. It is important that we know both the content (doctrine) and the Person (Jesus Christ) of the gospel to be converted.

Knowing the propositional truth of salvation is knowing God's plan of salvation. If one wishes to become a chess master, he must learn the rules of the game and discipline himself to play by them. If one wishes to be a Christian, he must follow God's plan. This is sometimes called the Roman Road of Salvation since the verses that are often used to lead a person to Christ are found in the Book of Romans.

The first step in this plan is to know your need. The Bible says, "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). This does not mean there is nothing good in man but rather that none of us is as righteous as God himself. God has a perfect standard of holiness required for entrance into heaven. Unfortunately, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). It makes little difference how good we are. We are not good enough. If a marathon runner attempts to set an Olympic record, it makes little difference if he misses by five seconds or five hours. He has missed the standard he had set for himself. Even if we were "almost perfect," we still fall short of God's holy standard of perfection.

The second step is to know the penalty. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). This refers to both physical and spiritual death. Physical death occurs upon the separation of the body and spirit of man (James 2:26). Spiritual death occurs when one is eternally separated from God. John wrote of a future point in time when "death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (Rev. 20:14).

A third step in God's plan of salvation is to know the provision. This provision is found in the gospel. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Because we could not pay the price for our sins, Jesus did. Today he provides salvation as a free gift to all who will take it (Rom. 6:23). Jesus provided what we could not provide for ourselves. That provision gives us the option to receive or reject God's gift of eternal life.

A person can know the above three steps in this plan and never be saved. He must personally respond. "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead thou shalt be saved" (Rom. 10:9), Jesus traveled through Israel and offered salvation to his own people, but he was rejected. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12). You must know how to respond to the gospel and respond to be saved.

The emotions. Many religious groups place too much emphasis on a person's emotions and create what is known as "psychological conversion" to their particular religious sect. In reaction to this, some conservative Christians have attempted to deny their emotions completely. Neither emphasis is correct. God made man complete with an emotional capacity. If kept in proper perspective, our emotions lead to a healthy conversion. The abuse of emotions by some radicals should not cause us to abandon that which is good. A person will be emotionally affected by his conversion by either a cause or an effect experience.

The apostle Paul rejoiced "not that ye were made sorry but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner.... For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (2 Cor. 7:9, 10). Paul recognized there were two kinds of emotional reactions to the gospel: "godly sorrow" and "sorrow of the world." There is a place for "godly sorrow" in our lives that leads to further spiritual insight. The "sorrow of the world" is remorse for getting caught, not sorrow for the act committed.

Sometimes God will allow a person to experience guilt so he can understand and appreciate forgiveness of sins. Often God must use our emotions to cause us to respond to the gospel. On other occasions, God will use our emotional reaction so he can better deal with us after salvation. When Philip preached the gospel in Samaria and many people were saved, the Bible records "there was great joy in that city" (Acts 8:8). The apostle Paul expected his converts to continue to respond emotionally to God. He told the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). It is all right to get excited about our relationship with Christ.

Each of us has a different way of expressing emotions depending upon age, sex, background, and a host of other unique experiences that make us who we are. Sometimes we tend to think the person who shouts and jumps for joy or a person who cries loudly is more emotionally involved in a situation than the person who sits apparently oblivious to what is happening around him. A person is not more or less saved depending upon the volume of his emotional outbursts, but when we are converted, it will affect our emotions.

The will. God created man with a will to choose to respond or reject the work of God in his life. In order to be converted, a person must respond. This does not mean we

save ourselves. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9). While "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9) and we do not earn our salvation, God does tell us to receive it (John 1:12).

Some churches baptize, teaching that baptism saves a person. But baptism should not be equated with salvation. Baptism could be defined as "salvation symbolized." When a Christian is baptized, he is illustrating a twofold symbol. First, it is a symbol of redemption, how Christ died for his sins, was buried, and on the third day rose again from the dead (Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 15:1-4). Second, baptism is a symbol of regeneration. The candidate being baptized is saying he has personally trusted Christ as Savior and a supernatural change has taken place in his life (Gal. 2:20).

THE WILL AND CONVERSION	
1. Trust in	Prov. 3: 5
2. Repent	Acts 2:38
3. Believe	Acts 16:31
4. Receive	John 1:12
5. Be born again	John 3:7
6. Call	Rom. 10:13
7. Confess	Rom. 10:9

THE BASIS OF REGENERATION AND CONVERSION

The instrument of salvation. The Bible plays a significant role in an individual's salvation. Just as a workman uses tools to get his job done, so God uses the Bible as a tool to deposit spiritual life into a new believer. We are "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever" (1 Pet. 1:23). The Bible convicts of sin (John 16:9-11), gives a new nature (2 Pet. 1:4), and becomes the basis of spiritual power to overcome sin (Ps. 119:9, 11). The Bible contains an interesting promise concerning its power. "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa. 55:11).

When we are seeking to reach the lost for Christ, we would do well to remember the power of the Word of God and use it. People are not saved because of intellectual arguments, but because the Holy Spirit uses the Scripture to point out needs and to convict of sin. We should learn to work with God in winning souls.

The agent of salvation. The Holy Spirit is the Person who grants eternal life to the repentant sinner. He is the divine workman who regenerates the individual. He works in the heart to convict the sinner of sin, then he draws the sinner to the Savior. Next the Holy Spirit effects the work that Paul describes, "Put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Col. 3:10). Paul described it further, "the Spirit of God dwell in you" (Rom. 8:9). After the Spirit is in our hearts, he witnesses our conversion. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16).

CONCLUSION

God is in the life-changing business. He takes the broken pieces of our lives and makes new vessels. Someone has said God takes the canvas of our life when the colors are running and blurring, then paints a masterpiece. As powerful as God is, he chooses to limit his power to what the Christian will allow him to do.

God could save everyone today, but he will not save anyone who will not let him do so. We need to come by faith and allow God to perform the work of regeneration in us. We then need to continue to cooperate with God as he perfects that change in us.