

Biblical Conversion and the Modern Church

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There was a time, not too long ago, when the phrase "conversion experience" was part and parcel of popular Christian vocabulary. Though this term may have fallen into disuse of late, the concept of some type of emotional, psychological or religious "experience" marking the initiation of the believer into a relationship with Jesus Christ, remains an important part of modern Evangelical theology. Terms such as "accepting Jesus Christ as my personal savior," "asking Christ into one's heart," other well-defined acts marking conversion, such as "going forward," by walking a church aisle, or "experiencing" the presence or the peace of God, are often used in connection with this discussion. There is much that is true in this popular understanding. And yet, there is a great deal that is false and confusing, and it would be very helpful to define what we mean by conversion, and deal with the biblical data on the subject.

In the Reformed tradition the idea of conversion is often broadly defined as the awakening of a person who is dead in sin to an awareness of the need to place faith in Jesus Christ, and to turn from sin and self to God in repentance. Thus conversion includes the exercise of faith and repentance. Conversion may be marked by a personal crisis in one's life, wherein one is dramatically converted almost instantaneously. Yet, on the other hand, conversion may also be the result of a gradual process over a long period of time. In the classical Reformed understanding regeneration, which is the sovereign act of God in supernaturally giving the new birth to his elect (John 3:3-8; Ephesians 2:5), is prior to conversion. Only those regenerated by God are thus converted through the subsequent act of believing and repenting. This means that conversion must be seen as a response to a prior work of God in the human heart, and a divinely aided one at that.

From the sinner's perspective, psychologically speaking, it really seems as though the sinner has been asleep, unaware, indifferent, if not altogether hostile to the things of God, until regenerated by God. At best God and his gospel made no difference to him. At worst the sinner hates God and opposes his kingdom at every turn. But now "awakened," after the new life is implanted within by the Holy Spirit, the sinner now becomes consciously aware of

his or her sin (Acts 2:37). This conviction of sin is usually brought about through the preaching of the Law (the Ten Commandments) and includes both the awareness of personal guilt for breaking God's law, and the awareness of the inability that one has to please God through one's own works or efforts (Romans 3:20). The individual becomes aware of the great fact that he or she is a sinner in desperate need of a savior. The Bible teaches that conversion may occur either simultaneously, as in the case of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1-19), or gradually as in the cases of Jeremiah, John the Baptist or Timothy. Thus biblical accounts of conversion "experiences" vary.

Another aspect of conversion is the doctrine of illumination. God the Holy Spirit, through the preaching, reading or teaching of the word of God, opens a person's mind and heart to understand what the Scriptures say about the human condition, and the need that the sinner has to act upon this awareness (Romans 10:14-17). Once regenerated and convicted of sin, God opens their minds to understand the truth of God and their hearts to now act upon what the mind knows to be true. That is, sinners at some point come to realize that they cannot save themselves, but instead must trust in Christ to save them. This is where the exercise of saving faith enters the picture. They now are compelled to believe or trust in the finished work of Christ as the object of their faith, rather than trust in their own efforts or righteousness to merit favor from God. They surrender to Jesus Christ through simple trust in his ability to save them from the wrath to come. They have been converted.

Closely related to this is the idea of repentance. Someone who places his or her trust and exercises saving faith in Christ will also repent of their sin. The Bible speaks of repentance as including a knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20), sorrow for offending the holy God (Psalm 51), and a desire to be cleansed from their moral pollution (II Corinthians 7:9-10). Thus someone who is regenerated will believe and repent, freely and gladly, since the new nature desires the things to which the old nature was oblivious or actively opposing. Repentance should be seen primarily as a fruit of faith, "and is wholly an inward act, and should not be confounded with the change of life

that proceeds from it." (1) In other words, repentance itself is a negative condition, a turning towards God and away from sin. Repentance is not merely ceasing from specific acts of sin.

Therefore, tremendous confusion results from several erroneous ideas now popular in American Evangelicalism. The first of these false ideas arises when the conversion experience itself is made the prerequisite, or the cause of regeneration. This raises serious logical problems. For if someone must be converted before he or she can be regenerate, we are left to conclude that infants cannot be saved. We know that this is not the case in Scripture, but this does not mean that conversion is not necessary in the case of adults. Since conversion is the God-given response which is produced by regeneration, all of those whom God regenerates in adulthood are subsequently converted. But as we have seen, conversions can and do vary, and those who do not know just exactly when it was that they first placed their trust in Jesus Christ, need not live under the tyranny of those who insist that unless one can tell the exact moment in time that they were "saved," that they can have no assurance that they are Christians. If someone has faith in Jesus Christ, he or she is saved regardless of when, or of how it happened. People have faith in Christ because God was pleased to give them faith through his gracious act of new birth.

Another point of confusion is a related one. Not all conversions can be made to fit a ready-made pattern. In the cases of those who have lived open lives of sin and rebellion against God, their conversion may, in fact, be dramatic, both externally, as seen in the dramatic outward change in their lives, and inwardly, in that their own psychological experience is one of great crisis and emotion. God deserves all the praise when such a person is converted. But it is a great error to insist upon a dramatic or emotional conversion experience as the norm for all Christians. Those who were raised in Christian homes, for example, and who have been taught the word of God from their youth (as in the case of Timothy), may have a gradual or even "mundane" conversion in which there is no observable external change, or noticeable internal crisis, or sensational experience. Many Christian believers may not even remember when it was that they were converted, since many such people have never known what it was not to believe in Jesus Christ. They may not know when, merely that they have been converted, through faith and repentance. It is easy to overlook them, but God

deserves all of the praise in this type of conversion as well! Thus conversions may vary from individual to individual.

The evidence of conversion, then, is not to be found in a person's having sought a "conversion experience." In biblical conversion, public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of God the Father is the ultimate test of genuine transformation. In conversion accounts in the New Testament, the public profession of faith in Christ was immediately followed by baptism. Yes, there should be a noticeable change in affections, and in performance. But using this as empirical "proof" of conversion is a dangerous practice. In the first place, there are many persons who appear outwardly godly, but are members of sects and cults, such as the Mormons, who may pass such outward tests with flying colors. Yet people who reject the true gospel cannot be converted. No, good works and a changed life are fruits of faith, and we must remember that in many cases, true piety remains deliberately private and is self-consciously not self-seeking. Thus a public profession of faith, followed by baptism, rather than demonstrable outward performance, has been historically taken as the sign that conversion has occurred. Failure to understand this has had a profound consequence for many evangelicals.

Since the American church has lost the doctrinal foundation for conversion in the prior work of God in regeneration, conversion has become increasingly seen as itself effecting regeneration. That is, it is commonly understood that I am regenerated through my own act of faith or repentance. Hence a dramatic conversion experience is seen as the sure-fire mark that someone has become a Christian. Such a theological perspective has led to all kinds of manipulation in much of modern evangelism, since the goal of the evangelist is now to produce the conversion "experience" itself rather than preach a pure gospel in which the word of God is faithfully proclaimed, and through which God is pleaded of call his people to faith. Thus many in the modern church now find psychological and emotional manipulation an attractive means to an end. If someone can be made to feel emotional enough, or guilty enough, or embarrassed enough, they can be manipulated to cry, to walk an aisle, and to meet with a counselor after the service. It is far easier to take the safer course and evangelize by means of undulating music, witty and entertaining oratory, complete with image-oriented dramatic pageantry,

rather than confront an entire culture with the life giving message of the gospel.

What we must recover, if we are going to understand conversion from a biblical sense, is that we cannot produce conversion through any means! God, however, has promised to produce multitudes of conversions through the proper means of the simple proclamation of the gospel, and any approach which attempts to short-circuit this divinely ordained process must be seen to miss the biblical mark by a wide margin. Until we go back and recover the

biblical understanding of conversion, the easier way will always win out. After all, it is far easier to tell someone what they want to hear, instead of confronting them with the truth. It is certainly much easier to entertain the television generation rather than to instruct them in the deeper truths of the faith. It is far easier to get people to raise their hand in a darkened room with every head bowed and every eye closed than it is to get them to submit to the waters of baptism in front of an entire congregation. But such is modern America.

1 [Back] Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 487.

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