

Chapter XX: Conversion: Repentance and Faith

When the change wrought in regeneration begins to manifest itself in the conscious life, we speak of conversion.

1. Conversion in General

The Bible does not always speak of conversion in the same sense. The conversion we have in mind here may be defined as that act of God whereby He causes the regenerated, in their conscious life, to turn to Him in faith and repentance. From this definition it already appears that God is the author of conversion. This is clearly taught in Scripture, Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25. The new life of regeneration does not of itself issue in a conscious change of life, but only through a special operation of the Holy Spirit, John 6:44; Phil. 2:13. But while in regeneration God only works and man is passive, in conversion man is called upon to co-operate, Isa. 55:7; Jer. 18:11; Acts 2:38; 17:30. But even so man can only work with the power which God imparts to him. Like regeneration conversion too consists in a momentary change, and is not a process like sanctification; but in distinction from regeneration it is a change in the conscious rather than in the unconscious life of man. While conversion is necessary in the case of all adults, Ezek. 33:11; Matt. 18:3, it need not appear in the life of each one of them as a sharply marked crisis. The Bible mentions instances of conversion, such as Naaman, 2 Kings 5:15; Manasseh, 2 Chron. 33:12, 13; Zacchaeus, Luke 19:8, 9; the eunuch, Acts 8:80 ff.; Cornelius, Acts 10:44 ff.; Paul, Acts 9:5 ff.; Lydia, Acts 16:14, and so on. Besides this it also speaks of a national conversion, as in Jonah 3:10, a temporary conversion, which includes no change of heart, Matt. 13:20, 21; 1 Tim. 1:19, 20; 2 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 6:4-6, and a repeated conversion, Luke 22:32; Rev. 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:8, 19. This is not a repetition of conversion in the strict sense of the word, which does not admit of repetition, but a revived activity of the new life after it has suffered eclipse. Conversion comprises two elements, the one negative and the other positive, namely repentance and faith, which call for separate discussion.

2. Repentance, the Negative Element of Conversion

Repentance looks to the past, and may be defined as that change wrought in the conscious life of the sinner by which he turns away from sin. It includes three elements, namely, (a) an intellectual element, in which the past life is viewed as a life of sin, involving personal guilt, defilement, and helplessness; (b) an emotional element, a sense of sorrow for sin as committed against a holy and just God; and (c) an element of the will, consisting in a change of purpose, an inward turning from sin and a disposition to seek pardon and cleansing. Rom. 3:20; 2 Cor. 7:9, 10; Rom. 2:4. It is wrought in man primarily by the law of God. Roman Catholics have an external conception of repentance. According to them it comprises a sorrow, not for inborn sin, but for personal transgressions, which may merely result from the fear of eternal punishment; a confession made to the priest, who can forgive sin; and a measure of satisfaction by external deeds of penance, such as fastings, scourgings, pilgrimages, and so on. The Bible, on the other hand, views repentance wholly as an inward act, an act of real sorrow on account of sin, and does not confuse this with the change of life in which it results.

3. Faith, the Positive Element of Conversion

In distinction from repentance, faith has a forward look.

a. Different kinds of faith. The Bible does not always speak of faith in the same sense. It refers to a historical faith, consisting in an intellectual acceptance of the truth of Scripture without any real moral or spiritual response. Such a faith does not take the truth seriously and shows no real interest in it. Acts 26:27, 28; Jas. 2:19. It also speaks of a temporal faith, which embraces the truths of religion with some promptings of conscience and a stirring of the affections, but is not rooted in a regenerated heart. It is called temporal faith, Matt. 13:20, 21, because it has no abiding character and fails to maintain itself in days of trial and persecution. Cf. also Heb. 6:4-6; 1 Tim. 1:19, 20; 1 John 2:19. Moreover, it makes mention of a miraculous faith, that is a person's conviction that a miracle will be performed by him or in his behalf. Matt. 8:11-13; 17:20; Mark 16:17, 18; John 11:22, 40; Acts 14:9. This faith may or may not be accompanied with saving faith. Finally, it not only names, but stresses the necessity of, saving faith. This has its seat in

the heart and is rooted in the regenerated life. Its seed is implanted in regeneration and gradually blossoms into an active faith. It may be defined as a positive conation, wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, as to the truth of the gospel, and a hearty reliance on the promises of God in Christ.

b. The elements of faith. We distinguish three elements in true saving faith. (1) An intellectual element. There is a positive recognition of the truth revealed in the Word of God, a spiritual insight which finds response in the heart of the sinner. It is an absolutely certain knowledge, based on the promises of God. While it need not be comprehensive, it should be sufficient to give the believer some idea of the fundamental truths of the gospel. (2) An emotional element (assent). This is not mentioned separately by the Heidelberg Catechism, because it is virtually included in the knowledge of saving faith. It is characteristic of this knowledge that it carries with it a strong conviction of the importance of its object, and this is assent. The truth grips the soul. (3) An element of the will (trust). This is the crowning element of saving faith. It is a personal trust in Christ as Savior and Lord, which includes a surrender of the soul as guilty and defiled to Christ, and a reliance on Him as the source of pardon and spiritual life. In the last analysis the object of saving faith is Jesus Christ and the promise of salvation in Him. John 3:16, 18, 36; 6:40; Acts 10:43; Rom. 3:22; Gal. 2:16. This faith is not of human origin, but is a gift of God, 1 Cor. 12:8, 9; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 2:8. But its exercise is a human activity, to which the children of God are repeatedly exhorted, Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 2:5; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:5; 6:11.

c. The assurance of faith. Methodists maintain that he who believes is at once sure that he is a child of God, but that this does not mean that he is also certain of ultimate salvation, since he may fall from grace. The correct view is that true faith including, as it does, trust in God, naturally carries with it a sense of safety and security, though this may vary in degree. This assurance is not the permanent conscious possession of the believer, He does not ever live the full-orbed life of faith, and as a result is not always conscious of his spiritual riches. He may be swayed by doubts and uncertainties, and is therefore urged to cultivate assurance, 2 Cor. 13:5; Heb. 6:11; 2 Pet. 1:10; 1 John 3:19. It can be cultivated by prayer, by meditating on the promises of God, and by the development of a truly Christian life.

To memorize. Passages showing:

a. That God is the author of conversion:

Acts 11:18. "And when they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life."

2 Tim. 2:25. "In meekness correcting them that oppose themselves; if peradventure God may give them repentance unto the knowledge of the truth."

b. That man co-operates in conversion:

Isa. 55:7. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto Jehovah, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, and He will abundantly pardon."

Acts 17:30. "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now He commands men that they should all everywhere repent."

c. The necessity of conversion:

Ezek. 33:11. "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord Jehovah, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, house of Israel?"

Matt. 18:3. "Verily I say unto you, Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven."

d. Historical faith:

Acts 26:27, 28. "King Agrippa, believe thou the prophets? I know that thou believe. And Agrippa said unto Paul, With but little persuasion thou wouldest fain make me a Christian."

Jas. 2:19. "Thou believe that God is one; thou doest well; the demons also believe, and shudder."

e. temporal faith:

Matt. 13:20, 21. "And he that was sown upon the rocky places, this is he that hears the word, and straightway with joy receives it; yet hath he not root in himself, but endures for a while; and when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, straightway he stumbles."

1 John 2:19. "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they all are not of us."

f. Miraculous faith:

Matt. 17:20b. "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place: and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you."

Acts 14:9, 10. "The same heard Paul speaking: who fastening his eyes upon him, and seeing that he had faith to be made whole, said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped up and walked."

g. Christ as the object of easing faith:

John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life."

John 6:40. "For this is the will of my Father, that every one that beholds the Son, and believes on Him, should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

h. The necessity of cultivating assurance:

Heb. 6:11. "And we desire that each one of you may show the same diligence unto the fullness of hope even to the end."

2 Pet. 1:10. "Wherefore, brethren, give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure."

For Further Study:

- a. What kind of repentance is mentioned in Matt. 27:3; 2 Cor. 7:10b.?
- b. Can you name biblical persons in whose lives conversion in the sense of an outstanding crisis could hardly be expected? Cf. Jer. 1:4; Luke 1:5; 2 Tim. 3:16.
- c. Can you name some of the great words of assurance found in the Bible? Cf. Heb. 3:17, 18; 2 Cor. 4:16 — 5:1; 2 Tim. 1:12.

Questions for Review:

1. In how many different senses does the Bible speak of conversion?
2. How do temporary and repeated conversion differ?
3. What is true conversions? What elements does it include?
4. What elements are included in repentance?
5. How do the Roman Catholics conceive of repentance?
6. How does conversion differ from regeneration?
7. Who is the author of conversion? Does man co-operate in it?
8. Is conversion as a sharp crisis always necessary?
9. Of how many different kinds of faith does the Bible speak?
10. What is characteristic of historical, temporal, and miraculous faith?
11. How does temporal faith differ from saving faith?
12. What elements are included in faith? How much knowledge is needed?
13. What is the crowning element of saving faith?

14. Who is the object of saving faith?

15. Does the Christian always have the assurance of salvation?

16. How can he cultivate this assurance?