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THE EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION AS VIEWED FROM THE STANDPOINT OF
CONVERSION AND REGENERATION

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The experience of conversion stands as the gateway to the realization of salvation in the full significance of that Biblical concept. Our Lord Himself said, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). Thus the authority of Christ Himself establishes the imperative need for conversion.

These words of Christ were spoken by Him upon His return with His disciples to Capernaum from Caesarea Philippi. On the way home the disciples had been arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest in the kingdom. In the house they presented their problem to Jesus. In response to their question, Jesus called a little child, took him in His arms, and then spoke these words. Instead of answering their question about position in the kingdom, Jesus pointed to conversion as essential to entry into the kingdom. The only way to be saved and to enter into the kingdom is to be converted. The new birth is indispensable for salvation and Christian living.

I. The MEANING of Conversion

We usually employ the word "conversion" to cover all that is included in the beginning of the Christian life. In popular usage the terms "conversion" and "regeneration" are regarded as practically synonymous. But a fuller understanding of the subject demands a consideration of their precise significance and differences.

1. A study in terms. Our English word "conversion" means the act of turning or changing from one condition or attitude to another. It is used both of things and persons. Thus we speak of something being converted when its structure or use is changed; as water converted into ice, a car converted into a truck, etc. We speak of a person being converted to a new viewpoint or manner of life.

The noun "conversion" occurs only once in our English Bibles (Acts 15:3). The Greek word epistrophē signifies a turning about, a conversion. The compound verb epistrephō occurs 39 times in the received Greek text of the New Testament (in the Nestle Greek text the compound form occurs only 35 times). In our King James Version it is translated "converted" 8 times (Matt. 13:15; Mark 4:12; Luke 22:32; John 12:40; Acts 3:19; 28:27; James 5:19, 20); "turn" 23 times; "return" 6 times; "go" once; and "came again" once. The simple form of the verb, strephō, occurs 18 times (21 times in the Nestle text) and is translated "converted" once (Matt. 18:3) and "turn" in the other places.

The basic meaning of the word is thus seen to be that of a turning around. It is often used in a physical sense of a person turning around (as Matt. 9:22; Mark 5:30; 8:33; John 21:20; Acts 16:18, etc.). It is also used in a moral or spiritual sense of an individual turning about (Matt. 13:15; Luke 1:16-17; Acts 9:35, etc.). When we speak of Christian conversion we are using it in the sense of a spiritual turning of the soul. Conversion then denotes that voluntary act of turning by which a man, in obedience to the divine summons, turns from sin and unto God.

The basic significance of the term implies that the one converted has been going in the wrong direction and testifies to the basic perversion of human nature. Our previous life may have been directed to various wrong objects. With the Thessalonian converts it had been their idols (1 Thess. 1:9). With the prodigal son it was his selfish pursuit of personal independence and pleasure (Luke 15:13-19). With Saul of Tarsus it was a wrong attitude and course of action in an attempted service of God in ignorance (Acts 26:9). The universal fact of human sinfulness has set us all on a road leading away from God and makes conversion necessary.

The word "regeneration" occurs only twice in the Bible (Matt. 19:28; Titus 3:5). However the concept is common under other terms, such as "born again," "a new heart," "a new creature," etc. In Matthew 19:28 Jesus uses the word "regeneration" to denote "the earth new birth, when the present distressing circumstances will pass away and new conditions will prevail, at the coming of the Son of man to reign in righteousness over all this lower creation."¹ In Titus 3:5 the reference is to the work that takes place in the individual believer when he is born again through faith in Christ. The Greek word paliggenesia is a compound form from palin and genesis and means "a new birth, renewal, regeneration." Regeneration carries the thought of the impartation of new life, hence of necessity is a divine act. As Strong says, "Regeneration, or the new birth, is the divine side of that change of heart which, viewed from the human side, we call conversion."²

Regeneration testifies to the fact that the natural man is dead in sin and must have a new life imparted to him. Hence, as William Evans points out, "It is not the old nature altered, reformed, or re-invigorated, but a new birth from above. This is the teaching of such passages as John 3:3-7; 5:21; Eph. 2:1, 10; 2 Cor. 5:17."³

2. The human and the divine. In the experience of Christian conversion the human and the divine element are both present. Regeneration is the work of God; we cannot produce the new birth by any act or attitude of our own. Only God can impart new life to the soul; it is altogether and absolutely the work of God. "Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). Hence in this phase of the conversion experience the convert is passive. We do not produce our second birth any more than we did our first birth. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. (John 3:5).

There is also a human side to the work of regeneration. The human and the divine, in the actual experience of conversion, do not operate in isolation. While we can never produce the new birth, we are yet responsible to meet the conditions for the work of regeneration. The operation of the human and the divine in regeneration are brought together in John 1:12-13. "But as many as received him--" that is the human side; while "were born..... of God" presents the divine side. Strong clearly states these two aspects as follows:

The Scriptures recognize the voluntary activity of the human soul in this change as distinctly as they recognize the causative agency of God. While God turns men to himself (Psa. 85:4; Song 1:4; Jer. 31:18; Lam. 5:21), men are exhorted to turn themselves to God (Prov. 1:23; Is. 31:6; 59:20; Ez. 14:6; 18:32; 33:9, 11; Joel 2:12-14). While God is represented as the author of the new heart and the new spirit (Ps. 51:10; Ez. 11:19; 36:26), men are comanded to make for themselves a new heart and a new spirit (Ez. 18:31; 2 Cor. 7:1; cf. Phil. 2:12, 13; Eph. 5:14).⁴

While we clearly recognize and accept the human factor in conversion, we must not forget the truth spoken by our Lord when He said, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). These solemn words

1. H. A. Ironside, Great Words of the Gospel, (1944), Moody Press, p. 10.
2. Augustus Hopkins Strong, Systematic Theology, (1946 reprint, three volumes in one), The Judson Press, p. 809.
3. William Evans, The Great Doctrines of the Bible, (1912), Bible Institute Colportage Assoc., p. 152.
4. Augustus Hopkins Strong, ibid., p. 829.

warn us against any thought that a man can become a Christian at any time by his own decision and initiative apart from the drawing work of the Holy Spirit.

The spirit of God is faithful in His convicting work with sinners (John 16: 8-11), but the sinner must be willing to turn to God if he is to experience regeneration. The sinner is passive in relation to the divine impartation of the new nature but he must be active in voluntarily turning from sin and accepting the offer of God in Christ. As Finney said, "Neither God, nor any other being, can regenerate him, if he will not turn."⁵ Thus Jesus sadly told the Jews, "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life" (John 5:40).

It is clear that there is a difference between conversion and regeneration, that the human and the divine element are both present in the experience of salvation. But any attempt rigidly to separate them in actual experience is fraught with peril. An overemphasis upon the divine to the exclusion of human responsibility by hyper-Calvanism often had disastrous consequences. This was the error that Finney opposed so strenuously in his day.⁶ It was often held that all the sinner could do was to wait until God regenerated him, for until God worked regeneration in him all he could possibly do was to oppose God. People under conviction of sin were often told simply to go home and wait until God regenerated them, and consequently many of them were never saved. Finney rightly fought this teaching and held that man had the power to turn, he must will to turn to God as God commanded him to do, and that when he did so God would regenerate him.

It seems to us that there is the danger today of going to the opposite extreme in placing our emphasis upon the human decision to receive Christ to the neglect of a necessary stress upon the need for regeneration. Unless care is taken, the modern evangelistic emphasis upon "decisions for Christ" may obscure the divine factor and produce conversions that do not result in salvation. It is possible to experience a turning or conversion purely on a human level, induced by psychological means alone, which is not Christian conversion. Such conversions do occur in non-Christian religions, where converts are made and life is completely changed, but it is not a saving change.

Man is responsible to obey the divine command to repent from sin and accept Christ (Acts 17:30; 2 Cor. 5:20), and must never simply passively wait for God to work regeneration in him. Yet the turning of man from sin must be recognized as the result of the interpenetrating and quickening work of the Spirit of God in the human heart. But in turning to Christ the convert is conscious of the turning as a matter of his own volition. His faith in Christ is the condition for the divine work of regeneration. But the two aspects of conversion are not a matter of chronological succession. "We are not to think of an interval of time between our act in response to God and God's act in changing us. There is no interval of time between. The two sides of the relation are completed at one and the same time. They are contemporaneous events in the soul's life."⁷

II. The MANNER of Conversion

The question has often been raised as to whether conversion is an act or a process, whether it is gradual or instantaneous. When we remember the human as well as the divine element in conversion, the answer is that it may be viewed as either. The divine impartation of a new nature in regeneration is an instantaneous act, not a gradual process. But the preparatory work of conviction and enlightenment may be and generally is a gradual process. "Influences leading to the result

⁵ Charles G. Finney, Lectures on Systematic Theology, (1946 reprint), Colporter Kemp, Whittier, Calif., p. 290.

⁶ Charles G. Finney, ibid., pp. 282-300.

⁷ Edgar Young Mullins, The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression. (1932 reprint), Sunday School Board of S. B. C., p. 384.

ay come from various sources and continue through many years..... God's grace seeks an long before man responds to it. But the moment comes when the will submits and he moral bent of the nature is changed."⁸ "But as many as received him, to them ave he power to become the sons of God" (John 1:12). The aorist tenses in the riginal point to a definite act of receiving on the part of man as well as a definite ct on the part of God.

The experiences of individuals in being saved vary greatly. No two persons eed expect exactly the same experience. God works with each according to his nature, isposition, and training. The conversion of a child may be very simple, calm ex-erience, while the conversion of a hardened sinner may be a veritable cataclysm. t is possible for a child to be saved so young that in later years the time and lace cannot be remembered. Thus J. Wilbur Chapman testified, "I do not know the ime when I was converted. I remember when I joined the Church, but I had been Christian long before."⁹ In such cases the fruits of regeneration are the con-clusive evidence of the fact itself. On the other hand, a study of the adult con-versions recorded in Scripture, especially the book of Acts, gives hardly an instance f other than instantaneous conversions, associated with a definite time and place.

Unless care is taken, the recounting of a spectacular conversion may create ifficulty for some young seeker. If the emphasis is placed upon the nature of the xperience itself, rather than upon the fact of the personal acceptance of Christ, uch young souls may be confused by expecting a certain type of experience and be isappointed and troubled when God does not deal with them in that way. The vital oint in a conversion testimony should be not the dramatic experience of the individual ut the fact of a personal union with Christ through faith in Him. "If any man be n Christ, he is a new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17).

III. The MEANS of Conversion

Scripture clearly teaches the employment of means in the work of conversion. aried views on the matter make it necessary to consider the means in conversion oth negatively and positively.

1. The negative consideration. Regeneration is not accomplished through baptism, as is sometimes taught. To hold that baptism itself is the act which re-generates (Catholic view) or that it is the condition under which regeneration is accomplished (Disciples view) leads us to the striking incongruity that a spiritual change is wrought through a physical, ritualistic means. If the ritual of baptism s the means of, or is essential to regeneration, it is strikingly strange that the pistle Paul, the great missionary, never intimates that fact. "Never once, in all is discussions of the way of salvation, does Paul intimate that the new creation is effected by a ritual observance. It is always and everywhere regarded and treated as a spiritual experience wrought by the Spirit of God."¹⁰ In fact Paul explicitly denies the value of ritual for regeneration. "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Gal. 6:15). In 1 Cor-inthians 4:15 Paul reminds the Corinthians, "In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel," yet in 1:14 he thanks God that he baptized none of them save Crispus and Gaius. Could he thus speak of baptism if it had been the means through hich they had been begotten again?

This teaching is based primarily on John 3:5 - "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit." Many Bible teachers hold that, following the analogy of the teaching of Scripture as a whole, water in John 3:5 must be understood figuratively

8. Edgar Young Mullins, Ibid., p. 382

9. J. Wilbur Chapman. "Conversion," p. 12 (Tract by Bible Institute Colportage Ass'n.)

10. George W. Lasher, "Regeneration--Conversion--Reformation," The Fundamentals,

A Testimony to the Truth, (no date), Testimony Publishing Co., Vol. X p. 34.

as meaning the cleansing power of the Word of God. This view is in agreement with the tenor of Scripture and is quite probable. But it may be questioned if Nicodemus, with his ritualistic background, would thus have understood the words of Christ. Other expositors, like J. W. Shepard¹¹, think that by the water Jesus has reference to the baptism of John with its demands for repentance and confession. Such an implication would be quite intelligible to Nicodemus. (Christian baptism had not yet been instituted and the passage does not speak of Christian baptism at all). Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must enter the kingdom through the door of personal repentance and confession and the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit, to which John had made reference in his preaching. Thus understood, the passage makes reference to the two aspects in conversion. The "water" speaks of the human responsibility to submit to the demands of God, while "of the Spirit" makes explicit mention of the divine aspect in regeneration. We accept this interpretation as most probable.

2. The positive consideration. The Holy Spirit is the personal agent in regeneration (John 3:5; Titus 3:5) and employs different means and influences for the work.

The Spirit works in regeneration through the Word of God. "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth" (James 1:18). "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). The Word of God, interpreted and vitalized by the Spirit, is a very effective agent of conversion. Repeatedly accounts appear where individuals and even whole villages have been converted through the simple reading of the Bible. Although a knowledge of the Bible in itself does not save, it is yet of vital importance in leading to salvation. "That from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

The Holy Spirit likewise uses providences in cooperation with the Word to lead men to salvation. Mercies experienced, as well as instances of judgment, have not infrequently been used to arrest people and turn them to faith in Christ.

Personal influence is also an important means used by the Spirit in leading people to yield to Christ. We are all aware of the great importance of the power of human personality in leading people to accept Christ. The preacher, evangelist, or missionary, proclaiming the Word, is generally the human agent in conversion. Thus Paul reminds the Corinthians, "In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel" (1 Cor. 4:15). Happy are those parents who are thus instrumental in leading their children to Christ. Individual believers by their admonitions may be the means of bringing about this change in sinners (James 5:19-20).

Scripture and church history likewise proclaim the fact that the prayers of believers are a highly important means used by the Spirit in conversion. In 1 Timothy 2:1-4 Paul teaches us that we are to pray for all men because it is God's will that all men might be saved. Underlying all great revivals have been the prayers of God's people.

The experience of conversion, wherein the sinner repents of his sins and in faith turns to God and through the operation of the Spirit is made a new creature, stands at the beginning of the Christian life. Yet in another sense, conversion is not limited to the beginning of the Christian life. From the fact that the term "conversion" simply means "a turning," every turning from sin in the Christian life may be in a subordinate sense, be designated a conversion. Thus Jesus said to Peter during the night before the crucifixion, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:32). These subsequent turnings from sin in the Christian life are but the evidence of the reality of the impartation of a new governing nature in the believer at regeneration. Yet theological usage rightly tends to restrict the word conversion to that first turning from sin to God and employs other terms to designate these subsequent turnings from sin in the life of the believer.

11. J. W. Shepard, The Christ of the Gospels, (1954 reprint), Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., p. 101.

SUPPLEMENT, BY THE FINDINGS COMMITTEE, ON THE PAPER

" THE EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION AS VIEWED FROM THE STANDPOINT OF
CONVERSION AND REGENERATION "

NOTE 1 - In the introductory paragraph, after the quotation from Matt. 18:3, add the following quotation and statement.

Christ also said, "Verily, verily I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Thus the authority of Christ Himself establishes the imperative need for the conversion-regeneration experience.

NOTE 2 - After the analysis of the term "conversion" add the following supplementary note at the bottom of page 11.

According to Scriptural teaching, there are two constituent elements in the conversion experience: repentance and faith. The first expresses the sinner's turning away from sin; the second, his turning unto Christ. The constant emphasis on the need for repentance in the teachings of Christ and the Apostles indicates its importance as the first step in the appropriation of God's saving grace. A genuine saving faith is inseparably connected with true repentance. In describing his ministry of evangelism to the Ephesian elders, the Apostle Paul refers to these two aspects of his gospel message in these words: "Testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 20:21).

NOTE 3 - Following the analysis of the term regeneration, page 12, this note should be added after the second paragraph.

The new birth constitutes only the beginning, and not the consummation or perfection of the new life which God through the Holy Spirit has implanted in the believer. Through the proper use of the means of grace (Acts 2:42, etc.) and by constant yielding to the Holy Spirit, the new life is to be progressively realized in the character and life of the believer. This process of growth and sanctification finds its completion and consummation at the Second Coming of Christ, when "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

NOTE 4 - (To be inserted at the end of the paper.)

In any analysis of the "Means of Conversion" it is of vital importance to make a clear distinction between primary and secondary or subordinate means God uses in conversion. The Holy Spirit is the agent; the Word of God is the true and indispensable means. The influence of Christian testimony, the prayers of God's people, the impact of providential events, etc. are means in a secondary sense only. The latter may probably be better designated as the instrumentality by which the gospel is made effective in the salvation experience.