

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Conversion

“For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.” — 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Introduction

According to sociologists, “conversion” refers to any act of changing belief systems. It is what happens whenever one repudiates formerly held views and embraces new ones. A “convert” is a “proselyte”—one who has left his previous religion (or lack thereof) and joined a different one. The making of converts is called “proselytism.”

To some extent, the definition is accurate. Conversion does represent a departure from some system of influential beliefs and a new devotion to a different one. Even the term “proselyte” is a Greek term (προσήλυτος, *prosēlytos*) used in New Testament. Jesus uses the word to describe those who became disciples of the religious leaders of Israel: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Matt 23:15). Luke uses it to describe those Gentiles who *left* their polytheistic worldviews and *embraced* the God of Israel as the One true God (see Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43).

But conversion—defined biblically—is more than a mere *transfer* of membership or participation from one religion to another. True biblical conversion is the dramatic consequence of supernatural regeneration. In the multifaceted plan of salvation, spanning from eternity past to eternity future, it is that component which involves—for the first time in salvation’s outworking—the full conscious participation of the redeemed sinner.

“Conversion is both the work of God and the work of man. God must convert us, and yet we must turn to him; both are true. We should not jettison either side of the paradox. The preacher therefore must earnestly and fervently urge his hearers to be converted, trusting that God will enable them to do so.”

—Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 115

A. Key Terms and Definitions

- 1. Conversion.** Wayne Grudem defines conversion as “our willing response to the gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation” (*Systematic Theology*, 709). With a little more explanation, Millard Erickson defines it as “a single entity that has two distinguishable but inseparable aspects: repentance and faith. Repentance is the unbeliever’s turning away from sin, and faith is his or her turning to Christ. They are, respectively, the negative and positive aspect of the same occurrence” (*Christian Theology*, 946). MacArthur and Mayhue (*Biblical Doctrine*, 590) provide an even fuller explanation:

Key idea:
The exercise of repentance and faith in response to the gospel call.

As God shines the light of regeneration into the sinner’s heart, he opens a man’s spiritual eyes so that he can see the bankruptcy of sin and the worthiness of Christ (Acts 26:18; 2 Cor 4:6), who is perfectly suited to forgive our sins and provide the righteousness we need for eternal life. Finally furnished with the ability to perceive reality as it is, the newborn soul necessarily and immediately turns away in revulsion from sin and eagerly turns to embrace Christ.

The key New Testament term used to describe conversion is the term ἐπιστρέφω (*epistrephō*), which means “to change one’s mind or course of action,” “to turn back/return,” or “to turn around.” It does not allow conversion to be understood merely as *addition, modification, improvement, adaptation, or enlightenment*. Rather, it communicates the two-fold idea of **repudiation and adherence**. It is a **change of spiritual orientation** that recognizes that one’s current direction is fundamentally futile and reproachable and that a different direction is irresistibly compelling and inherently superior. One of the most descriptive texts is found in 1 Thessalonians:



- **1 Thessalonians 1:9-10** – “For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.”

Of the Thessalonian believers’ conversions commentator Leon Morris (*Thessalonians*, 53) writes,

Becoming a Christian involves a very definite break with non-Christian habits. Whatever the believers’ previous background, there must always be a turning from idols of some sort. The act of conversion involves a change of direction of the will. This is a decisive happening, a reorientation of the whole life. . . . There was no attempt to find a place for Christ in the polytheistic milieu. Such an idea was preposterous. No matter how greatly their habitual practices had to be changed, the Christians of the first century saw that there could be no place for an idol alongside Christ.

The term was not used only to describe the conversion of pagans to Christianity, as if only the Gentiles needed such conversion. A survey of the use of the term ἐπιστρέφω (*epistrephō*) shows that it was used to refer to the conversion to Christ of both Jews and Greeks. For example: **2 Corinthians 3:16; Acts 3:19; 11:21; 14:15.**

B. Essential Characteristics

1. Conversion is the effect of regeneration. It is *regeneration*—the supernatural transformation that takes place at the core of our being—that causes *conversion*, not *conversion*—the expression of repentance and faith—that causes *regeneration*.

- **Acts 16:14** – “and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” The “opening” of the heart is attributed to God, and its effect is described as the ability “to respond” to the gospel.

This assertion recognizes conversion to be the product of a supernatural work of God, directly and efficaciously prompted by Him through regeneration. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains it well: “**Conversion is the first exercise of the new nature in ceasing from old forms of life and starting a new life. It is the first action of the regenerate soul in moving from something to something.**”

2. Conversion includes both repentance and faith. These two components are so closely intertwined that they are often expressed in the same context, being used almost interchangeably. Yet they are different concepts and must still be distinguished. Their relationship to each other can be illustrated by **the two sides of a coin**—you can never have one without the other. Ultimately, both are gifts of God. (Repentance and faith will each will be treated in detail in the next two segments of the series.)

Arthur Pink (“Fourfold Salvation”) provides an excellent definition of these two elements in conversion:

Repentance is the hand releasing those filthy objects it had previously clung to so tenaciously. Faith is extending an empty hand to God to receive His gift of grace. Repentance is a godly sorrow for sin. Faith is receiving a sinner’s Savior. Repentance is revulsion of the filth and pollution of sin. Faith is a seeking of cleansing therefrom. Repentance is the sinner covering his mouth and crying, “Unclean, unclean!” Faith is the leper coming to Christ and saying, “Lord, if You will, You can make me clean.”

3. Conversion has no fixed pattern. The way in which regeneration effects conversion in a sinner is unique to each individual.

- Consider these “conversions” in the Old Testament: *Naaman* – 2 Kings 5:15; *Manasseh* – 2 Chronicles 33:12-13; *Nebuchadnezzar* – Daniel 4:34-37; *the inhabitants of Nineveh* – Jonah 3:5-10.
- Consider these “conversions” in the New Testament: *Zacchaeus* – Luke 19:8-10; *the 3000 on the day of Pentecost* – Acts 2:40-41; *Paul* – Acts 9:1-19; *Cornelius* – Acts 10:44-48; *Lydia* – Acts 16:13-14; *the Philippian jailer* – Acts 16:25-34.

Regarding this absence of a fixed pattern, Hoekema (*Saved by Grace*, 120) writes,

To set up the same pattern for everyone is highly dangerous and contrary to Scripture. What is most important about a conversion is not the way in which it occurs, or even the time at which it occurs, but its genuineness. If one is going in the wrong direction, it is immaterial whether he or she now makes a U-turn or goes around several blocks; the thing that matters is whether in the end he or she is going in the right direction.

The unique details of each conversion account testify to the marvelous operation of sovereign grace. God does not force a sinner to convert. Though the effect of regeneration is irresistible, its operation is so compelling and persuasive that the sinner willingly converts. God condescends to each elect individual to draw him or her to Himself according to his or her unique personality and circumstances.

4. Conversion foreshadows a way of life. As 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 indicate, the “turning from/turning to” represents a one-time, pivotal moment in the life of the convert. He or she leaves behind sin, Satan, and self-righteousness to embrace the one true and living God through His Son Jesus Christ—once and for all.

However, the turning does not end there. As the new life instilled by regeneration continues to influence all areas of a person’s life, he or she continues to make many new “turns” as a new pattern of living—turning from the practice of specific sins that still remain (a process called “mortification”) to the practice of new virtues consistent with the example of Jesus Christ (a process called “vivification”). These more practical “turns” that the believer experiences in the Christian are reflected in the **“put off/put on” terminology of the New Testament**. To “put off” is to turn away; to “put on” is to turn to. Indeed, this “put off/put on” experience is a one-time event for the believer (see **Colossians 3:9-10**). In other sense, this “put off/put on” action continues (see **Romans 13:12; James 1:21; 1 Peter 2:1-2**).

In fact, sometimes believers can even undergo a significant “post-conversion turn” after falling into egregious sin and turning back—at a decisive moment—to the pursuit of Christ likeness. This is not a new salvation experience (salvation—if truly experienced—is never lost), but it is a monumental turning nonetheless.

- David in Psalm 51; Peter in Luke 22:31-32; the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2:5; etc.

5. Conversion serves as an important test for assurance. Though it is caused unilaterally (monergistically) by God through the act of regeneration, conversion nonetheless *is the experience of the believer*. The one who is regenerated is the one who turns—*consciously, willingly, actively*.

Consequently, because it is *felt* by the believer, a conversion experience becomes an important test—though not the only one and not one to be used in isolation—for the assurance of salvation. To determine whether one is indeed “born of God,” one can and must look for the *first effect* produced by that regeneration—the conversion experience. Even though a genuine believer may not recall the precise moment or day when this conversion happened, he or she should recall a definitive renunciation of sin, the world, or self-righteousness, and a definitive embrace of God in Christ Jesus.

6. Conversion can be counterfeited. Counterfeit conversions are self-manufactured conversions—conversions which do not occur as a consequence of regeneration, but as a consequence of human effort. Such self-manufactured conversions often lead to subsequent turns *away from* Christianity to some other belief system. This is what Scripture calls “apostasy”—a *falling away* or *total abandonment* of the faith.

- **Matthew 13:18-22; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 4:1; 1 John 2:19; etc.**

But most false converts never leave the church. They remain as tares among the wheat. Generally unidentifiable, but harming the church and its ministry by showing ambivalence and even opposition to sound doctrine; impeding the church’s obedience to the Great Commission; extending friendship to the world and its ways; and in general, obscuring the difference between the regenerate and the non-regenerate.

As Alleine writes, “The devil has made many counterfeits of conversion, and cheats one with this, and another with that. He has such craft and artifice in his mystery of deceits that, if it were possible, he would deceive the very elect” (*Sure Guide to Heaven*, 10). Alleine (*Sure Guide to Heaven*, 19-25) goes on to describe common categories of false conversions by describing six misconceptions about conversion:

1. “Conversion is not the taking upon us the profession of faith” (it is not merely an expression of interest or agreement).
2. “Conversion is not putting on the badge of Christ in baptism” (it cannot be equated to the completion of a religious ritual such as baptism or entrance into membership in a local church).
3. “Conversion does not lie in moral righteousness” (it is not merely an exhibition of certain kinds of new behaviors).
4. “Conversion does not consist in an external conformity to the rules of piety” (it is not merely in moral reforms and assimilations).
5. “Conversion is not the mere chaining up of corruption by education, human laws or the force of affliction” (it is not acquired through training, discipline, self-improvement, or asceticism).
6. “Conversion does not consist in illumination or conviction or in a superficial change or partial reformation” (it is not to be equated with the most heightened experiences of natural emotion and effort).

D. Practical Implications

1. **You must turn.** Matthew 18:3; Acts 14:15.
2. **Test yourself.** 2 Corinthians 13:5. Was your past marked by a definitive moment/period of time when you saw the bankruptcy of sin and the worthiness of Christ?
3. **Do not be surprised at apostasy.** 1 Timothy 4:1. There are always tares among the wheat. Keep preaching the gospel even to the people in the pew.
4. **Aim for conversions, not decisions.** Evangelism is not about decisions. It is about declaring to sinners that they must repent and believe.

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Recommended Reading:

- John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 589-591.
- Joseph Alleine, *A Sure Guide to Heaven* (originally entitled, *An Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*).

Homework:

- In your own words, define “conversion.”
- Explain the relationship between regeneration and conversion. What are some consequences that come from misunderstanding the nature of this relationship?
- Take some significant time to reflect upon your own conversion experience. Record the most notable details.
- When you describe your conversion, are you able to explain to others the *theological backdrop* of what happened, or do you focus exclusively on the experience? What is the danger of doing only the latter?
- It was stated that a conversion experience is one of several tests to determine the authenticity of one’s salvation. Why is that so?
- How would you defend against the accusation—whether by another person or by Satan—that you are a false convert?
- If you have any concerns that you may not be converted, make it your number one priority to meet with a mature believer to discuss these concerns. Do not rest until you get an answer.

Hymns: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (*Hymns of Grace* #274); “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy” (*Hymns of Grace* #391)

This Week’s Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: December 4 – *Fall Fellowship*