

# Conversion

*Like the two sides of the same coin, faith and repentance are the necessary elements of true conversion.*



**T**he study of theology demands clear definition of terms, especially in setting forth a doctrine of scripture. Two theologians may use the same term to mean entirely different things. So what of the term *conversion*? It might be described as the first spiritual exercise of the regenerate soul. In regeneration, the principle of the new life is implanted in the soul. That new life manifests itself in faith and repentance, which together constitute a genuine work of conversion. The

sinner ceases  
from his  
former  
way of

life and starts his new life. Conversion is a turning from one thing to another.

As with the term *regeneration*, the term *conversion* is not frequently used in scripture, but the truth is clearly taught there. Take the words of Christ in Luke 22:32: “But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.” The Lord employed the term to suggest “turning back” or “coming back.” He was speaking not of Peter’s salvation, but of his contrition after backsliding and of his return from that sad state. The meaning is clear here. But the regular use of the term refers to the initial salvation of the soul when the sinner turns from sin unto God. The Lord used the term in this way in Matthew 18:3:

“Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

True conversion is born of godly sorrow and issues in a life of faith and devotion to God. As the apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians, “Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death” (2 Corinthians 7:10). It is a change rooted in the work of regeneration, a change of thought and opinions, of desires and volitions. It involves the conviction that the former direction of life was not just unwise but wrong. It alters the entire course of one’s life.

How does conversion take place? It is primarily a work of the Holy Spirit, but

man himself must believe and repent. At this point the work of God enters into the conscious life of the sinner. He immediately and consciously believes and repents under the enabling power of grace, having first experienced the new birth by a direct operation of the Holy Spirit.

There are two specific elements in conversion: faith and repentance. Paul sets forth these two elements in Acts 20:21: “Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”

## Faith

Faith is the particular act that unites the soul to Jesus Christ. Its importance is reflected by the words of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: “The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling” (Answer 30). Saving faith is the special exercise of the soul by which Christ and His atonement for sin are laid hold upon and made one’s own. The value of faith therefore must not be minimised.

Saving faith is the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man. It is a work of grace and a gift of God: “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” (Ephesians 2:8). Such faith is ordinarily wrought through the ministry of the God’s word: “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). It therefore believes the truth of the testimony of God speaking in His written and proclaimed word: “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Saving faith principally and particularly includes a trust in, or a resting upon, Jesus Christ as the specific revelation of the word of God and the only means of receiving eternal life and salvation. In men, it appears in different degrees as it is so often assailed by the great enemy of the believing soul. But it is never lost and will eventually tend towards full assurance in the heart of a believer.

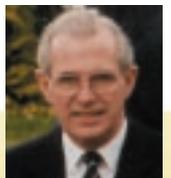
This faith—a hearty assent to the truth and a trust in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour—is always accompanied by a genuine evangelical repentance, the second element in conversion.

## Repentance

The doctrine of repentance is a most vital one. In the present religious climate, it needs to be both understood and emphasized. It is an essential part of “the whole counsel of God,” but it is largely discarded in the preaching of the modern pulpit. It has been jettisoned by some in favour of an “easy believism” that turns a blind eye to the sinfulness of sin and the evil of fallen human nature. The new evangelical does not present sin in the manner in which it is dealt with in the word of God. The total depravity of the sinner and the natural corruption of the human heart are little recognized. Since this is so, the remedy for sin—and with it the necessity for true repentance and godly sorrow for sin—is not recognized either. If the pulpit fails to declare it, then it follows that the hearer will neither acknowledge nor understand the need for repentance.

Perhaps the best summary of this scriptural doctrine is found in the Westminster Standards. From the *Shorter Catechism* (Question 87) and the *Confession of Faith* (Chapter 15) we can draw the following conclusions: 1) Repentance, like faith, is a saving grace. 2) It involves a necessary knowledge and sense of sin. 3) It includes knowledge of the holiness and righteousness of God. 4) It apprehends the mercy of God in Christ. 5) It grieves for and hates sin. 6) It turns from that sin to God through Christ. 7) It walks in newness of life. True, evangelical repentance includes these aspects and manifests them when it is exercised. This is the missing ingredient in much of the new evangelical preaching and commitment of today.

These two essential elements then—faith and repentance—constitute a genuine conversion to God and are the evidence of the Holy Spirit at work within the soul of man. The word of God plainly calls us first to faith (Acts 16:31) and then commands repentance (Acts 17:30). May these be wrought in your heart; may you know the reality of the biblical experience of conversion. ■



Rev. James Beggs is lecturer in systematic theology in the Theological Hall of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster.