

In my recent articles I shared thoughts on the great themes of Justification and Regeneration, which are some of the wonderful riches which result from the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. I sought to stress that neither are in the form of a process, but are deliberate acts of God. He alone is the one “*who justifies the ungodly*” (Rom 4:5) and Himself has “*saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:5).

The next of the great riches that flow from the Lord's resurrection is Conversion. Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven, where “*God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*” (Acts 5:31) The implication of this verse is that, if Jesus had not been raised from the dead and exalted to heaven, He would not be there to give us His salvation and His death would have been pointless!

Now, unlike Justification and Regeneration, Conversion is a process through which we receive salvation. That does not mean, however, that we just sit back, wait and hope that God will do it all for us: most definitely not! Even though our conversion is for God to initiate it is essential that we co-operate. Our conversion requires our deliberate action.

The basic meaning of the original Old and New Testament words for conversion is ‘to return’ or ‘to turn’. For example, Jeremiah prophesied to backslidden Judah, “*Say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the LORD... Return everyone from his evil way, amend your ways and your deeds.’*” (Jer 18:11) In predicting Peter's denial, Jesus said, “*when you have turned again strengthen your brothers*” (Lk 22:32), meaning when Peter had returned to a right relationship with the Lord.

Conversion also means to turn to God for the first time: “*Turn to me and be saved all the ends of earth! For I am God, and there is no other.*” (Is 45:22) Paul described his mission as being sent “*to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins*” (Acts 26:18). It is rather like using a ‘sat nav’ when out driving and, having taken a wrong turn, hearing the dreaded voice saying, ‘**turn around when possible!**’ It means to turn from going in the wrong direction to the right one. My ‘sat nav’ voice is telling me that I need to be converted! When we speak of conversion, we normally use it to mean to turn to the Saviour for the first time; and that is the way I shall use it in the rest of this article.

Every genuine conversion consists of two major parts, which are ‘Repentance’ and ‘Faith’. These also involve the various elements of ‘Conviction’, plus ‘Contrition’, plus ‘Confession’, plus ‘Consolation’, plus ‘Commitment’ – with all elements acting together. My intention is to consider each of these, but before doing so let's think about the

CONVERSION TIME-SCALE

It is very important to take note of the fact that conversion can be a sudden or a gradual experience. Isaiah's testimony is that “*In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up... And I said: ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; I am a man of unclean lips ... for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!’ / Then one of seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal taken from altar. He touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for’*” (Is 6:1–7). It would seem that Isaiah's vision burst in upon him on a particular occasion. So it was for Paul on the Damascus road, when “*suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.*” (Acts 9:3–6)

On the other hand, it seems that it took three years for the light of who the Lord Jesus really was and what He had come to do to dawn on the disciples! It was even on the night of Jesus's betrayal that Philip asked, “*Lord, show us the Father.*” Jesus said to him, “*Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?*” (John 14:8,9)

Another thing to note about conversion is that, although there were occasions when lots of people were converted at the same time in the same situation – as at Pentecost, for example (Acts 2:41) – it is still an individual experience. Every true Christian has their own story to tell. Maybe we ought to share our stories more often, even make some short videos and put them on the church website?

The essential thing to grasp is that all genuine conversion experiences are equally valid. In my case, it took about six months from my taking the gospel seriously to then being blessed with an unexpected and sudden experience of salvation. There are members of our church, especially those raised in godly Christian homes, who came to know the Lord through a steady and gradual process over some years. Conversion could be illustrated by the sun coming out, as we say. Sometimes the sun is hidden by thin hazy cloud and gradually seems to emerge. At other times it is behind a thick dark cloud and then, as the cloud is blown away, the sun suddenly bursts out in a blaze of light and heat. But, however it happens, we all see its light and feel its heat. When and how we are converted certainly matters, because it is the most important part of our personal history, but what matters most of all is that you and I *are* converted.

CONVERSION: PART ONE – REPENTANCE

The words ‘repent’ and ‘repentance’ occur about seventy-five times in the English Standard Version of the Bible. In the New Testament the words mean ‘to change our way of life as result of complete change of thought and attitude’.

Repentance is a wholesale re-evaluation of the way we think about God; about who Jesus is and what He came to do; about what the Bible is and why it matters; about life after death; about who and what we are; and about the way we are living our lives. Then the most important part is doing something about it. Going back to my sat nav illustration, to repent means I have come to the firm conclusion that, although I thought I was going in the right direction, I now realise that I am going in the wrong direction and, as a result, must turn around. But what brings us to that conclusion and so starts off the process of our conversion? The answer is:

Conviction Of Sin

Conviction of sin is another work of God the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised His disciples that *“When he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement”* (John 16:8). The *“world”* here stands for people who by nature are in a godless condition. In conviction of sin, the Holy Spirit brings that condition to light and shows people how wrong they have always been in their thinking, attitudes and deeds!

Some may think the Holy Spirit does not need to do that, because everyone has a conscience: *“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires... they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them”* (Rom 2:14,15). But we all have a problem with our consciences, in that they are part of our fallen human nature – they are all *“seared”* (1 Tim 4:2) to a greater or lesser extent. This is why everyone at times justifiably feels guilty about some wrongs but not others. We might have a conscience about watching a violent TV programme, but not about reading a salacious novel!

This sort of thing continues to be a problem for us when we become Christians. Some of the Christians in Corinth had a conscience about eating food previously offered to idols, while, for others in the church, this was of no concern at all (1 Cor 8:1–13). When I was writing this article we had just had all the angst being poured out in relation to the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests. But where is the conscience about the more than two hundred thousand babies being destroyed in their mothers’ wombs every year in England and Wales alone! Don’t their lives matter? Apparently not!

Another problem with the fallen human conscience is that, even when it results in worldly people feeling guilty about something they have done wrong, it is rarely, if ever, in relation to the Holy God – and it is almost always accompanied by excuses, which allow the individual to think themselves ‘not as bad’ as others they could name!

It is only when the Holy Spirit gets to work in our consciences that we begin to understand what sin really is and just how sinful we really are. We need the Holy Spirit to convict us by exposing us to the true nature, depth, extent and seriousness of our sins and sinful state. It is His convicting work that begins to engender in us a sense of deserved guilt before God. When David was convicted of his sins he said, *“I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”* (Ps 51:3) The awfulness of his wrongdoing became a weighty burden on his heart and mind.

Under conviction of sin we come to agree with God’s verdict that *“None is righteous, no, not one.”* (Rom 3:10). We agree with Isaiah that we are *“unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”* (Is 64:6) Peter came to realise that every part of humanity has been corrupted, so was inspired to describe the human race as *“slaves of corruption”* (2 Peter 2:19). Paul came to the same conclusion: *“I know nothing good dwells in me”* (Rom 7:18). David, Isaiah, Peter and Paul all came to recognise that even their best thoughts, intentions and deeds are infected by our fallen-ness. And it is just the same for us: we take God’s side against ourselves in condemning ourselves and thus arrive at the point of true ‘self-denigration’ before Him.

That enables us to see that, ultimately, all our sin and sinfulness is against God. Even though King David had sinned grievously against a number of particular people and, as representative of his nation, against all its citizens, he came to realise that his sin was all against His and their Creator God: *“Against you, you only, have I sinned”* (Ps 51:4). Isaiah acknowledged, on behalf of all his people, that *“our transgressions are multiplied before you and our sins testify against us”* (Is 59:12). The reality is that every sin we commit is actually against God – and that is the most dreadful thing about us!

Today we are bombarded with a world philosophy that is directly opposed to all that conviction of sin means! The website ‘positivepsychology.com’ is one of many concerned with how to increase self-esteem. We are told that the thing people need most is a heightened sense of self-worth. The underlying thought, therefore, is that conviction of sin must be very bad for us! It is being suggested strongly that to tell people they are sinners, especially the young and elderly, ought to be classed as psychological abuse and made a criminal offence!

Now, there is no doubt that human beings ought to be valued. After all, we are the pinnacle of God’s amazing creation – *“God created man in his own image”* (Gen 1:27) – and that is an amazing status to have! Everybody ought to be saying, *“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”* (Ps 139:14) God so values his creation and the people in it that He sent his Son to give His life *“for the life of the world”* (John 6:51). To God, *all lives matter!*

The huge problem with the world’s ‘self-worth’ philosophy is that it ignores totally, even rejects deliberately, the fact of the fallen state of humanity. It is a disastrous deception which has led to all sorts of confusion, frustration and trouble for humankind the world over! If we are to have anything like an accurate and balanced understanding of who and what we are, it is vital to hold both human worth and human sinfulness in balance – and that is true for Christians and non-Christians alike! That is why conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit is a very good thing for us all. If you know it in your experience, praise God for it!