

I have found it a particular blessing during this lockdown period to have the opportunity to consider again the great Bible themes of Justification, Regeneration and Conversion and have the privilege of sharing some thoughts with you. My preparation for these scripts and videos has been a delight as I have realised anew what a wonderful thing it is to be a Christian. I remember the joy of the occasion when, at the end of March 1956, I was saved. I was sure that when I went back to school the next day and told my class mates, they would all want to be converted too. I distinctly remember being quite surprised that they weren't really interested!

Generally speaking, it is no different today. Rarely does anyone show interest in the wonderful good news of salvation. Why is that? Various answers could be given, but I think one is to be found in the signs of the times of our Lord's return. We are told that, as the time draws near for our Lord to come and gather His people to Himself, God will send "*a strong delusion*" so that people will believe lies and not the truth (2 Thess 2:11). There are a number of suggestions as to what that strong delusion might be, but in this modern age it could be the idea that human beings are merely evolved matter. Or that we are all born intrinsically good and, therefore, ought to feel good about ourselves!

This kind of godless thinking underpins so much of what guides the affairs of nations today, especially in the western world. Very sadly, this philosophy of life springs from the "*unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*" (Rom 1:18) That suppression includes the denial of the existence of God and of the day of judgement. Therefore, generally speaking, the population of our country does not consider there is need for radical change in how they think and live. To them repentance is utterly irrelevant.

That is why a wholesale revision in our thinking, attitudes and lives can only be engendered by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. Only He can cause us truly to realise the fact of our inbred corruption; that "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick*" (Jer 17:9). As Jesus said, "*out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.*" (Matt 15:19). It is Holy-Spirit conviction that causes us both to see our sinfulness and acknowledge our guilt before God; as the prodigal son said, "*I have sinned against heaven*" (Luke 15:18). When the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, we begin to understand that we are sinners by inward corruption and outward expression. That conviction starts to produce a radical change in our thinking, and this leads to:

CONTRITION FOR SIN

Under conviction, we start to think of our sin as a very serious matter; then, in contrition, to begin to **feel** bad about ourselves and our state in God's sight. We start to understand that we have been "*following the prince of the power of the air*" – that is, the devil – and have "*lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind*", all because of the serious condition of being "*by nature children of wrath*" (Eph 2:2,3).

In contrition, we stop thinking that sin is just an occasional lapse; that it isn't such a big issue; that it doesn't matter if no one notices – and, in any case, will soon be forgotten. Instead, we start to feel like Isaiah: "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips*" (Is 6:5). Or like Job: "*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself*" (Job 42:5,6).

We start feeling as King David did: "*I am sorry for my sin.*" (Ps 38:18) Or as Jeremiah described the repentance of wayward Israel: "*I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth*" (Jer 31:19). Our past sins become a matter of real concern to us, and we feel the ignominy of our past sinfulness. We start to feel like Peter who, after he had denied Jesus three times, "*went out and wept bitterly.*" (Luke 22:62)

Holy-Spirit conviction causes a serious thoughtfulness concerning our sinfulness, and contrition stirs a deep emotional response. We really do feel ashamed of ourselves: "*All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face*" (Ps 44:15). We find that we can't simply dismiss our sins as 'just one of those things' or forget about them and get on with life!

We begin to sense that we are in a very dangerous position, knowing that "*the wages of sin is death*" (Rom 6:23); we begin to feel disturbed that "*it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement*" (Heb 9:27) – and judgement, it stikes us, is exactly what we deserve. We become convinced that "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*" (Heb 10:31) and, rightly, we begin to feel fearful.

In contrition, the realisation begins to dawn in heart and mind of "*storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgement will be revealed.*" (Rom 2:5)

All of this leads us to looking for a way out! At Pentecost, when the multitude realised that they were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, whom God the Father had made Lord and Christ, "*they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brothers, what shall we do?*" (Acts 2:37) They had a deep, heartfelt sense of being in a desperately dangerous position and, consequently, most earnestly sought an escape route. They had an acutely justifiable sense of self-preservation.

We see the same reaction in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who “*would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*” (Luke 18:13). One of the criminals, crucified alongside the Lord Jesus, acknowledged that he and his fellow criminal had been condemned “*justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds*”. He then turned to Jesus to plead for deliverance: “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*”(Luke 23:41). Both the tax collector in the parable and the criminal on the cross sensed their great danger and the need to escape!

I would suggest the greatest need of our nation today, even taking Covid-19 into account, is for Holy-Spirit conviction of sin leading to contrition. I say this because I don’t believe that anyone ever truly comes to the Lord Jesus Christ for His everlasting salvation until they know and feel their need of His mercy and forgiveness. People do not understand their need of the Saviour until they realise at least something of the depth of their fallen condition and gain a sense of their guilt before a holy God because of their sin.

Conviction and contrition are not only the great need in our country, but are also a very real need in the experience of our churches! There is a marked absence of this work of the Holy Spirit among us. It seems a very rare occurrence, when the gospel is being preached in our services, for someone to cry out, “*what must I do to be saved?*” (Acts 16:30) We need earnestly and persistently to pray for the Holy Spirit to give that “*godly grief [which] produces a repentance that leads to salvation*” (2 Cor 7:10).

Nevertheless, there is something very important to be aware of. It is this: that conviction and contrition do not automatically lead to conversion! There can be a very real sense of guilt and sorrow for sin that falls short of true repentance. For example, when the people of Egypt were suffering the plague of locusts, Pharaoh came to the realisation that “*I have sinned against the LORD your God*” (Exod 10:16), but still he did not let the children of Israel go! Judas Iscariot, having betrayed Jesus, felt the depth of his wickedness and returned the payment of silver to the priests, saying “*I have sinned by betraying innocent blood*”; and yet “*he went and hanged himself.*” (Matt 27:3–5).

The essential thing is that, to be converted, we have to make the best possible use of our conviction and contrition. If it is to be true repentance, we have to do something with it. We have to take some action. God does not repent for us! This is why Peter told the crowd at Pentecost, “*Save yourselves from this crooked generation.*” (Acts 2:40) As I pointed out previously, Justification and Regeneration are entirely God’s work, but Conversion requires our deliberate response.

There is however, another very important thing I need to point out. During the process of conversion, we do not all experience the same depths of conviction and contrition. When Martin Luther was a monk at Wittenberg in Germany, he had such a depth of conviction and contrition that he would often lie all night on the stone cold floor of his cell in mid-winter. He scourged himself, and at times fasted to near starvation, to try to be righteous in God’s sight, or at least to be a bit less unrighteous. But if you have never felt the pain and depths of conviction and contrition that Luther experienced it does not mean that you are not a Christian.

It is worthwhile noting that conversion experiences related in the Bible happened quickly. This means that there could not possibly have been time for prolonged periods of conviction and contrition. At Pentecost there was very real conviction and contrition, but it is most striking that at the end of just one sermon “*those who received his [Peter’s] word were baptised and were added that day*” to the Church (Acts 2:41). When the Philippian jailer took Paul and Silas into his home, washed their wounds and heard the gospel, “*he was baptised at once, he and all his family.*” (Acts 16:33). Conviction and contrition were very real, but also short lived!

Neither Peter nor Paul told their hearers to go for a month of conviction treatment and then a few weeks of contrition therapy. Not at all! The people were assured that the Lord would accept and save them there and then. If you have been convicted of your sinfulness and are feeling sorrow over your sins, then turn to the Saviour now and ask Him to cleanse you in His precious blood. If you feel the urgent need to escape the coming judgement of God, then do the only sensible thing and go straight to the Lord: “*The prudent sees danger and hides himself*” (Prov 22:3). So turn to the Saviour and take refuge in Him without delay.

If the Holy Spirit has brought you to see the reality of your sinfulness and caused you to have real feelings of sorrow and a sense of danger as a result, then be thankful! If you were asleep with your house on fire, you would be so grateful if someone woke you up and helped you to escape. So every Christian ought truly to be grateful for the conviction of sin engendered by the Holy Spirit, and the feeling of contrition which resulted; especially because it comes with the assurance that God “*who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy*” promises that “*I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite*” (Isa 57:15). It is wonderfully true, as Jesus promised, that “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.*” (Matt 5:3)