

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

church for the sake of Jesus, but what draws me thither irresistibly is Mary'. This fact cannot be overcome: thousands of Roman Catholics have a similar feeling. There must therefore be 'something in it'. In actual fact Mary is a power; indeed, she is not an imaginary but a real one. She was a power long before there were any Roman Catholics, and long before Mary, the mother of Jesus, lived. The 'Eternal Feminine' has attracted not only Goethe, but men of all ages."

"The image of a sublime and pure, infinitely kind and loving woman exists in the depths of every man's soul, and is the goal of a powerful if unconscious longing. What could be more affecting to a worshipper of Jesus than to rediscover and to worship this image in the mother of one's beloved Master?"

We cannot conclude this article better than by quoting the beautiful comments of George Adam Smith on the nature of God as revealed in Old and New Testaments in his commentary on Isaiah xxxi. "With such fountains in Scripture, we need not, as some have done, exalt the Virgin, or virtually make a fourth person in the Godhead, and that a woman, in order to satisfy those natural longings of the heart which the widespread worship of the mother of Jesus tells us are so peremptory. For all fulness dwelleth in God Himself. Not only may we rejoice in that pity and wise provision for our wants, in that pardon and generosity, which we associate with the name of father, but also in the wakefulness, the patience, the love, lovelier with fear, which makes a mother's heart so dear and indispensable. We cannot tell along what wakened nerve the Grace of God may reach our hearts; but Scripture has a medicine for every pain. And if they feel their weakness as little children feel it, let them know that the Spirit of God broods over them, as a mother over her babe; and if they are in pain or anxiety, and there is no human heart to suffer with them, let them know as closely as a mother may come to suffer with her child, and as sensitive as she is to its danger, so sensitive is God Almighty to theirs, and that He gives them proof of their preciousness to Him by suffering with them."

## Conversion

BY THE REV. D. A. BROWN, A.L.C.D., M.Th.

### I

**I**N general, Christian conversion may be defined as "the re-orientation of life from self to God, through Jesus Christ", as is done in the report *Towards the Conversion of England*. Such a definition includes the conversion of societies and institutions, but in this article we are concerned more particularly with the conversion of the individual, i.e. with such a reorientation appropriated by an individual to apply to his or her own personal life.

In thus limiting the term to 'individual conversion' we must not forget the wider background of the eternal love and life of God. God is for ever acting towards all men in perfect love, even when He brings judgment upon them. The response of the individual to this love of

God does not evoke the love of God for Him ; it means rather that the barriers on his side are down and that the love of God is now unhindered in its working. This must be stressed at the beginning (and it will be referred to again at the end), because in dealing with such a subject we are necessarily concerned with the human response, and the temptation will be for us to think of man's salvation as dependent upon man's decision, and to forget that it rests only on the love of God. Nor can man's response be truly caused by human importunity, but by the ever present activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men. And yet because man is a creature of time, conversion from his point of view is seen always as a movement within time, as a crisis in an individual's life, whereby he passes from darkness to light, from death to life. Thus it is that the New Testament always treats conversion as an act in time made by a particular person. It is, if one may put it so, the point of adjustment, the gearing in of a person's historical life, to the Eternal Life of God. For this reason the New Testament uses generally the aorist tense when speaking of conversion ; e.g. 1 Cor. vi. 11 ; Rom. vi. 2 ; Col. iii. 3.

But while the New Testament deals thus with conversion as a crisis, a point within time, it does not exaggerate it to the exclusion of all else. The crisis of conversion is supremely important, but to treat it as a thing in itself is an abstraction and to forget not only the prior activity of the Holy Spirit, but the life long process of growing up to be the full grown sons and daughters of God which must follow. The New Testament writers emphasise the connection between *the* crisis and the continual crises of daily life to a degree we find hard to appreciate. To neglect this leads to conversions that miss the mark. The New Testament insistence on this point will become clear if the following brief lines of argument are followed up.

1. The imitation of Christ is God's purpose for every one of His children (Rom. viii. 28-29 ; 2 Cor. iii. 18)—it is the end of conversion to which every converted man is the committed heir.
2. The call of Christ to men for faith in the days of His flesh took concrete form in His call to them to follow the path of *discipleship*—i.e. an apprenticeship to Him as Master Craftsman in the craft of living (Mk. viii. 34-35 ; Jo. xii. 24-26). See also Mt. xi. 28-30, where the yoke spoken of is to be a shared yoke, by which the weaker found strength and guidance from the stronger. This, incidentally, holds a large place in the teaching of the front-line churches of the mission field and of Europe.
3. The earliest form of the Creed, as far as we know, is the formula found in Rom. x. 9, "Jesus is Lord". If this Creed was the formula of confession in baptism, as seems most likely, then for the early Church conversion and baptism meant submission and obedience to the discipline and rule of Christ as Lord.
4. Dean Selwyn in his commentary on 1 Peter lays bare a primitive baptismal catechism, traces of which are found in a number of New Testament Epistles. He points out that an integral part of this baptismal catechism was an exposition of the Christian life in terms of renunciation, behaviour, and especially the law of love.

The importance of this for our purpose is that it shows that the catechumen was taught very clearly that by his conversion and his baptism he was committed to a particular pattern of life, to renunciation and struggle, whereby he would grow up as the child of God.

From this it will be clear that while the act of decision is significant in itself, yet for the New Testament writers its significance was largely derived from what followed. It was significant, that is, as the start to a new life—as the birth into a family, as the opening of the eyes to see and the illumining of the mind to acquire true knowledge. It is the growing up which informs and gives significance to the crisis.

## II

The terms in which the New Testament speaks of the conversion experience are as follows.

(i) In terms of *new birth* and *adoption* : Matt. xviii. 3 ; John i. 12, iii. 1-8 ; Rom. viii. 15 ; Gal. iv. 5 ; Eph. i. 5 ; Jas. i. 18 ; 1 Pet. i. 23 ; 1 John iii. 1.

(ii) In terms of *new creation* : Rom. xii. 2 ; 2 Cor. v. 17, 18 ; Gal. vi. 15.

(iii) In terms of *putting off* the old man and *putting on* the new man : Eph. iv. 22-24 ; Col. iii. 8-10.

(iv) In terms of *illumination* : Matt. v. 14 ; John viii. 12 ; Rom. xiii. 12 ; 1 Thess. v. 7, 8 ; 1 John i. 5-7.

(v) In terms of the gift of *life* : John iii. 16, etc. ; Eph. ii. 5 ; Col. ii. 13 ; 1 John iii. 14.

(vi) In terms of *reconciliation* and *forgiveness of sins* : Acts ii. 38, iii. 19, v. 31, x. 43 ; Rom. v. 10 ; 1 Cor. vi. 11 ; 2 Cor. v. 20.

These terms in which the New Testament experience of conversion is expressed are all profoundly interesting in themselves, but for our purpose we shall concentrate on two general points. First, these terms are all the expression of an *experience*, from which experience they draw their colour, force and power. Men could speak in terms of *new birth* because they had begun life over again, in a new family, the family of God, with a new way of life, the way of the Cross, with new loyalties and commitments. Perhaps the most potent influence in bringing this terminology into use was their discovering God in his character as Father and learning for the first time to say "Our Father". Men could speak in terms of *illumination*, because their doubts and perplexities had been resolved, their confidence for the future was clear, their values were transformed. They could speak of *life* because they experienced in themselves the release that comes from forgiveness, and the strength which comes from worship and fellowship.

Second, this experience came through *encounter with Jesus Christ* as a living reality, a Saviour able to rescue them from sin, a Lord with authority to direct and control their lives, a Person to be adored, worshipped and trusted. This was no intellectual assent given to theological propositions about the nature and work of Jesus Christ. It was a passionate committal of the whole personality in encounter with another living Person, summed up for us in the Greek word

*pistis*, a relationship so intimate and inclusive that St. Paul explains it in terms of the marriage relationship (1 Cor. vi. 16-17). *Pistis* is normally translated faith, but our word 'faith', as commonly used, is inadequate to express the great width and depth of meaning which the word carries in the New Testament, and of which the three main elements are love (or worship), trust, and obedience.

Some would say that this inner experience is all that is meant by conversion. I hope to show that this is a mistake and an inadequate exegesis of the New Testament. Such a restriction of the meaning of conversion is often due to an over-emphasis on one form only of conversion experience, often by the experiencing of forgiveness and reconciliation, whereas, as we have seen, the experience may take many forms. But while the conversion experience is manifold in form, in pattern it is yet one. It may be analysed as follows.

1. The Centre of all conversion experience is encounter with Jesus Christ as a living Person.

2. This encounter may take place in many ways and on different occasions, for each man's experience is different; but it always occurs at the point of the individual's need, and takes its character from the way in which the Living Christ meets that particular need. It may be the need for forgiveness and reconciliation, caused by a deep sense of sin. It may be the need for power and strength, caused by impotence and failure to overcome. It may be the need for One worthy to worship and to love. It may be the need for One able to lead and control, caused by uncertainty and aimlessness. What is important is that none should try to force the convert's experience into fixed channels or customary terminology. Any of (or other than) these points of need may be the initial point of encounter and of conversion. But in a full grown Christian experience Christ is known in all His saving Power—as the Saviour who brings forgiveness and deliverance from sin, as God to be worshipped and adored, as the Final Succourer of man to be trusted, as Lord to be obeyed.

3. The response that the convert makes must be a real one, and he must be encouraged to respond to Christ, as far as he knows Him at the moment, and in the way in which He meets his particular need, with his whole self. His response will necessarily be an *imperfect* one, for he grows into a more worthy one only as understanding develops both of the Gospel and of Himself. Indeed, none of us makes a perfect response this side of eternity. The important thing is that we respond to Christ in the way He asks us to do at each particular moment in which we live.

4. This response is often sudden in its realisation; but we must remember that the "sudden" response has been long prepared for by the Holy Spirit. It may also be gradual, but then the personal life story must reach a point where the convert can say, "Now at this moment I belong to Christ". Such an act of faith may be so revolutionary that the conversion will appear sudden, or it may be the last step in a series of decisions very similar to the one immediately before it. The important thing is that the Christian should be able to say with real meaning at each particular moment, "Jesus is my Lord".

Any of (or other than) the points of need listed in (2) may be the initial point of encounter and of conversion. But by a full grown Christian Christ is known in all the width of His saving power, as the Saviour who brings forgiveness and deliverance from sin, as God the Son to be worshipped and adored, as the Final Succourer of men to be trusted, as Lord to be obeyed. The adventure of the Christian life is the ever new discovery of the saving power of Christ. The newly converted must not be content to know Christ only at the point where first he allows Him to meet his need. He must allow the Holy Spirit to open up his whole life to the redeeming work of Christ.

None can deny the overriding importance of this inner experience of encounter, for all else humanly speaking stems from this and derives its reality therefrom. There can be no true church life, no real Confirmations, no effective Sunday school teaching or youth work unless the participants are converted people in the sense that they have made—and are making in the present—a true response of repentance and faith towards Jesus Christ. The Church is the fellowship of 'converted' people.

### III

The New Testament refuses to make the experience of conversion private to the individual concerned. The Church has a vital and necessary part to play in conversions. In the first place, the convicting witness which leads to conversion can only come through the witness of the Church, whether corporately or through its individual members. Often a person is attracted first to the Church, and comes to Christ by way of it. The saving work of the Holy Spirit in the world to-day is effected by His life in the Church.

But the Church is more than a witness to Christ in the matter of conversion. Conversion cannot take place without the Church. For a person, by his conversion, is made a member of the Church of Christ, whether he is aware of it or not. He is born into the Family of God (John i. 12, Rom. viii. 15), he enters by the door into the Fold of Christ (John x. 9; 1 Peter v. 1-4), he is grafted into the True Vine (John xv; Romans xi); he is taken up as a member in the body of Christ (1 Cor. xii. 12-27; Eph. i. 22-23; Col. i. 24), he is built as a stone into the Temple of God (Eph. ii. 20-22; 1 Pet. ii. 4-5), he is made a member of the New Humanity in Christ (1 Cor. xv. 22, etc.), a member of the New Israel (Gal. iii. 9, vi. 16; Phil. iii. 3; 1 Pet. ii. 4-10). This membership does not depend upon the convert's choosing to be such; it is inescapable if he enters into a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

In the second place, it is important to note the place that baptism, the sacrament of initiation into Christ and into the Church, holds in the evangelism of the early Church. There seems to be a reference to baptism, expressed or implied, wherever conversion is in question. Explicit connections are made in Mark xvi. 16; Acts ii. 38, viii. 12, 36, ix. 18, x. 47, xvi. 33, xviii. 8; 1 Cor. xii. 13; Gal. iii. 27; 1 Pet. iii. 21. Statements which imply the connection abound. In some, the conversion experience itself is interpreted in terms of the act of baptism. E.g. in Romans vi. union with Christ in His death and resurrection is

interpreted in terms of the immersion of baptism. In 1 Cor. vi. 11, the cleansing from sin is linked with the cleansing properties of water. Further, in Selwyn's Commentary on 1 Peter (pp. 397-9) will be found arguments supporting the view that the metaphor of putting off the old and putting on the new (Col. iii. 8-10 ; Eph. iv. 22-24) " well fitted baptismal usages and ideas ". In Rom. x. 9, the word " confess " is to be taken with " the ' formula ' of faith " (v. 8) and interpreted as " confess in baptism ". Here Salvation is seen to depend both on confession in baptism and on a corresponding inward faith. There is a clear parallel in Eph. v. 26.

These verses, together with the fact that in the New Testament era the inward crisis was always followed by baptism, would seem to suggest that in the New Testament view two factors together make up the conversion experience. (a) The inward assent and belief of the individual—his personal response of repentance and faith towards Jesus Christ. (b) His Submission to the great committing act of baptism and public testimony, and entrance into the fellowship of the Church.

To limit the term ' conversion ' to (a) alone seems to be a false abstraction and to obscure (b), which is a vitally important factor in the crisis of conversion itself. It reinforces and gives substance to the inward decision. This is the reason why the New Testament Christians found such a warmth and depth and reality in their conversion. To them, conversion was not only some inward assent, to be made privately in their own minds. It was not realised until they submitted to baptism, to the exhilarating joy of risk and danger, and had experienced the newness of the classless, loving fellowship of the Church. My point is that the Sacrament, in the New Testament, went along with and reinforced the inner decision. It is almost an academic point to discuss whether a man was really converted after he had made his inward decision and before he had been baptised, for the two went together. An illustration that may help is this. Two people are engaged to be married ; their betrothal is completed and reinforced in the church service. Neither in itself is the marriage. The church service is nothing without the betrothal : the betrothal is actualised on the wedding day. The inward decision may be likened to the betrothal, the act of baptism to the marriage service. That the marriage must grow and develop thereafter adds point to the illustration.

#### IV

From this argument several important points arise. There is always the danger of over-emphasising the inward response. We are not to decrease our emphasis, but rather to balance it by an increased realisation of the importance of the outward and sacramental. We are also hindered by our opening of the door of infant Baptism to all the world, so that it is but rarely that we can ask a convert to confess his faith in the sacrament of Baptism. But Confirmation lies to our hand. While doing all we can to encourage the inward response before Confirmation, let us at the same time teach our candidates that Confirmation is the time when their conversion is made complete, because it is the sacramental confession before the Church, spoken of,

e.g., in Romans x. 9. Failing this, for example in the case of those already confirmed, let us encourage acts of testimony within meetings of the whole congregation so that the converts' inner decision may be strengthened by the outward confession.

We must now draw together the three lines of inner experience, the Church, and Christian living. (i) The start of the Christian life is the crisis of conversion : the apprehension by the individual of a deep personal need, and an act of personal response to Jesus Christ as He meets that particular need.

(ii) But this first response of committal must grow into true Christian faith. It is significant that Baptism was delayed in the Early Church until the convert had undergone the catechumenate and been instructed in the fullness of Christ's saving work. The convert must be shown the many-sided character of faith, and, in particular, that it is both an active and a passive thing. It is, on the one hand, accepting Christ as Saviour, that is, accepting for oneself the benefits of the Passion of Christ, and realising thereby forgiveness, reconciliation and deliverance from the bondage of sin. It is accepting, too, His gift of new life, and the power of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, faith means the acceptance of Christ as Lord, the disavowal of past sins, the submission of oneself to the discipline of the Cross, and the first step in obedience and Christian living. (Incidentally, it is for this reason, that passive words like *accept, receive, welcome*, are dangerous and one-sided, if used alone, and need to be matched with such active words as *obey, follow, enlist*. We must make clear to the convert that Jesus is Lord as much as he is Saviour, and our terminology must be wide enough to include this.)

(iii) Every effort must be made to reinforce the inner decision by outward act—Baptism, Confirmation or testimony. One reason why so many backsliders say there was nothing in their conversion is that they were not led to the immensely concrete and emotionally satisfying step of public confession. We forget that the warmth of New Testament language derives not from the strength or weakness, the vitality or otherwise, of the individual's own prayers, but from what met him, of fellowship and of persecution, the day he joined the Church. Another reason why converts backslide is because their experience of Christ does not widen beyond the first point at which they met with Him.

Finally, we are to remember that the really important thing is not our decision but the love of God in Christ. Our assent is but the ratifying for ourselves of something true from all eternity—the creative, redeeming activity of God ; our faith is but our gearing-in with His great purpose. It is of the humility of the love of a God who became Incarnate that He invests our imperfect response with an eternal and abiding significance.