

# Conversion

## The Revd Dr Gerald Bray

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Unlike most of the topics we have discussed so far in this series, the subject of conversion has a curiously sectarian air about it. Most people recognise that creation, for example, is a Christian doctrine, even if they do not happen to believe it themselves, but conversion is very much more nebulous. Is it, properly speaking, a doctrine at all? Would it not be better to describe it as a particular kind of experience genuinely experienced by a few spiritual giants — Paul, Augustine, Francis of Assisi and Luther spring to mind — and artificially induced in a thousand mission halls, but otherwise a rather unpleasant phenomenon which can be ignored for practical purposes?

There is no getting around the fact that conversion has a slightly bad odour for many people because it presupposes a human condition which few will readily admit to and which many believe exists only in exceptional cases of which they themselves are not examples. Conversion requires an awareness of sinfulness, and it seems in some cases at least, that this is tied to grievous actual sin. It demands a willingness to accept one's own utter helplessness in the face of this evil, and a readiness to plead for mercy from God, the righteous judge. It assumes, as many today do not, that there will be a day of reckoning for sin which no man shall escape, and that our chief business in life is to escape the sentence of *guilty* which will inevitably be passed on us at the Judgement.

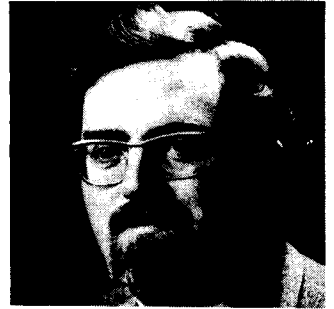
**The truth of the matter is that conversion is not primarily an experience but a doctrine, and to understand it we must examine principles before we look at specific cases.**

In a word, conversion assumes a number of prior beliefs *and experiences* which are never likely to be popular and which are particularly unfashionable at the present time. It is quite possible to attend a church every week — even an Evangelical, "Bible-believing" church — and never hear words like *sin* or *guilt* mentioned in any meaningful way. Perhaps there is a kind of ritual confession, and some churches continue to have evangelistic services with altar calls and the like, but apart from a few places where the old ways have not changed, the message given is much more likely to concentrate on the joys of fellowship in Christ than on some of these more sombre realities. In a day of minimal church attendance we are all conscious of the need to attract more worshippers, and most people tend to think that there is no point in putting any potential member off!

These tendencies are reinforced by the pressures from a theological liberalism (sometimes in the guise of "neo-evangelicalism") which does not accept the presuppositions on which a doctrine of conversion is based and which pours scorn on the cultivation of individual souls at the expense of social justice or corporate solidarity. The believer in conversion is thus on the defensive at every point, and he is obliged to state his position with clarity and confidence in a climate which is fundamentally hostile to him. But in spite of all the difficulties — and there are many — the attempt must be made, because conversion has always been, and still remains, a fundamental ingredient in the life of both the Christian and the Church.

When we examine the Scriptures for its teaching on the matter, we are liable to turn first to Paul, whose conversion on the road to Damascus has always served as the archetypal experience of this kind. This is understandable, but it is a pity, nevertheless, for at least two reasons. First,

*The frequently unexamined subject of conversion is addressed by Dr Bray as he continues his survey of Biblical doctrines.*



even by New Testament standards it was an extraordinary event. Paul was a typical example of the "great sinner" — he was on his way to persecute the Church, after all — and his conversion has every dramatic ingredient one could wish for. It makes a wonderful story, and we must never belittle its importance, but it can hardly be said that the experience of the average Christian is anything even remotely similar! Second, the purpose of Paul's conversion experience was unique. In it he received a vision of the Risen Christ who called him to be an apostle, one born out of due time. That is extremely important, but it has no parallel elsewhere, and cannot be regarded as a very appropriate model for us. There are other accounts of particular conversion in the New Testament, some of them spectacular (e.g., that of the Philippian gaoler) and some more intellectual (e.g., that of Dionysius the Areopagite). There is no set pattern to which we can appeal, even if we can detect a common experience.

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The truth of the matter is that conversion is not primarily an experience but a doctrine, and to understand it we must examine principles before we look at specific cases. Our minds focus inevitably on chapter 3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be *born again*. This hallowed phrase has acquired a certain notoriety in recent years, thanks to a religious awakening in the United States which has made being "born again" a condition of election to the Presidency. As a result it has been picked up by the media and is now being used as a convenient expression for what is no more than a change of attitude or opinion. In itself, that is not to be despised of course, but it falls a long way short of what the Bible means. In the New Testament, regeneration is not a superficial change of the kind which might be produced by clever advertising. On the contrary, it is a completely new beginning, on a different basis from the one which obtained before.

If we look for theoretical justification in the Scriptures, we turn instinctively to John's Gospel, where, the contrast between darkness and light is pictured at its starkest. Our minds focus inevitably on chapter 3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be *born again*. This hallowed phrase has acquired a certain notoriety in recent years, thanks to a religious awakening in the United States which has made being "born again" a condition of election to the Presidency. As a result it has been picked up by the media and is now being used as a convenient expression for what is no more than a change of attitude or opinion. In itself, that is not to be despised of course, but it falls a long way short of what the Bible means. In the New Testament, regeneration is not a superficial change of the kind which might be produced by clever advertising. On the contrary, it is a completely new beginning, on a different basis from the one which obtained before.

This new basis is necessary because of the state of sinfulness in which all men since Adam find themselves. It does not matter if they have not committed any parti-

cularly grave sin; merely being in that Condition is enough. Nicodemus was a good and pious man, probably closer to God than most men of his time. He was even able to recognise a positive value in Jesus — not unlike what many liberal-minded folk would be prepared to admit today, viz. that he was an extraordinary man with a particularly close relationship to God. Yet even with all that going for him, Nicodemus was *dead*, spiritually speaking. Even he had to begin all over again with an experience of salvation and new life in the Spirit of which he had no conception.

Later on in the Gospel it becomes clearer what this involves. In John 14-16, Jesus explains to his disciples who he is, what his mission means, and how it will be worked out. In these chapters he gives instruction in particular about the work of the coming Holy Spirit. In John 16:8 we read that when the Holy Spirit comes, he will *convict* the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgement. Here in a nutshell is the message of the Gospel and the doctrine of conversion.

### **If I have not been convicted of my sin in a way which produces repentance in me, then I have not heard the Holy Spirit.**

First, the work of conversion is one which belongs to the Holy Spirit. If he is not the author of experience, then it is not authentic. It is certainly possible to simulate the experience, and many preachers have been masters at this. People have been known to respond to many kinds of call, for many reasons. It is not always apparent at the time, but later on we know from the record of those who go on in faith — as opposed to those who fall away — who has been genuinely touched and who has not. God is free to act (or not) as he chooses, but one thing is absolutely clear. However he may act, the initial result is always the same — it produces *conviction* in the heart of the one who hears. If I have not been convicted of my sin in a way which produces repentance in me, then I have not heard the Holy Spirit. It may be dramatic, or it may not. I may have a whole catalogue of sins to confess or I may not. But one thing is sure — I must know, intellectually and experimentally — that without God I am lost. If I cannot say that, I am not a Christian.

Second, the content of the Holy Spirit's message is highly specific. He convicts us of *sin*, because we have not believed in Christ. We are guilty of the blood which he shed for us on the cross. It was there that atonement was made, not just for sin in some general sense, but for *my sins*, not just for the world, but for *me*. It comes home to me, not in a way which excludes others, but in a way which gets to grips with the real problem at the heart of my particular life. I have sinned; I am a sinner; I need forgiveness. My disobedience has driven Christ to his death for my sake — that is the intensity of the personal relationship with him which is the hallmark of all true conversion.

Then the Holy Spirit convicts us of *righteousness*. Why? Because the Christ whom we nailed to the tree has risen and ascended on high. At the right hand of the Father he rules in righteousness over the world. How can we hope to know him if we are not also clothed with his righteousness? It is a popular failing, condemned by Paul in Romans 6, to imagine that by sinning we can somehow increase the flow of God's grace towards us, as if there is an unlimited supply of mercy just waiting for an opportunity to be used. It is a quaint delusion which is fostered by ritual practices like Confession in the Roman Church, but we should never underestimate its power to deceive and the strength with which it is condemned in Scripture. There is no genuine conviction of sin unless there is also a conviction of righteousness — a point which reinforces Jesus' earlier teaching about the need to be born again. There is a complete and permanent turn around here — not just a cosmetic readjustment which will wear off after a week or two.

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit convicts us of *judgement*. Why? Because Satan, the prince of this world has been condemned. It is easy to look at this verse and think that judgement here refers to our own sense of conviction of sin. Yet there are two reasons why that is improbable. First, that has already been mentioned. We are not going to be judged *after* we have been convicted of sin and righteousness! Once we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ there is no condemnation left to be feared, so that interpretation can be ruled out. Second, the text tells us that it is Satan, not the believer, who is condemned. We say in our earlier discussion of the Fall, how the Bible maintains a balance between personal sin and cosmic evil, recognising each for what it is. It is the same in the process of conversion. We are convicted of our own personal guilt and held accountable for it. We are then shown the righteousness of Christ which is alone sufficient to save us. Finally, we are told that Satan has been defeated. There can be no going back because there is nothing worth going back to, or for. Who wants to serve a defeated prince? The world has not heard that message yet, but to the Christian it is a vital part of his experience. How many young believers have slid back because they were never convicted of this? How many continued secretly to fear the power of Satan, and feel its attraction? What a terrible price we can pay if we neglect this aspect of our conversion!

The teaching of John's Gospel is normative for our experience of conversion, and the principles laid down here are the essential ingredients which give it its authenticity. When we look at the rest of the New Testament and examine the testimony and lives of those who received the Word with power, we are brought back again and again to the same themes. We do not have to deny the accusation that so much of this is purely psychological; the psyche is, after all, an important element in our make-up, and the great evangelists of history have always prided themselves on being called to be soul-winners for Jesus. It would be a strange conversion indeed which was not deeply psychological in its effects.

### **It is, quite simply, a new birth, an entry into a relationship with an eternal Lord and Saviour who brings us into his eternity. That is conversion; anything less is counterfeit and deceit.**

What we must avoid is the suggestion that what is psychological is necessarily manipulated. We must reject the accusation that it is partial or superficial, that it might wear off like any emotional experience. True conversion, as the history of the Church and the witness of countless saints makes clear, does not come and go like that. It is, quite simply, a new birth, an entry into a relationship with an eternal Lord and Saviour who brings us into his eternity. That is conversion; anything less is counterfeit and deceit. Let us not be ashamed of the Gospel which we have been given to proclaim, but let us spread it in the firm conviction that he who has brought us to a knowledge of his saving truth will redeem many from the terrors of the Last Judgement and eternal damnation.

### **Correspondence**

*We have received the following letter from the Revd Jock Stein of Dundee (co-author with the Revd Howard Taylor of the recent Fount Paperback, published by Collins, In Christ All Things Hold Together) in response to Dr Bray's article on the Fall published in Evangel 3:1.*

*Dr Bray has written a brief reply.*

### **The Fall and the Place of Women**

In the course of a helpful article on the Fall, Gerald Bray draws one conclusion which would require far more

biblical argument before it could be accepted. He refers to 1 Timothy 2.14, and Paul's rabbinic argument that because Eve sinned first, women should therefore have a subordinate role in public worship.

Dr Bray attempts to read Paul's thinking as he focuses on woman as the vulnerable point of man, and sidesteps the more obvious point that Paul makes, namely that Eve, not Adam, is the guilty party. In the light of what Genesis actually says, I am sure he is right to take this line; Paul, as so often, was making a specific theological case for a specific situation in the early church; he did the same thing to persuade women to wear hats in worship, and Peter did the same thing with the conduct of slaves.

However, if we wish to go deep into Paul in this kind of way, we must do it properly! Dr Bray makes no mention of the following verse, 1 Timothy 2.15. This has a double reference: (a) to the birth of the Messiah, through which God planned to deal with the sin of humankind, starting at the same vulnerable point and setting aside the male for the female in the virginal conception of our Lord; and (b) to the salvation of women through precisely this act of God — the entry of our Lord into our space-time history is part of God's plan of salvation which overcomes the disobedience of the Fall through the obedience of Jesus Christ. It is not insignificant that as a result of an encounter in another garden, a woman is chosen as the first to spread the news of a risen Lord.

Even though Paul chose to confine women strictly to the gallery, as was the custom in Jewish worship, his thinking includes seeds of theology which would in due time lead Reformed churches such as the Church of Scotland to ordain women to public ministry. This is of course exactly what happened in the case of slavery, which was at one time "justified" both in terms of creation ordinance and the Fall.

Dr Bray seems partly to recognise this, because (unlike Paul in this context) he does actually assign women a role (albeit "subordinate"); this is at least a nod towards Paul's own practice elsewhere, which accepted the counselling and teaching role of Priscilla (named before her husband Aquila), the position of Lydia as head of a household... not to mention the apostle Julia in Romans 16 (unless you think, as some scholars and translators do, that she must have been a man called Junias).

*Jock Stein*

Dear Mr Stein,

Thank you very much indeed for your long and thoughtful response to my article in *Evangel* about the Fall. It is always very encouraging to see that some people like yourself take the trouble to go over very carefully what is said! I quite agree with you that I have not considered 1 Timothy 2:15 in the way which you suggest I ought to have done, and I must confess that the main reason for this was precisely because I wanted to avoid the women-issue! I know that it is important, and that it needs to be thought through very carefully, but in the limited space available, and given the topic — which is the Fall of mankind, not the ordination of women — I did not want to get irretrievably sidetracked.

I would hope myself that the points you raise could be dealt with in a future article in *Evangel*, possibly by someone more conversant with the subject than I am, because, as you so rightly point out, they are too important to be ignored. But I think we can agree that the Fall is not the best heading under which to deal with the question!

Yours sincerely,

*Gerald Bray*



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