

Conversion: Spiritual Experiences (4)

How success oriented are we? Dr. Klaus Bockmühl, professor of theology and ethics, Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., claims that successful evangelists never seem to teach just what conversion means. He says that many people register a decision for Christ, but that there is no content to it. Conversion is seen as a change of mood, of friends, of opinions, but not of daily life.

New converts readily testify of their spiritual experiences. In our day, when experiences are "in", we must ask ourselves the questions - What is experience? What are the marks of having a personal relationship with God? How do people become converted? What is true conversion? Does everyone need a dramatic Damascus road experience? I remember a devout young Christian lady, who was told that she had to know the exact moment of her conversion. If she couldn't, she was not a true Christian. The young lady became greatly disturbed as she neither knew the day nor the hour of her conversion. She had always believed herself to be a Christian. Peace returned to her when she learned from Scripture that dramatic conversions are not meant to be everybody's experience.

Conversion is not just a change of feeling, a new attitude towards religion or even a spiritual experience. Conversion is to turn from one direction to another, or to return from one place to another. Conversion is what we do when we repent of our sin, believe and turn to the Lord of life. It makes a break with the past – the prodigal son returning home to his father (Luke 15:18). It is leaving behind the worship of idols, turning to the service of God (I Thess. 1:9), and living in dependence on Him (I Cor. 6:15-20). True conversion is not only the act of the will, but also the change of heart. The Bible says that out of the heart are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23). Conversion then is a total surrender and commitment to the Lord.

A converted man has a new direction in life. He seeks to live as Scripture would have him live. He becomes transformed. When the 8,000 Dani tribesmen in West New Guinea turned to Christ, they decided to burn their fetishes on a certain day. This symbolic act destroyed their former fears and old allegiances, and opened the way to the learning of Biblical living. Some other tribes, who had become Christian, decided to give up feuds. They ruled that half of their weapons should be burned, despite the fact that the non-Christian tribes were still fully armed. All these new Christians burned their weapons, not because missionaries forced them to do so, but because these new converts thought that it was a good thing to do. They had heard the Gospel, responded to it and understood that turning to Christ calls for a break with the past.

Conversion describes what we do. But the language of human activity does not mean that missions is human work and conversion is human achievement. All genuine revivals, all the movements towards God, and every conversion are all God's doing. Of course we can neither repent of our sin nor believe without the grace of God. Salvation is of the Lord. Only the Holy Spirit can open the eyes of the spiritual blind and break the bondage of sin.

Is conversion just the beginning of the new life with Christ or is it an only once event? Too often conversion is seen only as a crisis encounter with the Lord. The first conversion is from death to life, from the sinful self to Christ.

True conversion flows out of regeneration. After we have become truly converted, our work is far from done. A Biblical example is Zacchaeus, whose life was changed through his meeting with Jesus Christ. The ruthless man of high finance found peace with God. His spiritual "experience" led to actual deeds of restitution. He said to Jesus, "Listen, sir! "I will give half of my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times as much" (Luke 19:8).

The Reformed Faith rightly speaks of "daily conversion." Conversion involves the Christian in a life time of growth into spiritual maturity, into becoming more like Jesus Christ. A soundly converted man seeks God's glory. There can be no true conversion without distinct results. Paul taught, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity (2 Tim. 2:19).