

THE DOCTRINES OF THE BIBLE: SOTERIOLOGY 7: CONVERSION



According to Thiessen (Thiessen, 1949) conversion is the Biblical doctrine of the change that takes place in a person who has been convicted by the Holy Spirit and surrenders his life to Jesus Christ. At the time of conversion, a number of actions occur, usually simultaneously. These are conversion, justification, regeneration, union, and adoption. Once these have taken place, the process of sanctification takes place, over a longer period of time, and it is not so much an action but a process.

The act of conversion includes two elements. First, there is **repentance**, and thereafter **faith**.

REPENTANCE

Repentance is the act of realising that you have lived in sin and cannot be reconciled to God without repenting of your sin. Evangelism often neglects this vital process in what is seen as a quick way to fill the numbers in terms of the conversions. However, if there is no repentance and the understanding that you need a Saviour, then there cannot be any real submission to this same Saviour. Throughout the Old Testament, repentance was a central theme. It is even more prevalent in the New Testament:

John the Baptist's first words recorded by Matthew were that people should repent:

²**Repent** ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. – **Matthew 3:2**

A few years later, Peter said the same on the day of Pentecost:

³⁸Then Peter said unto them: **repent** and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. – **Acts 2:38**

Later on Paul would do the same:

²¹Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, **repentance** toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. – **Acts 20:21**

and

³⁰And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to **repent**. – **Acts 17:30**

Repentance is to change your way of thinking about something; to change your mind. It takes place in three ways: **intellectually**, **emotionally**, and the actual **decision**.

The **intellectual reasoning** (knowledge) is the mental process where the sinner understands the facts about their sinful condition. All men know of their sin and Paul makes this very clear:

²⁰Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the **knowledge** of sin. – **Romans 3:20**

Repentance requires of a person to change their mind about how they think about Jesus Christ. This is done intellectually.

Following this is the **emotional element** and has to do with one's feelings. It implies that one realises their errors, and this leads to sorrow:

⁹Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye **sorrowed** to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. – **2 Corinthians 7:9**

The final part is called **volition** – the actual voluntary decision a person takes to change. This is an inward turning away from sin and to God. Note that it requires action. This can either be a mental and emotional exercise, or an outward, physical demonstration:

³⁸Then Peter said unto them: repent and **be baptized** every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. – **Acts 2:38**

Here Peter tells the listeners to first repent (intellectual and emotional reasoning) and then to be baptised (volition, decision).

If repentance means turning away from sin, then it must also include turning towards something else – God's holy character is the opposite of sin and thus it is logical that repentance requires a 180 degree change, opposite from where you were. You turn **from**, and turn **to**.

Repentance is never to be taken lightly:

²⁴And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, ²⁵In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; **if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;** ²⁶And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will. – **2 Timothy 2:24-26**

Repentance is a gift from God. Some people may come, and have in the past, to repentance by witnessing extraordinary events. Just imagine for a moment if you lived in the time of Jesus and witnessed His many miracles – water turned into wine; the healing of deaf, mute, and blind people; and raising them from the dead. This should have been enough to shake people out of their faithless nature. Did these events really lead to repentance? Unfortunately, not always. God uses the following means to get people to repent:

- the Word of God – Luke 16:30;
- the preaching of the gospel – Matthew 12:41;
- the goodness of God – Romans 2:4;
- the chastisement of God – Hebrews 12:10;
- the belief of the truth – Jonah 3:5-10; and
- a new vision of God – Job 42:5.

FAITH

Faith is the belief in something that controls your life. Unfortunately, too many people have faith in the wrong things.

¹¹Now **faith** is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. – **Hebrews 11:1**

Faith requires hope for something that we have not seen yet. Faith is important because we are:

- justified by faith:

¹Therefore being **justified** by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. – **Romans 5:1**

- enriched by faith:

¹³Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: ¹⁴That the **blessing** of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. – **Galatians 3:13-14**

- sanctified by faith:

¹⁵And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. ¹⁶But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; ¹⁷Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, ¹⁸To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are **sanctified** by faith that is in me. – **Acts 26:15-18**

- kept by faith:

²⁰Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou **standest** by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: ²¹For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. – **Romans 11:20-21**

- established by faith:

⁹And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is Remaliah's son. If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be **established**. – **Isaiah 7:9**

and

- healed by faith:

⁹The same heard Paul speak: who steadfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be **healed**, ¹⁰Said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked. – **Acts 14:9-10**

What is faith? Faith is the sum of what is contained in the Word of God – the entire Bible serves as the foundation for our faith. In faith we walk, not always knowing where to; and we overcome difficulties by faith. We sometimes use the words **hope** and **belief** in the same way as faith, but there are small differences:

- **Hope** is placing our faith in the things to come, and it is one aspect of faith. It is a desire and an expectation. Once these have happened, it is neither hope nor faith anymore:

¹¹Now faith is the substance of things **hoped** for, the evidence of things not seen.
– **Hebrews 11:1**

- **Belief** is the intellectual element of faith. You may be inclined to believe something because the same or similar has happened in the past.

¹³But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and **belief** of the truth: ¹⁴Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. – **2 Thessalonians 2:13-14**

- **The faith** is the total Christian doctrine which is contained in the Bible:

⁶For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept **the faith**: – **2 Timothy 4:6-7**

When dealing with the conversion of an unsaved person, **faith** is the act of turning to God and **repentance** is the turning away from sin. Because faith comes from the heart, it contains an intellectual, emotional, and volitional change in the person. These are three elements that are necessary for faith.

The **intellectual** element is the one Paul refers to in the book of Romans – he makes it clear that even if the gospel has not been proclaimed to a person, they can see the goodness of God in creation.

²⁰For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are **clearly seen**, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: – **Romans 1:20**

Added to this are the historical facts that cannot be denied. Paul makes it very clear that faith starts with the intellect:

¹⁷So then faith cometh by **hearing**, and hearing by the word of God. – **Romans 10:17**

The act of hearing is an intellectual one. The intellect convinces us of the existence of God. Even the atheist who denies the existence of God, in his argument, admits the existence of God. You cannot deny something that does not already exist. Of course, in our time where we have the proclamation of the gospel no longer only through the preaching (hearing of the Word) of others, but also online, as with reading content on this website, one can argue that **reading** can be included with hearing.

The **emotional** element is clearly seen in the parable of the sower:

¹⁹When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. ²⁰But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; ²¹Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. – **Matthew 13:19-21**

The thing about our emotions is that while they are a trigger that can lead us to faith, our emotions often fluctuate. One minute we can move mountains because we were elevated by a sermon we heard on Sunday morning or evening but come Monday morning and we face traffic to get to the office, we often lose it. Our emotions are a roller coaster ride, and we should learn not to rely on them. Matthew refers to the same in verse 21. Emotions control us when things look good and God blesses us, but when He tests us, those same emotions evaporate and give over to frustration.

It is very important to understand that we can rely on the emotional element to start off the process, but after that, faith is what keeps us going.

The **volitional** element is the one that decides to act, based on what faith has revealed. Once you have accepted the gospel in faith, you have to apply it. Application is the voluntary element. You have to appropriate the promises of salvation yourself, otherwise your faith will not stand. One important aspect is the surrender of your heart to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Without total surrender, your spiritual life will be one of major ups and downs. What we should remember is that God is the same, whether we are on the mountains or in the valleys, as it is so well explained in song. Find and listen to Lynda Randle's song, God on the Mountain.

The appropriation of the promises of the Word of God in our lives is so evident in a well-known verse:

¹²But as many as **received** him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: – **John 1:12**

Receiving Jesus Christ is the appropriation of all that He is and offers.

THE SOURCE OF OUR FAITH

Faith has both a divine and human side. Jesus is the divine author and perfecter of our faith:

²Looking unto **Jesus** the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. – **Hebrews 12:2**

Our responsibility comes from us as humans to accept the Word:

¹⁷So then faith cometh by **hearing**, and hearing by the word of God. – **Romans 10:17**

THE RESULT OF OUR FAITH

Our faith leads to **salvation, assurance, and good works.**

- All aspects of our salvation, whether it is:
 - **justification**

¹Therefore being **justified** by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: ²By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. – **Romans 5:1-2**

- **sanctification**

To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are **sanctified** by faith that is in me. – **Acts 26:18**

or

- **adoption**

⁵He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? – **Galatians 3:5**

depend on faith.

- Our assurance comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit when we believe the Word and place our trust in the Word. Because we have assurance, we have peace with God:

¹Therefore being justified by faith, **we have peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ: ²By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. – **Romans 5:1-2**

- Good works are the result of faith. We could never be saved by the works we have done, but now that we have been saved by grace through faith, good works should follow:

¹⁰For we are his workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus unto good works**, which God hath before ordained **that we should walk in them**. – **Ephesians 2:10**

CONCLUSION

Have you truly repented of your sin and placed your faith in God through his Son Jesus Christ? Demonstrate your faith by the way you live, whether you are on the mountain or in the valley.

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