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Conversion In the Early Church. (2013)

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Conversion in the Early Church.

Topics.

- Conversion and being born again.
- The early church and home meetings.
- Personal relationship with God should not be confused with the Gospel.
- A person is baptised into Christ, not into an organisation.
- The universal and global church of God on earth is not buildings.
- God's Kingdom and Satan's kingdom.
- The worst of all sinners.
- Paul's motivation and the horrific power of wrong belief.

Despite the enormous variety of temperaments, backgrounds and capacities the people reached by the Gospel in the early church there are some factors that are common to all who experience being converted (i.e., born again).

Paul when speaking of his conversion wrote: -

- The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life (1 Tim. 1:15-16).

From these verses we learn that Paul saw himself as the greatest of sinners, this is because prior to his conversion he: -

- Ravaged the church and entered house after house dragging men and women out and committing them to prison (Acts 8:3).

Ravaged carries the idea that he not only spoke evil of those who confessed the Lord Jesus Christ, but also aggressively set about assaulting and abusing whoever believed in the Lord violently doing whatever he could to destroy and break up the church.

Luke in his letter wrote of Paul: -

- He went about breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord and went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2).

Saul wanted the high priest to give him letters that when he presented them to the priests at Damascus they would give him permission to drag men and women confessing Christ out of their synagogues so that he could take them captive to Jerusalem to be punished and even put to death (Acts 22:5) (Acts 26:10). This is why Paul considered himself the foremost (worst) of all sinners

For further information concerning Paul, see the title: -

- The Worst of all Sinners (at the end of this chapter).

We also learn that Jesus used Paul as an example to display to every sinner seeking God that there is no sin that will stop God from saving whoever humbles themselves before Him and in honest repentance accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their eternal Saviour.

The conversion of Paul's life from extreme fury against Christ to a life of surrendered devotion toward him shines a brilliant spotlight on the truth that God's mercy is without limitations and that there is no barrier to God no matter how spiritually blinded a person maybe if they are seeking after Him. Though Paul was aggressively against Christ he had an honest zeal for God, Paul was not doing what he did for pride, ego and power as the religious leaders who plotted Jesus murder were, but because of his honest zeal for God. Paul was zealous for Moses Law and the Jewish faith and spiritually blinded to what was truly important to the heart of God and to the King and Saviour who had ascended from the bloodstained cross.

The experience of Paul's encounter with Christ gives us an insight into the pattern of conversion in the early church. From Paul's conversion we see that his encounter with Jesus: -

- Illuminated Jesus as Lord and his conscience was reached.
- He faced up to the fact that he had been kicking against the pricks, meaning he had been fighting against his conscience and against God's plans and purposes.
- His emotions were stirred as he saw the implications of his rebellion against Christ and the plan and purpose of God.

These were all steps to reaching Paul's will because the ultimate goal of Christ was to bend Paul's will in in trusting surrender to him so that he would be Lord and King of Paul's life. Since neither God nor Christ will ever force themselves upon us God invites us into his Kingdom by bringing us face to face with sin and revealing his love. After encountering Jesus in this way Paul was immediately transformed in direction, motivation and passion for Christ and as time went on his supreme aim was love for his Redeemer. This is why the conversion of Paul is rightly called a pattern for subsequent believers.

Conversion and being born again: some might ask, "What is the difference between conversion and being born again?" The answer is simple, there is no difference they are simply different titles that refer to the same experience.

Conversion and being born again both apply to the following: -

- Being converted from one life to another life.
- Changing from an old life to a new life.
- Experiencing an event that lifts a person into a place of spiritual joy and happiness.

The following is a couple of secular examples of being born again. When a person who is poor wins the lotto or a man or woman fall in love their lives are dramatically changed for the better and they are filled with overwhelming joy. When something like this happens in a person's life they not only cry out with exuberant joy I have been born again meaning they have found new life, but they also feel this new life in their mind, emotions and heart. The expression born again can apply to those in the secular or Christian world, because it simply means that a person is feeling and experiencing a new and better life.

Born again and Christianity: for a Christian born again means that a person has been converted from a life without God to a life in union and relationship with God. It means they have been delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13). The following is some of the most common factors to all who were converted in the early church; their mind was illuminated to Christ and their conscience was quickened (i.e., stirred) and they came to the Lord with a humbled and grateful heart and yielded their will to him and their life was changed.

Being led to conversion: not everyone is led to the point of conversion in the same way, the following are some of the different ways in which people were led to conversion in the early church: -

- By means of the Old Testament Scriptures and the prophecies.
- By the wonders and miracles Christ did and the deliverance of demons.
- By the purity of Christian life and the monotheism of Christianity (in contrast to many gods).
- By the testimony of the martyrs (i.e., those who witnessed their deaths saw that these people had something greater than life itself).
- By the prospect it holds out of immortality and everlasting glory in contrast to eternal death.

The early church and home meetings: ponder for a moment; when the early church came together after Christ's death and resurrection it was made up of Jews who had been indoctrinated with Moses Law for nearly four-thousand years, Samaritans who had married foreign wife's and adopted their pagan practises, and Gentiles who knew nothing about God or the Old Testament Scriptures. These groups of vastly different mindsets were coming together in home churches to worship God. Though there was amongst their meetings a multitude of different views all had one thing in common, Jesus was central in their lives; he was the one that they were coming together for.

They no-doubt loved talking about Christ and studying the Scriptures together, I suspect much like university students who when given an assignment get together in a spirit of friendship so they can learn from each other by sharing their thoughts, ideas and discoveries to improve their knowledge and their marks.

They don't argue and impose their thoughts onto the group, but simply share their ideas in a spirit of learning and discovery. Not only do they all understand that some ideas will be accepted and others may end up in the bin, but they have also learnt through their school years that to improve their knowledge, enhances what they are studying and enrich their learning they need to be with others who have an interest in the same thing. This is the reason the early church gathered together in homes in the regions they lived in.

Spiritual relationship with God should not be confused with the Gospel: the personal and devotional relationship between a Christian and Christ should always be a separate issue to the Gospel. Though all faithful Christians worldwide come to Christ through the one Gospel not all will have the same devotional relationship since each of us comes to the Lord with different mindsets, different emotions and many from vastly different cultures, different levels of education (especially religious) and different degrees of past baggage and hang-ups and the list goes on.

For this reason though there is only one Gospel there will be many different personal experiences and devotional relationships amongst the global body of Christ since God does not turn us into clones, but allows each to have their own unique and individual daily and personal heartfelt spiritual relationship with Him and His Son. This is why what God does in one person's life should never be made a blanket teaching that this is what God will do in every other believers life (as often happens), when it comes to relationship God deals with each one as an individual according to His eternal purposes, but when it comes to salvation there is only one Gospel that leads to eternal life in everlasting glory.

A person, is baptised into Christ, not into an organisation: there are some religious organisations, institution and churches whose oversight require those seeking water baptism to embrace their set code of doctrines and sometimes even their historical religious customs and traditions before they will baptise a repentant sinner who has accepted the Gospel and is devoted to Christ. This is not biblical water baptism, during the time of Christ and the apostles there were no denominations or religious organisations and institutions in the Christian faith.

A person was water baptised into Christ upon accepting the Gospel and on the basis of their repentance before God and belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. After being baptised the repentant sinner is immediately delivered from the domain of

darkness and transferred into the global spiritual Kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13) and they become a part of the worldwide body of Christ. Though the KING of this global spiritual Kingdom of God is a perfect King his Kingdom is not at this present time. Why some might ask? Simply this: Christ's Kingdom in this present era is a family of believers made up of sinners from all nations, cultures and races who are united by God's Spirit of love for the King who laid his life down for them.

No-one in this family can attain to the perfect Holiness of God (if they could Christ died for no reason) this is why at this present time it is a Kingdom with flaws, blemishes, shortcomings, weaknesses, stains spots and imperfections made up of family members who are saved by God's grace and by their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ nevertheless: -

- The new-self, is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Col 3:10).

Paul in this verse shines a brilliant spotlight on the truth that for every faithful brother and sister in Christ who has a heartfelt desire to continually seek after the Lord and follow him: putting on the new-self will be an ongoing process until that glorious, awesome and breath-taking day when: -

- The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will rise first then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and our perishable (corruptible in KJV) body puts on the imperishable (incorruption in KJV), and our mortal body puts on immortality and so we will always be with the Lord when the perishable (corruptible in KJV) puts on the imperishable (incorruption in KJV), and the mortal puts on immortality and death is swallowed up in victory (1 Thess. 4:14-18) (1 Cor. 15:53-55).

Until this majestic world changing event comes every brother and sister in Christ is saved by faith in Christ and by God's grace, and all are called to put on the new-self and aim and endeavour to walk in the Spirit (doing what is right, good and noble) until the trumpet sounds and Christ returns so that while living here on earth our life honours God and brings a good testimony to the name of Christ.

Jews, Moses Law and Gentiles: remember there were Jews who had been steeped in the Mosaic Law for over four-thousand years, Samaritans who had married foreign wives and adopted their pagan practises and Gentiles who knew nothing of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all uniting together as one new nation in the Body of Christ (also called a new nation in Christ, a new creation in Christ, the church and the Kingdom of God).

These two groups would have to have shown each other enormous grace and love, because now in Christ they were members of the same global family growing together, in behaviour and in knowledge seeking out in a spirit of adventure and excitement further truth's contained in the prophecies, the Psalms, the books of wisdom and the many other treasures and pearls the Scriptures contain. Today a repentant sinner who desires to submit to God and accept Christ as their Saviour should be baptised regardless of whether they want to be a member of a denomination, religious organisation or an established church structure, because being a member of a religious organisation or a church congregation has no power to save someone to eternal life, it may help brothers and sisters grow in their salvation, but it should not be a requirement for the baptism of a repentant sinner who is devoted to Christ.

Being a member of a religious organisation or church structure should be a separate choice and issue to being baptised into Christ. The newly baptised believer should have the choice of what organisation or church they want to commit too or be a part of if any. This is because repenting before God and believing in the Lord Jesus Christ is not dependent on being a member of some religious organisation or church congregation. The act of being water baptised is the act of an individual man or woman expressing their commitment to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and not a baptism into any particular religious organisation or denomination. Those who have the privilege of baptising a repentant sinner into Christ's global family must trust God and that person's faith in the Lord to save

them and not man-made religious organisation, institution or church, it is God who saves the sinner and it is their faith and God's grace who will keep them in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Churches obviously help in this role, but we should always be on guard that we do not fall into the danger of trusting the church to keep the saved sinner more than God's Holy Spirit, their heartfelt faith, God's grace and their passion and personal relationship with Christ.

The universal and global church of God on earth is not buildings: the church is people it is the collective group of all who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ worldwide. At this moment it is the invisible spiritual kingdom of God existing now in the heart and mind of those who belong to Christ, it will be literally manifested through them on earth when Christ returns (Luke 13:28-29). It is not a perfect Kingdom since it is made up of sinners saved by grace struggling to overcome the natural limitations of human nature (self, ego, pride, greed, lustful thoughts, jealousies anger and such like things).

When the Lord Jesus Christ returns all those who belong to him will be made perfect in righteousness it is only then that the church, the Kingdom of God and the body of Christ be made perfect. Those who know God's love through the Lord Jesus Christ go to church not to get saved, but because they are saved. Faithful brothers and sisters in Christ go to church to be with other people who belong to God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for the following four reasons: -

1. They have a common bond in love.
2. To learn more about the Saviour who laid his life down for them.
3. To worship and praise Christ and his heavenly Father as a united family.
4. To work together to expand the Kingdom of God and do the work of Christ on earth as a collective group.

Going to church does not save anyone to eternal life, only faith in Christ and God's grace has that power, but this does not mean that many church structures and gatherings do not benefit the Lord's Kingdom and those who belong to it in many ways.

God's Kingdom and satan's kingdom: Jesus teaches that satan's kingdom is global and influences the entire world to oppose God and the Lord Jesus Christ it is an invisible spiritual kingdom existing now in the heart and mind of men and woman in every nation throughout the world. Likewise it is with God's present spiritual Kingdom it is a global Kingdom existing in the heart and mind of men and woman throughout the world who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and desire to honour God and live a life that brings a good testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ. This invisible spiritual Kingdom is manifested outwardly by those who proclaim the Gospel and by good works through the individual lives of those who belong to Christ and collectively through the faithful church (with all its buildings, governments and imperfections).

For further information see the titles: -

- Kingdom of God (ON WEBSITE MENU).
- Satan, in Satan and his Family (ON WEBSITE MENU).

The worst of all sinners: throughout my Christian years I have heard people state that they are the worst sinner of all and therefore believe God could not save them, all they have to do is look at the life of Paul prior to his conversion and ask themselves, "Have I broken up Christian families and put innocent men and women into prison and agreed as Paul did, to them being put to death simply because they were devoted to Christ? And then look at what God was able to do with Paul's life.

If anyone thinks they are the worst of all sinners and beyond God's saving grace consider the following, there was no-one in the Jewish priesthood higher in authority than the high priest Paul's authority and power was enormous. To be given letters from the high priest (Acts 9:1-2) that allowed him to destroy whoever

taught contrary to the Jewish faith gave him legal authority to use not only Jewish, but also Roman officers and soldiers throughout the land of Israel to do whatever Paul instructed them to do to destroy the opposing Christian faith. This is exactly what Paul was doing until the Lord miraculously turned his life around. We know Paul was causing wide spread chaos and mayhem throughout the region because Luke tells us when Paul left Jerusalem for Tarsus: -

- The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied (Acts 9:31).

Clearly showing the widespread havoc and destruction Paul was causing to the churches in Judea, Galilee and Samaria prior to his conversion.

Paul's enormous, terror and destructive power: Paul states prior to his conversion he was advancing in Judaism beyond many his own age among the Jews and because he was so extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers he violently persecuted the church of God trying to destroy it (Gal. 1:13-14) and pursued those who confessed Christ to death, binding and imprisoning both men and women (Acts 22:4) being convinced that he should do whatever he could to oppose the name of Jesus. After being given authority by the high priest he not only locked up many of the faithful in prison at Jerusalem, but when they were put to death he cast his vote against them and punished them in all the synagogues trying to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them persecuted them even in foreign cities (Acts 26:10-11).

Paul's motivation and the horrific power of wrong belief: it was not that Paul was motivated by jealousy, pride and selfish ambition as many of the Jews were or from an evil heart. Rather Paul's motivation was from his zeal for God and what he believed was the right way to protect the religious laws and faith of the Nation of Israel. Paul had been taught by Gamaliel (a Pharisee and eminent doctor of the law) in the strictest laws of Moses (Acts 22:3) and was therefore so legalistic that he believed those who were confessing Christ were blasphemers to the laws and customs God had given to Moses and to the Covenant the LORD had establish with Israel.

It was because of this wrong belief that Paul was motivated with such fury. This shines a brilliant floodlight on the power and horror of wrong belief especially when it is infused with a legalistic heart that lacks, mercy, grace and compassion which in Paul's case had been generated by attending a religious school that gave him a wrong understanding of God and what is important to God's heart. There is another great lesson we can learn from Paul's life, it is obvious Paul was fully conscious of the hurt and harm he had done to brothers and sisters in Christ prior to his conversion, but he did not allow the horrors of it to rob his mind from the peace and love of Christ nor hinder him in any way from proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel.

The following encouraging words of Paul show us all how he and by extension how we all should all overcome the mental horrors of our past life.

Paul said: -

- I do not consider that I am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own, the one thing I do is to forget what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philip. 3:12-14).

Scriptures Concerning the Gospel of Christ.

The following list of Scriptures can be used as an aid to help led a person to eternal salvation in Christ.

- Salvation (John 10:7-18) (2 Cor. 5:16-21) (1 John 4:9-19) (Ephes. 2:1-22)

- Eternal life (2 Tim. 1:8-11) (John 20:30-31)
- Jesus is the way the Truth and the Life (John 14:1-11)
- Beyond human understanding (Rom. 11:33-36)
- Christ is the end of the law (Rom. 10:1-4)
- Confess and believe (Rom. 10:8-13)
- Faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17)
- Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 13:10)
- The mystery (Rom. 15:8-12)
- Paul's Gospel (Rom. 16:25-27)

End.