"It is human to err; it is devilish to remain willfully in error."
—Augustine

04-Dec-09

What Is Real Conversion? (Part One)

The world contains over a billion professing Christians—of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox creeds, not to mention the hundreds of denominations such as Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Coptic, Adventist, Messianic, and so forth. Beyond these, a significant percentage of these billion-plus souls is "non-denominational," all of whom consider themselves to be Christian nonetheless. Despite ecumenical efforts, the number of differing Christian groups is only increasing around the globe.

This plethora of Christian "faith traditions" exposes the open secret that Christendom is sharply divided along lines of both doctrine and practice. Not only do the denominations argue over the nature of God, law and works, abortion, and the afterlife, but they also squabble over church government, the ordination of women and homosexuals, liturgy, communion, and a host of other issues, big and small. Hardly any point or observance has not come under fire.

In fact, the bickering between rival faiths can be downright petty, as is illustrated in the silly rivalries among Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Coptic, Syrian Orthodox, and Ethiopian monks over who controls various areas of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Even today, a Muslim family holds the keys to the church's main entrance because the Christians do not trust each other. In the summer of 2002, eleven monks needed medical attention after a fracas that began when a Coptic monk moved his chair from its approved place to get out of the blistering sun!

Are these the actions of converted Christians? How does a converted person act? What determines whether a person is converted or not? And can just anyone be converted?

Perhaps the most basic question we can ask is, "Who can be converted?" If a person professes to be a Christian, saying that he has accepted Christ as his personal Savior, is he converted? Is that all it takes? If so, does it mean that all "Christians" are converted?

The Bible, specifically Romans 8:6-9, 13-16, answers all of these questions about who can be converted:

> For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. . . .
>
> For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit [it]self bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

This passage lists four points about who is a true Christian—and thus, converted—and who is not. First, Paul says that a person who is still carnally minded—who has not submitted to God's spiritual way of life—is not subject to God's law, nor can be. Conversely, and more positively, a true Christian *is* subject to God's law. So if an individual claims to be converted but does not and will not keep God's law, then he is not converted.

Second, the apostle tells us that God considers a person His—that is, one of His children—if he has the Holy Spirit in him. When the Holy Spirit resides in someone, he is said to be "in the Spirit," and he will do or want to do all of the things that God desires of him.

Third, a person "in the Spirit" is trying to eradicate the ungodly deeds of the body. In other words, he is making great efforts to overcome sin. Human nature, goaded by the

wicked influence of Satan the Devil (Ephesians 2:2), is essentially selfish or self-interested and in opposition to the way of God, which is based on love for others or outgoing concern. The converted Christian strives to change from sinfully self-centered to righteously God-centered, which means he has to deny himself the evil desires of his carnal nature.

Fourth, Paul writes in verse 16 that God's Spirit in the converted person bears witness that he is one of God's children. Put another way, the Holy Spirit produces testimony, proof, or fruit, that an individual is indeed a son or daughter of God. In effect, the true Christian exhibits the fruit of God's Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), removing all doubt about his conversion.

If someone claims to be converted yet does not fit these four attributes, he is not truly converted.

We need to grade ourselves on these points. Have we been baptized and received God's Spirit by the laying on of hands? Are we keeping God's law? Are we are overcoming the sins that so easily trip us up? Are we growing in God's righteousness and producing fruit? How far has the conversion process gone in us?

Two passages in Acts provide an additional point to consider, one that tends to cause confusion on the subject of conversion. Acts 2 records the details of the Pentecost after Christ's resurrection, when Peter speaks to the assembled multitude, telling the Jews that they had killed their Savior on Passover:

> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2:37-39)

Shortly thereafter, in Acts 3:19, Peter preaches at Solomon's Porch and says something similar: "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." Peter shows conversion to take place at a definite time and all at once. He says, "Repent and be baptized," and "Repent and be converted." It is like snapping your fingers. Just like that. So when we repent and accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, and are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, we are considered to be "converted." We have forsaken our old way of

life and embraced God's.

However, as mentioned briefly above, conversion is also a process, which Part Two will explain.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

By This Shall All Men Know You
by John O. Reid (1930-2016)

Using an analogy of a Tlingit Indian ritual of leaving a young man on a remote island with only a bow and arrows until he learns to become a man, John Reid suggests that God requires a similar thing for us. We have to learn the survival skill of loving one another (John 13:34-35), developing personal relationships, the chief identifying trait of a Christian- a characteristic that does not come naturally. We need to learn the difficult skill of refraining to retaliate or get revenge even though every fiber of our being craves it. We are not to allow an evil situation to cause us to abandon being like God. Loving those who don't love us builds godly character. Christ has given us a living example of how to do this- applying mature long-suffering Agape love. Of all spiritual gifts, love has pre-eminence.

From the Archives: Featured Article

Are Your Beliefs Preferences or Convictions?
by John W. Ritenbaugh

John Ritenbaugh discusses the depth of our beliefs, showing the difference between our preferences and our convictions. He looks at both legal and spiritual ramifications of this subject.

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our Email Subscriptions page.