



"Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth."
—A.W. Tozer

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What Is Real Conversion? (Part Two)

In Part One, we learned that a great deal of confusion exists—even among professing Christians—about true conversion. Contrary to many who teach it, confessing the name of Jesus is not how the Bible defines a converted person. Scripture shows that a person must [repent](#), [be baptized](#), and receive the Holy Spirit; keep God's commandments; work to overcome his sins; and bear the fruits of God's Spirit. Such a person has converted—changed or transformed—from his old life to a completely new one in Christ.

We also saw that the Bible calls a person "converted" when he repents and accepts [Jesus Christ](#) as his personal Savior, and is baptized and receives the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands. [Acts 11:19-21](#) provides an example on this initial conversion:

Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

Luke writes "a great number . . . turned to the Lord." The Greek word that is here translated "turned" is the same word that is elsewhere rendered as "converted." There is a point where [God](#) considers a person to be converted. In this case, these people in Antioch believed the preaching of these persecuted Christians, and they not only agreed with their teaching but also "changed" or "transformed" their lives. Once this change of heart takes place, when a person repents and receives God's Spirit, he is converted.

Notice, however, how this scene continues:

Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out [Barnabas](#) to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. ([Acts 11:22-23](#))

Though the church was young at this point, its leaders had already learned that people can, after the excitement of their "first [love](#)" of the truth wanes, fall back into their old, sinful way of life. They can revert to carnality. Some [fall away](#) altogether. Their problem is that they do not "continue with the Lord." In other words, they do not persist in being converted more completely, or as the writer of Hebrews puts it, they do not "go on to perfection" ([Hebrews 6:1](#)). This teaches us that conversion is not a one-time event but a process that begins with a single event.

Like conversion, salvation is also a process. In one sense, it happens all at once when we are justified, as God considers us to be saved at that point. However, justification is only the initial part of a much greater process that will take the rest of our lives to complete. In fact, the Bible says we *have been* saved ([Ephesians 2:5](#), 8; [II Timothy 1:9](#); [Titus 3:5](#); etc.), we *are being* saved ([I Corinthians 1:18](#); [II Corinthians 2:15](#); [Philippians 2:12](#); etc.), and we *will be* saved ([Romans 5:9](#); [13:11](#); [Hebrews 9:28](#); [I Peter 1:5](#), 9; etc.)—clearly illustrating a process with past, present, and future aspects, which are respectively justification, sanctification, and glorification.

Conversion is similar. God converts us upon the receipt of the Holy Spirit, but we still have the remainder of our lives to live according to God's

instructions and to imitate the holy, righteous character of Jesus Christ ([Romans 8:29](#); [II Corinthians 3:18](#); [Ephesians 5:1](#); [Colossians 3:9-10](#); [I Thessalonians 1:6](#); etc.). Our initial conversion is merely the first touch of God's mind upon us. We have so much further to go. Truly, we will not be completely converted to God and His way of life until we are changed to spirit in the [resurrection from the dead](#) (see [I Corinthians 15:50-53](#)).

Thus, those who have only recently been baptized and received God's Spirit are newborns ([I Peter 2:2](#)) in the lifelong process of transformation to reflect the righteous character of God ([Romans 12:2](#)). The writer of Hebrews points out, "For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age" ([Hebrews 5:13-14](#)).

In a similar vein, the apostle Paul writes in [I Corinthians 3:1-3](#): "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal." In [Ephesians 4:11-14](#), he explains this concept in terms of the work of the ministry:

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the [faith](#) and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine. . . .

He describes conversion in terms of growth from childhood to maturity. As babies grow into adolescents, and then into teens, young adults, middle-agers, and senior citizens, so are Christians to develop spiritually. The apostle continues his thought in verse 15, saying that the goal is to "grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ." Conversion, then, is a process of spiritual development from carnal immaturity to Christ-like maturity—or in its ultimate sense, divine perfection.

As Christians, we are to go through the process of conversion—spiritual transformation of character—to the point that God considers us ready to fulfill the destiny and the office that He has prepared for us. If God were to change us right now into spirit beings, how many of us would be converted enough to fulfill the responsibilities He would give us? Beyond the fact that God would not do this until the time is right, it is likely that few, if any, of us would have the sterling character required.

That conversion is a process only makes sense. It is just like the natural, human process of growth of a child. What would one think of a "baby" that was born already mature, six feet tall and 190 pounds? Woe to the mother of that kid! Nevertheless, it would be abnormal, a freak, an anomaly. God did not design nature to work that way; living organisms must experience a process of growth, even if it is brief. So, like a baby, a newly regenerated Christian ([Titus 3:5](#)) must grow and mature through the process of conversion from a state of carnality to spirituality, from flesh to Spirit ([Romans 8:5](#)).

Next time, we will look into the impact of [sin](#) on conversion.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Producing Fruit](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

As shown in the parable of an unclean spirit leaving a man, yet returning with seven more spirits, being cleaned (or purged of leaven) is only the beginning of the growth process. To be made clean only prepares us for producing fruit. God's concern is for us to mature spiritually. If we stand still (resting on the laurels of our justification), the dark forces are going to pull us backwards. Uselessness invites disaster. We have to get away from the

negative fixation of not doing and begin concentrating on doing. The consequences of not bearing fruit are graphically described in John 15:6. God's purpose, once we are cleaned, is to produce growth in us.

From the Archives: Featured Article

'Tis the Season: Help for Our Young People

by Staff

As another Christmas season approaches, many in God's church dread having to endure it. But could our children dread it even more, being singled out among their peers when they do not participate in Christmas activities at school and in the community? We can help them not only to endure this season but also understand why God's way, founded on truth, is so much better.

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