



"Sin is simply wanting one's own way above all else."
—Ralph Earle

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What Is Real Conversion? (Part Three)

The first two parts of this series considered the questions of who is truly converted and whether conversion is an event or a process. Perhaps an even more basic question on this subject is "What role does [sin](#) play in conversion?" There would be no need for conversion without the existence of sin and its destructive effects on humanity. Sin and the anti-[God](#) world it has spawned is what Christians must turn from so that they can truly follow God's way of life.

God gives a concise description of conversion in [Ezekiel 18:30-31](#): "[Repent](#), and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit." However, if a person is converted, and he subsequently sins, does he automatically become *un* converted? Certainly not. Since conversion is a process in which one turns to righteousness and [holiness](#) over time, it also takes time and a great deal of habitual sin for one to revert completely to an unconverted state.

The apostle John helps us to understand the Christian's battle against sin in [1 John 1:5-10](#); [2:1-2](#):

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of [Jesus Christ](#) His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He Himself is the [propitiation for our sins](#), and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

In this passage, John is responding specifically to certain claims, voiced by Gnostics who had already begun to infiltrate the church, regarding sin and a Christian's ability to sin. They claimed three false beliefs:

1. In verse 6, that their conduct had no bearing on their relationship with God. As John repeats their statement, they believed that they could sin—"walk in darkness"—and continue fellowshiping with God with no adverse effects. John calls this a lie.
2. In verse 8, that they had no sin—in effect, that they were perfectly pure already. John calls this self-deception.
3. In verse 10, that they were *beyond* sin—in other words, that they *could not* sin. The apostle says this belief calls God a liar.

This passage reveals how little the Gnostics understood, though they claimed to know it all, which is what the Greek word *gnosis* means, "to know." A Gnostic is "one who knows," or pejoratively, a "know-it-all." Gnostics were proud of their knowledge, believing that they knew more than others did. Worse, they felt that their knowledge gave them superiority over others who had not studied the "mysteries" of spirituality as deeply as they had. However, John exposes that they actually knew *nothing*. As he writes, the truth was not in them; they did not understand even the most basic elements of Christianity.

He answers their false claims quite simply. First, he argues that, by definition, a Christian is one who follows the example of Christ, so it is sheer nonsense to say that our manner of life has nothing to do with our relationship with God. Only if we do as Jesus did will we stay in fellowship with God and please Him ([John 8:29](#)). If we are constantly trying to follow the example of Christ, His blood will be available to cleanse us of our sins, and He will gladly do so along the way.

Second, he counters that we only show our hypocrisy and self-deception if we claim not to sin, because we are obviously *full* of sin. Paul instructs us that God's law defines what sin is ([Romans 7:7](#)), and even a cursory comparison between God's righteous standards and our imperfect lives reveals that a great deal of sin remains in us after baptism—sinful ways that we must turn from. If we fail to see any sin in ourselves, we are clearly deceiving ourselves.

Third, regarding a Christian being incapable of sin, John contends that such a statement calls God a liar. Since the whole plan of God is based on redemption from sin, if we are already so spiritual that we cannot sin, why is God putting us through this farce of conversion? The truth is that all men are sinful ([Romans 3:23](#)). Jesus teaches that, just as God is perfect, we are to become perfect ([Matthew 5:48](#)), and Paul echoes that our job is to "go on to perfection" ([Hebrews 6:1](#)).

In his answer, John admits that, even though the whole thrust of Christianity is to turn from sin and live sinlessly, we still have sinful human nature in us—or as [Jeremiah 17:9](#) says, a heart that is "deceitful" and "desperately wicked"—and we do sin. Yet if we sin, admit it, repent of it, and seek forgiveness for it, Christ's blood covers the sin, and we go on striving not to sin. The desired result is that we have overcome the sin, learned a lesson, and grown in character. This is how conversion works: step by step, one transformation to the image of Christ at a time.

This should tell us a few things about conversion. For starters, it is not something we can do alone. It is God who works to convert us by His Spirit, as we work in cooperation with Him ([Philippians 2:12-13](#)). Conversion is His spiritual, creative process at work, transforming us into what He has purposed and designed us to become. As Paul says, the process of

conversion is God's workmanship in us ([Ephesians 2:10](#)). He conducts us through the entire process.

In addition, we realize that, no matter how long we live, the process of conversion will never be complete. We can never achieve perfection in this life, for we will always fall short of the righteousness of Christ. With its inherent self-centeredness, human flesh can never be entirely converted to God's way of outgoing [love](#). The apostle Paul, certainly a righteous man, lamented many years after his initial conversion, "I am carnal, sold under sin" ([Romans 7:14](#)) and "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (verse 18). Only by the [resurrection of the dead](#) at Christ's [second coming](#) will we be truly "incorruptible" ([I Corinthians 15:52](#)).

Yes, sin is involved in the conversion process, but we are endeavoring to overcome it. Even with the indwelling of God's Spirit, from time to time we will sin. Thus, a converted person is not perfect, but he is constantly working in that direction under God's guiding hand.

Next time, we will consider more deeply the goal of the conversion process.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Sin of Self-Deception](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

In our relationship with God, we must emphasize principle over pragmatism, because pragmatism inevitably leads to idolatry. Jeroboam, in setting idolatrous shrines and festivals at Dan and Bethel, appealed to the carnal desire for practical convenience (I Kings 12:26-33). These practical compromises eventually led to the desecration of the Sabbath and the holy days, ending in the captivity of Israel. When doctrine is diluted, it turns into outright idolatry. Like ancient Israel, we have to guard against the tendency

to gravitate toward ministers speaking smooth and pleasant things at the expense of turning from the truth. If we are led into deception, it is because our carnal nature wanted it that way (Jeremiah 17:9).

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Are Some Sins Worse Than Others?](#)

by Martin G. Collins

It seems that some sins should be worse than others in God's eyes. Is this so? Martin Collins explains that, though all sin merits the death penalty, some sins carry greater consequences and penalties.

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