



"The hardest thing about the Christian life is that it is so daily."
—Daniel Henderson

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What Is Real Conversion? (Part Four)

Sometimes we are so caught up in our day-to-day activities, including overcoming our individual sins, that we forget the goal of the conversion process, the product into which we are to be transformed. Perhaps we do not really forget it, but we often lose sight of it in the rush of our lives. Like ants, we are always busy doing something, and we forget to remind ourselves about what we are converting to. Where do we want to end up when our lives are complete? Answering this question helps us to evaluate how converted we are.

[God](#) set down the goal of human life at the very beginning, when He created mankind in the Garden of Eden. [Genesis 1:26](#) states plainly, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.'" Many commentators opine that these words, "image" and "likeness," are essentially synonymous in Hebrew—meaning that human beings generally look like God—but doing so limits God's creativity to the merely physical. [The gospel](#) declares that God's plan for every person is far grander and quite spiritual in nature. Though the difference between these two words is admittedly difficult to define, they suggest that man's physical creation is only the first step in His two-part creative work.

Two New Testament verses illustrate how we can understand the difference between "likeness" and "image." The apostle Paul writes in [Philippians 2:7](#) that Christ came "in the likeness of men," or in other words, in human form. Thus, *likeness* conveys the sense of mankind looking like God; humans are essentially God-like in bodily shape. God, therefore, used Himself as a model for His creation of Adam.

In contrast, [Hebrews 1:3](#) tells us that Christ is "the express image of [the Father's] person." The Greek word underlying "image" is *charaktér*, and while it literally describes an impress on a coin, its figurative usage suggests an exact representation of another's *nature*. "Image," then, speaks to God's *non-physical* qualities, such as His mind, personality, and character. Thus, though we are born in the bodily [likeness of God](#), He calls us to be converted into His spiritual image.

In terms of God's carrying out a dual creative process, Paul writes in [Galatians 6:15](#), "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation." In Christ, God continues to create. While God's physical creation of mankind ended on sunset of the sixth day ([Genesis 1:31](#)), His spiritual creation is ongoing, and it will continue as long as there are human beings to transform into His image. Each Christian is a "new creation."

What He is creating is the "new man." Paul instructs us to "put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true [holiness](#)" ([Ephesians 4:22-24](#)).

First, he says to *put off* the "old man"—our sinful nature that has kept us separated from God and that does not live as Christ lives—and *put on* the "new man," an entirely different nature that reflects the very character and way of life of God. This new man is a creation of God and has everything to do with righteousness and holiness.

In [Ephesians 4:25](#), 28, he provides a few examples of how this process works: "Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. . . . Let him who stole steal no

longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need." Notice that in these examples we have a behavior to *put off* and a different behavior to *put on*: The apostle advises us to quit lying and to replace it with speaking the truth, as well as to stop stealing and to start working so that we can give to others. This is the process of conversion: with God's help through His Spirit, forsaking our sinful nature and all its destructive behaviors and then taking on the godly nature and its constructive behaviors. This is how God is creating His image within us.

In [Colossians 3:1-4](#), 9-11, Paul approaches this subject slightly differently:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. . . . Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

The apostle sets matters in their proper perspective. Christians have been called to a wonderful destiny, but it is not without sacrifice. We were called to die to our old lives—the old man—and to seek and embrace an entirely new way of life, the life of God. If we successfully work through this process of salvation, during which we are converted or transformed into the image of our Creator, then we will be resurrected in glory at Christ's return.

What Paul does in this passage is to orient our lives in their ultimate direction—toward Christ. We are "raised with Christ." We are to seek heavenly things "where Christ is." Our lives are "hidden with Christ." "Christ . . . is our life." We are being made new according to Christ our Creator's image, just as [Genesis 1:26](#) said. To us, "Christ is all and in all." Thus, God is converting Christians, followers of Christ, into "the express image" of our Lord and Savior, to echo Christ's own description in [Hebrews 1:3](#).

There is the goal. [Jesus Christ](#) is everything to us. He is the One—the new Man—we are all trying to put on. This is what [II Corinthians 3:18](#) proclaims: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." Through the Holy Spirit working in us, we are being converted from the glory of man to the glory of God. How awesome!

The apostle John writes in [I John 3:2-3](#): "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, *we shall be like Him*, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." The two apostles agree perfectly. We are in the process of transforming into the image of Jesus Christ, and this conversion requires us to purify ourselves, to refine our lives, to the righteousness and holiness of Christ. Certainly, a tall order, but one that God promises to assist us in fulfilling by His Spirit.

Next time, we will walk the battlefield on which the bulk of the conversion process takes place: the mind.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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