

Becoming a Christian

In recent years, Christians have been given more instructions on how to 'win people to Christ' than in the whole history of the church. Yet there are probably fewer genuine conversions now than there have been for centuries. The technique of 'leading people to the Lord' has been so propagated that Christians, almost universally, accept a totally unscriptural view of conversion. If the pastor has not yet 'led to the Lord' the seekers among his flock, there must be something wrong with him! While most Christians believe in the sovereignty of God, many retain methods of evangelism, and ideas about conversion, which are inconsistent with this doctrine.

Three simple steps?

One of the most popular aids on this subject is an IVP booklet, "Becoming a Christian", but it is typical of many similar 'guides'. The author starts by asserting that many people 'would like to become Christians if only they knew how to'. The booklet then sets out three simple steps, two of which are preliminary and the third which will 'make' the reader 'a Christian'. He uses Revelation 3:20 ('Behold, I stand at the door and knock') to define the decisive step. Believing in universal atonement, he says the reader must 'claim [his] personal share in what [Christ] did for everybody'.

Towards the end of the booklet we find this statement: 'If the reader has clearly understood what Christ has accomplished on the cross, and has considered carefully the demands He makes, there is nothing to stop him from becoming a Christian.' He recommends a prayer 'I believe that for a long time you have been patiently outside the door, knocking. I now open the door. Come in Lord Jesus, and be my Saviour and my Lord for ever.' Even if he feels no different, the reader is advised to tell someone else that he has 'received the Lord Jesus Christ'.

I recognize that many people may have been blessed by this booklet. No doubt the writer is sincerely trying to help people who are seeking the Lord. Nevertheless, this booklet promotes a wholly unscriptural view of Christian conversion.

Sincerity not enough

It has become common to assume that to exercise faith in Christ is a small thing. It may be simple, but that does not mean it is easy. Neither should we assume that if a person is sincere, he necessarily understands the gospel. It is true that all we have to do is believe, but according to Scripture this is impossible to fallen human nature (1 Corinthians 2:14). The human heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). It cannot grasp that, when Christ was lifted up, he was made a curse for sinners like us, and we are therefore cursed until we repent and trust in him. We have to believe that we can do absolutely nothing to help ourselves spiritually, and that Christ alone can save us. Only God can reveal to us these truths.

Many ask for forgiveness without the faintest idea of what is involved. In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:23), the 'good ground' represents a man who hears the Word and 'understands it'. He grasps the truth of what is required. This understanding, which is God's gift, distinguishes the 'good ground' from the other types of 'ground' described. It is wholly unscriptural to represent this mighty transaction of believing in Christ as something done easily.

Decisionism

Furthermore, believing in Christ is often presented as that which is physical and not spiritual. People are so anxious to see their friends converted that they assume that if an appropriate physical act is performed, some spiritual reality must accompany it. This is the basic idea behind the false doctrine of 'Baptismal Regeneration', where the outward ritual is assumed to bring about a spiritual transformation. What happens? People are invited to 'go to the front' of the service, or to put up their hands, or sign decision cards, or at least to pray a particular prayer. It is all done with the best of intentions, no doubt, to help people spiritually. But, alas, they are told that if they have sincerely followed the instructions, then they are saved. This cannot be true since salvation is a work of God and not of man (John 3:8).

Faith in faith or faith in Christ?

Even 'Reformed' counselling sometimes falls into the same error. This happens when people are told that if they have prayed a particular prayer, they are saved. People are encouraged to believe that they have

been saved because they have prayed the right prayer. The whole idea is that once they have prayed certain words, they have 'done it', and this leads them to have faith in their own 'faith'. Faith itself has become a work. We are not saved on account of our faith but by means of it. It is the instrument of our salvation, not the ground or basis.

When we hear accounts of conversions, and of people being 'led to the Lord', it is generally on the basis that people have performed some exercise of a physical character, which is assumed to be an indication of an accompanying spiritual experience. At this point, perhaps, I ought to confess that I have done the very thing I am condemning. I have 'led people to the Lord', something which is, in fact, absolutely impossible since true conversion is a spiritual work performed by God's Holy Spirit. It is as much as we can do, by the grace of God, to point people to Christ. Our churches are being filled with people who have simply been told they are Christians on the basis of some action performed or prayer uttered. What we should be told is that salvation does not depend on anything we have done, but on what God (in his sovereign good pleasure) has done for us through Christ.

Christ at the door

In order to pursue this point let us consider Revelation 3:20. I realize that many people have been blessed by what I believe to be a false interpretation of this verse. I recognize that God may overrule false exposition. For example, a preacher may misuse a text but nevertheless present biblical doctrine supported by other Scriptures.

However, in the popular interpretation of Revelation 3:20, we are not taken to the rest of the Bible for an interpretation, but to Holman Hunt's famous painting "The Light of the World". In this picture, Christ is shown waiting patiently outside a door which he cannot (or will not) open. We are told that he is waiting for man to open his heart so that he can enter. This picture has become very popular with preachers, since it enables them to concentrate on man's will as the crucial element in salvation. This misrepresentation of the gospel ignores the cross, and represents salvation as something obtainable by an act of will, rather than bestowed on undeserving sinners by the grace of God.

Christ the Judge

Let us remember that this picture occurs in the book of Revelation, which is full of pictures drawn from other parts of Scripture. While the word 'door' is used in various senses in the New Testament, Christ himself uses it in relation to his return (Mark 13:29). Notice particularly Luke 12:36-40, where Jesus, speaking of his return, likens himself to a lord who comes and knocks on the door. The servants open to him and he makes them sit down to eat. What more helpful explanation could we find as we compare it with Revelation 3:20?

We also have guidance in James 5:7-9, where we read that 'the coming of the Lord is at hand', and 'the Judge is standing at the door'. It is evident, therefore, that Christ standing at the door is a picture of his return.

Bearing this in mind, we can return to Revelation to see the context. In five out of the six preceding 'letters to the churches', language is used which intimates Christ's return — 'I will come to you quickly... Hold fast what you have till I come... I will come upon you as a thief and you will not know what hour I will come upon you... Behold, I come quickly!' (Revelation 2:5;2:16;2:25;3:3;3:11). It should not surprise us, therefore, to find a reference to Christ's coming to the Church of Laodicea in judgement at a point similar to that in which apocalyptic language is used in preceding letters.

The Judge was standing at the door - 'Behold I stand at the door and knock.' Those who would hear his voice, recognize the terrible condition of the church, and humble themselves, would escape judgement. Indeed, they would be blessed by communion with their Lord. But let the careless and profane beware, for 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Hebrews 10:31).

This Scripture, therefore, has a solemn message for today. It is, surely, offensive to God to represent Christ the Judge, not as One whose 'eyes are like a flame of fire', but as One who waits helplessly to see what man will do.

A necessary journey

In Matthew 12:42, Christ refers to the 'Queen of the South' who came from a distant land to hear the wisdom of Solomon. Jesus then adds that

he himself is greater than Solomon, and thus even more worthy to be sought and heard. Here we have a biblical illustration, which carries the authority of the Son of God himself. It pictures a soul seeking and finding Christ, and thus helps us understand how a person may truly become a child of God.

We know from the story that the effort involved in the Queen's endeavour was great, considering the distance she had to travel, the difficulty of the journey, and the perils involved. She was determined to go personally rather than send a councillor with a message. How clear it is that the effort she made was very great; she came, we are told, from 'the ends of the earth'. But she was not unique. In his prayer at the dedication of the Temple, Solomon prayed concerning 'a foreigner, who is not of Your people Israel, but has come from a far country for Your name's sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your strong hand and Your outstretched arm)' (1 Kings 8:41-42). Even in those days, therefore, God made provision for the whole world! News had spread abroad concerning the great things he was doing for his people the Jews, and those who sought him realized that they must travel to Jerusalem in order to find the one true God.

Things are different now, of course. Since Christ ascended to his Father's throne, and the Great Commission was given, it is the message that does the travelling. The gospel has gone out to the 'end of the earth', and people no longer approach God through the hardship of pilgrimage. But this does not mean that no effort is necessary on the part of the ungodly.

Modern techniques of evangelism have been adapted to make effort seem unnecessary. Because all the hard work has been taken out of many tasks in this twentieth century, it is tacitly assumed that the same applies to salvation. It is considered now an easy thing to become a Christian. The very terms used make this clear. We have to 'decide', to 'commit', and to 'give', things we do very easily in the normal course of life.

How different are the terms used in Scripture! Christ spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven 'suffering violence', and 'the violent' taking it 'by force' (Matthew 11:12). He also spoke of men 'pressing into' the Kingdom (Luke 16:6). He spoke of 'searching', 'striving', 'knocking' and

'seeking'. In Hebrews 11 we are presented with the idea of a spiritual pilgrimage, and are told that God rewards those that 'diligently seek him'. John Bunyan, with the insight of an understanding pastor, accurately pictured this searching and striving in his famous allegory, Pilgrim's Progress.

Spiritual pilgrimage

It is legitimate, therefore, as we look at the Queen of Sheba and the whole Old Testament experience of physical effort in the search for God, to spiritualize these things and recognize that the one who is seeking Christ has to make a spiritual journey. The faithful pastor continually comes across people who tell him they have 'asked to be forgiven, have prayed that they might become Christians, and have sought the Lord, but all without success'.

The wise pastor does not shrug off their difficulties by telling them that they have already arrived, and it doesn't matter how they feel. He knows that the human heart is deceitful, and that they have more to learn about themselves before they will know enough to lay hold on Christ by faith. He urges them to go on. He tells them to continue to seek the Lord. He does not give them the impression that if they perform a certain act, or speak a certain prayer, they will instantly and automatically arrive.

Instead, he tells them that they will most certainly arrive if they seek the righteousness that comes through faith (Philippians 3:9), and that when they do arrive they will know indeed, and this will be a blessed moment. He will not need to give them human assurance, though it may be his place at times to direct them to promises which may help them to this end. The seeker's experience will be like that of the Queen of Sheba. He will make a great discovery. He will find Christ, and will know that he has found him. We will not need to tell him that he has found Christ—he will tell us!

The pastor and the seeker

When a true pastor tells seekers to 'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ', he does not make the mistake of offering them an 'easy way'. He does urge upon them their great need, but he can do no more than Bunyan's Evangelist, who pointed Pilgrim to Christ. His work is to make sure that seekers are travelling towards Mount Zion, or perhaps we should say,

the cross outside the city wall. His counsel is all towards this end. He may need to encourage some that God's dealing with them, since otherwise they might faint under their burden of sin. Others, he may warn solemnly, reminding them of their terrible condition. But he cannot tell them that the cross is just around the corner, or that they have arrived, since he cannot see into their hearts and does not know.

When their burden falls off, they will know, as it was for Christian in Pilgrim's Progress when he got to the cross. This may not happen dramatically, of course, but happen it will. Furthermore, the real test and proof of faith is in the fruit of the Spirit, which is borne by those who are truly converted. This is the only evidence of new life in Christ that is scriptural, and that justifies a person taking assurance to himself or giving it to others.

Receiving Christ

We are told in John 1:11-12 that, 'He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.' This verse is also used by some in their evangelistic technique in order to 'get people through'. It is true that the word 'receive' is active rather than passive, but we must understand the full picture intended. To help us do so, consider a second illustration drawn from Scripture, namely Christ's entry into Jerusalem.

Zechariah 9:9 is a wonderful prophecy of Christ's coming to his own: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Behold, your King is coming to you: He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.' Here we have a God-given picture of true salvation. Just as Christ entered Jerusalem to be received by the people, so he comes to men and women to be received spiritually. He came to Jerusalem 'having salvation', but also as their King. He does the same to men and women today.

He is not a King who waits for man's invitation. He did not wait outside the city to see if people really wanted him. He took the initiative: 'your King is coming to you'. So Christ comes as a King with salvation — he approaches men. God does not hold out salvation on a 'take it or leave it' basis. He comes to us with it.

How does Christ come to the seeker? He speaks through the Word, through the ministry of that Word, and through his dealings with them. And to this they must respond. Let them come out to meet him, so to speak; let them receive him and welcome him; let them yield and respond to all they feel he is doing in them. This co-operation is, of course, enabled by grace alone — they can only respond as the Holy Spirit enables them — their ability to receive Christ brought about by that same Spirit (John 1:12). Faith itself is God's gift. Nevertheless, we urge them by the Spirit's grace to respond.

Perhaps the most striking point about this illustration is that the King decides when he comes to his subjects. It is God who decides when a person will be saved. It is not within the power of man. It is an act of God.

Pastoral help

So this is what actually happens in salvation; in his sovereign purpose God causes a man to seek and find salvation in Christ. I have restricted myself to an area where there is much confusion, an area where a pastor needs to be very skilful. He must not mislead men, but neither must he leave them in the air. He must point them to Christ and tell them to seek him. He must, at the same time, tell them to respond as God is drawing near to them. He must be skilful in discerning the work of the Spirit in the heart. But his energies must be bent towards encouraging, at all times, spiritual activity in the heart of the one with whom he is dealing. This he can do through the Spirit's help, but more he cannot do, and should never attempt to.

We can conclude on a positive note with the wise counsel given by Israeli pastor Baruch Maoz. He was approached by someone who wanted to know how to repent. He replied, 'If you are aware of your sin and your need of God's forgiveness, just call out to him, and keep on calling until you know that he has answered. Then come and tell me about it.' What wisdom! The seeker found the Lord. He was not given assurance by the pastor, but by the Lord!

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