

## CHAPTER 13

# CONVERSION AND NEW LIFE

Salvation is described in theology as the process of man's repentance, conversion, justification, sanctification and regeneration. Salvation means that the old Adam can be changed into the new Adam. It means liberation from bondage to sin. Hence salvation changes the inner life of the individual. It changes his personal relationship to God; it transforms his relationships to other people. Thus, salvation has both personal and social implications.

To be reconciled to God, one must be converted. Conversion means that man turns away from himself and turns toward God, with a fundamental redirection of the will and a radical reorientation of one's life. As Paul put it, the believer dies to sin, and is reborn in Christ (Rom. 6:8-11).

How does conversion take place? How can a self-centered life be changed into a God-centered life? Three answers have been given.

1. Pelagius, a British monk and ardent church reformer (c. 360-420), claimed that any man can change if he really wants to. Living a Christian life is an act of determination and dedication. We are not held back by external forces beyond our control; no one is bound to sin. We sin simply because it is

our desire to do so. Everyone is free to be what he wants to be. God has given each of us a capacity to do good; we can turn to God by our own free will. So conversion, for Pelagius, was defined as a moral act, a conscious decision to live according to Christ's commandments.

2. Augustine disagreed with Pelagius' views. On the contrary, he held, man is captive to sin. We are bound by an inherited condition of self-centeredness. There is no human escape from egocentricity. Since the Fall of Adam and Eve man has not been able to avoid sinning. Only God can reverse the basic direction of man's will. Grace alone can make conversion possible. By an act of prevenient grace,<sup>1</sup> God breaks the bondage of our human will and reverses its sinful direction.

3. A mediating position was championed by Aquinas, and has been called either semi-Pelagianism or qualified Augustinianism. Aquinas agreed with Pelagius that man has a part to play in his own conversion. He concurred with Augustine in stressing the role of God in the work of regeneration. Hence the Thomist view is known as synergism: God and man cooperate in the work of salvation. God moves the human will, but He does not act apart from our conscious choice. Conversion has to be a voluntary act on our part; yet our ability to choose comes from God.

Luther and Calvin turned away from the Thomist interpretation and revived the Augustinian position. In a controversy with Erasmus, who believed in man's free will, Luther argued for the bondage of man's will.

Calvin's attitude was forcefully expressed in his doctrine of predestination. Salvation is God's act and His only; man has nothing to do or say about his ultimate destiny. However, we should note the religious basis for Calvin's idea. He felt that predestination was a logical deduction from faith in God, based on our assurance of divine concern. God saves us in spite of our faults and weaknesses. How grateful we should

feel towards God, Calvin would say, knowing that our destiny has been predetermined by Him!

Whether a Christian prefers the Pelagian, Thomist or Augustinian interpretation of the will, there is general agreement about the steps leading to conversion and regeneration. First of all, new birth follows the act of repentance. Fellowship between the righteous God and the sinner requires that a man be sorry for his transgressions. The human heart must be moved to repentance.

But will God accept our act of repentance? To answer this, the Protestant Reformers worked out the concept of justification by faith. Luther insisted that justification cannot be obtained by works. Justification comes as an act of divine grace, independent of man's merits. God simply accepts us as we are in spite of our sinfulness.

Nevertheless, in order for salvation to occur, this objective act of God must be accompanied by man's subjective response. As Tillich later interpreted Luther, man must accept that he is accepted. He has to recognize that his estrangement from God has been replaced with union between himself and his Creator.

The second factor in the process of regeneration is forgiveness by God. When we whole-heartedly repent, we can be sure of God's merciful readiness to forgive us. "If we confess our sins he is just, and may be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every kind of wrong" (1 John 1:9). Thirdly, as a consequence of our sincere repentance and God's act of justification, we receive grace to carry out His will. Conversion results in a gift of amazing power to live a new life. The Christian is blessed with unusual strength to resist old temptations and live a Christ-like life. The old Adam is transformed into a new creature.

Finally, the new birth leads to participation in a new community. As an individual enters the fellowship of the

church, he becomes a comrade with hosts of others who live in communion with God. Being a Christian is never a solitary experience. By becoming reconciled to God, a Christian achieves fellowship with others. As Cyprian claimed, "No one can have God as his Father who does not accept the Church as his Mother." Luther taught that justification leads to sanctification. Once we are reconciled to God, we start to change into what He wants us to be. Sanctification means the process of individual and communal transformation under the influence of Christ and the Spirit.

But Luther insisted that after a Christian is justified, he still remains a sinner. This doctrine of justification by faith alone weakens man's resolve to improve his moral condition. To remedy this situation, Wesley proclaimed his ideal of Christian perfection. To be perfect is to be fully devoted to Christ and to express that faith in every act. Perfection refers to simplicity of intention and purity of affection. If a man allows Christ to reign in his heart, his nature will be so transformed that he will do nothing but good and pure acts. The Christ-spirit will permeate his whole being, just as the bloodstream nourishes the entire physical body.

Calvinists and Anglicans criticized the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection. Calvinists felt that Wesley was too optimistic about the nature of man, while Anglicans criticized the narrow-minded Puritanism which characterized Methodist attitudes to innocent pleasures. Both groups felt that Wesleyanism was excessively moralistic, Pharisaical and legalistic. Yet Wesley was right to emphasize the value of inward experience and a moral lifestyle. Social prestige and theological orthodoxy are not half as important as zealous moral endeavor and growth toward perfection.

Protestantism has a tendency to become individualistic, pietistic, evangelistic and other-worldly in its understanding of salvation. To correct these weaknesses, Walter Rauschenbusch

advocated the Social Gospel. He was a Baptist pastor in a tough section of New York City, for about a decade at the close of the 19th century. He and some other young clergymen formed a study group called the Brotherhood of the Kingdom, which met for a conference every summer from 1899 to 1914 to consider the individual and social application of Jesus' ethical principles. Later Rauschenbusch became professor of church history at Rochester Theological Seminary.

According to Rauschenbusch, the Social Gospel is an enlargement of the Christian message of salvation. Besides recognizing the sinfulness of every human heart, we must become aware of the sinfulness of the social order. In addition to working to save individual souls, the churches should redeem men's institutions. We need to repent of collective evils, as well as personal sins.

Rauschenbusch believed that the kingdom of God was the focus of Jesus' teaching, and should be put back at the heart of the Christian message. He did not think that God would destroy existing social institutions. Instead, the kingdom will grow out of our present society, when we transform it by the application of Christian teachings. The kingdom is not an other-worldly hope, but God's goal for this world. God is working for—and wants our cooperation in—the reorganization of all humanity according to His divine will.

Rauschenbusch had numerous foes in his time, and the Social Gospel remains a controversial topic in theological circles. There is no doubt that the movement had serious weaknesses,<sup>2</sup> yet Rauschenbusch made a permanent contribution to Christian thought. He was right to emphasize Christian social responsibility. No Christian ethic is sound if it deals with individual morality alone. Christians must have a special concern for oppressed and disadvantaged classes and races. Rauschenbusch persuaded the churches that social institutions can change and should be transformed. Christians have a duty

to influence social structures, as well as individuals. At the same time, the Church must not think that men will become saints simply by the alteration of their social environment.

To repent means literally to turn around, to reorient oneself. Hence the Christian process of salvation should be different from the lifestyle of ordinary men. However, modern theologians differ from one another about the nature of the Christian lifestyle.

Some people will be converted by hearing and understanding divine truth, as Augustine was by the preaching of St. Ambrose. Others will decide to believe because of an inspiring experience, such as John Wesley's experience of feeling his heart strangely warmed when he attended a prayer meeting at the chapel of the Moravian Brethren. Ignatius Loyola was in a hospital bed reading a novel when he realized that he should become a soldier for Christ. St. Paul was traveling on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians living there when he was struck blind by a vision of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit touches the heart in any way possible. A person may never have a dramatic experience of conversion, but gradually, very gradually, through study and church attendance he may make religion a normal part of his life.

Whatever the process of conversion, it is necessary to grow in understanding of the divine truth as well as in spirituality, i.e. trusting dependence upon God, living with steady God-consciousness, deeply feeling the loving heart of God. One can love divine truth for the sake of truth and do good for the sake of goodness, love others and work on behalf of the kingdom for the sake of God. The life of faith should not be too strenuous, repressive or exhausting. Living for God includes being responsible and identifying one's will with the divine will; yet at the same time, with this disciplined living there comes a joy, enthusiasm and constant awareness of God's grace and help. Niebuhr speaks of the "paradox of grace"—we

must believe as if everything depended upon God, but we must act as if everything depended upon ourselves.<sup>3</sup> When we do our best, God blesses our tiny effort, magnifying it with His abundant grace. In the life of faith we truly feel amazing grace and experience astonishing miracles.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER 13

1 Grace given by God before the act of conversion.

2 Reinhold Niebuhr criticized the Social Gospel movement for:

1. excessive optimism about the progress of man;
2. utopianism—because it believed the kingdom could be realized on earth;
3. belief in love alone without seeing the need for justice.

See his *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (Fairfield: Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, 1977), pp. 110-111; also *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), Ch. 6.

3 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II: *Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 216.