

XXIX.

Conversion of All That Come.

“Turn Thou me and I shall be turned.” —*Jer. xxxi. 18.*



The elect, born again and effectually called, *converts himself*. To remain unconverted is impossible; but he inclines his ear, he turns his face to the blessed God, he is converted in the fullest sense of the word.

In conversion the fact of cooperation on the part of the saved sinner assumes a clearly defined and perceptible character. In regeneration there was none; in the calling there was a beginning of it; in conversion proper it became a fact. When the Holy Spirit *regenerates* a man, it is an “Effatha,” *i.e.*, He opens the ear. When He effectually *calls* him, He speaks into that opened ear, which cooperates by receiving the sound, that is, by harkening. But when the Holy Spirit actually *converts* the man, then the act of man coalesces with the act of the Holy Spirit, and it is said: “Let the wicked forsake his way, *and let him return* unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him” (*Isa. lv. 7*); and in another place: “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.” (*Psalm xix. 7*)

It is a remarkable fact that the Sacred Scripture refers to conversion almost *one hundred and forty times* as being an act of man, and only six *times* as an act of the Holy Ghost. It is repeated again and again: “Repent and turn to the Lord your God” (*Acts xxvi. 20*); “Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord” (*Jer. iii. 22*); “Sinners shall return unto Thee” (*Psalm li. 13*, Dutch Version); “Repent and do thy first works” (*Rev. ii. 5*). But conversion as an act of the Holy Spirit is spoken of only in *Psalm xix. 8*, “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul”; in *Jer. xxxi. 18*, “Turn Thou me and I shall be turned”; in *Acts xi. 18*, “That God also to the Gentiles *granted* repentance unto life”; *Rom. ii. 4*, “That the goodness of God *leadeth* thee to repentance”; in *2 Tim. ii. 25*, “If God peradventure will *give* them repentance”; in *Heb. vi. 6*, “That it is impossible to *renew* such (as fall away) to repentance.”

This fact should be carefully considered. When Scripture presents conversion as the Spirit’s act but six times, and as man’s act one hundred and forty times, in preaching the same proportion should be observed. And, therefore, the preachers who, when preaching on conversion, treat it almost invariably in its passive aspect and in the abstract; who apparently lack the courage and boldness to declare to their hearers that it is *their* duty to convert *themselves* unto God, seriously err. It has a very pious look, but it is against the Scripture. And yet it is perfectly natural that one should hesitate to say, “*You* must convert *yourself*,” so long as regeneration and conversion are still confounded. For then the declaration, “*You* must convert yourself,” ignores the sovereignty of God, and implies that a dead sinner is still able to do something of himself. And this is the reason why the preachers who will not surrender the sovereignty of God, and who will not deduct anything from the deadness of



the sinner, are afraid “to speak to deaf ears.” Hence they *pray* for the conversion of the hearers, but dare not in the Name of the Lord *demand* it of them.

And nothing may be deducted either from the divine sovereignty or from the sinner’s deadness. Every demand for conversion which has such tendency is Pelagianism, and must be rejected. But if the teaching of the Reformed Church in this respect be thoroughly understood, the whole difficulty disappears.

It should be noticed, however, that Scripture, speaking of conversion, does not always imply that it is *saving* conversion. The real work of salvation is always accompanied on its way by a phantom. Alongside of saving faith goes *temporal* faith; alongside of the effectual call, the *ordinary* call; and alongside of saving conversion, *ordinary* conversion.

Conversion in its saving sense occurs but once in a man’s life, and this act can never be repeated. Once having passed from death unto life, he is alive and will never return unto death. Perdition is not a stream spanned by many bridges; nor does the saint, tossed between endless hopes and fears, cross the bridge leading to life, by and by to return by another to the shores of death. No; there is but one bridge, which can be crossed but once; and he that has crossed it is kept by the power of God from going back. Tho all powers should combine to draw him back, God is stronger than all, and no one shall pluck him out of His hand.

We state this as distinctly and forcibly as possible, for at this point souls are often led astray. It is heard repeatedly these days, “Your conversion is not a momentary act, but an act of life which repeats itself constantly; and wo to the man who fails for a single day to be converted anew.” And this is altogether wrong. Language should not be so confounded. Tho the child *grows* for twenty years after he is *born*, and before he attains maturity, yet, he is born but once, and neither *conception* nor *pregnancy* before it, nor *growth* after it, is called “*birth*.”

The fixed boundary should be respected also in this instance. It is true that conversion is preceded by something else, but that is called not “conversion,” but “regeneration” and “calling”; and so there is something following “conversion,” but that is called “sanctification.” No doubt the word “conversion” may also be applied to the return of the converted but backslidden child of God, after the example of Scripture; but then it refers not to the saving act of conversion, but to the continuance of the work once begun, or to a return not from death, but from a temporary going astray.

In order to discriminate correctly in this matter, it is necessary to notice the *fourfold use* of the word conversion in the Scripture.

1. “Conversion,” in its *widest* scope, signifies a forsaking of wickedness and a disposition to morality. In this sense it is said of the Ninevites that God saw their works, that they turned from their evil works. This does not imply, however, that all these Ninevites belonged to the elect, and that every one of them was saved.



2. “Conversion,” in its *limited* sense, signifies saving conversion, as in [Isa. lv. 7](#): “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”

3. And *again*, “conversion” signifies that, even after it has become a fact in our hearts, its principles must be applied to every relation of our life. A converted person may for a long time continue to indulge in bad habits and ungodly practises, but gradually his eyes are opened for the evil, and then he repents and forsakes the one after the other. So we read in [Ezek. xviii. 30](#): “Repent and turn yourselves from *all* your transgressions.”

4. *Lastly*, “conversion” signifies the return of converted persons to their first love, after a season of coldness and weakness in the faith, *e.g.*: “Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent and do thy first works” ([Rev. ii. 5](#)).

But in this connection we speak of *saving* conversion, of which we make the following remarks:

First—It is not the spontaneous act of the regenerate. Without the Holy Spirit conversion would not follow regeneration. Even tho called, he could not come of himself. Hence it is of primary importance to acknowledge the Holy Spirit, and to honor His work as the first cause of conversion as well as of regeneration and calling. As no one can pray as he ought unless the Holy Spirit prays in him with groans that can not be uttered, so no regenerate and called person can convert himself as he ought unless the Holy Spirit begin and continue the work in him. The redemptive work is not like the growing plant, increasing of itself. Nay, if the saint is a temple of God, the Holy Spirit dwells in him. And this indwelling indicates that everything accomplished by the saint is wrought in him in communion with, by the incitement and through the animation of the Holy Spirit. The implanted life is not an isolated germ left to root in the soul without the Holy Spirit and the Mediator, but it is carried, kept, bedewed, and fostered from moment to moment out of Christ by the Holy Spirit. As men can not speak without air and the operation of Providence vitalizing the organs of respiration and articulation, so it is impossible that the regenerated man can live and speak and act from the new life without being supported, incited, and animated by the Holy Spirit.

Hence when the Holy Spirit calls that man and he turns himself, then there is not the slightest part in this act of the will which is not supported, incited, and animated by the Holy Spirit.

Second—This saving conversion is also the conscious and voluntary choice and act of the person born again and called. While the air and impulse to speak must come from without, and my organs of speech must be supported by the providence of God, *yet it is I who speak*. And in much stronger sense does the Holy Spirit in conversion work upon the



wheels and springs of man's regenerated personality, so that all His operations must pass through man's ego.

Many of His operations do not affect the ego, as in Balaam's case. But not so in conversion. Then the Holy Spirit works only *through* us. Whatever He wills He brings into *our will*; He causes all His actions to be effected through the organism of *our being*.

Hence man must be commanded, "Convert thyself." The teacher bids the pupil speak, altho he knows that the child can not do so unaided by Providence. In the new life the ego depends upon the Holy Spirit who dwells and works in him. But in conversion he knows nothing of this indwelling, nor that he is born again; and it would be useless to speak to him about it. He must be told, "Convert thyself." If the Spirit's action accompanies that word, the man will convert himself; if not, he will continue unconverted. But tho he convert himself, he will not boast, I have *done this myself*, but bow down in thankfulness and glorify that divine work *by which he was converted*.

In these two we find the evidence of genuine conversion: first, the man bidden, converts himself, and then he gratefully gives glory to the Holy Spirit *alone*. Not that we fear a man's conversion will be hindered by some one's neglect. In all the work of God's grace His Almightyness sweeps away everything that resists, so that all opposition melts away like wax, and every mountain of pride flees from His presence. Neither slothfulness nor neglect can ever hinder an elect person from passing from death into life at the appointed time.

But there is a *responsibility* for the preacher, for the pastor, for parents and guardians. To be free from a man's blood, we must tell every man that conversion is his *urgent duty*; and *to be without excuse before God*, after his conversion, we must give thanks to God, who alone has accomplished it in and through His creature.



Sixth Chapter.
JUSTIFICATION.

