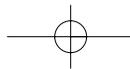
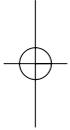


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What Is True Conversion?



Basics of the Reformed Faith

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What Is True Conversion?

Stephen E. Smallman

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■ In the gospel of John there is a story recorded of Jesus healing a man who was born blind. This remarkable healing immediately became a matter of controversy instead of wonder because Jesus performed it on the Sabbath. Jesus' detractors therefore tried to deny the miracle and badger the man into denouncing Jesus. The arguments went back and forth until finally the poor confused man could only respond, "Please don't ask me to explain everything; all I can tell you is this—I once was blind but now I see" (John 9:13–25).

I think that is a beautiful expression for anyone who has been truly converted to Christ. He or she is profoundly aware that something spiritual has happened, but just what that "something" is, is still unclear. For someone raised in a church setting there may be more that can be said than the words of the man in John 9, but explaining one's conversion is still difficult, and requires some additional insight. That is the purpose of this brief booklet.

My intention is to explain the meaning of true conversion to Christ while keeping in mind that young man who knew he had been changed by Jesus but couldn't explain it. He is like the dozens of people I have talked with about their spiritual pilgrimage during my years of ministry. I have learned that I need to listen and ask questions to understand where people are in their comprehension, and go on from that point

■ True Conversion

(or perhaps stop and correct misunderstandings). In keeping with that approach, this will be an *experiential* discussion of conversion. I'm writing personally and out of my own experience, and I will try to write in a way that will encourage you to think through yours. This approach is valid as long as we are committed to let our experience be judged by the teaching of Scripture, as best we are able.

I am addressing the new convert, but I'm also thinking of those who have been believing Christians for some time. It has been my experience that very few believers have done a thoughtful analysis of how God brought them to faith. I hope this will help every reader stop and reflect on the remarkable love of God to us, not only in sending his own Son to the cross to pay for our sin, but in sending his Holy Spirit to patiently win us over. Appreciating God's work in us is not only a source of joy, but it is crucial to our ability to encourage others, including our own children, along the pathway to genuine faith in Jesus.

I am also aware that some reading this booklet are not at all sure of their own conversion. You may be new to the church or have been around for a long time. Perhaps you have assumed you have been a follower of Jesus, but now you want to make sure your faith is real. Whatever your stage of spiritual journey, it is my prayer that reading this booklet will be a help to bring you to a place of trusting yourself into the care of Jesus the Savior.

You will note that I will discuss conversion by explaining from the Bible the work of the three persons of the Holy Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In terms of the experience of conversion, our first encounter with God is the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit (even though we don't know it at the time). I will therefore reverse the usual order of how we discuss the Trinity by starting with the *Spirit*, who leads us to faith in the *Son*, which gives us in-

sight into the depth of the love of the *Father*. Frequently I will quote single verses or portions of Scripture texts, but I encourage you to stop and look up the verses in their larger context, and to reflect on other passages I reference.

My own personal pilgrimage was given a biblical perspective and definition by encounters with books and teachers from the Reformed tradition. Thanks to them I began to understand it from the perspective of how God works, as revealed in Scripture, rather than just how I felt. Those encounters brought a stability and energy to my Christian experience that is still growing. Therefore it seems very appropriate that in a series entitled Basics of the Reformed Faith there be a consideration of conversion. I am deliberately trying to write as a pastor to those with only elementary knowledge of our “Reformed” terminology, but I will try to provide additional thoughts in endnotes. The review questions at the end of each section are designed to allow you to stop and apply the material to your own experience.

The booklet is also valuable for use in small groups. There are many possible ways it can be used, but ideally four weeks should be set aside for study and discussion. The four sections labeled “Review” mark the stopping points for each week. Each section can be read aloud by members of the group during the meeting with pauses for discussion. Or the booklet can be read in advance and discussed when the group meets. I have written in a way that encourages people to consider their own experiences; that is also what the questions encourage. Invite a few members of the group to tell their stories each week. The other members will learn to ask questions that enable a greater understanding of the experiences.

Groups typically move from sharing of personal experiences in the first weeks, to more carefully considering the biblical passages and the doctrine they teach. This is how it

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should be. In the end people should know more of Christ and his great salvation, but in the process of getting there, members of the group will also feel that they know one another on a much deeper level.

One of the “fathers in the faith” who has helped me the most in this area of spiritual experience is Archibald Alexander, a pastor and evangelist and the founding professor of Princeton Theological Seminary. In 1845 Alexander wrote a book called *Thoughts on Religious Experience* because he was concerned that a new view of conversion seemed to be taking over the American church. He was particularly troubled about the common use of spectacular conversion “testimonies” as a means of teaching people what kind of experience to expect in conversion. However, he was not against talking about our own experience with Christ, and had this to say: “There are, however, cases in which it may be expedient—it may be delightful—for a few select friends to enter into a full detail of the dealings of God with their souls.”¹

I pray that this booklet will encourage the delightful experience of recalling the many ways that God has been dealing with your soul.



I grew up in a nonreligious family. My first experience of church was at age twelve when my mother took me to a nearby Protestant church to be baptized. I had no instruction as to the meaning of baptism, took little interest in the church, and very quickly stopped going. But God had other plans for my life. As a teenager I was invited by the pastor of a local Bible church to play basketball for his church league team. Church didn’t interest me, but basketball did—even if I had to make the sacrifice of going to church once in a while. I loved playing