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Understand what's happened!

‘Whatever’s happened to you?’ That’s the kind of question we may be asked once we’ve committed ourselves to Jesus Christ. I taught in a boys’ school for three years, and I received an encouraging letter – nearly 30 years afterwards – from one of the boys I taught. He reminded me that he’d been something of a rascal at school and that after university he spent three years hitchhiking around the world, becoming increasingly aware of the purposelessness of his life. In his letter he related how some years later he picked up a Christian booklet while on holiday entitled *Journey Into Life*, and through reading it he had been brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result, his life has been changed for the better – he’s different now!

Our lives change radically when we become Christians. Our contemporaries and friends will probably consider it strange that we no longer want to do many of the things we used to do with them (1 Pet. 4:4). Some of our past activities may have been obviously wrong, and others just not profitable. Our direction in life has now changed. Life has really begun all over again for us.



**DIFFERENT FOR THE RIGHT REASONS**

We should be different people as Christians, and different for the right reasons. I'm not suggesting we should try to be different. We're all suspicious – and rightly so – of someone who puts on a pose and pretends to be something that he isn't. But such an inward revolution takes place when we become Christians that the differences a complete change of management brings can't help but show themselves.

CONVERSION

First of all, we've been converted. Strange ideas exist about conversion. If we say, 'I've been converted', the probability is that people will think we've become some kind of religious fanatic, or they'll describe us as having 'turned religious'. I don't think, however, we should avoid using the word 'conversion', but rather we should show by the real difference conversion makes what a wonderful thing it is.

Conversion means *turning*. On becoming a Christian we turn *from* in order to turn *to*. Paul wrote of the conversion of the Thessalonian Christians in these terms: '[Y]ou turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven' (1 Thess. 1:9, 10). The *turning from* aspect of conversion is *repentance*.

It's important not to take it for granted that we understand what repentance involves. When I sin I may be sorry for what I've done, and even go so far as to admit it to others and ask their forgiveness, where that's appropriate. But that may not yet be repentance. I may, for instance, then go on to do the same thing all over again. Repentance means more than just being sorry, and it's more than admitting or confessing where I've gone wrong. It's bitterly regretting the very nature of sin – that it's rebellion against God. Repentance is changing my mind about my sin so





that I don't only admit and confess it, but I determine not to go that way again where it's in my power to avoid it.

Now we'll probably think immediately, 'I'm not strong enough in myself to see through such a determination.' That's why the Bible indicates that repentance is a gift from God – it's a virtue that He works in us and something that brings a revolution in the realm of our will. And precisely because it is God's gift, it may be expected to be an effective and powerful principle in our life.

The church of Jesus Christ is made up of men and women whose lives have been changed and are being changed by His power. Reminding the Corinthians that 'the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God', Paul spelt out what he meant: 'Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Cor. 6:9, 10). And then he wrote, 'And that is what some of you were' (11). Notice, that's what some of them *were* – they had now been converted, and therefore they had repented – turned away – from these things. When the Lord Jesus conveyed God's forgiveness to a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery, He also said to her, 'Go now and *leave* your life of sin' (John 8:11).

I'm not suggesting that after our conversion, we are no longer tempted by sin or that we don't still fall into sin. We always carry around with us a fallen nature, and sin clings to us like mud. But we no longer *continue* doing the wrong things which characterised our old life *as a matter of habit*. When our old sins raise their ugly heads we hate them, and we know that we must turn from them yet again. Whereas sin once mastered us, we now strive to master it.

So while repentance begins with an initial act, it's also a *daily* activity. God doesn't want us to pretend that we don't sin, but





instead He expects us to repent and to confess our sins honestly as soon as we are aware of them, and He promises immediate cleansing (1 John 1:9). That won't lead to a casual attitude towards sin – as some might think – but it will have the opposite effect. The more we confess sin, the more we hate it and want to turn from it.

But repentance is only the first half of conversion. We turn *from* sin in order to turn *to* God, and this turning to God is *faith*. Faith – this trust – rests upon a solid basis. Christian faith isn't vague and airy-fairy; it rests upon essential facts which the Bible makes plain. It declares first that God our Creator has made Himself known to us in Jesus Christ, His Son, as in no one else – and that Jesus of Nazareth was God Incarnate (God in human flesh).

It explains, secondly, that the main purpose of Jesus' coming into the world was that He might die for our sins as our Substitute. The wrath of God, which our sins deserve, fell upon Jesus so that it might not have to fall upon us. This was an act of amazing love – in fact, breathtaking grace.

Thirdly, Jesus was buried and raised to life again on the third day, and He was seen and recognised by His disciples – and they were transformed by the experience. These amazing events of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection all took place as God promised they would in the Old Testament Scriptures – the first half of the Bible as we now possess it. On account of what the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished we may receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38, 39).

These facts have to be understood and received: first we need to give our intellectual assent to them. God doesn't call us to faith in His Son without adequate grounds. The four gospels, for example, provide the plain evidence of Jesus' deity, and, therefore, of the reliability of all that He said (cf. John 20:30, 31),



especially that He's the Saviour of those who call upon Him to save them.

But we still haven't arrived at the kind of faith which brings salvation. We must believe these truths about Jesus to the point where we *act* upon them, where we personally *call* upon Him. That's why the Bible talks of 'the obedience that comes from faith' (Rom. 1:5). Supposing you visit me in Edinburgh, and you become unwell, and you ask me for the name of a doctor. I tell you the name of my own doctor and assure you of his credentials and ability to help, and you completely believe me. But that won't do you any good at all until you show that you believe what I say by personally picking up the telephone and ringing the doctor, or physically arriving at his surgery and saying, 'Please help me!' To know that Jesus is the Saviour and to believe that He is the Son of God isn't sufficient – although, unfortunately, that's the place at which many stop. For our faith to be acceptable to God we must personally call upon Jesus in prayer and say, 'Lord Jesus, save me!' Then almost before we know what has happened, faith passes suddenly from believing certain truths to believing in a Person and finding that Person to be real! It's a wonderful experience.

Conversion is made up of these two parts: we turn *from* our sins – which is repentance – *to* Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord – which is faith.

NEW BIRTH

Another way of describing what happens when we become Christians is new birth. It's a helpful picture because no birth takes place without hidden work preceding it. When we're converted, we soon realise, as we look back over our life, that God was at work in us long before we appreciated it. In fact, it was that hidden work which brought about our conversion.



New birth underlines God's necessary and unique involvement in my becoming a Christian. There's one thing with which I had nothing to do – and that was my natural birth to my mother and father. I was there all right, but it happened without my having any say in the matter! Becoming a Christian – being born again – is essentially God's work. John sums it up at the beginning of his gospel: 'To all who received him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God' (John 1:12, 13).

One of the first people in the gospels to seek an interview with Jesus was Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling community (John 3:1-21). He seems to have been genuinely seeking after God. He was religious, but he had no personal relationship with God. He claimed to know about God, but he didn't really know God personally. Jesus came straight to the point and said, 'You must be born again' (John 3:7). He explained that this new birth is a work of God's Holy Spirit – the Third Person of the Trinity – a work as mysterious and as powerful as the wind (v. 8).

Conversion emphasises more the *outward* aspects of becoming a Christian: we are seen to turn from wrong in order to turn to Jesus Christ and to good. But new birth emphasises more the *inward* nature of the work God does in us: we are made new men and women (2 Cor. 5:17) by the implanting of spiritual life (Rom. 8:2).

New birth and conversion are two ways of describing the same experience in that they go together: where there's new birth there will be the change of conversion; and where there's the genuine change of conversion the explanation can only be the experience of new birth.

We've come some way then in explaining why we can't help but be different when we become Christians. God Himself





comes to take up residence in us. Jesus Christ lives in us by the Holy Spirit. Like a shop which changes hands, 'Under new management' goes up over the door or in the window, and changes must be expected. God the Holy Spirit is determined to form the character of Jesus Christ in us so that we bring honour to Jesus.

ADOPTED

New birth leads naturally to the lovely truth that when we become Christians we are adopted into God's family. I've been privileged to share the decision to adopt with a number of couples. One thing has always been plain: they've *wanted* the child they've adopted! While we feel unworthy to be adopted into God's family, the Bible assures us that God wants us – and that's why He's adopted us.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and His response was to give them 'the Lord's prayer', which begins, 'Our Father ...' As soon as I became a Christian I discovered that I could come to God with confidence. The Holy Spirit is given to all God's sons and daughters so that they may have the assurance to cry, 'Abba, Father' (Rom. 8:15). I would be very upset if my children called me 'Sir', but I delight in their calling me 'Dad' and their taking for granted my complete interest in all that they do and need. Our Heavenly Father is the perfect Father, and He deals with us individually as if we were the only person with whom He had to deal. As the infinite God, this is no trouble to Him – He can do it perfectly.

RESCUED

God isn't everyone's Father. A misconception exists that God is the Father of everyone. But it's not so. It's true, of course, that He's everyone's Creator. Jesus brought the truth right out into





the open when He said to some of His opponents, 'You belong to your father, the devil' (John 8:44).

Our adoption involves God rescuing us 'from the dominion of darkness' and bringing us 'into the kingdom of the Son he loves' (Col. 1:13). The explanation of our spiritual blindness and indifference to God prior to our conversion was our domination by Satan, the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4). His power over us was all the greater because we were unaware of it. The price of our release from Satan's kingdom was Jesus' death because it was at the cross that victory against Satan was achieved for us. All the time we were alienated from God, Satan had us in his grip. But as soon as we put our trust in Jesus Christ, the conqueror of Satan, then Satan's power in our lives was broken.

Jesus Christ is now our rightful Lord and King. We belong to His kingdom. First, He reigns in our hearts as our King – He sets up His throne there by His Spirit. And, secondly, He prepares a place for us in His eternal kingdom and at His second coming we'll enter into that kingdom and enjoy its eternal benefits. Already 'our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body' (Phil. 3:20, 21).

We can see now why there's such a continual conflict in our lives. Satan doesn't easily let go of those who have been released from his influence and power. We'll talk more about that battle later, but don't be surprised at it. When I became a Christian in my teens, I mistakenly imagined that most of my battles would be over. While perhaps some were, new ones began – and they continue! The Christian life involves a fight against Satan and his temptations, but it's a *good* fight. It's a good fight because I wouldn't know anything about such a fight had I not become





a Christian. And it's a good fight because with the strength of Jesus Christ I may win.

PHILIPPIANS 1:6

One verse aptly sums up what's happened to us, and it's found in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul had witnessed the conversion of many of the Philippians when he visited their city (Acts 16:11-40), and in his letter he writes, '[B]eing confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus' (Phil. 1:6).

My cupboards contain a number of incomplete works: projects I've started and never finished. God, quite unlike us, always completes what He begins. In Edinburgh, where I live, there's what is known as 'Edinburgh's Disgrace' or 'Edinburgh's Folly'. It's a monument, in the most prominent part of the city, which was begun and never completed. It was supposed to be an exact copy of the Parthenon, and was built as a memorial to Scottish soldiers and sailors who died in the Napoleonic wars. In 1822, when part of the money had been collected, the foundation stone was laid with great ceremony, but only the base and 12 columns were built – at the cost of £1,000 each. Nothing more has been done! God's work in our lives can never come to that.

What God begins, He continues – and that's been the experience of Christians throughout all centuries. God's Spirit never leaves us. Like a sculptor with his lump of stone, the Holy Spirit chips away at the rough stone of our lives determined to transform us, with our co-operation, into the likeness of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Satan will always try to distract and hinder us, but the One who is at work in us is greater than the enemy of our souls (1 John 4:4). We by no means see everything clearly at first in the Christian life, but God's Spirit will continually





illumine our hearts and minds by the Scriptures, both as we read them and hear them taught and preached.

Our co-operation influences the speed of God's continual work in us, and we must play our part, but God's Spirit will constantly stir us up to co-operate. We'll find our conscience regularly prodding us on to better things, making us uncomfortable about doubtful things – and God's Spirit achieves this secretly and mysteriously as part of God's continuing work. If our continuance as Christians depended simply on us, we would despair. But it doesn't! 'The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it' was the assurance Paul gave the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:24), and it's ours too.

CHECK!

It never hurts to check something over to ensure that it's right. We should check out that these things we've described have happened. Have my attitudes to sin changed? Do I daily strive to turn from the wrong to the right? In whom am I trusting? In myself or in Jesus Christ? As I recall my sin, is His cross my sole confidence before God? Do I delight to call God 'Father'? Is Jesus my Lord and King? Are there signs of God's good work in me?

If so, be glad! And don't be surprised if your old friends and your family find you different. Dare to be different! We don't help other people to become Christians by pretending to be like them. Jesus calls us to be like salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16), and the obvious truth about both is that they serve a good purpose simply because they are different from the environments into which they're placed.

In an interview with a married couple who were applying for church membership, I asked the husband to tell us how he had become a Christian. He explained that he'd been ill for several months in hospital. One of the nurses impressed him



over the weeks because somehow or other she was different – and the difference expressed itself positively in her high standards of nursing and caring. One day he plucked up courage to ask her why she was different. She was somewhat surprised at the question, but she did explain that she had become a Christian and that she tried to please the Lord Jesus Christ in her nursing. As a consequence, the patient became a Christian – and, to complete the story, later the nurse's husband!

A PRAYER

Lord, I marvel at Your grace in giving Your Son, Jesus Christ, to die for me so that I might be brought into Your family. Please continue Your good work in me and carry it on to completion. Make me sensitive and obedient to the Holy Spirit, and help me to live no longer for myself but for Your Son. I ask this for His Name's sake. Amen.

QUESTIONS

1. We've described becoming a Christian in terms of conversion, new birth, adoption and rescue. Can you add any further descriptions the Bible gives? (See, for example, 2 Cor. 5:17 and 1 Pet. 2:9-11).
2. In what ways would you expect a Christian to be different from those who are not Christians? (See, for example, Rom. 12:14-21; Eph. 4:17-32; 5:1-21).

BIBLE REFERENCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

ON CONVERSION:

Matthew 18:3; Acts 3:19, 26; 14:15; 26:17, 18, 20;
1 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 Peter 2:25.

ON REPENTANCE:

Isaiah 55:7; Hosea 14:1, 2; Luke 13:3, 5; 19:8; Acts 17:30;
Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 7:9, 10.

ON FAITH:

John 1:12; 3:16; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:17; Ephesians 2:8, 9;
Hebrews 11:1-6; 12:2.

ON NEW BIRTH:

John 1:12, 13; 3:3-7; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:3, 23; James 1:18;
1 John 2:29; 4:7; 5:1.

ON ADOPTION:

Matthew 5:9; 6:9; John 1:12, 13; Romans 8:15, 23;
Galatians 3:26; 4:5, 6; Ephesians 1:5.

ON GOD'S KINGDOM:

Matthew 6:10, 33; 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1,
14, 34; Luke 12:32; 22:16; Romans 14:17; 2 Timothy 4:18;
Hebrews 12:28.

ON GOD'S GOOD WORK IN US:

2 Corinthians 5:17; Philippians 1:6; 2:12, 13;
1 Thessalonians 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 14; Titus 2:11-14;
1 Peter 5:10, 11.