

# Conversion--What Is It and How Produced?

by Alvin I. Hobbs

---

*Conversion is a Scriptural process through which a sinner becomes a Christian, involving a turning from sin to God by faith in Christ.*

**Scripture:** John 3:5, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:4, Ephesians 2:8, James 1:18

**Topics:** "Conversion", "Faith In Christ"

---

## Description

Alvin I. Hobbs delves into the historical perspectives on conversion, tracing the evolution of beliefs from the early Church to the present day. He highlights the importance of understanding conversion as a Scriptural process where sinners turn from the love of sin to the love of God through faith in Christ. The sermon emphasizes that conversion involves a change of beliefs, moral habits, disposition, and a revulsion of feeling towards God, ultimately leading to a new life in Christ.

---

## Transcript

OR three hundred years after the Church of Christ began, the issues in respect to conversion were not sharply defined. The belief was general that all men are born with a certain depravity of moral inclinations. Hence, all become sinners and, therefore, are proper subjects of conversion. It was as generally held that conversion is effected by the co-operation of the Holy Spirit with the human will. Or, as a church historian says, it was believed that "the free action of the will is the condition and the concomitant of all the operations of grace."

Towards the close of the fourth century the speculative system of doctrine afterwards defined and advocated by Augustine began to attract attention. He taught that the sin of Adam is the sin of the whole race in such extent that its guilt and penalty are the heritage of every human being. Hence all, even infants are liable to eternal damnation. Further, that all have inherited such a corruption of nature as enslaves the human will to a principle of sin dominant in every soul. He, therefore, "ascribed conversion wholly to the efficiency of divine grace, which touches the springs of choice, is irresistible, and is bestowed on those (the elect only) whom God has proposed to receive to Himself."

The essential elements of this doctrine were reproduced in Calvinism. As Pelagianism was a reaction from Augustinianism, so Arminianism was a rebound from Calvinism. Pelagianism fell rightly under the ban of heresy, while some elements of Augustine's doctrine failed of Synodical approval. Arminianism rejects predestination and irresistible grace; but inconsistently and without the pretext of an eternal elective decree, leaves the sinner helpless and doomed unless [207] the Holy Spirit shall by omnipotent power

regenerate him, or make his conversion possible by a precedent miracle. That the "flesh" (Rom. 7: 13) has in it no good thing as a result of Adamic sin, in part at least, on account of which there is perpetual antagonism between the flesh and the spirit of every man, there is every reason to believe, but to carry this notion, or any other, to the extreme that man's nature is so corrupted by original sin that his moral responsibility is destroyed, makes it impossible to vindicate God's justice in punishing sin here or hereafter.

That the initiative in conversion springs from the will by the agency of the Holy Spirit is gratefully admitted; but the co-operative agency of the sinner must also be affirmed. Otherwise, a fatalistic element enters which fosters spiritual pride, or casts the sinner down into despair. These evils were attendant upon Augustinianism and are yet the legitimate fruits of kindred systems of doctrine. And, as in the past, so now, they furnish good reasons for the rejection of the doctrines.

The writer would prefer to treat the subject without reference to unscriptural theories. But metaphysical subtleties have clouded the Scriptures. The clouds must be dissipated. Clear views of the word of God should be secured.

For distinct and yet not wholly independent treatment, the question divides into two:

1. What is Conversion?
2. How is it produced?

But, first, a provisional statement. Conversion is a Scriptural process through which a sinner becomes a Christian. It involves a turning from the love and service of sin to the love and service of God by faith in Christ.

Now, let us determine what conversion is not. It is not merely a

CHANGE OF OPINIONS.

One may give up Calvinism for Arminianism, [208] Unitarianism for Trinitarianism, Buddhism for Christianity, or the reverse, without achieving anything more than an intellectual somersault.

It is not simply a change of the

OUTER MORAL HABITS.

Morality is not religion. Moral habits may be formed by worldly culture. Many of vicious habits have exchanged them for good ones without reference to religion. True, no moral code is practicable for the race which does not root itself in religion. Yet, some persons of trained equipoise able to check appetite and passion on the hither side of vicious habits, are apt to contrast their seeming virtue with the moral slips of frail Christians. Such are too much occupied in Pharisaic self-adulation to perceive their own spiritual inferiority. The polish of worldly culture must not be confounded with the fruit of real conversion.

It is not a mere change of disposition from unfriendliness or selfishness to

BENEVOLENCE--GOOD WILL TOWARDS MEN.

It involves this, but far more Unless kindness to men be underlaid with loyalty and love to God, it will soon degenerate into a splendid vice. That amiability which conceals or mutilates truth merely to please, is nothing but vicious indifference. It is disloyalty to God. A vaunted charity, even in the pulpit, which sacrifices sound doctrine on the altar of worldly applause is supreme selfishness. That sort of liberalism which exalts beneficence--works of charity--above the blood of Christ as an atonement for sin, and teaches sinners to depend upon it as a meritorious cause of salvation, only turns what is praiseworthy in itself, into a whirlpool of damnation. All works of charity done in the name of and for the love of Christ will receive a reward otherwise they may become mere moral diletantism.

Conversion is not simply a revulsion of feeling commonly called [209]

#### GETTING RELIGION.

Religion, rather, should get us. This revulsion, often witnessed at the anxious-seat, is supposed to be miraculous. But to account for a natural effect by a cause is fanatical. In Revival Lectures, p. 253, President Finney, an ardent advocate of this method of conversion, says: "The design of the anxious seat is undoubtedly philosophical and according to the laws of the mind." Thus, it is admitted that this revulsion of feeling is secured by a natural cause under natural laws. Two laws only need to be noted: 1. We feel, in respect to matters of faith, as we believe. 2. The belief of a falsehood affects the feelings in the same way as belief of the truth, provided the falsehood appears to be true. All emotional activity in the sphere of faith is controlled by these laws. The Roman Catholic believes he has sinned. Feels guilty, depressed. Believes that, on confession, he can receive absolution from the priest. He departs happy. Is this conversion? Jacob believed Joseph dead, mourned deeply. Afterwards believed him alive, and rejoiced.

The rule to pardon is: "The conditions complied with, the promise is sure, with peace and joy as the result." Yet the evangelist who formulated this rule taught the sinner that:

"Jesus has promised his sins to forgive

If we ask in simple faith for His love."

In vain do we search the Scriptures for such a promise. Still, without faith, none can be forgiven.

It is quite the fashion now to promise pardon to all who "will only believe." Jesus said: "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved"--pardoned. But these terms are discounted by a sophistical use of the answer of Paul and Silas to the jailer, Acts 16: 31, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved." They did not say, "believe only." They immediately preached to him the word of the Lord that he might know what else was requisite. "And he took them the same hour of the night and was baptised." Then he [210] rejoiced, was happy. Cf. Acts 2: 37, 38, and Acts 22: 10-16.

Those who pervert the gospel seem to think if any overt act of obedience is required in order to pardon, that the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith is nullified. But the gospel "was made known to all nations for the obedience of faith," which Paul seems never to have thought of as an equivalent of Judaistic "works of righteousness" by which justification is impossible. The "obedience of faith," or its several steps, are but means of grace, and in no sense a ground of merit as the Jews regarded "works of righteousness," or deeds of Law. Instead, therefore, of urging all the gospel terms of pardon upon the sinner, and also the appended promise, the custom is to exhort him to "believe only," and to expect the evidence of the remission of sins in a change of feeling.

Conversion is not what some theologians call

## REGENERATION.

In Systematic Theology, Vol. 3, p. 31, Dr. Hodge says:

"Regeneration is not only an act of God, but also an act of His almighty power. . . . If an act of omnipotence, it is certainly efficacious, for nothing can resist almighty power." "The assertion that regeneration is an act of God's omnipotence is, and is intended to be, a denial that is an act of moral suasion. It is an affirmation that it is 'physical' in the old sense of that word, as opposed to moral; and that it is immediate, as opposed to mediate, or through and by the truth."

To make this meaning more forcible he contends that it is a miracle like restoring sight to the blind, or like raising Lazarus from the dead.

Hence, regeneration may occur without the preaching, belief of, or obedience to, the gospel. Consistently, he holds that infants, as well as adults, are its subjects. By the system last reviewed, conviction of sin is secured by the gospel; in the case of adults, their conversion follows as a miracle--the sinner being passive. Dr. [211] Hodge holds conversion to be a duty in which the sinner is active, but that the precedent regeneration is by a miracle in which the sinner is passive. But, on p. 16, with strange inconsistency, he says:

"It is the soul that is spiritually dead; and it is to the soul (in regeneration) that a new principle of life, controlling all its exercises, whether of the intellect, the sensibilities, the conscience, or the will, is imparted." But if the new principle controls the will, how is conversion an act of the sinners own volition? It must be an inevitable consequence of regeneration. It is as miraculous at the second step as is regeneration at the first.

Moreover, if any sinner be not converted, logically, God is responsible. If finally lost, it cannot be the sinner's fault. If God shall punish the sinner here or hereafter, how can his justice be vindicated? The learned doctor saw the difficulties involved and wrestled manfully with them, but without success, as all unbiased minds will conclude.

If he had adopted the ancient usage of the word regeneration, it might have been bad for his theory, but well for the truth. On p. 5, he says:

"In the early church the word regeneration often expressed, not any inward moral change, but an external change of state or relation." "This usage, in a measure, passed over to the Christian Church. When a man became a member of the church, he was said to be born anew, and baptism, which, was the rite of initiation, was called regeneration."

This is true in part. But in his life of Constantine, p. 628, Eusebius shows that the Greek fathers called baptism regeneration because it was the teliosis--the consummating act of the new birth, the last act of the process called regeneration.

The norm of regeneration was declared by our Lord thus: "Except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." This language involves both an inward spiritual change and an outward change of relations. Is it credible, [212] therefore, that the early church said of a man who had been baptised only that he was born again? Moreover, with the words of Jesus before him, how dare any

one exclude baptism from the new birth! How can he affirm that regeneration is limited to an inward spiritual change?

He might have said, truly, that when, in later times, Christians, falling into a false doctrine of original sin and under the ex opere notion of baptism, and concluding that baptism should be given to infants to save them from damnation, did regard it as a sort of regeneration. (See Wesley's Doctrinal Tracts, old editions.)

The mystical theories of regeneration go to pieces on John 3: 5, like ships upon a reef. If baptism is a part of the process of regeneration, and infants as well as adults must be regenerated in order to enter the kingdom, it follows that all unbaptised infants and adults are forever shut out. And if the kingdom of God is equivalent to heaven, then it follows that all unbaptised adults and infants are forever lost. If, as the creeds of Christendom and the best interpreters of all parties allow, "born of water" is the equivalent of baptism, then regeneration is not complete without it, and is not a single act of omnipotence, but a process involving the activity of the sinner.

A little attention to the meaning of the phrase, "Kingdom of God," may relieve us from these and many other perplexities. The Church of Christ is the last historic manifestation of the kingdom of God, and is spoken of sometimes as the kingdom. See Matt. 16: 18, 19. Now, if Jesus meant that a birth of water and of the Spirit is a sine qua non to entrance into His Church, then no question should be raised as to the ultimate salvation of infants or godly adults who may not have been baptised. This Scripture has nothing to do with the question. It neither affirms nor denies the entrance of anybody into the ultimate kingdom of glory.

That Jesus did refer to the kingdom in time, and not in eternity, is evident. John, Jesus and the apostles [213] had everywhere preached that it was near at hand. With this proclamation still ringing in the public ear, it is morally certain that Nicodemus came to Jesus to learn about the kingdom of God, or the Church of Christ, just about to be established. Hence, what Jesus said about entrance into the kingdom should be restricted to the kingdom in time, or the Church.

That this is recognised by the universal Christian consciousness, controversy aside, is shown by the fact that almost all Christian churches do now require and have always required baptism of those who would enter. Even infants are excluded unless baptised. And what is more conclusive is, that every baptismal rubric of Christendom bases the demand for baptism, as the initiatory rite, upon these very words of Jesus. And at the same time the wisest theologians admit that when baptism is morally or physically impossible, if the impossibility be not self-imposed, the want of it may not debar from the kingdom of God in eternity. And further, that no infant will be excluded therefrom for lack of baptism. We are, therefore, warranted in the interpretation now given. And much special pleading against baptism as a part of the process of conversion or regeneration is forever set aside. We are now prepared for a more positive treatment of the subject.

Singularly enough the noun conversion occurs but once in the Bible. Paul and Barnabas "being brought on their way, they passed through Phenice and Samaria declaring the conversion of the Gentiles" (Acts 15: 3). The term regeneration in a kindred sense occurs but once in the Bible--Titus 3: 5. Historically, at least, they are interchangeable. It would have been equally correct to write, declaring the regeneration of the Gentiles. In their conversion they were doubtless born of water and of the Spirit.

The noun rendered conversion in this passage, denoting a finished process, is from epistrephein, which occurs in the New Testament thirty-nine times. In every case but one, the Revised Version renders it [214]

actively to turn, or by an equivalent. In the Authorised Version it is rendered passively ten times, so strong a hold upon King James' revisers had the mystical theory of passivity of conversion. The same verb, without the preposition *epi*, occurs eighteen times. In every case it is active in the original and in the R. V. The A. V. only once. Matt. 17: 3 gives it passively. In thirty-four out of fifty-seven occurrences of both forms a physical act or process is denoted. In the rest a moral turning is indicated.

By correct translation scholarship has swept away the verbal basis of

#### PASSIVITY IN CONVERSION.

The verb sometimes expresses comprehensively this moral turning. Acts 14: 15 Sometimes it is joined with other terms, which express one, or more, constitute elements of the process, and other terms are added to express the consequents: "Hearing the gospel a great multitude believed and turned to the Lord." Acts 11: 20, 21. "Repent ye, therefore, and turn." Acts 3: 19. Sometimes the elements of the process are given without the verb. Acts 18: 8. Comparing Acts 2: 38 with 3: 19, it is evident that baptism is the outward act by which the inward moral turning is manifested, and relates the sinner to Christ in order to salvation from past sins. "Repent ye, therefore, and turn, that your sins may be blotted out, that so there may come seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord." This is equivalent to, "Repent ye and be baptised every one of you in--*epi*--the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The steps in the process are hearing, believing, repenting, and being baptised. The consequents--remission of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit. But the following shows that the sinner, with the gospel available, is responsible for every step in the process of conversion. That he must be active from the first:

"For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; [215] lest at any time they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their hearts, and should turn again and I should heal them." Matt. 13: 15.

The spiritual declension of the Jews was progressive--not fixed at birth. Their own sinful practices had brought on heart stupidity and dullness of hearing, which was followed by voluntary spiritual blindness. Their moral perversity, and not innate depravity, which required a miracle to remove, was the obstacle to their moral turning. If anywhere the necessity of a miracle precedent to conversion should be taught, it certainly should have been taught in this passage, for it stands related to the preceding parable of the sower, as a doctrinal comment. Besides, the doctrine of the parable itself is that faith depends upon hearing and understanding the word. See Luke 8: 12. The blame for non-conversion is plainly cast upon the Jews thus: "Ye will not come to me that ye might have life." Hence Paul's aphorism: "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Paul and Barnabas "so spake that a great multitude both of Jews and Greeks believed." Miracles were wrought, but not in sinners to enable them to believe. The apostles spoke "boldly in the Lord, who gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands." Acts 14: 3. By a miracle wrought on his deputy, who sought to turn him away from Paul's preaching, Sergius Paulus was influenced to become a believer.

But, says the objector, Did not the Lord open Lydia's heart that she attended unto the things spoken by Paul? Acts 16. But how? By a miracle wrought within her? The record does not say so. It says nothing about a miracle. Her heart might have been opened, as was that of Sergius Paulus, by a miracle wrought in her presence. Or it might have been done providentially, without a miracle. We, therefore, protest against the use of this case as an exception to the rule of conversion. It may be asserted [216] then,

without fear of successful contradiction, that, historically, there is not one case of conversion where miraculous regeneration preceded conversion.

Failing to justify the doctrine by the historic record mystics resort to such Scriptures as contain figurative presentations of the subject. But what is a figure of speech? Lord Kames says, it is "the using a word in a sense different from what is proper to it." Again, "a word used figuratively, or in a new sense, suggests at the same time the sense it commonly bears, and thus it has the effect to present two objects: one signified by the figurative sense, which may be termed the principal object; and the one signified by the proper sense, which may be termed the accessory."

In ordinary rhetoric the use of figures is for ornament. In revelation they are used more for instruction because the purpose is to make known "the deep things of God"--spiritual things, and we must learn the spiritual by means of the natural, animate and inanimate. Almost all words in their first or proper sense denote only the natural. But afterwards, figuratively, become signs of spiritual ideas, that is, they are turned from their proper to a figurative signification. But, upon the principle of analogy between the natural and the spiritual, there can be no figure without analogy. If a natural object bear no analogy or likeness, in any respect, to a given spiritual object, then the word which denotes the former cannot be used figuratively to denote the latter, and as there must be similarity in order to a figure, sameness or identity renders a figure impossible. Because, if two objects are identical, one word in the same sense would apply to both. The failure to observe this self-evident proposition has led Mr. Drummond into error. His book, "Natural Law in the Spiritual World," repeatedly confounds analogy with identity in dealing with Scriptural figures.

No natural object is an inadequate image of any given spiritual object. Hence, to affirm of the spiritual everything that may be predicated of the natural because the same word may be applied to both, but [217] to one properly and the other figuratively, is servility to a false method of interpretation, and only a theoretical bias, or something worse, can account for such procedure. But, because of the inadequacy of any one natural object to image a spiritual one, revelation sometimes affords us an all-round conception by several figures, each carrying its own appropriate analogy.

Hence, to form a theory of conversion, for example, based upon one figure only, while ignoring others, is violence to the word of God. Therefore, any figures of speech relating to any given subject, should be interpreted subject to mutual limitations. No figure should be stopped short of, or pressed beyond, its own analogy. No figure should be forced to usurp the place or to do duty for another, or urged into conflict with any unfigurative statement, or the analogy of the faith. No figure must be interpreted so as to violate the nature or attributes of its principal or accessory objects, or so as to involve an analogy between them which does [218] not exist. If any of these self-evident principles shall be disregarded, figures may be distorted, obscured or put on all-fours to run hither and thither at the bidding of any controversialist more intent upon victory than truth. The diagram shown on the preceding page may present to the eye a fair induction and arrangement of the Scriptural figures related to our subject.

Observe, around the subject are ranged figures, each of which elucidates it in part or in whole. Companion figures are placed near each other. Let us now proceed to their examination:

"Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth" (Jas. 1: 18).

BEGOTTEN.

This figure presents an analogy between a natural and a spiritual fact. In nature a new organism animated with a new life results. But, in the spiritual realm an already existent being--a man--is begotten. The text helps to limit the analogy. The man is begotten with the word of truth. He is begotten, not immediately--without means--but mediately, through or by means of truth. Therefore, he is begotten not by "physical" but by moral power, Dr. Hodge to the contrary notwithstanding. Dr. A. Barnes, in a note on this passage, is more correct than his fellow churchman. He says, "By the instrumentality of truth. It was not a mere creative act, but it was by truth as the seed or germ. There is no effect produced in our minds in regeneration which the truth is not fitted to produce."

The man is fitted with a new moral life. His spiritual character is changed. Hence, although not a new organism, he is a new moral being.

"Of his own will begat he us." God takes the initiative in our salvation. The sinner cannot beget himself. But he can resist the truth, so as not to be begotten. Hence we are not begotten by an irresistible act of God's power--by a miracle. See 2 Tim. 3: 8; Acts 7: 51.

Those who are begotten of God are his spiritual children. Likewise all true believers. "Ye are all the [219] children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." "But faith comes by hearing." Hence, Paul to the Corinthians: "For though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have you not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel" (1 Cor. 4: 15). Or, they were begotten of God through Paul's agency, by means of preaching the gospel, the word of truth.

The highest evidence of the moral change contemplated is love. "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obedience to the truth unto unfeigned love of the brethren, love one another from the heart fervently; having been begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the word of God which liveth and abideth forever" (1 Pet. 1: 22, 23). It is plain that the word of God is the medium through which spiritual life is communicated. Life is germinant in divine truth. Therefore, although this figure is often used by mystics to justify the notion of miraculous regeneration, it must be evident that its scriptural usage refutes the doctrine.

#### BORN AGAIN.

In the natural order one is begotten, then born. Hence, the propriety of this companion figure which includes the former and goes beyond it. "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3: 5 seq.). Every one, naturally, is born of double parentage. Hence, the duality of parentage in the figure. Naturally, birth is not the beginning of life, but the translation of the living being into a new environment, where the existent life may be developed and enjoyed. It is a change of state or relations. Analogically, the same is true of the spiritual birth. A man is begotten--a new life is imparted by the Holy Spirit through the truth, which involves an inward spiritual change, then he is born of water, or by baptism he emerges into the kingdom of God. That is, baptism as a divine appointment effects an outward change of relations. Therefore, regeneration admitted by Dr. Hodge and others to be the [220] equivalent of being born again, is not an act of omnipotence--a miracle--but a moral process. In perfect harmony is Paul, Titus 3: 5, 11. "According to his (God's) mercy, he saved us by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit."

"There can be no doubt," says Dean Alford, note on John 3: 5, "on any honest interpretation of the words, that to be born of water refers to the token or outward sign of baptism, to be born of the Spirit to the thing signified, or inward grace of the Holy Spirit. All attempts to get rid of these two plain facts have sprung

from doctrinal prejudices, by which the views of expositors have been warped."

DEAD, QUICKENED, RAISED.

"But God who is rich in mercy for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, quickened us together with Christ (by grace have ye been saved) and raised us up with him and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2: 4, 6). The sinner is dead. How? As Lazarus in his grave? Without power of thought, feeling, will or action? Certainly not. But as the union of Lazarus with the life-sustaining natural environment was severed and he had no power to restore himself, so the sinner's union with God, the source of spiritual life, is disrupted and he is without power to regain his lost estate. But God who is rich in mercy exerts upon him through the gospel the moral power necessary to make him alive. It should be especially noted that the text says, "We were dead through our trespasses," not through or by reason of Adam's sin. "And you did he quicken, when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins" (v. 1, R. V.). They were under the death sentence of law. Under condemnation. Morally dead. The law kills. The Spirit quickens. See 2 Cor. 3: 4 seq. The letter here stands for the law as a system of justification. The Spirit for the gospel, called the faith--a system of justification by grace through faith. The one was a ministration of death condemnation. The other a [221] ministration of the Spirit of life. Hence, Paul: "Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid. For if there had been a law given which could make alive, verily righteousness would have been of the law. Howbeit, the Scripture hath shut up all things under sin that the promise of life by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe" (Gal. 3: 21, 22).

Again, Jesus said: "It is the Spirit that quickeneth." "The words that I have spoken unto you, they are Spirit and they are life." It is clear then that this quickening was moral, not physical, and that it was by the gospel, the word of truth, involving forgiveness of sins.

It should be emphasised that, under the reign of grace, whatever death was brought upon our race through Adamic sin by reason of his federal headship was annulled by reason of the federal headship of the second Adam. So now, "every one must give account of himself to God." Adam's sin will never shut out one of his children from heaven. Our own sins exhale the atmosphere of death. What, without our will or consent, we lost in the first Adam, we have regained or shall regain in the second Adam, without our will or consent. Hence, infant regeneration, baptism and church membership are the useless output of the mine of tradition and speculation.

But to return. In the natural order a dead man should be raised. Hence, in a figure, the dead sinner quickened is the subject of a moral resurrection effected in baptism. "Having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead. And you being dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, you, I say, did he quicken together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses" (Col. 2: 12, 13; cf. Rom. 6: 2-4).

Does one say this is a spiritual resurrection, therefore, the baptism is not necessarily an immersion in water? Grant the former, but if baptism is the sign of the thing signified, it must be a burial in and a rising [222] out of water. In affusion there is no such correspondence between the outer and the inner. Hence, says Meyer, note on Acts 16: "Immersion was, in fact, quite an essential part of the symbolism of baptism." Moreover, this spiritual resurrection could only occur by faith, hence, baptism without faith in the subject of it utterly unknown to the Scriptures. Therefore, infant baptism is a solecism.

In baptism believers, quickened sinners, rise to walk in a new life--in a new moral environment. It is plain that the last two figures are rhetorical equivalents of being begotten of the Spirit and born of water. Yet they should be discriminated, for many Scriptures involve one or the other as the aim of speaker or writer requires.

#### NEW CREATION.

"Wherefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, they are become new" (2 Cor. 5: 17, R. V.). Between the original creation of man and his new creation there is an analogy, else the term creation is not used here figuratively but literally. But if analogous they must not be regarded as identical. Generally mystics reason thus: Man was originally created by miracle, therefore, his new creation is by a miracle. If the two creations are simply analogous and not identical, as all eminent writers declare, then the conclusion is unwarranted, and the figure does not sustain the doctrine of miraculous regeneration.

Now before man was created there was no man. There was no consciousness or moral experience. The creation of man was through physical power as opposed to moral. In his creation all his faculties were so formed and adjusted that their functional activity harmonised with the will of his Maker. Hence, the appearance of God's moral image in man. Before the new creation there is a man. He had a prior consciousness and moral experience. The re-creation is by moral power, for it is a moral effect. Hence, the reappearance of God's moral image. But for the moral [223] suasion of Satan seducing man from loyalty, the moral image of God in him had not been lost or obscured by the degrading power of sin. In the new creation the moral image of God is restored by the restoration of his faculties to their normal, functional activity by means of the moral power of a higher knowledge of truth. "For though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more," after the flesh.

Kata sarka, after the flesh--is the unregenerate man's standard of knowledge. The flesh dominates the spirit. The corporal instincts, propensities, appetites and passions, characterise him. He minds carnal things, and as he was brought into this condition by moral suasion, so moral suasion through spiritual knowledge--the word of truth--may reverse the preternatural order, that he shall be morally a new creature. But, as he was active in his degeneration, so he must be active in regeneration. Hence the propriety of Paul's language: "Lie not one to another, seeing ye have put off the old man with his doings, and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Col. 3: 9, 10; cf. Eph. 4: 22-25).

Now, since in this creation, or change of moral personality--moral manhood--Christians are represented as having had an active agency, it is certain that the re-creation is not effected by miracles which would nullify that agency. But the theory we combat does, "and is intended" to do this, hence, it is false and unscriptural. Besides, it robs the sinner of moral responsibility. It makes him incapable of turning to God after His grace has removed all obstacles to salvation on the divine side, and has made the sinner a subject of the divine energy in the word of truth. Hence, we may fairly conclude that the Christian is a new creature because of his changed moral personality, in which the image of God reappears, and this change is effected by the Holy Spirit through the truth. God is the efficient cause of the change while the sinner is [224] co-operant. Hence, says Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."

Here, then, again, we find another rhetorical equivalent for regeneration or the new birth. It is the finished product--the man in Christ, the Christian--who is a new creation. But, in none of the figures passed under review, is the miraculous theory of regeneration affirmed, under a fair interpretation.

The remaining figures of the circle,

ADOPTION, NATURALISATION, TRANSLATION,

are generally conceded to be against the theory, involving as they do the whole process of conversion, and the sinner's activity in it. We feel, in view of what has been said, fully justified in holding fast the proposition with which we set out. Conversion or regeneration involves a change from unbelief to faith in Christ; a change of the affections from the love of sin to the love of righteousness; a change of will, or repentance, involving godly sorrow for sins and issuing in a reformation of life. See 2 Cor. 7: 8-11, R. V. Afterwards a change of relation through baptism as the divinely appointed means. Thus is conversion consummated. Then the convert can by faith appropriate the promise for remission of past sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, rejoicing in Christ.

HOW IS CONVERSION PRODUCED?

After what has been said, but little need be added. God is the efficient cause, the Holy Spirit is the divine agent, and divine truth the means or instrument. "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." This is the ordinary method. The gospel should be the matter of preaching. It was originally revealed by the Holy Spirit and formulated on the lips of inspired men, then committed to record that all subsequent preachers might be sure of it. One may object that this method discards the present agency of the Spirit; that it is reliance upon the dead letter. The underlying thought of this objection is that [225] the written word is only so much dead printer's ink. But we do not so conceive it. Divine facts, thoughts and ideas are stored in the Word of Truth, and from it are conveyed into the mind by reading or hearing. It is charged with spiritual power. "Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" "The word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart." Or, as Albert Barnes truly says: "There is no effect produced in regeneration which the truth is not fitted to produce, and the agency of God in the case is to secure its fair and full influence on the soul."

But how? We answer, not by a miracle wrought in the sinner to control or coerce his will, but providentially, by many agencies and instrumentalities reinforcing the truth. The Spirit dwells in all Christians--a living ministry included--to sanctify them by the truth and to energise all their faculties in preaching and teaching the truth. Barnabas "was a man full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and much people was added to the Lord." A personal embodiment of truth in the lives of Christians gives it a mighty winning power (1 Pet. 3: 1). The church in its organic history and ceaseless activity presses it upon the attention of the world, and if it were united as the Saviour prayed, the world would believe that he was sent of God. Social customs, civil laws and institutions are colored by it. Universal literature more or less absorbs and bears it silently into the thoughts of all men.

Revealed thought floats upon and mingles with the stream of

TRADITION.

Much of divine truth has found lodgment in the minds of men who never saw or read a Bible. The Spirit in ten thousand ways may operate on human minds through the truth thus widely disseminated in [226] the absence of a printed Bible. But experience demonstrates that spiritual effects are always proportioned to the quantum of divine truth possessed. Hence the whole Bible should be given to all, and the living ministry along with it. None should be so rash as to deny that the Holy Spirit may by direct or indirect suggestion fix the sinner's attention upon the truth in order to his conversion, so long as it is declared in the Scriptures that the evil spirit now works in the children of disobedience (Eph. 2: 2). But it is equally rash to say that without the truth the Holy Spirit regenerates by a miracle. Miracles were never intended for this end, but to arrest attention and fix it upon the word of truth which they attested, so that its power to regenerate might be realised. The truth, in one or another form, usually as formulated in the gospel, is the medium through which the Spirit begets, quickens, renews, recreates or regenerates the sinner. He who believes in Christ through the gospel, repents, and is baptised in his name, is a Christian and entitled to his promises, and if faithful unto death, his shall be the crown of life. Amen. [227]

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/alvin-i-hobbs/conversion-what-is-it-and-how-produced/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**