

The Holy Spirit in Conversion (Author Unknown)

What Are We Talking About?

First, we are talking about the Spirit's part in the conversion of a sinner. The word conversion means "a turning from," and it refers to the change that occurs in the heart and life of a person. It is the transformation from being under the control of sin and Satan to submission to Christ and righteousness. Jesus spoke to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. He said, "But arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:16-18). Of the Thessalonians Paul said, "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from Idols to serve a living and true God" (I Thessalonians 1:9). Conversion is the point of turning from sin to God.

The absolute necessity of conversion is clearly set forth in the New Testament -- no man can be saved until he turns from sin. Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Conversion is a fundamental condition upon which a man is at peace with God. It is a moral process that is begun, carried on, and completed by a moral power, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). There are three basic changes that take place in conversion. First there is the purification of the heart. The heart is changed by faith (Acts 15:9; Romans 10:17). Second the life is changed by repentance (Acts 11:18). Third, the state or relationship are changed by baptism (Galatians 3:27). With a purified heart, a changed life, one is ready to be translated into the kingdom of the son of God's love, the church. Paul wrote, "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). As a member of the kingdom of Christ an individual is a "new creature" (II Corinthians 5:17). Conversion produces new attitudes, new emotions, and new actions.

The Denominational View

Due to the influence of John Calvin, a theologian who lived in the early 1500's, conversion means something entirely different than what we have found in the Bible. Calvin has influenced the major protestant denominations with His view of the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. Through his doctrinal espousals the religious world has come to view conversion as some strange and mysterious experience that is effected

through the direct operation of the Holy Spirit on the sinner's heart.

The doctrine of the direct operation of the Spirit is the outgrowth of the doctrine of inherited total depravity. This doctrine holds that man is born a sinner, so depraved that he cannot think a good thought, do a good deed, and all that involves his nature is totally corrupt. Some miraculous or supernatural power is required to recover such a depraved soul. Thus, the power of God separate and apart from the word of God is required. Calvinists have looked at the word as a "dead letter" which is incapable of being understood by one so depraved from birth.

This is the underlying cause of the "better felt than told" experiences, the dreams, visions, and other heart wrenching experiences. The influence of God through His Spirit on the sinner is a strange and inexplicable power. No one can achieve it without deep strivings of the soul, and only then if the Spirit decides to operate will the sinner be saved. N.L. Rice, in debate with Alexander Campbell, argued: "We believe and teach, that in conversion and sanctification there is an influence of the Spirit in addition to that of the Word, and distinct from it -- an influence, without which the arguments and motives of the gospel would never convert and sanctify one of Adam's ruined race. We further believe, that although the Word of God is employed as the instrument of conversion and sanctification, where it can be used; God has never confined himself to means and instrumentalities, where they cannot be employed." Campbell Rice Debate, page 628. J.B. Moody, a Missionary Baptist, in debate with James A. Harding argued, "... man is so depraved that he cannot render acceptable obedience to the Gospel unless aided by this divine power in addition to the Word. I believe this divine power through the Word, and in addition to the Word, is exerted in circumcising a man's ears so he can hear, in circumcising his heart so he can feel and love, in opening his blind eyes so he can see, in creating him in Christ Jesus, in quickening him into life, in giving him the new birth, in convicting him of sin, in giving him repentance and the spirit of prayer and supplication, in working confiding faith in his heart, in shedding abroad the love of God in his heart, in opening his understanding, in bestowing upon him wisdom, by working in him both to will and to do, by helping him in every effort in obedience to the Lord." The Nashville Debate, page 415. Then Moody added, "I purpose to argue my proposition from the necessity of such additional power as seen in the helpless condition of man, growing out of his complete depravity." Ibid., page 416.

The doctrine of total inherited depravity is a creation of man's wisdom; it is denied in the Bible. Man at birth is pure, holy, and innocent. Jesus recognized this inherent nature of man before "actual transgression."* Jesus said, "Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Luke 18:16). Adam was not created with a "depraved nature." He was pronounced "good" by Jehovah at creation (Genesis 1:31). Men corrupt their natures through choice, not birth. Solomon wrote, "Behold I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought our many devices" (Ecclesiastes 7:29). Please look up and study the following verses. Ezekiel 18:20; Isaiah 53:6; II Timothy 3:13. We come into a world sinless and pure. The world is corrupt and contaminated by sin. All men do sin, but not through merely being born.

The Holy Spirit in Conversion

The Holy Spirit is instrumental in every conversion of a sinner. No sinner is ever saved without the operation of the Holy Spirit. These facts are abundantly clear from the Scriptures. Consider the following points about conversion.

The Work of the Holy Spirit Involves

1. The Holy Spirit is involved in every new birth (John 3:5).
2. The Holy Spirit is the giver of spiritual life (John 6:63).
3. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin (John 16:8).
4. The Holy Spirit provides freedom from sin (Romans 8:2).
5. The Holy Spirit sanctifies (II Thessalonians 2:13).
6. The Holy Spirit justifies and cleanses (I Corinthians 6:11).

Establishing the work of the Holy Spirit says nothing about how that work is accomplished. This is perhaps the most crucial point in this study. There is no issue relative to what or whether the Holy Spirit operates in conversion. The only issue is how the Spirit does His work. Denominationalism holds to the view that the work is done immediately, without means, or instrumentality.

Please see the citation above from Rice and Moody. The Bible teaches that the Spirit operates on the heart of a sinner through agency, or means. That agency or means is the revealed word of God. Calvinists see the work of the Spirit on the sinner to be separate and apart from the word.

The Work of the Spirit and the Word

Everything that is said to be the work of the Holy Spirit converting a sinner can be said of the revealed word. If there is an exception to that some sincere Bible student or scholar should find it. Notice the following:

Born again by	Spirit (John 3:6)	Word (I Peter 1:23)
Quickened by	Spirit (John 6:63)	Word (Psalm 119:50)
Convicted by	Spirit (John 16:8)	Word (Titus 1:9)
Freed by	Spirit (Romans 8:2)	Word (John 8:31-32)
Sanctified by	Spirit (I Cor. 6:11)	Word (John 17:17)
Justified by	Spirit (I Cor. 6:11)	Word (Rom. 5:1; 10:17)
Washed by	Spirit (I Cor. 6:11)	Word (Eph. 5:26)
Called by	Spirit (Rev. 22:17)	Word (II Thes. 2:14)

Consequences of the Direct Operation Theory

There are serious consequences following the assumption that the Holy Spirit operates in converting sinners separate and apart from the word of God.

Notice them:

1. There is a denial that man may be held accountable for his sins. If a man is lost and must wait for the enabling power of the Spirit, separate and apart from the word, he could not be held accountable for his sins. Yet we are told that all will give an account of themselves in judgment (II Corinthians 5:10).
2. It denies the need to preach the gospel to the lost. If salvation of the sinner is totally dependent upon God's sending the Spirit, separate and apart from the word, it would be foolish to preach to the sinner. He could not understand it nor could he obey it without this divine assistance. But we are told to go preach the gospel to everyone (Mark 16:15).
3. The Devil is more powerful than God. Rational beings act by motives. The Bible teaches that Eve was seduced by Satan (II Corinthians 11:1-3). Both Adam and Eve were misled by the motives Satan set before them. If God cannot lay before us motives to do His will and incline us to righteousness then the Devil is more powerful than God. But read II Corinthians 5:10-14). Adam and Even heard Satan's lie and believed it. They obeyed him and were lost. If the sinner cannot hear God's word, believe and obey it to be saved, then error is more powerful than truth.

Conclusion

A summary of this can be stated simply that the conversion of a sinner is accomplished by the Holy Spirit through the word and only through the word. This is why the word of God is called the "sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17). On the day of Pentecost, the first gospel sermon was proclaimed by men under the direct guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit. As the words fell on the ears of the audience, Luke describes what happened. "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37). It was the Spirit operating on their hearts through the preached word that convicted them. Then it was the Spirit speaking through Peter that told them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (verse 38). There is but one way conversion is possible -- by the Spirit -- through His inspired message.

* "Actual transgression" is a term used by Calvinists to distinguish between sins one actually commits and those they allege one is born with.