

Lesson 6

The Work of the Spirit in Conversion

Defining Conversion

Different people define *conversion* in different ways, but generally speaking, the following description is common: “Conversion is the entire process by which a sinner is saved: including hearing & being convicted by the Word; believing and repenting; and being regenerated and forgiven.”

When we think of *conversion* in this way, it can add to the confusion that exists regarding the role of the Spirit in salvation.

Is conversion:

- A general term for the whole process of becoming saved?
- A specific term describing one aspect of the process?
- Done *by us* or *to us*?
- Accomplished by a human decision and action? Only by God? Or both?

There are three dominant viewpoints regarding the conversion of the unsaved:

1. **It is an individual decision to turn to God in faith and repentance.** In this viewpoint, *the human act constitutes regeneration*. (This has been the central element in much of the Restoration Movement teaching over the last two centuries.)
2. **It is a work of God on the life of the sinner.** Human responsibility is eliminated completely as conversion cannot be accomplished by human means, but only by God, through the Spirit. (This is the Calvinistic viewpoint.)
3. **It is a specific work of the Spirit at a specific moment in time.**

It is this third viewpoint which we will pursue in this lesson. Rather than define *conversion* as the entire process by which a person is saved, it is better (and less confusing) to define *conversion* specifically as “the exact moment when a sinner is changed from an **unsaved state** and condition to a **saved state** and condition.”

What the Spirit does to bring the sinner to faith and repentance is not the same thing as what He does to regenerate the sinner. As mentioned in the introduction of the previous lesson, there are two stages in which the Spirit works on the unsaved person:

Stage 1: Before Conversion

Before conversion, the Spirit works indirectly through the Word to convict sinners and lead them to Christ through faith and repentance.

See James 1.18; 1 Peter 1.12. The power of the word of the Spirit convicts sinners of sin, righteousness, and judgment, moving them to choose to believe and repent.

The word is not what accomplishes the pardon. Forgiveness comes via a direct act of God.

The word can always be resisted.

Stage 2: During Conversion

During conversion, the Spirit works directly on a person's heart on the occasion of one's baptism for the purpose of regeneration and renewal, Titus 3.5-6.

- The Spirit is the one who applies the saving benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection to the sinner.
- The Spirit is the source of life, John 6.63; 2 Corinthians 3.6; Romans 8.2.
- The Spirit is the one who will resurrect our dead bodies, Romans 8.11.

Both stages, *before* and *during* conversion are different and must not be lumped together.

What Happens at Conversion

1 Corinthians 6.11b describes three things that occur at conversion: **regeneration**; **sanctification**; and **justification**. All three describe differing aspects of our initial salvation.

- *You were washed.* The washing here is the *washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*, Titus 3.5. It is a *metaphysical change* where a person's soul is no longer in a state of spiritual death, but is now alive toward God. See Colossians 2.13; Ephesians 2.4-5; Romans 6.3-4.
- *You were sanctified.* This is a *positional change* where a person is "set apart" in that he/she is moved from Satan's kingdom to God's kingdom. See also Colossians 1.13. A synonymous term to this initial sanctification is the word *adoption* whereby a person becomes a member of the family of God (Galatians 4.5-7; Ephesians 1.5).
- *You were justified.* This is a *legal change* where a person's status before the law of God has been changed. He/she is declared "not guilty." See Colossians 2.13-14.

For the remainder of this lesson, we will focus on the first aspect of salvation Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 6.11: *regeneration*.

The Spirit's Work of Regeneration

Defining Regeneration

R. A. Torrey⁴⁷ has succinctly defined *regeneration* in the following way:

⁴⁷ Torrey, R. A. *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit as Revealed in the Scriptures and in Personal Experience*. New York; Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1910.

“Regeneration is the impartation of life, spiritual life, to those who are dead, spiritually dead, through their trespasses and sins, Ephesians 2.1.”

Elaborating further, Hodge⁴⁸ has written:

“Regeneration is a spiritual resurrection; the beginning of a new life. Sometimes the word expresses the act of God. God regenerates. Sometimes it designates the subjective effect of his act. The sinner is regenerated. He becomes a new creature. He is born again.”

Regeneration as the Activity of God

Regeneration is used only a few times in the New Testament and only once in the context of the beginning moment of our individual salvation. That passage is found in Titus 3.4-6:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

Here *regeneration* refers to an instantaneous, one-time occasion where a spiritually dead person is given spiritual life. This results in that person moving from his lost state to his saved state.

Regeneration in Titus 3.5 must be seen as something only God can do.

Simply put, Titus 3.4-6 expresses the activity of *God our Savior*, moved by grace and *mercy*, who worked *by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit* to save us from eternal destruction. In fact, Paul clarifies human activity plays no part in conversion when he says it comes *not because of works done by us in righteousness*, 3.5b.

Now, in more detail, we will learn how these verses describe ***the occasion of our regeneration***:

- A. 3.4: *when the goodness and loving kindness of God appeared*: The Great Physician’s actions are motivated by grace.
- B. 3.5a: *He saved us*: A one-time, completed action.
 - 1. 3.5b: *not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy*: This explains **why** you were saved.
 - 2. 3.5c: *by the washing of regeneration and renewal*: This explains **what** happened during your baptism.
 - 3. 3.5d: *of the Holy Spirit*: This explains **who** gave you new life.
- B. 3.6: *whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior*: Connect to Acts 2.38, i.e., receiving the gift of the Spirit.

A Closer Look at Titus 3.5

In Greek, *regeneration* in Titus 3.5 is a compound word, taken from words that are translated into English as “again” and “birthday.” We may rightly refer to the day of our conversion as our “rebirthday.”

⁴⁸ Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.

In the Greco-Roman literature of Paul's day, the word was used to talk about "coming back from death to life," or "the restoration of life of individuals."

Renewal is a verb that means "to make new" or "to renew."⁴⁹ The word stresses **quality**. God takes what is dead and makes it alive and beautiful. One Greek dictionary⁵⁰ defines regeneration as something "new in nature, different from the usual, better than the old, superior in value or attraction." The word can be used in the sense of describing something "unfamiliar, unexpected, striking, wonderful, or unheard of."

Titus 3.5 is the fulfillment of Ezekiel 36.25-26. It is clearly a change which can be accomplished only by a supernatural power. *Can a person raise himself from the dead? Can a person give birth to himself?* In writing about God's activity in salvation, Leon Morris⁵¹ has written:

"The Christian life is due to supernatural action. Christianity does not simply mean a moral change within men. It is more than merely "turning over a new leaf". It is such a radical change that the man can be said to have been born all over again. He can be said to be created anew (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is not anything that men may do for themselves. It takes place as a result of the work of the Spirit of God. We cannot begin to understand what Christianity is all about until we have grasped this."

Regeneration is where God assumes the role of the Great Physician -- rather than the role of Judge as in justification. Ezekiel 36.26 describes it as an inward change of the heart. It is a reversal of the general direction of one's life. It is the beginning of a process of further change, i.e., the lifelong healing process of sanctification.

Other Passages Describe Salvation as a Work of God

- John 1.12-13: *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*
- Colossians 2.12: *having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*
- Ephesians 2.10: *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

The new birth is God's act in response to man's acceptance of the gospel by the obedience of faith, Romans 1.5, 16. Our rebirth is "no human process, but a divine accomplishment; a spiritual act wrought by God."

⁴⁹ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1996.

⁵⁰ Behm, Johannes. "Καινός, Καινότης, Ανακαινίξω, Ανακαινώω, Ανακαινώσις, Έγκαινίζω." Edited by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-.d

⁵¹ Morris, Leon. *Spirit of the Living God*. London: InterVarsity Press, 1967. p. 73.

Regeneration as the Effect of God's Activity

The following three terms describe *regeneration's* subjective effects. It is something *done on us* or *to us*. In this part of the conversion process, we play the passive role.

Rebirth

John 3.3-5: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born again** he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

- "Again" in 3.3 is ambiguous and can mean either "again" or "from above." The context determines the meaning. Here Jesus' statement makes it clear He is referring to being born from above, i.e., by the Spirit.
- Jesus emphasizes "born of the Spirit" in 3.5, 6, 8, talking about something that happens to the spirit of the person, not the body.

In **John 1.12-13; 1 John 3.9; 4.7; 5.1, 4, 18, John** repeatedly speaks about Christians being born of God. See especially 1 John 2.29.

1 Peter 1.3, 23: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be **born again** to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, since you have been **born again**, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;*

- 1.3: The verb tense of "born again" is active, declaring God's action in saving us.
- 1.23: The verb tense of "born again" is passive, describing the human experience of what was done to us.

New Creation

2 Corinthians 5.17: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. Focus on "new creation." This is the result of our baptism.*

Galatians 6.15: *For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a **new creation**.*

Ephesians 2.10: *For we are his workmanship, **created** in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. "Created" is the new creation of 2 Corinthians 5.17.*

Circumcision

Colossians 2.11-13: *In **him** also you were circumcised **with a circumcision made without hands**, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,*

2.11 - *in Him*, i.e., when you entered into the saving union with Jesus, . . . *you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands*... This refers to the event of our salvation and fulfills Deuteronomy 30.6. **Spiritual circumcision is not accomplished by the sinner himself, rather it is passive, referring to something done to him.** It is the spiritual, internal, invisible work of God in the heart of man.

2.12: Spiritual circumcision results in our sin being removed, which paves the way for our spiritual resurrection, 2.13.

Romans 2.28-29: *For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.*

Circumcision of the heart, i.e., the soul or spirit. **Note how the circumcision of the inner man is performed by the Spirit.**

Regeneration and Baptism

Titus 3.5, John 3.5; Romans 6.1-6; and Colossians 2.12 all tie baptism to regeneration. From these passages we may conclude that the Spirit's work of regeneration occurs **at the time** of baptism. It occurs **during** baptism. It **accompanies** baptism. Baptism is the **occasion** for it.

Baptism does not cause regeneration

Connecting baptism and regeneration will lead to the possibility of labeled as teaching *baptismal regeneration*, defined as "baptism being the cause of transformation, bringing a person from spiritual death to life."⁵² This view has long been held by Roman Catholics who believe "baptism signifies, celebrates, and **effects the new birth of the baptized, *opus operatum***."^{53 54} Lutherans, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and Anglicans are also said to believe in baptismal regeneration. This view must be rejected. John Miley⁵⁵ has aptly written, "No man can rationally think it possible that the outward application of water to the body should effect the interior renovation of the soul." Rather than baptism being *the cause of regeneration*, we should see it as *the time of regeneration*.

The "Washing" of Titus 3.5

The *washing* of Titus 3.5 comes from the original word *loutron* and refers to baptism. In Ephesians 5.26 the same word is also used where it specifically refers to the washing of water. The verb form is also used in Hebrews 10.22 where the writer speaks of our bodies washed with pure water. Theologically, *washing* and *washed* are terms that refer to baptism. *Regeneration and renewing* describe **the nature** of the *spiritual*

⁵² Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998. p. 1099-1100.

⁵³ Cairns, Alan. *Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002.

⁵⁴ *Opus Operatum: Equivalent to ex opere operato; * a Latin phrase employed by Roman Catholic theologians to signify that the benefit of a sacrament is conferred "by virtue of the work wrought." In other words, the grace is in the sacrament which conveys it to the passive recipient without the necessity of faith and repentance. Cardinal Bellarmine said that the administration of a sacrament is called opus operatum, so that "it confers grace by virtue of the sacramental act itself. (See Cairns.)*

⁵⁵ Miley, John. *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2. New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1893.

washing that accompanies the baptismal washing. The regeneration and renewing are caused by the Holy Spirit.

Looking again at the main verb in the verse, *He saved*, we see it refers to a specific moment in the past -- which would be consistent with the *time* of baptism.

Note also how the baptismal waters are not the cause of the regeneration and renewal . . . the Spirit is. **The power is not in the water but in the presence of God.** *The occasion is baptism, but it is the Spirit who renews the spirit of man defaced and spotted by sin.*⁵⁶

Colossians 2.12-13

The *burial* in this verse is comparable to Romans 6.4, 6. In baptism we personally experience death to sin. When we come to God for baptism, we move in faith, **trusting in His work**. The *resurrection* in Colossians 2.12 is also tied to our baptism. See also Romans 6.4b. *Buried with him* and *raised with him* both refer to the same, single event of regeneration when *God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses*, 2.13. This event is our **baptism**.

In both passages, salvation originates, not from the water or the act itself, but by the power of God as He works on a person's heart.

We Receive the Gift of the Spirit at Baptism

Baptism is the time when we receive and allow the working of the Spirit. It is not the cause. The Spirit only comes on the preconditions of faith and repentance. Note again Colossians 2.12: our baptism is *through faith in the powerful working of God*. Repentance is also a necessary prerequisite, Acts 2.38. Galatians 3.3 and 3.14 also teach that Christians receive the Spirit *by hearing with faith*. **Through faith, but in baptism.**

In a moment we will connect Titus 3.6 with Peter's promise in Acts 2.38. But before we do, much confusion on what it means to receive the *gift of the Spirit* can be dispelled when we understand the three purposes for the outpouring of the Spirit from the time of Pentecost and beyond. These purposes are:

1. **For salvation**, received by all believers in baptism, Acts 2.38; 5.32; Titus 3.6.
2. **For miraculous empowerment**, *indirectly* received by the laying on of apostles' hands, Acts 8.17.
3. **As a special kind of sign**, *directly* received on a few individuals, Acts 2.4; 10.44.

It should be stressed that the main purpose for the outpouring of the Spirit **is for salvation**. The other two are exceptions to the norm, with the "special kind of sign" having only two instances recorded in Scripture.

Titus 3.6 and Acts 2.38-39

⁵⁶ Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit*, p. 269.

Here, in Titus 3.6, Paul says the Spirit has been *poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior*.

First, see the **abundance** of God's gift. He has been *poured out on us richly*. The Spirit has more than enough power to save even the worst sinner.

Second, know that *poured out* is the same word used in Acts 2.17-18, where the phrase is used to describe the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. While that *pouring out* refers to the miraculous empowerment of the 12 as a special kind of sign, in 2.38, Peter reveals that the Spirit is offered to all who will repent and be baptized *in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin*. When Paul refers to the *pouring out of the Spirit* in Titus 3.6, the imagery of baptism in the previous verse seems to indicate that Paul is referring to the baptismal offer of Acts 2.38. When Peter says *you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*, he is not referring to a gift from the Spirit, but the Spirit himself as an indwelling, healing presence in the life of a Christian. Again, the main purpose of receiving the Spirit is for the purpose of salvation.

Remember, the Spirit is the source of life for those dead in sin, Ezekiel 36.26-27; John 6.63; 2 Corinthians 3.6. The Spirit is received in baptism.

When we are baptized in the name of Christ two things happen:

1. Our sins are forgiven, Acts 2.38; Colossians 2.13-14.
2. We receive the Holy Spirit, Acts 2.38; Titus 3.6.

Conclusion

Regeneration is the renewing, life-giving act worked directly upon the sinner's heart by the Holy Spirit in baptism. Those who believe in the *word-only* idea of conversion have a serious problem. If, as they say, the Spirit produces the Word; the Word produces faith and repentance; and faith and repentance produce regeneration, then *the Holy Spirit does not regenerate us at all, we actually regenerate ourselves*. This cannot be true.

What has been conveyed in this lesson is that the Spirit Himself works regeneration on our hearts *after* we have come to a conscious decision to believe and repent, as motivated by the Word. Thus there are two separate interventions by the Spirit:

1. The Spirit produces the word; the word produces faith and repentance.
2. Then, the Spirit produces regeneration.

The first work is indirect and mediated through the Word. The second work is direct and unmediated.

Cottrell's example⁵⁷ of this works well for illustrative purposes:

Think of what happens when a person has a heart problem and sees a cardiologist. The man will die without outside intervention. After examining the patient, the doctor works through evidence and persuasion; leading the sick man to believe and commit. In a subsequent and separate act, the

⁵⁷ Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit*, p. 284.

cardiologist performs the actual operation itself. Thus, does the Holy Spirit work in two different ways; in two stages, to accomplish regeneration in the spiritually dead sinner.

For Thought and Reflection

1. Is it better to define conversion as a general process or a specific working of the Spirit? Why?
2. How does 1 Corinthians 6.11 show what happens at conversion?
3. What is regeneration? Who is responsible for it?
4. When is a person regenerated? What passage describes God's work in it?
5. What three concepts are presented in Scripture to express the effect of our regeneration? Do we do these things or are they done to us?
6. What is baptismal regeneration?
7. What is the washing of Titus 3.5?
8. What two things do we receive in baptism?