

The Book of Acts (#13); Conversion to Christ (4)

We will begin with us reading once again the reaction and response of the Jewish gathering after having heard Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Here is Acts 2:37through 47.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

³⁸Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

⁴⁰And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." ⁴¹Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴²And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

⁴⁶So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Today we continue to consider the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in bringing sinners to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ the Lord. It is hoped that through the emphasis on the role and work of the Holy Spirit, that we will not only better understand the nature and way of salvation, but that we may grow in our understanding and appreciation of the Holy Spirit Himself. Yesterday's entry in the popular devotional, *Morning and Evening*, by **Charles Spurgeon** (1834-1892) was a good word regarding our relationship with the Holy Spirit:

Common, too common, is the sin of forgetting the Holy Spirit. This is folly and ingratitude. He deserves better from us, for He is good, supremely good. As God, He is good essentially. He shares in the threefold ascription of "Holy, holy, holy" that ascends to the Triune God. He is unmixed purity, truth, and grace. He is good benevolently, tenderly bearing with our waywardness, striving with our rebellious wills, quickening us from our death in sin, and then training us for heaven as a loving father trains his children. How generous, forgiving, and tender is this patient Spirit of God. He is good operatively.

All His works are good in the most eminent degree: He suggests good thoughts, prompts good actions, reveals good truths, applies good promises, assists in good attainments, and leads to good results. There is no spiritual good in all the world of which He is not the author and sustainer, and heaven itself will owe the perfect character of its redeemed inhabitants to His work. He is good officially: Whether as Comforter, Instructor, Guide, Sanctifier, Quickener, or Intercessor, He fulfills His office well, and each work is filled with the highest good to the church of God.

Those who yield to His influences become good; those who obey His impulses do good; those who live under His power receive good. Let us then act toward Him according to the dictates of gratitude. Let us revere His person and adore Him as God over all, blessed forever; let us own His power and our need of Him by waiting upon Him in all our holy enterprises; let us hourly seek His help and never grieve Him; and let us speak His praise whenever occasion occurs. The church will never prosper until it more reverently believes in the Holy Spirit. He is so good and kind that it is sad indeed that He should be grieved by slights and negligences.

Acts 2 records the way in which God brought salvation to His people. We have already considered the work of the Holy Spirit in calling and enabling a God-called man to proclaim publicly the gospel from the Word of God as the initial and effectual instrument to bring to pass His saving work. And then last week we spoke of the initial work of grace of the Holy Spirit in illuminating sinners to their need of salvation and the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. These Jewish people had been awakened, and that quite suddenly and thoroughly, to the truth of their sinful condition and their need of salvation by God through Jesus Christ. It was the Holy Spirit who pressed the truth of the gospel upon the minds and hearts of these Jews who had gathered and who heard the apostle Peter proclaim the Word of God to them. Today we would like to consider more specifically what spiritual truth the Holy Spirit revealed to these souls that resulted in their conversion. And so, today we will continue to address what we began last Lord's day:

II. The Holy Spirit illuminating sinners to biblical truth (2:37).

But before we address the main subject for today, let me say another word regarding the illumination of the Holy Spirit when considering last week's emphasis. The work of grace in the lives of these people on the day of Pentecost was quite sudden and very thorough. In the course of just several minutes, apparently, they were no longer Christ rejectors but rather they had become seekers of Christ. This amazing and sudden work of saving grace is seen in the work of God's kingdom in the world. **Jonathan Edwards** (1703-1758) once preached a message that set forth this gracious and life-transforming work of the Holy Spirit in a sermon entitled,

A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be Both Scriptural and Rational Doctrine

He preached this sermon in his church in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1734. It was based on the words of the Lord Jesus after Peter confessed his understanding that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus then had said to Peter,

“Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven.” (Acts 16:17)

Edwards spoke of the blessedness of Peter in that the Lord had revealed to his soul this knowledge of who Jesus was in truth. By extension, we understand that this blessing is also given to all those to whom God has revealed the true nature and work of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Here are Edwards' words:

That Peter is pronounced blessed on this account. *Blessed art thou* – “Thou art a happy man, that thou art not ignorant of this, that I am *Christ, the Son of the living God*. Thou art distinguishingly happy. Others are blinded, and have dark and deluded apprehensions, as you have now given an account, some thinking that I am Elias (Elijah), and some that I am Jeremias, and some one thing, and some another; but none of them thinking right, all of them misled. Happy art thou, that art so distinguished as to know the truth in this matter.”

The evidence of this his happiness declared; *viz.*, that God, and He *only*, had *revealed it* to him. This is an evidence of his being *blessed*. *First*, as it shows how peculiarly favored he was of God above others; “How highly favored art thou, that others that are wise and great men, the Scribes, Pharisees, and Rulers, and the nation in general, are left in darkness, to follow their own misguided apprehensions; and that thou shouldst be singled out, as it were, by name, that my Heavenly Father should thus set His love, on *thee, Simon Bar-jona*. This argues thee *blessed*, that thou shouldst thus be the object of God's distinguishing love.”

Secondly, it evidences his blessedness also, as it intimates that this knowledge is above any that *flesh* and *blood* can *reveal*. “This is such knowledge as only *My Father which is in heaven* can give: it is too high and excellent to be communicated by such means as other knowledge is. Thou art *blessed*, that thou knowest that which God alone can teach thee.”

Edwards went into great detail setting forth what this light of illumination is and what it isn't, and how God brings this work of grace to be experienced by His people. Edwards then spoke of the responsibility understanding this doctrine of divine illumination presses upon professing Christians:

This doctrine calls us to examine ourselves. This doctrine may well put us upon examining ourselves, whether we have ever had this divine light, that has been described, let into our souls. If there be such a thing indeed, and it be not only a notion or whimsy of persons of weak and distempered brains, then doubtless it is a thing of great importance, whether we have thus been taught by the Spirit of God; whether the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, hath shined unto us, giving us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; whether we have seen the Son, and believed on Him, or have that faith of gospel-doctrines which arises from a spiritual sight of Christ. Indeed, to be a recipient of God's illuminating grace, when the truth of salvation in Jesus Christ is revealed to the soul, it is a cause for great exclamation, for great celebration.

But we should say a few words of concern for some of us who may not recall or be able to point to a particular event in your life when this divine understanding of Christ and the gospel was made vivid and relevant to your soul. But understand that a sudden, life-changing moment of illuminating grace does not always occur in the experience of all true Christians.. Yes, sometimes it is a sudden work of illuminating grace which reveals truth to the soul. But often times the Holy Spirit performs the grace illumination in a soul over a period of time. This is quite common among Christians who were raised within a good church ministry. A sinner may come somewhat gradually to see his sinful condition before God and for his need of salvation. Through the ongoing exposure to biblical reading, teaching, and preaching, and through God's providential work of the Holy Spirit, the sinner's understanding of spiritual truth increases in degree and intensity over time. Whereas the sudden imparting of spiritual truth to one's soul may be termed as the grace of spiritual **revelation**, the gradual accumulation of understanding and the gradual increasing of conviction of sin and the need of Christ is acquiring spiritual **understanding**. The apostle Paul prayed that the Lord would perform both means of illumination of spiritual truth to the minds and hearts of the Christians in the church at Ephesus. Paul wrote,

...after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, (I) do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of **wisdom** and **revelation** in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling..." (Eph 1:16-18)

Do not feel needlessly alarmed if you have not experienced the sudden transforming experience when spiritual truth flooded your soul. If you are increasing over time in your understanding of the content and importance of spiritual truth, that is, of biblical teaching, then you may rejoice in the grace of the Holy Spirit at work in your soul.

Nevertheless, there is a definite, specific time in which the Holy Spirit applies the truth of the gospel to the soul which marks a significant and lasting change in both faith and practice. This is when the soul is converted to Christ. We might cite the apostle Paul as an illustration. Before his conversion, Paul for some time had been the instigator of persecution by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. He unleashed his hatred and anger against those who had become Christians under the ministry of the Holy Spirit. During this time, however, the Holy Spirit must have been at work in his soul convicting his conscience. Paul had witnessed, may have even supervised the killing of Stephen. We read of the mob's murderous action is in Acts 7.

Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him (Stephen) with one accord; ⁵⁸and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. **And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.** ⁵⁹And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:57-60)

The manner in which Stephen died and testified of the glorified Lord Jesus must have had an influence upon the heart of Saul of Tarsus. And we can well imagine the testimonies of the Christians that Paul had personally apprehended and abused must have also been piercing his conscience as he was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord”, bringing them bound to Jerusalem. But when the time arrived that the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and he was converted, all that he had witnessed must have come heavily upon his conscience. The Lord Jesus Himself indicated that this had been Paul’s experience. We read about this in Acts 9.

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven.

⁴Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

⁵And he said, “Who are You, Lord?”

Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

⁶So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” (Acts 9:3-6)

Apparently the Lord had been prodding Paul for some time regarding his errant views and unjust dealings with others in the Christian community. His conscience had been convicted. His past works and experiences had been as goads poking him in the side. But when Paul saw the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, those promptings of the Holy Spirit came upon him with great weight, and then seeing and hearing the risen Lord Jesus, he fell upon his face in humble contrition and in trusting faith.

This may be your case. The Lord has shown you increasingly the presence of and the hideous nature of your sin. May the day come when you no longer resist. May the conviction of the Holy Spirit make your soul so miserable you will come to see and learn that the only remedy is to come to Jesus Christ alone for mercy and grace.

And so, although the grace of illumination that results in conversion happens suddenly and can be quite life-transforming, a period of soul preparation will commonly take place in one’s life prior to conversion. We have spoken of this in not to distant past. Two older writers may be cited who gave great attention to the work of God’s grace preparing the sinner for the conversion event that would take place in his life. **Solomon Stoddard** (1643-1729) was the pastor of the congregational church in Northampton, Massachusetts. He was the grandfather of Jonathan Edwards, who was recognized as perhaps the greatest pastor/theologian that God has raised up in America. Stoddard published a book in 1729 entitled, *The Nature of Saving Conversion*¹. He wrote of God’s work of preparation with view to the conversion event. After stating that saving conversion is wrought at once by God—it is a single and sudden event—he described God’s preparation of the sinner for his conversion that takes place over time.

There is wont (the need), ordinarily, to be a great deal of time spent in a way of preparation for this change. In order to this change, there is wont to be (a need for) a work of contrition and humiliation; and though in primitive times we read of men passing through the work in a very little time, yet ordinarily we find that much time is consumed in the work of preparation. There are many temptations to overcome, flatteries and discouragements to be removed. Men lose a great deal of time falling into slumbers, by backwardness to reform some evils, by trying to establish their own righteousness, by fearing they are not elect, of that God has given them up to hardness of heart, by imagining their hearts to be better than they are, by their own unwillingness to own the justice and sovereignty of God. So that commonly several months are spent and sometimes years, before they get through the work of preparation. Yet conversion itself is wrought at once in the hearing of one passage in a sermon, by the remembering of one Scripture.²

¹ Solomon Stoddard, *The Nature of Saving Conversion* (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1919, [orig. 1719]).

² *Ibid*, pp. 1f.

We have also given attention to the influence of the New England puritan, **Thomas Hooker** (1586-1647) wrote much on the Lord's preparation of the sinner prior to his conversion.³ In 1632 he first published, *The Soul's Preparation for Christ*, in which his chapter titles depict this work of God's grace prior to conversion:

1. God is Capable of Breaking the Hearts of the Most Stubborn Sinners on Earth
2. A True Sight of Sin is Needed
3. Some Means by Which We Can See Sin Convincingly
4. The Necessity of Exposing the Evil of Particular Sins to Men's Consciences
5. Serious Meditation on Your Sins is a Special Means to Bring the Soul to a True Sight of and Sorrow of Sin
6. More Helps in Meditating on Your Sins
7. Of Soul-Piercing Sorrow
8. The Heart Prepared for Christ
9. How God Supports the Hearts of Those Broken for Sin with Hopes of Mercy
10. The Heart Truly Broken for Sin Will Make Free and Open Confession of Sin
11. Sound Contrition of Heart Brings a Thorough Hatred of Sin

When God purposes to save a sinner unto Himself through Jesus Christ, He goes to work in a person's heart and life. He must bring that one to desire and willing to forsake all his sin and to begin a life of humble, trusting, following and obeying Jesus Christ through life unto his promised inheritance—eternal life. If we are telling people that they can come to Christ any other way than forsaking sin and trusting and yielding to Jesus Christ as Lord in all areas of life, we are promising a way of salvation that is not taught in the Word of God.

The work of preparation for coming to Christ is not a work in which you prepare yourself to become acceptable to Him; that is not possible for sinners. It is God's work of grace in preparing you, so that you see and believe your only hope is if He accepts you through His mercy and grace alone. Preparation is not being cleansed of your sin; you cannot do that. God's preparation of you is to show you that there is no other way to be cleansed from your sin apart from coming to the Father through Jesus Christ alone. His work of preparation is to show you just how defiled and filthy you are and that you have no ability to change your condition. He prepares you by showing and convincing you that Christ alone is the fountain that can cleanse you from sin. As the prophet once declared: "In that day", that is, in the day of the coming of Jesus Christ, "a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1). The Lord convinces sinners, who are without any other hope, that there is mercy and grace in Jesus Christ alone. He enables us to see that the streams of blood and water that flowed forth from His side, when He hung on His cross, alone provide a full atoning sacrifice whereby we may be forgiven and cleansed from our sin. It is with that knowledge and that hope that in Christ alone that we come to Him asking, seeking, and knocking for Him to open the way to our conversion and grant us entrance into this new way of living that will end in the gift of eternal life.

But amazingly, on this occasion, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit worked so mightily that He wrought His grace of illumination to these people suddenly and remarkably. He brought upon them great conviction of sin, a keen awareness that they were helpless and without any claim or basis of appeal to God, and that they were in need of God to save them from their sin through Jesus Christ alone, or they would die in their sins and be punished in hell for eternity.

Now having addressed in general terms the grace of illumination by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, we may now delve a little deeper to consider the specific spiritual truths to which the Holy Spirit had illuminated these 3,000 souls. What specific matters of spiritual truth did the Holy Spirit bring to their minds and drive home to their hearts? The answer may be found in listening to our Lord's words to His disciples the night He was betrayed, in which He promised His apostles that He would send them the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Here is John 16:5-11:

³ Thomas Hooker, *The Soul's Preparation for Christ* (International Outreach, Inc., 1994), 204 pp. He is commonly referred to as "the Father of Connecticut."

“But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. ⁸And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹of sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; ¹¹of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. (John 16:5-11)

The Lord had announced to His apostles that He was leaving them. They were severely troubled by this news, not knowing what they would do or how it would fare with them, when He was no longer with them. But Jesus declared that it was not only necessary that He leave them, but that it would be to their advantage to do so. This no doubt caused them doubt and concern. “How can this be? How can we continue this kingdom work in Your absence, since You are the king of the promised kingdom and we cannot survive, yet alone succeed, without You?”

But Jesus assured them that He must return to His Father so that He could and would send the Holy Spirit upon them. He did not speak overtly of what would occur upon His entrance into the presence of His Father. Of course we know that upon His entrance into heaven after His resurrection He came before His Father, the Ancient of Days, who was seated on His throne in heaven, and received from His Father’s hand the conference of His kingdom (cf. Dan. 7:13, 14). Jesus Christ was exalted and enthroned as the promised king over the newly inaugurated kingdom of God. Jesus then, having received the gift of the Holy Spirit because of His righteous life and triumph over death, would pour out His Spirit upon His gathered people on Pentecost. He would baptize each and every one of His people in the Holy Spirit, as had been so promised many times beforehand.

The Lord Jesus then declared to His disciples what the Holy Spirit would do through them and for them in converting the world to salvation through Jesus Christ. Jesus declared, “***And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.***” And then more specifically, Jesus said,

- (1) “*of sin, because they do not believe in Me;*
- (2) “*of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more;*
- (3) “*of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.*”

The Holy Spirit would enable His disciples to complete their mission to evangelize the world, by convicting the world of three essential truths. Yes, the Holy Spirit would be the ***Comforter*** of His people, but He would first be the ***Convictor*** of the world. This work as the Convictor is, of course, with regard to bringing about the conversion of the world unto Jesus Christ. He both *convinces* the sinner of the fact of his guilt before God and He *condemns* the conscience of that sinner by causing him to know and feel the wrath of God upon him because of his sin. He then *comforts* the believing sinner that God has forgiven his sins because of Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus spoke here of “the world”, which is not to be understood as including every person living throughout the world, but of people from all over the world. The mission of the disciples would not be as our Lord’s own ministry during His earthly ministry, in which He was sent only “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:24). But because of His glorification through His crucifixion, His resurrection, and His ascension to the throne of God in heaven, Jesus Christ became Lord of all the world. He was sending His disciples into all the world with the gospel, and the Holy Spirit would bring about the conversion of the world. The kingdom of God would include Gentile believers along with a remnant of Jewish believers out of the world.

Here are the words of **Matthew Henry** on this matter:

See who they are whom He is to reprove and convince: *The world*, both Jew and Gentile. (1) He shall give the world the most powerful means of conviction, for the apostles shall go into all the world,

backed by the Spirit, to preach the gospel, fully proved. (2) He shall sufficiently provide for the taking off and silencing of the objections and prejudices of the world against the gospel. Many an infidel was *convinced of all and judged of all* (1 Cor. 14:24). (3) He shall effectually and savingly convince many in the world, some in every age, in every place, in order to their conversion to the faith of Christ. Now this was an encouragement to the disciples, in reference to the difficulties they were likely to meet with, [1] That they should see good done, satan's kingdom *fall like lightning*, which would be their joy, as it was His. Even this malignant world the Spirit shall work upon; and the conviction of sinners is the comfort of faithful ministers. [2] That this would be the fruit of their services and sufferings, these should contribute very much to this good work.

Now, what do we mean by the Holy Spirit bringing "conviction" to individuals? This is not a mere human persuasion through reason and argument convincing a sinner that we are right and he is wrong about essential matters of the gospel. The Spirit's conviction is brought through the proclamation of the Word of God by a human witness, but whose witness is blessed by the Spirit, who gives the sinner a keen sense of truth about the spiritual truths of the gospel. The conviction of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is a mind-changing, heart-stirring, a will-shaping work in which the sinner becomes thoroughly convinced that he has been in ignorance of what he did not know, in error with what he thought he knew, and in rebellion to what is true, good, and right before God.

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) wrote of this work of conviction in bringing people to true conversion as one of the evidences of regeneration, or being born again:

A new and heavenly mind must be created by omnipotence, or the man must abide in death. You see, then, that we have before us a mighty work, for which we are of ourselves totally incapable. No minister living can save a soul; nor can all of us together, nor all the saints on earth or in heaven, work regeneration in a single person. The whole business on our part is the height of absurdity unless we regard ourselves as used by the Holy Ghost, and filled with His power. On the other hand, the marvels of regeneration which attend our ministry are the best seals and witnesses of our commission. Whereas the apostles could appeal to the miracles of Christ, and to those which they wrought in His name, we appeal to the miracles of the Holy Ghost, which are as divine and as real as those of our Lord Himself. These miracles are the creation of a new life in the human bosom, and the total change of the whole being of those upon whom the Spirit descends.

As this God-begotten spiritual life in men is a mystery, we shall speak to more practical effect if we dwell upon the signs following and accompanying it, for these are the things we must aim at. First, regeneration will be shown in *conviction of sin*. This we believe to be an indispensable mark of the Spirit's work; the new life as it enters the heart causes intense inward pain as one of its first effects. Though nowadays we hear of persons being healed before they have been wounded, and brought into a certainty of justification without ever having lamented their condemnation, we are very dubious as to the value of such healings and justifications. This style of things is not according to the truth. God never clothes men until He has first stripped them, nor does He quicken them by the gospel till first they are slain by the law. When you meet with persons in whom there is no trace of conviction of sin, you may be quite sure that they have not been wrought upon by the Holy Spirit; for "when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." When the Spirit of the Lord breathes on us, He withers all the glory of man, which is but as the flower of grass, and then He reveals a higher and abiding glory. Do not be astonished if you find this conviction of sin to be very acute and alarming; but, on the other hand, do not condemn those in whom it is less intense, for so long as sin is mourned over, confessed, forsaken, and abhorred, you have an evident fruit of the Spirit. Much of the horror and unbelief which goes with conviction is not of the Spirit of God, but comes of satan or corrupt nature; yet there must be true and deep conviction of sin, and this the preacher must labour to produce, for where this is not felt the new birth has not taken place.⁴

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, **The Soul-Winner** (William B. Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 32f.

Let us consider each of these three arenas of the illumination by the Holy Spirit to the sinner He purposes to bring salvation and bestow the gift of everlasting life.

A. The Lord said the Holy Spirit will *convict the world of sin, because they do not believe in Me...*

1. Why is it necessary to convict the world of sin in order to receive salvation from sin?

We might ask, why is it necessary for the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin? A rather obscure Puritan writer, **Thomas Allen** (1608-1673) wrote on this matter, citing six main reasons this illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is necessary in order to bring a sinner to experience salvation.

(1) Convincing of sin is necessary in order to salvation because unless a soul is convinced of sin it will hardly ever come to Christ.

“Till a soul is convinced of sin it will never come to Christ. This is the course of sinners. Until they are convinced of the necessity they will not come. In John 5:40 Christ said, “Ye will not come to Me that ye may have life.” No, the soul will look to find the life in his own hands by his own works and endeavors, by its prayers and duties. He will not come to Christ that he might have life; and therefore, when Christ tenders grace and mercy to sinners, alas, they fight it and despise it because they have not been convinced” (or, convicted).”

(2) Because, unless a soul is convinced of his sin, Christ is not willing to come to that soul to save that soul.

“I say, Christ is not willing to save a soul that is not convinced of sin, and therefore Christ said (mark it, I pray), ‘The whole need not the physician, but those that are sick.’ Matthew 9:12: “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

(3) Convincing of sin is necessary in order to salvation because, unless a soul is convinced of sin, if Christ come to save it, it will not be willing to accept Christ, and receive Christ and salvation by Christ. He will not be willing.

“No, Christ came to His own and His own received Him not... And hence it is that Christ tenders and offers Himself in the gospel and offers salvation therein to poor sinners; and people, because they are not convinced of their need for Christ, do not receive Him.

(4) If a soul is not convinced of sin, that soul will be hardly taken off from its sins; it will not part with its sins; and if it does not part with sin it cannot be saved; no man can be saved with his sins.

“Thus it is with the sinner. So long as his affections are not taken off from sin, and till a soul is convinced of sin, his affections remain for it; and though he may be frightened and restrained for a time, yet those affections will return again.”

(5) Convincing of sin is necessary in order to salvation because unless a soul is really convinced of sin that soul can never love Jesus Christ, never prize Jesus Christ. “Unto them that believe,” said the apostle, “He is precious” (1 Pet. 2:7).

“And what is the reason that Jesus Christ is not more precious to our souls, and that the soul can love the Lord Jesus Christ more? O here is one great reason. Possibly the soul was never really and truly convinced of sin. If it is, the more dear and precious will Jesus Christ be to that soul.”

(6) The last ground and respect for which it is so necessary that a soul should be convinced of sin in order to salvation is because otherwise, if a soul is not really convinced of sin, that soul notwithstanding all its

profession, will be very unstable in faith and comforts; it will be tottering and wavering; that soul will never be rooted and grounded, but its comforts will be up and down.”⁵

2. How does the Holy Spirit convict the world of sin?

Because we are reformed in our understanding of the Scriptures and of history, we emphasize the important, but rather forgotten and neglected role of revealing sin to people through the declaration and proclamation of the moral law of God. This is clearly the teaching of all Holy Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments. As we have sought to emphasize in the public reading of the Old Testament each week, the law of God in the Bible may be understood as set forth in two forms or two categories. These are natural law and positive law.

Natural law refers to the universal moral law of God impressed on the mind of man. Positive law refers to different things prescribed or proscribed for a particular period, place, and people.⁶

First, let us consider what is often referred to as *positive law*. Again, these are laws that God had enacted to be in force under particular historic covenants in which God related with His people through history. A clear example of positive law can be shown in the various food laws that God required of His people through biblical history. In the days of Noah after the flood, God permitted the diet of His people to include all manner of food—meat, fruit, and vegetables, except that meat could not contain the blood of the animal. God had said to Noah,

“Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs.
⁴But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. (Gen. 9:3).

However, centuries later with the institution of the Mosaic covenant with Israel, God gave very clear and precise instruction that only food that He declared to be “clean” was permissible to eat, for God then declared that “unclean” food was forbidden to be eaten by the people of Israel. But when the Lord Jesus ministered on earth, He made the pronouncement that it was not different foods that made people clean or unclean, but that the fallen heart was the seat and source of sin. In that declaration, the Holy Spirit moved Mark to record that through this teaching of Jesus, He purified all foods (Mark 7:19). There are no longer categories of clean and unclean food in the will of God for His people.

The civil laws that governed the theocratic state of Israel under the Mosaic covenant and the ceremonial laws of the tabernacle and the temple fall into the category of positive law and are not binding upon Christians who are in the new covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

But there is a second, broader category of God’s law, which is commonly referred to as *natural law*, or God’s moral law, which are those laws set forth in the Bible that reflect God’s holy nature and will, laws that are true and binding upon all people in all places and at all times. This moral law of God, as it is commonly referred to, sets before the readers of all of Scripture God’s laws, for they reflect the nature, character, and prescriptive will of God for all people who are created in His image. On the final day of judgment, the Lord Jesus will judge all human beings who have ever lived in His world by His natural (moral) law that He has established over His creation. James wrote about this matter:

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; ⁹but if you ¹⁰show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. ¹¹For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. (James 5:8-12)

⁵ Thomas Allen, *The Way of the Spirit in Bringing Souls to Christ* (The Northampton Press, 2024 (orig. 1676), 78-86.

⁶ Samuel Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ, His Covenant, and His Kingdom* (Founders Press, 2019), 15.

God uses His law—His moral law—to declare and define what His righteousness is and what sin is. We read in 1 John 3:4, “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.” Sin is the transgression of the moral law of God. It is through the moral law of God that the Holy Spirit convicts people of their sin, of their certain damnation, and their need of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Of course the law of God cannot bring salvation to sinners, but it is used by God to reveal to sinners their need for salvation through Jesus Christ alone. The reason the law of God cannot bring about salvation is because the law of God cannot be kept by sinful man; it can only damn him in his sin. Paul wrote of this in Romans 8. He declared,

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. ⁷Because ***the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.*** ⁸So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom. 8:5-8)

The law of God condemns fallen man, for it reveals sin to him and shows that God’s justice will be administered by Him unto the just damnation of sinners.

It was the law of God that had originally convicted the apostle Paul of his sin and his need for salvation. He wrote in Romans 7 his own testimony of coming to salvation through being convicted of his sin by the law of God.

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.” ⁸But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. ⁹I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. ¹⁰And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. ¹¹For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. ¹²Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

¹³Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. ¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. (Rom. 7:7-14)

But having set forth the abiding and authoritative moral law of God for all people, in all places, and at all times, our Lord Jesus declared in John 16:7 a different ground upon which the Holy Spirit would convict the word of sin. Again, Jesus declared, to His disciples,

Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. ⁸ And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹***of sin, because they do not believe in Me...*** (John 16:7-9)

But we will need to address the nature and implications of this statement next time.
