

"Conversion"

Pako Evening Service: 18/12/2016

Scripture Reading: John 3:1-21; Rom 6:1-14; Sermon: "Our conversion, God's choice."

Congregation, one of the things that is always a little difficult is to get our heads around the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, the work of our conversion. How does Holy Spirit cause one to come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? It's difficult for a number of reasons, not least being the sin of pride. It's difficult to accept that we cannot begin that process at all. There is something within us that resists the idea that our conversion is all the work of God the Father through the gracious operation of His Holy Spirit. We like to think that we have a role to play so that at the very least we can take some of the credit. Well let me tell you from the outset, that isn't going to happen. No one is going to get to heaven and say to themselves, "Wasn't I lucky that I chose to be saved". No one!

The Bible clearly teaches that our conversion which leads to repentance and acceptance of Christ as Saviour is all of God's grace, from beginning to end. Indeed, this truth is the very thing that drives evangelism and missions. For if we didn't believe in the power the Holy Spirit to soften harden hearts and to bend them so that they willingly embrace the good news of Christ, then we would have every reason to despair. So our conversion from life without forgiveness, without hope, without a Saviour, to a life that leads to repentance, forgiveness in Christ and therefore is now full of hope and comfort is all of grace! By the gracious work of the Holy Spirit we are made aware that our present godless, sinful life style is causing God's wrath to mount up against us. The Holy Spirit makes us aware, that unless we repent and believe in Christ, we will ultimately bear eternal punishment.

Now it seems to me that there is confusion about the process of conversion. So often you hear people say that they chose to be saved, or they chose to accept Christ as their Saviour. Now to some extent that is true, but we only choose to be a Christian **after** the Holy Spirit has convicted us of our sin and need of a Saviour! The Holy Spirit enables godless man to see their sin and godless behaviour and creates within them a deep desire to leave their old ways and follow Christ. In fact, that is the definition of being "born again!" There is no such thing as a 'born-again' Christian. That is actually a contradiction, and oxymoron. We can only be called Christians under the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, but not born-again Christians. To be born again is coming from being spiritually dead to spiritually alive by the power of the Holy Spirit working in one's heart.

We may not know the exact time or place when that occurs, and it may even occur over a period of time, but it does need to happen and it is the Holy Spirit's work. Without the Holy Spirit's work, we remain enemies of God. Eph 2:4 sums it beautifully. At one point we were all dead in our trespasses and sins, "but God who is rich in mercy quickened us to new life in Christ (Eph 2:4ff). That's why at conversion we also repent! In fact, conversion does not happen without repentance. You either repent or perish. And in a sense, 'conversion' and 'repentance' occurs everyday in the life of the Christian. As we come under the Word of God, applied by the Holy Spirit, and surrounded by Christian love and example, we begin to appreciate God's love for us in Christ more and more and have an ever increasing awareness of our sin.

And so we realise more and more that there is a need for constant change and correction in our own lives! That's the process of sanctification. And that process continues right throughout life until such time when we have been fully clothed with our heavenly dwelling and our mortality has been swallowed up by life itself. At the moment of conversion, we realize that the first sinful Adam within us, as Rom 6 reminds us, was put on the cross and he died. And on resurrection Sunday the new life Adam arose, namely by the life giving Holy Spirit. And from that point on the first 'sinful' Adam no longer has power over us! Romans 6:6 tells us that he has been rendered powerless. "It is no longer I that liveth, but Christ who liveth in me!"

In fact, as our lives become increasingly in tune with God's Word and Spirit, we recognise that old nature of sin and when it raises its ugly head and we flee from it! So if you were to ask me when I was converted I would say to you that it happened at Calvary. My old self died when they killed my Saviour. Because ultimately, at Calvary is where my sins were paid. And if you ask me when I came to life, when I was born again, I would have to say three days later, when my Saviour arose from the dead! That is what Rom 6:11 says, "We must count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." You and I, and the whole church must apply this verdict of faith to ourselves. By faith, we know that we have died and have risen, because Christ died to sin and arose to live for God. And we are in Christ.

How do I know that I am already part of all these events? Because God has promised to me, that all Jesus accomplished is for me. He already told me that at my baptism, when I was too young to fully understand. Yes, already at our baptism, God signifies that we are no longer under the curse of the first Adam, irrespective of whether we will come to faith, because His promises are true that all who believe will share in the righteousness of Christ. And that's why it is a blessing and privilege to be born in a covenant family that instructs and encourages children to place their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ! Without it, we would probably never come to faith. So in summary then, conversion is when the Holy Spirit gets in under my skin and dwells in my heart and makes the work of Jesus real to me, either through my parents, a friend, or even a stranger telling me or causing me to hear the gospel.

Secondly, how do we know we have been converted? First, conversion has occurred is when you start to hate the old way of life. It starts when you begin to recognize your sin before a holy God and you start hating it more and more. In fact, hating it more and more and running from it. It starts when you have a godly sorrow for your sin, a necessary part of conversion. I

"Conversion"

mention godly sorrow, for it is no good saying you stuffed up and have no godly remorse for your sin. The more we become aware of our sin the greater our sorrow should be. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but world sorrow brings death!" (2 Cor 7:10). Paul, at the end of his earthly life called himself the chief of sinners in 1 Tim 1:15;

Congregation, if a person claims to be converted, but shows no godly remorse for his sin, even when it has been lovingly pointed out, then we may need to ask, "Have they really been converted?" True conversion leads to sorrow for sin and creates a desire to leave sin. Having said that, let me add a word of caution here. Some people are so conscious of their sinfulness, that when you listen to their prayers you would wonder whether they ever lived in the joy of their salvation. Others on the other hand, are so joyful that you are left wondering whether they know that their sin was also part of the reason why Jesus went to the cross. King David struck a pretty good balance in Psa 51. v3) For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 7) Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. 17) The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Secondly, we may know we are converted when there is a visible increase of the fruit of the Spirit. And again, if we cannot see that increasing fruit, we need to ask whether conversion has taken place! Christian conversion is more than just being sorry for sin. Once we have been called to Christ we need to reorder our lives so that we bear fruit. Jesus wants us to let go of the old sinful life so that He can give us more of the new. And this letting go of the old involves sacrifice and sometimes suffering. Jesus is now my Lord, and that means my worldly passions must now become secondary or done away with altogether! And if we are unwilling to give up the old, we will be in danger of losing the crown of life. We need to realize, that when we are converted, we no longer belong to ourselves. We now belong to our faithful Saviour who bought us with His precious blood and He is renewing us through the work of His Holy Spirit.

However, it is not all suffering. When we come alive in the new self we will have wholehearted joy in God and we will delight to do good as God wants us to. And this is the secret to a joy filled life, when our desire to do good is more powerful than to do evil. We don't overcome evil by merely fighting against it. We change when we have a taste for doing good which is given by the Holy Spirit. What do we do that is good? Only those things that arise from true faith, conforms to God's law, and is done for his glory. In other words, not what is based on what we think is right or established tradition, but only that which arises from true faith. For "everything that does not come from faith is sin," says Paul in Rom 14:23. And our faith is in Jesus Christ, that is where the relationship is. And we sin when we make decisions outside of that relationship.

We need to follow Jesus' own prescription in John 15:5, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." By the way, Jesus did not say that when we go it alone we are bound to miss the mark now and then. "No" he said, "apart from me you can do nothing!" Only when we abide in Christ are our words, deeds and ourselves acceptable to God. We do good when it conforms to God's law. King Saul claimed that he had kept the best of the Amalekite cattle for a sacrifice to the Lord. But Samuel the prophet said "To obey is better than sacrifice...and you have rejected the word of the Lord" with the result "...he has rejected you as king"(1 Sam 15:22-23)

Congregation we are always inclined to give our own behaviour a little selfish pious twist. We should never defend taking our self-willed byways. Instead, we should concentrate on doing God's will, conforming to his law, which is His Word. Lastly, if our behaviour glorifies God we are doing good. That should always be our underlying aim, to glorify God. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (WSC Q&A1). If we do things that dishonour God's name then we do wrong, we are entirely wrong, even when we think we can defend ourselves. Let me close by saying two more things. Some people arrogantly claim they have reached perfection. We know that this is not true while we live in a sinful world. In fact, more than that, if we say we no longer sin we make God out to be a liar and the truth is not in us. John makes that clear in 1 John 2:10.

There is also another danger, and that is saying how hard it is to do God's will and good works. Doing good works is a labour of love, and to love is not hard for those whom God loves. If we keep on saying, and some people do till their dying day, that it's so hard to do good, then we are actually saying that Christ's work is imperfect. Christ set us free to do good works. He gave us his Spirit so that we desire what He himself wants. Therefore, we may, we can and we want to do good works. That is not to say that people without saving faith cannot cooperate within good programs and projects. They are capable of doing civil and moral good, but only Christians can render spiritual good. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights." (Jam 1:17) That means nobody has anything good unless it comes from God. And nobody can do any good in God's eyes if they neglect or deny His Son as their Saviour.

So do you have a genuine sorrow for sin, so much so that you run from it? Do you have a wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a delight to do every kind of good as God wants you to? Yes? Praise God, for he has worked that in through his Holy Spirit. If you cannot say "Yes" then my prayer is that Holy Spirit will cause you to see your sin and bring you to repentance. Rev 3:20-22, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Are you listening? Amen.