

It Is Written

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How the Holy Spirit Converts

By Mark White

Conversion to Christ involves the work of the Holy Spirit. Of this we have much scriptural testimony. In fact, the Holy Spirit is essential to conversion. Hardly anyone would deny this. However, there is much dispute over the way in which the Holy Spirit assists in the conversion of a sinner. Frequently, we hear testimonies from people who declare that the Holy Spirit overwhelmed them in some way or the other. To their minds, salvation is a “better-felt-than-told” emotional experience. It is almost impossible to reason from Scripture with people who believe that they have been saved in such a supernatural way.

Generally, there are two theories about the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion. First, there is the idea that man is so spiritually dead that only a miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit can produce regeneration. This majority view asserts that the Spirit must operate directly — even irresistibly — on a sinner’s heart in order to burn away the sinful nature which keeps man from accepting God’s will. The direct operation of the Holy Spirit precludes His use of any medium or agency to convert the sinner, such as the word of God.

Secondly, there is the view that the Spirit converts through the medium or agency of the word of God. Operating through the word, the Spirit accesses the hearts of men, convicts them, and causes them to come to Jesus by obeying His gospel.

Now, please be aware that the omnipotent Spirit of God could use either of these means if He so desired. This is not a question of what the Spirit has power to do, but one of what He actually does. What does the word of God reveal concerning what the Spirit actually does to convert sinners?

Jesus taught that when the Holy Spirit came, He would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Jesus explained in verse 9 that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin, “because they believe not on me.” Jesus is the pure, sinless, and holy Son of God. To reject Him is to reject God (Luke 10:16) and to oppose what is right. The Holy Spirit’s word convicts the sinner of sin in rejecting the Savior. In verse 10, Jesus said the Holy Spirit convicts of “righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see me no more.” Jesus was condemned by man on a charge of blasphemy, but His resurrection, ascension, and exaltation to God’s right hand established His claim of equality with God. Through the word, the Holy Spirit works on the sinner’s heart, convincing him that Christ is righteous and he is guilty. Further, in verse 11 Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit convicts “of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.” Paul called Satan “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). He withstood Jesus in every way, although he was ultimately unsuccessful. He was responsible for the death of Jesus, hoping to not only destroy His life but also His work. When God raised Jesus from the tomb, the plans of the Devil were foiled, and his doom sealed. He is under the judgment of God! The gospel (revealed by the Holy Spirit) works in the heart of a sinner, convicting him of the absolute certainty of his own accountability before God.

Please understand that the Spirit does not coerce our conviction. There is no arm-twisting, nor is there any trickery or physical force involved in bringing us to faith in Christ. Suppose you were trying to convince a friend of siding with you on some issue you both face. Your friend has the freedom to accept your ideas, or to reject them altogether. To gain his agreement, you would present all the facts you could, make logical arguments, draw sound conclusions and be as persuasive as possible that

your ideas must be accepted. This is exactly how the Holy Spirit operates upon our free wills through His word. In short, conversion does not occur miraculously through the Spirit's direct intervention. There is no evidence that the Holy Spirit convicts sinners against their wills.

The Scriptures teach that the Spirit operates through the word of truth which He has revealed. In every instance of conversion in the New Testament, the Spirit and the word are never separated. The word of God was taught to every person who was converted to Christ. Certainly, some miracles were performed, and there were outpourings of the Holy Spirit. Yet, each case shows that the Spirit's word had to be believed and obeyed for salvation to take place. In fact, the Holy Spirit was "poured out" when conversion was not the object of such outpouring. Consider what happened in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. The apostles received the Spirit (v. 1-4) and then spoke by His power. They were inspired messengers of the Spirit. Declaring the righteousness of Christ, Peter preached the gospel and identified Jesus as the long-awaited Christ (v. 36). This Spirit-inspired teaching convicted these people and prompted them to ask, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (v. 37). They were instructed to "repent and be baptized" so they could be forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (38).

Furthermore, the case of Cornelius in Acts 10 demonstrates that the Holy Spirit was "poured out" (v. 45) upon these Gentiles, but not for the purpose of salvation. In spite of such an outpouring of the Spirit upon them, Cornelius and his household still needed to be "baptized in the name of the Lord" (v. 48). Belief in Christ was essential for the "remission of sins" (v. 43). To give Cornelius the information he needed to formulate such faith, Peter taught him the Spirit-inspired gospel (v. 34-43). Later, in Acts 11:14, Peter relates that an angel had spoken to Cornelius telling him to send for Peter to come to Joppa. Peter's purpose there was to "tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved." These "words" which convicted Cornelius and instilled faith in his heart were words inspired by the Holy Spirit! Cornelius may have been "baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:16), but it was the Spirit's convicting message which brought him to salvation.

Consider the fact that genuine faith comes by hearing God's word (Rom. 10:17). Our hearts are made pure by faith (Acts 15:9). Birth by water and by the Spirit (John 3:5) is essential for one who wishes to see the kingdom. Paul said that the Corinthians were born by the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15). James added that God birthed us with the "word of truth" (1:18). Finally, Peter assures us that we were "born again ... through the word of God which lives and abides forever." (1 Pet. 1:23). The evidence is abundant that the Spirit convicts and converts through the agency of the Scriptures.

"Numbers" versus Real Growth

By Paul Earnhart

I have an uneasiness about any great emphasis on statistics in measuring the growth of churches. I am skeptical because numbers can so often mask what is happening to people. The ultimate goal of our Father for His children is both spiritual and personal. He wills that we be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). Success or failure in this enterprise cannot be measured by mere statistics. A far more important question to raise as numbers change is how individual saints are faring in their effort to be more Christ-like. Churches only truly grow as the individual members of those assemblies grow. What is the glory of our numbers if people are not prepared to go to heaven?