

## **PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION**

### **What it means to become a Christian**

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Unscrambling the meaning of important terms which describe Christian experience is not easy, but let's try:

*Conversion* signifies a dramatic change of attitude toward God and direction of life through accepting Christ the Lord and his ways. *Regeneration* refers to a change of nature: we become sons and daughters of the Lord. *Justification* means that we have a new standing before God. *Sanctification* encompasses all of the foregoing in the sense of describing the development of true Christian character by virtue of our new nature and standing. These terms define what it means to be "in Christ," as the apostle Paul puts it, the "old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

How can terms such as justification and sanctification be made meaningful to modern people yet remain faithful to their biblical sense? Some reject the term justification on grounds that it suggests a legal fiction. Others are leery about the term sanctification on grounds that it suggests a bombed mind.

The answer to such anxieties is that the truth of scripture has nothing to do with either legal fictions or bombed minds. Biblical understanding calls for serious attention to what being "in Christ" means so far as the spiritual and moral transformation of human life is concerned.

### **True Relation With God**

Justification by faith was the cornerstone doctrine of the Reformation. It is solidly embedded in the writings of Luther, Calvin and Knox and in all Protestant theology ever since. What is it?

"Justification by faith alone" answers the crucial question, "how can a person be just with God?" We are sinners. The consequences of sin are guilt, condemnation and estrangement. Estrangement is overcome by reconciliation (Rom. 8:35, 39). Condemnation is removed through forgiveness (Rom. 8:34). Guilt is cancelled by the reckoning of righteousness (Rom. 8:33). All of these spiritual realities come to us through God's grace in Christ (Rom. 8:1; 5:11-12).

The critical passage on justification is Romans 3:21-26 where Paul declares that justification is a gift through Christ's redemption, which each one of us receives by faith. The entire book of Galatians amounts to reaffirmation of this teaching. Parallel passages include Acts 10:43, Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:5. The earliest

promise is given in Genesis 15:6. More is added in Psalm 32 and Habakkuk 2:4. The full-orbed teaching occurs in Acts 13:28-29, Romans 3-5 and Galatians 3.

Without question, the Hebrew and Greek terms for justification are employed in a forensic (judicial) sense: that is, it is not moral influence which evokes change, but a declarative judicial act. To declare what? That the just condemnatory demands of the law against sin have been fully met in the judgment death for sin which Christ died. That in virtue of this satisfaction a new, objective relation between God and man, a state of righteousness has been created through Christ's death (Romans 4:25; 5:18 ).

In Christ we are accounted righteous, says Paul. We enter upon a new relation with God (in the New Testament the terms righteousness and justification are correlatives). We are forgiven many times; but we are justified in God's sight only once. Justification is once for all complete, never to be repeated.

This is the subtle, but vital difference between justification and sanctification. The eminent British New Testament scholar E. K. Simpson writes that justification means "to account righteous and no amount of ingenuity will enable us to modify this interpretation; it does not mean "to be made righteous" and all attempts to confuse it with sanctification must therefore be abandoned."

The decisiveness of this spiritual fact is the ground of Paul's joy and confidence, not any claim on his part to continuing faithfulness or goodness (Romans 4:1-2). The grounds for justification is not our own righteousness; rather, it is the unrepeatable atoning work of Christ who by his death took upon himself our guilt.

Thus the basis for reconciliation is established because sin is atoned for. Faith is the means to receive justification; it is never the grounds for justification. Bishop Richard Hooker (1554-1600) a famous British theologian wrote, "God doth justify the believing man, yet not for the worthiness of his belief, but for his worthiness who is believed." The truth of justification is the indispensable foundation of spiritual wholeness, which is peace with God and hope of the final glory of God.

### **Developing True Character**

Sanctification builds upon justification. It is presented in the New Testament as both decisive event and continuing process. At conversion, Christians are sanctified in their turning to God, which is analogous to justification (Heb. 10:10); as well, Christians are in the process of being sanctified (Heb.10:14). These two verses sum up New Testament teaching regarding sanctification.

"Set apart" for God's fellowship and service is fundamental to the meaning of sanctification. Thus spoken, it is analogous to "holiness," a quality which accrues to those who walk in close fellowship with God (Isaiah 6). The ethical impact of one's feeling profane derives from awareness of sinfulness before the glory of

God. The God of love made known in Christ is also the holy Father.

Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit. He brings forgiveness in response to faith and renews us day by day in the image of Christ. Thus forgiveness (being washed), justification and sanctification coincide as the true work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:11). Paul proceeds to show that true liberty entails our commitment to goodness as temples of the Holy Spirit, not enslavement to fleshly impulses (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

The Holy Spirit himself is the seal of our sanctification, which is not an abstraction but the Spirit's personal presence in each Christian's heart (Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor.3:16; 2 Cor. 1: 20-22; Eph. 1:13-14).

### **The Primary Sign of the Holy Spirit**

The task of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ in us (John 16:12-15). Christ is intended to be both the reality and fullness of the Spirit in every Christian's experience.

The Anglican scholar Lionel Thornton has correctly summarized the relation of the spirit to Christ in each Christian's life: "Both Christ and the Spirit dwell in the Christian soul but not in the same way. Christ is the indwelling content of the Christian life ... the Spirit is the quickening cause; and the indwelling Christ is the effect of that quickening."

The unfolding promises in scripture about the Holy Spirit reinforce the foregoing truth, but this is missed by many Christians. Usually we reckon the fulfillment of the promise of the Spirit (Isaiah 42:1-4; 61:1-2; Ezekiel 36:27; Joel 2:28-29) to have had its primary fulfillment at Pentecost in Acts 2. This is a mistake. The primary fulfillment occurred in the new man, namely Jesus Christ (Lu. 4:18-21). Jesus Christ himself is the primary sign of the Spirit in humanity for the new age.

Christ's Spirit-bearing humanity is the pattern of the life which God intended for mankind. It is this life which the Spirit desires to duplicate in each one of us (Rom. 8:11). Significant parallels are drawn in the New Testament between his life and ours, which induced Irenaeus, the second century church father, to speak of the recapitulation of the race in him. Christ is the file-leader of the new humanity. We are begotten of the Spirit, as he was begotten of the Spirit (John 3:115). We are baptized in the Spirit as he was (1 Cor. 12:13). We may triumph over the tempter as he did (Eph. 6:10-11; 1 John 2:14). We, as he, may live and minister in the Spirit (Acts 1:8 ).

Christ the Lord is the giver of the Spirit, the model of life in the Spirit and the example of fullness of life in the Spirit. Who had more of the Spirit than the Lord Jesus? We are converted to Christ to become like Christ. Let no one put you down for aspiring to be like Jesus as the pattern of true life in the Spirit. This quality of

life, says Paul, is the meaning of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26). Paul concludes the foregoing passage with the command, "Walk in the Spirit." This is the mark of true sanctification. In the New Testament we are never commanded to be baptized in the Spirit (that happens at conversion when we are joined to Christ by faith). We are, however, commanded to be filled with the Spirit and to walk in the Spirit. This has nothing whatever to do with a bombed mind, which Paul specifically excludes (e.g. bombed by alcohol, Eph. 5:18). Rather, the fullness of the Spirit embraces the fullness of Christ. By his presence and power the first Christians witnessed, lived chaste lives, opened new fields, confronted evil forces and rejoiced in hope of God's final kingdom and glory.

Death has a part to play in sanctification. Christians are to die to sin (Rom. 6:1-11; Titus 2:14; 3:5-7), which is symbolized in our baptism where we are laid in the grave of the Lord Jesus yet raised in order to live to God. Christians are to die to the world (Gal. 6:14) in the sense of rejecting the categories and forms of its godless way of life. Christians are to die to self (Gal. 2:20) in the paradoxical sense that though we die with Christ the same self nevertheless lives, renewed to live the life of faith. The death of the Christian to the world, the flesh and the devil does not mean detachment from life and society but identifiable discipleship which exhibits Christ-like characteristics.

The on-going sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is quiet, unobtrusive, tender. The Spirit works by persuasion not coercion. Hence the biblical analogy of the tenuous smoking flax which may easily be snuffed out as the mode of Messiah's work (Isaiah 42:3) to which may be joined Paul's parallel warning about the ease with which the Spirit can be quenched (1 Thess. 5:19). Surely the delicate virtues described by Paul as the Christ-like fruit of the Spirit are the signs of the Spirit's presence and working in our lives: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.

These marks of abiding in Christ are the imprimatur of the Spirit's presence. Said our Lord,

*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).*