

Differences Between Conversion And Repentance

'If a man seeks the office of an overseer, he desires a good work ... He should not be new convert lest becoming proud he may fall into condemnation' (1 Timothy 3:1 & 6). 'The apostles were sent on their way by the assembly (early church) ... declaring the conversion of the Gentiles. They caused great joy to all the Christians' (Acts 15:3).

The two groups of people we will be discussing in this article are the never saved unconverted, non-believers and then the backslidden formerly converted people who once believed and knew God then turned away from Him. Both groups need to repent but on a different level. Initial repentance and conversion are vastly different from the repentance of backsliders. Conversion is the act of getting to know God through Jesus in an entirely new relationship for the very first time. Most people, especially in the Western world in Christian nations, know about God's existence due to Easter, Christmas, Sunday School or speaking with Christians but they do not know Him personally. These people may have heard about being born-again but do not understand the concept. They cannot comprehend the reality of Jesus being the Son of God and the Son of Man (mankind) and our Messiah. They often do not believe the Bible is God's spoken and written Word (2 Timothy 3:16). Sin to these unsaved people is the normal way of life and anything the church may say is to them, stifling and sometimes offensive. They do not know anything about holiness, righteousness, salvation, repentance or Godliness and even less about denying oneself to serve God. These people are unsaved and spiritually lost and it is the mandate of all Christians to teach these unsaved souls about the Lord so they can convert to Christianity and thus be saved. They need to repent and be baptised as the Bible says. 'Repent and believe in the Gospel' (Mark 1:15). 'Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38). Repenting in this context is turning one's life around completely, turning to God and away from sin for the first time in their lives. This repentance is to form a brand new relationship with God by accepting the blood sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. God's forgiveness comes through His undeserved mercy and grace. He forgives them because they did not know any better than to live their lives in sin. In His mercy, God ignored or overlooked their sin as He waited patiently for them to repent (Acts 17:29 & 30).

New converts to Christianity are often very zealous to share the Gospel. They have found what they have been unknowingly searching for, sometimes for many years. Conversion can happen at any time of life, from a young child as young as four years old up to people over one hundred years old. When new converts experience the first flush of the presence of God they are often euphoric because they realise they are in the presence of our Creator. Repenting and being forgiven is a huge event in their lives. Sometimes these new converts want to tell everybody and they can really annoy others who have not come to a place where they are ready to be saved. Some new converts grow in God very rapidly, turning away from all areas of sin in their lives and embracing everything holy and righteous for the rest of their lives. Other converts take years to give up the 'old life' and some never quite give their entire lives to God. Another group are zealous for God for a time but as life becomes difficult and sin is more appealing, they give God up and life becomes very hard then they blame all their problems on everyone around them and mostly they blame God for their difficulties. These people often become hardened and bitter, sometimes persecuting genuine Christians. The Bible calls these people who have slidden back into sin, backsliders. They need to repent of their backsliding and restore their relationship with God.

This is what Jesus said referring to new converts and to backsliders; "Behold a farmer went out to sow. As he sowed some seeds fell by the roadside and the birds came and devoured them. Others fell on rocky ground where they did not have much soil and immediately they sprang up because they had no depth of earth so when the sun had risen they were scorched and because they had no root they withered away. Others fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked them. Others fell on good soil and yielded fruit, some one hundred times as much, some sixty and some thirty. Those who have (spiritual) ears to hear let them hear (comprehend, understand) ... When anyone hears the word of the Kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown by the roadside. What was sown on the rocky places, is he who hears the word and immediately with joy receives it yet he has no root in himself but endures for a while. When oppression or persecution arises because of the word he stumbles and falls away. What was sown among the thorns is he who hears the word but the cares of this age and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and he becomes unfruitful. What was sown on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who most certainly bears fruit and brings forth Spiritual fruit, some one hundred times as much, some sixty and some thirty" (Matthew 13:3 to 9; 19 to 23). There are people who have personally known God from infancy by having Godly parents or a Godly person who has led them to Jesus at a young age and those people have a strong, steady relationship with God and are walking in repentance and forgiveness, bearing constant Spiritual fruit. 'From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus' (2 Timothy 3:15).

The next group of people we will discuss are the backsliders, the people who have known God and walked away from Him. They need to repent of their sin of backsliding because this sin is against Jesus Himself. Repenting in this context is to humble one's heart before God and sincerely apologise for sinning in a way they knew better but sinned anyway. 'The backsliding of the simple minded will kill them. The careless ease of fools will destroy them' (Proverbs 1:32). 'Go and proclaim these words ... "Return you backsliders," says God, "I will not look in anger on you forever for I am merciful" ... "Return you backsliding children"' (Jeremiah 3:12 & 14). 'Restore to me the joy of Your salvation. Uphold me with a willing spirit then I will teach transgressors Your ways. Sinners will be converted to You' (Psalm 51:12 & 13). "Return to Me and I will return to you" (Malachi 3:7). Jesus said, "I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the holy angels of God over one sinner repenting" (Luke 15:10).

Returning to God and restoring one's salvation is vastly different to initial conversion. One cannot return to God if they never knew Him in the first place so repentance of the backslider is a decision of the human will to return to God and worship Him as they once did. As we can read in the above verses, God is calling out to the backslider to reunite with Him. Repentance of backsliders is the restoration of an existing relationship that had broken down and it is always the fault of the sinner when the relationship with God breaks down. God never leaves us but many people leave Him (Hebrews 13:5). When people make a conscious decision to turn away from God, the Lord will abide with that person for a while but over the course of time, the further the person drifts from God, the further God is from the backslider (Proverbs 15:29). Eventually, the backslider can lose their salvation if they refuse to repent. The eternal damnation of the backslider is far worse than for someone who has never known God. 'After they (the backsliders) have escaped the defilement of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus, if they are again entangled in it and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. It would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them' (2 Peter 2:20 & 21).

When Jesus said holy angels rejoice over a repentant sinner, this context reveals He was speaking of a backslidden sinner according to the parable of the prodigal or wayward son in Luke 15:11 to 32, not a new convert. In the parable, the younger of the man's two sons asked for his inheritance and left his father; the wayward son wasted his inheritance and ended up very poor; the son joined up with unbelievers and had to feed unclean pigs to survive because nobody would give him food; the son realised he was better off with his father and chose to return to his father with a contrite and repentant attitude declaring he had sinned against God and heaven, feeling unworthy he asked to be made a servant not a son but his father was waiting for the wayward son's return and rejoiced with everyone when the lad returned. The father said, "My son was dead but is alive again, he was lost but has been found." This young man left his father, the father did not leave him. Our eternity is our inheritance and this young man wasted his inheritance ending up spiritually poor with no food or no spiritual bread, which are the teachings of the Bible. We will not live by bread alone but by every Word spoken by God, which is the Bible (Deuteronomy 8:3). Notice, the wayward son chose to return to his father who welcomed him back with love, forgiveness and rejoicing. The young man did not have to meet his father for the first time, he already knew his father well so he chose to return home. Like this wayward son, some people feel they are so far from God and feel so unworthy of forgiveness, they feel they cannot return. The son's loving father ran out to meet him the moment he knew the son was coming home. When someone backslides they offend God so they must go directly to God and repent. Trying to seek forgiveness through someone else is pointless. When a backsliding person chooses to return to God they are welcomed back into God's inheritance with rejoicing but there just might be consequences to the backslider's actions.

When King David repented of his sin with Bathsheba and the cold-blooded murder of her innocent husband Uriah (2 Samuel 11:2 to 2 Samuel 12:23) David's illegitimate son born to Bathsheba died as a direct consequence of David's wicked actions. David had to repent but he did not have to convert to God because he was already part of God's covenant people. He returned to God and had his relationship with God restored. When backsliders return to God they need to understand their actions have consequences and they are wholly responsible for their own actions so they can never blame anyone else. Every negative action has an equally negative consequence. We reap what we sow. 'Whatever a man sows is what he will reap. If he sows to his own flesh, will from the flesh reap corruption. Those who sow to the Holy Spirit will from the Holy Spirit reap eternal life' (Galatians 6:7 & 8). If a backslider sows destruction they may reap destruction for the remainder of their lives even though God has forgiven the sin. One example could be, if a backslider commits a foolish crime he may end up in prison and have a negative police record for the rest of his life, even if he does repent and return to God.

If we offend a person we should go to that person, apologise then we should go to God and repent. If we sincerely repent, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sin and He will cleanse our unrighteous deeds. 'If

we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9). We cannot ask forgiveness on behalf of someone else because they need to repent before God themselves. We all need to walk in constant forgiveness because we do not know the time or hour our Lord will return to earth and we do not know if we will die before He returns so either way we need to have our hearts clean and in constant readiness to meet our Lord. 'Watch therefore, for you do not know in what hour your Lord will come ... Be ready, for in an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come. Who is the faithful and wise servant? ... Blessed is that servant whom his Lord finds doing well when He comes' (Matthew 24:42 to 46).

There is currently an erroneous teaching circulating the world stating, once we have repented at conversion we never have to repent again. That teaching is pride and the complete opposite of Scripture. The most righteous people mentioned in the Bible repented of their personal sin many times over throughout their lives. We are all sinners and we all have to walk with God in a repentant attitude to remain justified. See what Jesus taught us about the proud man who felt he was superior to people who repented and prayed not to God but to himself. "Two men went into the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed to himself like this, 'God I thank you I am not like the rest of men, extortioners, unrighteous, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all I get.' But the tax collector standing far away would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but beat his chest saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the Pharisee, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 18:10 to 14). Anyone who thinks they do not have to repent needs to humble themselves and repent.

Another erroneous teaching is 'once saved always saved' no matter what people do. That too is opposite of Scripture. Once we are saved we are always saved on condition we remain with God. If people give their lives to God then turn away from Him (backslide), they can certainly lose their salvation and must genuinely repent to be restored to God. 'Jesus has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death to present you holy and without blemish and blameless before Him on condition you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast and not move away from the hope of the Gospel ... which is being preached to all humanity under heaven' (Colossians 1:22 & 23). 'Concerning those who were once enlightened, tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance since they crucify the Son of God for themselves again and put Him to open shame' (Hebrews 6:4 to 6). Backsliding is putting Jesus to open shame when He should be honoured and glorified. 'May the name of our Lord Jesus be glorified in you and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus our Messiah' (2 Thessalonians 1:12). 'You will walk after Yahweh your God and fear Him, keep His commandments, obey His voice, you will serve Him and cleave to Him' (Deuteronomy 13:4).

Amen and God bless you.

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